

Policy Paper

The Myth and Reality of Iraq's al-Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilization Forces): A Way Forward

Author:

Hassan Abbas

Publisher:

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES)
Amman Office

September 2017

Amman, Jordan



Published in 2017
by Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Jordan & Iraq

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Jordan & Iraq
P.O. Box 941876
Amman 11194
Jordan

Tel. +962 6 5008335
Fax: +962 6 5696478

Email: fes@fes-jordan.org

Website: www.fes-jordan.org

Facebook: www.facebook.com/FESAmmanOffice

Not for sale.

© FES Jordan & Iraq

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reprinted, reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means without prior written permission from the publishers.

The views and opinions expressed in this publication are solely those of the author, and do not necessarily represent those of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung or the institution he is affiliated with.

Table of Contents

Introduction 1

Who constitutes the Hashd? What are their organizational structures, motivations and operational capabilities? Who sponsors and funds the Hashd? 4

How do Sunnis (and other groups) view the Hashd? Why are Iraq’s neighbours so concerned about the role of the Hashd? 9

Can the Hashd be fully integrated into Iraq’s official security forces? 11

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS: 12

Introduction

The contrast was unforgettably awe-invoking: the spontaneous, unpredictable, revolutionary move, entrenched within the gentle, soulful aura of the city's holiness. The glaring desert sun of Iraq was blazing with full energy, mirroring the people's voices that took to the streets. It was the mid of June 2014, and the gradual transformation of al-Qaeda in Iraq into the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) was no secret as Mosul had fallen a few days ago, casting a dark shadow upon the lives of millions of Iraqis. But just as heavy as that shadow was, there was an even greater cloud of resistance, pride, and defiance. All before my eyes.

I stood on the sandy streets of Najaf as a mere visitor to pursue my study of the "new" Iraq, insignificant in the overwhelming spiritual essence that the atmosphere possessed. In front of me, the golden dome of Ali bin Abu Talib's shrine glistened under the bright sky, beneath me sitting dust covered centuries of historical glories and tragedies. The spur-of-the-moment, gallant crowds that took marching to the streets, were making their way to the doors of the leading Shia cleric Ayatollah Sayyid Sistani, demanding a religious call to arms to protect their homeland. The self-proclaimed "Islamic State" was seen as expanding and Baghdad appeared vulnerable. Insightfully, Sistani implored citizens to join Iraq's security services and the al-wajib al-kifai fatwa (religious injunction)¹ issued for the purpose did not encourage any vigilante type action.² But who cared to pay attention to the nuance at the time. All his followers heard was a religious call to action.

Thousands of people strode with the confidence of their Mesopotamian ancestors, reclaiming the liberty they so desperately longed for. The embracing of their freedom was loud, vivacious, and symbolic. The years of Saddam oppression were over – their eyes heavy with determination, mouths uttering words of might and resilience. This was the moment when the idea of al-Hashd al-Shaabi, the Shia dominated Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) was born. Sistani's fatwa calling on Iraqis "to defend the country, its people, the honor of its citizens, and its sacred

¹ According to Ayatollah Sistani's website (<http://www.sistani.org/english/>), wajib kifai means an obligation which is imposed on the Muslim community as a whole; and if it is fulfilled by one or more individuals, then the rest of the community is no longer required to do that.

² The sermon from Sistani's representative Abd al-Mahdi al-Kerbalai, on June 13, 2014 declared: "Citizens who are able to bear arms and fight terrorists, defending their country and their people and their holy places should volunteer and join the security forces to achieve this holy purpose." See Loveday Morris, "Shiite cleric Sistani backs Iraqi government's call for volunteers to fight advancing militants," The Washington Post, June 13, 2014; available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/volunteers-flock-to-defend-baghdad-as-insurgents-seize-more-iraqi-territory/2014/06/13/10d46f9c-f2c8-11e3-914c-1fbd0614e2d4_story.html?utm_term=.818b59d436ea

places”³ did the magic. I travelled to Iraq many times since then to follow the political, religious and security developments, and this policy brief is based on my personal observations and interviews with dozens of people who joined this movement, Iraqi politicians and members of Iraq’s official security forces. I had the opportunity to discuss Iraq affairs with experts and scholars in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Turkey and Iran as well.⁴ Thanks to Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung’s office in Jordan and Iraq, an earlier draft of this paper was presented before a group of Iraqi politicians, government officials and representatives of various organs of PMF/Hashd in Baghdad in February 2017, to elicit their feedback. I am very grateful to the group for their insights and valuable critique for improving the paper. I am also very grateful to the respected Bahraluloom family of Najaf, and the two very learned Iraqi ambassadors to the Washington D.C. – former Ambassador Lukman Faily and present ambassador Fareed Yasseen – all of whom facilitated my trips to Iraq and shared their valuable insights.

