



PITFALLS OF THE PARAMILITARY PARADIGM: THE IRAQI STATE, GEOPOLITICS, AND AL-HASHD AL-SHAABI

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Iraq has a decades-long tradition of extensive paramilitary forces. They are highly varied in their political affiliations, ideologies, and objectives, and some have historically been part of the state while others have battled against it. Although formed mostly along sectarian lines and around particular political and tribal leaders, today some 60 paramilitary groups have coalesced under an umbrella organization known as the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) or, in Arabic, *Al-Hashd al-Shaabi*.

These groups—which played a key role in defeating the Islamic State (ISIS) in Iraq, now pose their own challenges to the Iraqi state and society. They have deeply permeated the state and its still-developing political institutions. There is substantial risk that they will exploit their power, undermining progress of the Iraqi state toward being a more inclusive, equitable, and capacious provider of public goods and security.

The paramilitary groups are also enmeshed in the region's geopolitical rivalries, and in any regional conflict, they could act as key proxies of local powers, particularly Iran—outcomes severely detrimental to the stability of Iraq and adverse to U.S. interests in the Middle East. Devising an effective policy for dealing with the paramilitary groups is thus fundamental to Iraq's stability.

Various policies can be explored to chip at their power, mitigate their abuses, and enforce their accountability. Over time, such policies can reduce their power relative to Iraqi citizens and the Iraqi state. Strengthening and depoliticizing Iraqi institutions—such as the army, police, judiciary, and local administrations—will be vital, but that is an unlikely near-term prospect. And the current geopolitical environment in the Middle East, with tensions running high between United States and Iran on one hand and Iran and Saudi Arabia on the other, further severely complicate efforts to curtail the influence of the Hashd.

The implementation of any particular policy measure may be contingent on the emergence of more permissive conditions, but close consideration should be given to several policy avenues:

- Creating economic alternatives for individual Hashd fighters interested in leaving the security sector;
- Absorbing individual Hashd members into other state security institutions;
- Rechanneling payment flows and establishing uniform promotion criteria for all Iraqi security actors;

- Limiting the economic power and political capital of the Hashd;
- Improving service delivery and strengthening the state at the local level;
- Widening the separation of the Hashd from politics; and
- Reinforcing accountability through a sequential peel-off approach.

INTRODUCTION

Iraq's paramilitary groups played a crucial role in helping to defeat the Islamic State (ISIS), which in May 2014 came to control one-third of Iraq, including its second largest city Mosul. For three years dominating a large territory, functioning as a state, and calling itself the Muslim "caliphate," ISIS became one of the world's most vicious, best financed,¹ and successful terrorist groups. Its rise and stunning success came after a decade of violence in Iraq that began with the U.S.-led coalition invasion of the country in 2003 to topple the brutal dictator Saddam Hussein. Between 2004 and 2010, the war evolved into a counterinsurgency fight against al-Qaida in Iraq and against the Mahdi Army and various other militias, many of which later came to constitute key elements of the anti-ISIS paramilitary forces. U.S. and coalition troops left Iraq in 2011. Three years later, under the onslaught of the Islamic State, the Iraqi military and police often proved impotent. Although facing only a few thousand ISIS fighters, the Iraqi military and police frequently simply folded and ran away. In late spring 2014, ISIS was at the doorstep of Baghdad.

In this context, dozens of paramilitary groups organized to defend communities and retake territory from ISIS. A *fatwa* by Iraq's Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the country's most influential Shia cleric, stimulated and legitimized their formation. In the case of some groups, the *fatwa* merely permitted their reestablishment. Iraq has a decades-long tradition of extensive paramilitary forces with highly varied political affiliations, ideology, and objectives, with some historically part of the state and others battling it. Along with international military support

to the Iraqi government, the paramilitaries were important for ending ISIS' three-year reign at the end of 2017. As of summer 2019, ISIS no longer controls significant territory in Iraq, though it still conducts terrorist attacks, ambushes, raids, and kidnappings, generating significant insecurity for local communities in parts of the country.²

However, with the defeat of ISIS, even if not its full demise, the anti-ISIS paramilitary groups now pose their own challenges, threats, and risks to the Iraqi state and society. At the same time, they have deeply permeated the Iraqi state and its developing political institutions. The Iraqi state is thus as much threatened, infiltrated, and shaped by the paramilitary groups, as it is dependent on them and seeks to exploit and shape them.

