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## **From soldiers to politicians?**

Iraq's Al-Hashd Al-Sha'abi 'on the march'

It has become clear since Iraq's May 2018 elections that many of the armed groups that make up the country's Al-Hashd al-Sha'abi (aka Popular Mobilization Forces) intend to fully integrate into the Iraqi Security Forces and/or disband at some point now that the fight against the Islamic State (IS) has reached a much lower level of intensity. Several groups are less likely to do so, however, including those linked with Iran. Although all 50+ Hashd groups have been brought under the legal purview of the Iraqi state, in practice a number continue to operate autonomously. The fragmented nature of both the Iraqi state's coercive capabilities and the country's political landscape will make it difficult, in the short term, to compel reluctant groups to integrate into state security forces or disband. Pushing for enforcement of such compliance risks violence and is best avoided.

At the same time, using a broad set of indicators to monitor Hashd-related events and incidents based on open, online sources, this brief provides substantial evidence that some Hashd groups are using their autonomy to strengthen their power base in ways that will complicate achieving greater integration in the future. Our research suggests that policy makers in Baghdad and Western capitals should support four initiatives that can help limit this risk without triggering large-scale violence:

- Gradually establish a direct, incentive-based relationship between Hashd fighters and the state to shift the loyalties of fighters over time.
- Tighten local command, control and coordination mechanisms of all state security actors to compartmentalise the way in which Hashd groups operate, especially locally.
- Ensure that (international) reconstruction funds have strong in-built safeguards and standards that reduce corruption and do not contribute to the growing penetration of the Iraqi economy by armed actors, e.g. by the IS contracting them.
- Address the root causes of the emergence of the IS to remove the rationale for some Hashd groups to retain arms (and to make Iraq safer).

## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

After months of deadlock following national elections in May 2018, Iraq is putting together a new government. The new President, Barham Saleh, and Prime Minister, Adil Abdul Mahdi, are veteran politicians with reputations as technocrats and reformers. However, the Iraqi Parliament has approved only 14 out of 22 ministerial nominations, leaving key posts to be agreed – such as the defence, justice and interior ministers. This suggests that fierce behind-the-scenes battles are being fought for control of Iraq’s ‘security’ ministries. Many perceive Hadi al-Ameri’s Al-Fatah block of 48 seats, which largely represents Iran-affiliated armed groups of Iraq’s Al-Hashd al-Sha’abi (aka Popular Mobilization Forces – PMF)<sup>2</sup> as being both a key obstacle as well as contender. For example, the Prime Minister’s recent nomination of Al-Fayadh as Minister of the Interior was widely seen as a concession to the Hashd and out of keeping with the promise of a ‘technocratic cabinet’. Mr. Al-Fayadh used to chair the Al-Hashd al-Sha’abi (PMF) Commission. Come what may, the Iraqi national elections

have already propelled several Hashd groups – such as Moqtada al-Sadr’s Saraya al-Salam, the Badr Corps and Asa’ib ahl al-Haq – to greater state power.

This development seals the process of ‘political disintegration’ of the Hashd as an entity. Some of its composite groups have ‘gone local’, (e.g. the Sinjar Resistance Units – YBS), while others have started to integrate into state security forces (e.g. shrine-affiliated forces) or shifted their focus from the battlefield to the ballot box to pursue their objectives in the political realm (e.g. Saraya al-Salam and the Badr Corps). Entering the twilight of the fight against the Islamic State (IS) always meant that the diversity of the many Hashd groups – long hidden by the shared desire to defeat a common enemy – would come to the fore once more. But the high drama of recent electoral and government-forming developments was as predictable as it was hard to truly imagine. It has become clear that a number of Hashd groups are there to stay.

This policy brief is the second in a series that aims to develop a deeper understanding of how selected Hashd groups evolve in relation to the central Iraqi state.<sup>3</sup> Using a broad set of indicators to monitor Hashd-related events and incidents based on open, online sources, it compares the development of the power base, intergroup relations and attitudes towards the Iraqi government of seven Hashd groups across two monitoring periods: January–September 2017 and February–May 2018 (until the elections of 12 May).<sup>4</sup> The brief’s purpose is to generate

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- 1 The authors gratefully acknowledge the review of this brief by Mariska van Beijnum and Al-Hamzeh al-Shadeedi (Clingendael), as well as Younes Saramifar (Free University, Amsterdam) and another external peer reviewer who prefers to remain anonymous. They also owe a debt of thanks to Zahed Yousuf and his Dialectiq methodology/platform (<https://dialectiq.blog/>). The brief’s contents remain the authors’ responsibility.
  - 2 The ‘Hashd’ is an amalgam of around 50 armed groups of varying coercive capabilities, levels of organisation and attitudes towards the central government of Iraq. These groups are administratively run under the state-run Hashd Commission (or PMF Commission), but some of its groups operate on a relatively autonomous basis akin to paramilitary or hybrid forces. What they have in common is their joint defence of the country against Islamic State (IS). Most, but far from all, Hashd groups are Shi’a. The Hashd as a collective entity with a high level of popular legitimacy dates back to Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani’s fatwa of June 2014 against IS. For a useful analysis of its evolution: Rudolf, I., *From battlefield to ballot box: Contextualising the rise and evolution of Iraq’s Popular Mobilization Units*, London: King’s College (ICSR), 2018.

