



The al-Hash'd al-Shaabi, Paramilitary Groups in Iraq

The Rise of Iraq's Elite-Backed Security Forces, the Popular Mobilization Forces

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Introduction:

The Iraqi security sector has been under extreme pressure to carry out reform since the United States invasion in 2003. Since then, the international community has invested immeasurable time and resources into promoting change within the Iraqi security sector, yet has failed to enact a policy that suits the unique situation of Iraq. Iraq operates under a complex, intertwining system of the formal and informal sectors. The security forces are no exception to this, as the armed forces of Iraq consist of the formally recognized Iraqi military, as well as dozens of paramilitary groups with varying alliances and goals that have been formally and informally incorporated into the Iraqi security sector.¹ These paramilitary groups, formally called the al-Hash'd al-Shaabi, or the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) or Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), played a major role in the battle against the Islamic State (IS) and now are struggling to find their position within the security sector as international actors attempt to impose reform.

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The al-Hash'd al-Shaabi have consolidated their political power in recent years, expanding their influence beyond local paramilitary operations.
- Desires for political advancement while simultaneously remaining autonomous with paramilitary actions has fueled the rise of Iraqi elites to maintain control as politicians and heads of paramilitary groups.
- The Iraqi government has institutionalized the al-Hash'd al-Shaabi forces since the fall of the Islamic State in 2017, resulting in an official, highly autonomous security actor with political power and access to state funds.
- Paramilitary forces in Iraq play a significant role in the security of the country, particularly in areas beyond the capital, where Islamic State fighters are still operating.

¹ <https://www.e-ir.info/2019/04/29/iraqs-evolving-paramilitaries-will-have-an-impact-on-state-and-society/>

Born out of Spite: For Protection and For Iraq

The Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), while predominantly entailing Shia-aligned paramilitary groups, should not be seen as an institution that is rooted in sectarianism and religion. Rather, the PMF is representative of the diverse groups and cultures that exist throughout Iraq, consistent to the needs of individual groups and regions around the country. Some groups are aligned with Iraq's supreme religious authority, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, while others find their allegiance within Iranian backed forces.² Significantly, these PMF paramilitary forces do not all have a Shia ideological outlook. Some PMF groups represent Sunni, Christian and Yazidi aligned groups.³

The PMF gained its strength in 2014, when Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani issued a "fatwa" or statement of a call to arms asking Iraqis to come together against the Islamic State.⁴ Groups were formed all over the country, and the al-Hash'd al-Shaabi was mobilized to combat IS as they began taking over swaths of territory in late 2014. The state-sponsored military forces in Iraq were unable to establish the manpower needed to combat the growing threat of IS, and the formulation of the PMF allowed a network of military groups to strengthen the already existing security forces through coordination at a national, regional and local level, while remaining mostly autonomous.⁵ However, Sistani's fatwa did not establish the PMF, but rather engaged groups that already existed, alongside new paramilitary groups for a collective purpose.⁶

Emboldened by Sistani's call to action, some of the pre-established paramilitary groups that were formed in response to the 2003 US Invasion of Iraq

and the period of insurgency that followed, such as the Jaysh al-Mahdi, the Badr Organization and Kataib Hezbollah, all once again organized themselves for the purpose of resisting occupation and protecting the communities where these groups were born.⁷

Cycles of regime change, which has branded Iraqi politics for decades, now often results in power vacuums. From these power vacuums and divisions within the government and security apparatus, locally-led, autonomously functioning paramilitary groups have risen from these periods of post-regime-change chaos.⁸ Examples of this can be seen from as far back as the Ba'ath regime, with the Iraqi People's Army from 1974–1991, the Fedayeen Saddam from 1995–2003, the Badr Organization 1980s–present and now many others that fall under the umbrella of the PMF.⁹ Paramilitary groups are born out of the regime changes in Iraq, as a response to the fragility of the state and its security sector. The question now remains is whether, and how, Iraq will be able to formally incorporate these groups into the national institutions, and how international institutions and organizations operating in Iraq approach working with these groups, if at all.

