

The Hashd is dead, long live the Hashd!

Fragmentation and consolidation

Nancy Ezzeddine
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CRU Report



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Executive summary

Between August and December 2018, the original Al-Hashd al-Sha'abi - as a national amalgam of 50-odd armed groups created to fight IS - slowly disintegrated. Some groups concentrated on local-level activities and control, others on political activity while yet others integrated into the Iraqi Security Forces. Yet, the label of the 'Hashd' lives on and now refers to a restructured entity in which Iran-affiliated groups increasingly dominate - Kataib Hezbollah, Asaib ahl al-Haq and the Badr Corps especially. This entity aims to gradually increase its socioeconomic influence throughout Iraqi society by leveraging the legitimacy it derived from the fight against IS and by filling the gap created by the absence of public services and disappointing government performance.

While there are upsides to this development, it also risks creating smaller governance units that operate within the Iraqi state with relative autonomy, serving some groups and citizens more than others. The key to mitigating this risk is a stronger Iraqi state that accepts the major Hashd groups as junior partners in Iraq's governance (in addition to their parliamentary representation) and is capable of setting clear boundaries related to their operations and coercive capabilities. On this basis, it can incorporate Hashd energies and strengths into its own development plans. Initiatives that can help stimulate a development in this direction include strengthening the role of the Iraqi Federal Police and Army at the local level, improving the capacity of local governments to provide services and creating local charters in which local government and Hashd groups agree upon social and economic performance objectives.

Introduction

Dozens of armed groups came into being in 2014 to defend Iraq against the rapid advance of the Islamic State (IS) on Baghdad after the partial collapse of the Iraqi Army.¹ Together, they became known as 'Al-Hashd al-Sha'abi' (or Popular Mobilisation Forces, PMF). The Hashd is essentially a structured network of about 30 to 50 paramilitary groups of different sizes, capabilities, affiliations and sectarian composition. Most Hashd groups and fighters are nevertheless Shi'a.² When the IS-threat diminished after years of fighting, a number of individual Hashd armed groups increased both their economic and political activity, such as competing in the 2018 Iraqi elections.

Today, the Hashd as a coercive institution is a standard feature of both the security architecture and daily life in large parts of Arab Iraq, including the disputed territories.³ During recent interviews in the Kirkuk area, senior Hashd commanders (mostly of the Badr Corps, one of the constituent groups of the Hashd) made statements such as 'nothing can stand against us any more', or, 'the power of the Hashd is undisputed and we will use it in the right way to govern' – from a viewpoint that considers the Hashd a true representation of citizen mobilisation.⁴ Administered by the state-sanctioned Hashd Commission, most Hashd groups have formally become part of the Iraqi security apparatus. However, some continue to operate on a relatively autonomous basis in spite of their formal incorporation.⁵

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- 1 Although some Hashd groups existed before 2014, Al-Hashd al-Sha'abi is conventionally understood to have been created in response to the fatwa issued by Grand Ayatollah Al-Sistani in defence of Iraq against IS in June 2014.
 - 2 For a useful analysis of the evolution of the Hashd, compare: Rudolf, I., *From battlefield to ballot box: Contextualising the rise and evolution of Iraq's Popular Mobilisation Units*, London: King's College (ICSR), 2018; for the current state of affairs of the Hashd in organisational terms: Knights, M., *How the U.S. Government Should Think About Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces*, The Washington Institute, 2019, [online](#).
 - 3 See for instance the 'PMF Pulse' map on 'Reported PMF military camp locations' of May 2019 (in the authors' possession).
 - 4 This paper benefited from six key informant interviews with senior Hashd commanders between 3 and 5 March 2019 in Kirkuk, Tuzkhurmatu and Amerli. We owe a particular debt of gratitude to the IRIS research team at the American University of Iraq in Sulaymaniya for enabling these interviews.
 - 5 On 1 July 2019, Prime Minister Abdul Mahdi reinvigorated governmental attempts to establish greater control over Hashd forces by issuing a decree that calls for full military integration by stripping original unit names away, closing Hashd local military basis as well as economic offices, and foregoing any links between armed groups and political parties. See: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/01/world/middleeast/iraq-armed-groups-prime-minister.html> (accessed 9 July 2019). Similar efforts preceded this decree, which was widely seen as the result of the combined pressure of the US and (a) Friday sermon(s) from Grand Ayatollah Al-Sistani.

This paper is the third – and last – in a series that purposes to generate new insights into how Iraq’s existing plurality of coercive organisations can be harnessed to provide greater human security, and how the potentially negative impact of this plurality on state development can be mitigated.⁶ Using a broad set of indicators to monitor Hashd-related events and incidents as reported in open, online sources in Arabic and English,⁷ the series compares the development of the powerbase of seven Hashd groups, their mutual relations, and their attitudes towards the Iraqi government across three monitoring periods: January–September 2017; February–May 2018 (until the 12 May elections) and August–December 2018.⁸ The current paper covers the last period.

As pointed out in our previous paper (November 2018), the original version of the Hashd – the organisational umbrella created to fight IS – was disintegrating due to the disappearance of the external threat that kept it together. It noted that, while some groups were ‘going local’ (e.g. the Sinjar Resistance Units – YBS), others were integrating more fully into the security forces (e.g. the Abbas Combat Division – ACD), and yet others were focusing on their political activities and dissociating themselves somewhat from the Hashd (e.g. Saraya al-Salam).⁹

Based on evidence gathered, this paper argues that the original Hashd no longer exists. While the label lives on, it now refers to a restructured entity in which Iran-affiliated groups increasingly dominate – Kataib Hezbollah, Asaib ahl al-Haq and the Badr Corps, especially. This entity operates at least in part on the basis of a transnational concept of

6 This paper is part of Clingendael’s Levant research programme that 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>.

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

8 We focus on seven groups: a) Asaib ahl al-Haq; b) Abbas Combat Division (ACD); c) Tribal Mobilization Forces (TMF); d) Badr Corps; e) Saraya al-Salam; f) Sinjar Resistance Units (YBS); and g) Kataib Hezbollah. However, after a decade of armed groups influencing Iraqi state institutions, the ‘boundaries of membership’ between such groups and the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) are no longer clear-cut. For example, elements of the Iraqi federal police employ many Badr cadres. This paper does not explore factions and partisan influences within the ISF.

9 Ezzeddine, N., M. Sulz and E. van Veen, *From soldiers to politicians: The Al-Hashd al-Sha’abi on the march*, The Hague: Clingendael, 2018; see also: Ezzeddine, N. and E. van Veen, *Power in perspective: Four key insights into Iraq’s Al-Hashd al-Sha’abi*, The Hague: Clingendael, 2018.

