



# HASHD AL-SHAABI IN ITS 7<sup>TH</sup> YEAR: CAN IT BE TAKEN UNDER CONTROL?

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## INTRODUCTION

**I**t is observed that in addition to its military power, the Hashd al-Shaabi, Iraqi militia umbrella group also known as the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), founded in 2014 in Iraq with the fatwa

issued by Iraq's top Shiite cleric Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani<sup>1</sup> and whose legitimacy is still being called into question, has a major impact on political, social and economic life in Iraq, assuming an alternative role to the institutional structure of the country. As

<sup>1</sup> "Iraq conflict: Shia cleric Sistani issues call to arms," BBC, 13 June 2014.



Operation to liberate Mosul from ISIS

an umbrella organization consisting mostly of armed Shia militias supported by Iran, the Hashd al-Shaabi has yet again actively occupied the agenda of the country by displaying its latest drone models in the military parade on 26 June 2021<sup>2</sup>, organized for the seventh anniversary of the fatwa issued by Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani on 13 June 2014 that laid the foundation of the organization, raising questions and discussions about its future in its seventh year of operation.

Deputy Chairman of the Hashd al-Shaabi Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, who was assassinated in a US drone strike in Baghdad in January 2020 together with the Commander of the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Qasem Soleimani, had ordered the deployment of an air defense unit

a few months prior to his death, yet this order was overruled by the Chairman of the Hashd al-Shaabi, Faleh al-Fayyadh.<sup>3</sup> Already carrying out drone strikes, the Hashd al-Shaabi's addition of anti-aircraft weapons to its arsenal, despite the opposition of authorities, will both intensify the attacks on foreign powers, particularly the US, and make it even more difficult for the already-struggling government to control the organization. While Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi, who has brought important changes to governmental posts and the security bureaucracy especially since his inauguration in May 2020, was unable to achieve progress in his first promises to reconstruct the Hashd al-Shaabi and reserve the use of force to the government; the consolidation of power by the organization through anti-aircraft weapons

<sup>2</sup> "Iraq's Iran-backed PMF militia flaunts drones ahead of seventh anniversary parades," *The New Arab*, 15 June 2021.

<sup>3</sup> "Iran-backed militia leader in Iraq orders creation of new air force branch," *Kurdistan 24*, 5 September 2019.

and drones indicates how hard it is for the government to control the organization.

## A NEW HEZBOLLAH: THE HASHD AL-SHAABI

The Hashd al-Shaabi, founded in June 2014 with the fatwa issued by Ayatollah al-Sistani when almost one-third of Iraqi land was occupied by Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), acted as a coalition between Sistani, Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, Iran's spiritual leader Ali Khamenei and some other small groups rather than as a monolithic structure.<sup>4</sup> As the organization harboring almost one hundred different militia groups and approximately 150 thousand people has become in time an important Iranian hard power instrument in the region, the fight against pro-Iran militias in the Hashd al-Shaabi has become one of the top priorities in Iraqi governments' agendas.

Although in 2016, with the initiative of the then Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, the Hashd al-Shaabi was incorporated into the Undersecretariat of National Security under the Prime Ministry as an auton-

mous body with the hope that Iranian influence on the organization shall be minimized and governmental control shall be reinforced<sup>5</sup>, the Hashd al-Shaabi was considered to be "a legal instrument funded by Iraq following Iran's orders", which led to divergences both in the country and in the Hashd al-Shaabi.

However, the Hashd al-Shaabi, obtaining a bureaucratic shield with this legalization process in addition to its military power, reaped the fruits in 2018 elections of its efforts of providing dynamic support to the field during the fight against ISIS. Indeed, the Fatah Alliance supported by politicians affiliated with the Hashd al-Shaabi won the second most seats in the parliament and added a political dimension to the organization's social, military and bureaucratic power, becoming one of the critical decision-makers in the country. Hence, Iran has been successful in making the Hashd al-Shaabi, a project of Revolutionary Guard Corps, a dominant power in Iraq; just as what it tried and accomplished in Lebanon with Hezbollah.

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<sup>4</sup> "İŞİD Sonrası Irak'ta Tartışmalı Yeni Aktör: Haşdi Şaabi," Bilgay Duman, ORSAM Analiz 198, May 2015; "Networks of power: The Popular Mobilization Forces and the state in Iraq," Renad Mansour, Chatnam House, February 2021.