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- 3 Our first brief can be found here: Ezzeddine, N. and E. van Veen, *Power in perspective: Four key insights into Iraq’s Al-Hashd al-Sha’abi*, The Hague: Clingendael, 2018. Online [here](#) (accessed 17 September 2018).
  - 4 We focus on seven groups: a) Asa’ib ahl al-Haq; b) Abbas Combat Division; c) Tribal Mobilization Forces (TMF); d) Badr Corps; e) Saraya al-Salam; f) Sinjar Resistance Units (YBS); and g) Kata’ib Hezbollah. However, after a decade of influence of armed groups on Iraqi state institutions, the ‘boundaries of membership’ between such groups and Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) are no longer clear-cut. For example, elements of the Iraqi federal police employ many Badr cadres. The brief does not explore factions and partisan influences within the ISF.

new insights into how Iraq's existing plurality of security organisations can be harnessed to produce greater human security, and how interactions between such organisations and the Iraqi state can remain non-violent.<sup>5</sup>

## 2. The general 'state of the Hashd' in the first half of 2018

Following the military and territorial defeat of IS in and around Mosul in the summer of 2017, Iraq gradually shifted from an all-out warfighting effort to focusing on reconstruction. Notwithstanding a continued IS presence in the border areas with Syria, the Hamrin mountain region and around Kirkuk, which necessitates further clear and hold operations, the Hashd has become correspondingly less relevant to Iraq's national security. But despite calls for either its integration into the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) or its dissolution, neither has fully come about. Figure 1 on the next page maps the current state of the powerbase, intergroup relations and attitudes towards the Iraqi central government (exemplified by the Iraqi Army and the Iraqi Federal Police) of seven selected Hashd groups.<sup>6</sup>

The figure offers a few immediate insights for the period February–May 2018 in comparison with our previous visualisation of Hashd power, relations and attitudes over the period January–September 2017:<sup>7</sup>

– *Insight #1: Most Hashd groups have stronger relationships with the Iraqi Army and federal police than in the previous monitoring period.* This can be explained in part by the fact that active fighting in much of the country has subsided, which was the core task of the Hashd. As a result, greater coordination with the army and police has become unavoidable to ensure the provision of security, especially at the local level.<sup>8</sup> Another factor is that several Hashd groups – in our sample this mostly concerns the Tribal Mobilization Forces (TMF), Abbas Combat Division and Sinjar Resistance Units (YBS) – have demonstrated a serious intent to integrate or disband, both of which necessitate good relations with the ISF.

– *Insight #2: Fewer Hashd groups feature a negative attitude towards the central Iraqi government than in the previous monitoring period.* In particular, Badr and Asa'ib ahl al-Haq, previously in clear competition with the state, have slowly shifted their discourse to emphasise greater partnership with the state and a desire to advance a national political agenda. A benefit of the now formalised position of both groups in the Iraqi security architecture appears to be improved coordination between these Hashd groups and the state. Such formalisation was achieved through the November 2016 'Hashd law' passed by the Iraqi Parliament and the March 2018 decree of Prime Minister al-Abadi. The law made the Hashd an independent military institution within the ISF, reporting to the Prime Minister, while the decree puts Hashd members on a par with service (wo)men in the military, with equal pay, rights and duties. Neither measure has resolved the ambiguities surrounding the command structure and level of political activity of certain Hashd

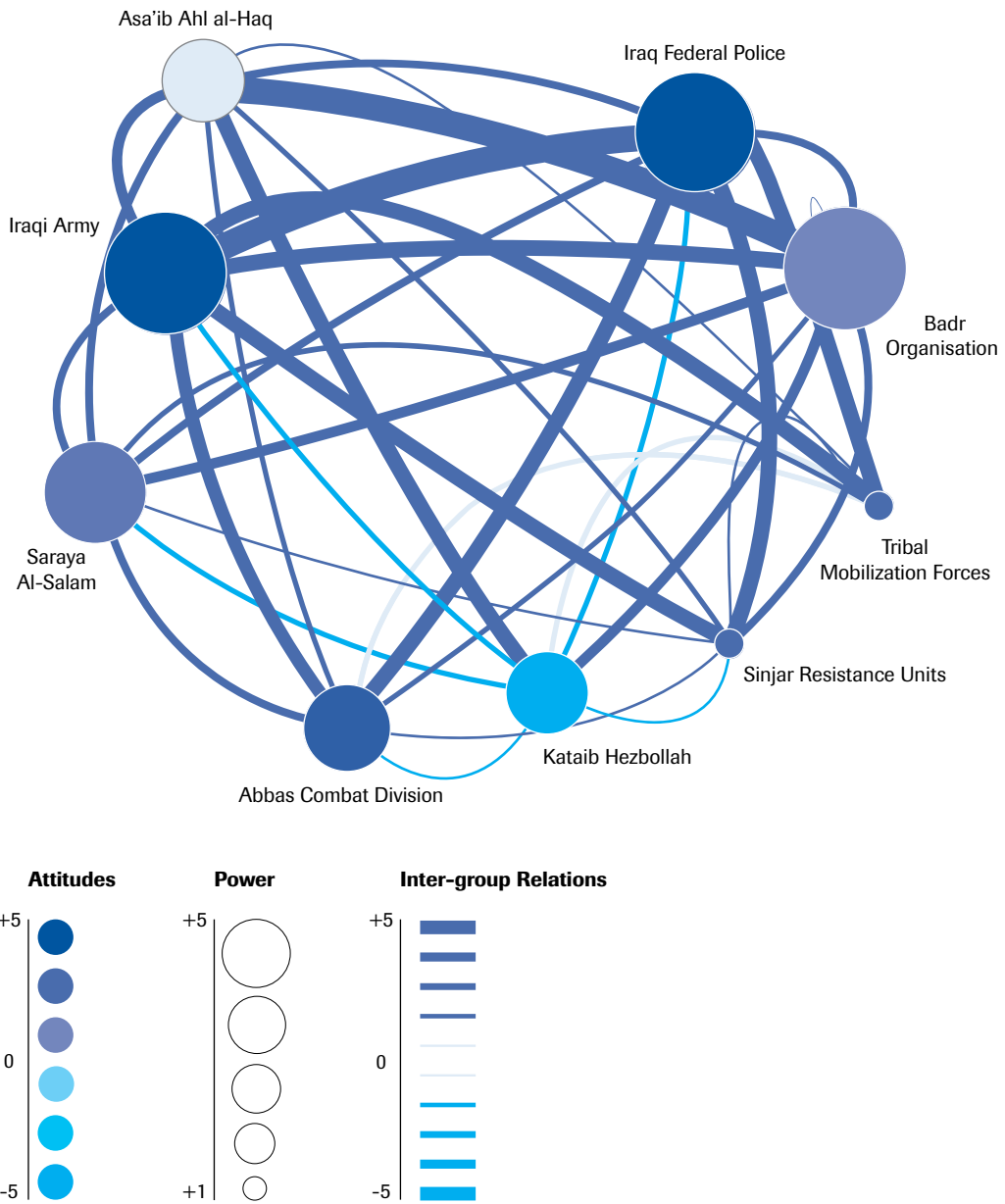
5 The brief is part of Clingendael's Levant research programme, which examines the impact of hybrid coercive organisations – armed actors that simultaneously compete and cooperate with the state – on state development. Its publications are available here: <https://www.clingendael.org/research-program/levant>.