After the United States formally withdrew its troops in 2011, before re-engaging to combat IS in 2014, many of the paramilitary groups from the post-2003 security vacuum were formally incorporated into the Iraqi security sector.¹⁰ These groups have varying alliances, including affiliations with Shia or Sunni leaders, and countries such as Iran. These paramilitary groups remain deeply rooted in the religious institutions of their founders, which has resulted in misunderstandings between international actors that attempt to enact security sector reform in Iraq. However, these paramilitary groups pose potential threats to security sector reform, as many operate as policing bodies, parallel to the

2 https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/FP_20190625_iraq_felbab_brown.pdf

3 <https://www.gppi.net/2017/08/16/quick-facts-about-local-and-sub-state-forces>

4 <https://www.trtworld.com/mea/grand-ayatollah-ali-al-sistani-s-influence-over-iraq-23964>

5 <https://www.e-ir.info/2019/04/29/iraqs-evolving-paramilitaries-will-have-an-impact-on-state-and-society/>

6 https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/FP_20190625_iraq_felbab_brown.pdf

7 <https://www.e-ir.info/2019/04/29/iraqs-evolving-paramilitaries-will-have-an-impact-on-state-and-society/>;

<https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/188-iraqs-paramilitary-groups-challenge-rebuilding-functioning-state>

8 <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/188-iraqs-paramilitary-groups-challenge-rebuilding-functioning-state>

9 <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/iraq-militia-groups>;
<https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/iraq-what-fedayeen-saddam>

10 <https://publications.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/2179.pdf>

formalized, national police and army. Paramilitary groups in Iraq further threaten the ability of the country to establish and strengthen the rule of law, which has been an ongoing issue, particularly considering the protests that broke out in October 2019.¹¹

Over the years, the PMF has become further integrated into the Iraqi security sector. In 2019, there were 122,000 PMF fighters authorized to receive a national salary, but it is estimated that there were over 150,000 registered fighters in the PMF.¹² The total number of fighters that identify as part of the PMF may indeed be much higher, but tens of thousands of fighters have been formally registered into the national security system, and receive government payment for their role in the paramilitary groups, through the Iraqi Ministry of Finance and the PMF Commission.¹³ The largest and most powerful PMF groups are headed by influential figures who comprise politicians seeking to claim legitimacy on the basis of either state or non-state sources of authority, and use their influence as politicians to further autonomous military action under the PMF umbrella.¹⁴

From Warlords to Politicians

Because of the informal structure of many of these paramilitary groups, many of the groups' leaders were already well integrated into local politics and their paramilitary influence subsequently emboldened their positions amongst the population, enabling them to later become more influential within Iraqi national politics or vice versa. Former deputy head of the PMF, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, who was killed in the January 3rd airstrike that targeted Iranian General Qassem Soleimani, is a perfect example of a figure in Iraq with prominent military and political experience, well regarded throughout the country. Muhandis was the head of the Iranian-backed paramilitary group Kataib Hezbollah, which has been linked to multiple attacks on the Green Zones in Baghdad, as well as other military bases throughout Iraq. Prior

to his ascent to the head of Kataib Hezbollah, he was a member of Iraqi Parliament when the US invaded in 2003. He fled to Iran for exile, but returned after the troops withdrew in 2011.¹⁵ Muhandis is one of many examples of prominent figures using their military or political experiences to gain influence and delve into the other sector.

Leaders of the paramilitary groups have become further emboldened within the Iraqi Army and national politics since the downfall of IS. In 2018 the country held highly controversial and disputed national elections, the first since the fall of IS. The outcome of the elections clearly demonstrated the influence that the PMF forces had within the country, as more than 20 factions of the PMF formed an alliance with the Fatah Alliance, led by Hadi Amiri, former Minister of Transport and head of the Badr Organization (another paramilitary group) within parliament.¹⁶ The outcome of this large coalition demonstrated the growing influence of the PMF within politics, as well as their ability to gain support of the population.

A full analysis of the political implications of the growing PMF presence in Iraqi national politics is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is significant to note that despite the PMF's creation of a coalition within the Iraqi parliament, they still face many challenges, internally with their varying alliances and visions, as well as externally as they continue to gain further legitimacy and power through military and political influence.

