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Tehran's Servants:

Iraq's Shia Militias Emerge as the Key Armed Force Facing Islamic State in Iraq

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Summary

- With the entry of Islamic State into Iraqi territory in June 2014, the country's military collapsed before the much smaller IS force at Mosul, with both Baghdad and Erbil coming under threat. Iraq's army suffered from corruption and absenteeism, and lacked a commitment to the fight against the militants.
- The advance of Islamic State in Iraq was eventually slowed. In part this was on account of the intervention of US airstrikes, but of greater significance has been the mobilisation of Iraq's Shia militias. While these militias have benefited from US air support, they are overtly hostile to the American involvement in Iraq.
- The rise of the Shia militias has profound implications for the future of Iraq on account of the involvement of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in their organisation. This move fits into a wider pattern of Iranian efforts to extend the Islamic Republic's influence across the region through its various proxies.
- In June of 2014, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani issued a fatwah calling for the mobilisation of Shia militias in defence of Baghdad, and at the same time the Iraqi government announced the formation of a commission tasked with overseeing these groups. As well as enlisting the support of well-established veteran militias, these moves saw the proliferation of a number of smaller Shia military groups.
- The Iranian connection to the militias is made particularly significant on account of the fact that these groups do not serve an exclusively military function, but also have a political one. The close involvement of IRGC's Qods Force commander Qassem Suleimani in the organisation of the militias provides a direct operational channel between Iran's Supreme Leader and events in Iraq.
- The Iranian involvement with the Shia militias extends to a well-established arrangement of arming, funding and training of these groups. Accordingly, they have grown to become the most powerful military force in Iraq, with the Iraqi government being left both dependent on the militias for the defence of Baghdad and fundamentally too weak to challenge these groups even if it wished to do so.
- The rise of the Iranian-backed Shia militias appears set to contribute to the de facto partition of Iraq along sectarian lines. Sunni fears about abuses and looting by the militias has almost certainly contributed to some Iraqi Sunnis preferring Islamic State rule to that of the militias.
- In the longer term, the advancing power and influence of the Shia militias will only assist Tehran in its efforts to promote Iranian hegemony across the Middle East. With the prospect of sanctions against Iran being lifted in the wake of the nuclear deal, the regime's ability to back the militias and its other regional proxies can be expected to increase significantly.

Figure 1: Control of Iraq as known May 20, 2015



Map by Evan Centanni, starting from [blank map](#) by [NordNordWest](#). License: [CC BY-SA](#)

This paper is based on a research trip conducted in Iraq in June 2015. In the course of the trip, the author visited frontline areas maintained by the Iraqi Shia militias in the western Anbar Province and in Baiji, and interviewed senior militia commanders and fighters and opponents of the militias. The article combines data gathered during the trip with information gleaned by the author from online sources in both Arabic and English.

1. Introduction

The sudden and unexpected entry of the Sunni jihadi movement Islamic State into Iraqi territory in June 2014 precipitated an immediate and acute crisis for the government in Baghdad. The Iraqi Security Forces collapsed before the jihadis. Mosul, the second most populous city, fell to IS, and by August both the capital Baghdad and Erbil, capital of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) area in northern Iraq, were in danger.

The central problem facing the government of Iraq in the summer of 2014 was that its armed forces were very clearly not fit for purpose. The Iraqi army collapsed before a much smaller IS force in Mosul. The army was beset by deep-rooted corruption and absenteeism, and by an absence of commitment to the fight against the jihadis.

Two separate interventions managed to stabilise the situation, not defeating IS entirely but preventing further progress. The first of these was the commencement of US air action after 7 August. The second intervention, of ultimately greater significance, was the mobilisation of Iraq's Shia militias in defence of the capital, and in the campaigns to turn back the jihadis. Of course, in the KRG area in the north, the vital ground role has been played by the Pesh Merga. But further south, it is the Shia militias who have played and are playing the central role in engaging the jihadis on the ground.

The reason why the rise of the militias is of greater import is because it has long-term implications for the political future of Iraq – or at least the section of Iraq that is controlled by the Baghdad authorities. The Iraq Shia militias, as we shall see, are political as well as military organisations. Indeed, in line with Iranian regional strategy, they are masters at converting military power into political power. As such, current events in Iraq offer an example and a warning regarding Iranian intentions and strategies vis-à-vis the Middle East. In the current situation, with Iran on the cusp of obtaining access to monies formerly frozen within the framework of sanctions, understanding the nature of Iranian practice is a matter of urgent importance for the formulation of rational western policy.

