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**THE FUTURE ROLE OF
THE HASHD AL-SHAABI
IN IRAQ -
KEY INFLUENCERS OF POST-ISIS
POLITICS?**

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***N.B.:The article only reflects
the opinion of its author.***



THE FUTURE ROLE OF THE HASHD AL-SHAABI IN IRAQ - KEY INFLUENCERS OF POST-ISIS POLITICS?

Since the takeover of a third of Iraq by the Islamic State (ISIS) in 2014, the Hashd al-Shaabi, or the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), have emerged as both a pivotal military and political actor in Iraq. With al-Baghdadi's declaration of an Islamic Caliphate from Mosul in June 2014 and the subsequent collapse of the Iraqi armed forces, the Hashd were able to fill this security vacuum in order to prevent the further expansion of ISIS, hence drawing popular support for the militias among the Iraqi public.¹

However, while many Iraqi and international politicians as well as analysts are focused

¹ Despite their participation in battles against ISIS, there have been documented incidents of abuse and human rights violations by several Hashd units. For a detailed account of documented abuses of the Hashd during the 2016 Fallujah operation, see "Iraq: Fallujah Abuses Test Control of Militias", *Human Rights Watch*, June 9, 2016, available at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/06/09/iraq-fallujah-abuses-test-control-militias>

on the current military operation to liberate ISIS's final stronghold in Iraq, Mosul, the future of the Hashd al-Shaabi has yet to be explicitly defined for the post-ISIS period.

The Hashd are most often referred to as a Shia militia, however, this is an oversimplification of the group, as their intricacies and political motivations are not fully understood or examined. With upcoming provincial and parliamentary elections occurring in the next year and a half, the Hashd al-Shaabi are positioned to emerge as leading political influencers, as their military victories and popularity has and will continue to propel them to the forefront of Iraqi policy-making and political maneuvering. In light of this, it is crucial to analyze the emergence and backgrounds of these militias, as well as

their relationship with the Iraqi state and other political actors in order to understand what structure the Hashd al-Shaabi will constitute, and how they will shape Iraqi politics following the defeat of ISIS.

This article examines the different militias that consist of the overall Hashd al-Shaabi organization, as well as their formation and ideological viewpoints that motivate their participation in both military and political affairs. Their connections to the Iraqi state, government policies regarding the Hashd, as well as their political representation will also be analyzed. All of these factors indicate that the Hashd will be preserved as a semi-autonomous, yet permanent institution of the Iraqi state security apparatus, and the political prominence of the Iran-backed Hashd groups is likely to exacerbate the current political tensions between the Shia elite in Baghdad. The substantial political standing of the Hashd also provides an opening for an increase

in Iranian influence in Iraqi affairs, as the Iran-aligned militias are likely to push for pro-Iranian interests in the political arena. In the long run, the Hashd will use their political influence as well as their popularity to position themselves for electoral success in the upcoming elections.

Contextualizing the Role of the Hashd al-Shaabi

Much of the analysis concerning the Hashd al-Shaabi is based on two misconceptions about the group. The first is that the Hashd al-Shaabi is one, unified militia, and the other is that it was formed solely to fight ISIS as a result of Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani's fatwa, or religious edict, following the fall of Mosul to ISIS in June 2014. In fact, the Hashd al-Shaabi is an umbrella organization of around 60 non-state armed groups,² the majority of which

2 Renad Mansour, "After Mosul, Will Iraq's Paramilitaries Set the State's Agenda?" *The Century Foundation*, Jan. 27, 2017, available at <https://tcf>.

are Shia.³ These militias have a wide array of political and ideological viewpoints, and many are heavily supported by actors outside of the Iraqi government, hence, as opposed to the single, Shia-dominated group they are often characterized as, the Hashd al-Shaabi are a heterogeneous group of militias. The second misconception that Sistani's

org/content/report/mosul-will-iraqs-paramilitaries-set-states-agenda

3 In addition to these majority Shia groups, there are also a number of Sunni, Christian, Yezidi, and other minority militias that consider themselves a part of the larger Hashd al-Shaabi structure. The Iraqi government reports that there are around 25,000-30,000 Sunni fighters, along with a couple of Yezidi and Christian militias. Saif Hameed, "Iraq's parliament passes contested law on Shi'ite paramilitaries", *Reuters*, Nov. 26, 2016, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-military-idUSKBN13LOIE>

Due to the significantly larger number of Shia militias in the overall Hashd structure, this article will focus on these militias. For a detailed report on minorities in the Hashd al-Shaabi, see Robert Tollast, "Inside Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units", *The National Interest*, May 23, 2016, available at <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/iraqs-shia-militias-arent-bad-you-think-16291?page=2>

fatwa was the cause for the emergence of these groups is also incorrect. Several of these militias have been active on the Iraqi political and military scene long before the emergence of ISIS, as many were formed either in response to the US invasion and occupation, or to the Iran-Iraq war.⁴ Only a few were in fact formed as a result of Sistani's call to arms in 2014.

The Hashd militias are officially under the control of the Iraqi state through the Hashd al-Shaabi commission, which is an umbrella organization encompassing most of the Hashd militias. Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, as commander in chief of the armed forces, is the nominal head of this commission; however, as will be discussed later, he retains almost no control over the militias. Deputy Hashd Commander, the Hashd's

4 Kirk H. Sowell, "The Rise of Iraq's Militia State", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, April 23, 2015, available at <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/?fa=59888>

overall military commander is Abu Mahdi al-Mohandis, who also leads Kataib Hezbollah, one of the Hashd militias.⁵ The leader of the Badr Organization, Hadi al-Amiri, is the assistant commander, and acts as a military field commander.⁶ Despite this seemingly official nature of the Hashd commission, each militia has an autonomous command structure as its political and military decisions are made independently by its leader or commander, and thus, the militias are able to act with relative autonomy from the government.

