



## PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

# The Al-Hashd al-Sha'abi Militias at a Crossroads

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The recent assaults on the militia bases of al-Hashd al-Sha'abi raise questions about Iraq's future. Despite the Iraqi PM's ultimatum demanding that the militias, which operate under the Iranian umbrella, integrate into the Iraqi military apparatus, a number of them are not complying, which could have implications for Iraqi sovereignty.

The al-Hashd al-Sha'abi (Popular Mobilization Forces) militia bases in Iraq, which are largely supported by the Islamic Republic, operate separately from the Iraqi army. These militias were founded in response to the crisis in the Iraqi army that followed the conquest of Mosul by ISIS in June 2014. The catalyst for their formation was an advisory opinion (*al-wajib al-kifai*) issued by Ayatollah Ali Sistani, a senior Iraqi Shiite cleric. His *fatwa* called for the establishment of popular mobilization forces to protect Iraq, and the Shiite community in particular, from danger.

In February 2016, the Iraqi Parliament approved a decree ordering al-Hashd al-Sha'abi to integrate into Iraq's armed forces, with its members instructed to disengage from any political party, but this order was not implemented. The war against ISIS led to a triangular collaboration between the Iraqi army, the Kurdish Peshmerga forces, and the al-Hashd al-Sha'abi militias, which remained under independent Iranian command.

When the fighting came to an end, the al-Hashd al-Sha'abi militias were faced with two alternatives: integrate into Iraq's security forces, or disarm and integrate into Iraq's sociopolitical system. Both were anathema to Tehran, which is concentrating its efforts on strengthening its political and military power. But things have changed: ISIS has been largely expelled, and Iraq is in the process of restoring its sovereignty.

Elections for the 329-member Iraqi parliament were held in May 2018. The election campaign was a golden opportunity for Iran to implement its plan to turn the militias operating under its umbrella into an influential political axis in Iraq. To this end, a new political mechanism was established called the Fatah Coalition. Led by Hadi Ameri, the coalition included representatives of the Iranian Shiite militias, including the Badr organization, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, Kata'ib Hezbollah, and Kata'ib al-Imam Ali.

Once the votes were counted, the Fatah Coalition stood in second place with 48 seats in the new parliament. The Saairun Alliance, led by Muqtada al-Sadr, came in first with 54 seats. In third stood the Al-Nasr Coalition, led by Haider Abadi, with 42.

In July of this year, Iraqi PM Adel Abdul-Mahdi issued an ultimatum – against Iranian resistance – demanding that al-Hashd al-Sha'abi finally integrate [into Iraq's security forces](#). The Shiite militia commanders do not appear to intend to implement this directive. The Liwa al-Muntadhar militia (operating in the Kurdish region) made headlines with its refusal to be evacuated from that battle-stricken area, despite American pressure on President Barham Saleh and PM Abdul-Mahdi.

From Iran's point of view, turning Iraq into a client state is a vital step in implementing the "axis of resistance" conceived by the leader of the revolution. This conceptual pattern rests on four dimensions:

- Penetrating through soft power; i.e., establishing cultural centers, providing welfare and Islamic guidance with the aim of recruitment, and creating sympathy for Ayatollah Khomeini's "Vilayat-e Faqih" concept.
- Establishing combat militias functioning under the guidance of the Revolutionary Guards, with the object of setting up a hybrid mechanism operating simultaneously with the Iraqi army.
- Investing large resources in post-war restoration, with an emphasis on telecommunications infrastructure, industrial, and urban reconstruction.
- Turning the militias into a powerful political force that is actively involved in formulating foreign and domestic policy, in line with Iran's interests.

This conceptual pattern is intended to combine the military, political, and economic dimensions and to serve – no less importantly – as a cultural agent.

Tehran's inroads into Lebanon (through its Hezbollah proxy) have served as a springboard from which to implement the same model in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. Yet despite Iraq's economic dependence on its neighbor to the east, the presence of Shiite militias under Iranian rule has been met with both domestic

and foreign opposition. The recent round of attacks on the organization's bases and ammunitions warehouses has created a renewed debate about the presence of al-Hashd al-Sha'abi militias on Iraqi soil, with voices objecting to their activities and expressing concern about the possible outcome of Iran's violation of Iraqi sovereignty.

The attacks on the bases are seen as an attempt to disrupt Iran's grip on Iraqi (as well as Syrian and Lebanese) territory, which Tehran needs to establish its long-sought ground corridor from the Iranian border to the Mediterranean basin. In the wake of the assaults, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis has been instructed to establish an [air unit](#) that will work alongside the militias' forces. Interestingly, this order came from Muhandis himself, who acts as deputy chairman of the organization, and not from Falih Fayyadh, the organization's chairman. This could indicate an internal debate regarding the fulfillment of instructions coming from Tehran.

In a move widely interpreted as a signal that [Muqtada al-Sadr](#) is under Iran's sphere of influence, Tehran recently distributed an image of that influential cleric sitting between the Supreme Leader and the Quds Force commander at a ceremony marking the day of Ashura. The spectacle of Sadr in Iran fanned the flames of the internal argument in Iraq between supporters of the Iranian presence and those in opposition to it.

Some argue that Sadr's presence in Iran will strengthen its sphere of influence and jeopardize Iraq's independence. But others praise it, stating that it is natural for a Shiite leader to be present at mourning ceremonies commemorating Imam Hussein. They stress that Sadr enjoys good relations with all neighboring countries and claim that leaders throughout the region value his views.

It is worth noting that Sadr recently announced that he would implement the integration of the Sarayat al-Salam militia into the Iraqi military apparatus, in accordance with the ultimatum issued by the Iraqi PM. This stood in sharp contradiction to the position of Shiite militia commanders operating under Iranian auspices who oppose the move.

Ever since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979, the regime has worked tirelessly to promote its revolutionary ideology throughout the Muslim world. The disintegration of Iraq following the removal of Saddam Hussein, in combination with Iraq's demographic structure, provides fertile ground on which to advance this worldview.

The Iraqi PM, who faces a great challenge in integrating the militias, stands between the hammer and the anvil. On one side is Iran, which strives to exploit

Iraq's structural weaknesses to boost its leverage. On the other are the US and, to some extent, Saudi Arabia and Israel, which hope to counter Tehran's aspirations to transform Iraq into a client state.

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