The policy paper focuses on three primary issues: a) the prevailing status and workings of the Hashd forces; b) relevance of local and regional politics to the security dynamics of Iraq; and c) policy recommendations for the Iraqi government and its allies on how to think about the future of the Hashd and secure Iraq better. For this purpose, a range of questions are framed for analytical purposes dealing with the strength and weaknesses of the Hashd forces, their local and regional sponsors, their capabilities and activities on the ground including allegations of human rights violations, concerns of Sunni Iraqis with regard to sectarian dimensions of this phenomenon and last but not the least as regards the agenda and planning of the Iraqi government for security sector reform.

In principle, scholarship on the subject indicate that there are no shortcuts to resolving complicated security solutions; private armed groups and militias, which operate as parallel policing structures, can quickly spiral out of control, gain power, and often lead to more violence as their primary tactics are fighting violence with violence.⁵ More so, non-state armed groups frequently threaten the ability of the states to establish and strengthen rule of law institutions. In states tackling insurgency, organized crime, and terrorism, local political groups jump in this fray for money, weapons, and to expand their political constituency. Politics as well as desperate search for security often drives such initiatives, while scared and harassed populace buy into these measures knowing that the state lacks the

³ Abbas Kadhim and Luay Al Khatteeb, “What Do You Know about the Sistani Fatwa,” Huffington Post, July 10, 2014; available at: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/luay-al-khatteeb/what-do-you-know-about-si_b_5576244.html

⁴ Materials are also borrowed from my presentations in two conferences in Iraq on the subject (in September 2015 organized by Humanize Global in Baghdad and in December 2015 organized by Al-Hussain Shrine in Karbala). Some of the ideas in this paper were earlier presented in the conference organized by Centre for the Study of Islam and Democracy (CSID) in April 2016 in Washington DC.

⁵ Hassan Abbas and Nadia Gerspacher, “The Irregulars,” Foreign Policy, March 30, 2015; available at: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/03/30/the-irregulars-vigilantes-police-security-iraq-afghanistan/>

capacity to establish its writ. There is no shortage of examples in this arena. Afghan warlords such as Abdul Rashid Dostum and Ismail Khan (both still very powerful) were allowed by the former Afghan President Hamid Karzai (with the tacit US/NATO approval) to maintain private militias to protect their security interests and to counter Taliban moves in their areas, while in Mexico, anti-crime gangs emerged spontaneously to fight the notorious drug cartels.⁶ In both cases, security and peace remains elusive even though a semblance of security is achieved in certain areas at the cost of rule of law. More importantly, this happens in lieu of building local police forces postponing organic state building processes. Research studies show us that such a trade-off is a bad deal in the end but as Brookings's notable scholar Vanda Felbab, argues such initiatives may even receive international support under special security conditions:

*when national forces prove unable or unwilling to defeat the threat, such as in Iraq, Syria, Libya, Nigeria, and Somalia, the United States increasingly faces decisions whether to support (or establish) local militia and other irregular forces. Indeed, militias are back in vogue as a tool of U.S. security policy.*⁷

Whether Iraq is facing a similar dilemma is an important question. Views about the nature, utility and agenda of the Hashd vary widely among regional as well as international experts and are often driven by political as well as sectarian and national interests. Objectivity is a victim in the process, as is the case in many other contentious international issues. In a conversation I had with a Saudi military official, he defined the Hashd as "thugs who are focused on committing genocide of Sunnis," while an American military intelligence official, who had served in the Iraq campaign earlier, shared his conviction that these groups are nothing but "an extension of Iranian influence and consequence of a premature US departure from Iraq."⁸ Syed Ahmed Safi, an eminent Iraqi Shia leader, who administers the Al-Abbas Shrine in Karbala, on the other hand told me that, "the Hashd are our valuable asset ensuring Iraq's survival and safety from ruthless ISIS terrorists."⁹ Al-Hashd al-Shaabi are more popular than Iraqi military in the South according to a Carnegie report which maintains that rather than enlisting with the Iraqi military, around 75 % of men aged 18 to 30 years from the Shia majority provinces signed up to join the

⁶ Neil A. Englehart, "A Tale of Two Afghanistans: Comparative Governance and Insurgency in the North and South," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 50, No. 4 (July/August 2010), pp. 737-743; available at http://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/poli_sci_pub/2

⁷ For instance, see Vanda Felbab-Brown, "The Dubious Joys of Standing up to Militias and Building Partner Capacity: Lessons from Afghanistan and Mexico for Prosecuting Security Policy Through Proxies," Brookings, July 21, 2015: available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-dubious-joys-of-standing-up-militias-and-building-partner-capacity-lessons-from-afghanistan-and-mexico-for-prosecuting-security-policy-through-proxies/>

⁸ The conversation with the Saudi official took place in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia in April 2016, while the interview with the US official was conducted in October 2016 in Washington DC.

⁹ Interview in Karbala, Iraq, July 2016.

