Clingendael
Netherlands Institute of International Relations

Mapping and tracking the power, relations and attitudes of Iraq's Al-Hashd al-Sha'abi

Methodology note

To the reader:
- This document clarifies the methodological choices that underlie our mapping and tracking project of the power base, relations and attitudes (towards the Iraqi state) of selected Iraqi Al-Hashd al-Sha'abi groups in 2017-2018.
- It complements an excel spreadsheet that contains the content of our methodology, i.e. how we have operationalized our key concepts through indicators and variables.

Conflict Research Unit (CRU) – Netherlands Institute of International Relations 'Clingendael'

This note is part of the Levant research program on hybrid security organizations:
https://www.clingendael.org/research-program/levant

The Hague, June 2018

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1. Context

Much has already been written about the Iraqi Al-Hashd al-Sha'abi (hereafter abbreviated to 'Hashd'). Also known as the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), or Popular Mobilization Forces (PFM), the institution is basically an umbrella term denoting a wide variety of paramilitary groups that operate both inside and outside the remit of the Iraqi state at the same time. Existing work has generally taken the form of reports that are based on a mix of interviews and literature review by analysts such as Renad Mansour (2018), Fanar Haddad (2018), Renad Mansour and Faleh Jabar (2017), Renad Mansour and Erwin van Veen (2017), Dylan O'Driscoll and Dave van Zoonen (2017) and Abbas (2017). What these analyses have in common is that they are largely qualitative, consider the Hashd as an organizational entity and focus on the likely future of this institution in relation to the Iraqi state (in particular its security establishment). In addition, there is a smaller number of pieces that discuss individual Hashd groups, such as Steinberg (2017) or the [Mapping Militant Organizations](#) project at Stanford University. Finally, there is work that brings together the many media utterances and daily reports on the Hashd on a more anecdotal basis, such as the 'PMF Pulse' provided by the US Embassy in Baghdad. In sum, there is a lack of more detailed and more quantitative analysis of individual Hashd groups in relation to each other and with the Iraqi state that allows comparative and longitudinal analysis at the level of particular groups.

2. Objectives

The purpose of the Hashd 'mapping and tracking' project at Clingendael is to deliver against two objectives that have the potential to complement the more qualitative and more generic analyses referenced:

1. To quantitatively analyse and visualize three key dimensions of selected Hashd groups: 1) their attitude towards the concept of the Iraqi state (its capacity to engage in legitimate coercion in particular), 2) their power base and 3) their relationships with one another and with key Iraqi state security forces;

2. To conduct comparative and longitudinal analysis of the development of selected Hashd groups of these three dimensions by producing regular data snapshots.

To this end, we have operationalized 'attitudes', 'power' and 'relations' via sets of variables and indicators that we use to code reporting on the Hashd by tracking a fixed set of open-access sources on a regular basis. Where evidence is found that meets one or several indicators, it is recorded and coded. We monitor 'power' and 'relations' of selected Hashd groups for 3-4-month periods and then produce an aggregated snapshot of key developments.

As 'attitudes' take longer to change and are more difficult to quantify, we allow for greater fluidity in our data collection and also include evidence that pre-dates the monitoring period. As more snapshots of aggregated data become available over time, we will put more focus on longitudinal analysis.

This project is part of Clingendael's Levant research program that looks at the impact of hybrid security organizations on state performance and development in Syria and Iraq. The program's outputs can be found here: https://www.clingendael.org/research-program/levant.

3. Basic methodology

Group selection. The existing range of significant Hashd groups, i.e. groups that have a membership that goes beyond a few hundred fighters, feature political representation at the national level and/or exercise territorial control that includes more than a dozen villages, can be divided into three categories:

- Pro-Iran Shi'a groups that accept the Iranian political-religious governance model, have close ties with Iranian security forces and receive a form of Iranian support.
- Pro-Iraq Shi'a groups that reject the Iranian model, are instead affiliated with an Iraqi school of Shi'a religious thought and are more nationalist in outlook.
- Sunni and minority groups that are more local in nature.

In addition, there are the Iraqi Security Forces who represent the logical state counterparts to the Hashd. Note that the Peshmerga are regional security forces according to the Iraqi constitution and, in any case, do not fall under the institution of the Hashd as it is currently configured. We selected a total of nine organizations to track as per table 1 below (7 Hashd groups and two state security organizations).