Officially, the militias are controlled by the Iraqi government. In practice, few Iraqis of any persuasion take seriously the notion that the government of Haider al-Abadi exercises control over the armed Shia groups. Rather, it is Iran, via the IRGC and its Qods Force, which is the controlling, organising and supplying hand behind the militia mobilisation and the most important militias.

Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, a key leader of the militias who is regarded as the right-hand man of Qods Force commander Qassem Suleimani in Iraq, told the author of this report that “The Hashed is playing the main role currently, and is now planning and leading large operations, in full cooperation with the army.”¹ Al-Muhandis added that “The Hashed relies on capacities and capabilities provided by the Islamic Republic of Iran.”²

¹ Author interview with Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, Baiji, Iraq, 9 June 2015.

² *ibid.*

Figure 2: Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis with an officer of the Badr Organization



Shia militiamen and commanders interviewed for this report were openly contemptuous of the role being played by US forces and the western coalition. A number claimed that the US was secretly backing IS. A fighter of Ktaib Hizballah interviewed in Anbar claimed that “IS is supported by US, Saudi Arabia, Israel and others. We try to fight them but the Americans come and bomb us and enable them to run away.”³

“Also they parachute aid, weapons, clothing, which they drop to IS. I have seen this with my own eyes. We managed to capture some equipment – mortars and hand grenades and uniforms. Saudi and American equipment.”⁴

The current crisis in Iraq raises a range of pressing questions for policymakers and observers seeking to assess the fast-moving events in that country. Particularly crucial is the need to consider how it is that a situation has arisen whereby the main force fighting IS in central Iraq, and the main beneficiary of western air support, are Iran-supporting Shia militias in which views such as the ones expressed above are prevalent. Similarly, we are forced to question what the key events were that led to the current situation in which it is the militias, rather than the state army, which currently plays the key role in defending the Iraqi capital. Who are the key militias and the key players among them? And perhaps most importantly of all, what is the role of Iran in all this, what might the current situation mean for the future of Iraq, and what are the possible implications of all this for the region as a whole?

³ Author interview with a fighter of the Ktaib Hizballah militia, Huseybeh al-Sharqiyyeh, Anbar Province, 13 June 2015.

⁴ *ibid.*

2. What were the Key Events Leading to the Current Situation?

The mobilisation of Shia militias against the advance of the Islamic State towards Baghdad was officially launched with the issuing of a fatwa by Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani on 13 June 2014. Al-Sistani, the great symbol of the Iraqi Shia, did not, however, go on to play a further practical role in what followed. Rather, on 15 June, the government announced the formation of the “Hashed al-Shaabi” (Popular Mobilisation) Commission, to be headed by Fali al-Fayyadh, who also serves as National Security Advisor to Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi.⁵

Figure 3: A Shia militia poster, Baghdad, June 2015



Thus, officially, the Popular Mobilisation Forces consist of pre-existing Shia militias, increased in size as a result of al-Sistani's fatwa, alongside newly formed militias and a small number of Sunni tribal fighters. These forces are headed by al-Fayyadh and the Popular Mobilisation Committee. In this way, the Popular Mobilisation Forces, or “Hashed”, are officially part of the structure of the Iraqi government, despite not being part of the armed services or the police. In practice, however, the Popular Mobilisation Committee appears to play more of a liaison role between the various militias, rather than one of direction and leadership. The militias have their own existing leadership structures of long standing. The committee has not replaced these with a new structure of command from al-Fayyadh down to the militia leaders and then to the fighters on the ground.

Hikmat Guwood, leader of the powerful Albu Nimr tribe of Anbar who worked closely with the Americans during the surge, described the current situation in the following terms: “The Iraqi government controls nothing ... Abadi has no power. The real power in Iraq is the militias.

⁵ Luay al-Khattib, 'Sistani's Jihad Fatwa One Year On: The Man Who Pulled Iraq From the Brink With a Single Statement', *Huffington Post*, 14 June 2015, available at: www.huffingtonpost.com/luay-al-khattib/sistanis-jihad-fatwa-one_b_7579322.html, last visited: 5 October 2015.