The paramilitary groups are also enmeshed in the region's geopolitical rivalries, particularly those between Iran and Saudi Arabia, Shias and Sunnis, and Iran and the United States. In the spring of 2019, as the Trump administration alleged an increased threat stream in the region, the paramilitary groups were in the thick of the crisis. Though not specifying which groups, the Trump administration claimed that an increased threat to U.S. military and civilian personnel emanated from Shia Arab militias, a claim that was widely interpreted as meaning pro-Iran militia groups in Iraq. But as this paper goes to press, the threat has not come to pass. Yet the militias could, whether purposefully or inadvertently, pull the region's powers into conflict. Some of them have stated that in a conflict between Iran and Iraq, they would obey Iran; others have openly agitated against the U.S. presence in Iraq and even advocated the use of force against U.S.

troops again. In any regional conflict, they would act as key proxies of local power—an outcome severely detrimental to the stability and recovery of Iraq and adverse to U.S. interests in the Middle East.

Devising an effective policy for dealing with the paramilitary groups is thus fundamental to Iraq's stability. Yet the Iraqi state and the country's technocrats are currently weak compared to the paramilitary groups, whose political power continues to grow. At the same time, the paramilitary groups are not unified in their affinities, political ambitions, and economic activities, and each group has its own vulnerabilities. With paramilitary groups currently holding an upper hand relative the Iraqi state, having also permeated it, this diversity and fluidity also provide policy opportunities for shaping the behavior of the groups toward less nefarious behavior and outcomes less detrimental to the strengthening of Iraq's independent, depoliticized, inclusive, and rule-of-law-based institutions.

In addition to drawing on existing policy analysis and academic literature on Iraq's paramilitary groups, this paper, a preview of a forthcoming book on the topic in the Brookings Marshall Paper series, is based primarily on the author's research in Iraq in December 2018. In Baghdad, Erbil, and Mosul, the author interviewed former and current Iraqi government officials, representatives of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) Commission and Al-Hashd al-Shaabi groups of various sectarian and political affinities, including their military commanders and associated politicians, Iraqi security experts and journalists, Iraqi military and police officials of various ranks, NGO and other civil society representatives, businessmen, refugees in camps for internally displaced people, Western military advisors, and diplomats from several embassies in Baghdad.

WHO ARE THE PARAMILITARY GROUPS?

Although formed mostly along sectarian lines and around particular political and tribal leaders, some 60 paramilitary groups coalesced under an umbrella organization known as the PMF or, in Arabic, Al-

Hashd al-Shaabi. They have varied, and though not necessarily always distinct, political or religious affiliation, with multiple groups affiliated with the same political leader or military commander, for example. The lead body of Al-Hashd al-Shaabi, the PMF Commission, has 152,000 fighters in its official register, though some, potentially as many as 70,000, are likely ghost fighters. Of those officially registered by the PMF Commission, some 122,000 receive official government salaries, with the rest receiving salaries from officially unspecified other sources.³ Another 30,000 fighters operate in unregistered paramilitary groups. Some of these are traditional or more newly constituted tribal forces.⁴ As a result of Hashd lobbying, some 30,000 additional slots were expected to be allocated for salaries in 2019, with the possibility of further registrations allowed on the PMF Commission's registry.⁵

During the height of the anti-ISIS campaign, the paramilitary groups may have numbered as high as 250,000 (with perhaps some 100,000 having self-demobilized).⁶ Such numbers, however, are mostly unverified estimates, with both national and local government officials and military officers often having little clarity as to what Hashd groups operate in a particular area with what manpower. Nor is there a clear, accurate, and complete intelligence picture of the behavior and misbehavior of the groups.⁷ The paramilitary groups can be divided into five broad categories:

1. Groups pledging allegiance to Iraq's supreme Shia religious authority, the Najaf-based Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, and sometimes referred to as "shrine militias" because of their defense of Shia shrines;
2. Groups pledging allegiance to Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, supported by Tehran, and associated with key Iraqi politicians (though they also pledge support and homage to al-Sistani);
3. Groups associated with Muqtada al-Sadr and now embracing Iraqi nationalism and opposing Iran's influence in Iraq;

4. Sunni, Christian, Yazidi, and other ethnic minority self-defense groups, many of whom operate under the umbrella (or in the view of some, yoke) of the PMF Commission; and
5. Tribal paramilitary groups some of which remain outside the PMF umbrella.

