



**Clingendael**

Netherlands Institute of International Relations

JUNE 2018

## **Power in perspective: Four key insights into Iraq's Al-Hashd al-Sha'abi**

Al-Hashd al-Sha'abi (Popular Mobilization Forces) is an umbrella term for approximately 50 Iraqi armed groups of varying capabilities and interests. This policy brief explores the power base, relationships and attitudes of seven Hashd groups towards the Iraqi government between January and September 2017 to understand the effect they may have on the nature of the Iraqi state in the near future. It identifies four key insights:

- The Hashd are highly heterogeneous and need to be analysed as individual groups to develop strategies for their peaceful incorporation into the Iraqi security landscape.
- The Hashd groups' sources of power – coercive/security, socio-religious, economic/financial and political – are connected, but not in equal measure. This means that only limited positive and negative power multiplier effects – in which power in one dimension can increase power in another dimension – can be created.
- All the Hashd groups have at least one vulnerable power dimension at the national level. This gives the Iraqi government leverage to ensure that groups fall in line with national priorities when the stakes are high enough.
- Few Hashd groups oppose the Iraqi government and shun political engagement with it. This means that there is scope to negotiate political solutions for incorporating the Hashd into the Iraqi security landscape. It also suggests that the threat of the Hashd to the legitimacy/existence of the Iraqi government is somewhat overstated.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

On 12 May 2018, the Fatah Alliance under Hadi al-Ameri came second in Iraq's elections by winning a provisional 47 seats (14 per cent).<sup>2</sup> This alliance is made up largely of pro-Iranian groups that hail from Iraq's Al-Hashd al-Sha'abi (Hashd), also known as the Popular Mobilization Forces.<sup>3</sup> The Alliance's electoral result was a timely reminder of the relevance of the Hashd in Iraqi politics.

The Hashd is a collective term that refers to around 50 armed groups of varying coercive capabilities, levels of organisation and attitudes towards the central Iraqi government.<sup>4</sup> While they are grouped administratively under the state-run Hashd Commission (or PMF Commission), Hashd groups operate on a relatively autonomous basis within broad strategic parameters set by the groups themselves and/or with the relevant parts of the Iraqi government and the Iraqi Security Forces. What the Hashd groups have in common is that they

are revered for having effectively defended the country against Islamic State (IS) and that their place in Iraq's security landscape remains unclear. Most Hashd groups are Shi'a, but there are also, for example, Sunni, Yazidi and Turkmen elements. The Hashd arguably came into being in June 2014 in response to a fatwa issued by Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani to Iraq's Muslim community to resist IS, which had just conquered Mosul and threatened Baghdad. Against this backdrop, and with the defeat of IS, the recent elections are likely to mark a new phase in the role of the Hashd after its four years of existence in the battlefield.

This policy brief aims to develop a deeper understanding of the nature of this amalgam of armed groups and how they may affect the future nature of the Iraqi state.<sup>5</sup> For example, some observers have pointed to the risk of state capture by the Hashd, or even suggested that a number of its groups are a prospective threat to the legitimacy or functioning of the Iraqi government. The brief analyses the development of the power base, intergroup relationships and attitudes towards the Iraqi government of seven selected Hashd groups.<sup>6</sup> As the first of a series, it examines the period January to September 2017 to set a baseline for what the power base, relationships and attitudes

1 The authors gratefully acknowledge the review of this brief by Younes Saramifar (Free University, Amsterdam), Renad Mansour (Chatham House), Mariska van Beijnum and Al-Hamzeh al-Shadeedi (Clingendael). They also owe a debt of thanks to Zahed Yousuf and his Dialectiq methodology/platform (<https://dialectiq.blog/>). Our methodology is based on Dialectiq, which also generated some of the visualisations in this brief. Its contents remain the authors' responsibility.

2 See: <http://www.nrtv.com/en/News.aspx?id=267&MapID=2> (accessed 31 May 2018). The official results may be some time in coming as it is decided whether allegations of widespread fraud should lead to a recount or a rerun of the elections. For the moment, the diaspora vote has been annulled while 10 per cent of the vote within Iraq is being manually recounted.

3 Notably, the Badr Organisation, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, Kata'ib Hezbollah and Kata'ib al-Imam Ali.

4 There are about 50 groups officially registered with the Hashd Commission, but not all are active on a continuous basis. See also: Mansour, R., *From Militia to State Force: The transformation of al-Hashd al-Shaabi*, Carnegie Middle East, Diwan online: <http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/61986>, 2015 (accessed 18 May 2018) and Abbas, H., *The myth and reality of Iraq's al-Hashd al-Sha'abi: A way forward*, Amman: FES, 2017.

5 Our complete methodology, describing how we operationalised key concepts, sources we tracked and groups we selected can be found [here](#). A short note that discusses our methodological choices and issues can be downloaded [here](#).