Hashd.¹⁰ However, the fact that the Mosul operation is driven and led by the US-trained Iraqi Special Forces and the Counter-Terrorism Forces, which are quite diverse, deserves broader recognition. To navigate through these perspectives, many issues require dispassionate inquiry. A relative and understandable dearth of academic and field study work add to the challenge of finding the truth in the matter.

Who constitutes the Hashd? What are their organizational structures, motivations and operational capabilities? Who sponsors and funds the Hashd?

Following the humiliating collapse of the Iraqi army while facing ISIS in June 2014, the Hashd clearly filled a gap and helped secure Baghdad. Moreover, the rise of the Hashd served as a psychological boost for the ordinary Shia in Iraq who felt besieged and defenseless – and even started fearing return of a Saddam-like era. Iraq's Arab neighbors often ignore this Iraqi fear and concern.

There were five categories of forces that came to be ultimately known as al-Hashd al-Shaabi – an umbrella group managing many armed groups with varying political and ideological leanings:

a) Pre-existing Shia armed groups that were active in the 2003-2011 timeframe: These are mostly Iran-backed groups such as the Badr Organization, Kataib Hezbollah and Asaib Ahl al-Haq. These are considered as the relatively best trained, most resourceful and powerful on the ground. The total number of fighters under this section adds up to almost 40,000 to 45,000. They have an effective media wing covering their operations and profit from frequent contributions and active presence on social media. Most of the groups in this category resisted and challenged the U.S. and coalition presence in Iraq before the 2011 withdrawal. Officials of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) have helped these groups with training support and equipment and their members are even tacitly encouraged to follow Iranian Supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in matters of religious jurisprudence.

b) Armed wings of Iraqi political parties: These include groups such as Saraya as-Salam (Peace Brigades, formerly al-Mahdi Army) and Liwa ash-Shabaab ar-Rasali aligned with Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr; these groups pose the most severe challenge to prospects of strong democratic institutions as they are extensions of political forces that can be used for violence to settle political scores if need be. Roughly estimated, the strength of these groups range between 45,000 to

¹⁰ Figures quoted in Renad Mansour, "The Popularity of the Hashd in Iraq." Carnegie Middle East Center, 1 February 2016; available at <http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/62638>

50,000. Some of these groups move in and out of PMF depending on political developments at a given time.

c) New armed groups that emerged especially in response to Sistani's fatwa and mostly comprised Shia volunteers from the South of Iraq who received funds from the independent foundations running shrines in Karbala, Najaf and Baghdad: these are highly revered by Shia but least resourced. The total strength of these groups is around 18,000 to 20,000 volunteers. The Saraya al-Ataba al-Hussainiya and the Ali al-Akbar Brigade are among the important groups in this category.

d) Many smaller groups emerged across Iraq on tribal lines driven purely by local security considerations. This has mostly been on self-help basis but lately some of these groups have developed understanding and alliances with more organized and larger groups. Al-Hashd al-Shariya, comprising Sunni tribal units also fall into this category. These are estimated to be in dozens and may have around five thousands active members in total. In this category are also included some criminal gangs for whom the Hashd label provides an excellent cover for kidnapping for ransom and other nefarious activities.

e) A distinct PMF operates in Turkmen areas [Kirkuk, Amerli, Bashir, Tozkhormato, Kharatnah, Kazah and al Hafr] as well. The Turkmen Hashd overall constitute around four thousand members and are called "Brigade 12". There is also Christian and Shabak PMF units in Ninawa plains. Another small PMF unit known as "Faili Kurds" is also active in the Kurdish areas.¹¹

By the time the Iraqi army regained its senses, the Hashd had developed into a force to be reckoned with, acting now more as an attack force that led campaigns to liberate certain areas from ISIS and in some cases – such as in Tikrit – handed them to the army and federal police. In other cases, it operated as a support force following the footsteps of military, Fallujah being a case in point. This developing relationship was uncomfortable to begin with and the Hashd's lack of accountability created a challenge. A Shia Iraqi military leader from the South who walked out on Prime Minister Maliki in late 2014 in response to increasing activities of an Iran backed Hashd group told me that he had to flee Iraq for his safety afterwards as the pro-Iranian factions were pursuing him.¹²

The government tried hard in the 2015-16 timeframe to create the impression that it was in control of the Hashd. On paper, the Hashd Commission reported directly to Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi who as Commander-in-Chief supposedly managed the entity. Its chairman is National Security Advisor Falih al-Fayyad, a former Dawa Party official who took care of all things administrative. Deputy Hashd Commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, closely aligned with Iran,

¹¹ Comments from Abbas al-Bayyati. Member of the Iraqi Parliament on an earlier draft of this paper, February 2017.

