

- We are saving Iraq

*The legitimising discourse of The Popular Mobilisation  
in Iraq*

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# Abstract

Since its formation in 2014, al-Hashd al-Sha'bi has established itself as an effective fighting force in Iraq and has played a significant role in fighting IS. It rapidly became a powerful and significant force almost overnight, capable of standing up to the IS's lightning advance in Iraq. The organization gained support and popularity from its success in battlefields, helping to stem militants advance and regain most of the territories controlled by IS. This thesis will tackle the newly formed military organization al-Hashd al-Sha'bi in Iraq, and asks how the organization's elite discursively legitimize their role and war on IS. It will attempt, through interviews with al-Hashd representatives and elites to contribute with insight into the military organization, and more specifically their discourse legitimizing their formation as a national armed force parallel to the Iraqi Counter-Terrorism Service. It will also seek to examine how they plan to achieve their short-term and long-term goals in Iraq, militarily, as well as politically. This will hopefully contribute to a more profound understanding of the nature of the motives behind their chosen policies.





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All inaccuracies and mistakes in this thesis are entirely my own.



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# 1 Introduction

On the 9<sup>th</sup> of December, 2017, Iraq's Prime Minister, Haidar al-Abadi, proudly announced total victory over the self-proclaimed Islamic State in Iraq (IS). The Prime Minister declared the end of a four year war against IS. The liberation of the Iraqi-Syrian border marked the final chapter in the military fight against IS in Iraq, after the Iraqi forces cleared IS' last members from the country.<sup>1</sup> In the summer of 2014, however, the situation was very different when the militant group captured about a third of Iraq's territory and announced the creation of an Islamic caliphate in the region.<sup>2</sup> One of the most important factors that contributed to the reversion of this critical state, playing a significant role in the combats, and helping stem IS' expansion, was the establishment of al-Hashd al-Sha'bi (the Popular Mobilization).

In the turmoil that followed IS' seizure of Iraqi territories, Iraq's most senior Shia cleric Ayatollah Sistani issued a fatwa (religious edict) on the 13<sup>th</sup> of June 2014, which led to the creation of al-Hashd al-Sha'bi. He called upon all "able-bodied" Iraqi men to join the Iraqi army in their fight against IS, to defend their country, their people and their holy places.<sup>3</sup> The response to the fatwa was both immediate and enormous; hundreds of thousands of volunteers, particularly from the Shia areas, rushed to sign up in the fight against IS. This *levée en masse* of Iraqis joining the army, led to the establishment of what has come to be known as al-Hashd al-Sha'bi, an amalgamation of both volunteers with no formal military background and approximately forty already existing Iraqi Shia armed groups.

In light of al-Hashd al-Sha'bi's expanding influence on Iraq's security landscape, this thesis seeks to get an insight into the formation of al-Hashd al-Sha'bi and how the organization was able to establish a presence in Iraq and emerge as one of the most powerful and significant forces capable of halting IS' advance in Iraq. In addition to asserting themselves as a potent fighting force in the country, the elite and fighters of al-Hashd al-Sha'bi have become significant players in the country's political environment, and enjoy substantial and broad political legitimacy.

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<sup>1</sup> The Guardian, *All Iraqi Lands Have Been Liberated from Isis, Says Haider Al-Abadi* (theguardian.com2017).

<sup>2</sup> Martin Chulov, "Isis Insurgents Seize Control of Iraqi City of Mosul," *The Guardian* 10.06.2014 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Al Jazeera, "Iraq Cleric Issues Call to Arms against Isil," *Al Jazeera*, 14.06.2014 2014.

## 1.1 Research question

As this thesis will attempt to understand al-Hashd al-Sha'bi through the discourse its key figures, the following main research question is proposed: **How is al-Hashd al-Sha'bi discursively legitimizing its war on IS and its role in the Iraqi state?**

This necessitates a binate division of the research question with the inevitable following-up questions: On the legitimization discourse on the war against IS, it is necessary to understand how they argue for their indispensability in the power vacuum that existed during the context of the IS' takeover of the country, and how religion has played a role in regarding the fight as a religious duty. On its perceived role in the Iraqi state, it is important to examine how they argue for their presence as part of the Iraqi military and not a militia, as well as how they portray themselves as a state force for all Iraqi peoples regardless of their religious backgrounds. The last part will also explore how they respond to allegations of being an Iranian proxy military force, in addition to their relations with other influential states in the region, including the US.

Through interviews and interaction with the central figures I explore their discourse, and how they frame the war on IS and their role in it. I argue that the leading figures of al-Hashd attempt to both balance and counter various controversies related to the organization's characteristics, such as its image as a rescuer of Iraq, its Shia origin, its Iranian relationship and its political role. By engaging in a discursive discussion about these different aspects of its image, it strives to be perceived as part of the Iraqi army, which also has political ambitions in the country.

## 1.2 Previous research

When I first began conducting my research in 2014, the existing literature was scarce, as the emergence of al-Hashd was in its initial phase. This naturally changed with the developments in Iraq and the increasing need for both military and academic analysis of the phenomenon of al-Hashd. As these findings have come recently and at the end of my project, I have unfortunately not been able to examine them thoroughly.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Recent reports include Renad and Faleh A. Jabar Mansour, "The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future," *Carnegie: Middle East Center* (2017); Hassan Abbas, "The Myth and Reality of Iraq's Al-Hashd Al-

The dominant part of the literature published during the data gathering this study on the al-Hashd have been written by researches in the field of counterinsurgency, strategic studies and policymakers, whose primary focus is on the US's interest in the country and region, and what impact this force has on US presence there, in addition to how to confront and eliminate this force. A predominant focus in these publications is on al-Hashd has therefore been on concepts and strategies on how to defeat and eliminate al-Hashd as a sectarian Iran proxy force that challenges the state's monopoly on force. This focus has led to a tendency in the publications and articles to emphasize how to eliminate the Popular Mobilization. It is also commonly perceived as a contributor to the sectarian violence, to weaken the state's monopoly on the use of force and as an Iran proxy.<sup>5</sup> This approach is both insufficient and irrelevant to the topic of my research as an academic discursive analysis, and thus serves more as a backdrop to understand how and why al-Hashd is presented in the existing publication this way. However, it is important to be aware of the common descriptions of al-Hashd as they too color their discourse in attempting to confront what they see as stereotypes of themselves. In addition, it also formed my initial impression of them prior to my fieldwork and thus also the questions I posed to them.

In both the media and the academic literature, the terms paramilitary or militias, as al-Hashd al-Sha'bi is often termed, are labels usually applied to paramilitary forces and irregular forces, such as 'vigilantes', 'death squads', 'self-defence forces' and 'paramilitaries'.<sup>6</sup> In their article 'Militias in Civil Wars' Jentzsch, Kalyvas and Schubiger define such irregular forces as non-state actors involved in armed conflict specifically on the side of the state or operate independently to protect local community from insurgents and pursuing to obtain its allegiance or participation. Aliyev employs the same description of pro-government militias as Carey et al.<sup>7</sup>, who defines pro-government militias based on four characteristics, (1) recognized as groups affiliated with the state or promoted by the state, (2) not part of the

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Shaabi (Popular Mobilization Forces): A Way Forward," ed. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) (Amman, Jordan 2017).

<sup>5</sup> Norman Cigar, "Iraq's Shia Warlords and Their Militias: Political and Security Challenges and Options," (ARMY WAR COLLEGE CARLISLE BARRACKS PA STRATEGIC STUDIES INSTITUTE, 2015); Michael Knights, Phillip Smyth, and Ahmed Ali, "Iranian Influence in Iraq: Between Balancing and Hezbollahization?," *Policywatch* (2015); Dylan and Dave van Zoonen O'Driscoll, "The Hashd Al-Shaabi and Iraq Subnationalism and the State," ed. Middle East Research Institute (2017).

<sup>6</sup> Sabine C Carey and Neil J Mitchell, "Progovernment Militias," *Annual Review of Political Science* 20 (2017).

<sup>7</sup> Sabine C Carey, Neil J Mitchell, and Will Lowe, "States, the Security Sector, and the Monopoly of Violence: A New Database on Pro-Government Militias," *Journal of Peace Research* 50, no. 2 (2013).

regular security forces, (3) armed, (4) organized.<sup>8</sup> Aliyev however distinguishes ‘state-parallel’ paramilitaries from the conventional ‘state-manipulated’ paramilitary force and argues that ‘state-parallel’ paramilitaries’ have been more proliferated during the twenty-one century, which have expanded and become more predominant just recently. He defines ‘state-parallel’ paramilitary forces as different from those conventional paramilitary militias. According to Aliyev, their characteristics and functions vary from the traditional paramilitary militias in form of their establishment, system, aims and increase to prominence and downfall.<sup>9</sup> As will be examined, al-Hashd and its current features make it highly challenging to classify them as either of the categories mentioned.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Corinna Jentsch, Stathis N Kalyvas, and Livia Isabella Schubiger, "Militias in Civil Wars," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59, no. 5 (2015).



## **2 Method and ethics**

In this chapter, I discuss methodological approaches employed in this thesis. I elaborate my use of sources and selection of the data, followed up by some reflections on my role as a researcher and access to the field of study. Finally I conclude by discussing some ethical considerations.

### **2.1 Why this topic**

I remember I was sitting and watching the news on IS's assault on Mosul in Summer 2014, as the group declared a caliphate, or Islamic State on the territories it commanded in Iraq and Syria. What surprised me and surprised the world as well was the sudden takeover of Mosul and other Iraqi territories in such a short time and with relatively few IS fighters faced with no resistance from the Iraqi security forces. However what astonished me even more was the declaration of Sistani's jihad fatwa and the response of the Iraqi population to it. With a single statement Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani managed in just a few days to mobilize hundreds of thousands of men into what became known as al-Hashd al-Sha'bi with the asserted function to assist the regular Iraqi army to repel the IS threat. Many questions went around in my mind while watching volunteers recruit themselves to defend the country: what is this newly formed Popular Mobilization? Is it a temporary mobilization? Is it going to replace the Iraqi army? Is it a Shia force and is it militias? For one thing, I was sure that a historic event was taking place on June 13<sup>th</sup> the day that the jihad fatwa was declared through the creation of a powerful military force. My curiosity on the magnitude of this phenomenon took me to a deeper exploration of al-Hashd al-Sha'bi.

### **2.2 Sources and material**

The study uses semi-structured interviews as the main source of material for analysis. Newspapers, academic publications, official documents and public speeches supplement this material. Lastly, I have used secondary literature in order to get a broader picture of al-Hashd al-Sha'bi.

I use qualitative methods, as they are useful to understand and explore social phenomena.<sup>10</sup> What is significant in my thesis is how the people I have spoken with perceive the role of al-Hashd al-Sha'bi. This will hopefully also contribute to a more profound understanding of the nature of the motives behind their rhetoric. Although my informants are central figures in al-Hashd al-Sha'bi, and it is in their best interest to give a positive and favourable image of their own role and the organization, it is exactly this portrayal and information I wish to explore in my thesis: their discourse on how they legitimize themselves.

## 2.3 Fieldwork

I decided to conduct fieldwork in Iraq in order to obtain a deeper understanding of my research topic. There, I interviewed representatives of al-Hashd al-Sha'bi's and other prominent figures positive towards the organization. The fieldwork not only gave me insights and information I otherwise would not have been able to acquire. By being present and meeting my informants, I gained their trust as a researcher. My informants expressed their appreciation of my interest in their point of view and in how they understand and interpret their own reality. In return, they were more than willing to share their experiences and perspectives I otherwise would not have obtained outside of the field.

The findings rest on fieldwork for three weeks conducted in Baghdad and Karbala in September 2016. During this period, I managed to interview ten informants. During my journey, the situation was especially insecure due to several bomb attacks targeting several places in Baghdad<sup>11</sup>, specifically in the district of Karada, where my main interviews were performed. As I have family members and a network of friends, I advised them prior to my travel and consequently decided to go ahead with the trip. Through them, I was able to get in touch with al-Hashd al-Sha'bi's head of Information Management, Muhannad al-Ikabi and who then put me in contact with the majority of my informants. I wanted to interview more but because of the limited time I had there - and we had to reschedule some of the interview dates due to the security situation, this became unrealistic.

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<sup>10</sup> Tove Thagaard, *Systematikk Og Innlevelse : En Innføring I Kvalitativ Metode*, 4. utg. ed. (Bergen: Fagbokforl., 2013), 11.

<sup>11</sup> Alexandra Sims, "Baghdad Car Bombing: At Least 11 Killed in Twin Blasts Outside Shopping Mall," *Independent*, 09.09.2016 2016; Lizzie Dearden, "Isis Suicide Bomber Detonates Car in Shia District of Baghdad in Latest Terror Attack in Iraq," *ibid.*, 06.09.2016.

Three of my informants belong to the three most prominent factions in al-Hashd: Badr Organization (Munazzamat al-Badr), represented by Hadi al-‘Ameri, League of the Righteous (‘‘Asaib Ahl al-Haqq) with its leader Sheikh Qays al-Khaz’ali and Hezbollah Battalions (Kataib Hizbullah) with Ja’far al-Husayni. The fourth informant is the leader of the Christian faction, Babylon Brigade, Rayan al-Kildani. The fifth is a tribal leader of Anbar, Faysal al-‘Assafi, forming a Sunni fraction as chairman of the uprising tribe in Anbar. The sixth is the Deputy Commander of al-Hashd al-Shabi, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. The seventh is head of Information Management, Muhannad al-Ka’bi. The Eight is the then Spokesman of al-Hashd al-Sha’bi, Ahmad al-Asadi.<sup>12</sup> The remaining two are outside of the organization, respectively Grand Ayatollah Sistani’s spokesman, Sheikh Abdul Mahdi al-Karbalai and the Sunni Nineveh politician, Abdul Rahman al-Luwayzi, who is also a Member of Parliament. All the informants I reached responded positively to my request for an interview. As much as I was curious about their world, they were also eager to tell me about al-Hashd and their role in it. This was especially the case as they knew it would be an academic research and not simply a media interview.

## 2.4 Interviews

During my fieldwork I conducted interviews in a qualitative, semi-structured form, where I asked open-ended questions. Qualitative interviews are particularly valuable for obtaining insight into the participants’ own experience, opinions and feelings.<sup>13</sup> This was consistent with the aim of this study.

Semi-structured interviews are useful as they are flexible of unpredicted subjects and arguments during conversation. As such it gives an opportunity for follow-up questions and elaboration.<sup>14</sup> My approach included a set of topics and questions I had prepared in advance, and during the interviews I directed the discussions towards them. To get an equivalent research material I asked similar questions to all my informants. My impression was that my informants showed little hesitance in discussing and answering my questions and they talked proudly and openly about their opinion towards the topics and issues introduced to them. All of my respondents can be classified in the ‘elite’ category. Being an elite implies that they are

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<sup>12</sup> Recently, al-Asadi resigned from his position in order to participate in the coming elections of 2018.

<sup>13</sup> Monica Dalen, *Intervju Som Forskningsmetode : En Kvalitativ Tilnærming* (Oslo: Universitetsforl., 2004); *ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Steinar Kvale, *Doing Interviews*, (London: SAGE Publications, 2007). 56-57; *ibid.*

leaders and experts in the community, who are in powerful positions.<sup>15</sup> Due to their prominence, it was also a challenge to set up dates for the interviews, as they had to reschedule my appointments several times due to their busy schedule. Performing elite interviews is arguably quite challenging as the informants can try to control and define the topic. Therefore, a semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions was suitable in order to let me lead the conversation in the direction of the topics and questions I prepared for. I chose elite interviews because the representatives of al-Hashd al-Sha'bi can be regarded as *key respondents* that possess unique and extra knowledge linked to the research question.<sup>16</sup>

Most of my interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of my informants and notes were taken during the interview and afterwards. Each interview took approximately 30-45 minutes. Since my mother tongue is Arabic, all the interviews were performed in Arabic, thus a translator was not needed. This gave me a close connection with my informants and gave the conversations an informal flow. Furthermore, adapted to the dress code of Shia Muslims in Iraq by wearing the black cloak, known as the *abaya*, during my interview with the Muslim informants, including the Sunni informants. This was a conscious decision as I hoped that my choice of dress code would further increase both confidence in me and make the atmosphere less tense. This naturally brings in the issue of me as a woman interviewing men. Contrary to what would be thought as an additional challenge, I rather experienced my gender to be facilitating. This I think can be because of the fact that I was the only woman present during all of the interviews, which consequently made them give an extra effort in both facilitating the interview and making me feel comfortable in the setting. All my interviews were conducted one-on-one, although sometimes more than one person was present in the place during an interview but the conversation was always performed between the respondent and me.