It is difficult to accurately estimate the number of active troops in each Hashd militia, or even all of the groups, partly due to the fact that thousands of Iraqis signed up with a militia after Sistani's fatwa, however, many never actually received training or are currently fighting. In addition, Hashd militias tend

to exaggerate the number of fighters in order to bolster their reputations. Experts estimate that there are around 90,000 to 110,000 fighters amongst all Hashd militias.⁷ The different Hashd factions can be divided into three categories according to their political and ideological affiliations; (1) those aligned with Iran, (2) those aligned with Grand Ayatollah Sistani in Najaf, as well as (3) other Shiite political parties that have influential political power and militias, but lie outside of the overall Hashd umbrella.

The Iran-Backed Hashd Groups

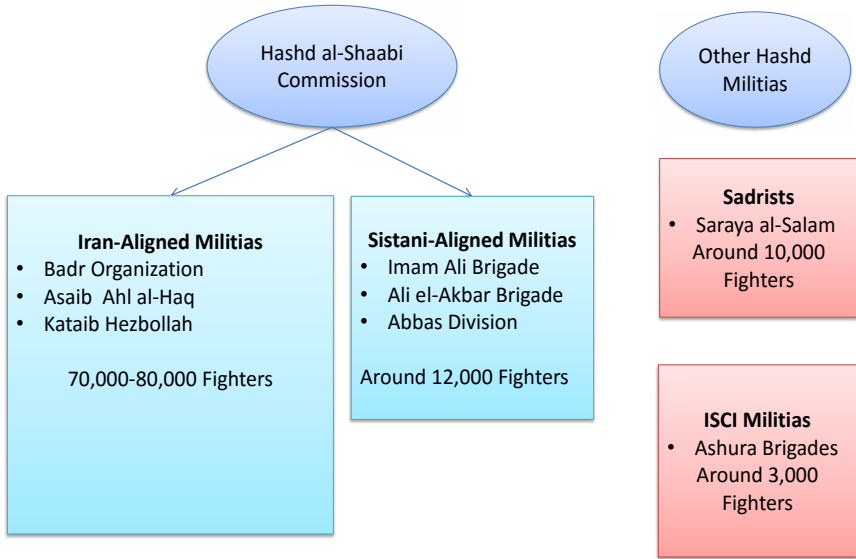
Around 70,000 to 80,000 fighters under the Hashd umbrella are associated with a militia backed by Iran, among which include the Badr Organization, Asaib Ahl al-Haq, and Kataib Hezbollah.⁸ These militias were formed

⁵ "Security and Politics Mix Inseparably in Hashd Forces", *Inside Iraqi Politics No. 111*, July 20, 2015.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Renad Mansour quoted in Annie Slemrod, "Who are Iraq's Militias?", *IRIN*, July 13, 2016, available at <https://www.irinnews.org/analysis/2016/07/13/who-are-iraqs-militias>

⁸ Hameed, 2016.



prior to the emergence of ISIS and Sistani’s mobilizing fatwa. They first rose to prominence during the US occupation, where many of these militias violently opposed the US presence. Following the withdrawal in 2011, many transitioned to focusing on political and social activities, keeping their militias on reserve status.⁹ However, with the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, these groups began

sending fighters to Syria to fight alongside Hezbollah in support of the Assad regime.¹⁰ The fall of Mosul in 2014 to ISIS and the collapse of the Iraqi armed forces provided an opening for these Iranian groups to mobilize further support and recruits for their militias in Iraq. These militias are heavily influenced

9 Sam Wyer, “The Resurgence of Asaib Ahl al-Haq”, *Institute for the Study of War*, Dec. 2012, available at <http://www.understandingwar.org/report/resurgence-asaib-ahl-al-haq>

10 Matthew Levitt and Phillip Smyth, “Kataib al-Imam Ali: Portrait of an Iraqi Shiite Militant Group Fighting ISIS”, *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, Jan. 5, 2015, available at <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/kataib-al-imam-ali-portrait-of-an-iraqi-shiite-militant-group-fighting-isis>

by pro-Iranian rhetoric and sentiment, as their operations on the ground are coordinated by Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corp (IRGC) Quds Force¹¹ commander, Qassem Soleimani, and they have access to Iranian weapons and training.¹² This is evident as many of the Iran-backed groups overtly display the image of Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei either on banners, or on their websites.¹³ On the political scene, these militias represent Shia and pro-Iranian interests in parliament, as well as other government entities.

The Badr Organization is the largest and most prominent of the Iran-aligned Hashd militias, led by Hadi al-Amiri.

11 The Quds Force is the Special Forces unit of Iran's IRGC, which reports directly to Khamenei.

12 Dan De Luce and Henry Johnson, "Can the US Control Iran's Militias in the Fight for Fallujah?", *Foreign Policy*, June 9, 2016, available at <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/06/09/can-the-u-s-control-irans-militias-in-the-fight-for-fallujah-shiite-iraq-isis/>

13 Ned Parker, "Power failure in Iraq as militias outgun state", *Reuters*, Oct. 21, 2015, available at <http://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/iraq-abadi/>