¹² Interviews with the General in late 2016 and early 2017.

supposedly served as the operational coordinator for the Hashd while Badr leader Hadi al-Ameri, a mere “Assistant Commander” on paper, actually played a far more central role in decision-making of the Iran-backed groups.¹³ Qasem Soleimani, commander of the Quds force of the IRGC, and other Iranian commanders also guided various Hashd operations on the ground.¹⁴ Another assistant commander named Thamir al-Tamimi, representing Sunni Muslims in the mix, was a nominee of the Speaker of Parliament, Salim Jabouri (a Sunni from Diyala).¹⁵

In reality, the groups under the Hashd umbrella lack cohesion and any common strategic vision needed for a long-term campaign against ISIS and the likes. At times they are pulled in different directions, given varying objectives of their respective sponsors. For instance, policies pursued by Iran backed groups are often not in sync with Sadrists and Maliki competes with Abadi to maneuver the overall direction of Hashd forces. While the day to day administrative affairs including financial management of these forces are largely controlled by Hadi Al-Ameri and Muhandis, operational and tactical decisions are taken by group commanders in the field. At a macro level Abadi is in favor of collaborating more with the U.S. and other friendly western nations to balance Iranian influence on Hashd forces.¹⁶ In a nutshell, PMF is not a monolith by any stretch of imagination.

In my estimate based on interviews with members of Hashd forces, there are around 35 groups that are actively operating under the Hashd umbrella (this doesn't include the small Hashd units developed on tribal lines in various locations). Various media and regional experts believe this number to be around 50, which appears to be an exaggerated assessment. In some cases, large groups have splintered due to political differences, strategic maneuvers from the sponsors or caused by disputes over financial management. For instance, Harakat al Nujaba led by Sheikh Akram al Kabi is an armed group that distanced itself from Asaib Ahl al-Haq in 2013. It has three brigades including one that operates in Syria – and some would count these separately.¹⁷ The total strength of these groups is estimated to be around 125,000 fighters but it is quite possible that 10-15 % of these are “ghost

¹³ Interviews with Iraqi military officers, March 2016. For background also see, Anne Barnard, “Iran Gains Influence in Iraq as Shia Forces Fight ISIS,” The New York Times, March 5, 2015; available at http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/06/world/middleeast/iran-gains-influence-in-iraq-as-shiite-forces-fight-isis.html?_r=0

¹⁴ “A New Controversial Actor in Post ISIS Iraq: Al-Hashd Al-Shaabi (the Popular Mobilization Forces,” ORSAM Report No: 198, Ankara, May 2015; also available at <http://www.orsam.org.tr/files/Raporlar/rapor198/198eng.pdf>

¹⁵ See, “Security Focus: Security and Politics Mix Inseparably in Hashd Forces,” Inside Iraqi Politics, Issue No. 111, July 20, 2015; available at <http://www.insideiraqipolitics.com/Files/Inside%20Iraq%20No111.pdf>

¹⁶ For a good discussion of these rivalries and tensions, see Renad Mansour and Faleh A. Jabar, “The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq’s Future,” Carnegie Middle East Center, April 28, 2017; available at <http://carnegie-mec.org/2017/04/28/popular-mobilization-forces-and-iraq-s-future>

¹⁷ For details, see, Amir Toumaj, “Iraqi militia leader receives warm reception in Tehran,” FDD’s Long War Journal, September 9, 2016; available at: <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/09/iraqi-militia-leader-receives-warm-reception-in-tehran.php>

warriors” who are paid without any active role on the battleground. Ahmed Al-Asadi, the official spokesman of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) claimed to have 141,000 members.¹⁸ According to official Iraqi budget figures in 2016, 110,000 members of the Hashd were benefitting from direct government funding at the time – both in terms of salaries and equipment.¹⁹ The Head of the Iraqi Parliament’s Security and Defense Committee Hakim al-Zamili shared with me that the number of PMF members receiving direct government funding by mid 2017 has risen to 122,000.²⁰ Some groups receive more due to their affiliations with Iran and the shrine administrations in Najaf, Baghdad, Samarra and Karbala.

The Shia dominated South is generally quite critical of the Iraqi government’s strategies and overall competence. The two shrines in Karbala have adopted many austerity measures to be able to fund their own Hashd factions whose primary responsibility is to strengthen the defenses of the two holy cities to ensure safety of pilgrims and also support anti-ISIS campaigns in neighboring provinces. The fact that more pilgrims now visit Karbala on the occasion of Arbaeen every year (estimated to be between 17 to 20 million) than those who perform Hajj (around 1.5 million) explains the nature of the gigantic task.²¹ Hundreds of thousands of Iraqis walk on foot from across Iraq to Karbala shrines at this occasion to pay homage to the sacrifice of Prophet Mohammad’s grandson Hussain who along with his friends and family was massacred by Yazid, the so called Muslim ruler of the time. Hussain had defied Yazid’s unjust policies and refused to submit to his oppressive regime. Iraq’s neighboring Arab states often ignore or dismiss the significance of this massive gathering for sectarian reasons it appears – and Iraqi Shia lament this attitude. Shia are generally very sensitive – at times overly sensitive – regarding these religious commemorations and various rituals given the oppression that they have suffered historically. Under Saddam Hussein, the commemoration of Shia holidays was banned – and many Arab states still strictly discourage or disallow public commemoration of Shia holidays (despite significant Shia populations in their midst). For the Iraqi Shia, the Hashd are heroes who are standing up to the divisive forces that wish ill to Iraq and are enabling the Shia Muslims to keep alive their great pilgrimage tradition. Hence the special reverence. Out of respect some Iraqis call the group al-Hashd al-Muqadas meaning the sacred forces. Iraqi marketplace in