Some Shia Hashd groups also recruited Sunni and ethnic minority members so as to present a pan-sectarian image. Only some militia groups supporting and associated with Sadr operate under the PMF Commission umbrella; others remain on the outside. Some have demobilized—in the sense of declaring the organization dismantled or stopping its previous activities—but they did not actually disarm and they retain their capacity to remobilize. There is also considerable fluidity in not just the allegiance but also the formal registration of many groups under the PMF Commission, particularly of the pro-Sadr ones and tribal and ethnic groups.

Dominated by pro-Iran groups, the PMF umbrella structure has so far mitigated the divisions, rivalries, conflicts, and resentments among and within the paramilitary groups enough to keep them under its control. The PMF Commission has thus greatly increased its bargaining power and the political influence of the pro-Iran groups.

Overall, both the formal and informal political capital and economic and military power of the paramilitary groups have steadily grown. This growth of political influence has taken place despite 2016 Iraqi legislation that institutionalized the Hashd as a separate military branch and sought to create a separation between Hashd fighters and commanders on the one hand and any political, party, and social framework on the other hand. In practice, the degree of separation between key political leaders (even if they no longer don military uniforms) and the groups often remains slim, and the groups have retained their allegiances to political leaders. The May 2018 parliamentary elections increased the Hashd formal political power, as politicians affiliated with large Hashd groups obtained significant political representation and a major role in the formation of the Iraqi government.

PARAMILITARY GROUPS' IMPACT ON IRAQI POLITICS AND INSTITUTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Even prior to the May 2018 elections, the Iraqi state had been in a weak bargaining position vis-à-vis the paramilitary groups for multiple reasons, including their carefully cultivated street credibility and appeal. The pro-Iran segment of the groups has worked very hard to stifle any serious political conversation in Iraq about their demobilization or absorption into the Iraqi army or police. Many of the shrine militias, i.e., groups affiliated with al-Sistani, also prefer their independent status. They justify this preference for independence in several ways: (a) They do not want to be tainted by the corruption of the Iraqi army; (b) their doctrine is incompatible with the doctrine of the Iraqi army; and (c) they would lose their effectiveness and elan if absorbed into the army.⁸ However, groups with other religious and political affiliation have been willing to consider and sometimes prefer such options.⁹ Engaging in an extensive and highly effectively public relations campaign to control any public discourse about their role, the Hashd groups have also ensured that the term “militia” is not used to describe them in Iraq so as to avoid any kind of pejorative connotation. (That term, however, is frequently applied to the Hashd in Western press and certainly the Hashd groups meet the standard definition of a militia.)

But the Iraqi state has a complex relationship with the Hashd groups. Key ministries, such as the Ministry of Interior, have long been dominated by clients of important politicians who have dominated powerful Hashd groups. Moreover, seeking to increase their political power, various politicians, such as the former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, have in recent years courted the Hashd groups and actively pushed for their legitimization and empowerment by the Iraqi state.

Thus, rather than being able to demobilize the paramilitaries or integrate them into the Ministry of Defense or Interior and subjugate them to independent rules-based institutions (which are largely lacking in Iraq), the Iraqi state has yielded to their preferences. It has institutionalized Al-Hashd

al-Shaabi as an official, highly autonomous security actor with an increased state budget. On par with a ministry, it reports directly to the prime minister.

Iraqi government officials justify such state legitimization on a variety of grounds.¹⁰ They argue that Al-Hashd al-Shaabi are still needed since ISIS is not fully defeated. They also see the Iraqi army as overstretched and unable to effectively patrol the country's borders and deserts. Such claims are disputed by some top officers in the Iraqi army.¹¹ In fact, putting aside the special U.S.-trained Counterterrorism Service (CTS), the regular Iraqi army remains troubled by multiple and pervasive deficiencies. Nonetheless, security sector reform, rather than continual reliance on the Hashd, could be a solution, but security sector reform remains a difficult and elusive subject in Iraq. In support of the institutionalization of the Hashd, Iraqi government officials also maintain that Sunni and minority groups are underrepresented in Iraq's army and police forces and thus are often unable to connect with or are outright resented by local populations. Iraqi government officials and security experts hope that over time, the process of legalization and regularization of the paramilitary groups will make their interests largely congruent with those of the wider nation—such that they moderate their behavior toward local populations and refrain from directly challenging the state.