Shi'a militancy¹⁰ aims to gradually increase its socioeconomic influence throughout Iraqi society, leveraging the legitimacy it derived from the fight against IS and increasing its popularity by filling a gap created by the absence of public services and disappointing government performance.

The short-term strategy of these Iran-affiliated groups combines marginalisation of some (larger) Hashd groups via their control over the PMF Commission with co-optation of other (smaller) Hashd groups as local auxiliaries. Being part of the Iraqi state simultaneously legitimises, empowers and constrains these Iran-affiliated Hashd groups. This paper traces the developments underpinning these shifts.

The authors are grateful to Mariska van Beijnum, Al-Hamzeh al-Shadeedi (Clingendael), Younes Saramifar (Free University, Amsterdam) and another professional who prefers to remain anonymous for reviewing this paper. We also owe a debt of thanks to Zahed Yousuf and his Dialectiq platform (<https://dialectiq.blog/>). The contents of the paper remain the authors' responsibility.

10 This was on display when Iraq's Iran-affiliated Hashd groups engaged prominently in relief efforts directly after the floods that ravaged Iran in April 2019, as well as during the recent celebration of the anniversary of the fatwa that created the Hashd during which Lebanese, Iranian and Iraqi martyrs for the resistance were also celebrated. On the former: Radio Free Europe / Radio liberty, [online](#) (accessed 17 June 2019); on the latter: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UyavuOdkK-0> (Arabic) (accessed 27 June 2019). For background on the concepts and developments underpinning transnational Shi'a militancy: Moghadam, A. (ed.), *Militancy and political violence in Shiism*, London: Routledge, 2013; Vatanka, A., *Iran's use of Shi'i militant proxies*, Washington DC: Middle East Institute, Policy paper 2018-5, 2018.

1 The general state of the Hashd in the second half of 2018

Iraq's political-security environment has changed significantly since the previous two monitoring periods. Most importantly, there has been a marked decrease in the intensity and frequency of organised violence. Remaining low-intensity conflict with the remnants of IS is concentrated in the rural areas of Nineveh, Anbar, Saleh el-Din and parts of the disputed territories. Hashd military forces were ordered to withdraw from Iraq's Sunni-majority urban areas following the reduction in fighting and because of local resistance against the presence of Shi'a Hashd forces as well as political coalition building between Shi'a Hashd groups-cum-political-parties and Sunni political parties.¹¹ The political violence of the summer of 2018 – in the form of a series of explosions and fires at warehouses storing arms and ballot papers, largely ascribed to intra-Hashd tensions – abated after the final election results were announced. Generally speaking, Iraqi politics are in a stable state, although tensions persist between the classic deal-making-based rule of Shi'a-Kurdish party-political elites and popular demands for better government performance, as manifested in recurrent demonstrations throughout the country.¹² In this context, Figure 1 below illustrates the current powerbases, intergroup relations and attitudes of seven selected Hashd groups towards the Iraqi central government (exemplified by the Iraqi Army and the Iraqi Federal Police).

11 See: <https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/531da2c8-a8ac-4634-b570-209109315929>; <http://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/200820182> (accessed 27 June 2019). Note that Hashd representative offices remain in a number of urban centres.

12 Mansour, R., *Iraq's 2018 government formation: unpacking the friction between reform and the status quo*, LSE Middle East Centre report, 2019

Figure 1 Powerbase, relationships and attitudes of selected Hashd groups (August–December 2018)

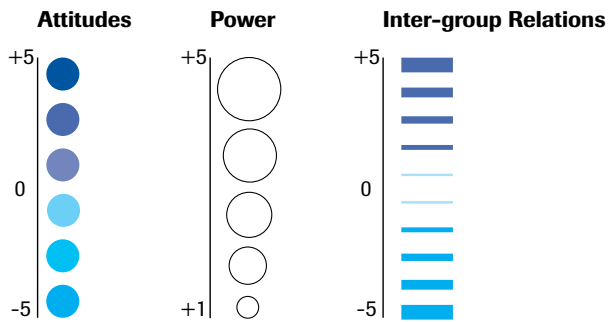
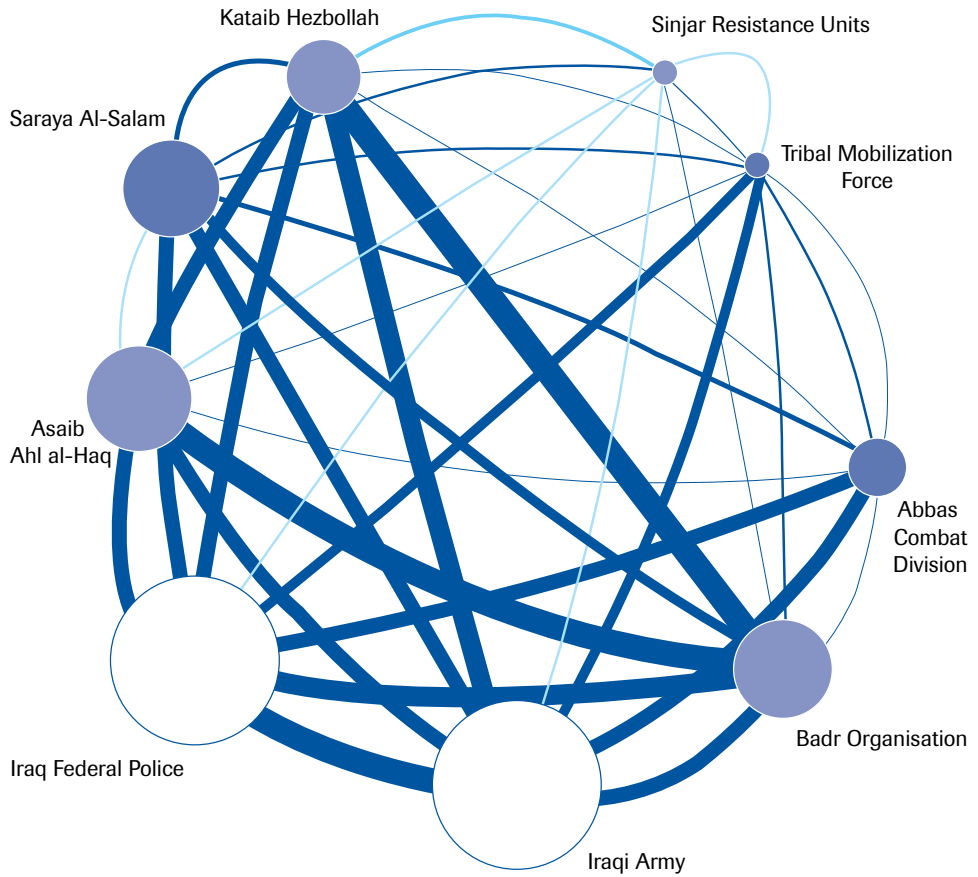


Figure 1 offers a few notable insights for the period August–December 2018 in comparison with our previous illustration of Hashd power, relations and attitudes for the period February–May 2018.