<sup>5</sup> "More Than Militias: Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces Are Here To Stay," Renad Mansour, War On The Rocks, 3 April 2018.



Iraqi protesters storm the US Embassy in Baghdad

## FAILED ATTEMPTS TO CONTROL

During his short-term administration between October 2018 and May 2020, Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi ran sort of a campaign against the Hashd al-Shaabi. In order to reinforce national sovereignty, to reduce the divergence between military and civil society and to curb Iran's influence on the Hashd al-Shaabi, Abdul-Mahdi issued a decree in July 2019 to subject the Hashd al-Shaabi to military law but could not implement it.<sup>6</sup> Again, on 17 September 2019 Abdul-Mahdi issued a decree stipulating structural changes in the Hashd al-Shaabi

in accordance with which deputy chairmanship is abolished and a secretary general and a chief of the general staff is appointed instead alongside the chairman in order to curb al-Muhandis' influence.<sup>7</sup> Despite all these efforts though, al-Muhandis' hegemony on the Hashd al-Shaabi remained until his assassination by the US on 3 January 2020 together with Qasem Soleimani.

The disproportionate violence of militia groups supporting Iran in the Hashd al-Shaabi believed to have played a role in the killing of 600 protestors along with many protesting leaders and activists in the protests

<sup>6</sup> "Iraq PM orders Iran-allied militias to be reined in," Reuters, 1 July 2019.

<sup>7</sup> "The future of the Popular Mobilization Forces after the assassination of Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis," Inna Rudolf, Foreign Policy Research Institute, April 2020, pp.10-12.

against the government that started in October 2019 against corruption, unemployment, inadequacy of public services and the growing influence of Iran increased the tensions between the government and the organization.<sup>8</sup> Following the assassination of Soleimani and al-Muhandis by the US during Abdul-Mahdi's administration, who was forced to resign because of the protests, the political branch of the Hashd al-Shaabi started to put pressure on the parliament to expel foreign powers, particularly the US, and the military branch of the organization intensified its attacks on US troops and bases.

In this period, four militia groups loyal to Sistani, namely Ansar al-Marja'iyya, the Imam Ali Combat Division, the Ali Akbar Brigade, and the Abbas Combat Division, also known as "Hashd-i Marja'iyya", decided to leave the Hashd al-Shaabi.<sup>9</sup> The main reasons for this decision by the groups at odds with Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis were that the ideology and working mechanism of the Hashd al-Shaabi were not national enough and that Iran's

influence on the organization was causing disturbance. It was claimed that after Muhandis' death, pro-Sistani groups tried to take part in the governance of the Hashd al-Shaabi but failing to do so, they decided to leave. It is also known that these groups were dissatisfied with Abu Fadak's succession of Muhandis as the Chief of the General Staff of the Hashd al-Shaabi. On the other hand, Sistani's groups decided to leave the Hashd al-Shaabi due to the latter's use of disproportionate force on protestors, attacks on foreign forces and irresponsible attitude toward the government. This divergence, which can be also interpreted as a manifestation of the conflict between Sistani's Najaf and Khamanei's Qom to become the center of the Shia world, has tarnished organization's image in the eyes of important figures in the region.<sup>10</sup> With the separation of Sistani groups, the Hashd al-Shaabi will no longer be able to effectively protect itself both at social and political level by using Sistani's name, which will be partially helpful in the struggle against the organization.

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<sup>8</sup> "Country has no future": Iraqi protester killed at Baghdad rally," Sofia Barbarani, Aljazeera, 25 May 2021.

<sup>9</sup> "Four brigades split from Iraq's PMF in sign of internal rift," The National, 22 April 2020.

<sup>10</sup> "Sistani versus Khamenei on Iraq's Hashd al-Sha'abi," Mehmet Alaca, LSE Middle East, 3 April 2020.

Washington, which prefers to target pro-Iran members and groups in the Hashd al-Shaabi instead of declaring as terrorist the whole organization founded by Sistani's fatwa and is a legal instrument of Iraqi security bureaucracy, is forcing Baghdad to take action by imposing sanctions on pro-Iran militias in the Hashd al-Shaabi and urging it to take the organization under control.