The groups currently do not threaten the state from the outside; they have indeed become a powerful component of the Iraqi state. However, there remain substantial risks that they will exploit their power and hollow out and distort the state from the inside. In that process, they could undermine the evolution of the Iraqi state toward being a more inclusive, equitable, and capacious provider of public goods and security.

WHAT THREATS DO THE HASHD POSE?

Nor does the current arrangement eliminate the threats and risks the paramilitary groups continue to pose to Iraqi society. These risks include:

1. Human rights and sectarian abuses, such as revenge, retaliation, political control, oppression of local populations, and repression of political critics and independent political, religious, and social voices;
2. Economic abuses, such as extortion, involvement in illegal economies, mafia-like economic practices, and coercive domination of legal economic markets; and
3. Detrimental political effects, such as mafia-like political practices, stifling of political freedoms, including to mobilize, and the distortion of Iraq's political system to favor politicians linked to paramilitary groups.

The involvement in criminal activities, legal economies, and local and national politics of course varies widely among the groups, with some perhaps not engaged in any nefarious activities. Groups pledging allegiance to Ayatollah al-Sistani are among the least politically and economically motivated, being focused instead mainly on the preservation of Shia shrines. Indeed, the problems of human rights and sectarian abuses, mafia-like economic practices, and political repression and manipulation are particularly intense in southern Shia areas, such as Basra, where pro-Iran Hashd and pro-Sadr groups are strong, and in Sunni and mixed areas, such as the governorates of Diyala and Ninevah. In central parts of Iraq where key Shia shrines and the shrine militias are located, such as Karbala and Najaf, such problems are often less intense and prevalent.

The willingness of each paramilitary group to obey the Iraqi state also varies over time and in various contexts. Each group has its own particular political, military, economic, religious, and legitimacy strengths and weaknesses.

Geopolitical risks include:

1. The lack of allegiance of some of the groups to the Iraqi state and their promotion of Iran's interests in Iraq;

2. The violent projection of Iran-Saudi-U.S. rivalry into Iraq, with the paramilitary groups as proxies of both Iran and Saudi Arabia; and
3. A possible outbreak of intra-sectarian violence among Shia groups over succession after the death of Iraq's Ayatollah al-Sistani.

One intersection of the Hashd groups with geopolitical rivalries has already materialized. The proclivities of the pro-Iran Hashd groups are clearly anti-U.S.—with the groups seeking to counter U.S. influence in Iraq and limit the activities and even the very presence of the United States in Iraq. During the spring of 2019, the U.S.-Iran rivalry began to dramatically entangle the pro-Iran Shia militias as the administration of Donald Trump sought to ratchet up pressure on Tehran and intensified its sanctions against Iran. First, the groups agitated for the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iran in response to President Trump's undiplomatic and injudicious comments that a U.S. base in Iraq used for anti-ISIS operations could be used to monitor Iran. Then, over the course of the spring, the Trump administration kept increasing pressure on both Iran and pro-Iran Hashd groups in Iraq. In March 2019, it designated one of the paramilitary groups as a terrorist organization, having previously so designated another Hashd group. Yet, since the group is part of Iraq's official security forces and on the payroll of the Iraqi government, the designation can potentially have widespread legal, diplomatic, and political implications. The designation could either enable, or even necessitate, sanctions against a variety of Iraqi institutions and politicians, destabilizing the country's political system and state structures, hampering U.S. assistance and diplomatic efforts in Iraq, and inadvertently increasing Iraq's dependence on Iran. Yet in April 2019, the United States went even further and designated Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a terrorist organization, the first time such a designation has ever been applied to a part of another country's government. The designation carries a wide set of sanctions against the IRGC as well as organizations, companies, and individuals

associated with it, which of course includes many of the Hashd groups, certainly all of the pro-Iran ones, and many Iraqi politicians. At least initially (and as of this writing), the Trump administration did not issue the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad instructions on how to implement and enforce the sanctions associated with the designations, nor did it specify the implications for the Iraqi state and politicians. The Trump administration hopes that the terrorist designations would limit the financial, physical, economic, and political capacities of both the IRGC and the pro-Iran Hashd groups.

