



**Middle East
Research Institute**

www.meri-k.org

Policy Brief

14 April, 2019. Vol. 4, No. 30

The Hashd Al-Shaabi: From heroes to ... what exactly?

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Iraq's various security forces were united in defeating IS. With their common enemy defeated, unity seems to have vanished rapidly. Implications & Recommendations are presented in this policy brief.

Now that IS has been defeated, at least territorially, governments, donors and the international community are investing in Iraq's state building programmes both at national and local levels. However, Nineveh governorate, which suffered greatest damage and requires greatest attention, has been the scene of a highly divided security landscape since its liberation from IS. The chronic divisions between different actors such as Peshmerga and Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) are only worsened by the presence of the Hashd al-Shaabi and other non-state actors in the Disputed Territories. This brief provides an analysis of the risks posed by Hashd in Nineveh and offers recommendations into regaining a grip on the situation.

In December 2017, Prime Minister Al Abadi declared that IS had been defeated in Iraq, stating: "our battle was with the enemy that wanted to kill our civilization, but we have won with our unity and determination".¹ The fight against IS may have been a rare instance in which the various Iraqi security forces showed a degree of cooperation among each other. The Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), the *Hashd al-Shaabi* and the Kurdish Peshmerga were united in the fight against IS, supported by the International Coalition against Da'esh. With their common enemy defeated, however, unity seems to have vanished rapidly.

¹ The New York Times (2017) Iraq Prime Minister Declares Victory Over ISIS [9 December 2017] via <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/09/world/middleeast/iraq-isis-haider-al-abadi.html>

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Hostile relations between these diverse security forces have returned to centre-stage. A complicating factor was the Kurdish referendum of 25 September, 2017, which was rejected by the Baghdad government. In October 2017, the ISF, led by the *Hashd al-Shaabi* forces, regained control over much of the Disputed Territories (DTs), including Kirkuk and areas in Nineveh recently liberated by Peshmerga from IS. Since then, *Hashd al-Shaabi* has become an important local actor in these DTs, engaging in people's daily lives and showing little sign of willingness to withdraw anytime soon.

Hashd's behavioural pattern

Henceforth, three developments in *Hashd al-Shaabi's* behavioural pattern are of particular relevance and have serious implications for peace and stabilization.

1. A security force meddling in politics is unconstitutional

The Parliamentary Order 91 of February 2016, through which the *Hashd al-Shaabi* became a legally recognized government organisation, states that all *Hashd* members "will be cut from all political, party and social frameworks, and political work will be prohibited in its ranks".² In addition, the Iraqi constitution states that security forces "shall not interfere in political affairs, and shall have no role in the transfer of authority".³ The *Hashd al-Shaabi leaders* are however increasingly powerful politicians in Iraq and believed to expand their power position through their *Hashd*-affiliated armed groups.

In Mosul, one of the cities where *Hashd* forces are most active, the divided political and security landscape is causing corruption and lack of commitment to citizens' needs. This came painfully to the fore when an overcrowded ferry sank on 21 March 2019, and killed over 100 people, infuriating Mosul's population as they saw the city's arguably corrupt lawmakers and governors protected by the various *Hashd al-Shaabi* forces.

2. Illegal shadow administrations are backed by Hashd

Another controversial development is the instalment of local shadow administrations in parts of the DTs, such as in Shingal (Sinjar) District. While the District and Sub-District Mayors and elected Council members were displaced from Shingal, *Hashd al-Shaabi* appointed new 'Acting' officials in their places. The Acting District Mayor, Fahad Hamid Omar commented on 27 December 2018: "*Hashd al-Shaabi* commanders, PKK [Kurdistan Workers' Party], and representatives of Shia and Sunni Arabs of Shingal met (...) and formed a committee to administer", thereby outlining the role of *Hashd* in this move.⁴ Although this replacement was not officially recognised by Baghdad and considered illegal (with arrest warrants issued against some of the acting executives), the federal government implicitly recognises the Acting executives by officially doing business with them.

3. Fragmented security landscape is a major spoiler in reconciliation and return

² For an English translation see <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/07/iraqs-prime-minister-establishes-popular-mobilization-front-as-a-permanent-independent-military-formation.php> (below)

³ Article 9a of the Iraqi Constitution (2005). Via <https://zaidalali.com/resources/constitution-of-iraq/>

⁴ Kurdistan24 (2018) PKK-affiliate, Sunni, Shia Arabs form parallel administrative body in Shingal: official. Via <http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/cc3c34ba-5657-4283-84a9-c91ccae926ab>

Local government representatives, civil society and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) working in a range of districts in Nineveh province, consider the presence of a myriad of security forces as the first and foremost barrier preventing stabilisation, return of IDPs and reconciliation. Interestingly, *Hashd al-Shaabi* forces have been formed among local populations, including minority groups (such as the Turkmen Brigade, the Christian Kataeb Babilayoun and the Yezidi Lalish Regiment). Nevertheless, significant proportions of Yezidis and Christians are reluctant to, or experience problems with, returning to their homes.