## 2.5 Hermeneutics and discourse

The material employed in this thesis as research data have been treated in line with an interpretation approach based on the principles of hermeneutics. Hermeneutical approach has played a relatively significant role as a theory of interpretation in the field of humanities. A significant idea within the tradition of interpretation is the process of *hermeneutic circle*. It is

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>16</sup> Svein S Andersen, "Aktiv Informantintervjuing," *Norsk statsvitenskapelig tidsskrift* 22, no. 3 (2006): 279.

a principle that describes that the whole must be understood by its part and vice versa.<sup>17</sup> This concept implies that our life and the way we comprehend it are contextual. Accordingly, in order to understand and analyse al-Hashd al-Sha’bi’s discourse, I need to understand the context and environment of the al-Hashd al-Sha’bi’s discourse. The information obtained from the collected material is analysed within a broader context that al-Hashd al-Sha’bi operates within. There is also a circular process in my own knowledge of the subject. My role as a researcher is crucial in the process of interpretation that is shaped by my prejudices concerning the subject I am analysing. In this process, it is important for me as a researcher to be aware of my background and pre-understandings of the topic, and how this will effect the interpretation and understanding of the data. Grown up in a western society with a Shia-Iraqi background will inevitably to some degree have an effect of how I interpret and understand the material. Thus, it was important for me to reflect and be aware of these issues when interpreting the material.

I interpret this material employed in this study by utilizing some elements from the field of discourse analysis. There are various definitions of the phrase *discourse*; in this study I use the definition of discourse as a “particular way of talking about and understanding the world (or an aspect of the world)”.<sup>18</sup> According to this definition, how language is used helps produce and change meaning, our comprehension of the social world, additionally this understanding and knowledge influence social behaviour.<sup>19</sup> I will also employ Fairclough’s concept of discourse that discourse is “a form of social practice which both constitutes the social world and is constituted by other social practices”.<sup>20</sup> Fairclough informs us that in addition to limiting people’s actions, discourse is also used as a way for individuals to promote their interests within a paradigm.<sup>21</sup> This is particular evident in the case of al-Hashd al-Sha’bi’s strategy of how they emphasise al-Hashd al-Sha’bi’s contribution on the war against IS as being a part of the national Iraqi military force.

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<sup>17</sup> Helge Jordheim et al., *Humaniora : En Innføring* (Oslo: Universitetsforl., 2008), 226-30.

<sup>18</sup> Marianne W. Jorgensen and Marianne Phillips Louise Jorgensen, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method (1)* (London: London, GB: SAGE Publications, 2002), 1.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-6.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

## **2.6 Ethical considerations**

The most challenging ethical dilemmas I was faced with during the course of my fieldwork was the issue of security and the fear of jeopardizing the informants' security, as well as my own and my family and network. As already mentioned, the political situation was particularly dangerous at the time of my fieldwork. As such, even the scheduling of an appointment with a military leader could be risky. These were considerations I always had on my mind. However, I was confident that the informants were well aware of the risks of setting up appointments with me. The informants were given the opportunity to remain confidential, which they all declined. This further gave me the confidence that my project was not placing them in any danger. The concerns were therefore mostly on my own security considerations.

## **2.7 Outline of the thesis**

The coming chapter (3) of this research will begin with a contextual background, beginning from the US invasion of Iraq which marks the initial emergence of militant insurgency in Iraq in the form of al-Qaida (ch. 3.1). This will be followed by an outline of Sistani's fatwa (ch. 3.2), in addition to a layout of the initial establishment of al-Hashd al-Sha'bi (ch. 3.3) along with a brief description of the main Shia fractions within al-Hashd. Chapter 4 is the main chapter consisting of the discourse analysis. The analysis will take as point of departure nine significant subjects for a deeper understanding of al-Hashd. The last chapter is my concluding remarks.

# 3 Context and background

## 3.1 The fall of Mosul

On 10 June 2014 IS took control over Mosul. The event became a turning point as Mosul is strategically significant and Iraq's second largest city. On that day, The Islamic State invaded the city of Mosul in Iraq without any offensive strife from the Iraqi army. Iraqi soldiers had reportedly dropped their weapons, shed their uniforms and run away as militant jihadists marched into the city. The assault on Mosul shed a grim light on the state of US-trained Iraqi's regular security forces and police, and revealed the incompetence of Iraq's conventional army, their weaponry, integrity and loyalty.

Although IS surfaced as one of the most notorious insurgent groups in Iraq almost overnight, it is by no means a recent insurgent organization. IS' roots in the region can be traced backed to the establishment of al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI) in 2003 following the US-led invasion. AQI evolved from Tanzim Qaidat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn (The al-Qaida organization in the land of the two rivers) led by the Jordanian Afghan-veteran Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. AQI was one of the most salient and lethal branches of al-Qaida that managed to gain foothold in the Sunni-dominated provinces of Iraq. The Iraqi government with the presences of more than 100.000 US troops in the country has never been able to fully defeat AQI and AQI has thus succeeded to survive in Iraq facilitated by the local context AQI functioned within.<sup>22</sup> Thus IS's expanding influence and presence in Iraq have taken place and developed gradually ever since the aftermath of US invasion in 2003, building strength and network until it became the group that was able to overrun large portions of Iraqi territories in summer 2014. As terror expert Truls Tønnesen argues, IS is an evolved version of AQI, developed from a non-Iraqi founders of AQI into a merge of ingenious Sunni Arab groups, led predominated by Iraqi former Baath officers.<sup>23</sup>

Scholars such as Toby Dodge and Zaid al-Ali argue that the fall of Mosul and IS' re-emergence in the country has to do with the political failure of Nouri al-Maliki's government

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<sup>22</sup> Truls Hallberg Tønnesen and konservering og historie Universitetet i Oslo Institutt for arkeologi, "Al-Qaida in Iraq : The Rise, the Fall and the Comeback" (Department of Archaeology, Conservation and History, University of Oslo, 2015).

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

– centralizing the political and coercive power in his and his elite’s hands.<sup>24</sup> This has been fuelled by Maliki’s violent response to the Sunni protests in Anbar, which has further contributed to radicalize the Sunni Arabs in the country. Consequently, IS managed to exploit the Sunni Arab discontent to develop and expand its power in the region by presenting itself as Sunni Arab saviour. However, to attribute the violence and the re-emergence of IS in the country to Maliki’s government attitude towards the Sunni Arabs, or to indicate it was the central driver of conflict, misses some of the facts that preceded the Sunni insurgency and IS’ rise to power.

There were more profound political and historical factors facilitating the re-emergence of IS in the country than the sentiment of the Sunni Arabs in the country feeling marginalized or treated unjust by the Iraqi government. Sunni insurgency has been mobilized since the US-led invasion and the flood of jihadists entering Iraq’s soli occurred before the collapse of the Iraqi state.<sup>25</sup> The Sunni discontent was rather about the inherent in any effort to supply Iraq a representative government responsive to the bulk of its population, namely the Shias. As Ranj Alaaldin argues, “The insurgency was, therefore, set in motion before politics and policies in the new Iraq were executed”,<sup>26</sup> and that the “myth of Sunni disempowerment and marginalization was already being propagated in 2003 and therefore from the outset of new Iraq, too soon for it to be real”.<sup>27</sup> IS has rather utilized the notion of Sunni Arab marginalization, to mobilize the support of a Sunni Arab insurgency, focused on the local grievance felt by the Sunnis – to expand and strengthen its Islamic State and become the main political expression of Sunnis in Iraq. One significant reason for Sunni Arabs to join the insurgency was to regain and reverse their position of power and influence, which they have dominated for decades in the country.

As Fanar Haddad argues, IS presence on Iraqi territories indicates the most extreme form of Sunni rejection. Ahmed Hashim explains in his book how the Iraqi Sunni insurgency emerged and says it is an insurgency about power, Sunnis who seeks to regain the power they

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<sup>24</sup> Toby Dodge, *Iraq : From War to a New Authoritarianism*, Adelphi Series (Trykt Utg.) (London: The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2012); Zaid Al-Ali, *The Struggle for Iraq's Future : How Corruption, Incompetence and Sectarianism Have Undermined Democracy* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 2014).

<sup>25</sup> Andrew F Krepinevich Jr, "How to Win in Iraq," *Foreign Affairs* (2005).

<sup>26</sup> Benjamin Isakhan, *The Legacy of Iraq : From the 2003 War to the "Islamic State"* (Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 188.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.



had lost following the fall of the Baath regime.<sup>28</sup> Thus it did not emerge as a result of Sunnis being socioeconomically and politically marginalized in the country.<sup>29</sup> Subsequently the sudden takeover of Mosul, the progress of IS and its allies across Iraq cultivated by the collapse of the Iraqi army is equally rooted in weak Iraqi governance structure and the growing Sunni insurgency following the US-led invasion.

More than a decade has passed since the invasion of Iraq took place in an attempt by the United States to remove Saddam Hussain's dictatorship on the pretence that Iraq had ties to al-Qaida, and to transform the country into a democratic regime with a free-market economy.<sup>30</sup> This ambitious aim resulted in a devastating war on a state that was already weak and centralized by, amongst others, a decade-long sanctioning by the international community. The overthrow of the Ba'ath regime in 2003 marked the starting point of a military and political turmoil in Iraq that, until this day, shows no signs of stabilizing. Not only did the country experience violence due to the post-conflict collapse of the state – in the form of looting, insecurity and lawlessness - but it also became a safe haven for the broader jihadist movements, including al-Qaida (hereafter, AQI).<sup>31</sup> Iraq became a refuge place for the Afghan-Arab jihadists, in addition to jihadists from around the world. From here, they could blossom and expand in the name of a holy war against the infidel occupation forces and the infidel Shiites, whom they regarded as an extended arm of the occupation forces.<sup>32</sup> AQI developed into one of the most active and resilient affiliates in the history of al-Qaida, which more than a decade later re-emerged as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (now commonly known as IS).

On June 10, 2014, IS swept across a third of Iraq's territories, seizing Iraq's second-largest city Mosul and encroaching as close as the vicinity of the capital and central power of the state, Baghdad. The Iraqi military collapsed in Mosul as commanders and soldiers abandoned their posts and weapons into the hands of IS.<sup>33</sup> At the same time as IS made rapid advances towards Baghdad, its spokesman Abu Mohammad al-Adnani posted on YouTube an

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<sup>28</sup> Ahmed Hashim, *Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency in Iraq* (Cornell University Press, 2005).

<sup>29</sup> Ahmed S Hashim, *Iraq's Sunni Insurgency* (Routledge, 2013), 13.

<sup>30</sup> For more on the decision to go on war on Iraq, see for instance George Packer, *The Assassins' Gate: America in Iraq* (Macmillan, 2005).

<sup>31</sup> Thomas Hegghammer, "Global Jihadism after the Iraq War," *The Middle East Journal* 60, no. 1 (2006).

<sup>32</sup> Mohammed M Hafez, "Martyrdom Mythology in Iraq: How Jihadists Frame Suicide Terrorism in Videos and Biographies," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 19, no. 1 (2007).

<sup>33</sup> BBC, "Militants Seize Iraq's Second City of Mosul," *BBC*, 10.06.2014 2014.

announcement of the group's aims: to establish an Islamic caliphates expanding from Iraq to Syria, declared war against the *Rawafids*<sup>34</sup> (pejorative term for Shia) and to demolish their holy places.<sup>35</sup> The audio served as a call to take up arms against the Shiites whom al-Adnani called infidels and worshippers of humans and stones. In the announcement, he urged fighters to go beyond Samarra and Baghdad and continue to Karbala and Najaf – two cities of holy significance for Shia Muslims. In the Audio, Karbala was designated as the Impure (*al-Munajjasah*) and Najaf as the Most Poytheistic (*al-Ashrak*). Al-Adnani was, however, far from the first spokesman of an al-Qaida affiliated insurgency group to use anti-Shia rhetoric and denounce Shia as *Rawafids*. Throughout history, al-Qaida affiliated groups have in their speeches and statements termed Shia as *Rawafids* – heretic and apostates and on those grounds, perpetrated attacks on the Shia.<sup>36</sup>

The audio message and declaration, however, differs from previous declarations and statements by al-Qaida affiliated insurgency groups. For the first time, the creation and establishment of an Islamic caliphate was announced, stretching from Iraq to Syria and of which Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was declared the caliph. Iraq witnessed a grave and threatening transformation in the region by IS' establishment of a religious, political and military state, with links to the dogmatic ideology of Salafi-Jihadism.<sup>37</sup> The declaration posed one of the gravest threats, not only to Iraq and the region's security, but to the international community as well.

## 3.2 A call to arms, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani jihad fatwa

As militants widened their grip across Iraq and threatened to march towards Baghdad and into Karbala and Najaf, the highest religious cleric of Shia Muslims in Iraq, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, issued a jihad *kifā'ī*<sup>38</sup> (sufficient) fatwa, (religious edict) on June 13, 2014,

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<sup>34</sup> An Arabic term which literally means rejection, refusal or dismissal. Since early times, Shias were referred to as *Rawafids*, rejectionists, those who rejects the three first caliphs. There is discussion of the precise emergence of the term, however it's often linked to two historical incidents. The prior narration is mentioned in Mohammed al-Baqir's time and the second in the tradition regarding, Zayd ibn Ali's uprising against the Umayyad rule. Etan Kohlberg, "The Term" Rāfida" in Imāmī Shī'ī Usage," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* (1979). The derogatory term continues to be employed on the Shia; in Saudi Arabia it is a Salafi-Wahhabi title for Shia. Mai Yamani, "The Two Faces of Saudi Arabia," *Survival* 50, no. 1 (2008).

<sup>35</sup> Channel4, "March to Baghdad": Isis Spokesman Urges Iraq Advance," *Channel4*, 12.06.2014 2014.

<sup>36</sup> Hafez.

<sup>37</sup> Quintan Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29, no. 3 (2006).

<sup>38</sup> *al-jihād al-kifā'ī*, sufficiency jihad, is an obligation jihad upon everyone, however if a group of people, an individual perform that obligation and it is enough, *kifā'ī*, then it's no longer mandatory upon the rest of the

which coincided with the Islamic month of Sha'ban 14, of the year 1434 in the Islamic calendar. As the month is highly significant as the birth month of the twelfth Imam within the Twelver Shia sect, it gave the fatwa an additional religious boost. The fatwa was issued shortly after the audio statement by al-Adnani. The religious edict called upon "all able bodies Iraqis to defend the country, the honour of its citizens, and its sacred places."<sup>39</sup> This was the first time since the British occupation of Iraq in 1920, that the world witnessed an announcement of a Jihad fatwa in Iraq by such a highly esteemed Shia authority.<sup>40</sup>

The importance of the fatwa cannot be overstated. In Shia Islam, a fatwa issued by an ayatollah is considered obligatory for individual who emulate the opinions of him. Thus, as most Shias in Iraq follows Sistani, it became a religious duty to volunteer. Al-Sistani's fatwas have also been powerful in other political circumstances. Behind the curtains, Sistani played a significant political role following the downfall of Saddam's Baath-regime. Influencing a number of critical occasions in Iraq's political and security realm. For example, after the fall of Saddam, he urged the Iraqi population to participate in the elections.<sup>41</sup> However, his recent fatwa marked a radical change from his previous statements and appeals as an advocator for restraint and moderation. In February 2006, during the intensification of suicide attacks<sup>42</sup> by Salafi-jihadist insurgency groups<sup>43</sup> targeting al-Askari shrine, a place revered in Shia Islam in the town of Samarra to provoke sectarian violence, al-Sistani issued a fatwa for calm and unity.

The fatwa proved and asserted the Shia religious authority's role in Iraq and its ability to interfere in the most crucial matter. Al-Sistani, generally and often rendered as a "quietist" took the matter in his hands and demonstrated himself as Iraq's leader and guardian when the government failed to do so, urging Iraqis to take up arms. Sistani's call to take up arms not

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community to take part of it, Etan Kohlberg, "The Development of the Imāmī Shī'ī Doctrine of Jihād," *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 126, no. 1 (1976).