- *Insight #1: The overall powerbase of most Hashd groups has not increased.* On the one hand, the decreasing intensity of fighting against IS reduced the coercive power the Hashd enjoyed in both previous monitoring periods, including the legitimacy associated with fighting IS and the material benefits of controlling territory. On the other hand, several Hashd groups expanded their political, economic and social activities to offset their loss of coercive power. As part of this stratagem, key Hashd groups – such as Asaib Ahl al-Haq, Badr and Saraya al-Salam – made notable gains in the May 2018 parliamentary elections. However, the political compromise between these groups, which could have further amplified their power, proved elusive as both the short-lived coalition between Al-Ameri (Badr) and Al-Sadr (Saraya al-Salam)¹³ and the protracted nature of the formation of Iraq’s new government demonstrated.
- *Insight #2: Relations between different Hashd groups, the Iraqi Army and the Iraqi Federal Police have further improved compared with the previous monitoring period.* Several factors contributed to this development. First, the end of major battles with IS eliminated a source of tension between the many Hashd groups and the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) about the conduct of the war. Second, the Iraqi Federal Police (IFP) has come to count many Hashd sympathisers and members among its ranks, which increases the web of informal relations between these organisations. Whether this is positive or negative remains a moot point at present. In the longer term, dual loyalties risk reducing institutional integrity and performance. Third, a clearer division of labour has been established between the various forces. The disputed territories offer an interesting example. In February 2019, a joint operations room was created in Kirkuk, which brings all relevant forces¹⁴ in the area together to analyse security threats, formulate a response and task a participating security organisation with carrying it out. It is also in the disputed territories that a clear(er) division of labour has emerged, in which the IFP takes care of internal borders and checkpoints, local police forces assure urban security and are based in cities, the army provides border security, and its special forces lead the remaining fight against IS based outside of cities. The Hashd serve as an auxiliary force that ensures rural security

13 The Ameri-Sadr ‘coalition’ dissolved within two weeks because of differences over key appointments (notably the ministries of Defence and the Interior), as well as a backlash from their respective constituencies.

14 The Iraqi Army, special forces, Iraqi Federal Police and the Hashd. Interestingly, it does not include the local police (at least not in Kirkuk city) as it is staffed by Kurdish officers from Erbil and Sulaymaniya. They were not seen as trustworthy by the other security forces. Source: several interviews with senior Hashd commanders in Kirkuk between 3 and 5 March 2019.

and acts in hotspots outside of urban centres.¹⁵ In consequence, the Iraqi Army and IFP occupy a more central space in the web of relations depicted in Figure 1.

- *Insight #3: Relations between Hashd groups not affiliated with Iran have become weaker compared with the previous monitoring period.* Figure 1 also illustrates that relationships between Hashd groups such as Saraya al-Salam (SAS), the Sinjar Resistance Units (YBS), Tribal Mobilization Forces (TMF) and ACD have weakened. Relations between these groups and the ISF have remained equally weak (except ACD). Several factors play a role. First, these developments are a logical consequence of the general demise of the 'original' Hashd. The rationale of working with other Hashd groups has simply decreased with the lower intensity of the fight against IS. Second, the PMF was always dominated by Iran-affiliated groups and their grip has recently strengthened (see below). This harms the ability of non-Iran affiliated groups to relate to one another. Third, the TMF and Sinjar Resistance Units now mostly operate locally, fading out from the national security scene.¹⁶
- *Insight #4: Relations remain strong between Iran-affiliated Hashd groups compared with the previous monitoring period.* Despite electoral competition and some post-election disagreements, relations have remained strong between Iran-affiliated Hashd groups. While they are different in character – Badr is an institutionalised part of the Iraqi political party landscape, Asaib ahl al-Haq is an emergent political force, and Kataib Hezbollah remains largely an armed faction – they are united by their shared ties with Iran and benefit both from their now formalised legitimacy and the partisan distribution of Hashd funding via the PMF Commission.

On balance, the 'original' Hashd is fragmenting to the point of disappearance. Relations between individual Hashd groups have faded and quite a few groups have become more closely linked with the ISF. This could indicate a trajectory away from a state of fairly autonomously operating paramilitary units, were it not for the fact that the Iran-affiliated Hashd groups emerge from this period with a steady powerbase, strong relations between themselves and appreciable influence on – and in – the ISF. It is probably a better reflection of reality to say that the diversity of the Hashd is being reduced to its Iran-affiliated core without, however, this core becoming much stronger than it was in previous monitoring periods.

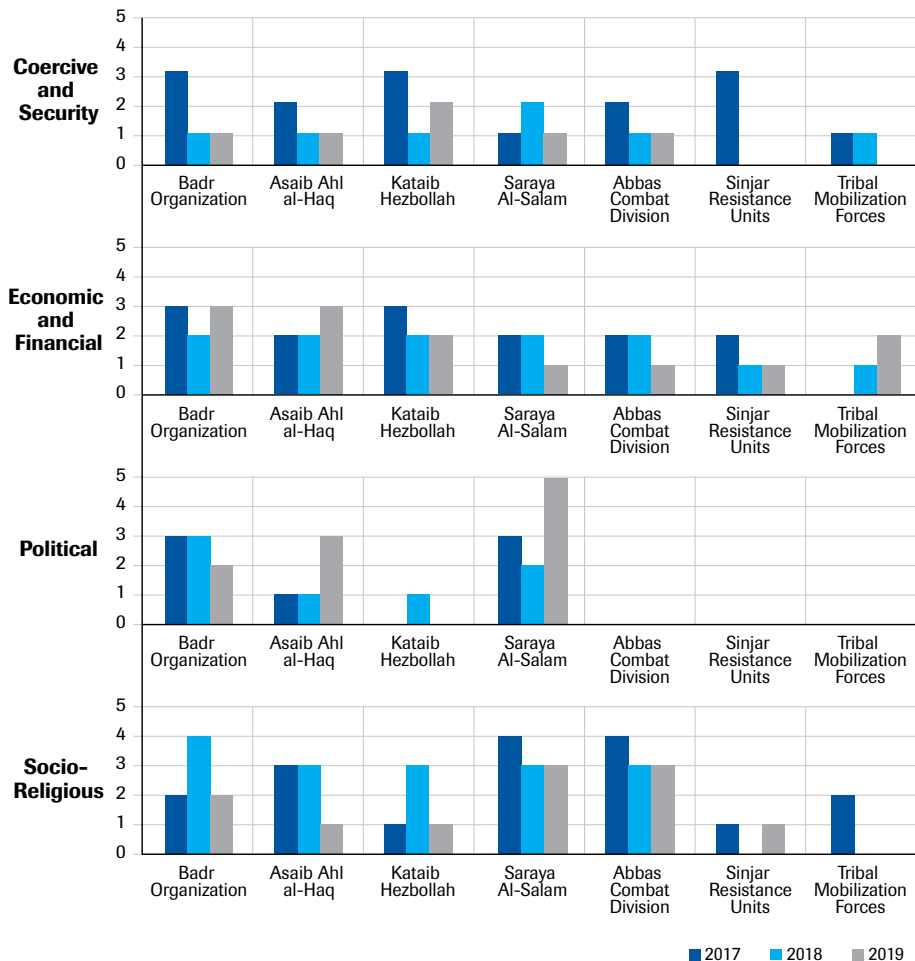
15 Several interviews with senior Hashd commanders in Kirkuk between 3 and 5 March 2019.