6 Our complete methodology, describing how we operationalised key concepts, tracked sources and selected groups can be found [here](#) (pdf). Short notes that discuss our methodological choices and issues as they arose during the research process can be downloaded [here](#) (pdf) for the period January–September 2017, and [here](#) (pdf) for the period February–May 2018.

7 See Ezzeddine and Van Veen (2018), *op.cit.*

8 Further on in the brief, the section 'Trend 3: Integration is not what it seems' offers more analysis on the nature and drivers of such coordination.

**Figure 1 Powerbase, relationships and attitude towards the central Iraqi government of selected Hashd groups (February–May 2018)**



Source: Dialectiq, using data gathered and coded by the authors.

groups, in particular those affiliated with Iran.<sup>9</sup>

- *Insight #3: The sectarian and pro-Iran behaviour of parts of the Hashd has diminished, at least rhetorically, in post-IS Iraq.* Badr and Asa'ib ahl al-Haq especially have sought to downplay their 'pro-Iran' label in this monitoring period by toning down the sectarian discourse that used to demonstrate their allegiance.<sup>10</sup> While this may be a temporary tactical ploy that reflects the electoral dictates of the May 2018 Iraqi elections, ideological clashes between pro-Iraqi and pro-Iranian groups have been reported inside the Badr organisation.<sup>11</sup> In contrast, Kata'ib

Hezbollah has maintained its negative attitude towards the central Iraqi government (stopping well short of open conflict), kept its distance from national Iraqi politics and, instead, pursued its own objectives (such as participating in the Syrian civil war).

On balance, this quick review of Figure 1 suggests that an Iran-sponsored, Hezbollah-type domination strategy is not on the cards in Iraq at the moment. Additional factors resisting such a development include the different outlooks on secular rule by Iraq and Iran's religious (Shi'a) schools of thought,<sup>12</sup> ambivalent popular attitudes and disgruntlement with direct Iranian political meddling in Iraq. It should be noted that Iran appears mindful of such views and exercises influence through a multidimensional strategy. This includes steady support for political parties and militias that prove trustworthy, divide-and-rule tactics towards paramilitary groups that become too independent,<sup>13</sup> and softer elements, such as the provision of scholarships for Iraqi citizens to study in Iran as well as free Persian language classes.

Given that the period under scrutiny – February–May 2018 – was election season, closer examination is needed of the question whether headline developments such as those highlighted above indicate temporary adjustments or longer lasting shifts. While it is difficult to accurately assess political processes that are in full swing, a hard look at the underlying power bases

9 Prime Minister Abadi did put greater emphasis on the constitutional prohibition of political activity by armed actors in the run up to the 2018 elections, but this was mostly ignored as it was seen as an electoral ploy to undercut the formation of the Al-Fatah alliance. See: Mali, H., *The future of Iraq's Population Mobilization Forces*, Carnegie Sada, 2017, online: <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/73186>; Reuters online: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-militias/iraqs-shiite-militias-formally-inducted-into-security-forces-idUSKCN1GK354> (both accessed 17 September 2018).

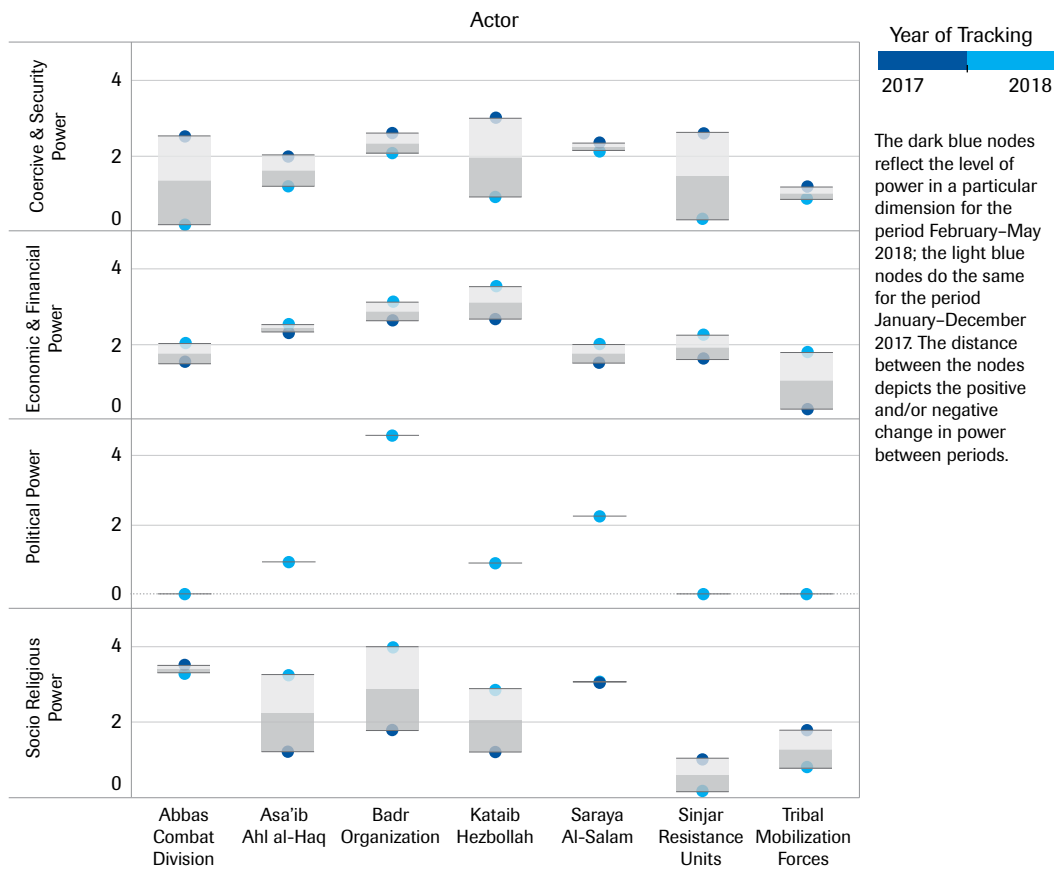
10 For example, the discourse of Badr and Asa'ib ahl al-Haq in this monitoring period has started to echo the agenda of Sadr's Saraya Al Salam in terms of its emphasis on promoting national identity and national unity. It must be noted, however, that Sadr's stress on the need for fighting corruption (fasad) is absent in speeches by Al-Ameri (Badr) and Al-Khazali (Asa'ib). See for example: Müller, Q., *Iraq. Has the Sadrist Movement Rallied to the Fight against Confessionalism?*, Orient XXI 2018, online: <https://orientxxi.info/magazine/interview-dhia-al-asadi,2515> (accessed 1 September 2018).