Today, if you're a civilian, you buy a uniform, get 5 cars and a few guns, go to Salah al-Din, register, and you're a militia. And you'll get money. It's a business."⁶

3. Who are the Key Militias and the Key Players among Them?

Following al-Sistani's fatwa calling for jihad, a large number of new militias emerged, some more serious initiatives, some along the lines described by Hikmat Guwood above. Some estimates put the current number of militias at around 100. But despite the new arrivals, a number of large and powerful bodies remain the most significant forces among the Shia. Of these, the Badr Organisation (formerly Badr Corps), the Ktaib Hizballah, Asaib Ahl al-Haq and the Saraya al-Salam (formerly Mahdi Army) are the most significant.

3.1 Badr

The Badr Corps, now renamed the Badr Organisation, is the most veteran of the pro-Iranian Shia militias active in Iraq. Founded in Iran in 1982 as the military wing of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), Badr was originally led by Iranian officers and took part in the Iran-Iraq war on the side of Tehran. Returning to Iraq in 2003, it sought to reconstitute itself as a political group, while never ceding its paramilitary capacities. Badr aligned with the US in its fight against Ba'athist elements in the post-2003 period, with many of its members joining the newly reconstituted Iraqi security forces. Badr has now officially separated from SCIRI, with both constituting political parties. The control by Badr and SCIRI of the interior ministry is a matter of concern for Iraq's Sunnis. Badr is suspected of involvement in sectarian killings. It claims a membership of 50,000 and has taken an active role in fighting IS in Diyala Province, and now on the key Baiji and Anbar fronts.

3.2 Ktaib Hizballah (Legions of the Party of God)

Founded in 2003, Ktaib Hizballah was active in the insurgency against the US. It is included on the US State Department list of Terrorist Groups. Originally led by Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, a close associate or possibly operative of the IRGC's Qods Force (interviewed for this report: see above), this force has been throughout the most openly identified with Tehran of the Shia military groups in Iraq. Now numbering around 30,000 fighters, Ktaib Hizballah commanders consider themselves to constitute a kind of elite or "special operations forces" group within the Hashed al-Shaabi, taking on the most difficult tasks and possessing capabilities in guerrilla warfare beyond those of the other groups. The author observed Ktaib forces in action in the Khaldiyyeh area of Anbar Province on 13 June, close to Ramadi City. Their discipline, cohesion and esprit de corps (in contrast to ISF troops and even to Badr fighters) were immediately notable. The organisation was involved in the liberation of Amerli from IS, where it benefitted from US close air support.

⁶ Author interview with tribal leader Hikmat al-Ghuwood, Baghdad, 11 June 2015.

Figure 4: Fighters of the Ktaib Hizballah organization with their banner, Huseybeh, Anbar province, June 2015.



3.3 Asaib Ahl al-Haq (League of the Righteous)

Led by Qais Al-Khazali, the Asaib emerged from a split away from the Sadrists Mahdi Army in 2004. It became completely independent of the Sadrists in 2008 and continued action against the Americans. Reputed to be the recipient of direct funding from Iran, Asaib is widely feared in Iraq as one of the most criminalised of the militia groups. Stories of its members seeking to terrorise and extort money from Sunnis who have fled to Shia areas of Baghdad are common. It is suspected of a recent atrocity in Baghdad in which a number of prostitutes were slaughtered. The Asaib is thought to number only around 3,000 fighters. It ran a list in the 2014 parliamentary elections in Iraq (the Sadiqoun Bloc) and won one seat.

3.4 Saraya al-Salam (Peace Companies)

This is the latest iteration of the military wing of the Sadrism movement. Sadr disbanded the Mahdi Army, which took an active part in the insurgency against the US, in 2008, replacing it with the Liwa al Yaom al Mawood, or Promised Day Brigade. The Saraya al-Salam (Peace Companies) was created as an additional military body following the entry of IS into Iraq in June 2014. It has taken an active part in the fighting against IS. Estimates of its membership vary widely, with some accounts suggesting it may have as many as 50,000 fighters.

These four militias are the most significant elements in the Hashed al-Shaabi. Other formations of note include the Ktaib Imam Ali, Saraya Tala'a al-Khorasani and the Harakat al-Nujaba.