Table 1: Selected Hashd groups for our mapping and tracking effort

Pro-Iran Shi'a groups	Pro-Iraq Shi'a groups	Sunni/minority groups	Iraqi Security Forces
Asaib ahl al-Haq	Abbas combat division	Hashd al-Ashaari (Sunni)	Iraqi Army
Badr corps	Saraya al-Salam	Sinjar resistance units (Yezidi)	Iraqi Federal Police
Kataib Hezbollah			

Group selection was done on the basis of: 1) sufficient group size/importance (see above, e.g. groups with fewer than a few thousand fighters were excluded), 2) availability of an adequate volume of news/reporting/analysis and 3) accounting for key differences *within* each category of Hashd groups while avoiding duplication.

Two illustrations will help make the approach to group selection more concrete. For example, the Badr corps is the largest but most ambiguous of the pro-Iran Shi'a groups while Kataib Hezbollah is the smallest and least ambiguous. We included both. Alternatively, the Abbas combat division and Saraya al-Salam are both pro-Iraq Shi'a groups. But where the former is affiliated with the traditional clergy/shrines in Najaf, the latter reflects Al-Sadr's own and more 'rebellious' school of religious thought (from a Najafi perspective, that is). Hence, we included both. In contrast, both the Abbas combat division and the Ali al-Akbar combat division are Najaf affiliated brigades. As the Abbas combat division is larger and more accessible, we excluded the Ali al-Akbar combat division.

On the whole, we feel that the seven Hashd groups included adequately represent the institution as a whole. The exception to this statement of confidence is our ability to capture small group and/or localized dynamics of power and control, but this is less relevant to understanding the national impact of particular Hashd groups on the development of the Iraqi state.[1]

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[1] Good research on the more micro-level is available here: http://www.gppi.net/publications/iraq-after-isil-an-analysis-of-local-regional-and-sub-state-security-forces/ (accessed 11 June 2018).

Along the lines of the same logic, the Iraqi Army and Iraqi Federal Police are the most relevant Iraqi security institutions at the national level since the Iraqi Police and Peshmerga operate locally, while the Counter-Terrorism Division technically has a specific thematic remit.

Operationalization of key concepts. Although our three key concepts for tracking the development of selected Hashd groups - attitudes towards the Iraqi state, power and relations – are developed in detail in the excel spreadsheet that comes with this note, a few short methodological remarks are nevertheless appropriate.

- *Attitudes* are operationalized via three indicators only that specifically seek to map how selected Hashd groups view the Iraqi state. We have kept this operationalization simple (i.e. we did not quantify our indicators) because attitudes shift slowly over longer amounts of time and, as a result, sophisticated indicator sets may not actually be required to capture changes adequately. Instead, our approach is to identify broad shifts based on evidence collected from our sources against three straightforward indicators triggering broader qualitative assessment.

- *Power* is operationalized through five dimensions that we felt are relevant to the political/security situation in Iraq, including socio-religious legitimacy and holding territory that complement more obvious sources of power like coercive and security, economic and financial as well as political capabilities. Some of our indicators and variables are necessarily proxies (e.g. the numbers of followers on social media as one indicator of socio-political legitimacy) and others will be adapted or discontinued if they prove too hard to track (e.g. the number of assassinations as indicator of coercive power). We introduced at least three variables per dimension to allow for triangulation and some attrition.

- *Relations* are operationalized through three dimensions that create a hierarchy of relationships based on operational (weak), interest (medium) and value compatibility (strong) to account for multi-level sets of relations and for apparent contradictions such as strong operational relationships that are not underpinned by strong shared values.

Source selection. Through initial exploratory research, we identified three key categories of online, open-access sources that seemed the most relevant to mapping and tracking Hashd groups because they publish relevant items with sufficient frequency and detail:

- Local, regional and international media outlets, i.e. online newspapers, online TV and online radio
- Think tank reports
- Social media accounts (Facebook, Twitter and websites) of relevant individuals, groups and state institutions

Within these categories, we initially selected 43 sources that covered key media outlets, think tanks and relevant social media accounts of the individuals, groups and institutions we selected for inclusion. After a short, initial monitoring period, we drew two conclusions:

- Many sources were not active or updated with sufficient regularity to warrant continued monitoring. This was particularly the case for several social media accounts.
- The range of sources generated far too much information to handle within available time and capacity. Especially watching and coding footage of local online TV news channels proved to be beyond our feasibility.