11 Confidential interviews with experts on Iraq's Hashd in July–August 2018. While it is too early to tell, Badr and even Asa'ib ahl al-Haq might follow a trajectory of political 'domestication' if local political-economy and constituency incentives outweigh Iran's foreign patronage, akin to the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) in the late 2000s. How political-economy interests, constituency expectations and foreign support influence armed group strategic outlook and behavior is a topic that should be monitored and analysed in greater detail. See also: Van Veen and Fliervoet, *Dealing with tools of political (dis)order: Coercive organizations in the Levant*, The Hague: Clingendael (forthcoming).

12 Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, Iraq's highest Shi'ite authority, views politics as the responsibility of politicians and only offers occasional political advice from his home in Najaf on big ticket items such as corruption and government composition. In contrast, Iran's Ayatollah Ali Khamenei runs this state as its 'supreme leader' with, for example, authority to appoint the Iranian cabinet and the final say over the country's foreign and security policy. His influence extends to Shi'ites who follow his 'leadership' anywhere inside and outside of Iran.

13 Iran has encouraged subgroups to break away from Sadr in the past, such as the Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Forces or Tashkil al-Hussein al-Tha'ir. See: <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2017/10/hashd-brigade-numbers-index> (accessed 27 September 2018).

**Figure 2** Shifts in the main dimensions of power of seven Hashd groups between January–September 2017 and February–May 2018



Note: Our measurement of socio-religious power is largely based on the focus and frequency of the outreach efforts of Hashd groups to (potential) constituencies. This includes, for example, attempts to canvass support from different elements of Iraqi society via inclusive or exclusive political discourse as well as offering patronage deals (e.g. maintaining martyr endowments and deals with tribes). See our methodology for more detail.

Source: Authors' analysis

of our selected Hashd groups provides some clues.<sup>14</sup> In the context of the Hashd in Iraq, we differentiate four dimensions of power: 1) coercive and security; 2) economic and financial; 3) political;

4) socio-religious).<sup>15</sup> Figure 2 maps shifts in these dimensions for seven Hashd groups between January–September 2017 (when the Hashd were still fighting IS) and February–May 2018 (when the national parliamentary elections were approaching).

14 We define power as the capacity of A to get B to act according to A's preferences in the context of practices, cultures and institutions of power. This builds on Robert Dahl's classic definition: Dahl, R., *Modern political analysis*, 5th edition, London: Prentice-Hall International, 1991.

15 Our initial methodology also featured 'territorial control' as a dimension of power. Yet, in the first monitoring period this turned out to overlap with the coercive/security dimension of power, whereas in the second monitoring period it became too difficult to measure as security arrangements at the local level became much more hybrid than during the fight against IS. In consequence, we dropped this dimension of power.

### Coercive and security power: Putting arms on hold

All Hashd groups recorded a drop in the coercive and security dimension of their power in the second quarter of 2018 as the intensity of the fight against IS decreased. Possessing coercive capabilities became less important as the uses to which such capabilities could be put became more constrained. For example, fighting battles against IS could no longer be used to establish territorial control or acquire financial advantages. Coercive activities are now largely limited to patrolling and guarding cities and villages, residual fights with IS forces and foiling small-scale attacks. Nevertheless, as Figure 2 indicates, the TMF, Badr and Saraya al-Salam have retained appreciable fighting capacities that they mobilise to clear areas such as Al-Hawija (a city) of IS, prevent infiltration and limit IED attacks, often in coordination with Iraqi security forces. In a similar vein but to a lesser extent, Asa'ib ahl al-Haq and Kata'ib Hezbollah have done the same by focusing on securing the border near Al-Qaim/Albu Kamal.<sup>16</sup> The greatest drop in coercive power is on the part of the Abbas Combat Division, which refrained from significant military activity, and the YBS, which focused on local control over areas in the north and north-east of Sinjar – especially after the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) Peshmerga withdrew in September 2017 and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in March 2018.

In addition, coercive power has become a less pronounced indicator of the quality of intra-Hashd relations as armed clashes between Hashd groups recorded for this period show a significant drop. As the elections approached, most Hashd groups refrained from engaging in street clashes and abuses, instead emphasising a national, pan-sectarian discourse. With less demand for warfighting, the PMF Commission suspended new recruitment

<sup>16</sup> It should be noted that significant Kata'ib Hezbollah elements have crossed the border to engage in Syria. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0qS880AGOBM> (accessed 1 September 2018).

while paramilitaries generally decreased investments in coercive capabilities, including training and the purchase of weaponry.