16 The negative relationship between the Sinjar Resistance Units and the Iraqi Army and Iraqi Federal Police stems primarily from the fact that the Iraqi Federal Government concluded an agreement with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) to reinstate the old pro-KRG administration in Sinjar without consulting the YBS that actually governs large parts of the area. In addition, few data on the YBS were available for this monitoring period. As relations between the YBS and Shi'a Hashd groups are negative in terms of ideology and political views, the lack of recent data on operational relations colours the overall relationship negatively even though tacit cooperation between these groups takes place.

2 Changes in the powerbase of specific Hashd groups

While it is difficult to accurately assess current developments, an in-depth look at the powerbase of our selected Hashd groups provides cues on possible futures. 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.

Figure 2 Changes across dimensions of power of selected Hashd groups



Coercive and security power: IS defeated, but a low-level threat persists

Throughout the period August–December 2018, minor battles continued to occur between the Hashd and IS forces along the Iraqi–Syrian border, especially at Al-Qaim. Kataib Hezbollah led much of the fight, with support from other groups such as Badr, Asaib ahl al-Haq, the ACD and the TMF.¹⁷ Badr formations were also active on both sides of the Iraqi–Syrian border to secure it against potential IS infiltrations from Baghouz (Syria). As a result, Hashd groups continued to provide a security presence in areas recently liberated from IS, including border control checkpoints. For example, the Hashd constructed a camp around al-Qa'im on the orders of Al-Muhandis, that includes a heliport and hospital.¹⁸

In addition to these minor battles at the border, IS also continued to carry out sporadic attacks throughout Sunni areas and in the disputed territories. Mostly these took the form of car bombings, sniper attacks and kidnappings. The TMF, which are in charge of providing urban security in many of these places, have proven to be an easy target for IS attacks and suffered appreciable losses.¹⁹ Complicating matters, the Sunni governorates of Nineveh and Saleh el-Din feature hundreds of kilometres of open land, with many abandoned villages that are attractive staging points for IS infiltration efforts and guerrilla-style attacks.

Finally, several arms storage depots and military centres associated with the ACD and Saraya al-Salam were attacked during the recount of the election results in the summer of 2018. A committee established by the ACD concluded that these attacks were not just isolated acts of violence but represented a pattern aimed at weakening the group.²⁰ Such political violence abated once the election results were formalised.

Economic and financial power: From payroll to new emporia

Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi's government implemented Al-Abadi's promise of aligning the salaries of Hashd fighters with those of their peers in the Iraqi military. However, although the PMF budget increased accordingly, measures were not taken to ensure direct payment of salaries to individual fighters. As a result, Hashd finances

17 See: <http://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/200820182>; <https://thedefensepost.com/2019/05/06/iraq-syria-militias-sweep-border-isis-cells/> (accessed 27 June 2019).

18 See: <http://al-hashed.net/2018/09/12/75-ينجز-الشعب-الحشد-المهندس-من-بايعاز/> (accessed 5 June 2019).

19 See: Alghadpress.com, online; <https://twitter.com/DavidMWitty1/status/103942877359679488>; <https://twitter.com/TomtheBasedCat/status/1048044252251508736> (all accessed 5 June 2019).

20 See: Al-Arabiya, online (accessed 5 June 2019).

are still controlled by the leadership of the PMF Commission, which is dominated by Iran-affiliated Hashd groups and plagued by persistent reports of corruption in the management and distribution of funds.²¹

In addition to improving the Hashd's official budgetary position, a number of Hashd groups also increased their informal and formal economic activities. In particular, the reconstruction business appears to be a growing and attractive line of business as the country recovers and funds pour in to help rebuild areas destroyed in the fighting against IS. The previous deputy speaker of Iraq's Parliament, Humam Hamoudi, even tweeted that the Hashd represents: 'Iraq's pride of victory (and) its hope in construction and stability'.²² Our interviews in the disputed territories suggest that the Hashd forces stationed there, such as the 16th Turkmen Brigade, were actively expanding into socioeconomic activities through the Hashd civilian branch (Hashd al-Madani) and its local service offices. Hashd officials (mostly Badr) framed the role of the Hashd as being 'the vanguard of the state'. In some places, it provides services such as rehabilitating roads and water pipes, in close collaboration with local communities. Several Hashd officials viewed such efforts as part of a strategy to serve the Iraqi people in line with the Hashd's religiously inspired origins.²³ The anomaly here is that the Hashd partially uses state funding to provide state-type services in places where the state is largely absent.²⁴

In addition to engaging in reconstruction and community service work, Hashd groups were also reported to be continuing their extensive smuggling activities, facilitated by their control over key border checkpoints. For example, millions of dollars are allegedly illegally collected at the Dohuk custom checkpoint. It is estimated that the tariffs and taxes levied by Badr on goods transported from Kurdish to Arab Iraq generate about US\$12–15 million per month at the Safra border crossing alone.²⁵ A similar situation is said to apply to tariffs and smuggling at the Shalamche (near Basra) and Chazabeh (near Amarah) border crossings between Iran and Iraq in the south of the country.²⁶

21 See: Al-Aalem, [online](#); Alghadpress.com, [online](#) (both accessed 5 June 2019).

22 See: <https://twitter.com/SheikhDrHamoudi/status/973228492715327488> (accessed 5 June 2019).

23 Several interviews with senior Hashd commanders in Kirkuk between 3 and 5 March 2019.

24 More precisely, the personnel costs of the Hashd are covered through the public budget allocated to the PMF Commission. The social service programme costs of the Hashd are covered by different revenue sources, including private and, arguably, illicit funds.