It was formed in Iran in the 1980s by Iraqi Shia military defectors from the Iran-Iraq war. Badr's active fighting force is reported to be more than 20,000 fighters,¹⁴ and is politically affiliated with the Badr political organization. Asaib Ahl al-Haq, which split from the Sadrist Mahdi Army in 2006, is led by Sheikh Qais al-Khazali, and its military strength is estimated to be around 10,000 to 15,000 fighters.¹⁵ This militia is also heavily pro-Iranian, as its main objectives are to promote Iranian and Shiite political and religious influence in Iraq, and it also enjoys close connections to the IRGC Quds Force.¹⁶ Out of these groups, perhaps the most pro-Iranian group is Kataib Hezbollah, or the Hezbollah Brigades, which was established in 2007.¹⁷ It is

14 Michael Knights, "Iraq's Popular Demobilisation", *Al Jazeera*, Feb. 26, 2016, available at <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2016/02/iraq-popular-demobilisation-160224050939178.html>

15 De Luce and Johnson, 2016.

16 Wyer, 2012.

17 Levitt and Smyth, 2015.

thoroughly committed to the Iranian doctrine of *velayat-e faqih*,¹⁸ and is actively working towards maintaining and increasing Iranian influence in Iraq.¹⁹ As a result, Kataib Hezbollah was categorized as a foreign terrorist organization by the US State Department in 2009.²⁰ It is estimated that this militia comprises of around 20,000 fighters,²¹ and is led by Abu Mahdi al-Mohandis, the deputy chairman of the Hashd commission.

Sistani-Aligned Hashd Groups

The groups aligned with the Shia clerics in Najaf and Karbala number around 12,000 fighters in total, and include the Ali al-Akbar

Brigade and the Abbas Division, among others.²² Following the ISIS takeover of Mosul in June 2014, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani of Najaf issued a fatwa calling on all Iraqis to defend the country by joining the armed forces to help protect Iraq from the further expansion of ISIS.²³ In response to this call, many Iraqis chose to join the Hashd factions aligned with Sistani and the Shia clerical establishment. Compared to the Iran-aligned militias, these militias are smaller in number, and are relatively apolitical in nature. They have no connection to Iran, and are instead trained and funded by the Iraqi Ministry of Defense and the Special Forces.²⁴ Ayatollah Sistani's rejection

18 Farsi for "Guardianship of the Islamist Jurist", a Shia doctrine that calls for a guardianship-based political system, where a jurist, or a Shia cleric, assumes the leadership position.

19 Renad Mansour, "From Militia to State Force: the Transformation of the Hashd al-Shaabi", *Carnegie Middle East Center*, Nov., 16, 2015, available at <http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/61986>

20 "Principal Shiite militias in Iraq, 2016.

21 Knights, 2016.

22 "Security and Politics Mix Inseparably in Hashd Forces", *Inside Iraqi Politics No. 111*, July 20, 2015.

23 "Iraq conflict: Shia cleric Sistani issues call to arms," *BBC News*, June 13, 2014, available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27834462>

24 Jack Watling, "The Shia Militias of Iraq", *The Atlantic*, Dec. 22, 2016, available at <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/12/shia-militias-iraq-isis/510938/>

of *velayat-e faqih* and Iranian interference in Iraq, as well as his belief that clerics should not have a role in politics all contribute to the apolitical outlooks of these militias.²⁵ Thus, the rhetoric espoused by these militias is more pro-Iraqi nationalist, and they support the state and Prime Minister Abadi.

The Outliers: Sadr and ISCI

The final group of the Hashd al-Shaabi consists of the two other dominant Shia political parties, which can be considered as outliers to the Hashd model. They do not fall under the larger Hashd al-Shaabi commission umbrella, and their moves and operations are coordinated solely by their political leaders. These two groups are Sadr's Peace Companies, or Saraya al-Salam, and the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq's (ISCI) Ashura Brigades.

²⁵ Hayder al-Khoei, "Post-Sistani Iraq, Iran and the Future of Shia Islam", *War on the Rocks*, Sep. 8, 2016, available at <https://warontherocks.com/2016/09/post-sistani-iraq-iran-and-the-future-of-shia-islam/>

The Peace Companies are led by Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, who is also the self-claimed populist leader of the Ahrar political party. These militias were formed in 2014 following Sistani's fatwa, however, this militia is a reorganization of Sadr's Mahdi Army, which fought the US occupation from 2003 to 2007.²⁶ Estimates of troop numbers vary, but the Peace Companies number at around 10,000 fighters.²⁷ Sadr is not closely aligned with any of the other Shia political actors or parties, and has also repeatedly stated that he is against Iranian interference and influence in Iraq, which strongly diverges from the Iran-aligned Hashd groups.²⁸ He has also stated

²⁶ "Principal Shiite militias in Iraq", 2016.

²⁷ "Iraqi Shia groups rally in show of power", *Al Jazeera*, June 22, 2014, available at http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/06/iraqi-shia-groups-rally-show-power-20146216504615669.html?utm=from_old_mobile

²⁸ Michael David Clark and Renad Mansour, "Is Muqtada Al-Sadr good for Iraq?", *Carnegie Middle East Center*, May 2, 2016, available at <http://carnegie-mec.org/2016/05/02/is-muqtada-al-sadr-good-for-iraq->

on numerous occasions that the Hashd should not be involved in the military operations against ISIS, as it will lead to further sectarian divisions within Iraq. Similarly to the Sadrists, the ISCI-affiliated Ashura Brigades also fall outside of the larger Hashd umbrella. ISCI is led by Ammar al-Hakim, a prominent Shia cleric from Najaf.²⁹ These militias were formed in 2014 as a result of Sistani's fatwa, and their total current military strength is estimated at around 3,000 fighters.³⁰

Overall, despite the variety of Hashd militias, the Hashd al-Shaabi umbrella is heavily pro-Iranian, as it is dominated both militarily and politically by the Iran-aligned factions. Their larger number of troops and comparably stronger military expertise are a result

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29 Mustafa Naser, "Why did Iraq's Shiite National Alliance chose new leader", *Al Monitor*, Sep, 18, 2016, available at <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/en/originals/2016/09/iraq-shiite-national-alliance-ammar-al-hakim.html>

30 "Security and Politics Mix Inseparably in Hashd Forces", *Inside Iraqi Politics No. 111*, July 20, 2015.

of the amount of funding and training they receive from Iran. Hence, while the Sistani and other militias do play a part in the overall Hashd structure, the Iran-backed militias hold a leading role in the Hashd commission.