### Economic and financial power: Unequal growth

All Hashd groups increased the economic dimension of their power base, but some did so more than others. Two factors played a significant role. First, the aforementioned decree of March 2018 that granted Hashd fighters similar rights to members of the military considerably increased financing for the Hashd as it effectively amounted to a salary raise.<sup>17</sup> However, it is not necessarily individual Hashd fighters that benefit. Hashd funding is allocated through the PMF Commission and then distributed via regional PMF bodies and the leadership of the different Hashd groups that pay the salaries of individual Hashd fighters. In consequence, the raise increases the scope for favouritism and volume of corruption along the entire line of PMF administrative management and command with the additional note that the PMF Commission is largely controlled by the Badr Corps. Because the TMF have their own command chain and salary allocation within the PMF Commission, they largely escaped the negative effects such 'Badr control' and substantially improved their financial situation in the wake of the Prime Minister's decree in particular.<sup>18</sup> The decree was

<sup>17</sup> 'Paramilitary registered members will be given equivalent salaries to those members of the military under the Ministry of Defence's control. They will also be subject to the laws of the military service and will gain access to military institutes and colleges.' See: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-militias/iraqs-shiite-militias-formally-inducted-into-security-forces-idUSKCN1GK354> (accessed 1 September 2018).

<sup>18</sup> Only those TMF fighters permanently registered with the PMF Commission benefited while fighters that are called upon on a more irregular basis were excluded. Source: Confidential Interviews with experts on Iraq's Hashd in July–August 2018. It should be noted that while we were not able to obtain confirmation that the TMF were receiving salaries from the PMF Commission for the first monitoring period from January–September 2017, we were able to confirm this through several sources for the February–May 2018 monitoring period.

also accompanied by a (not-yet-executed, it seems) decision to deregister a number of Hashd fighters, including those said to be in Syria. Presumably this task will also end up on the desks of the PMF Commission, further increasing opportunities for favouritism.

Second, this monitoring period has also witnessed a significant increase in economic *activity* by several Hashd groups. They have started to capitalise on the local and national networks they established during four years of fighting to control transport routes and markets, and obtain commercial advantages. Such activities range from licit reconstruction work to the illicit collection of taxes at checkpoints.<sup>19</sup> As part of this development, Iran appears to seek replication of its own paramilitary reconstruction model that it used following the Iran-Iraq war. Iran's 'Jihad-e Sazandegi' organisation of the time was greatly involved in civilian reconstruction but run by the Basij paramilitary arm of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Today, the IRGC retains substantial interests and control over wide swaths of Iranian industry. In similar vein, several Iran-affiliated Hashd groups have already created foundations and endowments that can serve as conduits for reconstruction efforts and funding – which is yet another way to increase the economic role of some Hashd groups that will make them economically more autonomous.<sup>20</sup> Hence, an issue to monitor is whether the noted diversification of revenue streams by some Hashd groups will sustainably increase their economic power and whether this will then be used to increase their power base in other dimensions.

### Political power: Change on the horizon

Because the monitoring period of this brief runs until the eve of the 12 May 2018 parliamentary elections, but does not include

their results, there is no recorded change in political power of the different Hashd groups.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, battlefield successes continued to be used to raise the political profile of some Hashd groups. Despite the fact that the constitution prohibits armed actors from forming political parties, and members of such organisations from competing for or holding political office, a minor name change or the separation of armed and political wings has allowed several Hashd groups to become legally established political parties.<sup>22</sup> Several Hashd groups benefited from a strong pre-existing political basis, such as the Badr Corps with 22 seats in the Iraqi Parliament before the May 2018 elections, or Saraya al-Salam with 34.<sup>23</sup>

### Socio-religious power: An opportunistic change in discourse?

Changes in socio-religious power as a source of overall power vary across Hashd groups. The TMF and YBS have witnessed a drop in their socio-religious power at national level due to their localised presence and focus, and their inability to establish a more prominent national profile. The Abbas Combat Division and Saraya al-Salam largely managed to sustain their pre-existing levels of social outreach by continuing to provide charitable services to their constituents and maintaining a focus on 'citizen concerns' by raising socio-economic struggles and human rights violations in their political discourse. The surprise lies in the increase in socio-religious power of the 'pro-Iran' groups in the Hashd, i.e. Asa'ib ahl al-Haq, the Badr organisation and Kata'ib Hezbollah. Their power in this dimension was previously based on garnering in-group support through a strong sectarian discourse and

19 See also: [http://www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas\\_52973-1522-1-30.pdf?180628172356](http://www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas_52973-1522-1-30.pdf?180628172356) (accessed 1 Oct 2018).

20 Confidential interview by one of the authors in October 2018; Badawi, T., Iran's economic leverage in Iraq, Carnegie Sada, [online](#), 2018 (accessed 1 November 2018).

21 Political power is measured by the total number of seats in Parliament and (in)direct control over ministerial positions and assignments.

22 See: <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2018/03/15/the-popular-mobilisation-forces-and-the-balancing-of-formal-and-informal-power/> (accessed 1 September 2018).

23 See: <http://carnegie-mec.org/2017/04/28/popular-mobilization-forces-and-iraq-s-future-pub-68810> (accessed 1 September 2018).



corresponding activities. The increase in their socio-religious power during the current period of analysis, however, has mostly been achieved by these groups retaining their strong in-group support *and* reaching out to other sects and ethnicities by advocating a more nationalist political agenda, leveraging their battlefield performance to gain political and popular credit, cooperating with Sunni Hashd groups, and engaging in significant popular outreach in western Iraq – its tribal parts in particular.<sup>24</sup> It should be noted that it is not clear these efforts secured a genuine increase in legitimacy across targeted constituencies despite the vast increase in their volume.