25 See: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-militias-insight/in-iraqs-parliament-shiite-militia-leaders-plan-to-call-the-shots-idUSKCN1N1DI> (accessed 5 June 2019).

26 Informal correspondence with a Hashd expert, mid-June 2019; see also: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=THodej_u-hU; on similar issues occurring at northern border crossings into Iran: <https://oilprice.com/Latest-Energy-News/World-News/Shia-Militia-Smuggles-Oil-from-Kurdistan-To-Iran-Iraqi-MP.html> (all accessed 27 June 2019).

Political power: Sizeable parliamentary representation, but a long way from being kingmakers

In this monitoring period, a number of Hashd groups appreciably increased their political representation. Karim al-Nouri, a Fatah politician, honored his promise: 'We are going to enter Parliament in civilian clothes, not uniforms.' Although the participation of several Hashd groups in the 2018 parliamentary elections was not a novelty – Badr, Saraya al-Salam and Asaib ahl al-Haq all successfully fielded candidates in 2014 – the expectation was that the Hashd would capitalise on their fight against IS and score a robust victory in the 2018 elections. The election results confirmed by the Iraqi High Electoral Commission on 18 August 2018 indeed allocated Hashd groups a significant number of seats. Al-Sadr's political bloc grew to 54 seats, while the Fatah alliance (composed of Badr, Asaib ahl al-Haq and a few others) obtained 48 seats. Voting patterns showed that using the fight against IS was a successful election strategy, in particular in Shi'a majority governorates.²⁷ However, a landslide 'Hashd victory' it was not. Although the 30% of seats the Hashd obtained in the Iraqi Parliament is significant, it also hides deep rifts.

For example, Sadr's Sairoun coalition immediately turned against the Iran-affiliated Hashd groups (united in the Fatah bloc) after the elections, while both Badr and Asaib ahl al-Haq struggled to turn their electoral gains into political influence when Parliament rejected some of their key nominees for cabinet. Another good illustration of division is how the Fatah alliance and Nouri al-Maliki's State of Law coalition nominated Hadi al-Ameri for Prime Minister, only to be rejected by several factions, including Sadr's Sairoun coalition. Similar rejections prevented the successful nomination of Falih al-Fayyadh for interior minister and Asma Al-Kildani for justice minister.²⁸ Sadr was particularly outspoken about nominations for the 'security ministries', noting that: 'The parties must be prevented from nominating any candidates for these positions because the security

27 See: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-election/iraqi-supreme-court-ratifies-may-election-results-idUSKCN1L40CS> (accessed 5 June 2019).

28 Al-Fayyadh runs the PMF Commission and is widely seen as Iran-affiliated. Asma Al-Kildani is the sister of Rayan Kildani, who is the head of the Christian Babylon Brigade and a Christian politician known to represent Hashd interests. She was also nominated by the Hashd for elected office.

forces must be loyal to the country.²⁹ Beyond the top ministerial level, however, Hashd influence over state institutions is difficult to restrict. For example, Badr personnel and supporters have long been known to control the Ministry of Interior, while Hashd-sympathisers are reported to have recently proliferated throughout the judiciary and IFP.³⁰

Socio-religious power: In the footsteps of Hezbollah?

Throughout this monitoring period, several Hashd groups expanded their role in the public sphere. The civic department of the Hashd is extending its outreach in universities and hospitals among other places, with the aim of securing benefits for those Iraqis with an (in)formal affiliation with the Hashd. This is accomplished through various strategies, including the mobilisation of volunteers to serve in these institutions and by using Hashd connections to hire sympathisers to fill vacancies.³¹ In addition, Hashd groups themselves have set up their own providers and advertise their own medical and educational services. Hadi al-Ameri and Qais al-Khazali have even spoken of their desire to establish a 'martyrs university' to exercise greater intellectual influence on the future of Iraq.³² Certain senior Hashd commanders in the disputed territories used the phrase 'I am Hashd' as a badge of association that reflects a willingness to serve the country through the institution of the Hashd – civilian and military.³³ It is no longer only a reference to fighting IS.

The wave of recent protests across southern Iraq targeted both government buildings and the offices of a number of Hashd groups. This suggests that, by becoming part of the establishment, Hashd groups are increasingly viewed as being responsible for inadequate governmental performance. This is an especially sensitive issue in the south of the country, where predominantly Shi'a provinces have long been marginalised while also providing most of the rank-and-file Hashd fighters against IS. There is a feeling that

29 See: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/08/why-iraq-needs-a-plan-to-bring-its-paramilitaries-into-the-mainstream-1a24b94c-378e-40d7-8f39-61ff083dd1df/> (accessed 5 June 2019).

30 Anecdotally, the Supreme Judicial Council put up slogans in its buildings such as: 'The Hashd are the back-up support of the intrepid Iraqi army.' Source: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/188-iraqs-paramilitary-groups-challenge-rebuilding-functioning-state>; on the influence of Badr in the Ministry of the Interior: Steinberg, G., *The Badr organization: Iran's most important instrument in Iraq*, Berlin: SWP, 2017.

31 Al Muhandis emphasises the role of doctors, teachers, scholars, civil society organisations and others supportive of the Hashd mission. See: <http://burathanews.com/arabic/news/342008> (accessed 27 June 2019).

32 See: <http://www.almanar.com.lb/3067986> (accessed 5 June 2019). On the martyr's university: <https://www.ft.com/content/ba4f7bb2-6d4d-11e8-852d-d8b934ff5ffa>; <https://n.annabaa.org/news/14659> (both accessed 27 June 2019).

33 Several interviews with senior Hashd commanders in Kirkuk between 3 and 5 March 2019.

southern sacrifices have not been commensurately compensated by either Baghdad or the Hashd as an institution. It also indicates that the Hashd cannot take its core constituency for granted, although the reaction of many Hashd groups to these protests has been very limited.

Box 1 A short reflection on the Hashd in Kirkuk

In the Kirkuk area, we were struck by the unified and relatively low profile of Hashd armed forces, their apparently high level of coordination with the ISF and the extent to which they felt empowered to be a force for good in Iraq. Senior leaders clearly articulated a civilian and a military vision for the Hashd that was almost Gramscian in nature, focused on serving communities, maintaining popular legitimacy and enduring strength. A poetry recital in Kirkuk city featured banners such as 'the Hashd will remain until the Mahdi returns' and 'the Hashd is for everyone' in an ostensible bid to demonstrate that 'being Hashd' is an enduring value and state of mind. As our field research was limited to Hashd leaders in the Kirkuk-Tuzkhurmatu-Amerli area, we hypothesize that the heterogeneous make-up of the disputed territories may have forced the Hashd to present a more disciplined, unified and civilian-oriented front compared with what may be the case in Shi'a-majority areas. Greater triangulation of our conversations in the Kirkuk area is needed.