We subsequently reduced our list of fixed sources to 23 by removing inactive or insufficiently updated accounts and by decreasing our local media outlets from 7 to 4 (now limited to online 'newspapers'). We do not think that this undermined the overall representativeness of the data we collect because we chose the most neutral of the local media outlets and because the overall group size of 23 remains sufficiently large for triangulation.

Finally, we assigned a value to each source between 0 and 1 to denote its frequency and therefore the rate with which it needs to be monitored. Sources with a value of 0.25 are monitored monthly (think tanks), those with a value of 0.5 are monitored weekly (most social media accounts and regional/international media outlets) and those with a value of 1 are – in principle - monitored daily (local media outlets). In addition, we have assigned each source a reliability scoring between 0 and 1 that allows to weigh each coded incident based on the reliability or bias of its reporting.

Time periods. To generate analytical snapshots of the attitude, power and relations of the Hashd that aggregate the individual data points we collect, we proceeded as follows:

- We first created a baseline for the period January-September 2017 as the Hashd were still fighting the Islamic State in this period, in close collaboration with the security forces of the Iraqi state and the Peshmerga. This period includes the reconquest of Mosul in July 2017 and its aftermath. We view it as representative of the wartime relations and dynamics of the Hashd between 2014 and 2017. It should be highlighted that we applied a lite-version of our methodology to generate the baseline, with data gathering and coding limited to short narrative descriptions at the dimensional level of our methodology that we subsequently coded (see the corresponding excel spreadsheet). As back-coding is time-consuming and more difficult, feasibility was our guiding principle.

- Our second monitoring period runs from March to May (elections) 2018. We timed this period to commence well after the fall of Mosul in July 2017 and without having to do more time-consuming back-coding (our 'mapping and tracking' project was designed between January-March 2018). The period includes the Iraqi elections of 2018. In short, we selected the period because it is likely to feature an important shift from the battlefield to the ballot box in how the Hashd behave and position themselves.

- Our third monitoring runs period from June to September 2018. This period was chosen on two grounds. First, if we can sustain our monitoring effort, we would like to do so in four-month intervals as we work on the assumption that these are long enough to meaningfully identify trends in Hashd power, relations or attitudes. Second, the period covers a good bit of the likely protracted post-election phase of coalition formation, negotiations and portfolio allocations and might therefore highlight yet further changes in Hashd positioning and behaviour.

4. Methodological questions and challenges

To test our methodology, we organized internal peer review workshops on 21 and 27 February 2018 with six other members of Clingendael's Conflict Research Unit. This generated 14 points of feedback of which the most salient ones are reflected below, together with how we decided to address them:

#	Comment	'Solution'
1	Why is there no weighting of variables? For example, based on: a) the number of sources b) the quality of information c) proxy v true variables?	We introduced a reliability weighting of sources (reliability = basic level of bias + accuracy as measured). We will initially use a 3-point scale: • Low reliability: 1) social media accounts, 2) media channels owned by Hashd individuals or groups; • Medium reliability: 1) neutral local media channels; • High reliability: 1) peer reviewed sources; 2) international media. Values can be re-assigned based on the results and insights that come from a longer period of data collection.
4	Will there be additional sources beyond those listed?	We will identify a set of additional sources to assess the factual elements of certain variables when putting the baseline analysis together.
6	How will you deal with methodology adjustments while gathering data, and the associated adjustments of data coding it may require? In the case where factual errors are discovered after data is recorded, how will such errors be considered or corrected?	• Methodological errors will be filtered out in the peer review and eliminated during the first period of real-time data collection. • Factual errors will be corrected on a case by case basis, also if they arise afterwards. • Source errors will be addressed either directly through the reliability weighting (in cases of data conflicts) or by adjusting source reliability weighing value after one or several data collection periods if the original rating turns out to be too positive or too negative.
7	Will you seek to directly measure how groups perceive each other's legitimacy? If not, why not?	This will not be done through the quantitative part of our methodology, but through the additional qualitative analysis that goes into each policy brief (see 'outputs'). Quantitative data cues on relevant power and relation scores will be considered of course.
10	How will you deal with 'confounding' / intervening variables?	This research model is a descriptive analysis that takes a snap shot of the different structures of power, attitudes and relationship at different points in time. There are no causal assumptions or claims.
11	How will you deal with the data difference between a tweet and a Carnegie report?	The volume of data points per source is likely to differ considerably. The reliability of each source will be taken into account as described and co-determine the influence of each data point on value scores.