### 3. Three emergent trends: February–May 2018

As the different Hashd groups engaged in a bout of competitive politics in the run up to the May 2018 parliamentary elections, while the fight against IS died down, three trends emerge from our data for this monitoring period.

#### Trend 1: From the battlefield to politics

With the elections in sight, Iran-affiliated Hashd groups in particular made serious efforts to boost their political profile. This points both to the legitimacy that electoral results are expected to confer and to the importance of the pathway they offer to institutionalize power and access to resources. Several electoral tactics are easily distinguished:

- Groups previously known for their strong sectarian rhetoric (including retaliatory killings of Sunnis suspected

of cooperating with IS),<sup>25</sup> such as Asa'ib ahl al-Haq, Badr and Saraya al-Salam, shifted to promoting anti-sectarian and nationalistic political agendas. Speeches by Qais al-Khazali (Asa'ib)<sup>26</sup> and Hadi al-Ameri (Badr) suddenly include sentences like 'getting to the phase of forming cross-sectarian electoral lists', or 'eliminating the triangle of death represented by sectarianism'.<sup>27</sup> At the same time, the number of sectarian violent events plummeted. Only a few isolated incidents suggest that rhetoric and intentions may not always be genuine. This include speeches by Al-Khazali who equates the Hashd with eschatological Shi'a ideas,<sup>28</sup> Asa'ib ahl al-Haq perpetrating revenge killings in Sadouniya, and the use of sectarian rhetoric on an Asa'ib-friendly TV show called 'Kalam Wajih'.<sup>29</sup>

24 See also: <https://tinyurl.com/yarkou7l>; <https://tinyurl.com/yct2y2o5>; [https://twitter.com/Qais\\_alkhazali/status/969603998239076352](https://twitter.com/Qais_alkhazali/status/969603998239076352); [https://twitter.com/Qais\\_alkhazali/status/962599168039706624](https://twitter.com/Qais_alkhazali/status/962599168039706624); <https://www.facebook.com/Qassim.Mohammed.Alaraji/photos/a.686735581500264.1073741829.684180021755820/910981542408999/?type=3&theater> (all accessed 1 September 2018).

25 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/02/15/iraq-militias-escalate-abuses-possibly-war-crimes> (accessed 1 September 2018).

26 Asa'ib ahl al-Haq already tested this strategy in 2011 by trying to refashion itself as a political and religious organisation focusing on Iraqi nationalism, claiming to promote dialogue between religious and ethnic groups while also providing services. See: Wing, J., Analysis Of The History And Growth Of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, The League Of The Righteous, An Interview With Institute for the Study of War's Sam Wyr, Musings on Iraq, 2013, online: <http://musingsoniraq.blogspot.com/2013/01/analysis-of-history-and-growth-of-asaib.html>.

27 See also: <https://tinyurl.com/yct2y2o5>; <https://tinyurl.com/ybqq2osm>; [https://twitter.com/Qais\\_alkhazali/status/969603998239076352](https://twitter.com/Qais_alkhazali/status/969603998239076352) (accessed 1 September 2018).

28 'The Hashd is past, present and future. It is past because it represents the fate of Imam Hussein and it is present because it represents the youth making the impossible and it is the future because it represents the young people who will pave the way for the emergence of the Mahdi.' (See: [https://twitter.com/Qais\\_alkhazali/status/985800308025643008](https://twitter.com/Qais_alkhazali/status/985800308025643008)); 'The Hashd represents the oppression of Hussein, al-Abbas and Zainab, the courage of Ali and the ethics of Muhammad'. (See: [https://twitter.com/Qais\\_alkhazali/status/985777001859608576](https://twitter.com/Qais_alkhazali/status/985777001859608576)).

29 See: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iranian-militias-in-iraqs-parliament-political-outcomes-and-u.s.-response>

- Several Hashd groups garnered the support of tribes across the country through a massive outreach campaign. More specifically, we recorded more than 40 meetings over a four-month period between Asa'ib ahl al-Haq, Badr, and Shi'a as well as Sunni tribes. The statement by Asa'ib leader Al-Khazali that: '[W]e love our country and we don't want to become sectarian again. We have good intentions and we are prepared to cooperate with everyone,' was somewhat typical of such efforts.<sup>30</sup> With this array of meetings come patronage deals, of which a common feature is the appointment of tribal members to public jobs or high-profile positions in Baghdad in exchange for votes.
- Iran-affiliated groups, such as Asa'ib ahl al-Haq and Badr, included Sunni candidates in Anbar and Salahuddin under the broader header of the Fatah-alliance and campaigned on a more nationalistic basis to broaden their electoral appeal. This also points to the possibility that at least some Sunnis might see a better future in a united Iraq.<sup>31</sup> Reconstruction efforts by these Iran-affiliated groups in Sunni areas, demining and the inclusion of Sunnis in Hashd groups (Sunnis fought in the Abbas Combat Division and Saraya al-Salam units) provide some support for this hypothesis. However, as long as Sunni areas remain economically marginalized, and Iran-affiliated Hashd groups retain a strong presence in Sunni-majority areas and prevent some returns,

greater progress will be hampered.<sup>32</sup> For the moment, such electoral moves are better seen as pragmatic efforts to look inclusive.

- Several Hashd groups use their presence and influence to also enter *local* politics. A key case is the YBS, which campaigned in the Sinjar area with a newly-established political party (the YBS-PADE) but failed to gain leverage beyond limited local influence. Other Hashd groups, such as Badr, have sought to establish control over local state bodies such as provincial councils. For instance, Badr continues to control the provincial council in Diyala and seeks to gain control of the provincial council, local police and local state courts in Ninewah through its Sunni Hashd allies.<sup>33</sup> As such moves typically do not follow the relevant procedures for appointment or election, they can be regarded as a bottom-up approach to infiltrating the Iraqi state at the local level in addition to what transpires at the national level.