While seeking to limit the power of the two designated Hashd groups (both pernicious, no doubt) and potentially limiting U.S. and international engagement with all of the pro-Iranian Hashd groups that receive IRGC support, the United States could overplay its hand. It could induce greater entrenchment of the groups in Iraq's economies, thus inadvertently boosting their patronage capacity and political capital even as they harden their anti-U.S. stance and distort local politics and economies.

A failure to hold the groups accountable, and the perpetuation of their misbehavior—analogueous to the misbehavior of Iraqi police forces, also formed out of militias—risks replicating the underlying conditions that allowed the Islamic State to become entrenched and that alienated Sunni populations from the Iraqi state. As it stands, according to Western military advisors in Iraq in December 2018, "Iraq's most serious threat is the lack of the state's monopoly on violence and a lack of clarity as to who is perpetrating intimidation and violent coercion where. In [the governorate of] Ninevah alone, the Hashd groups are the single biggest problem the government of Iraq needs to resolve in the next 18 to 24 months or we have the same 2014 problem all over again."¹² In various parts of Iraq, although overt sectarianism is down, there is a sense of political tensions and security fragility.

The Hashd groups themselves deny that they pose any kind of risk or threat to the Iraqi state and society. They portray themselves as heroes and

saviors of the Iraqi state and people and dismiss concerns about their abuses and criminal behavior as the product of foreign propaganda, lies, and slander.¹³ The Hashd say that whatever may have been the reality of such abuses in the past, they are now effectively controlled. The Hashd also contend that if any abuses were committed in the past, they were no worse than the abuses committed by other Iraqi formal security sector actors and foreign militaries.¹⁴ In fact, many human rights and security abuses were committed by Hashd groups, both pro-Iran Shia affiliates as well as Sunni tribal forces exacting revenge on ISIS associates and their families.¹⁵

The security commission set up under the PMF Commission to investigate allegations of Hashd abuses is an inadequate mechanism. It lacks independence and credibility. Instead of diligently investigating and prosecuting Hashd abuses against local populations, it focuses more on eliminating rivals. Among them are those who appropriate the Hashd label without the PMF's authorization and those who oppose key decisions of the PMF Commission and its support for Iran. Local federal and police forces fear taking on the Hashd groups. When the police and military do investigate the Hashd for extortion, racketeering, property theft, or murder, they often run into violent opposition or political subversion of their efforts by the Hashd.

The Iraqi public, particularly its Shia majority, continues for the most part to accord utter respect, reverence, and deference to Al-Hashd al-Shaabi. Anecdotally, some Shia residents are willing to concede that while Al-Hashd al-Shaabi are great heroes, over time they may no longer be needed. In contrast, many Sunni and minority residents express resentment and fear of the Hashd groups and would welcome their speedy demobilization, or at least their removal from interfering in citizens' lives and Iraqi politics, and their effective subjugation to Iraqi laws.¹⁶ Notably, however, even in the Shia south, resentment is bubbling up against the extortion, market monopolization, coercion, and other mafia-like practices of the Hashd groups. Particularly in

places where such practices of the Hashd groups are pervasive and public goods collapsed—mostly prominently Basra—Shia residents have mobilized to protest the Hashd groups and their sponsor Iran. If such resentments against the Hashd groups grow over time, the dissatisfaction may provide a key mechanism to limit the power and abuses of the Hashd groups, mitigate their threats to the state and society, and subjugate them to rule of law. Such an inflection point, however, is not imminent.

POLICY STEPS TO CONFRONT IRAQ'S PARAMILITARY GROUPS

Even though the political power of Al-Hashd al-Shaabi has led to their institutionalization and prevented any serious exploration of policies toward their disarmament, various policies can be explored to chip away at their power, mitigate their abuses, and enforce their accountability. *Over time*, such policies can reduce their power relative to Iraqi citizens and the Iraqi state and shape their behavior in support of an inclusive, equitable, accountable, and capacious Iraqi state.

Over the past year, the government of Iraq has told other governments that it prefers to deal with the Hashd in its own way and that it is not eager for outsiders' advice.¹⁷ For the moment, it appears to be satisfied with—or reconciled to—the status quo of Al-Hashd al-Shaabi and existing policy.