Source: Several interviews with senior Hashd commanders in the Kirkuk area (3–5 March 2019).

3 Earlier trends persist: August–December 2018

As the dust of the Iraqi elections settles and negotiations over key ministerial portfolios continued, Iran-affiliated Hashd groups were cementing their role as important shapers of Iraq's political economy. During this monitoring period, at least three important trends can be observed that continue developments noted in our last paper:

Trend 1: Ongoing centralisation of the PMF Commission favouring Iran-affiliated groups

Between August and December 2018, Kataib Hezbollah leader Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis skillfully exploited the protracted negotiations about the composition of Iraq's new government to centralise the administrative structure of the Hashd. Technically a deputy to Falih al-Fayyadh, Al-Muhandis is the real behind-the-scenes PMF powerbroker. It was he – not Al-Fayyadh – who ordered the withdrawal of Hashd military forces from the major Sunni- and Kurdish-populated³⁴ cities in August 2018.³⁵ It was also primarily Al-Muhandis who ordered key administrative changes, including: the creation of a smartcard salary payment system linking individual Hashd fighters directly to the PMF Commission (instead of payments flowing to individual fighters via armed groups); the redeployment of Hashd offices and camps from cities to more rural areas; the deregistration of a number of Hashd groups and fighters; and the establishment of regular training camps for Hashd fighters.³⁶ In the process, he tightened his grip on the institution. This became clear in the form of a campaign in which dozens of 'fake Hashd groups'³⁷ were closed down and a number of individual leaders, such as Aws

34 In the disputed territories.

35 This withdrawal was undertaken on behalf of the Fatah alliance to curry favour with Sunni and Kurdish groups during the crucial period of post-electoral coalition building. See: <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2018/10/17/rifts-over-control-of-the-hashd-al-shaabi-implications-for-government-formation/> (accessed 18 June 2019).

36 Aljournal [online](#) (accessed 20 May 2019). Al-Hashed [online](#) (accessed 23 May 2019) & Al-Hashed [online 2](#) (accessed 23 May 2019).

37 'Fake' mostly refers to groups that pretend to be Hashd and use its label to legitimise what are essentially profitable criminal activities. For such dynamics in the greater Mosul area in 2017: Rise Foundation, *Mosul and Tel Afar context analysis*, [online](#), 2017; also: <http://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/110220192> (accessed 27 June 2019).

al-Khafaji (a longtime Hashd leader who also fought in Syria), were temporarily arrested on charges of corruption and extortion.³⁸ Another example of a push towards greater centralisation is the decree issued by Al-Muhandis on 18 August 2018 ordering the disengagement of all Hashd factions from political parties, including religious shrine foundations. This elicited a strongly negative response from Maitham al-Zaidi, head of the ACD that is linked to the Karbala shrine, who saw it as an attempt to weaken his group financially since religious shrine foundations are non-partisan entities, not political parties.³⁹

Al-Muhandis could take these measures unopposed in part because of the administrative stasis that resulted from the protracted negotiations over the new government. But they were also possible because there is unrelenting and strong support among the Iraqi political establishment for the Hashd. Prime Minister Adel Abd al-Mahdi described the Hashd in December 2018 as: 'an historic achievement, whose preservation is one of our most important duties. [...]. There are those who are trying to say that Hashd al Sha'bi is temporary, but I emphasise that such a force is a necessity.'⁴⁰ Iraqi President Barham Saleh similarly said in an interview during his visit to Kuwait in November 2018 that 'all [armed] factions are under the command of the state and work alongside the ISF in maintaining security and fighting terrorism.'⁴¹ During the 2019 Suliforum, a security analyst went as far as saying that a number of senior Iraqi politicians prefer the Hashd to the Counter Terrorism Services (CTS) because the latter is US-linked and -trained.

These administrative changes and their enforcement are important for the long-term position of the Hashd in Iraqi society as they oriented the institution away from cities (leaving the resolution of difficult day-to-day law and order problems to the police) while maintaining its economic presence and community influence. This protects the popular legitimacy of the Hashd while at the same time centralising control.

38 See: <https://www.alsumaria.tv/news/260643/alsumaria-news/ar>; Alhadath, [online](#) (last accessed 12 June 2019); Mansour, R., *Iraq's Paramilitaries Are Turning on Their Own Ranks*, London: Chatham House, [online](#), 2019; Smyth, P., *Making Sense of Iraq's PMF Arrests*, Washington DC: The Washington Institute, [online](#), 2019.

39 See: Al-Aalem.com, [online](#) (accessed 23 May 2019).

40 See: http://www.shafaq.com/ar/Ar_NewsReader/7b932e65-e91f-430e-909c-0f03df70e78d (accessed 5 June 2019). Such rhetorical support also has direct consequences in the real world.

For example, the Hashd had their long-desired salary raise implemented as soon as the new government was confirmed. See: Aljournal, [online](#); Alhashed, [online](#) (both accessed 20 May 2019).

41 See: <http://al-hashed.net/2018/11/12/القاتل-جودة-يقين-7-اللواء-الشعبى-الحشد/> (accessed 5 June 2019).

Trend 2: Iran-affiliated Hashd groups increase their economic presence and influence

The centralisation of the PMF Commission and the political consolidation of Iran-affiliated Hashd groups goes together with their expansion – both licit and illicit – into Iraq’s economy. Although the scope of this expansion is hard to assess due to much economic data being either unavailable or of poor quality, useful indicators are available. To start with, there are several instances of illicit economic activity creating significant revenue. Taxation and smuggling at the Syrian/Iraqi border (Al-Qaim/Albu Kamal) and at the Iranian/Iraqi border is a lucrative business for Hashd groups with a stake in running border control posts, such as Badr, Asaib ahl al-Haq and Kataib Hezbollah.⁴² A spokesperson for a number of Arab tribes in the west and northwest of Iraq expressed himself in a circumspect manner when he said that: ‘the objectives of the leader of Asaib ahl al-Haq are known to us,’ explaining that there are agreements between the Syrian militias and their Iraqi Hashd counterparts to run joint customs checkpoints.⁴³ A similar story can be told for the Safra border crossing between Arab and Kurdish Iraq, where Badr reportedly earns millions of dollars per month on custom tariffs and taxes on goods.⁴⁴ Smaller anecdotal examples of illicit activity abound. Asaib ahl al-Haq allegedly runs gambling halls in Baghdad and is said to have looted the Baiji oil refinery. It is also reputed to engage in robberies and looting, as well as arresting civilians for ransom payments. Saraya al-Salam, in turn, is said to have extorted a Chinese oil company.⁴⁵