<sup>39</sup> Mike Obel, "Ayatollah Ali Sistani, Iraq's Highest-Ranking Shia Cleric, Issues Fatwa for Shias to Fight Isis," 13.06.2014 2014.

<sup>40</sup> The 1920 revolt in Iraq was instigated by the fatwa of the leading Shia cleric, Ayatollah Mohammed Taqi al-Shirazi. Yitzhak Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 2nd ed. with a new introduction by the author. ed. (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2003).

<sup>41</sup> The Independent, "Senior Shia Cleric Urges Iraqis to Vote in Elections," *The Independent*, 18.02.2010 2010.

<sup>42</sup> See for instance, Dodge, 16,17,56.

<sup>43</sup> Hafez.

only demonstrated the Iraqi state's weakness but also the Shia religious authority's strong position and function in the region.

Due to this fatwa, hundreds of thousands of Iraqi volunteers took up arms and joined the Iraqi army. The *levée en masse* of Iraqis joining the army established al-Hashd al-Sha'bi, (the Popular Mobilization). More importantly, and which has been the source of its controversy, Iraqi Shia militias, or as what they call themselves, Islamic Resistance Factions (Fasail al-Muqawama al-Islamiyya) also enlisted.

### **3.3 The emergence of a volunteer army**

In the wake of IS's rapid expansion in Iraq, conquering Mosul and mainly Northern Iraqi territories in June 2014, where it encountered almost no form of resistance by the Iraqi army, the country's religious authority, *marj'iyya*, reasserted itself as the Iraqi state's patrons by calling on the citizens of Iraq to defend the country and its holy places against the extremist militant's advance. The fatwa was announced during Sistani's representative, Sheikh Mahdi al-Karbalai during the Friday sermon delivered to a large crowd inside the holy shrine of Imam Hussein in Karbala. Sheikh Mahdi al-Karbalai announced that citizens who are able to bear arms and fight terrorists, in order to defend their country, people and holy places, should volunteer and join the security forces to achieve this holy purpose.

To defend the country against the terrorists was considered a sacred goal and those who got killed fighting IS militants were declared martyrs. The fatwa immediately mobilized prominent Iraqi Shia armed groups, hundreds of thousands civilians volunteered, particularly from the Shia areas, answering what is considered as a call of duty and joined the Iraqi army in the offensive against IS. The massive mass mobilization gave birth to al-Hashd al-Sha'bi. The term al-Hashd al-Sha'bi is composed of two Arabic words from the roots *hashada* and *sha'aba*. *Hashd* means to collect, mobilize, gather or crowd and *sha'bi* means people, popular or national. The term can thus be translated to People's Mobilization or the Popular/National Crowd/Mobilization. It is also known as Popular Mobilization Force.

Its birth dates back to the last months of Maliki's period, when the Iraqi government offered to arm citizens willing to fight IS, following insurgents capture of Mosul.<sup>44</sup> However, the appeal did not gather any substantial power until Ayatollah Sayyid Ali al-Sistani issued the jihad fatwa, which triggered hundreds of thousands of volunteers enthusiastically rallying to the call. Subsequently, the Iraqi government declared the establishment of al-Hashd al-Sha'bi umbrella organization, absorbed the mass mobilization and brought them under the government's authority. It became legitimized by the Iraqi State and part of the Iraqi Special Forces (ISF) joint command.<sup>45</sup> On the 7<sup>th</sup> of April 2015 it became formally under the authority of Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi as the commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces.<sup>46</sup>

Sistani's fatwa made it clear that it was not limited only to the protection of Iraqi Shia, but also included the protection of all Iraqis, territories and holy places. It strictly warned against any abuse in the liberated territories and issued recommendation on how to carry out jihad.<sup>47</sup> However, despite the fatwa's non-sectarian stance it aroused international fears especially among Sunni powers, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf as well as from the United Nations and was instantly interpreted as a critical development in the aftermath of the seizure of Mosul, sparking sectarian danger.<sup>48</sup> Without a doubt, it is the most interventionist fatwa by Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani to date since the US-led invasion of Iraq and thus marks a historical juncture. Nevertheless, the fatwa and the enormous response by the Iraqi community to the fatwa, serves as a reminder that Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani's power and legitimacy in Iraq remains very present.

When I spoke to Sistani's representative, Sheikh Abdul Mehdi al-Karbalai, I asked him why the religious authority issued a call to arms following the IS emergence in the country and not during al-Qaida's presence in Iraq. Al-Karbalai replied that it has to do with the current context and IS as an insurgent group, which he said differs from al-Qaida's strategy and governing structure: "IS is not merely a terrorist group, it is an insurgent group that has captured broad stretches of territory in Iraq and has declared an Islamic caliphate that extends

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<sup>44</sup> Al Arabiya News, "Maliki Offers to Arm Citizens Willing to Fight Isis," *Al Arabiya News*, 10.06.2014 2014.

<sup>45</sup> Al Jazeera, "Iraq's Parliament Passes Law Legalising Shia Militias," *Al Jazeera*, 26.11.2016 2016.

<sup>46</sup> Republic of Iraq: General Secretariat for the Council of Ministers, "Qarārāt Majlis Al-Wuzarā' Li-L-Jalsa Raqm 14 Fii 07.04.2015 " *Republic of Iraq: General Secretariat for the Council of Ministers* (2015).

<sup>47</sup> Al-Sayyid Ali Al-Husseini Al-Sistani, "Advice and Guidance to the Fighters on the Battlefields," *The Official Website of the Office of His Eminence: Al-Sayyid Ali Al-Husseini Al-Sistani* (2015).

<sup>48</sup> Al Arabiya, "Rise of Shiite Militias Could Fracture Iraq," *Al Arabiya*, 16.06.2014 2014.

from Diyala in Iraq to Aleppo in Syria. In addition to the Iraqi government security forces' collapse following the seizure of Mosul, there was a need of a call to arms to urge volunteers to join the security forces and fight the insurgents”.

### **3.3.1 Iraqi Shia armed group's participation within al-Hashd al-Sha'bi**

Although al-Hashd al-Sha'bi is composed of various religious components of the Iraqi population, with the majority of the volunteers being Shia civilians, the engagement of the Shia armed groups has been the core of al-Hashd al-Sha'bi. Iraqi Shia armed groups emerged shortly after the 2003 invasion of Iraq and have been a prominent and prevailing actor in Iraq's security environment. In addition to the thousands of civilian volunteers joining the Iraqi army, including Sunnis and Christians, the Popular Mobilization is composed of approximately 40 Iraqi Shia armed groups. While some emerged as resistance movements during Saddam Hussein's rule, others emerged following the US-led occupation of Iraq in 2003. Additionally, new ones were formed following the seizure of Mosul. The most largest and powerful within al-Hashd are those who formerly belonged to Badr Organization (Munazzamat al-Badr), League of the Righteous (“Asaib Ahl al-Haqq) and Hezbollah Battalions (Kataib Hizbullah).<sup>49</sup>

As the Iraqi state lost its institutional and coercive capacity, protecting the Iraqi civilians, particularly the Shia from the Sunni insurgency the Iraqi Shia population have depended on the Shia militias. In a country with little government and no order, the Shia armed groups testified powerfully to the inability of the Iraqi government to guarantee the personal safety of the Shia citizens.<sup>50</sup> Consequently, they increased their power and visibility on the streets and towns. While the Sunni insurgency exploited anti-Shia sentiments, stemming from the fear of the Sunni marginalization and alienation in the newly formed government, the Shia militias rose up through a legitimization in the name of sectarian killing performed by Sunni insurgent groups. Consequently, they asserted themselves as the Shia population protectors, which the Iraqi security services could not accomplish.

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<sup>49</sup> Michael Knights, "The Evolution of Iran's Special Groups in Iraq," *West Point Counter Terrorism Center Sentinel* (2010). K Gilbert, "The Rise of Shi'ite Militias and the Post-Arab Spring Sectarian Threat," (2013).

<sup>50</sup> Ches Thurber, "Militias as Sociopolitical Movements: Lessons from Iraq's Armed Shia Groups," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 25, no. 5-6 (2014).

Iraqi Shia armed groups stepped in the security vacuum left behind by US-led invasion and engaged in military activities against the Coalition forces, as well as with the Sunni insurgency and occasionally with the Iraqi government.<sup>51</sup> They continued their military fight against the US-led Coalition forces until their withdrawal in late 2011. Following the US-led forces withdrawal of Iraq, they shifted their focus from military activity to political, cultural and social activity. Until they resurged into prominence within the mass popular mobilization in response to the dramatic advance of IS in the region.

Three prominent non-governmental Shia armed groups were present in Iraq in the aftermath of the 2003 war known as Mahdi Army (Jaysh al-Mahdi), Hezbollah Battalions (Kataib Hizbullah) and League of the Righteous (‘‘Asaib Ahl al-Haqq). All these three are included in al-Hashd al-Sha’bi’s umbrella organization. Iraqi Shia armed groups’ forebears have evolved from social movements such as the Sadrists movement (Mahdi Army), into becoming a political-military force in the post-2003 Iraq. Some of the groups’ origin can be traced back to the period under the rule of Saddam that began as a Shia Islamist opposition to Saddam’s Baath regime, such as the Badr Organization which later emerged as a military fraction in 2014.

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<sup>51</sup> Dodge.

## 4 The discourse analysis

This chapter will examine several important characteristics of how various figures in al-Hashd al-Sha'bi discursively legitimate the role of the Hashd and its war on IS. I will begin by examining how they perceive the role of a-Sistani's fatwa, before looking further into how they explain the necessity of establishing al-Hashd. By exploring the elite's explanation on why al-Hashd is an important organization we will get an insight into its motives and goals. In the third section, I will look into how they seek to promote themselves as a part of the Iraqi military, contrary to the prevailing assumption of them being militias. Here, a further examination of the on-going institutionalization process is important. Section four studies how members of al-Hashd argue for their presence as necessary to protect the state, while the fifth section looks at how they advocate for their presence as strengthening the state. The sixth part looks at how the informants of al-Hashd seek to distance themselves from the sectarianism, while the seventh part focuses on how al-Hashd counters the portrayal of them as Iran proxies. The seventh part will look at the ambiguous relationship that al-Hashd shares with the US and its western allies, partly blaming it for the IS's existence in the country and at the same time criticizes what they perceive as a passive stance in countering it. The eighth section will cover their viewpoints of the regional countries, and in particular how they regard the role of Saudi Arabia. The last section will look at their future prospects as some of its prominent figures are now preparing to participate as candidates of the coming parliamentary elections.

### 4.1 The Blessed Fatwa (*al-Fatwa al-Muqaddasa*)<sup>52</sup>

The fatwa's effect and influence has been one of the most important legitimizing elements of al-Hashd al-Sha'bi's discourse in their fight against IS. Against this backdrop, al-Hashd al-Sha'bi's elite has strived to be perceived as an Iraqi army that represents all Iraqis, disregarding religion, even though it was built by a decree from a Shia cleric, by including and promoting other sect and religions within al-Hashd. It should come as no surprise that the fatwa and its role and effect are seen as vital and functional in the turmoil that followed IS seizure of Iraqi territories in 2014. They focus and emphasize on the fatwa's necessity rather than its Shia nature.

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<sup>52</sup> A common designation of al-Sistani's fatwa by all of my informants.



Al-Hashd al-Sha'bi's deputy commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis highlighted the fatwa's effect and role as such:

The turning point was Sayed al-Sistani's fatwa. This was the starting point for the youth to protect the sacred places; Karbala, Najaf and al-Kadhimya that were threatened by IS and to defend Baghdad, a fundamental change occurred; a new factor emerged in the change. Initially, foreigners did not believe that this would be a movement that would affect the military course of events, but it did.

Al-Muhandis describes the fatwa's role and force in creating a new fundamental factor in the region that affected the military course events, as an important and blessed phenomenon that the Iraqi state needs. He also added that it laid the grounds for an independence military branch. As such, he indicated an intention for its greater potential in the future Iraq.

The leader of "Asaib Ahl al-Haq, Sheikh Qays al-Khazali, also stated the fatwa's purpose as a defender and protector of Iraq:

If it was not for the fatwa of Sistani I can say that Baghdad definitely would have fallen, Iraq would have fallen down and the whole Gulf region would be under Da'esh's control.<sup>53</sup> What al-Hashd did, consisting of youth volunteering after Sayed al-Sistani's fatwa, was to defend their country, holy places and their people.

Although the respondents praised the fatwa's role as a significant factor for stopping IS's capture of other cities and obstructed the militants from progressing towards Baghdad, they also proudly mentioned the Iraqi peoples response to the fatwa, in addition to the non-state armed groups that fought against Saddam's Baath regime and the ones that emerged as a response to the occupation forces in post 2003 Iraq. Badr leader Hadi al-'Ameri said:

Personally, I believed that Sayed Ali al-Sistani definitely would announce a declaration. We wished for that but did not want to interfere because he is the most wise. If the incident calls for an urgent need of a ruling, he would give one. But in all honestly we were surprised. Sayed al-Sistani was studying the incident very precisely,

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<sup>53</sup> Da'esh is used synonymous for IS. It is the more frequently used label in the Arab world as a perogative term, although it initially is the pronouncement of their Arabic abbreviation.

if it was not for the fatwa and the Iraqi peoples response to the fatwa, and the role of the Islamic movements (*Ḥarakāt al-Islāmiya*), resistance factions (*faṣā'il al-muqāwama*), both those who were against the Saddam regime and those who were against the occupation forces. These were able with their experience and skills to organize the Hashd. Sayed al-Sistani's fatwa and the enormous response of the Iraqi people to the fatwa. I believe, is something to be proud of.

The Sunni politician Abdul Rahman al-Luwayzi described the fatwa's function as a significant and necessary move after the capture of broad stretches of Iraqi territory by IS. By focusing on Sistani's role in mobilizing the Iraqi population to take up arm, he, at the same time, makes a point on Iraqi state's leaders' powerless and ineffective leadership in mobilizing and appealing to the Iraqi society. The then Iraq's Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki encouraged civilians to volunteer to fight IS fighters by providing them weapons and equipment.<sup>54</sup> However the appeal was not answered in the same way as Sistani's call to take up arm. Al-Luwayzi said:

Sayed Ali al-Sistani's fatwa that established al-Hashd al-Sha'bi, came to play a great and functional role. The first effect it had was to stop the deterioration of security and prevent Baghdad from falling. Subsequently, al-Hashd al-Sha'bi contributed directly to destroying the myth of Da'esh as being undefeatable.

The Christian leader of Babylon Brigade, Rayan al-Kildani focused on the non-sectarian elements of the fatwa that it was for all Iraqis regardless of religion and sect, saying:

The fatwa of Imam Sistani did not specify a specific sect but it was to all Iraqis. Thus who can carry weapon to defend Iraq, it was for all Iraqis, Sunni, Shia, Turkmen and Christians. At that time the fatwa was the front valve to Iraq, if it was not for the blessed fatwa and al-Hashd al-Sha'bi, Da'esh would be in Baghdad, and Abu Baker al-Baghadid would be in the Green Zone.<sup>55</sup> [...] To be honest the blessed fatwa of Ayallolah Sayed Ali al-Sistani was not specified to only the Shia. Yes it was the Shia religious establishment (which issued it) but we consider Sayed Ali al-Sistani as a

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<sup>54</sup> ABC News, "Mosul: Iraqi Pm Nouri Al-Maliki Calls for State of Emergency after Insurgents Take Control," *ABC News*, 12.06.2014 2014.

<sup>55</sup> The Green Zone is the governmental centre of Bagdad. The headquarter of al-Hashd is also situated in this area.

representatives of all the sects of Iraq not only Shias. We all needed this blessed fatwa that emerged. Because the danger emerged towards Baghdad, Najaf and Karbala,, threatening all three cities with the terror (of the) Da'esh organization.

The Sunni leader al-'Assafi emphasized all the segments of the Iraqi people's participation in al-Hashd:

After the danger that occurred when IS took control over Iraqi territories, the religious cleric, Sayed Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, issued the jihad *kifāya* fatwa. Likewise, the children of Iraq, from all the religions, Christians, Yazidis and Muslims took up arms to fight Da'esh. Consequently, a civilian mobilization from all components of Iraq was mobilized and established what became known as al-Hashd al-Sha'bi.