5. Strengths and weakness of the evidence

Our methodology enables the development of analysis with strong foundational evidence because of several of its elements:

- It allows for triangulation by using a diverse set of open sources, including think tank reports, online media reporting, and personal social media accounts in both Arabic and English. In addition, by using flexible reliability scorings, we allow a weighing of data points to ensure a more objective triangulation.

- It establishes a consistent process that allows for robust comparative analysis between groups, dimensions, and monitoring periods. This is achieved through a methodology for each variable that gives each coded incident a value between -5 and +5.

- It generates a representative understanding of the range of Hashd by having selected groups with varying power capabilities, inter-group relations, and attitudes towards the Iraqi state.

- It allows deep dive analysis of each Hashd group across a list of variables and indicators that make sure a comprehensive and multi-layered understanding can be achieved.

Inevitably, our methodology also features shortcomings, including:

- Online open sources can be superficial or correct in their treatment of an incident. They typically benefit from qualitative assessment and field work analysis to develop a better grasp of their specifics as well as the bigger picture in which they are situated.

- Reporting can generate disproportionate evidence on particular groups and/or indicators/variables and this can create bias in our observations.

- Evidence for some variables and indicators is only publicized and circulated after their incidence. This limits our ability to record changes in real-time and creates a lag in our analysis.

This section will be updated to reflect the insights we will gain with each aggregated data snapshot that we produce.

6. Outputs

The basic output per monitoring period for this research project will be a policy brief of 4-6 pages that develop an analytical narrative based on the graphics we produce by visualizing the data we gather, code and analyse. These briefs also propose practical policy recommendations that can be inferred from the data.

Annex 1: References

Mansour, R. (2018), *More than militias: Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units are here to stay*, War on the Rocks, online: https://warontherocks.com/2018/04/more-than-militias-iraqs-popular-mobilization-forces-are-here-to-stay/

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Annex 2: About Clingendael, CRU and the Levant research program

Clingendael. Founded in 1983, the Netherlands Institute of International Relations 'Clingendael' (or the Clingendael Institute) is a leading think-tank and training centre in the field of international relations. The research and training programmes of the Institute focus on security and conflict, European studies, diplomatic studies, and international energy studies. Clients of the Institute are ministries of foreign affairs, defence, development cooperation, economic affairs and justice, as well as international organisations and the private sector.

The Conflict Research Unit. The Conflict Research Unit (CRU) is a specialized team within the Institute, conducting applied, policy-oriented research and developing practical tools that assist national and multilateral governmental and non-governmental organizations in their engagement in fragile and conflict-affected situations. Clients include the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its Embassies, as well as ministries of foreign affairs and development cooperation of other bilateral donors (e.g. the United Kingdom, Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Germany), UN organisations, the OECD/DAC, the World Bank, the African Development Bank, the European Commission, and Dutch and International NGOs. Building on a solid understanding of the political economy of conflict dynamics and transition processes, CRU research activities encompass the three central components of a comprehensive approach towards fragile and conflict-affected situations, i.e. security, justice and rule of law; governance and statebuilding; and peacebuilding, job creation and socio-economic development. Additional areas of research are gender and conflict; and (inter)national aid effectiveness and aid architecture issues.

The Levant research program. CRU's Levant research program analysis the impact of hybrid security organizations in the Levant (mostly Syria and Iraq) on state performance and development. It understands hybrid security organizations as those that compete and collaborate with the state at the same time but with varying intensity, depending on issues and time. Towards this end, the research program includes four dimensions of analysis: 1) the nature and behaviour of hybrid security organizations themselves (this focuses on the Hashd, the Peshmerga, pro-Assad militias and the Kurdish YPG); 2) conflict, reconstruction and reconciliation in Syria and Iraq, 3) the foreign policy of Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia towards the conflicts in Syria and Iraq and 4) wider socio-political developments in the broader Middle East. See: https://www.clingendael.org/research-program/levant