6 We have focused on seven groups: a) Asaib ahl al-Haq; b) Abbas combat division; c) Hashd al-Ashaari; d) Badr corps; e) Saraya al-Salam; f) Sinjar resistance units; and g) Kataib Hezbollah. It must be noted that after a decade of influence of armed groups on Iraqi ministries and state institutions, the 'boundaries of membership' between armed groups and the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) are no longer clear-cut. For example, elements of the Iraqi army and especially of the Iraqi federal police employ many Badr cadres and feature partisan control. This hybridity causes some armed groups and some elements of the state security forces to cooperate more easily, while this is more difficult for others. The brief does not explore factions and partisan influences within the ISF.

of different Hashd groups looked like when they were still fighting IS.<sup>7</sup> It is arguably also in this period that the groups used their battlefield credentials and prowess to position themselves politically for the post-IS phase.<sup>8</sup>

## Key insight #1: The Hashd are highly heterogeneous

Many commentators use the Hashd as a general term, which makes sense when referring broadly to all Iraqi armed groups that (used to) fight IS. However, if the aim is to try to understand how the Hashd are likely to affect the nature of the Iraqi state in the near future, the term has little meaning because it is too broad. A common 'solution' is to break the Hashd down into three main subgroups.

First, there are the pro-Iran Shi'a armed groups that pledge allegiance to Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. These include groups such as Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (which split from Al-Sadr's Mahdi Army in 2006)<sup>9</sup>; the Badr Organization (founded in Iran in 1982 and whose long-

time leader, Hadi al-Ameri, is a key figure in the operational management of the Hashd as an administrative entity) and Kata'ib Hezbollah (a smaller group with appreciable battlefield credentials that is headed by Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis who, incidentally, is also the military commander of the Hashd as an administrative entity). These groups generally advocate for maintaining the Hashd as a paramilitary force with a high level of autonomy and in parallel to Iraq's state security forces.

Second, there are the nationalist Shi'a armed groups that are more positively inclined towards the Iraqi government. In general, these argue that the Hashd should be abolished in due course and that those of its members who wish to should enlist in the Iraqi army or police. This category includes the 'shrine groups' that pledge allegiance to the leader (marjaa) of Iraq's Shi'a, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, such as the Abbas Combat Division, but it also includes a group like Al-Sadr's Saraya al-Salam. The former takes orders directly from the Iraqi national authorities. The Abbas Combat Division is headed by Maytham Zaidi, who is part of the general secretariat of the Abbas Shrine in Karbala. In contrast, Saraya al-Salam was formed in 2014 by remobilising cadres that used to operate as the Mahdi Army. It operates under the nationalist and homegrown clerical authority of Moqtada al-Sadr, who has his own political agenda for the future of Iraq.

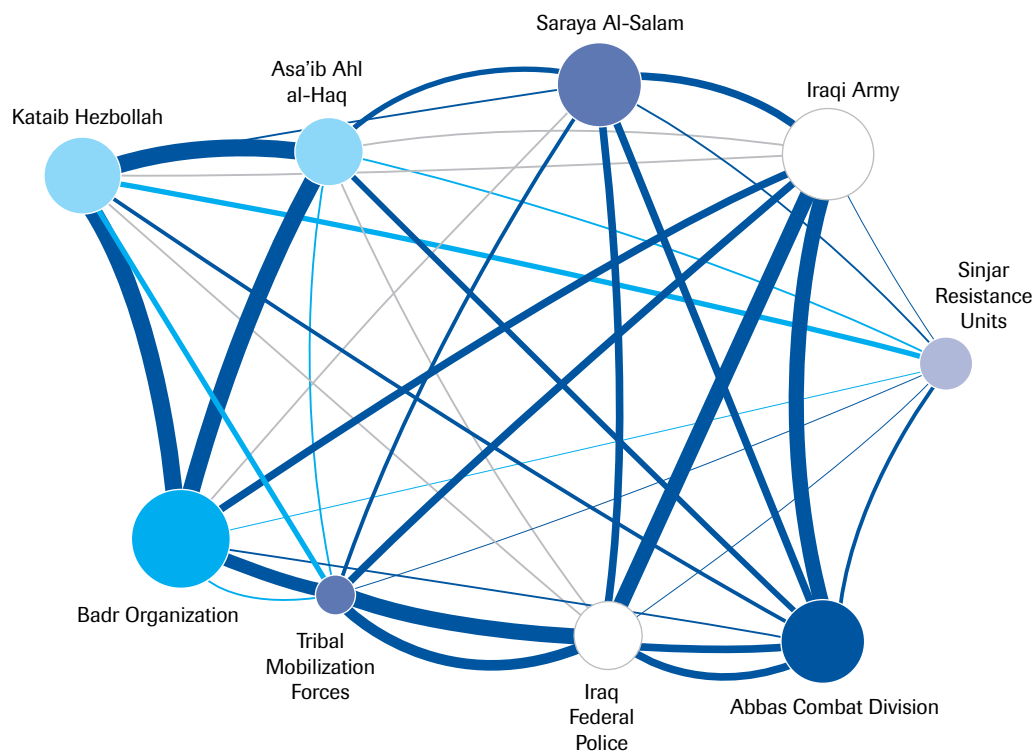
Third, there are non-Shi'a armed groups that typically do not operate at the national level and pursue more limited local objectives. These include the Tribal Mobilization Forces (a force of largely tribal Sunni fighters) and the Sinjar Resistance Units (a Kurdish/Yezidi force). Sunni Arab mobilisation in the context of the Hashd has occurred mostly in Anbar and Ninewa, but also in Salah al-Din and more recently liberated areas. With linkages to several leaders and political parties, the Sunni Tribal Forces have worked alongside local authorities, federal police and Shi'a Hashd groups in different governorates. The Sinjar Resistance Units, previously called King Peacock, date back to 2007 when they were formed to protect Iraq's Yezidi community during the civil war. They are