¹⁸ Al-Hashd al-Sha’bi, “Al-Asadi: 141 thousand fights from all national components in Hashd”, December 9, 2016, available at <http://tinyurl.com/hosaxae>

¹⁹ For details, see Iraqi budget for 2016, available at <http://www.moj.gov.iq/uploaded/4394.pdf>

²⁰ FES roundtable discussion on the draft paper. The total number of registered members of PMF according to Zamili in early February 2017 was 152,000

²¹ Alexandra Sims, “Millions of Muslims take part in mass pilgrimage of Arbaeen – in spite of Isis,” Independent, November 24, 2016; available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/20-million-muslims-march-against-isis-arbaeen-pilgrimage-iraq-karbala-a7436561.html>; also see Sayed Mahdi al-Modarresi, “World’s Biggest Pilgrimage Now Underway, And Why You’ve Never Heard of it!,” January 24, 2015, Huffington Post, available at: http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/sayed-mahdi-almodarresi/arbaeen-pilgrimage_b_6203756.html

most places I traveled to from Najaf to Samarra are full of banners with pictures of Hashd martyrs.

The Hashd operated pretty effectively in the battlefield. It cannot be denied that it achieved remarkable successes against the so-called “Islamic State”, pushing them out from a swathe of territory southwest of Mosul. They cleared over 2,000 square kilometers.²² In fact, these campaigns raised hope that ISIS could be pushed out of Iraq encouraging Iraqi military to put its house in order with the help of the US and other allies. The Hashd can legitimately claim that it created this opening for Iraq. According to a former Iraqi general, Iraqi military is in a better shape today in comparison to 2014. It is now leading major anti-ISIS campaigns and police forces are handed the cleared areas who in turn work hand in hand with Hashd to stabilize the area. In some key areas still – such as Tel Afar and Hawija – Hashd forces continue to be in the lead.²³

The relationship between the Hashd and the Iraqi government is largely contingent on the government’s relationship with Iran as well as important political parties that sponsor some factions. The new legal structure under which the Hashd are expected to operate – the Hashd law adopted by Parliament on 26 November 2016 – is being ambitiously projected as a game changer. The idea behind this effort is to create a legal structure that legitimizes but also depoliticizes the Hashd, while establishing a clear command and control structure under Iraq’s Commander-in-Chief. It also amounts to convert what started as a passionate movement to save Iraq into a structured and disciplined organization. That’s a tall order.

Iraq’s Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi is certainly concerned about the discipline and influence of the Hashd as it also impacts national political dynamics. At an event at United States Institute of Peace (USIP) in March 2017, while appreciating Hashd’s contributions, he acknowledged that some segments of Hashd are aspiring to gain power and “some have committed crimes, even armed robbery, kidnapping, and we are confronting them...”²⁴ He emphasized that he has categorically conveyed to Hashd forces that they cannot be allowed to participate in politics: “You cannot carry arms and you are a political group at the same time.”²⁵ He optimistically believes that majority of Hashd forces agree with him.

The relationship and coordination between the Hashd and the Iraqi army will likely remain strong up to the liberation of Mosul – expected to be accomplished in

²² Orla Guerin, “Iraqi Shia militias’ show of force in battle for Mosul.” BBC, December 3, 2016; available at http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-38194653?ocid=wsnews.chat-apps.in-app-msg.whatsapp.trial.link1_auin

²³ Renad Mansour and Faleh A. Jabar, “The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq’s Future,” Carnegie Middle East Center, April 28, 2017; available at <http://carnegie-mec.org/2017/04/28/popular-mobilization-forces-and-iraq-s-future>

²⁴ Transcript of Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi at the U.S. Institute of Peace, March 20, 2017; available at <https://www.usip.org/transcript-prime-minister-haider-al-abadi-us-institute-peace>

²⁵ Ibid.

the 2017-18 timeframe. It was generally assumed that the increasingly active US engagement in the anti-ISIS operations might be contingent on keeping the Hashd away from the Mosul operation. Hashd indeed appeared to be staying on the sidelines blocking only some critical exit points helping the overall effort. Gradually, it appeared that Hashd are fully active in the Mosul operation – at least in a strong support role for Iraqi and coalition forces. The Hashd also joined hands with the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) Peshmerga to encircle Mosul and prevent access to ISIS-held territories in Syria.²⁶ Insightfully, Lt. Gen. Stephen Townsend, the U.S. general commanding coalition forces in Iraq believes Hashd to be “remarkably disciplined” allies in the anti-ISIS operations and even appreciated their efforts in disabling ISIS network links in the vicinity of Tel Afar, West of Mosul, by stating that “the PMF did advance more rapidly than we expected and they’ve done a good job.”