On a final note, some Hashd groups use political power – once it is acquired – to strengthen their security and economic position. While this should not come as a surprise given the findings of our previous monitoring period,<sup>34</sup> the extent to which power dimensions influence each other must be explicitly emphasised. For example, it was primarily the Hashd groups with representation in the Iraqi Parliament (mostly the Badr organisation) that pressured Prime

30 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/may/12/iraq-elections-become-battleground-iranian-influence>

31 A 2017 survey found that between January 2016 and March 2017, there was a 22% increase in the number of people in Sunni-majority western Iraq who viewed the PMU in a positive light. See: <https://www.ndi.org/publications/improved-security-provides-opening-cooperation-iraq-march-april-2017-survey-findings>

32 An estimated 60,000 Shi'ite fighters are still deployed in many predominantly Sunni areas. See: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-militias/iraqs-shiite-militias-formally-inducted-into-security-forces-idUSKCN1GK354?feedType=RSS&feedName=worldNews> (accessed 1 Oct 2018).

33 For example, 60–70% of Mosul's Federal Police is said to be affiliated with the Badr organisation. See: <https://voiceofpeopletoday.com/iraq-revenge-popular-mobilization-units-will-inevitable/>; <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2018/02/13/the-politics-of-return-in-post-isis-iraq/>; see also: <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2018/03/15/the-popular-mobilisation-forces-and-the-balancing-of-formal-and-informal-power/>

34 Ezzeddine and Van Veen (2018), op.cit.

Minister Al-Abadi to increase the salary of Hashd fighters by giving them the same legal status as soldiers in the Iraqi security forces.

### **Trend 2: Making big money in reconstruction**

The shift of a number of Hashd groups from the battlefield into politics goes hand in hand with a shift from the battlefield into business. In part this can be seen as a process of power consolidation in which these groups simply seek to take advantage of their position. In part it is also a matter of drift, which results from the lack of clarity on the envisaged role of Hashd groups after the territorial defeat of IS. Different Hashd groups deploy different economic strategies, with most focused on the business of reconstruction. For example, the Abbas Combat Division is rebuilding critical infrastructure and is engaged in demining in several provinces, while Asa'ib ahl al-Haq, Kata'ib Hezbollah and Badr take a cut of the lucrative reconstruction business by positioning themselves as intermediaries. Moreover, the official engineering unit of the Hashd, which is controlled by Iran-affiliated groups, serves as a tool to channel Iranian funds into reconstruction projects.<sup>35</sup> Through its Khatam al-Anbiya construction firm, the IRGC also implements infrastructural projects.<sup>36</sup>

Hashd groups stepped into other economic sectors due to the Iraqi state's incapacity to run them efficiently. For example, the national waste company in Basra was taken over by one of the Hashd groups,<sup>37</sup> while Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and Saraya al-Salam are vying for control of commercial sectors

such as the taxi business in Kerbala.<sup>38</sup> Such competition is especially prevalent in areas where territorial control is not clear-cut and/or the ISF presence is underdeveloped. Even where ISF have re-established and execute primary security functions, which is the case in many areas, Hashd groups typically remain in the background to exploit business opportunities. Asa'ib ahl al-Haq even became active in the cultural sector to support its political ambitions. According to Naim al-Aboudi (Asa'ib): '[W]e are building schools and universities as we see the importance of creating a religious culture and more awareness among people.'<sup>39</sup> Lastly, different Hashd groups are reported to have engaged in illicit activities like extortion, looting and levying tariffs on goods at checkpoints.<sup>40</sup>

### **Trend 3: Integration is not what it seems**

Generally, the core of the challenge that the Hashd represents to the Iraqi government centres more and more on its Iran-affiliated groups (i.e. Asa'ib ahl al-Haq, Kata'ib Hezbollah and the Badr organisation). These groups want to be recognised by the state but also maintain themselves as a separate legal entity. Hadi al-Ameri (Badr) compares this with the 'National Guard in the USA or Saudi Arabia'.<sup>41</sup> Al-Khazali (Asa'ib) also made it clear he wants to preserve the Hashd as a separate legal entity under the office of the Prime Minister because it has become a 'cornerstone' of the state.<sup>42</sup> Ironically, overstating his affection for the Hashd as a socio-political project, he proposed to adopt the name 'Hashd ibn Hashd al-Hashdawi', which could be translated as 'Hashd, the son of Hashd from

35 Dury-Agri, J.R., Kassim, O. and P. Martin, *Iraqi Security Forces and Popular Mobilization Forces*, Washington: Institute for the Study of War, 2017. Online [here](#) (accessed 27 September 2018).

36 See: <http://www.jajarmnews.com/new.aspx?id=77303> and <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/09/gods-force-front-group-develops-shrine-in-iraq.php>

37 See also: International Crisis Group, *Iraq's Paramilitary Groups: The Challenge of Rebuilding a Functioning State*, Brussels/Baghdad: ICG, 2018. [Presumably Badr, given the location, but we were not able to confirm this.](#)

38 Confidential Interviews with experts on Iraq's Hashd in July–August 2018.

39 Alami, M., *What future for Iraq's PMU?*, Riyadh: King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies, 2018. Online [here](#) (accessed 27 September 2018).

40 See also: [http://www.gppi.net/fileadmin/user\\_upload/media/pub/2018/Gaston\\_Derzsi-Horvath\\_Iraq\\_After\\_ISIL.pdf](http://www.gppi.net/fileadmin/user_upload/media/pub/2018/Gaston_Derzsi-Horvath_Iraq_After_ISIL.pdf) (accessed 1 October 2018).

41 *Ibid.*

42 [https://twitter.com/Qais\\_alkhazali/status/972449435258060800](https://twitter.com/Qais_alkhazali/status/972449435258060800)

Hashd'.<sup>43</sup> Despite Prime Minister Al-Abadi's ongoing efforts at more equitable security sector reform, Iran-affiliated Hashd groups have generally come out on top with regard to the politically sensitive aspects of such reform efforts.