The Hashd and the Iraqi State

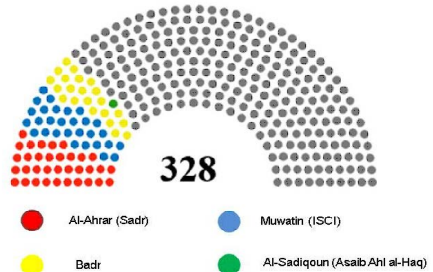
In the political sphere, the Iran-aligned militias also dominate much of the political dialogue, as these militias are considerably much more politically ambitious than their counterparts. This is also due to the fact that their leaders, such as Hadi al-Amiri and Abu Mahdi al-Mohandis, are prominent political figures, and hold leading roles in the Hashd al-Shaabi commission. Many of these leaders wear two hats; both as military commander, as well as politician. In particular, the Iranian-backed militias, who were well established before the takeover of ISIS, already had strong political footholds, as many of their

leaders and commanders are members of parliament, or have managed to secure cabinet positions. As the Sistani-aligned factions are more apolitical, the political dominance of the Iranian factions has led to a prevailing pro-Iranian rhetoric within the Shia parties in parliament. In addition, due to their military strength and immense popularity, the Hashd have managed to obtain enough political autonomy for themselves that allows them to remain essentially outside of government oversight.

The largest Iran-backed militia, Badr, is represented in parliament by the Badr political organization, which is part of the State of Law coalition in the Shiite National Alliance. Badr's political representation is reflected by its 22 out of 328 seats in parliament.³¹ Hadi al-Amiri serves as both the military commander as well as its political leader, being both a current member of parliament,

³¹ "Principal Shiite militias in Iraq", 2016.

Hashd Representation in Parliament



Source: <https://tools.wmflabs.org/parliamentdiagram/parliamentinputform.htm>

as well as having served as the Minister of Transportation from 2010 to 2014.³² Badr also has control of the Ministry of Interior, and the recently appointed minister, Qasim al-Araji, a Badr member, gives Amiri expanded powers in the cabinet.³³ It is estimated that more than 70% of employees in the Ministry of Interior, responsible for security and border control, are loyal to the militias.³⁴ Asaib Ahl al-Haq, which ran under the al-Sadiqoun list (under the State of Law bloc) in the 2014 parliamentary elections, is represented by one seat in

³² Ibid.

³³ "Iraq parliament approves new defense, interior ministers: state TV", *Reuters*, Jan. 30, 2017, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-government-idUSKBN15E1RO>

³⁴ Parker, 2015.

parliament.³⁵ Kataib Hezbollah does not currently have a political wing, however, its commander, Abu Mahdi al-Mohandis is extremely politically influential as the unofficial head of the Hashd al-Shaabi commission. Sadr also has quite a large political influence, as his political wing, al-Ahrar, currently has 34 out of 328 seats in parliament. The ISCI-affiliated Ashura Brigades, under the Muwatin political bloc, was the largest bloc in the Iraqi parliament from 2003 until the 2010 parliamentary elections. Currently, they are represented by 29 out of the 328 seats in parliament.³⁶ In addition, Ammar al-Hakim was recently elected the head of the Shiite National Alliance, which grants ISCI even further power and influence over the political process in Iraq. In total, as seen in the diagram above, the number of members of parliament associated with a Hashd

militia amounts to 86 MPs, which is slightly less than a third of the entire parliament.

The strong political representation of the Iran-aligned militias has resulted in a political system that is heavily pro-Iranian. The Hashd commission receives \$1 billion annually from the Iraqi state budget,³⁷ however, the Iran-backed Hashd are mainly dependent on Iran, from which they receive training, weapons and financial support.³⁸ This support has resulted in a complex system of loyalties and alliances, where the Iran-backed groups are nominally under the control of the Iraqi state and participate politically, however, many of them enjoy close relationships to Iranian figures, in particular Qassem Soleimani, and have declared loyalty to Iran.³⁹

37 Mansour, 2015.

38 Ranj Alaaldin, "Iran's Weak Grip: How Much Control Does Tehran Have Over Shia Militias in Iraq?", *Foreign Affairs*, Feb. 11, 2016, available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2016-02-11/irans-weak-grip>

39 Parker, 2015.

35 "Principal Shiite militias in Iraq", 2016.

36 Ibid.

Prime Minister Abadi has a complex and tenuous relationship with the Hashd al-Shaabi. The Hashd commission nominally reports to him as the commander in chief, however, Abadi has little leverage over the militias. Much of his time as prime minister has been focused on trying to check and contain the power and influence of the Hashd in order to stabilize his own position as prime minister. While Abadi is nominally opposed to much of what the Hashd al-Shaabi stand for, particularly the fact that many of the leaders are able to act “above the law”,⁴⁰ publically, he has supported the institutionalization of the Hashd in an effort to co-opt their popularity to bolster his own position. He often refers to both the Iraqi armed forces and the Hashd in press conferences when speaking about victories against ISIS⁴¹ in an effort to portray the

Hashd as under his control, and on an equal level with the armed forces. He also has tried to gain control of the Hashd through several of his own decrees, notably Executive Decree 91, which nominally places the Hashd under his control.⁴² However, these efforts have been largely ineffective against the political clout and Iranian support that the Hashd enjoy.

