

A NEW CONTROVERSIAL ACTOR IN POST-ISIS IRAQ: AL-HASHD AL-SHAABI (THE POPULAR MOBILIZATION FORCES)



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PREFACE

The ongoing instability in Iraq's domestic politics and deepening insecurity gained a new dimension after the capture of Mosul by the ISIS in June 2014. The ISIS reinforced its position during the period of the governance crisis caused by Nouri al-Maliki's insistence on his third term, despite objections, after the general elections of 30 April 2014. Hence, the Iraqi security forces proved inefficient against the advance of the ISIS, which ended up establishing its control on almost one-third of Iraq after capturing Anbar, Tikrit, Diyala, the south of Kirkuk and the north and south of Baghdad, as well as Mosul. As the ISIS started to pose a growing threat to both Iraq and the Middle East, the security and political balance in Iraq have changed and new alliances, entities, formations and actors have begun to determine the Iraqi politics.

In this new political process, two of the most debated issues in the national, regional and international agenda within the scope of the anti-ISIS campaign have been Iran's growing influence and domestic political developments in Iraq. Militia groups were reformed after the demonstration of the weakness of the Iraqi security forces against the ISIS. The government's support and the leading Shiite religious leader Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's jihad fatwa against the ISIS led many people to volunteer for militia groups. In this environment, Iran's efforts in the Iraqi territory to keep the ISIS away from its borders have attracted a great deal of attention. One of the hot topics in the fight against the ISIS has been al-Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular/National Crowd / Volunteer Forces), an organization under the direct influence of Iran that comprises militia groups and volunteers founded after Ayatollah Ali Sistani's fatwa.

Initially founded for supporting the Iraqi security forces, al-Hashd al-Shaabi has attained the position of the main and lead actor in the fight against the ISIS. While the institutionalization efforts for al-Hashd al-Shaabi has been going on with the support of the government, new problems related to the proliferation of militia groups have emerged. Controversies among different groups, these groups' activities especially in Sunni regions, and Iran's influence on these groups through the Iranian commanders assigned to Iraq have become the new hot topics in the fight against the ISIS. In addition to detailing the formation process of al-Hashd al-Shaabi, this study offers a detailed account of its structure and the militia groups within this bloc. In addition, this report includes analyses and assessments on the problems regarding al-Hashd al-Shaabi in the current and post-ISIS period. As it is one of the most comprehensive studies in the field in terms of its subject and scope, I hope it will be useful to the readers.

Assoc. Prof. Şaban Kardaş
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A NEW CONTROVERSIAL ACTOR IN POST-ISIS IRAQ: AL-HASHD AL-SHAABI (THE POPULAR MOBILIZATION FORCES)

INTRODUCTION

The period which started in June 2014 with the capture of Mosul by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has caused a shift in the regional and local balance of power. Within the new balance of power, a new period emerges, in which the cards are being reshuffled in terms of political order and security. The ISIS's advance at the expense of the Iraqi government and the waning power of the government has created gaps in the administration and defense of the country. The Iraqi politics reached a chokepoint as a result of the increasing ISIS activity in al-Anbar, Salahaddin, the south of Kirkuk and the environs of Diyala and Baghdad following the elections of 30 April 2014. Nouri al-Maliki, who held the office of the Prime Minister twice following the 2006 and 2010 elections, sought to retain the post for a third term. Since it was widely acknowledged that the negative consequences of his political, social, military and economic policies in the second term led to the rise of ISIS and its expansion of control, al-Maliki failed to receive authorization to form the government, even though his party won sixty more chairs in the parliament than its closest competitor.

After a voting in the Iraqi National Alliance, which was composed of the Shiite political groups, Haider al-Abadi was assigned to form the government. He completed the government formation process

within a month and received a vote of confidence on 8 September 2014, in the Iraqi Parliament's session to which 289 deputies joined out of the total of 325. The government's program received only 177 votes in favor, which indicated that there were still doubts about the Abadi government. The appointments for some other ministries, especially the controversial Interior and Defense Ministries, were agreed upon later. The security issue, which is the biggest problem of Iraq, was left unattended at the ministerial level during the critical struggle against the ISIS. Previously, no ministers dealing with security affairs had been assigned to their posts since 2012, and the former Prime Minister al Maliki also retained these posts under his portfolio until the end of his term. Therefore, it led to the monopolization and dominant control of security institutions by Nouri al Maliki. His attitude, which received serious criticism from all sections including the Shiite parties, came to be viewed as the root cause of the recent ISIS activity in Iraq. During the troubled government formation process in Baghdad following the 2014 Parliamentary elections, the ISIS found a fertile ground to reinforce and expand its sphere of control.

Meanwhile, confronted with the advance of the ISIS towards the Shiite holy sites, especially in Samarra, and the inefficiency of the Iraqi army and security forces to

prevent ISIS's slaughter of civilians, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the highest Shiite religious authority in Iraq, declared a "jihad" on 12 June 2014, calling all Shiites and Iraqis to fight against the ISIS. Thousands of Iraqi Shiites have formed "al-Hashd al-Shaabi", the volunteer forces that is translated as the "Popular Mobilization". Many Shiite militia groups that were had been formed after the US invasion of Iraq operated within al-Hashd al-Shaabi, as well as ordinary people without any links to militia groups, who want to fight against the ISIS. These steps led Iraq towards localization and militarization, which results in the Iraqi governmental system evolving into a loose structure. In the latest period, the Shiite militia groups have increased in number, while the Iraqi government simultaneously sought to convince the Sunni tribes living in the ISIS-controlled territories to join the fight against ISIS, by providing them with material and military assistance, similar to the US strategy in 2007 against al Qaida. Within this context, some Sunni tribes, who took part in the Sahwa or Awakening Councils formed as a part of the U.S. strategy against al Qaida and transferred to the control of the Iraqi government, have joined al-Hashd al-Shaabi, while other Sunni groups are seeking recently to form military units designated for themselves, such Al-Hashid Al-Watani. There are even some small Christian and Ezidi groups fighting alongside al-Hashd al-Shaabi against the ISIS.