27

How do Sunnis (and other groups) view the Hashd? Why are Iraq’s neighbours so concerned about the role of the Hashd?

Iraq’s Sunnis mostly look at the Hashd as a Shia force, which seeks to expand Shia influence in Iraq. Sectarianism as well as politics play a crucial part in this assessment but it is human rights violations committed during some Hashd operations that provide substance to the genuine Sunni concerns. Some of the Hashd excesses might indeed be inspired by revenge. In other cases, the Hashd argue that many of the Sunnis they targeted were secretly supporting Daesh.²⁸ Reports from various international human rights organizations including from Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch indicate serious atrocities committed by the Hashd in various theatres.²⁹ Sunnis often accuse Shia of attempting to dominate Iraq and excluding Sunnis from decision-making roles, but Shia interpret it as a Sunni refusal to accept that Shia are in a clear majority in Iraq. The apparent sympathies of many neighboring states with Sunnis further make the Shia skeptical. The Shia believe that they remain on the receiving end as they are most often the target of terrorist car bombs and suicide attacks. On the part of the Shia, they miss the fact that Sunnis are the biggest victims of ISIS onslaught as it is the Sunni-dominated areas that are in the eye of the storm – and it is Sunnis who are

²⁶ Isabel Coles et al, “Kurds, Shi’ite fighters to coordinate after sealing off Mosul”, Reuters, November 24, 2016, available at <http://in.reuters.com/article/mideast-crisis-iraq-idINKBN13J0X1>

²⁷ Quoted in Kimberly Dozier, “Top U.S. General: Two More Years to Beat ISIS,” The Daily Beast, December 25, 2016; available at: <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2016/12/25/top-u-s-general-two-more-years-to-beat-isis.html>

²⁸ Orla Guerin, “Iraqi Shia militias’ show of force in battle for Mosul,” BBC, December 3, 2016.

²⁹ For instance, see Amnesty International, “Iraq: Turning a Blind Eye,” 2017; available at: <http://www.refworld.org/pdfid/586e061e4.pdf>; also see, “Iraq: Possible War Crimes by Shia Militia,” HRW, January 31, 2016; available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/01/31/iraq-possible-war-crimes-shia-militia>

either becoming refugees in their own country or living under ISIS going through the worst form of oppression.

In some instances, reports have been exaggerated to serve vested interests of regional players who are critical of Iraq's progress. Many Iraqis believe that Saudi Arabia, Qatar and even Turkey have been feeding such stories to fuel divisions in Iraq. According to Robert Tollast, writing for *The National Interest*, "in 2015, there were reports of Hashd forces burning homes in Tikrit following ISIS's expulsion from the town. It later transpired that many of those destroying property were Sunnis from the Jabour tribe, taking revenge on members of the nearby Albu Ajeel tribe, who had been accused of supporting ISIS."³⁰

In December 2015, I had the privilege of speaking at an al-Hashd ash-Shabi conference within the Al-Hussain Shrine in Karbala. 60 participants contributed to an array of panels over the course of three days to discuss the presence and role of the Hashd. It was attended by many high-ranking leaders of the Hashd, religious scholars and other academics. My task was to speak on the Western perceptions and perspective on the matter. I didn't know what to expect. With my own research and views, I attempted to relay that from a Western perspective, the notion of a militia typically had a negative connotation.

For them, the issue was too personal, too spiritual. Because in actuality, their mission wasn't just about Iraq, it was about protecting the religious shrines. I was also introduced to some Sunni Hashd volunteers. After the conference, speakers were taken to a compound, which had formerly served as a hosting site for pilgrims, and had now been converted into a service for internally displaced persons (IDPs) from ISIS controlled areas. At the mosque located at this site, an unexpected debate sparked up, catching my attention and interest. A leading Sunni Imam visiting from Baghdad confronted the head of the Al-Hussein Shrine, about the human rights violations committed by a Shia-dominated armed group. He demanded their immediate removal. The Shia leader asked for specific names of the culprits and promised to ensure that they will be taken to task. The Sunni contingent participating in the conference was visibly relieved after this commitment.

Iraq's neighbors are understandably concerned that the Hashd will soon be operating transnationally and, in fact this is already happening in the Syrian conflict theatre. Even though those seriously concerned – such as Turkey, Qatar, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia – are apparently themselves involved in similar controversial practices, Iraq must take this concern seriously and enforce strict accountability for groups that are sending their volunteers to fight in other regional battlefields.