By mentioning different sects in Iraq, al-'Assafi is highlighting the non-sectarian aspects of the fatwa. Furthermore, he describes it as a jihad *kifāya*, thereby giving it a religious importance that also includes Sunnis.

## 4.2 Baghdad would have fallen

It should come as no surprise that the stated reason for the establishment of al-Hashd al-Sha'bi is the collapse of the Iraqi army in Mosul and the need for an armed force that could repel and stand against IS advance. It is however relevant to mention the respondents argument of the necessity of the continuity of al-Hashd al-Sha'bi even after IS has been combated and removed. This provides an insight into not just their current short-term goal removing IS but also their long-term goals. As Deputy Chairman of al-Hashd al-Sha'bi, abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, put it:

There was a huge danger, Baghdad was in the danger of falling, and the government was in a crISIS; it lost three provinces, and lost three to four military sections along with their weapons. The government would not have been able to fight and resist Da'esh if al-Hashd al-Sha'bi did not exist.

All respondents said that the fall of Mosul and the collapse of the Iraqi army and its weakness was the reason for the establishment of the Hashd al-Sha'bi, regardless of whether they were

elites of al-Hashd al-Sha'bi or political faction such as al-Luwayzi, Ninawah Member of Parliament al-Luwayzi, who said:

Al-Hashd al-Sha'bi emerged as a response to the needs of the realities on the ground. Da'esh's offensive progress on Mosul and the fallouts that followed; such as collapse of the Iraqi army, prepared and enabled Da'esh to approach Baghdad's parts. Consequently, there was an urgent need for a force that could repel Da'esh's attacks and progress.

A Sunni Sheikh al-Asafi simply said: "if it was not for al-Hashd al Sha'bi, not even one inch of Iraq's soil would be liberated".

Not only the interviews, but also several of the regular conversations I had with members of al-Hashd al-Sha'bi while waiting for my respondents revolved around the importance of the establishment of such military organization. They spoke of IS danger and terror in the region and described how Iraq would be under the control of IS caliphate if it was not for the contribution of al-Hashd al-Sha'bi in the battlefields.

The establishment of al-Hashd al-Sha'bi emerged also as a result of weakness of the state, the state's inability to exercise effective control over its territory and citizens although the informants did not criticize the Iraqi government security directly, they clearly saw a hole in the security apparatus, which is to be filled by al-Hashd al-Sha'bi's. As 'Asaib Ahl al-Haq's founder and leader put it: "If the army and police were sufficient then Sayed Ali al-Sistani would not have issued a fatwa and the Iraqi government would not have provided al-Hashd al-Sha'bi with all the supplement and requirement."

Leader of Badr Organization Hadi al-'Ameri, explained it this way:

So the government formed an organization and this organization is to organize those who volunteered in al-Hashd al-Sha'bi. Our role was to organize these gatherings, these forces and to stand up against Da'esh, especially after the collapse of the military institution in Mosul. At that time we had no military power that could repel the advances of Da'esh towards Baghdad. If it was not the fatwa of Sistani I can say

that Baghdad definitely would have fallen down, Iraq would have fallen down and the whole Gulf region would be under Da'esh's control.

The elite's strategy of assisted military contribution against IS helps to further their argument that al-Hashd al-Sha'bi played a significant role in the country. All respondents acknowledged that al-Hashd al-Sha'bi's establishment was a military creation in favour of the Iraqi government. They underlined al-Hashd al-Sha'bi military strength as both essential and crucial for the survival of the nation and highlighted al-Hashd al-Sha'bi fighters preparedness and willingness to fight the insurgents when the army was incapable of doing so. I asked my informants how they received the news regarding Mosul's fall and the collapse of the armed forces in Nineveh. One, such as al-'Ameri said:

In all honestly we were expecting that, because the military was exhausted in Ramadi, however we were surprised with the Mosul collapse operation, because the information we had, was that the leaders were saying "we are good, we have no problem and there is no danger" etc.... I think amongst several matters, what contributed to Mosul's.... to be honest is the administration and finance corruption that hit the military institution, and made some leaders disregard all things not related to money. This created distance between them; sometimes they even used to kidnap and release in exchange for money. There was an incorrect military building; we did not build a strong military institution. Many of those who came, came because of the salary. The needed training did not exist; the willingness ability and skills were not there. There are many mistakes. I think the main problem of the military institution is the financial corruption

Amerli clearly sees a need for a new military organization that is not corrupt and weak. As Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis argues: "A new equation emerged and changed the balance of power, to the advantage of the government and the people. And this was unexpected."

Thus one essential precondition for the establishment of the organization through their discourse has been the weakness of the state, they all indicated the state's inability to exercise effective control over Mosul and Nineveh province and its subjects are the main reasons for al-Hashd al-Sha'bi formation. As such al-Hashd al-Sha'bi has benefitted from the weakness of the Iraqi state and legitimized its existence and rose into prominence owing to crises and

the Iraqi government's inability to challenge the threat posed by insurgents. The organization was mobilized in the midst of the conflict. As the informants argued, as long as there is an armed conflict and the government is weak their existence becomes increasingly more important.

Ahmed al-Asadi, the official spokesman of al-Hashd al-Sha'bi explained it in the following way:

In the aftermath of this enormous collapse, the religious fatwa emerged; and tens of thousands of the Iraqi population volunteered to defend their country, holy places and to respond to the call of the fatwa and the homeland; to defend their land and honours. Simultaneous with the fatwa announcement, the prime minister instructed to form an organization, body, to organize those thousands of volunteers. Thus this organization was called al-Hashd al-Sha'bi.

While MP al-Luwayzi clarified further:

Sistani's fatwa was a wise decision and had a great role and effect on preventing Baghdad from falling, and also to mobilize the public towards the enemy. To be honest if the political leaders were verdict then the existence of such enemy like Da'esh would be an opportunity to unite and put all these politicians in one trench to combat Da'esh.

Although countering IS' seizure, and their goal to establish an Islamic caliphate in Iraq was the main goal to form al-Hashd al-Sha'bi, the collapse of the security forces in Mosul has been argued as equally critical. Preservation of the Iraqi state and opposition to IS are key priorities to al-Hashd al-Sha'bi, where their role has been to uphold the status quo on behalf of the government. Exploring their answers, the sentiment expressed above, demonstrate significant objects for their establishment as a significant military organization in post-2014 Iraq. First, is that al-Hashd al-Sha'bi possesses military strength that is both essential and crucial for the survival of the Iraqi government. They proclaim their superiority military and organizational over the conventional military forces and their readiness to fight IS militants when the army was unable to do so. They function as key counterinsurgency forces where

their role is to substitute for the. The deputy commander of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces describes this as follows:

Al-Hashd is now a powerful military system, in all our combats we depend on the planning. First we go and work on reconnaissance very well. We do not progress in our operations to the place. First our youth go where the enemy is and come back. Al-Hashd's intelligence is comparable to the army's intelligence; it is well developed. We plan our operations and the planning make up 50% of the operations' victory. Another point, we have a heavy fire, like weapons, munitions, missiles and combat cars. We have manoeuvre in our operations; our operations mainly consist of manoeuvre and collar, so that we can surround Da'esh, in addition to courage and persistence. We have a good system, we are now spread into brigades, these brigades, are spread in all our defence lines against Da'esh. Our military organization is not simply group of people and tribal that progress towards war zones. The tribal sons and peoples sons are now organized into a fully military and security system.

Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis highlights al-Hashd al-Sha'bi's superior military power, the high level of individual motivation amongst their fighters and al Hashd al-Sha'bi's material resources, structure and tactics which make them the best alternative to conventional armed forces. The latter is notorious for their low morale and poor organization.

Thus, the motives and incentives for the establishment of al-Hashd al-Sha'bi have primarily been the religious fatwa and secondly the military collapse. When the military collapsed as al-Assadi argues, they saw a need for a better and more secure security division and here al-Hashd al-Sha'bi could step in. Al-Hashd's spokesperson explains it as first being an assisted military unit that contributed to save Iraq and its people against the terrorist invasion:

Firstly, Since 2003 until 2014, we have not witnessed an occupation of a complete territory. Even Fallujah, during the first and the second battle, was not occupied in this way, and therefore there was no need for hundreds of thousands of volunteers. Secondly, the security system, especially the army, some units in the defence and local army collapsed, due to corruption and there was no monitor in the organization of these forces. It resulted in hundreds of terrorists seizing Mosul, where over 60.000 fighters existed. An enormous collapse took place in the governance security and military system.

### **4.3 We are not a militia, we are a state force**

How to define the organization al-Hashd al-Sha'bi has been a controversial question. As previously mentioned, the organization has been described as a militia, Iran-proxy, paramilitary and a sectarian organization. One of the most important subjects for al-Hashd al-Sha'bi's discourse has been to portray itself as a state force and not as a militia. All of the respondents agreed that is an Iraqi state force organization and they all refused the term militia. They emphasized the integration of the Popular Mobilization forces into the existing state's security apparatus that has helped to reinforce the country's security status quo. As Kataib Hezbollah spokesperson Ja'far al-Hussaini put it: "We work side by side with the security service and al-Hashd al-Sha'bi that is a governmental organization that is acknowledged by the parliament and the Iraqi government. Thus there is no room for us being called militias."

Badr Organization's leader, Hadi al-'Ameri, refused terms such as militias and said:

We reject those names such as militias. According to the Iraqi law, a militia is any military formation that carries weapon outside the government's framework. Currently we are carrying the government's weapon and we do not have any other weapon besides the government's weapons. The Hashd establishment is by the government. The previous Prime Minister, Nouri al-Maliki is the one who established al-Hashd al-Sha'bi's organization. The current Prime Minister, DR. al-Abadi also ordered the establishment of al-Hashd al-Sha'bi organization. Thus al-Hashd al-Sha'bi organization is an official governmental formation.

Thus, al-Hashd present themselves as strengthening the Iraqi security forces rather than creating a separate parallel and independent paramilitary force. Sheikh Qais al-Khazali's response to the question of whether they consider themselves to be a militia is illuminating:

Of course we reject [the word militia] and do not accept this meaning we do not consider this meaning precise and just at all. This is due to several reasons, one of the reasons and the main one is that; currently all of these formations work in accordance with legitimate perspective, that is the fatwa by the highest religious authority in the



holy Najaf, Sayed Ali al-Sistani. In respect to the law, it works in accordance with the government's cover, in accordance with the executive committee decree issued by the Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces, the Prime Minister. They are entitled, all the budgets, salaries, weaponry and the decision of the operations is from the government. Consequently we are regarded by the Iraqi government's law; factions under the law's roof. Thus we reject the term militias with the meaning they conclude, which is groups outside the law.

Deputy Commander of al-Hashd al-Sha'bi, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, describes terms, such as militia, on the organization in the following way: "This is part of the psychological war (*al-harb al nafsiyeh*) against us." He elaborates:

A militia is commonly known as being an armed group outside the control of the government. However, our so-called militias are in fact groups and masses that responded to the fatwa [of al-Sistani] and the government acknowledged them. That is why this is part of the psychological war.

By portraying themselves as a formal organization capable of conducting large operations with ISF, they seek to build legitimacy and credibility. Such a portrayal supports al-Hashd's on-going efforts to increase legitimacy as a permanent and critical organization within the Iraqi Security Forces. It indicates that it does not regard itself as simply a militia or an armed group that emerged with IS' assault on Mosul, and will vanish when IS is defeated.

According to our constitution, we are not militias. The constitution says that a militia is a group that carries weapon outside the government's framework. We are inside the government's framework. We are under the command of the Commander in chief of the Armed Forces, the Prime Minister. We have not entered a single military operation without the command of the Commander in chief of the armed forces, initially it was Maliki and currently it is Dr. Haidar al-'Abadi.

On November 26, 2016, when Iraq's parliament approved a law integrating the Al-Hashd into a separate, official Iraqi Army, it transformed the various non-state armed groups into a state force. Moreover, according to the new law, the organization is part of Iraq's armed forces, directly commanded by the prime minister.

The Iraqi government's decision to incorporate the militias and transform them into a state force, helped to prevent a potential undermining of the central government, as al-Hashd al-Sha'bi is now part of the state force. The Iraqi state thus has a monopoly on the authorization of legitimate force and al-Hashd al-Sha'bi is functioning within the legal framework, deeming it therefore, unfit for categorizations and labels such as 'militia'. Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq leader Sheikh Qais al-Khazali said:

Our entire finance is from the Iraqi government. The Iraqi government's budget for this year and the last year was included in the statement with the financial plan that the Iraqi government approved as al-Hashd al-Sha'bi's budget. [...] Some accuse the resistance factions, *al-faṣā'il al-muqāwama*, for not working in accordance to the commands and instructions of the Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces. Al-Hashd al-Sha'bi is a volunteer institution it depends on the emergence of the legitimate religious edict, its cover, military aim and function is in accordance with the law and under the instruction of the Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces. These are important elements. There is a difference between al-Hashd al-Sha'bi, those who belong to al-Hashd al-Sha'bi and those who belong to the Ministry of the Interior and defence. The difference is that those who belong to the Ministry of the Interior and defence are persons who are employed,; they have a (set) salary, rights and welfare benefits etc. They are as such obligated to the governmental rules. Those who are associated with and belong to al-Hashd al-Sha'bi are, however, volunteers. Their motives (in joining) are due to the religious edict, thus the government until now does not consider them employees, which means it does not give them the adequate salary for their work. There is a big different between the salary of al-Hashd al-Sha'bi and those in the Ministry of Interior and Ministry of Defence. A member of al-Hashd al-Sha'bi's salary is approximately 400\$, whereas those belonging to the security services receive 1000\$. Al-Hashd al-Sha'bi's members have no rights and welfare benefits. We can expect that after the liberation of Mosul we can be told; thanks you for your effort. What I mean is that the volunteer work that al-Hashd al-Sha'bi performs is an essential point. Our commitment to the instruction of the Commander in Chief of the armed forces means that we do not carry any operation, which the Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces does not accept or does not instruct us to. However our voluntarily and religious aspect makes it not obligatory upon us to

perform an operation that the commander in chief order us to and we find that it is a legislative ambiguity. There is a precise equivalence that should be clear. For example if we want to perform an operation in one district, and the commander in chief of the armed forces does not accept that, we should submit to his orders, because in the end we have commitments. However if one day the commander in chief of the armed forces asks us to work under the umbrella of the US occupation force, or with the Turkish forces and we believe in accordance with our legislative outbreak that it is ambiguity in performing that order and we came voluntarily the finance the government provide is very limited we are not obligated to follow it. This equivalence needs the precise distinction. When it is demanded of us to fight with the American forces and we do not fight, this does not mean that we are outside the power of the commander in chief of the armed forces or that we are insubordinate to the law. The proof is that we do not perform any operation and we have not performed any operation during the period of over two years where there is no acceptance or instructions from the commander in chief of the armed forces.

Al-Khaz'ali points to important differences between al-Hashd and the regular military which might be interpreted as a support to those who argue that al-Hashd cannot be considered as integrated into the state force. However, the differences that he points to have recently been changed in an attempt to further integrate al-Hashd into the conventional military force.<sup>56</sup> One can therefore argue that during my fieldwork, some aspects of their status as a state force or militia was still ambiguous.

When I asked the Badr leader, Hadi al-'Ameri, if he supports The Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces and the Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's declaration with regards to transforming al-Hashd al-Sha'bi into a force equivalent to The Counter Terrorism Service, which will be part of the military brand, he answered:

I personally believe that weapons should be restricted to the hands of the government. All weaponry should be under the control and command of the government. Since its inception, al-Hashd has been under the control and command of the government, and it should get even more organized under the commands of the government.

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<sup>56</sup> Nahrainnet, "داعش مع معاركه في جريحا 21300 وشهيدا 7637 وقدم اعدائه انف رغم مقدس الشعبى الحشد : الحق اهل عصائب عام امين", *Nahrain*, 13.12.2017 2017.

I followed up by asking him if he thought it would lose its support from the grass root if this will happen, he answered:

There are two things here; how to secure and take care of these morals, therefore it will be important to organize al-Hashd, we have no other option than to organize al-Hashd. But how can we secure this moral part of al-Hashd so that these spirit morals remain fighting and on the other side how to organize al-Hashd in order to transfer it into a disciplined organization. This needs work and equation. [...] Yesterday I talked about this, if we build al-Hashd and make it as a military institution I do not think it will perform the work it supposed to. We should build al-Hashd in such a form similar to special forces, where its specialization will be its non military war, so called *ḥarb ghayr niẓāmiyya*, non-conventional war.