At the same time, it is being observed that the Sunni Arab tribes that take part in al-Hashd al-Shaabi are those, which also had good relations with Nouri al-Maliki during his tenure as Prime Minister. At this point, Sunni Arabs are facing a necessity. Looking at their current position, it is thought that they have to make a preference between the ISIS and the Iraqi government's security forces. Neither the Iraqi government, nor the international coalition against the ISIS was able to adopt a policy towards the Sunnis, in order to make them play a greater role

in the fight against the ISIS. Sunnis, who were left without alternatives, are forced to join al-Hashd al-Shaabi or suffer under the rule of the ISIS. At this point, even the tribes, which oppose the ISIS, adopt a reactionary attitude towards the Iraqi government.

The fight against the ISIS has acquired a regional and international character with the ISIS's advance in Iraq and the formation of al-Hashd al-Shaabi. Meanwhile, Iran has been directly involved in Iraq, while the U.S. has declared its anti-ISIS strategy, which envisages material support for the forces that fight against the ISIS. A coalition of more than sixty countries, including Turkey, has started cooperating in the anti-ISIS struggle.¹ However, since Qasim Suleimani, commander of the Quds Army of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps, and other Iranian commanders have taken part in anti-ISIS operations, controversies have emerged regarding the relationship between Iraqi politics, the Iranian influence, al-Hashd al-Shaabi and its militia groups. The controversial issues about al-Hashd al-Shaabi are the increasing number of militia groups, its administrative control, the extent of the Iranian role in these military units, as well as military dominance and the questionable moves by some of its militia groups in the Sunni Arab regions.

Therefore, the Iraqi government has been forced to adopt a new strategy for the post-ISIS period. There are already ongoing debates about the current status, position and future of al-Hashd al-Shaabi in the fight against the ISIS. The group's international and regional legitimacy is overshadowed by Iran's growing influence through material, social, political, military, logistical and operational support. It is well known that the Sunni Arabs regard al-Hashd al-Shaabi negatively, due to Iran's influence. Even though some Sunnis have joined al-Hashd al-Shaabi, most factions other than the Shiites consider Iran's influence in Iraq as an "invasion." Even some

nationalist Shiite Arabs are discontent due to Iran's growing influence and think that it should be limited; however they choose to raise their complaints discretely, since Iran provides aid and assistance to Iraq. It is even possible to hear some arguments to the effect that Iran is aiding Iraq's fight against ISIS for its own national interests: For many, as Iran seeks to keep the ISIS away from its own borders, it instrumentalizes the Iraqis for this objective.

Keeping all these points in mind, it is useful to examine al-Hashd al-Shaabi, which is a new and controversial actor in post-ISIS Iraq. The issues that will be dealt with are the structure of al-Hashd al-Shaabi groups, future projections regarding their positions and formation in the light of the formerly inactive Shiite militias becoming active again, the stances taken by the Iraqi government and non-Shiite factions, Iran's influence, the US strategy against the ISIS and the position of Turkey.

I. AL-HASHD AL-SHAABI



As it is mentioned above, approximately 90,000 Shiites volunteered for the “jihad” that Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani called for in its fatwa, which he announced

due to the inefficiency and weakness of the Iraqi Army against the ISIS. These volunteers were organized into al-Hashd al-Shaabi (The Popular Crowd), which has a clear impact in the battlefield across the Iraqi countryside. Even though these groups were formed in order to reinforce the Iraqi security forces, they were viewed as the main body carrying out the fight against the ISIS and came to acquire the control in the battlefield. The group, which received command, logistics and arms support from Iran, is composed of mainly the Shiite militias, as well as volunteers and non-aligned fighters. Iraqi officials state that these militias, who are at the forefront of the fight against the ISIS, are asked to hand over the land they took from the ISIS to the Iraqi Army. Nevertheless, they have become the actual governor of many areas in terms of security and administration, with the support of the government.

The objectives of al-Hashd al-Shaabi are as follows:

- Fighting and ousting the ISIS from the Iraqi territory,
- Protecting the country,
- Protecting the sacred sites including mosques,
- Liberating the Iraqi people,
- Assisting the Iraqis, who cannot fight²

Currently, there are efforts for the institutionalization of al-Hashd al-Shaabi under

the Iraqi Prime Minister’s National Security Council. Therefore, the official authority on behalf of al-Hashd al-Shaabi is the Iraqi National Security Adviser Falah Al-Fayyad. Nevertheless, Jamal Jaafar Ibrahim, who is known as Abu Mehdi al-Mohandes, commands al-Hashd al-Shaabi in the battlefield. He manages the field operations of al-Hashd al-Shaabi on behalf of the Iraqi National Security Council. Abu Mehdi al-Mohandes was elected as a member of the Iraqi Parliament in 2006 from the Dawa Party under the name Jamal Jaafar Ibrahim. Abu Mehdi al-Mohandes, who is also a resident in Iran, is claimed to be the contact person between Iraq and Iran and serves in the office of the Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamanei.³

The role of Iran in these militia forces has been a matter of controversy. Since the operations of the Iraqi government against the ISIS have begun, Qasim Suleimani, commander of the Quds Army of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps, is argued to have taken part in these operations. On the internet and social media websites, there are photos of Qasim Suleimani taken during operations. It is even claimed that the majority of al-Hashd al-Shaabi operations against the ISIS are supervised by Abu Mehdi al-Mohandes and Qasim Suleimani. In addition, it is known that many Iranian commanders serve in the operations and support the militias in training and operational planning. Iranian officers provide training to al-Hashd al-Shaabi in Iraq. These officers, who are called “military advisors” by Iran, sometimes directly participate in operations. Hadi al-Amiri, the head of the Badr Organization and the commander of the Tikrit operation, declared that approximately one hundred “Iranian advisors”

supported the operation for Tikrit.⁴ Various sources declared that Mehdi Nevruzi, Sadik Yari Gülderre, Ali Riza Mesceri, Hamid Takavi and some other Iranian commanders lost their lives during battles.