Figure 5: Fighters of the Ktaib Hizballah in action against ISIS, Anbar, June 2015



4. What is the Role of Iran in All This?

The structures of control linking the militias to the Iranians are multifaceted. Officially, the Hashed al-Shaabi is controlled by a committee which is itself directly answerable to the Iraqi Interior Ministry, from which the militias receive financial support. The Interior Ministry, meanwhile, is of course subordinate to the authority of the government led by Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi.

Yet the appearance of control of the Hashed by central government deriving from this picture is deceptive. The militias, as noted above, are not purely military organisations. Rather, in the style preferred by the Iranians, the most significant among them combine a military element with political activity. As a result of this activity, the Interior Ministry, which, as mentioned

above, controls the Hashed Committee, is in itself in the hands of one of the militias, the Badr Organisation.

The Iraqi Interior Minister is Mohammed Ghabban, a member of Badr, who in the elections of 2013 stood as part of then Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's State of Law Bloc. So the ministry controlling the militia mobilisation (as well as the federal police) is in the hands of one of the militias. Ghabban, meanwhile, is also widely seen as a figurehead. The real strength in the Badr Corps is Hadi al-Amiri, who is also the field commander of Badr in the fight against IS. Because of al-Amiri's well known background as a militia leader, Badr apparently preferred to place a clearly civilian representative such as Ghabban at the helm of the Interior Ministry. But al-Amiri, who officially is the Transport Minister in the current Iraqi government, is probably the real decision maker in the Interior Ministry in all matters related to the militias.

The Badr Organisation's ties to the Iranian regime go back to its very foundation, as noted above. So its control of the Interior Ministry gives Tehran a direct line into the government of Iraq. But Iranian influence over the militias is not primarily dependent on the presence of Badr in the government.

The field commander of the Hashed al-Shaabi is Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis (quoted above). Al-Muhandis is the founder of the Ktaib Hizballah militia. A native of Basra, al-Muhandis's relations with the Iranian regime go back to the early 1980s, when he operated as a terrorist on behalf of the IRGC in Kuwait, organising attacks on embassies that supported Saddam Hussein in his war against Iran. Following the war, he lived in Iran, and returned to Iraq after the 2003 US invasion and the toppling of Saddam.

Figure 6: Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis at a briefing of militia and Iraqi Army Commanders, Baiji, June 2015



Al-Muhandis is a close associate of Qods Force Commander General Qassem Suleimani. It was Suleimani who began the organisation of the Hashed in June 2014, following the arrival of ISIS, and it is he who remains the main conduit for arms, training and finance from the government of Iran to the militias, and with the assistance of al-Muhandis.

An Iraqi official quoted by Reuters described Suleimani's role in the following terms:

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Soleimani is an operational leader. He's not a man working in an office. He goes to the front to inspect the troops and see the fighting ... His chain of command is only the Supreme Leader. He needs money, gets money. Needs munitions, gets munitions. Needs materiel, gets materiel.⁷

So in addition to the formal and visible link via the Interior Ministry and the Iran-supported Badr Corps to Iran, there is a second, hardly concealed and more important direct line of control, via Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and Qassem Suleimani, and direct to the Iranian Supreme Leader.

Figure 7: Qassem Suleimani on the Iraqi battlefield, October 2014



Figure 8: Qassem Suleimani in Iraq, March 2015



There are other lines. All the major militias have their own long-standing relations with Tehran. The foundation of the Hashed did not bring the militias into a single structure, so pre-existing lines of support and communication continue to exist and remain more important than the umbrella structure. So given that the militias are the most powerful military formation in the Baghdad-controlled part of Iraq, through the militias, Iran possesses a military instrument which affords it effective control over the country. The elected government has no force with which to

⁷ 'The fighters of Iraq who answer to Iran', *Reuters*, 12 November 2014, available at: www.reuters.com/article/2014/11/12/us-mideast-crisis-militias-specialreport-idUSKCN0IW0ZA20141112, last visited: 5 October 2015.

oppose the militias and is in any case dependent on them for defending the capital from the onslaught of ISIS.

5. What Might the Current Situation Mean for the Future of Iraq, and What are the Possible Implications of all this for the Region as a Whole?

First and foremost, the rise of the Shia militias and their Iranian patron to de facto power in Baghdad appears set to confirm the de facto partition of Iraq. As Hamed al-Mutlaq, an MP with the Iraqiyya list and a former senior officer in Saddam's army expressed it:

The militias are no different from ISIS. The Iranian intervention is no different from ISIS. The wealth of the country is looted by ISIS, but also by the militias and by Iran. This has led to chaos.