To define al-Hashd al-Sha'bi is not a simple task. There are qualitatively different means and strategies attributed to the terms militias, paramilitary and Iran-proxy but also because it is politically charged. Still, 'state-parallel' paramilitary force category cannot thoroughly be applied to al-Hashd al-Sha'bi as they are formally integrated into the Iraqi security forces. What distinguishes al-Hashd al-Sha'bi from other non-state armed groups and militias, including 'state-parallel' militia, are that it is a force that is directly accountable to the government. Thus, the phenomenon of al-Hashd al-Sha'bi does not fit into either of the two categories. Not only is it a force that was in the process of being integrated into Iraqi security forces (ISF) joint command, they also are only allowed to follow the commands of the commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces, Haidar al-Abadi.

On November 2016 the Iraqi government passed a law recognizing al-Hashd al-Sha'bi as an independent military force that is subject to the supreme commander of the armed forces Haidar al-Abadi. Thus according to Carey et al.<sup>57</sup> criteria for being called a pro-government militia and one of Huseyn's stipulated condition for 'state-parallel' militia is that paramilitaries are not part of the regular security forces. Consequently al-Hashd al-Sha'bi fails to fulfil the criteria of being called 'state-parallel' paramilitary.

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<sup>57</sup> Carey, Mitchell, and Lowe.

### 4.3.1 Institutionalization of al-Hashd al-Sha'bi

In summer 2014, the Iraqi Council of Ministers attempted to institutionalize the administration and recruitment of al-Hashd al-Sha'bi by calling for a directorate body (*hay'at al-Hashd al-Sha'bi*). The institutionalization of al-Hashd not only gave the Iraqi government the control of the recruitment process and an effort to bring al-Hashd under its auspices, but it also gave al-Hashd al-Sha'bi an official legitimacy. Critics has defined and explained al-Hashd al-Sha'bi for technically being under the Iraqi state's control however in practice Iranian-backed political groups control al-Hashd.<sup>58</sup> However, representatives of al-Hashd al-Sha'bi denies such accusations and argues they are part of the Iraqi state and they have no interests in remaining militia and is currently part of the Iraqi state. Deputy commander of al-Hashd al-Sha'bi, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis explains the legislation process as such:

It is a regulatory process, this happened after long dialogs. Al-Hashd al-Sha'bi as it is considered, is an institution. In the beginning there were an expectation of al-Hashd that after the end of Da'esh, there may not be a need for it, that it can be demitted. The majority in the government and the political forces reached a decision that it is necessary that al-Hashd remains and cannot be dissolved, because the dangers that threaten Iraq. Da'esh cannot be fought only by military forces, but with al-Hashd. Also al-Hashd has become an integral military system. We have an office similar to the Ministry of Defence; we have all staffs that are necessary regarding military forces. Our leader's office is communal with the police and the military. The Iraqi government and the chief commander came to a contentment that it is important of the durability and remaining of these forces. So that these forces remain formally. I told you we are in a triangle, fatwa, and the religious belief, the peoples respond and the approval of the governmental regulation. If we remain, we have to organize our position, there has to be an assurance for members of al-Hashd al-Sha'bi, there is a need for retirement, we have martyrs, wounded, mujahedeen that have been striving. This year will be the third year that they have strived for the country's sake. There has to be an assurance and guaranteeing for their rights. This guarantee has to be legislated. That's why the commander of chief announced this command. And we hope the law of Hashd al-Sha'bi will be voted in the parliament. This is to organize our inner position. We are organized with brigades; forms, staffs and leaders, but this

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<sup>58</sup> Knights.

will not stop our continued roots with the people. This is the philosophy of the subject, if we discontinue with the peoples subject and the relationship with the Ummah, community and discontinue with the religious and nation belief we will be transferred into an ordinary force, that may be left without any influence. So there will be no need for us. We could just broaden the army, with two three sections, if we negate our relationship with the community. So no our relationship with the people will remain, we cannot function without the people. In all our operations the people give their sons and their money. Like the day of *Arba'īn*, (40<sup>th</sup> day), in all our operations there is *mawākib* (locations where tents are erected), people's donations and the cooking, always accompany us. With Allah's will our relationship with the people will remain.

It is important for al-Hashd al-Sha'bi's representatives that their relationship with the Iraqi community will still remain even though they are currently under the Iraqi states' control and part of an government entity operation alongside the military. However they highlight the role and influence of the people, fatwa and the approval of the government' regulation, that all the three altogether make al-Hashd al-Sha'bi the unique institution that it is currently. Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq leader, Sheikh Qais al-Khazali, says that "the religious, national and political leaders of al-Hashd al-Sha'bi do exist and have an effect. Without these religious, political and jihadi leaders then al-Hashd al-Sha'bi would not have played this prominent role it has."

Factions within al-Hashd al-Sha'bi are removed as al-Hashd al-Sha'bi's spokesman Ahmed al-Asadi argued:

Like I said previously we do not speak in terms of factions anymore but numbers of brigades [...] The fractions have connections with the prime minister through their commanders. Those leaders have connection with the highest in command that is the prime minister. In al Hashd al-Sha'bi whatever concerns the military, logistic and administrative its pattern is obvious. Since we started until today we do not advance towards any operation, sometimes we even had to delay operation as happened in Fallujah. The Fallujah operation with regard to its danger and importance to Baghdad, we had to delay it because we had to wait for the acceptance and commands from the

commander in chief of the armed forces. We had actually planned to enter Fallujah in the end of 2015.

When I asked him why it was delayed, he answered:

Because we calculate differently for example, we calculate in terms of military, however the commander in chief of the armed forces, he calculate the military, political, economical and media, he has all these lines that meet up, that's why he is called commander in chief. His responsibility is to take everything into account, so that nothing gets affected. He has the last decision and say. Thus when we had to wait we waited, until we got the command from the chief of commander and we performed the commands [...] When we were ordered to advance Gharma for example we went to Garhma, Saqlaweiya, edges of Fallujah we went to edges of Fallujah and so forth. We are committed to instructions issued by the commander in chief of the armed forces. It is instructions given to us of how to perform them and that's what we follow. There are instructions given to the leaders in al-Hashd of how to perform and act during the battles.

As seen, the representatives of al-Hashd al-Sha'bi highlight the guidelines and instructions of the Iraqi government that they follow before and during the combats, and as such argues they are technically and in practice under the control of the Iraqi government. Badr leader, Hadi al-'Ameri, said:

Me personally I believe that weapons should be restricted in the hands of the government. All the weapons should be under the control and command of the government. Al-Hashd since its inception is under the control and command of the government, and it should get even more organized under the command of the government.

On the question on whether he thought it would loose some of the popular connection it has with the people if that happened, he answered:

There are two things, how to secure and take care of these morals, therefor it will be important to organize al-Hashd, we have no other option than to organize al-Hashd.

But how can we secure this moral part of al-Hashd so that these spirit morals remain to fight and on the other side how to organize al-Hashd to transfer it into a disciplined organization this needs work and equation [...] In every single operation we communicate with Prime Minister about the combats and we start to coordinate with the police and the army. We function as teamwork with the police, army and security service to execute the operations. Not a single operation did we execute by ourselves, not a single one, except with the acceptance of the Commander in Chief [...] In fact we have disagreed several times with the Commander in Chief. For example initially we were supposed to perform Baji operation, when Ramadi fell down, the Prime Minister commanded us to go to vicinity of Baghdad, so we went to vicinity of Baghdad. We were ready and prepared to perform the Bajji operation. We left Baji and went to perform vicinity of Baghdad operation. After vicinity of Baghdad I told him we should go to Fallujah first, he said no first Baji, after discussions in the end we followed the commands of Prime Minister, thus we gave up on our opinion and followed the Prime Minister's commands. After Baji operation I told him lets enter Fallujah first, he said no al-Jazeera first, north of Samarra and Tikrit; I gave up on my opinion and performed Prime Minister's instruction. After that, we said let us advance in al-Gahyara first then Fallujah, he said no first Fallujah. So several times we have had different opinions, and lastly we obey Prime Minister's orders, because he is the Command in Chief.

This indicates that al-Hashd al-Sha'bi's representatives may influence and discuss their opinion and also disagree however the last decision and will is with the Prime Minister and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces Haider al-Abadi.

On November 26<sup>th</sup> in 2016, the Iraqi government passed legislation making al-Hashd an official component of Iraq's security forces, subject to military law, with equal status to the army. The legislation got supported by 208 of the chamber's 327 members.<sup>59</sup> The Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi praised the law and said the fighters had proved themselves a significant part of Iraqi defences since IS capture of Iraqi provinces in summer 2014. "Those

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<sup>59</sup> Mohammed and Salma Abdelaziz Tawfeeq, "Sunnis Outraged by Iraq Law Legalizing Shiite-Led Militias," *CNN*, 28.11.2016 2016.



heroic fighters, young and old, need our loyalty for the sacrifices they have made, this is the least we can do.”<sup>60</sup>

## **4.4 Al-Hashd al-Sha’bi is the Iraqi state’s defender and protector**

The leaders of al-Hashd have on numerous accounts emphasized that they operate as a military force for all the Iraqi people and do not discriminate with regards to neither religion nor sect. As al-‘Ameri states,

The General Commander [Haidar al-‘Abadi] said we are not able to participate in the liberation of Mosul without the participation of al-Hashd. These people (the people who are discussing who can liberate Mosul, are the same people who let Mosul fall down) neither want Iraq nor the Iraqi army. They have sold their nationalism and they are even willing to let the Turkish support them but not al-Hashd. Al-Hashd, who are their country men. It is the Iraqis who emerged in the wake of Sayed Sistani’s fatwa and participated in the liberation of all cities, from Thuqeliya, Salah al-Din, Ramadi etc. Nevertheless we did not remain in the liberated cities, we withdrew and left it to its inhabitants. In al-Alam they sat with their sons, ruling al-Alam, while we were in the front lines, giving martyrs everyday. We liberate the territories and gave it back to its people. We reject our country being occupied by Da’esh, if some of them accept that, then we do not.

Hadi al-‘Ameri clearly attacks those who criticize al-Hashd and describes it as a nationalist army who is composed of Iraqis that emerged and was created in the Iraqi context. The fighters are willing to die for this country and do whatever they can to expel IS from the region. The Shias are willing to liberate the Sunni places as much as if it was a Shia district, even if it means that they themselves may get killed. Thus by portraying Hashd al-Shabi as an Iraqi national army, without which no liberation would be achieved, boosts its legitimacy as an Iraqi national army. This also acknowledges that liberation would not have taken place, and that Iraq would still be under IS, had it not been for Hashd al-Sha’bi. When Hadi al-‘Ameri says “we are even liberating the Sunni places” he indicates that as Shias, they are

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<sup>60</sup> Mustafa and Missy Ryan Salim, "Iraq Makes Iran-Backed Shiite Militias Official Despite Abuse Claims," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 27.11.2016 2016.

willing to die in order to expel IS, even when it concerns a Sunni-dominated territory. In his words, they do not differentiate between a Sunni or Shia city, Iraq is Iraq.

Today al-Hashd al-Shabi has become a real force on the ground, protecting Iraq, its sovereignty and the governing policy. In Nineveh province and Nineveh Plains, where the majority of its inhabitants are Christians, there are also some from Shabak and Turkmen. They were under the control of Peshmerga. However the military divisions withdrew from Mosul and Sahl Nineveh and left our families and people in front of the Jihadi Da'esh organization. Many Christian, Shabek, Yezidis, Turkmen of Tel Affar were killed. Thereafter the Christians from all sects composed of al-Kildani, Syriani, Ashuri and Armeni uprose against Da'esh. The leaders met in Baghdad and a Christian resistance was established to protect our cities and existence in Iraq.

As you may know, the Christians until today, did not carry weapons. However the danger reached our cities, homes, churches and our honors. Thus a resistance movement was established. In addition to the marjaeeya fatwa of Imam Sistani that did not specify a specific sect but it was to all Iraqis. Accordingly whoever could carry weapon to defend Iraq should do so, it was for all Iraqis, Sunni, Shia, Turkmen and Christians. At that time the fatwa was the front valve to Iraq, if it was not for the blessed fatwa and al-Hashd al-Shabi, Da'esh would be in Baghdad, and abu Baker al-Baghadid would be in the Green Zone. No one is able to deny the pious blood that fell down on the Iraqi soil, and the protection of the Iraqi holy places. When I say holy, I refer to all the holy places, the Sunni, Shia, Christians and Turkmen.

A group of Christians in Iraq have formed their own armed group called the Babylon Brigade that is also included in the al-Hashd al-Shabi, to protect people from the so-called Islamic State group. The leader of the Babylon Brigade says they were left with no choice but to take up arms when IS fighters targeted Christians. He underlines the unity call of the fatwa for all Iraqis to defend Iraq as a whole, the Sunni, Shia and other sects as well. Furthermore, he says;

The fatwa of Imam Sistani that did not specify a specific sect but it was a call to all Iraqis. Thus who can carry weapon to defend Iraq, it was for all Iraqis, Sunni, Shia, Turkmen and Christians. At that time the fatwa was the front

valve to Iraq, if it was not for the blessed fatwa and al-Hashd al-Shabi, Da'esh would be in Baghdad, and abu Baker al-Baghadid would be in the Green Zone. No one is able to deny the pious blood that fell down on the Iraq's ground and the protection of the Iraqi holy places. When I say holy, I refer to all the holy places, the Sunni, Shia, Christians and Turkmen.

To be honest the blessed fatwa of Ayallolah Sayed Ali al-Sistani were not specified to only Shia. Yes it was the Shia religious establishment but we consider Sayed Ali al-Sistani as a representatives of all the sects of Iraq not only Shias. We all needed this blessed fatwa that emerged. Because the danger emerged towards Baghdad, Najaf and Karbala were threatened by the terror Da'esh organization.

Thus Ayatollah Sistani's fatwa, prompting Iraqis to take up arms to fight against IS, is being constructed as a collective responsibility for all Iraqis and not only specific to the Shia. As such, it is as they designate it; a nationalist call to arm and not a specific call for a sect or an ethnic group to fight.

In the words of Sheikh Qais al-Khazali, "We fight in our soils, for our country in defense of our families, holy places, grounds, dignity and ourselves." The tone of the discourse is clearly unity and defense for all Iraqis and not only the Shia of Iraq, where they started out as primary protectors of the civilians and the country. Additionally Qais al-Khazali underlined the necessity of al-Hashd;

If the army and police were sufficient then Sayed Ali al-Sistani would not have issued a fatwa and the Iraqi government would not have provided al-Hashd al-Shabi with all the supplements and requirements.

We also know very well that the official forces and the Iraqi political affair of the Iraqi government is not enough to stand in front of such projects. They do not have the ability to stand in front such forces. However al-Hashd al-Shabi obtain a power of courage of national motive to stand preventive against the division of Iraq. Our other motive is protecting the sovereignty of the country and the oneness of the country from division.

All of the respondents emphasized that al-Hashd was established to defend Iraq, its citizens and its holy places regardless of any sect or city. The primary function of al-Hashd al-Shabi was thus defined as protecting the Iraqi population against attacks by IS and to supply and strengthen the Iraqi army, so it can stand firm in its combat against IS in the region.

Al-Hashd al-Shabi was as such assigned significant tasks within the Iraqi state by assisting police and security forces in their fight against IS. The triumph of al-Hashd was derived from its superior effectiveness as guardian of the Iraqi government, demonstrated thoroughly during its war against IS. Nevertheless the al-Hashd took pride over the important and committed role it had played in defense of Iraq, managing to halt IS's advance on Baghdad in addition to take back territories from its control. By clearly representing a formidable force that stood out, as one of the most powerful and influential institution that the Iraqi state-structure is dependent on, providing al-Hashd a legitimacy role and position as a new military institution that the Iraqi government was reliant on and that should preserve.

al-'Ameri argues,

[...] and to stand up against Da'esh, especially after the collapse of the military institution in Mosul. At that time we had no military power that could repel the advances of Da'esh towards Baghdad. If it was not for the fatwa of Sistani I can say that Baghdad definitely would have fallen down, Iraq would have fallen down and the whole gulf region would be under Da'esh's control. What al-Hashd, consisting of youth who volunteered after Sayed al-Sistani's fatwa, was to defend their country, holy places and their people. They are not militias as some call them.