The training of al-Hashd al-Shaabi continues in many parts of Iraq. There are two major training sites for al-Hashd al-Shaabi in Kerbela and Najaf. Moreover, Kirkuk and some other provinces have training centers as well.

The future of Hashdi al Shaabi also is surrounded with controversies. There are speculations that some militias of al-Hashd al-Shaabi will be employed as soldiers or policemen within the Interior Ministry or Defense Ministry after the ISIS is eliminated. However, there is currently no legal preparation for it. On the contrary, there are plans to integrate al-Hashd al-Shaabi into the Iraqi National Guard, which will provide protection for a province by recruiting its own citizens. This draft law called “Haras Watani” has been presented to the Iraqi parliament.⁵

Parallel to these developments, the Iraqi Council of Ministers has adopted a resolution for providing a salary to the fighters in al-Hashd al-Shaabi. It is known that not all militias within al-Hashd al-Shaabi receive salaries, but only those fighting in the front and the unemployed do receive salaries. There are some people among al-Hashd al-Shaabi ranks, who are civil servants or wealthy people, and it is claimed that they will return to their daily lives once the ISIS is defeated. Al-Hashd al-Shaabi provides a source of income for those people, who are unemployed. However, it is not clear how many people are in the ranks of al-Hashd al-Shaabi. The speculated figures range from fifty to ninety thousand, though no clear data exist on how many people receive salaries. It is claimed that approximately 65-75 percent of al-Hashd al-Shaabi members receive salaries, which amount to 875,000 Iraqi Dinars (approximately 680 US dollars) per person. Of the total amount, 125,000 Di-

nars is cut for food expenses and the net salary is 750,000 Dinars (580 US Dollars).

Different numbers are offered for the strength of various groups within al-Hashd al-Shaabi. These numbers are in a broad range and have a speculative character. Therefore, it is not possible to acquire an accurate number of the armed groups and their militants. In addition, different groups are active in different areas. Hence, the groups’ activities and numerical ratio show variations. Basically, besides the main active groups within al-Hashd al-Shaabi, which will be handled in the next chapter, there are smaller militia groups based on a limited geographical extent. Almost all such groups have been established after Ayatollah Ali Sistani’s call for jihad in June 2014, following the ISIS operations.

The most prominent groups within al-Hashd al-Shaabi are Badr Organization, Kata’ib Hezbollah, Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq, Kata’ib al-Imam Ali and Kata’ib Sayyid al-Shuhada, which are the most active and geographically widespread among other groups. The most numerous groups are Badr Organization and Kata’ib Hezbollah, though Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq, which is less numerous, has a greater combat prowess.

In addition to these major groups, several militia units are called only as al-Hashd al-Shaabi. These groups, which are not related to any militia groups, include local inhabitants. Six units of al-Hashd al-Shaabi militias around Kirkuk consist of 3,750 fighters from Kirkuk resident. Almost all these militia fighters are from the people of Shiite Turkmen districts and villages such as Taze Khourmato, Daquq, Beshir and Amirli, and all of their leaders are Turkmen.

At the same time, some Sunni Arab tribes have joined al-Hashd al-Shaabi in order to fight against the ISIS. Most of these tribes had attended the Sahwa (Awakening Councils) that was formed against al-Qaida. The estimated number of tribal fight-

ers varies between 4,000 and 7,000. The tribes supporting al-Hashd al-Shaabi have joined the Tikrit operation for the first time. Around 25,000-30,000 fighters took place in the Tikrit offensive and approximately 3,000 fighters were Sunni Arabs, who had an active role in liberating Elbu Acil and Al Alem. Some Sunni Arab tribes support al-Hashd al-Shaabi. These tribes are Al-Juburi, Hamdani, Liheib, Kuwaysh, Isravi, Habesh, Al-Obaidi, Shammar, Al-Khazrej from Tikrit, Al-Obaidi and Al Izzi from Diyala, Al-Juraifa, Abu Namar, Abu Mahed, Abu Suheib, Abu Risha, Abu Diab, Abu Faral, Abu Iteibe, Abu

Assaf, Abu Fehed. Other than that, some small scale tribes that are not mentioned here support al-Hashd al-Shaabi as well. Most of these tribes supported Nouri al-Maliki during his tenure as Prime Minister and they still have good relations with him. It is questionable that these tribes act for all Sunnis and they have representative quality. In addition, lack of leadership hinders the ability for Sunnis to act in union. Therefore, it is hard for al-Hashd al-Shaabi to gain legitimacy among Sunnis, and for convincing the majority if not the whole of the Sunnis about this issue.

II. THE SHIITE MILITIAS IN AL HASHD AL SHAABI⁶

There are forty three known groups in al-Hashd al-Shaabi. It is important to mention that local groups are present other than these as well. Four major groups are prominent in al-Hashd al-Shaabi, to which many other groups pledge their allegiance. There is no clear number of their fighters; however rumors say it varies between 10,000 and 25,000. These groups are as follows:

- Badr Organization
- Kata'ib Hezbollah
- Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq
- Saraya al-Salam

Among these, the strongest are Badr Organization and Kata'ib Hizbollah.

These groups are the militia groups, which were already present in Iraq before the fatwa of Ayatollah Ali Sistani. Some of them have gone inactive or have chosen to operate within political channels, while others were established after the former groups had gone inactive. Some militia groups within al-Hashd al-Shaabi were established in order to protect the sacred Shiite sites in Syria and fight for Bashar al Assad. Besides, there are new groups that were formed after Ayatollah Sistani's fatwa. However, only a handful of groups are active in many regions of Iraq. These are as follows:

- Badr Organization
- Kata'ib Hezbollah
- Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq
- Kata'ib Sayyid Shuhada
- Kata'ib al-Imam Ali

Even though Kata'ib Sayyid Shuhada and Kata'ib Imam Ali have fewer fighters, they are active almost in all battlegrounds, unlike the other groups, which have a limited extent of activity. Their area of dominance differs in provinces. For example, Badr Organization is said to be the most extensive Shiite militia group, though its area of activity is limited to the provinces north of Baghdad. Asaib Ahl al-Haq and Saraya al-Salam are stronger in Kerbela and Najaf, compared to the other groups. Asaib Ahl al-Haq and Hizbollah are more active in Basra and Asaib Ahl al-Haq is dominant in Muthanna.