On November 26, 2016, the Iraqi parliament voted into law the Hashd al-Shaabi Commission Law, which formally recognizes the Hashd as a permanent institution of the Iraqi government.⁴³ It was ratified with the support of the Shiite National Alliance, and was passed with a majority of 208 votes.⁴⁴ Under this

42 “Vague Hashd Law Preserves Existing Ambiguities”, *Inside Iraqi Politics* No. 144, Dec. 10, 2016.

43 Michael Momayezi, Emily Anagnostos, “Iraqi Situation Report: November 18-30, 2016”, *Institute for the Study of War*, Nov. 30, 2016, available at <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2016/11/iraq-situation-report-november-18-30.html>

44 “Hashd Law Strains Political Process”, *Inside Iraqi Politics* No. 144,

40 Clark and Mansour, 2016.

41 “Turkey’s Role a New Test for Abadi”, *Inside Iraqi Politics* No. 140, Oct. 8, 2016.

new law, the Hashd militias “shall be a part of the Iraqi armed forces, subordinate to the commander in chief of the armed forces”.⁴⁵ In theory, the law is meant to detail the Hashd’s integration into the Iraqi state, specifically regarding their structure and command, as it attempts to bring the Hashd under the control of the government. However, due to staunch Sunni opposition to the law—many Sunni MPs walked out of the parliamentary session in opposition⁴⁶—the law itself is somewhat vague. While it does state that Hashd fighters will receive salaries and pensions, similar to the armed forces, the law does not provide any explanation for the enforcement of the articles, and therefore, it can be assumed that the Hashd factions will retain their

connections to politicians as well as their political wings. It also lacks specifics regarding how the Hashd will be integrated into the state security apparatus, and whether the Hashd will be able to maintain its current structure and commanders.

The Future of the Hashd al-Shaabi

The Hashd’s command of popular legitimacy in Iraq, as evident from the significant number of volunteers it managed to recruit after the ISIS takeover of Mosul, is likely to increase its influence and strengthen the political role it plays in Iraqi politics in the post-ISIS period. Most Hashd leaders and commanders have publicly stated that they intend to continue to operate as militias, and have rejected suggestions that the Hashd should be dissolved or integrated into the armed forces following the defeat of ISIS from Iraq. They have also been very clear about their ambitions to increase

Dec. 10, 2016.

45 Ibid.

46 Omar Sattar, “How Iraq’s PMU Law is Disrupting National Unity Efforts”, *Al Monitor*, Dec. 14, 2016, available at <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/12/national-settlement-pmu-law-iraq.html>

their political standing and influence, by which they have also expressed their determination in running in the upcoming provincial and parliamentary elections.

The Hashd, as it currently stands, is in a position to emerge as a powerbroker within the current Iraqi political system. Their participation and military successes in the battles against ISIS and their popularity among the Iraqi public have allowed them to emerge as an alternative institution to what many view as a corrupt and inefficient central government. The Hashd's institutionalization as a permanent security force ensures their preservation as a group, however, they will continue to act as an autonomous actor. This will also cause the Hashd to play a destabilizing role on the Iraqi political scene by exacerbating the intra-Shia rivalry in Baghdad, and by pushing a pro-Shia, pro-Iranian sectarian agenda.

Institutionalization, Yet Continued Autonomy

The Hashd, mainly as a result of the recently passed Hashd al-Shaabi law, have become institutionalized within the Iraqi state, which formally ensures the continuation of these armed groups as a military organization, immune from pressures to dissolve. This law also indirectly guarantees the Hashd's future as a strong political influencer. However, the lack of enforcement mechanisms provided in the Hashd al-Shaabi law, as well as Abadi's unstable position as prime minister will allow the Hashd to continue to act in an autonomous manner.

Many Sunni politicians were pushing for the dissolution of the Hashd in the aftermath of the defeat of ISIS, in the hopes that their disbandment would prevent the further formalization of Iran's role in Iraq and to prevent further abuses by some Hashd units against Sunni civilians fleeing liberated areas. However,

the passing of the Hashd al-Shaabi law has essentially negated these efforts. The establishment of the Hashd as a formal institution of the Iraqi armed forces ensures that the Hashd can continue to act as a military organization even past the defeat of ISIS, and can claim this law as legal recognition from the state when faced with pressure to dissolve or integrate. Recognition by the prime minister also cements their future. In response to the Hashd bill, Abadi stated that the legalization of the Hashd al-Shaabi will allow it to become a force that “will represent and defend all Iraqis, wherever they are”.⁴⁷

However, despite this institutionalization, the Hashd will remain only nominally under the control of the central government due to the vague nature of the law,

Hashd leaders’ rejection of institutionalization, as well as Abadi’s inability to control the Hashd. The lack of specifics in the Hashd al-Shaabi law leaves many details of the future of the Hashd unclear. The way this law currently stands, details of the Hashd command structure, including its leadership and loyalties are somewhat ambiguous, and it is unlikely that these uncertainties will be clarified. In order to resolve these issues, parliament will either need to pass additional laws or amendments, however, due to the Shia political rivalry in politics, as well as Sunni opposition to the legalization of the Hashd, it is likely to be a very difficult and long-drawn out process if Abadi were to push for further legislation. Therefore, despite now considered a permanent institution of the Iraqi state, the Hashd is likely to retain its relatively autonomous command structure.