7 Our series provides more granular group-level analysis based on quantified data in addition to the more general analysis of the Hashd that already exists. See, for example: Haddad, F., *Understanding Iraq's Hashd al-Sha'bi: State and power in post-2014 Iraq*, The Century Foundation, 2018, online: <https://tcf.org/content/report/understanding-iraqs-hashd-al-shabi/>; Mansour, R. and F. Jabar, *The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future*, Beirut: Carnegie Middle East, 2017, online: <http://carnegie-mec.org/2017/04/28/popular-mobilization-forces-and-iraq-s-future-pub-68810>; O'Driscoll, D. and D. van Zoonen, *The Hashd al-Shaabi and Iraq: Subnationalism and the State*, Erbil: MERI, 2017.

8 The brief is part of Clingendael's Levant research programme, which examines the impact of hybrid security organisations – armed actors that simultaneously compete and cooperate with the state – on state development. The results of this research programme can be found here: <https://www.clingendael.org/research-program/levant>.

9 See: <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/143> (accessed 25 May 2018).

**Figure 1 Overview of the power base, relationship with other groups and attitude towards the Iraqi government of selected Hashd groups (first half of 2017)**



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

Legend: The size of the circle depicting a Hashd group denotes its power base (bigger means larger); the colour shade of the circle depicting a Hashd group reflects its attitude towards the Iraqi government (light blue is negative, dark blue is positive); the thickness of a line refers to the strength of a relationship (thicker is more intense) while its colour denotes its quality (light blue means negative, dark blue positive).

closely linked with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) in Syria.

Our analysis suggests, however, that this breakdown of the Hashd into three main subgroups is an oversimplification since there are significant nuances within each main subgroup. A few anecdotal examples illustrate this point. For instance, the category of 'nationalist Shi'a armed groups' puts the Saraya al-Salam – a group supported by Moqtada al-Sadr and serving his political agenda – together with the Abbas Combat Division – a shrine-funded group without political objectives. Clearly, these two are different in terms of their power base, outlook and relationships. Similarly, the pro-Iran Shi'a camp considers

organisations like the Badr Corps to be of the same type as Kataib Hezbollah. However, while the discourse of the Badr Corps is pro-Iranian, it is much less sectarian than Kataib Hezbollah. In further contrast to Kataib Hezbollah, the Badr Corps also engages in Iraqi politics and the group works pragmatically with the Iraqi government if and when necessary.<sup>10</sup> The upshot is that

<sup>10</sup> For example, the group has been reported to transport/man US-provided weapons and equipment. See: <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/07/badr-organization-fighters-pose-with-us-m1-abrams-tank.php> (accessed 20 May 2018). More broadly, see: Steinberg, G., *The Badr Organization: Iran's Most Important Instrument in Iraq*, Berlin: SWP, 2017.

each Hashd group must be analysed on its own merits. Figure 1 above visualises some of the differences between individual Hashd groups in terms of their power base, relationship with other groups and attitude towards the Iraqi government. A short assessment of key differences follows.

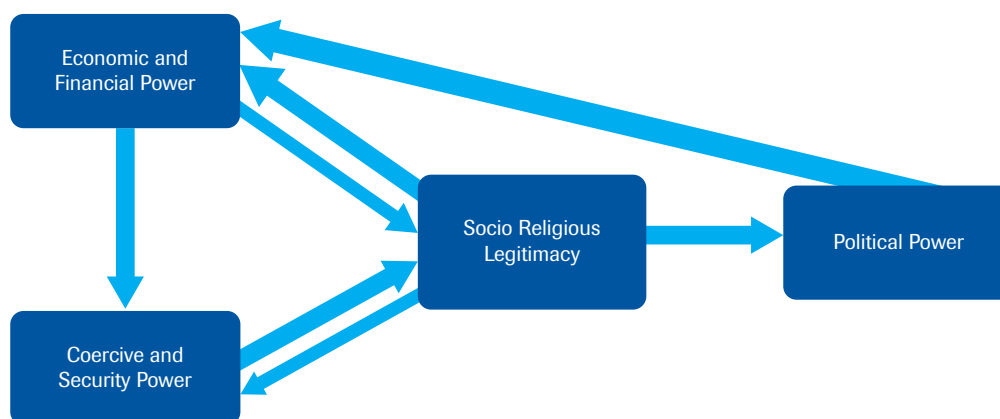
Figure 1 provides a few immediate insights:

- The thick triangular relationship between the Badr Corps, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and Kata'ib Hezbollah to the left side indicates strong and positive intergroup relationships. The Hashd groups that are seen as pro-Iran are well connected.
- The attitudes of these same groups towards the Iraqi government vary. Despite all three exhibiting a negative attitude, the Badr Corps is the least negatively disposed towards the government, presumably because of its greater political engagement.
- The power bases of the 'pro-Iran' groups vary significantly. By power base, we mean the coercive/security, political, economic/financial, socio/religious and territorial resources these groups have and use to pursue their objectives. In descending order, the Badr Corps leads the pro-Iran Hashd faction in terms of being its most powerful member, followed by Kata'ib Hezbollah and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq. The Badr Corps' strength is in part derived from its political power (parliamentary and ministerial representation) that in turn enables it to influence/control the Hashd Commission, parts of the Iraqi federal police and sections of the Iraqi army. Kata'ib Hezbollah's comparative advantage, on the other hand, is its astute battlefield strategies. Finally, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq is known for its tough fighters, but also carries a stigma due to its reputation of committing atrocities. The group also failed to gain political traction (and hence power) in the period under study.
- On the right of Figure 1 we find a trapezoid of the Abbas Combat Division, the Tribal Mobilization Forces, Saraya al-Salam, the Iraqi army and the Iraqi federal police (IFP). The three Hashd groups have weak relationships with each other, but all have relatively strong relationships with the Iraqi army and IFP, which creates an indirect connection.
- Another point of commonality is the positive attitude towards the central Iraqi government among these three Hashd groups, in particular that of Saraya al-Salam and the Abbas Combat Division.
- The power bases of the Abbas Combat Division, the Tribal Mobilization Forces and Saraya al-Salam vary, however. Saraya al-Salam is the strongest due to its political representation, its charitable welfare system and its ability to mobilise constituents. The Abbas Combat Division, despite having a high level of socio/religious legitimacy (a power dimension), has little political influence and limited funding.
- The Sinjar resistance units on the far right of the figure are relatively isolated, which is visible in its weak relationships with all the other actors. Despite a somewhat positive attitude towards the Iraqi government and a decent power base, the operational area of these units is more specific, which gives them limited incentives to relate to other Hashd groups.

## Key insight #2: The sources of power of the Hashd groups are connected, but not in equal measure

Our data suggests that the different dimensions that constitute the power base of the seven selected Hashd groups in our model – coercive/security, political, economic/financial, socio/religious legitimacy and territorial – are connected,

**Figure 2** Average levels and direction of influence between key dimensions of power of selected Hashd groups (first half of 2017)



Source: Authors' analysis.

but not in equal measure.<sup>11</sup> In other words, not all power sources are directly connected and those that are connected do not influence each other in equal measure. This means that an increase of power in one dimension can amplify power in some other dimensions, but that there are limits to such fungibility. A Hashd group that establishes control over more ministries (political power) can increase its control over a larger part of the state budget (economic power), but greater economic power does not easily increase socio/religious power. For example, the high level of socio/religious legitimacy of the Saraya al-Salam has helped to increase Al-Sadr's political power. In the same vein, the control of the Badr Corps over the Ministry of the Interior (political power) increased its influence over the allocation of state funding for the Hashd (economic power), which it used to decide which Hashd groups were paid and which volunteers could register. This enabled the pro-Iran Hashd

groups to increase their fighting ability faster (coercive/security power).<sup>12</sup>

Figure 2 reflects the strength and direction of the linkages between the dimensions of power we distinguish for selected Hashd groups in the period January to September 2017. We find that socio-religious legitimacy sits at the core of our power dimensions and is the only one that affects all others. It should be noted that other power dimensions – notably coercive/security and economic/financial – also influence socio/religious power. This suggests that the entire power base of each Hashd group is susceptible to disruption from several angles. We briefly discuss the nature and dynamics of each power dimension below.

Socio/religious legitimacy is an important and yet problematic power dimension for the Hashd because it has two components that generally work in opposite directions. On the one hand there is intra-sectarian legitimacy and, on the other, there is inter-sectarian legitimacy. Typically, if intra-sectarian legitimacy is high, inter-sectarian legitimacy is low. Practically, this means that due to

<sup>11</sup> In the analysis of the period January to September 2017, we left the 'territorial' dimension of power out of account because our data indicated that it corresponds almost 1:1 with the coercive/security dimension. Battles fought against IS, and the ensuing territorial control they enabled, create this overlap. However, these dimensions are likely to become more separate after the fight against IS.

<sup>12</sup> Mansour (2017), *op.cit.*; <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-al-abbas-combat-division-model> (accessed 13 June 2018).



their strong sectarian homogeneity and ideological affiliation, most Hashd groups are unrepresentative at the national level and have limited socio-religious legitimacy. The Saraya al-Salam might be a partial exception to this more general statement, as Al-Sadr has at times pursued a more nationalist rather than Shi'a discourse and, on several occasions, has worked across sects. The same goes for the Abbas Combat Division, since Al-Sistani is greatly respected by all parties. He, however, eschews a more political agenda.<sup>13</sup> Yet, the fundamental tension between intra- and inter-sectarian legitimacy does not have to be problematic from a Hashd perspective because high levels of intra-sectarian legitimacy may well be sufficient to enable different Hashd groups to hold on to their piece of the pie.

Socio/religious legitimacy as a source of power also presents the Shi'a groups of the Hashd with an additional problem, namely that of intra-sectarian *competition* for legitimacy. The politico-religious cleavages that run through the Shi'a community – e.g. in terms of affiliation with religious leaders like Al-Sadr (Saraya al-Salam), Al-Sistani (Abbas Combat Division) and Al-Khameini (Badr Corps) – divide the community. Shi'a groups compete over the same seats in parliament and for the same popular support. Such intra-community competition has hindered any single group from establishing itself as the dominant representative.