One essential precondition for the emergence of al-Hashd al-Shabi and its role in the fight against IS that they point out has been the weakness of the Iraqi state. As the military division collapsed in Kirkuk, Salah al-Din and Mosul, there was an urgent need for a force to stand firm in the fight against IS and to stop the expansion of the proclamation of an Islamic State in the region. IS' seizure of territory, and its proclamation of an Islamic State in Iraq thus became a defining moment for al-Hashd al-Shabi – greatly expanding its responsibilities and importance – as an emerging military institution recognized by the Iraqi government as a legitimate state-affiliated entity. Preservation of the Iraqi state has been a key characteristic in their discourse, regarding the fight against IS.

To perceive why and how militias form and fight, Jentzsch et al. in their article "Militias in Civil War" argue that militias have appeared, when the state's ability to implement effective control over its territory and inhabitants is severely weak, militia's function would be to strengthen the regular army.<sup>61</sup> In the case of Iraq, the Iraqi Security Forces demonstrated weak performance resisting IS fighters, as several Iraqi military divisions in north provinces crumbled. Al-Hashd al-Sha'bi rose to prominence as they filled these security vacuums left by the Iraqi military.

## **4.5 We are strengthening the state**

When the military collapsed in several Iraqi provinces, al-Hashd al-Shabi emerged as a more feasible and effective alternative to the regular army, especially in the cases of low morale and corruption, accordingly the discourse of al-Hashd has been focusing on the need of strengthening the army and here al-Hashd as a new military institution stepped in to boost the army. They represent themselves as patriotic and passionate fighters who are fighting for the liberation and Iraqi territorial integrity. Consequently there is a need for the persistence of al-Hashd due to the weakness of the military.

Al-Assadi asks,

How could just some hundreds violent, criminal gangs take over provinces and threaten its capital? Logical research and studies say that there is a big defect in the foundation and the state's administrative organization that resulted in this enormous collapse of the military system.

Reason and logic say that if such a thing is to not happen again, there is a need for the establishment of a wholly organization that is able to defend the democracy system in Iraq and to protect it, both in the present and the future. To defend the oneness of Iraq, its sovereignty and independence.

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<sup>61</sup> Jentzsch, Kalyvas, and Schubiger.

Al-Hashd clearly sees itself as reinforcing the functioning of the central government and not, as its critics argues, an undermining force in relation to the functioning of the state.

According to al-Khazali,

We also know very well that the official forces and the Iraqi political affair of the Iraqi government is not enough to stand in front of such projects. They do not have the ability to stand in front the IS force. Al-Hashd al-Shabi, however, has courage and motive to stand against the division of Iraq. Our other motive is protecting the sovereignty of the country and the oneness of the country from division.

This indicates that some prominent figures within al-Hashd al-Shabi, such as Sheikh Qais al-Khazali, see al-Hashd as a force stronger than the regular army, due to their willingness and fighting motives.

They seek to demonstrate that the Al-Hashd has succeeded in resisting IS and fighting them. They try to build their legitimacy and credibility by portraying themselves as a formal organization capable of conducting large operations with its ISF partners.

Al-Muhandis states that “They know, the armed forces, military and the police are not able to liberate Mosul alone. This is an obvious matter, if they could, there would be no need for us to give our blood, just to announce we have liberated Mosul.”

The above discourse indicates how Al-Hashd build their legitimacy as a significant force in the fight against IS by highlighting the weakness of the Iraqi military, especially following the collapse of several army division in the hands of IS. The rise to prominence of al-Hashd al-Shabi in the course of the war against IS in itself worked to increase al-Hashd’s legitimacy. Al-Hashd’s rise to dominate in the battlefields in the combats against IS, its role in defending the country and its development into a powerful military organization all served to bolster its legitimacy as a influential and significant institution, without which the military in Iraq would be too weak to combat IS. Such statements from prominent figures in al-Hashd support al-Hashd’s ongoing effort to increase its legitimacy as a permanent and critical military institution within the Iraqi Security Forces.

Al-Hashd al-Shabi's spokesman Ahmed al-Assadi says,

The decision became that al-Hashd will be part of such organization. We will form al-Hashd as a security independent institution that is attached to the chief in command of the armed forces, likewise the defense, internal and the other apparatus.

We send a message to the world that we in Iraq are advocators for peace, love and harmony. We gave thousands of martyrs defending the whole world by facing the terror groups and we will build a protected nation, where the civilian will choose their leaders, by voting. We will defend this process which we sacrificed and gave tenth of thousands of martyrs for. We are also willing to give thousands more so that our decision in life and our civilians from all components have the right to vote, to choose whomever he/she want to represent them

Ultimately, today al-Hashd al-Sha'bi is an organization defined by its emergence as a counter-combat IS force in the country. The devastating event following IS seizure of several Iraqi territories and the collapse of the army division in the hands of IS, is employed by al-Hashd's narrative to emphasize its legitimacy and existence as a significant military institution that will not end when the conflict ends. The al-Hashd justifies its existence for its role in the conflict where it played an integral part in the country's security landscape.

## **4.6 This is not a call for Shias to fight Sunnis**

The participation of Sunni, Christians and Yazidis in al-Hashd and the statements and sayings of the Sunnis I interviewed, as well as the Christian leader Rayan, challenges the portrayed picture of the organization as a Shia force fighting the Sunnis of Iraq. As we have already seen, Al-Hashd al-Shabi tries to portray itself as Iraqi nationalist mobilization. By being composed of other sects beside Shia it seeks to present itself as representing all Iraqis. Here, the leader of the Christian Babylon Brigade emphasizes the nationalist sentiment of the fatwa:

There is something everyone has to bear in mind and know that al-Hashd al-Shabi has united all the Iraqis. Today if you observe the combats, we will see that the Shia is next to the Christian and the Sunni is next to the Christian and vice versa. In the combats, if a Shia, Sunni or any sect from al-Hashd al-Shabi faction get besieged, all the other factions from Sunni and Shia will run barefoot to help their other brothers.

By saying that al-Hashd is not protecting a particular sect, community or nationality, but rather Iraq as a whole, they portray al-Hashd to be for all Iraqis. With this non-sectarian discourse, they seek to boost its legitimacy and credibility for not only Shia but also other sects in Iraq, and encourage its support.

According to al-Kildani,

We consider ourselves as a majority in al-Hashd al-Shabi because of our coherence with other factions in al-Hashd al-Shabi. As the leader of al-Hashd al-Shabi, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis does not differentiate between the factions. Also in terms of weapons and equipment. We may actually be in front of the others. We have never heard even from our Iranian supervisors that we should convert, no not at all. We live side by side, we all have our own religion and believe and fight Daesh terror organization.

When I asked about the sectarian accusations al-Hashd has been criticized for, such as revenge killings and sectarian operations against Sunnis, they all denied it. Al-'Ameri said:

Bring forth one incident that al-Hashd al-Shabi has acted against the civilians and the Sunnis. Our combat is against Daesh. Let me exemplify. Americans participated in the liberation of Ramadi. They demolished 85 percent of the town. What did the Sunnis say? If we had participated in that combat the UN Security Council would have issued a declaration against us. However, the US called it clean combat. No one said US destroyed Ramadi, they even call it the clean war, *al-ḥarb al-naḍīfa*. That's why this noise is a sectarian one and we do not accept it, it is not precise and it is fabricated.



Of course, I do not claim that mistakes do not occur, that sometimes in our combats not a single house has not been burnt, definitely this occurs. This is a combat. US destroys everything when they enter.

Today, when you go to places there the Americans has participated, you will see total destruction, but no one says a word. If al-Hashd and the Federal Police Forces just fire a single bullet on a house, they will make a catastrophe.

al-Kildani echoes the sentiments of al-‘Ameri,

Some politicians try to widespread *al-fitna al-tā’ifiyya*, the sectarian strife, by saying that al-Hashd kills and plunder. Where do all these accusations take place? Currently not only al-Hashd al-Shabi is accused even the Christians are accused, by being Safavids. I am Christian and proud of it. They accused me of being a militia, Safavid and Iranian. I am Iraqi and son of an Iraqi. I have been accused of several such accusations. We do not listen to these accusations. Whenever victory is gained by al-Hashd al-Shabi’s factions such accusations and voices emerge.

Al-Asadi makes a point in stating the composition of al-Hashd as a way of proving its cross-sectarianism:

We have approximately 22.000 from the Sunni from Salah al-Din, Anbar and Diyala. 15.000 from Mosul, so we have approximately 37.000 Sunnis, so the Hashd is composed of circa 25% of Sunnis. We have other minorities such as Yazidis, 1000, Christians 1500, Turkmen 4000, Shabek 1000. All in all minorities constitute around 8000 members.

Although al-Hashd does consist of Shia militias with a history in armed conflict with Sunnis that could place them in a challenging position, the elite in al-Hashd tries to combat this image by its cross-confessional aspect. Al-Hashd’s effort to emphasize its inclusive character is intended to boost its legitimacy as an a national entity for all sects. This indicates that they neither want to be seen as a sectarian organization, nor are they willing to be labelled as such.

## **4.7 Iran is the first country that helped us to fight Da'esh**

Iran has formed strong linkage with al-Hashd al-Sha'bi by supporting and assisting it with weapons and military equipment. This has led to the portrayal of al-Hashd as an Iranian proxy. Thus, much of al-Hashd's discourse consists of countering what they preserve as stereotyping.

According to the deputy commander of al-Hashd al-Sha'bi, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis,

In the beginning of the crisis, Mr. Qasim Suleimani (head of the IRGC's Quds Force) came immediately to Baghdad and met with the prime minister. The prime minister who officially asked the US for support in the fight against Da'esh, and the US did not respond, and no other countries responded either. Gulf countries, those who were not supporting Da'esh were silent. Iraq remained alone, in front of a great danger. Da'esh progressed towards Baghdad in a horrific way. The Islamic republic of Iran sent Mr. Qasim Suleimani, he met the prime minister, and I was there. The prime minister asked for help from the Islamic republic of Iran, in terms of weapons, munitions and even flights. He asked for Iranian flights to attack Da'esh's columns, that we all expected they would arrive to Samarra. Samarra was surrounded, approximately 10 km north Samarra, the Iraqi forces could arrive, and the rest was in Da'esh's control. There was a huge fear that the tombs of the Imams would fall in the hands of Da'esh. Everyday there were reports regarding Da'esh's columns is progressing towards Samarra. The prime minister asked verbally regarding the Iranians flights interference to attack Da'esh's columns. The flights were ready to attack at any time but because Da'esh did not progress that rapidly towards Samarra, and because of our quick (al-Hashd al-Sha'bi) progress, in (only) two weeks, towards Samarra there was no need for the aerial interference. The involvement with weapons and munitions from the Islamic Republic were requested officially from the former prime minister Nori al-Maliki and the current prime minister of the Islamic Republic. All the weapons and munitions that arrive from the official access of Iraq through the borders to Hashd al-Sha'bi's storehouse, which is also authorized and is under the control of the government and the supervision of the prime minister. The assistance of the Iranians is 100% right. There are 30 other countries that have their advisors inside Iraq. From Australians, Americans, etc. so the Iraqi government also asked from Iran. Likewise Iran sent brothers from the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps

and there are also brothers from Hezbollah that are officially in Iraq, to support the government and the Iraqi people in their fight against Da'esh. And we as al-Hashd are being supported, assisted, the aerial force is assisted by Iran, at time where there was no flights that could fly with the ability of attacking and killing, and Iran sent five SU flights. This happened with the request of the Iraqi government. Therefore, the presence of the varied advisors, especially from Hezbollah and the Islamic republic, are by an official request from the Iraqi government and we are currently working with those advisors.

While western media and researchers describe al-Hashd al-Sha'bi as Iran proxy and Iranian controlled militia, al-Hashd al-Sha'bi's elite consider Iran's role in providing material aid, training and operational leadership along with strategic guidance to al-Hashd al-Sha'bi as an important assistance that without it, IS would be in control of Iraq. Hadi al-'Ameli explained,

First of all, like I said previously in the beginning, US was silent regarding Da'esh, they in fact did not even say the word Da'esh. In those difficult circumstances if it was not for Iran and its support to the Iraqi government Iraq would be in the hands of Da'esh. Qasim Soleimani did not provide us weapons; he provided and gave weapons to the Iraqi government. All the weapons entered the Iraqi cellar and from there it was dispersed to al-Hashd. Qasim Solimani did not support al-Hashd directly. All this happened through the Iraqi government. Thus Iran provided support to the Iraqi government, in the first days we did not even have missile. Without this support, the Iraqi government would fall down. We do not ask Iran why do you support us? US are here and are participating as well no one says anything regarding that. US supervisors have reached 5000 supervisors until now. No one says a word about US assistance, why does no one ask why US have 5000 supervisors? All the other countries have supervisors here in Iraq, Italy, France, Australia, Germany and UK etc. one country has 100 supervisors, the other one 200 supervisors etc. However no one mention a problem regarding the supervisors of these countries. All the supervisors from Iran do not exceed 100, they have maximum 150 supervisors and this number includes their tea maker that they bring with them. And they make it a catastrophe for Iran? Solaimani and his supervisors are on the ground, in the battlefield providing consultation. Does the American do that? Do they expose themselves for this kind of danger? Thus the different between the American supervisor and the Iranian is that the Iranian are practical, functional supervisors. This is the difference between the

Iranian supervisors and the westerners. The Iranian supervisors are here with the acceptance and knowledge of the Iraqi government and they enter and depart with the acquaintance of the Iraqi government.

Al-Hashd al-Sha'bi's elite carefully balance Iran's role in the region as a vital and rescuing role, and in fact praise and affirm it. At the same time, they do not want the assistance to detract from al-Hashd al-Sha'bi's legitimacy and internal unity, since patriotism is a core aspect of al-Hashd's overall narrative, and therefore highlight Iran's contribution as a necessary and assistance role. Head of Babylon Brigade, Rayan al-Kildani, says,

Iranian supervisors has provided a lot to Iraq and to al-Hashd al-Sha'bi factions with the approval of the Iraqi government. Iran did not enter through the window however it entered with the consent of the Iraqi government and the commander-in-chief of the armed forces. There are also American supervisors, however they have failed. I have never seen them and we have been attacked several times by them. However, our brothers from the Iranian government were with us, they even slept in the streets on the ground next to us. We thank all the countries that supported Iraq and we condemn all the countries that supported Da'esh, it is known which countries has supported Da'esh, and which countries that have supported Iraq and provided help to it. Da'esh was next to Baghdad and no one moved. Iran did not only protect Baghdad but also the Kurdistan region. Da'esh reached Erbil and US starred and said these are revolutionaries from Mosul. [...] When the danger reached Erbil, the government called US and said we have to get approval from the congress to make a move. Some of the leaders from Kurdistan, Erbil called the Iranian government, and Hajj Qasim Sulaimani attended in Erbil within 24 hours and expelled the danger towards Erbil Kurdistan. Thus the Iranian government not only protected Iraq but it also protected the sovereignty of Erbil.

There is no doubt that they praise Iran's contribution in the fight against IS. However at the same time, they do not consider themselves as Iran-proxy and consider the Iranian assistance as any other assistance they have been provided by other countries in their combat against IS, however they look at the Iranian assistance as a genuine support unlike US assistance that came very late and is considered very weak. Spokesman of al-Hashd al-Sha'bi explains,

The Islamic republic and its great stance alongside with the blessed fatwa of the religious establishment are the ones who contributed in protecting the Iraqi state from further Da'esh attack. This great support thwarted the terror attack that targeted the whole region. When Da'esh was near Baghdad's door, thousands were ready to leave their places, like some of the security services and armed forces did in Tikrit, Salah al-Din and Mosul. They were ready to leave Baghdad. During this time Islamic Republic's advisers were present in the front lines in the combats to participate with advice and moral support. [...] However the countries that signed security agreements with Iraq in case Iraq was to be exposed to internal or external attack or terror danger amongst them the US, just watched while all this happened. While the Iranian transported flights that carried tons of weapons arrived to Baghdad and Arbil's airports everyday to send it to the Iraqi citizens in order to defend Iraq. [...] The Iraqi citizens will never forget these great stances. It is these stances with the religious establishment's fatwa that saved Iraq and allowed Iraq to remain a unity state and protected our honours. We thank them for what they offered us. This support is continued until this day, and it's not only to al-Hashd al-Sha'bi but also the military, security and Iraqi government, in fact to all components of the Iraqi people. The Islamic republic believes in the stability of the region, which also means a security to them as well, in addition to our religious, history and geography sharing.