In addition, the political power that Hashd commanders

47 “Iraq’s Parliament Passes Law Legalising Shia Militias”, *Al Jazeera*, Nov. 26, 2016, available at <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/11/iraq-parliament-passes-law-legalising-shia-militias-161126133010696.html>

currently enjoy makes it unlikely that they will accept the integration and submission of the militias to the state. Hadi al-Amiri of the Badr Organization has stressed the importance of the Hashd continuing to protect the Iraqi people even after the defeat of ISIS, which indicates an inclination towards the continuation of the Hashd presence both within the military and political sphere.⁴⁸ An Asaib Ahl al-Haq commander stated that his fighters will not integrate and join the Iraqi security forces, and his militia will continue to operate militarily as long as there are Sunni extremist groups in Iraq.⁴⁹ As it currently stands, the Hashd is a horizontal organization, with each

militia reporting directly to its own commander. Thus, it is unlikely that the commanders of each militia would be willing to give up their status as commander and individual political ambitions in order to dismantle the Hashd and integrate it into the Iraqi armed forces.

In conjunction with the Hashd leaders' rejection of formalized integration, Abadi's unstable position as prime minister will also allow the Hashd to maintain its current autonomous command structure. Abadi's lack of control over the Hashd is evident, as during the April 2015 battle to liberate Tikrit, the Hashd attacked civilian sectors of the city without informing the prime minister or the Ministry of Defense of their plans.⁵⁰ The security forces are also aware of the Hashd's autonomy, and as one police commander in Tikrit, a governorate with considerable Hashd influence, stated, "We don't have any authority over

48 Adnan Abu Zeed, "Iraq mulls post-IS role for PMU", *Al Monitor*, Aug. 22, 2016, available at <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/08/pmu-iraq-army-national-guard.html>

49 Stephen Kalin, "Iraq's Shi'ite Militias Could Prove Bigger Test than Mosul", *Reuters*, Dec. 1, 2016, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-militias-insight-idUSKBN13Q4AJ>

50 Parker, 2015.

them (the militias). They are a state inside a state”.⁵¹ The Hashd have also been accused of numerous cases of abuse and intimidation of civilians, into which the government has launched inquiries, yet has produced little results. While Abadi hopes that gaining control of the Hashd, even in name only, will bolster himself as prime minister, further efforts by Abadi will likely result in backlash from the Iran-aligned Hashd and could further weaken his position. All of these elements, the ambiguity of the Hashd al-Shaabi law, refusal of Hashd commanders to integrate, as well as Abadi’s failure to control the Hashd militias guarantees their status as militias outside of government control.

Intra-Shia Rivalry: Competition among Hashd Factions

While the fight to liberate Iraq from ISIS has dominated much of the political dialogue in Baghdad, the underlying

conflict between the main Shia political actors has persisted and has caused the political and economic instability that Iraq is currently facing. The main political rivalry likely to take place following the defeat of ISIS will occur between the three main Shia political actors; Prime Minister Abadi, former Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, and Sadr. The Hashd, in particular the Iran-aligned groups and the Sadrists, will contribute to this instability by using their political influence to push for their own agendas. This political antagonism will also play a role in the outcomes of the upcoming provincial and parliamentary elections.

The Hashd will continue to contribute to, and further this intra-Shia rivalry currently dominating the Baghdad political scene. In particular, the Iran-aligned militias, as well as Maliki, will seek to further destabilize Prime Minister Abadi in order to delegitimize him and bolster their own political standing, as

⁵¹ Kalin, 2016.

a strong central government under Abadi weakens the power and autonomy of the Hashd. Maliki was pushed out of power following the fall of Mosul to ISIS in June 2014, as his sectarian policies and corruption were viewed as the cause of the failure of the Iraqi armed forces to protect Iraq from ISIS, and Abadi, another Dawa party representative, took up the post of prime minister.⁵² However, following Abadi's appointment, the Dawa party split into two camps; those who support Abadi and those who support Maliki and his efforts to discredit the Abadi administration. Maliki and his Hashd allies will most likely attempt this by trying to thwart any further reform efforts proposed by Abadi, by supporting his opponents and by further contributing to the intra-Shia conflicts in Baghdad. Several of the top Hashd commanders are closely aligned with Maliki,⁵³

and are likely to support him in the upcoming elections, as he more closely represents their interests. These Hashd factions joined Maliki's Reform Front during the sit-in of parliament in April 2016, and also supported the impeachment of ministers aligned with Abadi.⁵⁴ Asaib Ahl al-Haq previously allied with Maliki during the 2014 elections,⁵⁵ and the other Iran-aligned militias are likely to do as well in the upcoming elections. By supporting Maliki and pushing to keep Abadi in a weak position in order to maintain their autonomy and political power, these Iran-aligned groups will play a destabilizing role on Iraqi politics.

security deal", *Al Monitor*, Dec. 13, 2016, available at <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/12/nouri-maliki-iraq-pmu-us-turkey.html>

54 Patrick Martin and Emily Anagnostos, "Iraq's Prime Minister Abadi Attempts to Reshuffle the Cabinet", *Institute for the Study of War*, March 13, 2016, available at <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2016/03/iraqs-prime-minister-abadi-attempts-to.html>

55 "Principal Shiite militias in Iraq", 2016.