These four groups mentioned above, which were active before Ayatollah Ali Sistani's fatwa, came together under the umbrella of the Islamic Resistance in Iraq and sought to have an institutional identity with al-Hashd al-Shaabi. No individual group controls al-Hashd al-Shaabi on its own and they carry out operations together. Even though there are efforts for creating a common identity under al-Hashd al-Shaabi, each group holds on to its own banner. The militia fighters obey the commander of individual militia groups. It sometimes causes coordination problems. Al-Hashd al-Shaabi groups have currently launched operations and taken control of Samarra, Jurf al-Sakhr, the outlying villages of Tuzkhurmato, the district of Amirli, Beled, the region of Baghdadi in al Anbar, the surroundings of Kirkuk (Taze Khurmato, Daquq) and lastly Tikrit. Not all Shiite militia groups have taken part in all these operations. As it is mentioned above, most groups are organized locally.

Local struggle against the ISIS and the emergence of many groups stand out as a strategy. The main intention is the shar-

ing of responsibility and the elasticity of response. An effort is made to include Sunni Arabs, Christians, Ezidis and even Faili Kurds (Shiite) in al-Hashd al-Shaabi, in order to prevent the impression of a “Shiite army.” In addition, local people are recruited in groups for preventing a possible image of an invading power. However, unlike the Shiites, most Sunnis and Kurds name it as “al Hashdi al Shiite” and consider its proliferation as a gang affair and invasion attempt. Similarly, there are rumors that suggest some militia within al-Hashd al-Shaabi oppress and inflict harm on the Sunnis. Even some fringe groups, which are not al-Hashd al-Shaabi members, cause non-human treatment of the people. Ayatollah Ali Sistani has declared another fatwa expressing that it is unacceptable that some groups cause harm to innocent people. He also suggested that civilians must not be killed, the militias must not loot and plunder; the children, the elderly and the women must be taken care of and they must share food, medicine and clothing.⁷

In order to nullify the negative view of the people and mitigate the responses, there are efforts to unify all groups under one roof. Therefore, the militias will likely be legalized and have an institutional appearance. However, since all groups within al-Hashd al-Shaabi hold on to their banners and stick to their group identity, it is hard to achieve an institutional integrity.

In this section, it will be convenient to give more information about the prominent groups.

1. **Badr Organization (Brigades):** It was founded in Iran in 1982, by Abdulazzi al-Haqim as a military and intelligence unit of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), and fought against Saddam Hussein’s regime during the Iran-Iraq War and afterwards. It has



been long known that the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps contributed a great deal to its formation. It served as the military wing of the ISCI until 2008, when it was abolished. After that, it separated from the ISCI and joined politics under the name of Badr Organization. It attended the elections of 2010 and 2014. Even though it presents itself as a political party, it has never abolished its armed militia. The Mehdi Army, which had gone inactive and disintegrated, and Badr Organization are the oldest Shiite militia groups in Iraq. The exact count of its members is not known; however, as of the current situation, it is the largest militia group. A generally accepted figure of its fighter count is approximately 20,000. Its center is in Baghdad, though it has offices in many provinces. Hadi al-Amiri is its current leader. He is known to lead al-Hashd al-Shaabi operations with Qasim Suleimani and Abu Mehdi al-Mohandes. Although he was put forward as a candidate for the Ministry of Interior in 2014 by Haider al-Abadi, many factions opposed to his appointment. However, Mohammad Gabban from Badr Organization was appointed as the Minister of Interior. Hadi al-Amiri has been frequently heard of during the period after the ISIS invasion. The influence of Badr Organization stretches from Baghdad to Mosul. It is the most prevalent of the Shiite militias in Iraq. It is powerful in the surroundings of Kirkuk, Tuzkhurmato, Amirli, Salahaddin and Diyala. In addition, Musa al-Qazim Regiment, which was formed in Baghdad by Mohammad Naji Mohammad, member of the Parliament and the head of Badr Organization Political Bureau Chief, takes part in Badr Organization. It is tasked with protecting the Tomb of Qazimiyye. Turkmen units participate in the local organization of Badr, especially around Kirkuk. For example, after

Badr's Northern Chief Mohammad Mehdi Beyati became the Minister of Human Rights, Yilmaz Shahbaz took his place. Mr. Shahbaz is the deputy chief of the Turkmen Wafa Movement. Badr also has a TV channel called Al-Ghadeer.

2. **Kata'ib Hizbollah:** It is the armed



wing of the Iraqi Hizbollah. It was founded in Hizbollah in Lebanon. It has close relations with Kata'ib Sayyid Shuhada, Kata'ib Imam Ali and Nujebba. The commander of Kata'ib Hizbollah is not known, while its Secretary General is Wasiq Battat. Even though, there were rumors that he was killed in Uzeim, in the eastern Iraq, in December 2014, it turned out to be false. In February 2013, he declared that he had established a militia group, "Mukhtar Army", and Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki issued a decree for his arrest. Wasiq al-Battat, who pledged allegiance to the Iranian religious leader Ali Khamanei, has been long known for its radical anti-Sunni stance.⁸ He is notorious for his statements threatening Saudi Arabia. He claimed responsibility for the mortar attacks into Saudi territory in November 2013. His militia group emerged as Kata'ib Hizbollah after the ISIS invasion. Its operational commander is Jassem Jazairi. Many Turkmen have joined Kata'ib Hizbollah. Its units in Kirkuk and the north of Iraq are composed of Turkmen. Its website is: "<http://www.kataibhizbollah.com/>".