³⁰ Robert Tollast, "Inside Iraq's Popular Mobilization," *The National Interest*, May 23, 2016; available at <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/iraqs-shia-militias-arent-bad-you-think-16291?page=2>

As regards the number of Sunni members of Hashd forces, ignoring high and exaggerated official claims, the number appears to be somewhere around fifteen thousand at best.

Can the Hashd be fully integrated into Iraq's official security forces?

Prime Minister Abadi, with the help of Ammar al-Hakeem, the leader of the National Iraqi Alliance, as well as other top leaders of the Shia block, endeavors to improve the governance model but this is only a good intention at this point. To be fair to Iraq, the post-ISIS demographic changes, financial distress due to low oil prices impacting the Iraqi economy, as well as divisions within and across ethnic and sectarian lines make the governance challenge an extremely complicated one. Moqtada as-Sadr, keeping aside all the controversies that he has been associated with, is partly responsible for provoking the Iraqi government to change its ways, through his hyperactive role in boycotts and street protests in the last couple of years. The former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki is another political player who continues to scheme and whose political career seems to be far from over. He might attempt to convert some of the Hashd forces (allied with his Dawa party) into volunteers for his political campaign for the 2018 national elections.

In an effort to bring the Hashd completely into the government fold, Iraq's parliament passed a law in late November 2016 to formally integrate the Hashd into the state's security infrastructure.³¹ The Hashd will now be deemed as an "independent military entity" functioning within the Iraq's armed forces. It is easier said than done. Policy statements had been issued earlier to this effect but with limited impact. This latest legislation in fact sanctifies what Prime Minister Haidar al Abadi had officially decreed on February 22, 2016 through Order 91.³² The real test will be if the various armed groups – such as Kataib Hezbollah (with Iran linkages) and Saraya Al-Salam (affiliated with Moqtada al-Sadr) - can give up their regional and political affiliations and develop true loyalty to national security interests as defined and pursued by the elected government. It seems very difficult at this point but Abadi's sincerity in moving in this direction deserves to be appreciated. Still, the new legislation is not without consequences: Besides empowering Abadi to manage Iraq's security forces in a more effective way, it brings the Hashd into a framework

³¹ "Iraq's parliament passes law legalising Shia militias," AlJazeera, November 26, 2016; available at: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/11/iraq-parliament-passes-law-legalising-shia-militias-161126133010696.html>

³² See, Bill Roggio and Amir Toumaj, "Iraq's prime minister establishes Popular Mobilization Forces as a permanent 'independent military formation'," FDD's Long War Journal, July 28, 2016; available at: <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/07/iraqs-prime-minister-establishes-popular-mobilization-front-as-a-permanent-independent-military-formation.php>

where they will have to follow stricter accountability norms. To cleanse the cadres of the Hashd from criminal elements, 47 members belonging to a variety of Hashd groups were handed death and prison sentences in early 2017 over charges of murder and unlawful arms possession.³³

The integration of armed groups into state security forces is never easy. It potentially creates parallel institutions with competing interests, which in turn can become a counterproductive exercise for national security. Still this is better than allowing the status quo to become entrenched. Disbanding the Hashd was unrealistic and almost impossible to implement. There were rumors earlier that Sistani could issue yet another fatwa disbanding the Hashd. It would help if Sistani were amenable to that option if combined with the commitment of the government to facilitate employment for Hashd volunteers. Trained and armed personnel should not be pushed into the unemployment bracket, as they are easily attracted to join criminal activities.

The Sunni factions are currently fractured due to internal political tussles and allegations of corruption. Some Sunni groups have also joined Hashd forces. For instance, Yazan al-Jubouri, a Sunni commander of one of the groups, has around 10,000 soldiers under his command. He himself confesses to have given exaggerated claims (40,000 in one instance) to receive more funds.³⁴

In a worst case scenario, Hashd groups could turn against each other after ISIS' ouster from Iraq. The intra-Shia, intra-Sunni, and intra-Kurdish divisions can exasperate in such a scenario. Like Hezbollah, the Hashd may also use their battlefield successes as a springboard into political campaigns, and this could dramatically change the political landscape in Iraq with serious implications for democracy.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. The Hashd should be gradually accommodated and integrated as part of the national security forces of Iraq after proper vetting of individuals and following standard recruitment procedures. Those found eligible should go through re-training in Iraq's military academies.
2. Proper investigations must be conducted to pursue the charges of human rights abuses and those found involved must be prosecuted through legal means. This will

³³ Mohamed Mostafa, "Court sentences 47 PMU militiamen to death, prison over murder, kidnapping," Iraqi News, January 11, 2017; available at: <http://www.iraqinews.com/features/court-sentences-47-pmu-militiamen-death-prison-murder-kidnapping/>

³⁴ Hassan Hassan, "Shia Militia Law Adds to the Challenges in Iraq." The National, November 27, 2016; available at <http://m.thenational.ae/opinion/comment/shia-militia-law-adds-to-the-challenges-in-iraq#page1>

not only enhance the credibility of government but also discourage any future violations.