Hashd’s engagement in licit activities includes Asaib ahl al-Haq’s expansion into pharmaceuticals and the oil business. Such examples echo previous instances of expansion into Iraq’s licit economy, such as Hashd groups taking over a waste company in Basra and a taxi business in Kerbala, as noted in our last paper.⁴⁶ In several governorates, Hashd groups remain pivotal in the reconstruction process. They have, for example, cornered the scrap metal market near Mosul, which impedes local reconstruction efforts while earning the militias millions of dollars.⁴⁷ The ACD is also active in the provision of humanitarian aid. For instance, it helped deliver water to

42 See: <https://thedefensepost.com/2019/05/06/iraq-syria-militias-sweep-border-isis-cells/> (accessed 5 June 2019).

43 Aljournal.com, [online](http://www.alhadath.net/alhadath/iraq/2018/11/28/سورباية-جميع-الحدود-تأمين-الحشد-طلب-تدقيق-العراق-عشائر.html) (accessed 12 June 2019). See: <http://www.alhadath.net/alhadath/iraq/2018/11/28/سورباية-جميع-الحدود-تأمين-الحشد-طلب-تدقيق-العراق-عشائر.html> (accessed 5 June 2019).

44 See also: *Iraqi oil report*, March 2019.

45 See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N5c60A0rHEM>; Smyth (2019), *op.cit.* Alaraby, [online](http://iq.shafaqna.com/AR/AL/3020266), 2019; <http://iq.shafaqna.com/AR/AL/3020266> (all accessed 27 June 2019).

46 See: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/iraqi-who-once-killed-americans-is-a-u-s-dilemma-as-he-gains-political-power-11544529601> (accessed 23 May 2019) Source

47 See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w9Tv2AlavC0> (accessed 27 June 2019).

Basra during the crisis and dealt with the R Zero water project in the province. Even the International Committee of the Red Cross discussed coordination of humanitarian efforts with the group in a conference.⁴⁸

On a final note, due to the high incidence of corruption throughout the Iraqi political system,⁴⁹ there is a significant risk that the positive electoral outcomes for the Fatah alliance and Sadr's bloc will enable a number of Hashd groups to penetrate the country's state institutions more deeply. This is likely to open new doors to corruption and favouritism, as political power is used to reap economic benefits. The Al-Bayan Center has for example shown that Iraq's state-owned enterprises are black holes in the country's public budget and susceptible to financial abuse.⁵⁰

Trend 3: Asaib ahl al-Haq moves closer to the Iraqi community

The two largest Hashd groups – the Badr Corps and Saraya al-Salam – are part of a broader constellation of affiliated parties and charities that together have significant political leverage. They are also senior coalition partners in the current government. In contrast, the political role and influence of Kataib Hezbollah and Asaib ahl al-Haq – 'tier 2' of influential Hashd groups – is less clear. Despite recent exhortations by Kataib Hezbollah that the Fatah coalition and Sadr's political bloc should overcome their political differences and complete the process of forming a government, it ultimately remains a more militarised group with transnational loyalty to Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.⁵¹

More interesting is the case of Asaib ahl al-Haq as it moves closer to mainstream Iraqi nationalism and acceptance of the Iraqi state as the dominant framework for political contestation. While maintaining links with Iran, Asaib's leader Qais Khazali also advocated for 'cutting political ties from the Hashd', stating that '[we must] strengthen the disengagement of the PMF from politics, and at the same time continue to be

48 See: Facebook of Al-Abbas, [online](#) (accessed 24 May 2019).

49 Transparency International's 'Corruption Perception Index' for 2018 puts Iraq on place 168 out of 180, [online](#) (accessed 20 May 2019).

50 See: Al-Bayan Center, [online](#) (accessed 12 June 2019).

51 Such exhortations included a Kataib Hezbollah spokesperson stating that: 'while appreciating the initiatives of [...] Al-Sadr and [...] Al-Ameri, to work towards an alliance, we see the return of political differences which is detrimental to the interests of the country and the people.' Source: <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/moqtada-al-sadr-and-hadi-al-amiri-to-form-political-alliance-1.739535> (accessed 5 June 2019). Kataib Hezbollah's allegiance was for instance expressed in the following manner: 'While we condemn this treacherous attack [in Ahvaz] we affirm our readiness to cooperate fully with our Mujahideen brothers in the Revolutionary Guard.' See: <https://kataibhezbollah.com/news/2950> (accessed 24 May 2019).

vigilant and ready in case our country needs [us] to defend it again.⁵² In reference to the state, Khazali stressed ‘the need for a government of services and not a government of privileges which should be ready to provide all support to achieve real reforms that our dear [Iraqi] people deserves.’⁵³ In speeches in January 2019, he even distanced Asaib from Iran, saying: ‘velayat-e faqih is not possible in Iraq in the same manner as in Iran because of the existence of the marja’iyya.’⁵⁴ Moreover, Khazali opined that ‘the Shi’a in Iraq cannot behave in the same way as the Shi’a in Lebanon because we are the majority in Iraq, whereas they are the minority in Lebanon.’ Here, he added: ‘We are a state!’⁵⁵

On one level, these statements merely affirm facts about the political, religious and social realities of Iraq. On another level, they are undoubtedly political slogans intended for popular consumption. On yet another level, however, they break with symbolic aspirations of convergence with Iran’s political-religious system, at least rhetorically. They also clarify that the Hashd has acquired sufficient domestic prominence to influence national politics from within without needing to reference the ideological system of another state that is not necessarily popular in Iraq.

Whatever the case may be, Asaib ahl al-Haq has persisted with its own efforts to expand, Gramsci-style, into Iraq’s socio-cultural sphere by securing the Ministry of Culture, setting up its own soccer teams and martial arts clubs (reminiscent of the mix between sports and militancy also found in the Balkans and Russia) and continuing to broadcast its actions through its own TV channel, Al-Ahad. Qais Khazali also meets regularly with Iraqi artists and stresses the importance of literacy in Iraqi society.⁵⁶

52 See: https://twitter.com/Qais_alkhazali/status/1063786703729688576 (accessed 24 May 2019).

53 See: https://twitter.com/Qais_alkhazali/status/1052587472423596032 (accessed 24 May 2019).

54 The Shi’a concept of clerical rule as applied in Iran (velayat-e faqih) is opposed by the senior Shi’a religious authorities in Iraq (marja’iyya).