52 Parker, 2015.

53 Omar Sattar, "Former Iraqi PM: US could have stopped IS with 2008

Muqtada al-Sadr is another contentious actor contributing to the intra-Shia conflict in Baghdad. The conflict between Muqtada al-Sadr and the Iran-backed militias is likely to be one of the focal points of post-ISIS politics. Sadr has a shaky relationship with much of the Shia elite, as he neither positions himself as a Maliki nor Abadi ally, but rather wavers between the two based on whom he sees as less corrupt and more likely to follow his interests. Despite commanding his own Hashd militia, Sadr is much more nationalistic, and opposes much of what Maliki and the Iran-aligned Hashd stand for. Abadi is currently being pressured by both of these actors; Maliki and the militias are attempting to weaken him by impeaching ministers allied with him, while Sadr is pushing for a complete overhaul of the political system. Sadr's push for technocratic reforms in what he views as a largely ineffective and corrupt

political system led to his storming of the Green Zone in April 2016, as well as his recent demands for reforms of the electoral commission, which resulted in violent protests in February 2017.⁵⁶ He has also stated that the participation of the Hashd al-Shaabi in the upcoming elections would be "suicide for the political process", and has called for the new Hashd law to be inclusive and non-sectarian.⁵⁷ These statements, as well as his position as a populist leader with a large following have jarred Maliki and the Iran-backed Hashd militias, and will likely result in conflict between the Sadrists, Maliki allies, and the current government and will further destabilize the political process.

56 "Inter-Shi'ite Tension Mounts in Baghdad After Clashes", *Reuters*, Feb. 12, 2017, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-sadr-idUSKBN15ROED>

57 Omar Al-Jaffal, "Will Popular Mobilization Units Participate in Iraqi Elections?", *Al Monitor*, Sep. 4, 2016, available at <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/09/popular-mobilization-iraq-election.html>

As opposed to the Iran-aligned Hashd militias, who are pushing for their own interests in the Iraqi political system, the Sistani-aligned militias are much more nationalistic and oppose the increasing role of Iran. While Sistani himself does not take an active role in politics, he is nonetheless an influential voice in the political sphere. He has spoken out against the presence of Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani in Iraq directing Hashd groups involved in military operations, and has also supported Abadi's efforts at reform.⁵⁸ Sistani's religious legitimacy among the Shia community could position him as yet another actor in this conflict among the Shia elite, if he chooses to take a more active role in politics. However, due to the comparably smaller and weaker nature of the Sistani-aligned militias, it is likely to be difficult to present a strong front to counter

58 Matthew Schweitzer, "The Future for Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units", *Education for Peace in Iraq Center*, Jan. 18, 2017, available at <http://www.epic-usa.org/pmu-future/>

the influence of the Iranian militias.

All of these political and sectarian factors are likely to culminate in the provincial and parliamentary elections, which, as of publication of this article, are scheduled to take place in September 2017 and mid-2018, respectively. The Hashd have acquired immense popular support, as a poll indicated that more than 99 percent of Iraqi Shias support the Hashd,⁵⁹ thus many factions are hoping to base their campaign strategies on their participation in the fight against ISIS, and Hashd commanders have made clear their intent to run. The spokesman of the Hashd commission, Karim al-Nuri, has said that the Hashd do indeed have political ambitions, which he states is justified through their participation in the military operations against ISIS and their contribution to the

59 Renad Mansour, "The Popularity of the Hashd in Iraq", *Carnegie Middle East Center*, Feb. 1, 2016, available at <http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/62638>

victories, and thus should be rewarded with political representation.⁶⁰ Hadi al-Amiri has stated that his long-term political ambitions are to win a substantial number of provincial council seats in the 2017 elections, which he intends to use as a jumping-off point for the parliamentary elections in order to increase Badr's representation in parliament and the cabinet.⁶¹ Similarly, despite his anti-Hashd rhetoric, Sadr has every intention of participating in the elections through his Ahrar bloc, and his popularity as a populist leader pushing for reforms is likely to support his electoral campaign. However, the difference in ideological and political viewpoints among the different Hashd groups could feasibly result in conflict and competition between them, as they vie to position

themselves as the legitimate Hashd al-Shaabi, and to co-opt its popularity. This could lead to political stalemate in the period leading up to the elections, as well as disagreements and potential clashes come election season.

Iranian Interference

The political and military dominance of the Iran-aligned militias also points to a likely increase in Iranian influence in Iraq in the post-ISIS period. The formal institutionalization of the Hashd provides a stable base from which to promote their pro-Shia, pro-Iranian agenda, and the political paralysis in Baghdad creates an opening for pro-Iranian actors to strengthen their foothold in the political process.

The institutionalization of the Hashd militias as a permanent branch of the Iraqi armed forces also gives these Iranian proxies a permanent position in the Iraqi state from which to advance a pro-Iranian agenda. Given that the Iran-backed

⁶⁰ Ali Taher, "Iraqis wary of political role for Popular Mobilization Units", *Al Monitor*, July 21, 2016, available at <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/07/basra-pmu-khomeini-iraq-iran.html>

⁶¹ Abu Zeed, 2016.

militias receive the majority of their support from Iran, rather than the Iraqi state, they are likely to continue to push for further recognition of Iranian interests by acting as their proxies in parliament and in the ministries. The participation of the Hashd in the battles against ISIS will allow Iran to take a more influential role, especially in the regions where the Hashd are currently fighting. Qassem Soleimani has been seen in Iraq several times helping to coordinate military offenses against ISIS,⁶² and many of the Hashd leaders and commanders enjoy a close relationship with him and other high-level Iranian officials. Loyalty to Iran is a common factor across the Iran-aligned militias, and some commanders wish to further formalize the role of the Hashd. Former Prime Minister Maliki, as well as Hashd commission head Abu Mahdi al-Mohandis seek to establish the Hashd as a permanent security ministry

inside the framework of the government, emulating the Revolutionary Guard model in Iran.⁶³ This is especially probable if Maliki is successful in his return to power, as he is backed by several of the Iran-aligned militias, which are pushing for the further institutionalization of the Hashd and for further Iranian influence. However, unlike the IRGC in Iran, the Hashd are a diverse group of actors, which could hamper further institutionalization, as not all of the groups are pushing for the same outcome. Sadr and his Peace Companies, as well as ISCI's Ashura Brigades are much more nationalistic, and reject any foreign, especially Iranian interference in Iraqi affairs. Even among the Iranian-backed factions, it is unlikely that the leaders will be completely apolitical and willing to surrender their political status to one commander to lead such a Hashd structure, therefore, in the short-term at least, a completely unified Hashd

⁶² Sowell, 2015.