## IRAN'S "SHADOW MILITIA" STRATEGY

Following the assassination of Qasem Soleimani, as pro-Iran militias intensified their anti-US activities on the field, the Iraqi Parliament agreed unanimously on 5 January 2020 with the initiative of Hadi al-Amiri's pro-Iran Fatah Alliance, to expel US and other foreign forces from the country. On the other hand, the US, reluctant to leave the country, started to declare militia leaders and their organizations as terrorists in retaliation to their attacks to its troops/bases and inflict sanctions. The US pressures on militias and their leaders such as the inclusion of one of the pro-Iran militia groups, the Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, to the list of terrorists and its leader Akram al-Kaabi to the list of "Specially Designated Global Terrorists", and the militia group Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and its leader Qais al-Khazali to the sanctions list created concerns over meeting a similar end to that of Soleimani and al-Muhandis.

Thus, pro-Iran militia groups in the Hashd al-Shaabi changed tactics and formed more than twenty new militia groups including Usbat al-Thaireen, Ashaf al-Kahf and Qadbat

al-Hoda.<sup>11</sup> Even though names of such "shadow" or "ghost" militia groups are frequently mentioned, lack of information regarding their central locations, commanders and command elements has flourished the idea that this may be a tactical move. On 3 April 2020, Usbat al-Thaireen said "US embassy, our eyes are tracking your movement, and you will not achieve what you are planning" in a drone footage of the US Embassy in Baghdad on their official Telegram channel and shortly after, another drone footage was posted showing Ain al-Assad military base in Anbar where US troops are stationed, with a similar message: "We are watching your movement". While it became obvious that the Hashd al-Shaabi now carries out air strikes through these groups, many shadow militia groups released videos of their attacks on US military convoys on the ground. Even though pro-Iran militias, who probably resorted to this method, tried to evade responsibility in order not to get caught in the US radar and to reserve their unaccountability, Baghdad's inability to take concrete steps caused the government to remain under Washington's pressure to take the Hash al-Shaabi under control. In this context,

<sup>11</sup> "Iran's new strategy: Iraqi ghost militias?," Mehmet Alaca, Daily Sabah, 17 April 2020.



Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi

Hashd al-Shaabi's publicly posting of its drones might mark a new era in the attacks against the US.

In the face of unrestrained actions of shadow militias, in addition to keeping the pressure on Baghdad, the US continued its military and diplomatic fight. On January 2020 the US Treasury Department announced sanctions under the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act against the chairman of the Hashd al-Shaabi Faleh al-Fayyad on account of violating human rights and added the name of al-Muhandis' successor, Hashd al-Shaabi Chief of the General Staff Abu Fadak to the list of Specially Designated Global Terrorists.<sup>12</sup> Washington, which prefers to target pro-Iran

members and groups in the Hashd al-Shaabi instead of declaring as terrorist the whole organization founded by Sistani's fatwa and is a legal instrument of Iraqi security bureaucracy, is forcing Baghdad to take action by imposing sanctions on pro-Iran militias in the Hashd al-Shaabi and urging it to take the organization under control.

## A DIFFICULT CHALLENGE FOR KADHIMI

Promising when he took office in May 2020 that his main agendas will include the reconstruction of the Hashd al-Shaabi and that the use of force will rest only with the state, Prime Minister Kadhimi issued a reform resolution on 3 June 2020 providing for the closure of all offices of the organization

<sup>12</sup> "Leveraging U.S. Sanctions on Faleh al-Fayyad," Michael Knights, The Washington Institute, 8 Ocak 2021; "The U.S. Designation of Kataib Hezbollah's Abu Fadak," Michael Knights, The Washington Institute, 13 January 2021.

in cities, subjection of units to military law as brigades and regiments instead of having their own flags and names, and the ban of all its members from political activities.<sup>13</sup>

In the same month, 14 militias on the US list of terrorists and members of the Kata'ib Hezbollah—one of Iran's most effective militia forces in Iraq—were arrested due to allegations of taking part in the rocket attack on Baghdad Airport and the US Embassy in Baghdad.<sup>14</sup> However, this move showed how difficult it is for Kadhimi to take the Hashd al-Shaabi under control, as the militias were arrested by the Counter Terrorism Service known to be close to Kadhimi and were released shortly after due to pressures. On the other hand, the reform plan issued on 3 June could not be implemented despite the necessity to be implemented for a one-month period.