The current policy environment is highly inauspicious for curtailing the power of the Hashd groups and their penetration into the Iraqi state. The technocrats are weak and beholden to politicians linked to Hashd and militia groups. The PMF Commission, dominated by pro-Iran groups, their backers, and leaders in the Iraqi parliament, is strong. If Iraqi institutions were more capacious and less politicized, the Iraqi state would be more easily able to constrain Al-Hashd al-Shaabi—and perhaps eventually demobilize some of its groups while absorbing others into regular security forces. Strengthening and depoliticizing Iraqi institutions, such as the army, police, judiciary, and local administrations, is vital. Nonetheless, it is also very difficult in the context of institutions

that have become highly politicized, extensively penetrated, and distorted by the Hashd. Consigning the state's efforts to contain and shape the behavior of the Hashd until Iraqi institutions are stronger can thus mean waiting for a long time.

The current geopolitical environment in the Middle East and the rivalries and antagonism among the United States, Iran, and Saudi Arabia further severely complicate efforts to curtail the influence of the Hashd. In particular, the U.S. designation of several Hashd groups and the IRGC as terrorist organizations exposes Iraqi politicians and government officials seeking to curtail the power of the militias to accusations of being U.S. proxies and stooges. Politicians and technocrats seeking to reign in the Hashd thus risk losing the very legitimacy within the Iraqi political system needed to promote policies to reduce Hashd power.

Worse yet, the designation of Iran's IRGC as a terrorist group also further significantly constrains policy options for dealing with the Hashd, including, paradoxically and counterproductively, policies such as disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR), and other policies to shape the Hashd behavior. Since pro-Iranian Hashd groups receive support from Iran and the IRGC, the U.S. government may be precluded from providing any kind of assistance to such groups, even for DDR, and Washington's international partners may be deterred from supporting DDR activities if they fear the United States could accuse them of violating its prohibition on providing material support to groups that interact with U.S.-designated terrorist entities.

Even within the existing political realities and policy parameters, a set of policy measures can be considered. The implementation of any particular policy measure may be contingent on the emergence of more permissive conditions. Those include, but are not exclusive to, more bottom-up resentment growing against the Hashd groups, particularly among the Shia population; a greater demand by Iraqi people for containment of the Hashd groups; and a reduction in geopolitical tensions, including between Iran and the United States.

Yet even in the much less permissive policy context, when an accommodation to the power of the Hashd is the only realistic option for the government of Iraq, an initial exploration effort to mitigate the risks and threats the Hashd groups pose can begin. Such a process will not be linear, easy, or pretty. Rather, it may involve multiple political and policy moves that merely start chipping away at the power of the Hashd and their infiltration into Iraq's state institutions. Unless some policy moves are attempted to constrain the Hashd, their power and infiltration into, and distortion of, the state will only grow.

A range of policy options are sketched here while they are elaborated in detail in a forthcoming book in the Brookings Marshall Paper series, with the absolute recognition that not all may be possible now or even in the future. The book will also analyze the feasibility the policy measures, the likely countermoves by the Hashd groups threatened by them, and steps to overcome some of these implementation challenges. However, the actual modalities of the policies and of countermeasures will need to be developed at the moment when they are about to be adopted.

Economic alternatives for Hashd fighters

Such a program is being explored by the government of Japan in collaboration with the Iraqi government. Various Iraqi NGOs have also explored possible DDR efforts. As of mid-2019, Japan's program remains in a pre-pilot phase, with its funding unclear, leaving it essentially on ice. Not labeled a DDR program, it is an effort to provide vocational training, such as in welding or electrical work, for local communities, linking up trainees with companies that could use their skills. Members of the Hashd interested in leaving the security sector could participate in such community-based economic efforts along with Iraqi civilians.

However, even under the best of circumstances, any such effort would only address Hashd members whose motivations are essentially apolitical and driven purely by economic interests and divert them

from engaging in illicit economic activities. Thus, it is most unlikely that many of the Hashd groups would be interested in participating at a group level. Such a program would neither address the extensive political interests of pro-Iranian and Sadr-affiliated groups, nor address the security dilemma of others, such as Sunni, minority, and al-Sistani-affiliated Hashd groups. At best, the initiative would contribute at the margins but not resolve the core challenges surrounding Hashd.