Furthermore, Christians fear a Shia-oriented demographic change or ‘Shia-isation’ in their major towns, such as Bartella where Shiite Shabak communities are moving in from the surrounding villages, arguably in search for livelihood opportunities, and settle in the urban districts, where (currently displaced) Christians used to live.

Implications & Recommendations

It is not a secret that Iraq’s national sovereignty is severely compromised in Nineveh and DTs. Whatever the core intentions of *Hashd al-Shaabi*, they are overruling the actual sovereign actor(s) in Baghdad or Nineveh. The plea for a unified security force of ISF and Peshmerga, integrating or disarming *Hashd al-Shaabi* forces, is getting louder among local communities.

- The main focus of the Iraqi government in Baghdad should now be rule-of-law, inclusive governance and empowering local governments to achieve permanent stability. The government should make clear that *Hashd* can either be a security force *or* a political organisation, not both. Its fighters should be disarmed or integrated into the ISF.
- The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Erbil should play a constructive role in this process and facilitate state-building for the sake of stability and return of IDPs.
- The international community and INGOs are moving away from humanitarian aid to capacity building or handover, and recently pledged to invest \$30 billion into reconstructing Iraq.⁵ The pledges are yet to substantialise but will not bring much sustainable change if the security situation is not addressed.

⁵ This was done in the international conference in Kuwait in February 2018. See <https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/iraq-kuwait-international-conference-reconstruction-iraq-dg-echo-un-ngos-echo-daily>

Who are the *Hashd al-Shaabi*?

The *Hashd al-Shaabi* is an umbrella of a range of forces, initiated with a *fatwa* issued by Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani after the onslaught of IS in the summer of 2014. The *fatwa* was destined to attract more men to join the ISF, however, enthusiasm for a demoralised, disintegrated and retreating Iraqi Army was understandably extremely low. Instead, the new volunteers joined half a dozen pre-existing and several dozens of newly formed paramilitary forces, which were collectively named *Hashd al-Shaabi*. This force rapidly grew to over 100,000 fighters and became vital in the fight against IS. It played an essential role in halting IS advances towards Baghdad and Shia holy cities⁶ and later in liberating the IS occupied territories in northern Iraq.⁷

In recognition of the *Hashd's* accomplishments and critical importance in this period, the Iraqi Parliament formally recognised this entity in February 2016 by introducing Office Order 91.⁸ The *Hashd* forces remained separate from the Iraqi Army but were integrated into the structure of the ISF and put directly under the Prime Minister's command, even though such legitimisation was considered by many as a potential risk for (further) sectarian divides.⁹

Internal divisions

The *Hashd al-Shaabi* is a majority Shia force, yet it is internally deeply divided. There are three major groups, characterized as pro-Khamenei, pro-Sistani and pro-Sadr. The first follows Iranian supreme leader Ali Khamenei and is the most vocal and dominant group among the *Hashd al-Shaabi*. These include the *Badr* Organization and *Asaib Ahl Al-Haq* (AAH) who also became highly successful in Iraqi national politics, particularly through securing electoral votes and a strong parliamentary faction (named *Fatih*) after the 2018 elections.¹⁰ In addition, smaller but significant organisations like the *Harakat al-Nujaba*, *Kata'ib Hezbollah* and *Saraya al-Khorasani* also fall into the Khamenei oriented group of forces.¹¹

The second faction includes the Abbas Division and *Ali al-Akbar* Brigade who pledged allegiance to Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani and defending Shia holy sites against IS. They are expected to be willing to integrate into ISF, should Al-Sistani tell them to do so.

The third faction comprises pro-Sadr groups, such as *Saraya al-Salam*, previously known as the Mahdi Army, which finds its fundamentals in the post-2003 U.S. invasion period. Muqtada al-Sadr, member of the important Sadr family and leader of these groups, opposes foreign influences in Iraq,

⁶ Ibid, p. 29

⁷ O'Driscoll, D. & D. Van Zoonen (2017) The Future of Iraq: Is Reintegration Possible? Middle East Policy 24[3] pp. 34-47

⁸ For an English translation see <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/07/iraqs-prime-minister-establishes-popular-mobilization-front-as-a-permanent-independent-military-formation.php>

⁹ Al Jazeera (2016) Iraq's parliament passes law legalising Shia militias. Via <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/11/iraq-parliament-passes-law-legalising-shia-militias-161126133010696.html>

¹⁰ Mansour, R. & F.A. Jabar (2017) The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future. Carnegie Middle East Center, Beirut / Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington D.C.

¹¹ O'Driscoll, D. & D. Van Zoonen (2017) The *Hashd al-Shaabi* and Iraq: Subnationalism and the State. Middle East Research Institute (MERI).

including that of Iran and the US, and declines cooperation with al-Maliki. A Shiite focused nationalism is what constitutes the ideology of this group.¹²

Article Citation: Hesselink, E. (2019) The Hashd Al-Shaabi: From heroes to ... to what exactly? MERI Policy Brief. vol. 4, no. 30.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of MERI.

¹² Ibid.