3. **Asaib Ahl al-Haq:** Its predecessor is the Mehdi Army, led by Muqtada al-Sadr. Asaib has been organized by the faction, which rejected the dis-



banding of the Mahdi Army in 2008. Its leader is Qais al-Khazali. Al-Khazali is the student of Mohammad Sadiq al-Sadr. Therefore, he has good relations with the Lebanese Hizbollah (Hasan Nasrallah is a student of Mohammad Sadiq al-Sadr as well). Al-Khazali, outraged by the Mahdi Army's agreement with the government, formed Asaib Ahl al-Haq. Other prominent members of the Mahdi Army, Mohammad al-Tabatabai, Ekrem al-Qaabi, Laith al-Khazali, and Abdulkhadi al-Darraj, defected from the Mahdi Army as well. These people had represented the hawkish faction within the Mahdi Army and had had disagreements with Muqtada al-Sadr over the methods of the group. The group continued its activity after 2008 as well. It became an effective participant in the fight against ISIS, after June 2014. In addition, it favors more radical methods and undertakes violent activities, compared to other groups. Asaib has influence in nine provinces where the Shiites live, such as Baghdad, Siyala, Tuzkhurmato and the south of Iraq. It is the most powerful group in Basra, Najaf, Kerbela and Muthanna. Asaib Ahl al-Haq has a TV channel, "Al-Ahad", which broadcasts on Nilesat. Its website is "<http://www.ahluahlaq.com/>".

4. **Saraya al-Salam (The Peace Brigades):** Saraya al-Salam is the new incarnation of the Mahdi Army. It was established under the leadership of Muqtada



al-Sadr, after Ayatollah ali Sistani's fatwa, in order to protect the sacred sites and Shiite places of worship. Even though its leader is Muqtada al-Sadr, Sayyid Riyad leads its military wing. It has undertaken important tasks in the protection of the holy sites in Baghdad, Samarra, Najaf and

Kerbela. For example, Saraya al-Salam protected the Tomb of Imam Hasan in Amirli, during the siege. In addition, its military success in the battle of Jurf al-Sahar (the Sunni settlement in Babel), which has changed the fate of Baghdad, is highly praised. However, its unstable course of action receives criticism and reactions. Muqtada al-Sadr, sometimes, declares that it stopped the activities of Saraya al-Salam. However, it continues its activities.

5. The Khorasan Brigades: Known as



the “Khorasani”, the Khorasan Brigades are formed by an Iranian commander, Hajj Hamid (Abu Meryem) Taqawi. Its leader is Ali Yasiri.

However, Hamid Jazairi is its most famous leader and he leads its operations. Another significant commander of the Khorasan Brigades is Hajj Abu Hasan Ibrahim, the commander of operations. The Iranian commander, who leads the Khorasan Brigades, is said to be Iqbal Pur. The Khorasan Brigades is viewed as the “Trojan Horse” of Iran. It is claimed that Iran views the Khorasan Brigades as its main actor in Iraq and sends all its training and logistical aid through it. Its command center is in Qadir Kerem in Suleimaniyah. Since Qadir Kerem is on the road between Tuzkhurmato and Suleymaniya, it is used as a logistical base. Iran’s supply routes pass through Qadir Kerem and reach al-Hashd al-Shaabi. This group has declared its allegiance to the Iranian leader Ali Khamenei. Its website is <http://www.alkhorasani.org/>.

6. Kata’ib Sayyid al-Shuhada: It has been long known that Kata’ib Sayyid Shuhada was formed in Basra by Badr Organization and



Kata’ib Hizbullah, in order to fight in Syria in 2013. Its leader is Hajj Abu Ala. His deputy is Ahmad al-Musavi. It is claimed that Faleh al-Kazali, the member of the Iraqi Parliament from the Loyalty to the Resistance Party, has fought in Amirli, along with the Kata’in Sayyid Shuhada. Later, he was announced as the official spokesperson of Kata’ib Sayyid Shuhada. Despite its relatively lower count of fighters, it fights in almost all battlegrounds. Its close relations with Kata’ib Hizbollah are well known. It declared its allegiance to the Iranian leader Ali Khamenei. It accepts the heritage of Ruhullah Musavi Khomeini, Ali Khamenei, Mohammad Baqr al-Sadr, Rageb Harb, who is a Lebanese resistance leader that was killed by Israel in 1984, Abbas al-Musevi, who is the founder of the armed wing of the Lebanese Hizbollah, and Hajj Imad Mugniyyah. Its website is <http://www.saidshuhada.com/>.

7. Kata’ib al-Imam Ali: Its leader is



Hajj Shibil al-Zaidi. It has close relations with Abu Mehdi al-Mohandes, Qasim Suleimani and Kata’ib Hizbollah. It is prominent in Tuzkhurmato and its surroundings. However, it is present in all battlegrounds. Its website is <http://www.kt-im-ali.com/>.

8. Haraqat al-Nujabba: Its leader is



Sheikh Eqrem al-Qaibi. He was one of the prominent commanders of the Mehdi Army until 2007.

After the Mehdi Army ceased its activities, al-Qaibi joined Asaib Ahl al-Haq and the Iraqi Hizbollah, though he has acted on its own. He is active in Babel, Samarra and some districts surrounding Baghdad. This group’s activities are

published on <http://www.alnujaba.org/>.

9. **Abu Fadel Abbas Brigade:** Its command center is in Kerbela, where Masjid al-Abbas is located. Therefore, the group is known as the Imam Abbas Brigade.



It was formed by the custodians of Masjid al-Abbas. Although it has links with the Abu Fadel Abbas Brigade in Syria, the two groups act separately. It is active in Baghdad, its surroundings and Salahaddin (Tuzkhurmato and Amirli). Abu Fadel Abbas Brigade has undertaken administrative tasks in Amirli.