3. A parallel investment in reforming the criminal justice system will pave the way for a strengthening of the democratic credentials of the state. Iraq desperately needs a professional police force, which is recruited on merit, trained well, fully equipped and supported by forensic tools and scientific investigations. International funding must support these efforts.

4. The direction given by Ayatollah Sistani in the fatwa titled “Advice and Guidance to the Fighters on the Battlefields” is a very important document that requires and deserves wider projection and dissemination, especially among the Hashd. It provides clear legal principles regarding armed conflict from an Islamic perspective emphasizing humanitarian considerations and discouraging sectarian instincts. Introducing this guidance to the all groups is the best short-term solution under the circumstances for discouraging sectarian tendencies.³⁵

5. The Iraqi government must strategize now on how to avoid any potential skirmishes between al-Hashd al-Shaabi and the Kurdish Peshmerga after the completion of the Mosul operation. This would require an extra ordinary outreach effort by the Shia led government towards the disenfranchised Sunni segments of society as well as Kurds.

6. Shrines in Karbala, Najaf, Baghdad and Samarra are independently run and financed, and it makes sense for them to have their own security arrangements. However, the government must encourage more coordination between private security organizations associated with the shrines and local law enforcement. Securing the cities where these shrines are located must be the state’s responsibility.

7. Reconciliation efforts following the model of the Amman Message can play an important role. ³⁶ Iraq needs to heal the sectarian wounds with creative solutions. Jordan’s Amman message is a remarkable initiative bringing together leading scholars from a variety of backgrounds who joined hands to acknowledge the validity of all major and minor Muslim traditions including Sunni, Shia, Sufi, Ibadi and Salafi; together they forbade the highly controversial practice of takfir (meaning declaration of apostasy) among Muslims and importantly set forth conditions for the issuance of fatwas, whereby discouraging the ignorant and illegitimate edicts in the name of Islam. This was a major achievement in an age of heightened sectarianism among Muslims. This initiative must be strengthened through follow up commitments by Shia and Sunni religious leadership in Iraq. Ultimately, defeating sectarian tendencies is the only way to stabilize the region.

³⁵ For the complete statement, see: <http://www.sistani.org/english/archive/25036/>

³⁶ For details, see <http://ammanmessage.com/>

8. The massive Sunni displacement coupled with the destruction of infrastructure in Sunni areas creates an opportunity for Baghdad to heal the wounds of conflict and rebuild the areas that have been liberated from the ISIS suzerainty for over two years. Successful rehabilitation of internally displaced Sunnis will be critical and here reputed international NGOs can play a significant role in terms of humanitarian assistance and resettlement. Decentralized governance structures with emphasis on local representation in security sector will help build trust between the center and the periphery. This process will, for example, require establishment of police and law enforcement training academies across Iraq. In the case of delay or failure, Sunni-led Hashd-type groups will emerge to fill yet another vacuum. Diyala, Samara and Tikrit will need special focus, as many ISIS recruiters are reported to be particularly active in these locations.

9. Need to fight corruption and nepotism is acute and this can be done through a focus on “national interest” and “greater good” instead of personal and parochial interests. Admittedly, this cannot happen overnight, but those in power corridors are more responsible for instituting accountability mechanisms to push state and society in this direction.

10. Sunni marginalization, which literally paved the way for ISIS, must be tackled through investment in development and education opportunities for youth. The external and regional efforts provoking the feeling of exclusion among the Sunni can only be defeated through internal cohesion and devising a new social contract between the state and society that is seen as just and fair by all citizens of Iraq.

It is critical to have a long-term perspective and to recognize that there is no shortcut to stability. This awareness requires the strengthening of the rule of law and of institutions beyond just lip service. Baghdad must invest in this direction when confronted with other competing priorities. For the Western and regional supporters of stability in Iraq, building the capacity of the Iraqi military as well as police should be a preferable policy choice, which is sure to pay off.

About the Author

Hassan Abbas is professor and Chair of Regional Studies department at the National Defense University's College of International Security Affairs in Washington D.C., USA. He is also an Eric & Wendy Schmidt Fellow at New America.

About FES Amman

The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) is a non-profit organization committed to the values of social democracy and is the oldest of Germany's political foundations. In Jordan, FES opened its office in 1986 and is accredited through a long-standing partnership with the Royal Scientific Society (RSS). The aims of the activities of the FES Amman are to promote democracy and political participation, to support progress towards social justice and gender equality as well as to contribute to ecological sustainability and peace and security in the region. FES Amman supports the building and strengthening of civil society and public institutions in Jordan and Iraq. FES Amman cooperates with a wide range of partner institutions from civil society and the political sphere to establish platforms for democratic dialogue, organize conferences, hold workshops and publish policy papers on current political questions.