Non-Iran affiliated groups have indicated a greater willingness to integrate into either the Iraqi armed forces or the police. For example, the two brigades of Saraya al-Salam in the Hashd have repeatedly stated their intent to integrate into the armed forces. However, retaining an armed group is vital given the current manner in which political competition for power and office is conducted in the Iraqi state. If Al-Sadr allowed his fighters to be integrated into the state apparatus while his rivals maintain their own armed groups, he would be at a disadvantage.<sup>44</sup> Practical considerations also play a role in the pace and nature of integration efforts. For instance, 1,000 fighters of the Abbas Combat Division have already registered with the Iraqi Ministry of Defence due to the non-payment of salaries by the PMF Commission. Moreover, although reports could not be verified that 500 YBS fighters have integrated into the ISF, a deal between different armed groups from Sinjar and the Iraqi Army in March 2018 suggests a high probability that the YBS will serve as a future local police force under the Ministry of the Interior or integrate into the Iraqi Army as a unit under the Ministry of Defence. Other YBS fighters are standing down as militiamen to return to work in agriculture and small businesses, or to support the YPG in Syria.<sup>45</sup>

Finally, it is unclear at present whether the TMF intends to integrate into the Iraqi Army. For TMF fighters who did not benefit from the

salary increase decreed in 2018, integration into the Ministry of Defence would secure a more stable and therefore attractive income (as with the YBS). However, the non-execution of the Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) plan for Sunni Sahwa fighters in 2008-2011 means that current integration efforts are hampered by significant distrust.<sup>46</sup>

#### 4. Policy conclusions

Many Hashd groups intend to integrate into the ISF and/or disband, but several do not. Most of the latter are Iran-affiliated. The present plurality of security provision in Iraq and the fragmented nature of its political landscape mean that it will be difficult to force these groups to comply. They have too much influence, legitimacy and coercive capacity. As a result, the legal integration of Hashd groups into the state's security architecture remains a superficial solution that does not fundamentally diminish the power base and influence of Hashd groups that prefer to remain independent in practice. The continued existence of the PMF Commission risks reinforcing this situation by providing the groups that do not wish to disband or integrate with a veneer of neutrality and a degree of state legitimacy despite the gradual dissolution of the Hashd as a collective entity.

At the same time, these mostly Iran-affiliated groups use their autonomy to legitimise their political position and increase their economic footprint. This can result in further expansion of Iraq's clientelist-based political economy with permanent dependencies of large constituencies on particular Hashd groups for jobs and services. It also risks gradual further infiltration of the Iraqi state

43 See: <https://tcf.org/content/report/understanding-iraqs-hashd-al-shabi/>

44 See: ICG (2018), op.cit.; <https://www.eurasiareview.com/14022018-the-militias-in-iraq-from-popular-mobilization-to-political-interference> (accessed 1 Sept 2018).

45 [https://twitter.com/Jake\\_Hanrahan/status/1018959608659005444](https://twitter.com/Jake_Hanrahan/status/1018959608659005444); <https://twitter.com/EricaSangsuwan/status/960823736067862528>; <http://www.hawarnews.com/en/haber/ybs-disclosed-resistance-of-age-martyrs-record-h1456.html>

46 The DDR plan at the time intended to enable and reward an uprising of Iraq's Sunni tribes against the predecessor(s) of IS with partial integration into the ISF and partial demobilisation based on attractive conditions. Prime Minister Al-Maliki shelved most of the plan, in part because he feared that Sunni influences in the Iraqi Army would become too significant.

apparatus, akin to how Badr gradually took control of the Ministry of the Interior between 2007 and 2010.




In short, there is substantial evidence that some Hashd groups are using their ambiguous status to move back and forth between formal and informal spaces as their interests dictate. Based on this insight, four initiatives can help policy makers in Baghdad and Western capitals contain the political and economic risks resulting from autonomously operating Hashd groups without triggering large-scale violence:

- *Establish a direct, incentive-based relationship between Hashd fighters and the state.* This could include elements such as insisting on direct salary payments from the state to individual Hashd fighters, making sure that promotions take place based on merit and are approved by a mixed Hashd-ISF commission, and making sure that entry into military training and education has to be authorised by the ISF command structure on an individual basis rather than through Hashd commanders. Based on the 2018 decree that established parity of conditions between Hashd fighters and ISF service members, such elements can help shift the loyalties of Hashd fighters from their group to the state.
- *Tighten local command, control and coordination mechanisms of all state security actors.* The initial objective is to establish a coordinated command structure at the local level under which Hashd groups comply with the Iraqi federal police and army orders and complement their local configurations. In the longer term, an integrated command structure is needed that brings ISF and Hashd units together in regional operation rooms. Geographical isolation and encapsulation will ease the task of integrating Hashd units into the ISF. Practically, a security sector plan is required that clearly defines local relationships between Iraq's different security entities under the National Security Council (NSC).
- *Ensure that (international) reconstruction funds, projects and programmes have strong in-built safeguards and standards that reduce corruption and, as far as is possible, avoid involving the charitable foundations and endowments of Hashd groups that refuse to demobilise or reintegrate* – to prevent reconstruction funds strengthening the economic power base of these groups. This means that a slower pace of reconstruction must be accepted, allowing more time to vet contenders and involve the ISF in protecting the staff and assets of contracted non-Hashd entities. Only a carefully thought-out approach will give private operators a chance to compete successfully.
- *Address the root causes of the emergence of IS.* As long as these are not addressed, IS elements and/or sympathies will continue to exist as an excuse for Iran-affiliated Hashd groups to resist demobilisation and integration – similar to how the Israeli occupation of the Sheba farms helps sustain Hezbollah's claim to arms. Strengthening the human capacity of provinces and municipalities, increasing their budget, and ensuring better Sunni representation in the west of Iraq are essential towards this end, as are efforts to increase the inclusivity of political rhetoric and media reporting.

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