Other than these groups, there are smaller local groups, which can be listed as follows:

10. **Hezbollah the Mujahideen in Iraq:**



As a separate entity from Kata'ib Hizbollah, it was organized by Abbas al-Mohammadavi of the Abna' al-Iraq al-Ghayyara political bloc, as a response to the ISIS threat in June 2014.

11. **Faylaq al-Wa'ad al-Sadiq:** Its leader is Sheikh Mohammad Hamza al-Tamimi, who is also the secretary-general of Haraqat al-Mustaḍafin al-Islamiya ("The Islamic Movement of the Oppressed"). It has declared allegiance to the Iranian leader Ali Khamenei.



12. **Kata'ib Al-Imam al-Hussein:** Its main area of activity is the province of Salahaddin. It was formed after June 2014 as the military



wing of Haraqat al-Risala al-Islamiya. It is loyal to the Iranian religious leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

13. **Kata'ib al-Imam al-Gha'ib:** It is a splinter group from Kata'ib Hizbollah. It is active mostly in Fallujah and Samarra.



14. **Kata'ib Ansar al-Hijja:** It was established by Sheikh Mohammad al-Qinani as the armed wing of Dawa Party Iraq Organization. It is claimed that it receives special support from Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi. It is known that it has allegiance to Kata'ib Martyr Sadr.



15. **Kata'ib al-Ghadab:** It was established by the Dawa Party Tanzim al-Dakhl, led by Abdulkarim al-Inzi. Its leader is Abu Fakkar al-Shamari. It has taken place in the operations around Baghdad, Tikrit and Samarra. It is claimed that Nouri al-Maliki supports the group. It pledges allegiance to the Iranian religious leader Ali Khamenei.



16. **Kata'ib al-Difa al-Muqaddas:** It is also known as Quwwa Sayyid al-Sadr. Its leader is Abu Assadullah al-Aboudi. It pledges itself to the defense of holy shrines and is supported by Nouri al-Maliki.



17. Kata'ib Ruhallah: It was established by Sheikh Abu Talib al-Mayahi. Its area of activity is Zabitiya in the north of Baghdad and Balad in Salahaddin province. It has pledged allegiance to the Iranian religious leader Ali Khamenei. It is known that the group receives direct support from Iran.



18. Kata'ib Ahrar al-Iraq: It was founded by Sheikh Abbas al-Maliki in October 2014. It operates in co-operation with Kata'ib Ruhallah.



19. Kata'ib al-Tayyar al-Risali: It is known that the group was organized by Adnan al-Shahmani. He had also formed a separate political faction, when he was in the State of Law Coalition in the Iraqi Parliament. The group mostly operates around Baghdad. Al-Shahmani had been in the Mahdi Army, and he left it in 2007 after a disagreement with Muqtada al-Sadr.



20. Kata'ib al-Shaheed al-Awal: Quwa al-Buraq: Its leader is Waseq al-Firdaws. It is known for its operation against Ayn al-Assad Airport, in the west of al-Anbar.



21. Kata'ib al-Shaheed al-Awal: It is claimed that the group is led by Ali al-Musavi.



22. Saraya Ashura: It is known as the armed wing of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq. While its military commander is not known, the group is closely linked to Ammar al-Hakim, the leader of the ISCI. It is active in Baghdad surroundings and Samarra.



23. Kata'ib Ansar al-Aqida: It is claimed that Sheikh Jalaluddin Sagir, who is an ISCI member, leads this group that is active in Baghdad and some portions of Salahaddin. It works closely with Saraya Ashura. It is most active in Dhi Qar and Kerbela.



24. Saraya al-Jihad: It is the armed wing of Haraqat al-Jihad and Bina. It was formed in June 2014. Its leader is Hasan al-Sari, who is a member of the Parliament from the Muwatin List backed by the ISCI. Its command center is in Wasit. It also has offices in Babel, Basra, Najaf, Kerbela and Baghdad. Haraqat al-Jihad and Bina's website is "http://www.newsagalibon.net/".



25. **Quwwa Shaheed al-Sadr:** There are claims that this group was organized by Dawa Party Iraq Organization. “Shaheed al-Sadr” (Martyr al-Sadr) refers to Mohammad Baqr al-Sadr, the founder of the Dawa Party.



26. **Liwa Youm al-Qaim:** It is well known that this group has ties with Kata’ib al-Mawt al-Istishariyya. However, there is little detailed information about that group. It has close relations with the Lebanese Hezbollah. Its leader is Abuzir al-Hassani. He is reported to have died in December 2014. It is active in Abu Garip in Baghdad. It has references to Hasan Nasrallah, the leader of the Lebanese Hezbollah.



27. **Liwa Dhu al-Fiqar:** Its leader is Abu Shahad al-Juburi. It pledged allegiance to the family of Muqtada al-Sadr. It has fought in Syria to protect the Shrine of Sayeda Zainab bint Ali.



28. **Hizbollah al-Sairun:** Rahman al-Jazairi is the secretary-general for the group, which has ties to the Lebanese Hezbollah. It is active in Wasit, the place that it was formed, and Baghdad.



29. **Liwa Assadullah Galip:** Suheil al-Araji is the leader of the group, which was organized in



order to support Bashar al-Assad’s regime and protect the holy shrines in Syria. It is active in Baghdad and Wasit.

30. **Liwa al-Montadar:** The group’s command center is in Basra. It operates under Kata’ib Sayyid al-Shuhada. Its leader is Sayyid Dagher al-Musavi, who was one of the advisors of the former Iraqi President Jalal Talabani. Al-Musavi is known for his close ties to the ISCI.



31. **Muqawama al-Islamiya Liwa al-Youm al-Maw’ud:** Initially, the group was formed as a branch of the Mehdi Army in September 2008. However, it had stopped its activity with the disbandment of the Mehdi Army. It started its activities with Samarra and Tikrit operations. Its activities are published on <http://www.almaoao.net>.