Hashd power in the political dimension is largely gained with time and experience if an initial basis can be established in the context of intra-sectarian competition for socio/religious legitimacy. Accordingly, the

smaller Shi'a factions of the Hashd – such as Kata'ib Hezbollah and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq – face competition from the larger and more established Shi'a Hashd groups. For example, Moqtada al-Sadr's party won 34 seats in the 328-seat parliamentary elections in May 2014 and looks set to win 55 seats in the May 2018 elections. In contrast, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq won just one parliamentary seat in 2014, despite expecting to carve off portions of Sadr's support base. The provisional results of the 2018 elections, however, indicate much greater electoral success for the group in the form of around 13 seats.<sup>14</sup> The next brief in the series will examine this development in more detail.

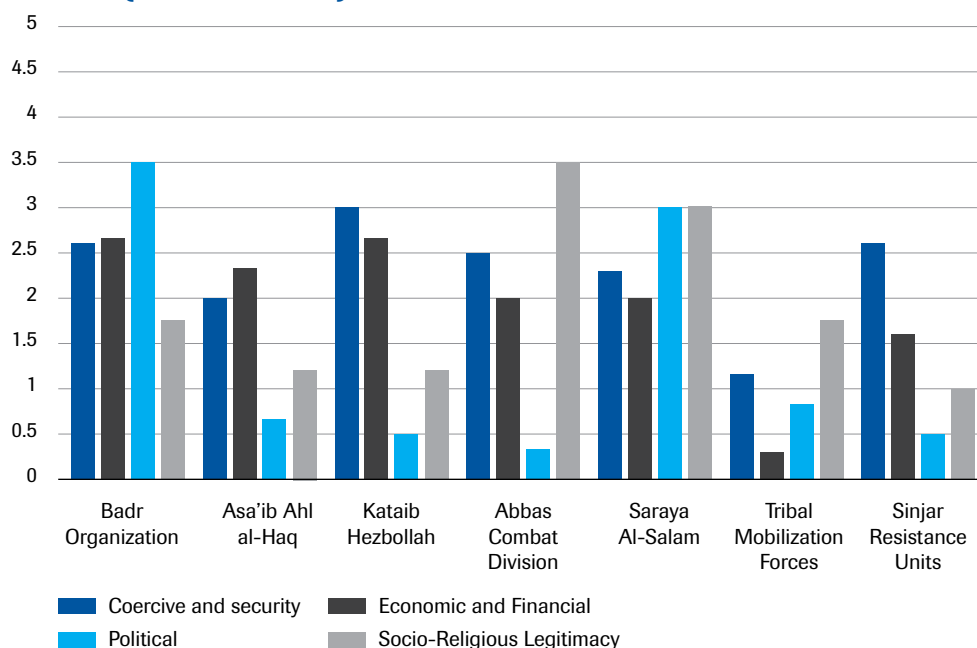
The economic/financial power of individual Hashd groups is made up of their share of state funds, autonomous revenue-generating activities and external funding. State funding – approximately US\$1.2 billion in 2017 – is the largest source of income and tightly controlled by the Badr Corps and its allies that run the Hashd Commission. Unsurprisingly, its distribution is skewed in favour of pro-Iran Shi'a Hashd groups.<sup>15</sup>

13 Conversely, if inter-sectarian legitimacy is high, intra-sectarian legitimacy is likely to be low. This latter scenario is hypothetical, however, as since 2003 Iraq has been run mostly along sectarian lines. The provisional results of the 2018 elections have not fundamentally changed this, although the low voter turnout (44%) suggests that more and more Iraqis are disenchanted with what it delivers. See: Al-Khoei, H., *Making sense of Iraq's elections, 2018*, online: <http://100iraqithoughts.com/2018/05/17/making-sense-of-iraqs-election/> (accessed 27 May 2018).

14 Smyth, P., *Iranian Militias in Iraq's Parliament: Political Outcomes and U.S. Response*, The Washington Institute, 2018, online: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iranian-militias-in-iraqs-parliament-political-outcomes-and-u.s.-response> (accessed 19 June 2018).

15 Since 2015, shrine factions have quarrelled with Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the operations commander of the Hashd Commission, about the distribution of the state budget for the Hashd. They accuse him of cutting their share and even of reducing the number of their fighters on the state payroll. By way of example, the Abbas Combat Division is said to provide 6 per cent of the authorised Hashd fighting strength (7,310 out of 122,000 fighters), but only receives 1.4 per cent of the state budget for the Hashd (US\$1.37 million per month out of a monthly state budget for the Hashd of c. US\$100 million). This means that only 28 per cent of its active-duty members (2,107 out of 7,310 fighters) are paid by the state. See: Knight, M. and Malik, H., *The al-Abbas Combat Division Model: Reducing Iranian Influence in Iraq's Security Forces*, The Washington Institute, 2017, online: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-al-abbas-combat-division-model> (accessed 25 May 2018).

**Figure 3** Scores for selected Hashd groups on four dimensions of power (first half of 2017)



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

Autonomous revenue-generating activities usually take the form of religious taxes, shrine revenue and support from religious charities (Hashd groups associated with Al-Sadr and the Najaf clergy benefit from such funds in particular). However, these funds are relatively modest. For example, the Abbas Combat Division received US\$2.52 million per month from *atabat* (shrine) financial services to pay salaries and support volunteer fighters.<sup>16</sup> At first glance, this may seem a significant amount when compared with its monthly US\$1.37 million in state funding. Yet, as noted, the group's allocation of state funding is skewed to its disadvantage. In fact, state funding covers only 28 per cent of the group's full strength as authorised by the same Hashd Commission. On the basis of its authorised strength, the Abbas Combat Division is in fact entitled to a state budget allocation of about US\$6 million per month (see note 15).