⁶³ Knights, 2016.

group is unlikely.

Prime Minister Abadi's inability to effectively control the militias, as well as the Hashd al-Shaabi law presents an opening for Iran and its proxies to further cement their control and influence on the Iraqi political scene. Abadi and the political system are often susceptible to the political influence and lobbying of the Hashd in light of their political clout. In early 2016, under pressure from the Badr organization and Abu Mahdi al-Mohandis, Abadi increased the Hashd's budget to \$1 billion from the Iraqi state budget, which is allocated towards their training and equipment.⁶⁴ In addition, the Iran-backed groups, who were heavily pushing for their participation in the Mosul offensive, were successful in lobbying and pressuring Abadi to allow Hashd forces into Tel Afar.⁶⁵ Despite facing

intense international and domestic pressure to prohibit the Hashd from participating in the offensive,⁶⁶ Hashd politicians were successful in their lobbying attempt. Hadi al-Amiri in particular lobbied on behalf of the Hashd groups to ensure their participation in Tel Afar, and to close this western corridor connecting Mosul and Raqqa.⁶⁷ The persuasive power that the Iran-backed militias are able to exert over Abadi and the political process indicates that they will be able to and will continue to push for Iranian

at <http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-iraq-mosul-analysis-idUKKBN13WIH3>

⁶⁶ Abadi was able to prevent the Hashd from entering Mosul proper during the offensive, which the Hashd acceded to in order to appear as a responsible actor, however, the Hashd have been engaged in this offensive in other ways to develop their influence in this area; through their operation in Tel Afar, and by sending humanitarian aid convoys into liberated areas of Mosul which clearly display Hashd flags and symbols. John Davison, "Shi'ite Aid Convoys enter Mosul, Bringing Relief and Suspicion", *Reuters*, March 22, 2017, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-mosul-aid-idUSKBN16T24H>

⁶⁷ Evans, Chmaytelli and Markey, 2016.

⁶⁴ Mansour, 2015.

⁶⁵ Dominic Evans, Maher Chmaytelli and Patrick Markey, "How Iran closed the Mosul 'horseshoe' and changed Iraq war", *Reuters*, Dec. 7, 2016, available

interests. The lack of detail in the Hashd al-Shaabi law also allows the Hashd will continue to follow orders from their backers, which in this case will allow Iran to maintain control of the militias, and continue to expand their influence in both the political and military sphere. Combined with their leverage over Abadi, this influence that the Hashd have over the decision-making process of the Iraqi government is indicative of a future role of the Hashd, in which they are likely to increase their political weight and sway additional policies in favor of Iranian interests.

Conclusions

While the Hashd al-Shaabi have been established as a permanent institution of the Iraqi armed forces, many ambiguities still remain regarding their status and structure in post-ISIS Iraq. The diverse group of militias that comprise the Hashd al-Shaabi umbrella organization are motivated by different

elements within the Iraqi political environment, and they are also backed by a number of varying actors. However, despite the various points of divergence between the different militias, it is clear that the Hashd will remain a dominant and influential actor in Iraqi politics and military affairs in the long run.

While the liberation of Mosul is still ongoing, the defeat of ISIS in Iraq is imminent. Both through their successes on the battlefield and the view that they are much more efficient and stable than the political system or even the Iraqi armed forces, the Hashd al-Shaabi have accumulated considerable popularity and respect from the Iraqi public, which positions them as a strong political actor for the future. The passing of the Hashd al-Shaabi law cements the formal institutionalization of these militias, however, the Hashd are not likely to consolidate into one group under the state, but rather, will maintain its current

autonomous leadership structure. In addition, as the dominant Hashd groups are pro-Shia and pro-Iranian, they will have a destabilizing effect on the political institutions in Baghdad, as they are likely to prevent further reform efforts, heighten intra-Shia competition, as well as allow for an expanded Iranian role in Iraq.

The Hashd's popularity among the Iraqi Shia community overshadows the little respect that people have for the Iraqi central government, which uniquely positions them as powerful influencers with considerable political sway over policy-making in Iraq. The parliamentary elections, while still more than a year away, will act as proof of the popularity of the Hashd and cement their presence and political ambitions, as many of the more established groups are likely to experience electoral success. The relationship between the Hashd and the Iraqi state is

likely to disintegrate further, as the passing of the Hashd law has created outrage and apprehension among Iraqi minorities, who fear the further institutionalization, as well as indirect legalization of Hashd activities. As Iraq enters into the post-ISIS period, efforts at stabilization in liberated areas are likely to be rocky, and so the Hashd may view this as an opportunity to further their ambitions.

The liberation of Iraq from ISIS presents a unique opportunity for the Iraqi government to embark on a program of improved state building, one that will affect Iraqi politics in the long run. However, this also provides a challenge for policy-makers in Baghdad, as the fight against ISIS has acted as a diversion from the underlying causes of the political impasse. Policy makers will need to start to address these issues head-on in order to set Iraq on the path towards political stability and

competence once ISIS has been defeated, specifically focusing the role of the Hashd al-Shaabi, and how they will affect national stabilization and reconciliation efforts.

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