Other than the abovementioned, there are some groups that are only known by their name. Usually, they are a division of larger militia groups and formed with the purpose of protecting or controlling a specific area. Some of them are listed as follows:

32. **Haraqat al-Abdal**



33. Saraya al-Zahra



38. Liwa al-Shabab al-Risali



34. Hizbollah al-Abraar



39. Liwa al-Sadeqeyn



35. Liwa Ammar ibn Yasir



40. Liwa al-Qaim



36. Liwa al-Imam al-Hasan al-Mujtaba



41. Liwa al-Imam al-Qaim



37. Kata'ib al-Fatah al-Mobin



42. Liwa al-Qaria



As it was mentioned above, many local groups, which were integrated with al-Hashd al-Shaabi, have emerged. It should be noted that there may be some other groups, which are not mentioned there.

CONCLUSION AND ASSESSMENT

As it has been underlined, al-Hashd al-Shaabi is a complex and ambiguous entity. There are different figures regarding the fighter count of the groups within al-Hashd al-Shaabi. The numbers presented have a speculative character and show a great variation. Therefore, it is impossible to have an exact number about the armed groups and their fighter count. Also, different groups operate in different regions. Even though there are some attempts at providing an institutional framework in order to prevent these militia forces from engaging in criminal or gang-like activities, many factions in Iraq have worries that al-Hashd al-Shaabi might pose serious problems.

Al-Hashd al-Shaabi has an increasing media visibility. Some militia groups within al-Hashd al-Shaabi seek to create a positive perception through social media websites. They try to undertake the similar propaganda methods that the ISIS uses. On their social media websites, they use photos and videos, which will promote a positive impression of themselves. In addition, they share a lot of videos, depicting their victories against the ISIS. Thus, they conduct perception management through media.

Nevertheless, Al Hashdi al Shaab, which was formed after Ayatollah Ali Sistani's fatwa for jihad and rose to prominence in the fight against the ISIS, brings about a sectarian danger. Even though Ayatollah Ali Sistani has called "all Muslims" for jihad against the ISIS, he received sectarian reactions, since he is a Shiite cleric. This situation causes the risk of sectarian conflicts besides terrorism.

In addition, they also actively seek legitimacy, by including Sunnis and Christians

within al-Hashd al-Shaabi ranks. Though, it still suffers from a legitimacy problem, considering the past activities of non-Shiite groups within al-Hashd al-Shaabi. As it is mentioned above, almost all of the Sunni groups in al-Hashd al-Shaabi cooperated with the government in the past. It is not possible to gain legitimacy for al-Hashd al-Shaabi in the eyes of the Sunni people, who were discontent with the government policies before Haider al-Abadi, through tribes and groups that were included. For this reason, comprehensive and realistic policies are needed to address the Sunnis' general and local problems. At this point, it is needed to come up with policies that are related to the Sunnis' political integration, local rights and demands.

The reemergence of the militia groups weakens the legitimacy of the Iraqi government. The fact that the government prefers militia groups for security, rather than security institutions such as police and army, will damage the institutional character of the state. As it was mentioned earlier, even though al-Hashd al-Shaabi seems to be an integrated entity that fights against the ISIS, in battlegrounds, each group carries its own banner and obeys its own commander. Despite the Iraqi government's attempts, it is difficult to control such an entity that encompasses more than forty groups. Even if it is controlled, al-Hashd al-Shaabi might experience disintegration, as it was seen earlier in Iraq. In addition, larger militia groups pressure the smaller ones in order to control and absorb them. It is likely that conflicts will arise from within al-Hashd al-Shaabi. If the government fails to achieve total control over these groups, it will be difficult to prevent instability, considering its current unstable and weak state.

Considering local politics, al-Hashd al-Shaabi will have an influential position for reasons such as its role in the fight against the ISIS, its military and financial power, and the link between the powers that have influence on al-Hashd al-Shaabi and the military and political balance in Iraq. For now, Haider al Abadi was unable to exert his control upon al-Hashd al-Shaabi, despite his efforts. There are also loud concerns in Iraq regarding efforts to control al-Hashd al-Shaabi by Nouri al Maliki, former Prime Minister, who seeks a third term Prime Ministry. In addition, Hadi al-Amiri, leader of the Badr Organization, which is an influential political party and the former militia group of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, gains popularity and increasing influence over al-Hashd al-Shaabi. Currently, one of the most important problems for Iraq's future is a clash of political interest carried through al-Hashd al-Shaabi.

It has been widely acknowledged that Iran provides arms and logistical support for the groups in al-Hashd al-Shaabi. The Iranian influence in Iraq has dramatically increased in this period. Although Iranian military advisors do not directly take place in operations, they undertake assignments in military strategy, operational planning and training. It is also claimed that Iranians carry out precision strikes. The extent of Iranian involvement started to receive reactions and complaints from nationalist Shiites and Sunnis in Iraq. The statements made by the adviser of the Iranian president on religious affairs and minorities, Ali Younusi, that described Baghdad as their "capital" has worsened the situation. Therefore, al-Hashd al-Shaabi, day by day, loses its ability to convince Iraqis at large and is viewed as an Iranian proxy. Many Iraqis think that Iran supports al-Hashd al-Shaabi in order to protect itself and instrumentalizes the Iraqi people for this aim, who lose their lives for the sake of Iran. Therefore, the Iraqi government needs to lessen the Iranian influence on al-Hashd al-Shaabi, in order to legitimize the group in the eyes of the Iraqi people.

Nevertheless, Iran's influence on al-Hashd al-Shaabi and Iraq is growing day by day. Unless the Iranian control over the militia is checked, al-Hashd al-Shaabi's Iraqi identity will fade and Iran's control in Iraq will increase. It will hinder independent policymaking and shatter the political and security balance in Iraq, while at the same time fueling instability.