If anything, Iran's contribution and assistance to the Iraqi government by fighting IS in the region has made Iran's influence and relationship in the country stronger than anytime. While some reports consider Iran's role in Iraq and al-Hashd al-Sha'bi as Iran-proxy alarming and should be stopped, the crisis that took place in 2014 revealed the strength of Iran's ties with Iraq. Iraq and Iran, once enemies who fought in the 1980s, the countries' relationship has blossomed after the toppling of Saddam's regime in 2003 and been even stronger with IS advance in the region as Tehran provided critical military support to the Iraqi government. Sunni Sheikh in Anbar province and chairman of the uprising tribe against IS, Faisal al-Asafi, said:

We are honoured of the Iranian support. Like I said previously Iran has a favour upon the Iraqi people. This combat is not only a combat that concerns Iraq, Da'esh is an international threat. Iran has an effective role in fighting Da'esh. Without them and

their supervisors, Iraq would not achieve victory, not an inch from the Iraqi soil would achieve victory.

‘Asaib Ahl al-Haq leader, Sheikh Qais al-Khazali, said:

The subject regarding Iranian accusation is something that they always use. Iran provided the Iraqi government weapons without expecting money in exchange. They had an effective role with their supervisor’s presence. We think these motives are due to uniting interests. The division of Iraq is not for the interest of Iran. Thus they strove against that, in addition to our collaboration regarding religion and doctrine. However this does not mean these factions follow Iran’s decisions. We have good relationship with Qasim Soleimani. We are honoured of our good relationship with him. The role he exerted in helping the Iraqis in their fight against Da’esh. It is something we honour and value. We admire his role in helping the Palestinians in Palestine, helping the Muslims in Bosnia-Herzegovina and all the other jihadi works he has performed.

It is not an exception of that Iran has had a prominent role and influence to numerous Shia groups in Iraq. However, many analysts simplistically regard this to be a proxy relationship whereby al-Hashd al-Sha’bi is directly under the control of Iran and simply responding to Iran’s commands and orders. This simplistic conflation has clouded much of US policy thinking with regards to Popular Mobilization as an Iranian backed militia, as fear for the raising Iranian influence in the region see it as an extension of the threat posed by Iran. This portrayal has also ignored Iran’s role as a neighbouring country in providing security and military aid to the Iraqi government when they were in need of support to fight IS.

## **4.8 The West is weak and blameworthy**

Prominent al-Hashd al-Sha’bi representatives that once battled the American forces during the United State’s occupation of Iraq are now co-belligerents who often share the same battle ground with the Americans. However, regarding the United States and its Western allies, the al-Hashd’s elite questions the motives of the anti-IS coalition, while at the same time do not advocate violent measures against coalition forces inside Iraq. Badr leader, Hadi al-Amerli, said:

We thank whomever who helps us in our fight against Da'esh. However in all honestly we believe that it is not enough to fight Da'esh military. Until now and we do not see the serious procedure in fighting Da'esh from US, and we told the Americans. It's not just about airstrikes: First of all, it's important to prohibit the terrorism thoughts. The Americans say we talked with Saudi Arabia about that. Well its not enough to talk with Saudi, they should pressure them. I swear if these terror ideas came from Iran, they would be in war against Iran by now. However when it comes to Saudi Arabia they say we told Saudi that. I said how about you pressure Saudi Arabia to stop this terror thinking. There is no pressure upon the terror ideology; the terror Wahabi thinking that belongs to ibn Taymiya. Secondly, the transfer of the foreign fighters who emerge, where do they enter from? They come from around the world to fight, how did they come and no one have any knowledge and information about their transformation? Can't they prohibit them? Everyone knows, that Turkey is also not serious regarding fighting the terrorists, even the Europeans admits it now, that Turkey is not serious in their fight against terrorism. Those who came from around the world the foreign fighters came through Turkey. Thus there is no fight regarding the ideology nor to stop and prevent the death convoys as I call them. There is no prevention towards the death convoys entering Syria and Iraq that bombs, destroys and kills. Thirdly the weapons, they themselves admitted.... they currently started to distinguish who is extremist and who is not. Jaish al-Nusra is terrorist, al-Nusra is terrorist, Ahrar al-Sham is terrorist, Jaish al-Islami is terrorist and everyone knows that. However they want to show as if there is an opposition that is just. This so called just and rightful opposition as they call them, is being provided with weapons by US and Saudi Arabia. I once read a good report, that says if Saudi Arabia stops the support of these factions they will end in a week and the regime will conquer them. Also if Iran and Russia did not support the regime, the regime would have fell down. So there is an operation by those that only wants to fell down the regime by the help of the extremist. So there is no prohibition regarding the ideas in addition there is no prohibition regarding financing them. In Syria Da'esh is selling oil to Turkey. Are they giving the oil for free? Everyone have knowledge regarding Da'esh oil business with Turkey. The talks about freezing terrorist money are all lies. There is no ideas that is prevented nor money or fighters. Another point I told them the Americans, is that Da'esh's military training is apparent, until now the Americans have not even attacked a single military camp that belongs to Da'esh.

Da'esh's logistic headquarters are not attacked. Thus I told the Americans thank you for your aid but we do not see the seriousness of your support regarding your fight against Da'esh.

The United States is usually portrayed as either a weak power unable to defeat IS, an interfering power attempting to reoccupy Iraq, or a deceptive and manipulative power that is actively backing IS. All in all the representative of al-Hashd al-Sha'bi do not see the seriousness of the United States fight against IS. Deputy commander of al-Hashd al-Sha'bi, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, explained:

The Americans, as I told you before I am acquainted historically, I am not analysing now. US left Iraq and the Iraqi political system in the lurch for months; at least until in the end of August 2014, they did not intervene in Iraq. They intervened when Erbil was about to fall down in the hands of Da'esh. 03.08.2014 Da'esh started to attack Erbil, we went to Erbil 04.08 and protected Erbil for about two months. We supported Erbil with weapons and munitions. After this incident and after the change of the prime minister, to a new prime minister, US intervened. Then they announced the formation of the international coalition force against Da'esh and their support to Iraq regarding fighting Da'esh. All this took place after the change of the prime minister. Also until now the sincerity and seriousness of fighting Da'esh by the Americans is absent. When they came to liberate Erbil, and I am acquainted with that, I went to Erbil several times and visited the liberated places, the places that have been liberated from Mosul by intermediary Peshmargha. The Kurdish military leader demonstrated to me how the liberation takes place. [...] First the flights take control of the place, purify it with the help of the flights, bomb it and then mark a line. Thereafter the Peshmarga forces are commanded to progress, around 5km, 6km, and 7km and likewise, until Mosul's dam was liberated. So US managed to liberate Mosul's dam in few days. Of course US possesses enormous possibilities, it is a massive military force. It can strike a blow and wound Da'esh badly. But it doesn't. For example, when it comes to the economic matter, it allowed hundreds of cars transferring oil everyday. The oil that Da'esh latched, around 15% of Iraq's oil, is seized by Da'esh and was transferred to Turkey. So hundreds of cars are passing. One time an Iraqi pilot, hit two IS trucks and he was punished. [...] The US refuses others to attack Da'esh. The first one who showed film of those transferring IS cars were the Russian flights that came



to the place. US allowed Da'esh to transfer the oil in Syria and the oil it seized in Iraq as well and did not attack them when it was able to do so. Another point, the US claims that they have rule of engagement. When Ramadi was liberated last year, of course districts in Ramadi were totally ruined, as they call it they have rule of engagement, they even let Da'esh run away, we are talking about hundreds. Each member of Da'esh that goes outside the place was filmed. For example when a car was transferred, let us assume there were 10 Da'esh members equipped with weapons in a car, the US flights did not attack that car. American flights know that this car will transfer and come back, they will first let the 10-armed people leave the car and then they will hit the car. They allowed Da'esh to move freely in Iraq. I believe that the American policy in Iraq is not to get rid of Da'esh, their policy is to administer the crIS, and let the operation continue, let the crIS continue between the Iraqis and Da'esh. They are actually observing the crIS and try to control the rule of the game as much as possible. It is difficult to imagine that such a powerful country such as the US has allowed for the continuance of Da'esh for the duration for this period in Iraq, while being an ally of the government of Iraq. The Iraqi government asked officially for help from the US to fight and attack Da'esh, but the help is (both) limited and flawed.

In particular, they often highlighted the weakness and flaws of US fight against IS in the region and that they would rather be without this kind of help. The Babylon Brigade leader, Rayan al-Kildani, said:

From the information we have received for around 3, 4 month that the US congress voted towards supporting the Christian forces Babylon, Peshmerge and the Sunni tribal. And in less than five hours an announcement was issued by us without any pressure and without someone knowing, that we reject it totally to receive any support from the US. Because US are the main reason for the current situation in Iraq.

Kataib Hezbollah spokesman, Ja'far al-Hussaini, explained:

Initially, the malignant US coalition came to support Da'esh. This coalition was established after US went through enormous and big casualties in several places. In addition to when US the Americans figured out that Da'esh will be collapse very soon

and the American plan will collapse with a Da'esh paper they established this coalition. Several defeats took place in Balad, vicinity of Baghdad, Abu Guraib and also in Amerli. Thus the Americans established this evil coalition to support Da'esh and to restrict the advance of the Iraqi security forces and al-Hashd al-Sha'bi. However they are in fact supporting Da'esh. We had investigation and it was proven to us with evidence that the Americans supported Da'esh through flights where they delivered supplies and weapons in Balad and Fallujah. Thus today when we talk about the Americans, any operation that Americans will be in, they will be with Da'esh. Therefor we cannot participate in any operation that the Americans will be in. The US and we are enemies we cannot participate or stand in one trench. The US is the main enemy, all the misfortunes falls upon Iraq is because of US and their occupation, in fact before the occupation as well. [...] We find it as a religious duty to and morals to fight US prior to Da'esh. Everyone knows that the Americans provided financial, military and flights support to Da'esh. They abandoned the security forces. The reason of Ramadi collapse is due to the Americans abandoned the Iraqi forces that existed inside Ramadi. In Balad we reported with pictures documented where the Americans provided supplies to the fighters of Da'esh. This also happened in Amerli, when the force advanced to reach Amerli, the Americans targeted this advanced force with four missile thorough one of their flights, in addition to that whenever a force advance towards one of their goals, both from al-Hashd al-Sha'bi and the Iraqi military they would be exposed to attacks, some that might be warning sign others as a direct harm. This happened in Fallujah, specific with Brigade One. [...] The US and us can never be in one trench unless we are in confrontation. Diplomacy do not work with them, they are the reason for Iraq's destruction. Our confrontation with them is a religious duty and a main goal. The Americans tried in Camp Habbania when we were there to lead the Ramadi operations, they asked us to meet KH leaders inside the camp. Our answer was to send a force of mujhadeen that they surrounded the place where the Americans were present in, thus they run away through their flights that were there to support them.

While 'Asaib Ahl al-Haq leader, Sheikh Qais al-Khazali, said:

US are not honest in their detriment of Da'esh. Da'esh is the US intelligence service tools to fulfil political aims. US want to manage Da'esh to accomplish their project.

US project in the region is to divide the territory, by dividing Iraq and Syria. In addition to that is that they do not want to end Da'esh paper until they reach this aim. This is the reality. Thus US are not serious and crucial in the required attacks against Da'esh as Russia has been. Russia's percentage of operations in one, two or three weeks have been equal to the total US operations since one and the half year they have operated in. They did not provide aid with the emergence of Da'esh. It is not reasoning that they did not have knowledge about Da'esh with all their intelligence service and satellite they have. Thus we do not think they are serious in their fight against Da'esh at all, in fact US has contributed by establishing Da'esh the same way they have established al-Qaida. They have experience with that. US Minister of Foreign Affairs in an official session in the congress mentioned that US created al-Qaida for political aims with the Soviet Union. It should not be excluded that they establish another Salafi, takfiri faction for the sake of political purposes. Our proof is their non-seriousness in their fight. [...] US should operate in an honest and serious way regarding assisting the Iraqi government and the Iraqi citizens. To distance itself from conspiracy, by performing projects that lead to damage. We do not have enmity towards the American citizens however we boycott the American policy. This matter is dependent on the US policy and management. By US distancing themselves from their project concerning the division of Iraq and the region.

Although they criticize the US role in its fight against IS and in fact sometimes blame US for IS existence and emergence in Iraq they do not proclaim war against US. As much as US are concerned about al-Hashd and its close link to Iran likewise is the al-Hashd al-Sha'bi concerned and criticize US role, aim and interest in Iraq.

## **4.9 The regional states are supporting IS**

While I was on field work in Iraq, new tensions and crisis between Iraq and Saudi Arabia emerged over Riyadh's ambassador to Baghdad, Thamer al-Sabhan where he was condemned for his media statements calling in the Iraqi government to exclude al-Hashd al-Sha'bi from its military war against IS and accusing Shia militias of abusing Sunnis in addition to setting a plot to kill him. In response, some Iraqi politicians denounced the ambassadors' remarks and interference in Iraq's interior affairs and asked Saudi Arabia to replace its ambassador in Baghdad. The Iraqi Foreign Ministry spokesman Ahmed Jamal said, "The presence of

Sabhan is an obstacle to the development of relations between Iraq and Saudi Arabia.”<sup>62</sup> In addition to the some of the Iraqi authorities response, al-Hashd al-Sha’bi’s representatives had also their strong comment and response against al-Sabhan’s accusations against them and their participation on the war against IS. Deputy commander of al-Hashd al-Sha’bi, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, said:

Saudi Arabia since 2003, until Sabhan’s appearance, has not recognized the political system in Iraq, despite the pressure from their ally, both the last and current US department regarding to have a diplomatic representative in Baghdad and to recognize the political system. They do not recognize the political system, they practiced sectarian policy towards the Iraqi population, and they supported and encouraged terror in Iraq. All the terror inside Iraq, if you go back to Zarqawi’s period, from al-Qaida, then to the shift to Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, and lastly Da’esh, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the concept is a Wahabi concept, and this concept is a Saudi-Arabian concept. Saudi Arabia has for decades spent billions of dollars on the spread of the Wahabi thoughts and concept, (which is) a puritanical one that does takfir, the act of declaring someone as non-believer. Leaders who led the sabotage and military operations inside Iraq were Saudis, bin Laden and Zarqawi gave homage to bin Laden. After bin Laden, and then the death of Zarqawi and bin Laden, and the changes that occurred, Da’esh emerged as Iraqi. In the past, half of the suicide bombers were Saudis, if you could get the archives and if you could get information on documents and statements from the Minister of the Interior, half of the suicide bombers in Iraq are Saudis. That’s why Saudi Arabia censures al-Hashd al-Sha’bi, because it ruined their plan of changing the political system. As such, it is not strange that they are accusing al-Hashd al-Sha’bi namely due to the fact that Saudi Arabia’s concept, policy and most dangerously military plan to bring down the political system failed. Al Sabhan only talks on behalf of his government.

As we can see from Abu Mahdi al-Muhanid’s statement, he strongly condemned the Saudi Arabia’s ambassador’s assertion on al-Hashd al-Sha’bi. Abu Mahdi al-Muhandi’s statement further condemned the role that Saudi Arabia has played in Iraq, noting that Saudi Arabia since the political change that took place in 2003 until now have been against it and has

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<sup>62</sup> Reuters, "Iraq Asks Saudi Arabia to Replace Envoy Who Riled Shi'ite Militias," *Reuters*, 28.08.2016 2016.

pursued a militant and political change inside Iraq to bring down the political system. They believe that they are doing so by pursuing a spiteful political campaign against al-Hashd al-Sha'bi through its officials and ambassador to Baghdad Thamer al-Sabhan in addition to use pro-Riyadh media outlets to call for the dissolution of al-Hashd al-Sha'bi's force.