In July 2020, Kadhimi showed his determination in his fight against pro-Iran names by appointing new names to the National Security Council and the Undersecretariat of National Security chaired previously for years by Faleh al-Fayyadh alongside his chairmanship of the Hashd al-Shaabi and who is known as one of Iran's men in the Iraqi security bureaucracy.<sup>15</sup> However, following the arrest of pro-Iran militia group Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq for carrying out the missile attack on the US Embassy in Baghdad in December 2020, the said militia group took to the streets in Baghdad for show of force and gave a message to Kadhimi, and

one of the leaders of Kata'ib Hezbollah Abu Ali al-Askari, addressed Kadhimi by saying "It is time to cut your ears like goats."<sup>16</sup> In response, Kadhimi appeared on the streets of Baghdad with his commanders in Counter Terrorism Service and said "we are ready to face you if necessary"; however, the release of the said militias in a short time and the inconclusion of the arrest warrant against al-Askari are an indication of the limitation of Kadhimi's power.

Again, the challenging of Kadhimi by the members of the militia group Rab'Allah on Bagdad streets in March 2021 in military vehicles and uniforms carrying AK-47's and RPG's as well as posters of Kadhimi under shoe prints and scissors with the caption "it is time to cut your ear"<sup>17</sup> indicate the influence of the militia in the country and the desperation of the government. Especially pro-Iran militia's inclusion among their targets of the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government and the Turkish base in Bashiqa near Mosul as well as opposing journalists, activists and protesters forced Kadhimi to adopt a tough stance against these groups. As a matter of fact, on 26 May 2021, following the arrest of one of the Hashd al-Shaabi commanders Qasim Muslih for taking part in the attacks against the Ayn al-Asad base where US troops were stationed and against the International Coalition forces, in addition to the killings of the protest leaders in Karbala; Hadi al-Amiri, Commander of the pro-Iran militia group Badr Organization and

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<sup>13</sup> "Irak'ta Haşdi Şabi'nin yapılandırılmasına ilişkin 'yeni kararname,'" Anadolu Ajansı, 4 June 2020.

<sup>14</sup> "Iraqi forces raid Iran-backed Kataib Hezbollah base, 14 arrested," Aljazeera, 26 Haziran 2020.

<sup>15</sup> "Irak Başbakanı Kazimi, hassas güvenlik ve askeri mevkilerde yaptığı değişikliklerle neyi amaçlıyor?," Haydar Karaalp, Anadolu Ajansı, 6 July 2020.

<sup>16</sup> "Iraqi authorities issued an arrest warrant against a leader of Kataib Hezbollah," Shafaq, 27 December 2020.

<sup>17</sup> "Shiite militia parades through Baghdad, warns against budget delays," Rudaw, 25 March 2021.

leader of the Fatah Alliance, met with Falih al-Fayyadh and Hashd al-Shaabi Chief of the General Staff Abu Fadak; and the Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada militia groups accused Kadhimi of trying to protect his power and delaying the elections. Also, there were claims regarding an initiative in the Iraqi Parliament by the Fatah Alliance and Shiite groups close to Hashd al-Shaabi to remove Kadhimi from office. However, Kadhimi did not yield and showed who had the upper hand in the current state of play despite the release of Muslih following the arrest of four other leaders of the Hashd al-Shaabi in Karbala.<sup>18</sup>

## WHAT SHOULD THE GOVERNMENT DO?

Despite all the efforts of the Iraqi government, the threat perception created by pro-Iran militia groups has become a phenomenon that is harder to resist with each passing day. Although Kadhimi would continue to fight the organization as long as he remains in office, it is difficult to say whether his efforts will bear any fruits. This may be seen in his statements on the seventh anniversary of Sistani's

fatwa on 13 June 2014 that laid the foundation of the Hashd al-Shaabi, where his emphasis on Sistani's Iraqi identity is considered to be a message to the Iranian-backed militias. Kadhimi, without mentioning the name of the Hashd al-Shaabi in his speech, is trying to fight the organization by using the name of Sistani, saying that Najaf is not satisfied with the use of the fatwa for non-national political and economic interests. However, the fact that Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq leader Qais Khazali called on the supporters of the group to "go out and protect the Hashd al-Shaabi if necessary" in case of an increase in the attacks targeting the organization, shows that possible pressures and moves by the government will be met with resistance. Even though Kadhimi is dissatisfied with Hashd al-Shaabi, by attending the organization's parade on 26 June 2021—in spite of possible criticisms—he showed his recognition of the non-negligible reality of the organization.