Besides, the uncertainty about the future of al-Hashd al-Shaabi continues. It is not known whether al-Hashd al-Shaabi will be a permanent entity or a temporary one. Especially, these two issues are contested. First, it is unclear as to how al-Hashd al-Shaabi will position itself in terms of politics and security after the ISIS is eliminated. Besides, it is a contested issue, whether the militia groups under al-Hashd al-Shaabi will continue their activities. Although it is claimed that the employed people (teachers, engineers, civil servants, doctors, etc.) in the ranks of the militia will return to their jobs, there is no guarantee for that. It is also said that the unemployed people in al-Hashd al-Shaabi ranks will be integrated to army and police forces in their own provinces. Besides the fact that it is unclear as to how many people will be integrated to the Iraqi security forces, there are also questions about its effect on the current ethnic and sectarian balance in the Iraqi security forces, which is the main cause of Iraq's current problems.

Despite the efforts, Sunnis and Kurds are grumbling about al-Hashd al-Shaabi. Lately, Shiites are having discontent against al-Hashd al-Shaabi as well. Even though no mass protests have taken place yet, some militias' behaviours and treatment of the people cause complaints and reactions even amongst Shiites. In addition, another problem is the loss of lives among Shiites during operations to liberate Sunni settlements, which Sunnis do not fight for. Therefore, some people started questioning the existence of al-Hashd al-Shaabi. As of the current situation, al-Hashd al-Shaabi acts independently and in an uncontrolled

manner, especially in the areas under their authority. The people complain about crimes of Al-Hashd al-Shaabi members such as stealing, seizure, kidnapping and extortion. Al-Hashd al-Shaabi's activities are reported by international media and non-governmental organizations as well. Recent reports of respectable organizations, such as the Amnesty International, mention the human rights violations committed by al-Hashd al-Shaabi.⁹

Despite the absence of conflicts between the militia, Kurds and Sunnis except for a few isolated, local incidents, it is impossible to overlook the possibility of an widespread conflict among the adversaries. Moreover, despite its growing numbers, al-Hashd al-Shaabi does not possess the capacity and ability to fight on its own against the ISIS. This is most evident in the regions, which host a diverse population. It is for this reason that al-Hashd al-Shaabi cooperates with the Peshmergha in the north and the Sunni tribal militia in their regions. This cooperation, while at the same time strengthening the fight against the ISIS, creates a potential for

consensus for the prevention of conflicts in the post-ISIS period.

Lastly, even if al-Hashd al-Shaabi is integrated to the Iraqi security forces after the ISIS is eliminated, the groups will most likely maintain their group identity in terms of ideology and politics. They will seek greater role in regional administrations, even if they do not take part in the government. Therefore, it is highly likely that the central government structure will evolve into a looser character with increased localization. It is also highly probable that power struggle among militias will take place within the Iraqi state. This is highlighted by the experience of Iraq in the last decade. Conflict dynamics may proliferate in such an environment. Therefore, it is crucial in the post-ISIS period that Sunnis must be integrated in the Iraqi politics in a balanced manner. They should be given the right to govern themselves in their regions and the basic citizenship rights must be restored. The current period has most clearly shown that it is impossible to attain stability and security in Iraq, without keeping Sunnis within the political and security setting.

ENDNOTES

- 1 These are the countries that have joined the coalition: the USA, Albania, Australia, Austria, Bahrain, Belgium, the UAE, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Canada, Croatia, Greek Cypriot Administration, Czech Republic, Denmark, Egypt, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Great Britain, Spain, Iceland, Iraq, Italy, Ireland, Japan, Jordan, Kosovo, Kuwait, Latvia, Lebanon, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Morocco, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Panama, Oman, Poland, Portugal, Qatar, South Korea, Romania, Saudi Arabia, Serbia, Singapore, Slovakia, Somalia, Sweden, Taiwan, Turkey and Ukraine. In addition, the European Union and the Arab League support the coalition.
- 2 Meeting with the Iraqi commanders that are assigned to al-Hashd al-Shaabi, Baghdad, March 2015.
- 3 Abu Mehdi al-Mohandes is being held responsible for a series of assaults in Kuwait in the 1980s, with the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps connection. He has close relations with Qasim Suleimani, commander of the Quds Army of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps. He is alleged to have complicity in the bomb attacks against France and American embassies in Kuwait, vehicle bomb attacks against the Amir of Kuwait and plane hijacking.
- 4 YDH, "Tikrit'te 100 İranlı askeri danışman", http://www.ydh.com.tr/HD13711_tikritte-100-iranli-askeri-danisman.html, Access: 5 April 2015.
- 5 Haras Watani is based on the idea that each province should have its local protection forces. One of the biggest reasons for founding Haras Watani is the practices of the Iraqi government army and security forces in Sunni regions and their inability to protect the people during the ISIS advance. As it is well known, after ISIS captured Mosul, the Iraqi security forces abandoned their posts and ISIS captured all the Sunni regions without a fight. In addition, after the emergence of al-Hashd al-Shaabi, the Iraqi government brought Haras Watani to the agenda, in order to nullify the reactions of Sunnis. The Iraqi government aims to include al-Hashd al-Shaabi within the umbrella of Haras Watani for appeasing the opposition; but debates continue regarding the structure and powers of Haras Watani.
- 6 The information gathered during the field research trips made in Iraq in October and December 2014, and January and March 2015 contributed to the writing of this chapter. In addition, the author benefited from the website: <http://jihadintel.meforum.org/> Access: 2 April 2015.
- 7 "Ayetullah Sistani'den IŞİD'le Savaşanlara 20 Emir", http://www.ydh.com.tr/HD13655_ayetullah-sis-taniden-isisle-savasanlara-20-emir.html, Access: 5 Nisan 2015.
- 8 Check the link for his statements: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?t=18&v=ZkAV7BCjkiw>, Access: 2 April 2014.
- 9 See, Amnesty International, "Iraq: Absolute Impunity: Militia Rule in Iraq", <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/MDE14/015/2014/en/>, Access: 5 Nisan 2015.



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