55 See: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/can-asaib-ahl-al-haq-join-the-political-mainstream> (accessed 24 May 2019).

56 See: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-militias-insight/in-iraqs-parliament-shiite-militia-leaders-plan-to-call-the-shots-idUSKCN1N11DI>; <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/can-asaib-ahl-al-haq-join-the-political-mainstream> (both accessed 24 May 2019).

Conclusion

Several Hashd groups – notably those affiliated with Iran and Sadr’s Saraya al-Salam – capitalised on the reputation, networks and territorial control they had established during their fight against IS to increase their political and economic powerbase without really disbanding, disarming or integrating into the ISF. As lesser Hashd groups faded into the background, the Iran-affiliated Hashd groups increasingly asserted control over the PMF Commission, including key ‘administrative’ functions like fighter registration, salary payments and deployment planning. While one may be forgiven for thinking that efforts to create a more homogeneous Hashd resemble the trajectory that Hezbollah has followed in Lebanon, Iraq’s diversity presents a critical challenge:

- Although powerful Hashd groups are both Shi’a and Iran-affiliated, Iraq’s Shi’a community has several political centres that are reasonably balanced, like the parties, charity networks and armed groups of Al-Sadr, Al-Hakim and Al-Ameri/Al-Muhandis.
- Within the Iran-affiliated Hashd groups – mostly Asaib Ahl al-Haq, Badr, and Kataib Hezbollah – substantial differences of interests, outlooks, loyalties and egos exist that make it difficult to fully homogenise command structures and align group interests.
- Popular discontent in Shi’a provinces with Iraq’s Shi’a political elites – increasingly including Hashd leaders – puts the longer-term support of Iran-affiliated Hashd groups at risk.
- Kurdish, Sunni and Christian parties, formations, constituencies and armed groups are sources of resistance – and support – against expansion.
- Perhaps most importantly, Iraq’s Shi’a religious establishment does not favour an Iranian-style governance model with theocratic elements and parallel state structures. As it remains highly influential and more prestigious than its Iranian counterpart, its views matter.

Factors such as these help explain why Iran-affiliated Hashd groups in Iraq operate in part on the basis of a transnational concept of Shi’a militancy, but do little to explicitly promote the associated notion of ‘resistance’ [against aggressors, oppressive and unjust authority] in rhetoric or action in Iraq. Nationalism as well as other ethnic, tribal, social and religious identities remain powerful competing forces.

The protracted nature of Iraq’s government formation after the May 2018 elections and the August 2018 recount testifies both to the political influence of Iran-affiliated Hashd groups via their Fatah alliance as well as to their constraints: they can veto, but

not determine.⁵⁷ It took a full 10 months (September 2018 – June 2019) to agree on the top nominations for the ministries of Defence, Interior and Justice.⁵⁸ At the same time, the strategy of making the Hashd more homogeneous also carries risks. For instance, marginalisation of smaller, yet heavily armed, Hashd groups can come to pose a threat of confrontation between larger and smaller, Iran-affiliated and non-Iran affiliated armed groups, as sociopolitical tensions within Iraq mount. Moreover, intra-Hashd politicking detracts from mobilising an effective response to renewed IS attacks.

The key to mitigating these risks is a stronger Iraqi state that is better able to channel the energies and strengths of key Hashd groups. In other words, less focus should be put on efforts to reduce the role of Iran-affiliated Hashd groups in political-economic affairs and more on improving the performance of the Iraqi state on issues that matter to its citizens. Many Hashd groups would probably be quite capable of and willing to support a stronger state as long as their own position remains secure. But it appears that a stronger state is needed to set boundaries preventing major Hashd groups from becoming individual states. With this in mind, policy makers in Baghdad and Western capitals can consider several initiatives to channel existing capabilities and energies towards peacebuilding:

- *Strengthen the role of the Iraqi Federal Police and Army at the local level, specifically their ability to ensure security in urban centres.* This includes the need to: withdraw Hashd forces from all urban centres (not only cities in Sunni areas and the disputed territories); carefully define the role of the Hashd in supporting Iraq's special forces in the fight against IS; and ensure better vetting of senior police and military ranks to prevent unwarranted infiltration by 'Hashd secondees'. It also requires a more clearly defined set of rules and responsibilities for Hashd forces across the country, tighter operational command centred on the Prime Minister's office, and greater accountability throughout the Iraqi security sector.

57 As the recent update to the UN Security Council by the UN's Special Representative also indicated: <https://www.un.org/press/en/2019/sc13700.doc.htm> (accessed 16 May 2019); for good background on the 2018 government formation process: Mansour, R., *Iraq's 2018 government formation: Unpacking the friction between reform and the status quo*, London: LSE/IRIS, 2019.

58 The nominations for these three vacancies were accepted by the Iraqi Parliament on 24 June 2019, leaving only the post of Minister for Education open. Najah al-Shammari (the new Defence Minister) is a Sunni Arab who used to serve as a senior Iraqi military officer under Saddam Hussein. He was supported by Ayad Allawi. Yassin Taher al-Yasiri (the new Interior Minister) was backed by Ammar al-Hakim whose parliamentary bloc of 19 seats recently announced that it would act as opposition during this parliamentary term, dissolving its Reform Alliance with Sadr. Farouq Amin Shawani (the new Justice Minister) is a Kurdish judge from Kirkuk, supported by the PUK. At first glance, none of the appointees are connected with the Hashd-based Fatah alliance. For an interesting take on these appointments see the following thread by @Mustafa_Habib33: https://twitter.com/Mustafa_Habib33/status/1143913919746064384/photo/1 (accessed 9 July 2019).

- *Improve the capacity of local governments to provide services and support their communities.* Local governments with enhanced capacities to undertake their functions can offer a viable, less partisan, alternative to the services that Hashd groups may provide. Improvements in the performance of local governments are one element of increasing their legitimacy among local constituencies. At the moment, effective and transparent local governance is absent in appreciable parts of the country, which creates space for others – such as Iran-affiliated Hashd groups – to fill. The international community could strengthen governance-focused Community-Driven Reconstruction (CDR) programmes that can subsequently be scaled up.
- *Consider creating local charters in which local government and Hashd groups agree on social and economic performance objectives.* If adequately regulated and monitored, such charters can harness Hashd capabilities and legitimacy in ways that recognise their interests but also ensure that their efforts benefit all Iraqis instead of particular subgroups. These charters can be funded from local or provincial block grant allocations. They should simultaneously restrict Hashd economic/business activity falling outside of their scope and could benefit from a popular monitoring/feedback mechanism on a religious, tribal or civil society basis.