Coercive/security power is primarily determined by group capacity (number of active fighters), military skills, and the

possession of heavy weapons – the three factors that arguably determine the tangible side of battlefield performance. It is useful to note here that the number of fighters a group can recruit and mobilise is related significantly to its level of popular support (socio-religious legitimacy), while its ability to retain fighters (i.e. pay salaries), skill them appropriately and equip them with warfighting equipment is related to its economic/financial power. As most Hashd groups operate on tight budgets, with limited financial resources to retain, specialise and equip their forces, they tend to rely on large numbers of volunteer fighters and basic training. The Abbas Combat Division, for example, has a reserve force of 40,000 fighters but only 7,000 are active. In similar vein, the Tribal Mobilization Forces have an estimated 22,000 fighters, but their limited training and weaponry reduce their effectiveness in battle. In contrast, pro-Iran Hashd groups generally benefit from better training and more secondments by Iranian voluntary forces (Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps), as well as greater access to finance (through the Iraqi government budget and, in some cases, additional funding from Iran).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*



### Key insight #3: All Hashd groups have at least one vulnerable power dimension

Although their success in the fight against the IS, the territorial control it allowed them to establish and their economic/financial interests provide most Hashd groups with a substantial amount of power in most of the dimensions we track, there are still significant variations between groups. Moreover, the power base of each Hashd group has at least one significant weakness.<sup>17</sup> As Figure 2 above indicates, this suggests that a weak(er)(ening) power base in any one of our dimensions can be exploited to create vulnerabilities in other dimensions.

Figure 3 shows that the strength of the different dimensions of power varies significantly among our seven Hashd groups. Generally, the pro-Iran Shi'a Hashd groups have lower levels of socio/religious legitimacy than the more nationalist Shi'a Hashd groups, but higher levels of economic/financial power. The non-Shi'a Hashd groups typically have lower average scores on all dimensions of power combined than the Shi'a Hashd groups.

A more abstract point to note is that the existence of around 50 Hashd groups creates intense competition over limited options for political representation (e.g. seats in parliament), administrative/executive institutions and state budget<sup>18</sup> according to a zero-sum type logic. Far from the

Hashd posing a collective threat to the Iraqi government, this situation tends to fragment power. Various competitive strategies can be identified that Hashd groups pursue in relation to each other:

- Different Hashd groups use different tactics to gain popular support. Pro-Iran Shi'a Hashd groups trade off the 'resistance brand' (against IS) that they derive from their strong coercive power and their battlefield accomplishments – including their armed struggle against both Saddam Hussein's regime and the United States, as well as against IS and Syrian Sunni rebel groups.<sup>19</sup> Asaib Ahl al-Haq is somewhat of an exception here, as it began providing social services to the Shi'a tribes of southern Iraq, established a network of religious schools across the region and sponsored public entertainment events such as soccer games from 2014 onwards.<sup>20</sup> In their turn, Saraya al-Salam and the Abas Combat Division have largely capitalised on their pre-existing social welfare activities, clientelist networks and religious schools of thought.
- Pro-Iran Shi'a Hashd groups seek to sideline selected Sunni and Christian Hashd groups to limit competition, while simultaneously allying with other Sunni, Christian, Yazidi and Turkmen groups (a strategy that can be thought of as 'co-opt or confront'). In addition to their control over the Hashd state budget, which they used to dominate the battlefields in the fight against IS, they also use their

17 Note that our analysis considers power at the national level. Significant regional variation may exist.

18 The Hashd lag far behind other Iraqi security agencies in terms of their budget allocation. In the 2017 budget, the Hashd Commission received funding for 122,000 fighters, which amounted to 1.39 trillion Iraqi dinars (c. US\$1.2 billion). In contrast, the non-Hashd security expenses in the same budget amounted to 30.19 trillion dinars (c. US\$26 billion). Hence, the Hashd were allocated approximately 6 per cent of Iraq's total security spending, despite providing 28 per cent of the country's frontline armed strength. See: <http://www.bayancenter.org/en/2016/12/876/> (accessed 31 May 2018).

19 Qais Al Khazali's of Asaib Ahl al-Haq, for example, stated that: 'The reappearance of Imam Mahdi will mark the completion of the Shi'a project. Iranian Revolutionary Guards, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Asaib Ahl-Al Haq, and the Houthis are working hard to make the ground fertile for Imam Mahdi.' See: UNAMI, *Military Landscape: The ISF, PMF, and the Peshmerga*, 2017.