However, this growing influence within the Iraqi political system, while signaling the integration of paramilitary groups into Iraqi national politics, also demonstrates the significance of political elitism and the ability of specific actors to control both political and paramilitary bodies through their influence. Regardless of where this influence came from, it should be regarded with caution, as many of these highly influential figures in Iraq demonstrate the duality of Iraq's security sector,

11 <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/amman/13689.pdf>

12 <https://www.mei.edu/publications/growing-economic-and-political-role-iraqs-pmf>; <https://www.e-ir.info/2019/04/29/iraqs-evolving-paramilitaries-will-have-an-impact-on-state-and-society/>

13 <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2018/08/01/after-the-elections-what-next-for-iraqs-popular-mobilisation-forces/>

14 <https://www.e-ir.info/2019/04/29/iraqs-evolving-paramilitaries-will-have-an-impact-on-state-and-society/>

15 <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/who-abu-mahdi-al-muhandis-qassem-soleimani-iran-iraq>

16 <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2018/08/01/after-the-elections-what-next-for-iraqs-popular-mobilisation-forces/>; <https://globalriskinsights.com/2018/05/special-report-iraqs-2018-parliamentary-elections/>

and therefore the difficulties that can be faced in attempting to reform it.

The role that PMF groups have in Iraqi politics and therefore their influence within the future of Iraq, and subsequently, security sector reform cannot be ignored. The powerbrokers that have emerged from the PMF have made a name for themselves within Iraqi politics. When discussing security sector reform in Iraq, the individuals who have been integrated into both Iraqi national politics as well as the paramilitary politics/hierarchy will play a key role in enabling or opposing security sector reform. It is also significant to note, that while many of people who are involved in the PMF and simultaneously Iraqi national politics act out of their own interests. Perhaps more significantly, the disaggregation between Baghdad, where Iraqi national politics is headquartered, and local paramilitary activity allows these political elites to gain further influence among their local constituents.

Beyond Baghdad: The Security Sector in the Periphery

The security situation in Iraq remains volatile today. Potentially exacerbated by the presence of international forces, struggles with popular support after a year of nationwide protests and continued attacks from IS in rural areas, the need for security sector reform, with or without international support, is clear. Yet, the willingness to engage with security sector reform in Iraqi, at a national level seems uncertain, as the political elites engage with matters that facilitate their personal interests. Further, the goals to implement security sector reform at a national level cannot be fulfilled beyond Baghdad, as the rural areas of Iraq operate somewhat autonomously outside of Baghdad. PMF forces have risen out of some of the most rural areas of the country, where Iraqi security forces are not present.

Different regions of the country face distinct security concerns, such as the ongoing attacks on the Green Zone in Baghdad which have caused concern over the international community's presence in the country, as well as the continued presence of IS cells in remote areas of the country.¹⁷

The PMF have played an integral role in stabilizing the situation on the ground throughout many of the remote areas in the country, while the Iraqi Army has been rebuilding areas of the country that fell to IS, with the support of the international coalition.¹⁸ IS, while predominantly defeated since the fall of the Caliphate in 2017, still exists in many areas of Iraq and Syria.¹⁹ The group carries out regular attacks against Iraqi security forces, both state military forces as well as those from the PMF and civilians.²⁰

PMF forces have played an integral role in continuing to combat existing IS cells throughout Iraq, particularly in the south and rural regions of the country. The remaining IS forces specifically target those who perform security functions and often carrying out attacks using guerilla tactics, rather than their former methods of large-scale suicide bombings.²¹ PMF forces are regularly targeted, yet their role in promoting security and acting as a defense mechanism where IS still operates is integral. The Iraqi military forces are targeted alongside PMF forces by IS, and the two security forces work in tandem to combat IS presence in Iraq.²²

While the PMF can be seen as a large umbrella organization, many of the individual paramilitary groups operate on their own agenda, potentially unaligned from the mission of the PMF as a whole. The power dynamics between PMF groups are extremely complicated, particularly outside of Baghdad, where tensions run higher.²³ Furthermore, there are geopolitical tensions that play out through PMF forces and depending on the individual alliance of an individual paramilitary group, they could operate as a proxy

17 <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/daesh-isis-terror-attack-kills-4-injures-3-in-iraq/2033689>