The deployment of the Shia militias, carrying arms and supported by Iran, has become a power center in defiance of the law.⁸

Such sentiments appear common among Iraqi Sunnis, who fear the growing influence of the militias and what this might mean for them and their families. Stories of abuse and intimidation of Sunni Arab refugees at the hands of the militias in Iraq are rife. Asaib Ahl al-Haq, in particular, are widely regarded as the most criminalised of the militias.⁹

Both Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have begun investigations into allegations of looting and mistreatment of Sunni Arabs by the militias in areas "liberated" from IS. Indeed, there are even Sunnis who prefer to stay when IS forces invade an area, rather than leave for Shia-dominated towns. IS, of course, slaughters anyone with any connection to the central government in Baghdad. But for Sunnis without any such connections, the prospect of living under IS rule is not necessarily worse than trying one's luck with Asaib Ahl al-Haq. It is presumably for this reason that there was not a mass exodus towards Baghdad when Ramadi fell.

Subsequent eyewitness reports from the city depicting life under IS rule report a stifling, brutally repressive system which enforces stringent Islamic religious observance along the lines favoured by Islamic State. Random mass violence and a consequent complete breakdown of daily life, however, have not taken place. Nevertheless, IS control of a large swathe of central Iraq clearly places Iraqi Sunni Arabs in a difficult position. A number of Iraqi Sunnis interviewed for this report spoke of their desire for a federal Iraq, in which a Sunni autonomous area would have a large measure of self-government.¹⁰ Clearly, such an outcome is impossible for as long as IS exists and holds territory. But the very fact that it is being raised by Sunni Arabs (the traditionally dominant group in Iraq) shows the extent to which the new Shia ascendancy in the country has had an impact on possibilities for the future.

⁸ Author interview with Hamed al-Mutlaq MP, Baghdad, 10 June 2015.

⁹ Conversations with Sunni refugees from Anbar, Baghdad, June 2015.

¹⁰ Author interviews with Hamed al-Mutlaq MP and tribal leader Hikmat al-Ghuwood.

A Baghdad dominated by Iran-supported Shia militias of the type described here is one in which both Iraqi Sunni Arabs and of course Kurds are unlikely to see their future. Hence, the emergence of Shia domination is likely to lead in the medium to long term to the splitting up of the country into separate enclaves and perhaps the eventual birth of new successor states. It may well be that this process is now unavoidable.

From a British and broader western point of view, the advance of Iran in Iraq through the successful sponsoring of the militias as political-military organisations should offer a warning example. This is particularly the case in light of the large amounts of money due to become available for Iranian use as a result of the nuclear agreement. As a result of that agreement, Iran is about to acquire a further \$150 billion for its use.

This money will certainly flow towards further strengthening the Shia militias in Iraq. It will also go towards promoting the Iranian model for political/military organisation as exemplified in Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East. In Syria, Lebanon, Gaza, the West Bank, Yemen and Bahrain, the IRGC are busy developing their clients and making use of them. In every context, the result is disorder, chaos and increased conflict. Western countries with investments in the region and with a broader interest in regional order and development need to understand that it is this model and its application which today constitutes one of the greatest dangers to peaceful development in the Middle East. In its own way, it is a danger no less profound than that represented by Sunni jihadi movements, such as IS, al-Qaeda and others.

The example of Iraq showcases the application by the Iranians of a very twenty-first-century type of warfare, combining the exploitation of religious fervour, the blurring of the dividing line between political and military activity and the creation and sponsoring of proxy organisations, with the intention of utilising these to further the interests of the Iranian state. These practices have brought Iran's clients to domination of Lebanon, and to the ownership of parts of Syria, Lebanon and Iraq, including the capital cities of those countries, as well as of the Gaza Strip. The early stages of similar efforts are under way in Bahrain, Kuwait and perhaps also Saudi Arabia.

Iraq shows what happens when the intentions and the methods of a powerful, ambitious and anti-western power are ignored or underestimated. These methods are intended to create a hegemonic group of Iran-aligned powers across the region. While this project may well founder on demographic realities, it is set to increase and systematise instability and conflict in an already deeply unstable region. Understanding the nature of Iranian strategic goals and tactical methods is crucial to formulating a coherent strategy to resist these. Taking a close look at what is currently taking place in Iraq would be a good start in achieving the former.

About the Author

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