Al-Hashd al-Sha'bi's spokesman Ahmed al-Assadi also warns about IS project and plan in the region, and says the same people who used to criticize the Iraqi army and the police are currently criticizing al-Hashd al-Sha'bi who is currently the main force fighting IS on the ground, by opposing and wanting to dismantle al-Hashd they are serving IS he says:

Since the start we believe that Da'esh is a military apparatus with a huge political project in region. It started in Syria and moved to Iraq, in addition aimed to attack other countries as well [...] However the establishment of al-Hashd al-Sha'bi, the religious establishment fatwa and the huge wiliness and the civilians great respond, moreover, the resistance factions and what they possess of military, security experience and their fast engagement against the combats towards these gangs, all this failed this huge political project. We are now in the end of this battle to end the remaining military apparatus of this project [...] That's why when we talk about a political project there is more than apparatus, there is military apparatus, that is Da'esh killers on the ground, media tool, political tool and there is ideological tool that support this dangerous toxic takfiri thinking. Thus, Da'esh politicians, and Da'esh media, are those who started to attack al-Hashd al-Sha'bi and they haven't stopped. They previously attacked the military, police and the National Guard, and they will also continue to attack whatever force to defend the democracy order. As mentioned previously their project was and still aims to fell down the democracy system in Iraq. Hence these accusations against al-Hashd has several goals, one of the main aims is to provide what they can provide in terms of assistance to Da'esh. Because when they weaken the largest force combating Da'esh this will give a chance to Da'esh to get stronger. Secondly they want to stagger the military and security position towards the forces that want to end these terror gangs and liberate territories [...] Saudi Arabia, Qatar, UAE, Turkey and other well countries are subsidizing and supporting the western provinces. Some are businessmen as well, like Khamis al-Khanjar, Saed al-Bazaz and others. These pay millions of dollars each year to media institutions and to some politicians in Iraq those that are trumpet that repeat what have

been said to them in terms of orders and commands from outside. To attack the Hashd, government and the military and to confuse the security and military situation in the country.

The Sunni Faisal al-Assafi had also his strong opinion about Saudi Arabia and held it responsible for the Sunni people's misery in Iraq noting that Saudi Arabia, Qatar and other Arab countries with US, UK and Israel are behind the so called IS project in the country and are the ones who employed sectarianism. He underlines al-Hash al-Sha'bi's prominent role in the fight against IS and argues that regardless of the finance and support of IS from these countries al-Hashd al-Sha'bi were able to devastate IS in Iraq. He says,

If it were not for Saudi-Arabia, Qatar and Turkey, nothing would have happened to the Sunni people, in form of murders and immigration. Nevertheless, on the contrary, the killing of Sunni and their immigration is all because of them. It is in fact diffident to say Sunni and Shia; we are all Muslims and Arab. [...] However, they employed sectarianism to divide Islam. Israel, US, UK, Saudi, Qatar and other Arab countries are all involved and behind this project, this has the UK intelligence service general admitted. [...] Iraq was targeted badly, any international country, if they only had money and technical and not having weapons wouldn't be able to stand firm as Iraq did. The extremist thinking is more dangerous than weapons, we know that those extremists in the whole world are a threat and danger, and no one is able to touch their supremacy. The struggle and conflict became in Iraq, their graves are now in Iraq in the hands of the brave Iraqi people. The Iraqi people who does not mind death; in fact they admire death, and do not like life, just for the sake of their dignity. To prove to the world and they proved it to the world. It's an honour that Abu-Qatar that financed Da'esh, declared that they financed it with all their ability and money, so that Iraq will end it. [...] Iraqis with their souls achieved victory. The plan and plot against Iraq was bigger than Iraq and any country. So thanks God these victories are majestic. Thanks to the Iraqi people, our religious establishment and tribes that are coordinated and cohesive. Thanks to all nations and religions in Iraq.

They are warning about Saudi Arabia's funding to jihadi groups as well as the Saudi Arabia's export of the rigid Wahabi ideology, thus al-Kildani argues that IS should not only be fought military but its ideology and its menacing calls for violence should be banned and stopped.

As such he is indicating that Saudi Arabia's religious school of teaching inspires IS. Leader of Babylon Brigade, Rayan al-Kildani, says

If we do not fight Da'esh ideologically, Da'esh will continue. Da'esh phase will end in Mosul. Not the people of Qatar and Saudi but the politics of the Saudi governance is to blame. Yesterday, Saudi Mufti, ordered for the killings of the Safavids, Rawafids and the Christians. There exist several of such sectarian matters. We wish for a religious just speech and not a religious speech that commands murders and terror. This is Saudi school teaching. [...] We honestly say it, I send letters to US and other countries and said if they do not pay attention to the politics of Saudi governance, then Da'esh will enter all the European countries. Even to your university, if Da'esh will not be fought ideologically and rationally. Military phrase of Da'esh will disappear but the ideology will remain.

Hadi al-'Amerli is also concerned about Saudi Arabia's support and influence to IS and opposes every aspect of IS's ideology and says it is not enough to fight IS military however the Wahabi Saudi thinking should be prohibited and stopped and blames also Turkey for acquiescence of IS members crossing its borders into Syria and Iraq. He says,

It's important to prohibit the terror thoughts. The Americans say we talked with Saudi Arabia regarding that. Well its not enough to talk with Saudi, they should pressure them. I swear if these terror ideas came from Iran, they would be in war against Iran by now. However when it comes to Saudi Arabia they say we told Saudi that. I said how about you pressure Saudi Arabia to stop this terror thinking. There is no pressure upon the terror ideology; the terror Wahabi thinking that belongs to Ibn Taymiyyah. Secondly, the transfer of the foreign fighters who emerge, where do they enter from? They come from around the world to fight, how did they come and no one have any knowledge and information about their transformation? Can't they prohibit them? Everyone knows, that Turkey is also not serious regarding fighting the terrorists, even the Europeans admits it now, that Turkey is not serious in their fight against terrorism. Those who came from around the world the foreign fighters came through Turkey. Thus there is no fight regarding the ideology nor to stop and prevent the death convoys as I call them. There is no prevention towards the death convoys entering Syria and Iraq that bombs, destroys and kills. Thirdly the weapons, they themselves

admit, they currently started to distinguish who is extremist and who is not. So there is no prohibition regarding the ideas in addition there is no prohibition regarding financing them. In Syria Da'esh is selling oil to Turkey. Are they giving the oil for free? Everyone have knowledge regarding Da'esh oil business with Turkey. The talks about freezing terrorist money are all lies. There is no ideas that is prevented nor money or fighters stopped or prohibited from entering the country.

Al-Hashd al-Sha'bi makes no effort to conceal their point of view regarding Turkey, Gulf States, particularly Saudi Arabia's role towards IS in the region. They openly and directly hold Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, and UAE accountable for IS emergence and rise in the country. These kind of statements and comments regarding Saudi Arabia, Gulf states and Turkey's role in the country shows that prominent figures and leaders within al-Hashd al-Sha'bi possesses the ability of freedom of expression to express their opinion even more harshly and strongly than the Iraqi government are willing or able to in foreign and internal matters.

#### **4.10 Yes, we will participate in the elections**

The significance of al-Hashd is such that it not only shaped Iraqi's security landscape but it also can potentially redraw the country's political map in the forthcoming elections in April 2018. Indeed, given the al-Hashd's recognition and popularity among the Iraqi population in particular the Shia, it seems all but foreseeable that prominent figures within al-Hashd al-Sha'bi can become significant political players in the political future of the country. By entering the election and gaining votes they will play an important role in the composition of parliament that will affect the political process.

From the interviews, it seems apparent that a increased number of the fighters are eager to position themselves politically in the political system. For the time being, some of al-Hashd's prominent figures are participating in the elections in a bloc called "The Mujahidin" lead by Hadi al-'Ameri<sup>63</sup>, to take part in forming the Iraqi government. This bloc will potentially compete with other Shia representatives in shaping the future of Iraqi politics.

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<sup>63</sup> Al-Akhbar, ""Al-Hashd Al-Sha'bi" 'ilā Al-Intikhābāt: "Taḥāḷuf Al-MujahidīN"... Bi-Ri'āsat Al-'āmirī," *Al-Akhbar*, 30.11.2017 2017.



Several of the fighters and figures in al-Hashd al-Sha'bi have already political parties in the parliament such as 'Asaib Ahl al-Haq within the Al-Sadiqun bloc and Badr Organization. Some of the Shia figures within al-Hashd might join different Shia parties and will no doubt compete for elections to form a large enough coalition block to form a government. As for the Sunnis within al-Hashd, they could also have an impact on the traditional Sunni parties and compete for elections. Accordingly, Iraqi Sunni politics might also be more fractured in the forthcoming election between those supporting al-Hashd and those opposing them.

As such, the participation of al-Hashd al-Sha'bi's figures in the upcoming election has prompted controversy in Iraq.<sup>64</sup> Iraq's Independent High Electoral Commission announced in August 2016 that it could not include any political entity registered under al-Hashd in the election, as it is a military organization connected to the security apparatus. During my fieldwork, I asked about the Iraq's Independent High Electoral Commission's rule and their opinion regarding it, Ahmed al-Asadi al-Hashd a-Sha'bi's at that time spokesman, answered as following:

Yes we will participate in the elections. However if an individual in al-Hashd want to nominate itself, he should send in his resignation. Accordingly, all the leaders of al-Hashd can nominate themselves if they want to. However the condition is that when they enter the election arena they have to be outside the military function. However the condition is that when they enter the election arena they have to be outside the military function. That is why I think in the coming election we will see al-Hashd representatives or those who defend al-Hashd al-Sha'bi not the officially representatives, because we do not have representatives of the defend ministry in the assembly. I mean those who are counted as part of al-Hashd al-Sha'bi they will have a much more presence in the parliament in than what they currently have.

This is what exactly happened in 28 November 2017, after almost four years as al-Hashd al-Sha'bi's official spokesman, Ahmed al-Asadi resigned from his position in order to join the elections.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Rudaw, "Hashd Forces Working Their Way into Iraq's Political System," *Rudaw*, 05.11.2017.

<sup>65</sup> Al-Hashed, "AhMad Al-Asadī Yu 'lin Istiqlālatah Min ManṣIbih Ka-MutaḥDdith Bi-Ism Al-Hashd Al-Sha'bi," *Al-Hashed*.

Qaish al-Khazali, stated:

If the military threats against the government ends then we will never carry weapon and we will cooperate with the coming political situation in a democratic and civilized way. We have done that in the past, when we used to fight the occupation forces and when the occupation officially ended 1.1.2012 we abandoned the weapons and entered the political work. We participated in the elections and we had a presence in the Iraqi parliament and other Iraqi provinces.

This indicates that they have political ambitions in the country, in addition to consolidate al-Hashd's power even more by becoming part of the parliament to have the right to eliminate proposal that is against al-Hashd al-Sha'bi's institution.

Al-'Amerli justifies joining the elections by stating that he is only a volunteer fighter in al-Hashd. As such they will seek to leverage their positions in combatting IS to gain votes in Iraq's 2018 elections.

We will without doubt participate in the election. Anyone from al-Hashd is also able to participate in the election. Likewise anyone from the military institution can also participate. Secondly I am not in al-Hashd, I am a representative in the Iraqi Parliament volunteer in al-Hashd for free, and I neither take salary or anything. The main point is can al-Hashd be among the election's list, of course this cannot happen. Similar for the police and military also there is not a list for them, likewise al-Hashd also. Any individual from the military or police who want to run for election can of course do that. Currently I have no position in al-Hashd I am only a fighter, I do not get salary I contribute and if they say do not participate in the election because of that, I will not participate. I am only a fighter.

Some of these representatives and members perceive their combats against IS, their leading roles in the frontlines and the blood their members have shed in defence of the country will likely place them in better position than their counterparts that has been sitting in Baghdad observing the conflict from far behind. Muhannad al-Kabi stated:

We are the ones at battlefields combating IS, while the other politicians are in Baghdad in their safe places. They have not done anything to the refugee problem that took place after IS took control, they have done nothing to the Iraqi people.

Consequently, they utilize the legitimacy that they have required in battlefield against IS, as well as local grievances of the displaced people at the refugees camps, to gain votes. In addition, they criticize the passive role of some of the politicians in the fight against IS and criticizing the way they have handled the refugee crisis, arguing that they have done almost nothing for the displaced people who fled from IS militants. By exploiting the discontent of the displaced people of attempt to gain their support to gain votes. Their critics are primarily aimed at the Sunni politicians that say they represent the Sunnis. As such, Qais al-Khazali argues that the Sunni politicians has lost the loyalty with their audience:

Some of the Sunni politician figures currently have lost the engagement and the connection with their audience. There are few Sunni politician figures that are in the parliament or the government that can go to the migration camp, because they are not welcomed there. They have done nothing to their people they claim to represent.

Faisal al-Asafi criticized some of the Sunni politicians and said as following:

These do not represent the western places; they do not represent the Sunni, Shia or any specific group. They only represent themselves. Currently they have no acceptance in the Sunni streets or the Arab streets. We reject those sectarians, who utilize and speak in the name of sectarianism. [...] Al-Hashd al-Sha'bi members are the ones who scarified and gave their blood for the sake of Iraq. Those are the real heroes who represent Iraq.

Initially created as a response to IS threat in the region to assist the Iraqi army in the fight against IS, current prominent figures of al-Hashd al-Sha'bi are now working their way into the politics by participating in the upcoming 2018 elections. By being integrated into the Iraqi governments, new politicians will emerge with close and solid ties to Iran that are critical to US and Saudi Arabia's role in the fight against IS in the region.

## 5 Concluding remarks

In this thesis I have analysed al-Hashd al-Shabi's legitimizing discourse. When it comes to their emergence, I found that al-Hashd al-Shabi's elite first and foremost explain their inception as a response to Sistani's jihad fatwa. Consequently, their origin and identity is due to the threat from IS in the region. On the subject of their character, they identify themselves both within a nationalistic and religious framework. The religious attributes are evident in their discussions about how important Sistani's fatwa has been for their establishment, as well as through the martyrdom ideology that they believe in.

Along with its national ideology and identity it also possesses a religious doctrine. The fatwa states that paradise is promised to those who lose their lives in the battle against IS, and this is something they often refer to. Consequently, they do not only look at their volunteer role as a national duty to defend the country against the IS danger, but also see it as a religious duty in response to the fatwa. Thus, they not only follow the commander of the armed forces, Haidar al-Abadi, but also the leadership of the religious establishment Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani.

They also find it important to emphasise and affirm is that they are part of the Iraqi state. Throughout their discourse therefore, they are determined not to be called militias. This also illustrates their insistence on being part of the Iraqi state and the Iraqi military system. They also seek to distance themselves from being described as a sectarian militia. They eagerly portray themselves as a cross-sectarian alliance, an Iraqi force for the defence of all Iraqis.

Although some of the figures in al-Hashd al-Shabi used to fight the occupation forces after 2003 and until their withdrawal, they do not proclaim war against the US. However, they do not regard its role in the fight against IS as trustworthy in their determination to remove IS from the region. However, although they deeply distrust the intentions of the US, they are willing to accept a degree of support in fighting them. They legitimize this relationship and willingness through the fact that IS is the main enemy and so they are willing to expel and remove this danger at any cost.

They do not conceal their critical stance towards regional states, in particular Saudi Arabia, expressing their anger and resentment for what they see as its financial and ideological support of IS. As such, they portray themselves as the ultimate force in the fight against IS.

An important new element in the discourse is their ambitions in politics. Initially started as a military force with the purpose to fight IS, throughout the three and half years prominent fighters in al-Hashd have also started to participate politically in the country. Today al-Hashd al-Shabi defines and legitimizes itself through its war on IS, and as a force that will continue to exist even after IS is expelled.

The creation of al-Hashd al-Shabi and the important part it played in the defence of the homeland when ISIS took control of large swaths of Iraqi territory summer 2014 has had far-reaching consequences. Al-Hashd al-Shabi demonstrated itself as a force that not just emerged as a response to severe IS threat to in country but also an important and powerful actor in the security and political environment. Al-Hashd al-Shabi's central figures have managed to transfer themselves from prominent fighters into political forces in the country. Their increased political ambitions, as well as the popularity they have gained from their battlefields victories, show that prominent figures in al-Hashd al-Shabi are likely to remain important actors in the military and political environment.

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