The fact that the Hashd al-Shaabi is an official part of the security mechanism in Iraq and where pro-Iran militias are active helps to understand the lack of clear distinction between the state and the militia;

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<sup>18</sup> "Irak'ta derinleşen Haşdi Şabi krizi seçimleri nasıl etkiler?," Bekir Aydoğan ve Mehmet Alaca, Anadolu Ajansı, 2 June 2021.

The fact that the Hashd al-Shaabi is an official part of the security mechanism in Iraq and where pro-Iran militias are active helps to understand the lack of clear distinction between the state and the militia; and especially, even though shadow militias took responsibility of the recent attacks, the government's inability to impose physical sanctions damages its image and use-of-force capabilities.



Military Parade of the Hashd al-Shaabi in Baghdad

and especially, even though shadow militias took responsibility of the recent attacks, the government's inability to impose physical sanctions damages its image and use-of-force capabilities. On the other hand, the fact that pro-Iran militias cannot be brought to justice despite their growing uncontrollability is an indication of the effects of these groups on the judicial mechanism, causing significant harm to Kadhim's popularity. Not wanting to lose his influence especially among the protesters and the youth, Kadhim is not giving up the struggle despite being aware of the difficulty of fighting the militia organizations. In this regard, the upcoming parliamentary elections planned to be held on 10 October 2021 are thought to be among the motivations behind Kadhim's latest moves.

The fact that the Shiite militias close to Iran within the Hashd al-Shaabi, which have been using drones in the attacks targeting US forces from time to time since 2019, demonstrated their air defense weapons in such a manner for the first time could be an indication that anti-US activities of these groups will become more effective in the upcoming period, weakening their level of accountability to the government. Especially, during the presidency of Ebrahim Raisi, who was elected as Iran's president in the elections held on 18 June 2021 and who is known to have close relations with the Revolutionary Guards and supreme leader Ali Khamenei, it is safe to say that Iran's policies toward neighboring countries and the US will also be important for the Hashd al-Shaabi and Iraq.

Considering the comments that, following Qasem Soleimani's assassination in Iraq by the US, Iran lost power in Iraq and that Soleimani's successor Esmail Qaani was not as effective, Iran may implement a more hawkish and intrusive Iraq policy with Raisi. In that case, it would not be wrong to expect the pro-Iran Shiite militia groups in Iraq to intensify their activities. In addition, the inclusion of drones in the policy to be adopted by the pro-Iran armed elements will not only make it harder to control them, but it will also put Baghdad in a more difficult position in the eyes of Washington.

In this sense, it can be expected that the rivalry between the US and Iran will intensify even more in the process of forming a government after the Iraqi parliamentary elections on 10 October 2021. Although Prime Minister Kadhimi does not stand as a candidate for the parliament, it is possible to say that he has been active for a second term as

prime minister. For Kadhimi, who has a more distant attitude toward Iran compared to former prime ministers, it can be said that Iranian foreign policy under Raisi will be a compelling factor. At this point, Iran is likely to try to maintain and even increase its influence in Iraq through militia groups, which can further increase the instability and insecurity in Iraq. It is also possible to say that US-Iran relations will continue to be decisive for the future of Iraq. In this context, the government can seek support from Shiite leaders such as Muqtada al-Sadr and Ammar al-Hakim, who find voice in politics and in the society and have a distant attitude toward Iran, as well as from Kurds dissatisfied with the hegemony of Iran-back militias and from Sunni actors who do not want to be in the same side with Iran. If no harsh and realistic attitude is adopted toward pro-Iran groups in Hashd al-Shaabi, these groups can increase their influence in the country in the upcoming period.

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