20 See: <http://www.aymennjawad.org/14510/iraq-who-are-asaib-ahl-al-haq-islamists>; <http://www.understandingwar.org/report/resurgence-asaib-ahl-al-haq>; <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/26/world/middleeast/iraq-isis-bombing.html> (all accessed 13 June 2018).

influence in the Hashd Commission to keep competitors divided. For example, the Sunni Tribal Mobilization Force (TMF) was only allowed to register 18,000 tribal fighters from across Ninewa in battalions made up of 100 to 300 fighters each. By imposing a limit on unit size, the Hashd Commission sought to prevent the emergence of a strong, cohesive Sunni force. In other Sunni governorates, such as Salah ad-Din, the Hashd Commission did not even allow a TMF formation programme to develop, despite requests from tribal leaders. Instead, recruitment of tribal forces was organised to strengthen the ranks of the Badr Corps and Asaib Ahl al-Haq. Such tactics prevented the TMF from developing into an effective fighting force.<sup>21</sup>

- Pro-Iran Shi'a Hashd groups also sought to marginalise the homegrown Sinjar Resistance Units after the re-conquest of Sinjar. After the defeat of IS through a combined, if forced, collaboration between the pro-Iran Hashd groups and the Sinjar Resistance Units,<sup>22</sup> Sinjar leader Haidar Shesho complained that, 'the [Shi'a] Hashd broke their promise of providing protection to Yazidis in Sinjar.'<sup>23</sup> Sinjar Yazidis have also accused the Shi'a Hashd groups of seizing control of public offices and citizens' properties, as well as trying to close down Sinjar Resistance Unit offices.<sup>24</sup> This has instigated several protests in Sinjar and violent clashes leading to casualties.<sup>25</sup> In Figure 1, such developments are represented in the negative relationships between pro-Iran Shi'a Hashd groups (specifically Asa'ib

Ahl al-Haq and Kata'ib Hezbollah) and the Sinjar Resistance Units (as well as the TMF).

The fact that each Hashd group under scrutiny here has at least one comparatively weak source of power combined with their internal competition suggests that the Iraqi government could have appreciable leverage over individual Hashd groups. This could be achieved either by further weakening an already weak power base in a way that creates maximum negative spillover effects into other sources of power, or by seeking to manipulate the differences and competition between key Hashd groups.

#### Key insight #4: Only a few Hashd groups oppose the Iraqi government and shun political engagement

With the decline of IS in 2017, several Hashd groups voiced their intention to translate their military dominance into political power. Qais al-Khazali of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq put it thus: 'A military victory without a political victory has no meaning and no value.' Factions such as Saraya al-Salam and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq intensified their activities early on in preparation for the 2018 parliamentary elections. Since March 2017, these groups have, for example, sought to form political blocs that strengthen their position. Moreover, they have increased and expanded their outreach activities, such as by establishing youth organisations, engaging with students at universities and meeting with tribal notables.

In contrast, other Hashd groups have made it clear that they have no interest in acquiring a political role after the fight against IS. These groups include shrine forces such as the Abbas Combat Division, but also Kata'ib Hezbollah and the Tribal Mobilization Forces. While the shrine forces and the Tribal Mobilization Forces prefer to be integrated into the Iraqi security forces, Kata'ib Hezbollah favours maintaining military power independent of the state. Finally, the Sinjar Resistance Units have indicated their preference for acquiring a federal status

21 See: <http://www.gppi.net/publications/sunni-tribal-forces/?L=0%27%22%2527> (accessed 30 May 2018).

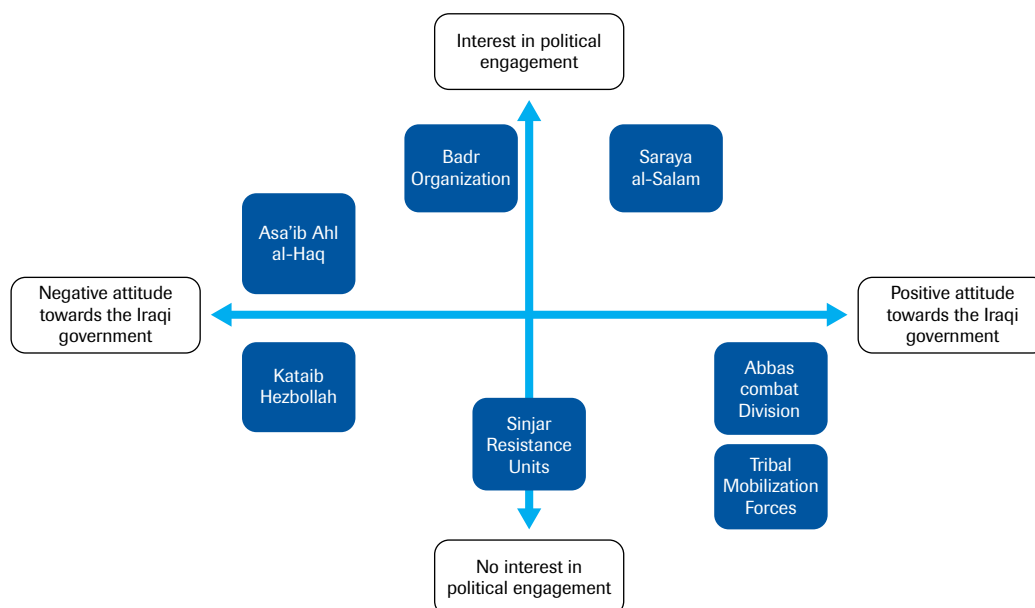
22 See: <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2018/3/28/sinjar-the-eternal-flashpoint> (accessed 30 May 2018).