18 <https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/iraqs-shia-warlords-and-their-militias-political-and-security-challenges-and-options/>

19 <https://www.defence24.com/how-dead-is-isis-the-groups-activity-in-2020>

20 <https://www.cgrs.be/en/country-information/security-situation-central-and-southern-iraq>

21 <https://www.cgrs.be/en/country-information/security-situation-central-and-southern-iraq>

22 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-52535842>

23 <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2019/02/iraqs-paramilitaries-are-turning-their-own-ranks>

of local power, which further threatens the stability and security of Iraq.²⁴ Not all the groups operate under the influence of international actors, some PMF groups identify more with sectarian ideologies rather than having political or military allegiances. There are internal tensions within the PMF, and just because there is one umbrella organization, does not mean that the dozens of individual paramilitary groups that function as part of the PMF, all share the same goals or alliances.

Reminiscing the Past to Find the Future:

Iraqi paramilitary groups have a deep history, dating back many decades, but consistently emerge during times of need. When formal Iraqi structures cannot adequately support the needs of the people, they have time and time again proved their resilience in forming autonomous, paramilitary groups. In order to understand how and why these groups are formed, and more specifically how they operate, particularly as many groups are further integrated into formal structures within the Iraqi military, one must look into the history of Iraq to answer these questions. In 2019, the US Army published nearly 1,300 pages of insight into the “lessons learned” after the invasion of 2003.²⁵ This study noted that the US Military, and those in charge of the operations had very little understanding of the history of the Middle East, and therefore failed to adapt to the political and security environment that they were operating in.²⁶

History tends to repeat itself, as the power vacuums that emerged in both the post-2003 invasion and the IS invasion in 2014 demonstrate, and the power that PMF forces have gained from these moments as the weak and disenfranchised Iraqi security structures, specifically the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Defence will again create significant challenges to fostering security sector reform in Iraq.

When international actors, such as the United States and the International Coalition they lead, the European Union’s Advisory Mission, and the NATO Mission in Iraq operate to enact security sector reform, a complete understanding of the history must be accounted for. The integration of the PMF into Iraqi politics, as well as the security sector, while not complete demonstrates the significance of political elites in the country and the influence that they have in multiple sectors, most notably within politics and paramilitary operations. This influence cannot be disregarded, as the security sector reform has been planned for years, but never seems to come to fruition. There are multiple challenges withstanding the success and prosperity of Iraq, but a key understanding of the PMF is essential to supporting Iraq in their efforts towards stability.

Key Insights and Conclusions:

The current government of Iraq has its challenges set out for them. Caretaker Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi, as well as the international actors that are working to promote security sector reform in Iraq, face multiple obstacles. The PMF seek legitimacy, as well as political and economic influence throughout the country and have evolved drastically, particularly since the downfall of IS in 2017. The PMF exist as a wide network of paramilitary groups, with multiple alliances and individual goals, they continue to gain greater political influence, and have become somewhat integrated into state institutions (both legally and illegally).²⁷ The PMF complicate the fragile structure of the Iraqi security sector, which is further exacerbated by the ongoing rocket attacks (particularly in Baghdad), geopolitical tensions between the United States and Iran, a decreasing number of US military forces as well as diplomatic engagement, all in the wake of a massive economic and public health crisis from the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the plummeting oil prices.

Therefore, why are the PMF paramilitary groups important to the future of the security of Iraq and

24 https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/FP_20190625_iraq_felbab_brown.pdf
25 <https://publications.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/3667.pdf>

26 <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/us-military-has-written-book-iraq-war-its-too-late>
27 <https://www.e-ir.info/2019/04/29/iraqs-evolving-paramilitaries-will-have-an-impact-on-state-and-society/>

why should the international community engage with these actors? These paramilitary groups, at all levels, within and outside of Baghdad are essential to force protection and operational security for international actors operating within Iraq. They represent a diverse and complicated network of military and political powers that enable political elites, that could endanger or promote security sector reform for the future of Iraq.

*This publication will be followed by further analysis of the international involvement in Iraq followed by concrete recommendations to international actors operating in the country, such as the international coalition, the EUAM and NATO Mission in Iraq, as well as recommendations to the government of Iraq.

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