A partial demobilization of only some groups also comes with challenges and problems. For example, were pro-al-Sistani Hashd groups to be demobilized, the pro-Iranian groups are unlikely to follow. Consequently, their political and coercive power would be counterproductively augmented.

Nonetheless, it would be highly productive for the Iraqi state to mount DDR-like support efforts, for example, for Hashd veterans currently not on the payroll of the PMF Commission or the state, and for widows and orphans of the anti-ISIS fight. If such programs combine widows and orphans of Iraqi soldiers and police officers as well as of alleged ISIS members and affiliates, they could both boost the political capital of the Iraqi state and contribute in important ways to post-conflict reconciliation.

Absorbing individual Hashd members into other state security institutions, rechanneling payments, and standardizing promotions in the Iraqi security sector

As part of security sector reform, members of Al-Hashd al-Shaabi interested in joining either police forces or the military at an individual could be encouraged to do so. The salary and other benefit structures could be altered again, this time by providing extra bonuses for well-performing soldiers and police officers. Such a differentiated structure with extra merit-based bonuses for non-Hashd members of the security sector could entice competent Hashd members to apply for such positions after their stringent vetting, including diligent and compulsory background checks, and with obligatory retraining or mandates that they

graduate from Iraq's defense colleges. Such a policy initiative would have the added benefit of making the prime minister the patron of the Iraqi military and police, while putting the political burden on the Hashd to mobilize against such incentives.

In addition, an effort should be made to channel Hashd salaries and benefits directly from the Iraqi treasury to individual Hashd members, bypassing the PMF Commission. Clearly, the PMF Commission would seek to subvert any such developments and prevent a salary increase for non-Hashd forces. Such opposition would, however, create bad public relations optics for the Commission. Efforts to bypass the PMF Commission in disbursing Hashd salaries and move to a biometric system would be strengthened if Iraq's reformers suggest a biometric system for all members of Iraqi security forces and if they could induce sufficient numbers of Hashd members to go public with accusations and resentments of the Hashd leadership stealing their salaries and benefits. Such revelations would both weaken the PMF Commission's capacity to prevent a rerouting of payments, reduce its public aura of heroism and untouchability, and create greater demand among the Iraqi public for constraining and holding the Hashd accountable.

If such a policy could be pulled off, over time, it could strengthen the state and switch the allegiance of Hashd members away from their Hashd patrons and the PMF Commission and toward the state.

Standardized, strictly merit-based criteria and training requirements could also be set for all Iraqi security sector actors both in recruitment and promotion, even if existing Hashd fighters are grandfathered in without such training and qualifications. But, for example, starting relatively soon, no new Hashd could be admitted without undergoing new compulsory training.

The Iraqi government could also exploit the PMF's stated preference to be treated like the CTS. Although the CTS is now a separate institution reporting to the prime minister, it lacks the Hashd's other powers and autonomy, including in decisionmaking

and financial control, both of which, in the case of the CTS, belong to Iraq's National Security Council. The government of Iraq could demand that the PMF Commission also accepts the same reduction in its power. Once again, the PMF Commission would seek to block such moves, and a powerful political coalition would have to be created before announcing such an initiative.

Whether in combination with any such efforts to constrain the Hashd, or independently of them, the government of Iraq also urgently needs to redouble its efforts to improve the capacity of the Iraqi army and police. Reforming police forces is always the most difficult institutional reform a country can undertake—a challenge augmented in Iraq's case by the penetration of the pro-Hashd elements into the police. Strengthening the capacity of the Iraqi army while also reducing its corruption, incompetence, and politicization is more feasible. Even so, the army remains years away from being a quality force. But unless the government of Iraq persuades the Iraqi people that the army can now defend the country from external threats and a new iteration of Sunni extremism, the Hashd will maintain a ready justification for their power and persistence.

Limiting the economic power and political capital of the Hashd

Employing the Hashd groups, as opposed to demobilized Hashd individuals, in reconstruction projects is highly problematic. The complications arise not simply from sectarian issues, such as Shia Hashd groups receiving reconstruction contracts in Sunni areas, instead of local businesses. The use of Hashd groups for reconstruction fundamentally strengthens their economic power, further distorts local economies, and reinforces the notion that joining such groups is advantageous for economic interests. It thus strengthens their political power and capital with local populations. Removing Hashd forces from reconstruction and from locations where they can easily generate income from illicit sources—such as border areas, major highways, and cities—would help reduce their economic

and related patronage power. Such a policy could be enhanced by a mandated requirement that at least some security actors in Iraq, such as Al-Hashd al-Shaabi and possibly also Federal Police and SWAT forces, rotate their physical deployments, thus limiting their opportunities to penetrate local legal and illegal economies and limiting their local political capital. Policies can be devised to implement such rotations without compromising intelligence gathering.