23 See: <http://www.rudaw.net/arabic/kurdistan/231020176> (accessed 30 May 2018).

24 *Ibid.*

25 See: <http://www.rudaw.net/arabic/kurdistan/151120177> and <http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/277598.aspx> (both accessed on 30 May 2018).

**Figure 4 Hashd attitudes towards the Iraqi government and their interest in political engagement (first half of 2017)**



Source: Authors' analysis

for Sinjar, akin to the arrangement for Iraqi Kurdistan.

Figure 4 maps the political attitudes of our seven Hashd groups towards the Iraqi government between January and September 2017, as well as their level of interest in political engagement. It shows that there is only one Hashd group in our sample that maintains a negative attitude towards the Iraqi government and is not interested in political engagement. It is unlikely that the existence of one, or a limited few, armed groups with these characteristics pose a significant threat to the legitimacy and/or functioning of the Iraqi government – as some have suggested. Gradual state capture by Hashd groups that do engage seems to be a far greater risk.

Combining Figure 3 (power scores on different dimensions) with Figure 4 suggests that two groups dominated the Hashd in the first half of 2017, both of which are willing to engage in political contestation over the future of the Iraqi state. On the one hand, there is Saraya Al-Salam with its nationalist and reformist discourse, as well as a generally positive attitude towards the Iraqi

government. On the other hand, there is the Badr Corps, supported by Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, with its more pro-Iran and pro-status quo discourse, as well as a more negative attitude towards the Iraqi government.<sup>26</sup>

Both groups have established political parties and a support base that predates both the formation of the Hashd and the fight against IS. But they have pursued different strategies throughout their battles with IS since 2014. The Badr Corps, allied with Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, has emphasised its strong coercive capabilities to build a reputation of battlefield success among its constituents. Its coercive capabilities are buoyed by its political influence, influence over the Hashd Commission and support from Iran. Saraya al-Salam played a smaller role in the battle against IS, sending its fighters to relatively unchallenging battles with limited risks. Instead, the group alternated between opposition to and support for the

<sup>26</sup> On this theme, see also: Mansour, R., *Iraq After the Fall of ISIS: The Struggle for the State*, London: Chatham House, 2017.

government, under the banner of pushing for pro-poor, anti-corruption governance reform. This aimed to increase its political credentials and mobilise its constituents.

## Policy implications for Western policy makers

The analysis contained in this brief demonstrates significant variation in the power bases, relationships and attitudes of seven selected Hashd groups towards the Iraqi government for the period January to September 2017. An immediate consequence of this observation is that the label 'Hashd' needs to be dropped for both analytical and diplomatic purposes. Instead, granular analysis at group level should be increased to develop strategies that help to ensure a peaceful evolution towards a more stable Iraqi security landscape. From this perspective, the threat that some say the Hashd poses to the legitimacy or functioning of the Iraqi government appears to be somewhat overstated. This is especially so if three implications of the analysis are kept in mind.

*First, there are quite a few Hashd groups that are keen to acquire a place in the Iraqi security landscape under general rules and regulations set by the Iraqi government that apply to all.* Such conditions would need to be established via a consultative process to respect both moral (the exceptional status of the Hashd) and practical (the lack of economic alternatives outside of government employment) considerations. With time, a proposition acceptable to both such Hashd groups and the Iraqi government could probably be developed.




*Second, competition between Hashd groups should be kept in check and balance encouraged.* Understandably, intra-Hashd competition has not been a key concern in previous years when all eyes were on the fight against IS. But restraining such a dynamic will become more relevant post-IS. Hence, in the national interest, greater effort should be made towards a more equal treatment of Hashd groups by the state. This will help avoid any single armed group becoming too dominant, for example because it retains the ability to underpin its political power with the threat of large-scale disruption or coercion.

*Third, all Hashd groups have vulnerabilities that the Iraqi government can exploit to ensure that groups fall in line with national priorities.* If the aim is to develop a more regulated and more stable security landscape, with less scope for coercive politics, there are a number of points of influence available. For example, low levels of socio-religious legitimacy are problematic for most Hashd groups that have a negative or ambivalent attitude towards the Iraqi government, which means that sound democratic processes could gradually reduce their influence. Also, the analysis suggests that there are very few Hashd groups that have a negative attitude towards the Iraqi government *and* no interest in engaging in politics.

### About the Clingendael Institute

Clingendael – the Netherlands Institute of International Relations – is a leading think tank and academy on international affairs. Through our analyses, training and public debate we aim to inspire and equip governments, businesses, and civil society in order to contribute to a secure, sustainable and just world.

[www.clingendael.org/cru](http://www.clingendael.org/cru)  
[cru@clingendael.org](mailto:cru@clingendael.org)  
+31 70 324 53 84

 @clingendaelorg  
 The Clingendael Institute  
 The Clingendael Institute

### About the authors

**Nancy Ezzeddine** is research assistant at Clingendael's Conflict Research Unit. In this capacity she primarily contributes to the Levant research programme, seeking to identify the origins and functions of hybrid security arrangements and their influence on state performance and development.

**Erwin van Veen** is a senior research fellow with Clingendael's Conflict Research Unit. A political scientist by training, Erwin applies this lens to the analysis of relations between political order, security and justice in conflict-prone environments. Extensive travel in the Middle East also generated Erwin's lasting interest in the region's conflicts.