An effort to reduce the economic and patronage power of Hashd groups will only be fully effective if a systematic effort is undertaken to dislodge them from coercive indirect monopolization of local legal economies and from participating in criminal extortion rackets. Such a change would require strengthening and backing up police and justice officials who investigate and arrest Hashd members participating in criminality. Since the Hashd groups publicly deny their mafia rackets and criminal behavior, political opinion and street power could also be mobilized behind determined police and justice officials to enforce rule of law. Casting the initial efforts as broader anti-crime drives in particular cities could strengthen the political backing and cover for such moves—at least at the outset.

Both the economic and political power of Hashd groups would also be diminished if formal government and international contracts were accorded on merit and on the basis of other credible principles specifically designed to reduce the competitiveness of Hashd-linked politicians. Any physical intimidation of economic competitors could become an immediate disqualifier. Building pluralistic market access—and hence limiting market dominance by Hashd-linked companies and politicians—could be elevated into a key contract award criterion, in addition to efficiency and the absence of corruption. Effective implementation of such a policy would require a granular knowledge of local markets and intensive background investigations of contract bids.

Improving service delivery and strengthening the state at the local level

Beyond policy maneuvers at the national level, the Iraqi national government and the international community could make a concerted effort to improve government performance in a few selected local areas, such as Basra, Mosul, and Tikrit. The goal would be to demonstrate that the state is working and significantly outperforming the Hashd groups and their affiliated politicians in delivering public goods and services in those areas. The effectiveness of such a policy would depend on the willingness of the national government to assign competent and non-corrupt task forces and non-sectarian technocrats to the selected local areas and to withstand Hashd pressures to maneuver their proxies into such positions. Reducing the political capital of the Hashd groups in this way would also strengthen the hand of local government, police, and justice officials in prosecuting Hashd crimes.

Widening the separation of the Hashd from politics

The Iraqi government could start diligently employing laws that prohibit the funding of parties from military income or illicit economies. In addition, Iraq could study and adapt the so-called “Empty Seat” law of Colombia. Such a law could be modified from the Colombian version to mandate that no official or elected representative convicted of any serious crime or political funding violation be allowed to remain in office, and that his or her political party not be allowed to fill the vacancy thus created.

Reinforcing accountability through a sequential peel-off approach

The Iraqi government could also adopt a focused-deterrence and reward-based sequential approach. A particularly badly behaving Hashd group, with extensive violations and criminal involvement, could be subjected to investigations and prosecutions as punishment for illegal behavior. In addition to the prosecution of individuals, some

formal resource distributions to the group could be suspended. Informally, contracts could be blocked and not awarded. Initially, the chosen target should probably not be a very powerful Hashd group, so as to minimize political counterpressure and early subversion of the effort. The government would also need to be prepared to resort to the use of force if the group escalates its confrontation with the state to armed resistance. In order to avoid other Hashd groups coalescing in its defense to prevent accountability, a well-behaving group that does not oppose such moves could be rewarded with bonuses or some other form of political or economic carrots. After a first Hashd group is thus defanged with a series of formal and informal punitive measures and fairly prosecuted, another badly behaving Hashd group would become the target. Over time, enough power and precedent could be developed to take on even very politically powerful Hashd groups implicated in highly problematic behavior. Political infighting among politicians affiliated with various Hashd groups could provide crucial openings. The Iraqi government could equally look for, exploit, and actively cultivate rifts and disagreements between politicians affiliated with the Hashd groups and the Hashd groups’ new military commanders.

But the state should not adopt a hands-off approach to conflicts among and between the Hashd groups, allowing the groups to self-destruct through political infighting or actual physical violence. The state cannot be sure who would win an internal political battle, whether an actor more susceptible to institutionalization and accountability or the opposite. Moreover, whenever militant or militia groups fight and the state simply watches from the sidelines hoping they destroy each other, local populations suffer and blame the state.

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