



## THE ANTAGONIST PRO-IRANIAN MILITIAS IN THE AL-HASHD AL-SHA'ABI AS SOURCES OF TERROR AND INSTABILITY IN IRAQ

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### Abstract

*The precarious political and security situation in Iraq in the post-2003 era led to unprecedented instability and a power vacuum in the country, which turned into an arena of regional competition between the USA and Iran. While the former had a wide-scale military presence, the latter exerted influence through support for certain Shiite political factions and militias. Following the U.S. military withdrawal in 2011, the deterioration of the security situation manifested itself more visibly when Daesh gained ground and captured Mosul, the second-biggest city in the country. With the crippled security sector unable to fight Daesh, the militias in the country were brought together under the umbrella of "al-Hashd al-Shaabi", which was funded and supported by the government. Proving instrumental in defeating Daesh, the al-Hashd al-Shaabi organization also involved pro-Iranian militias with anti-West agendas that had mainly been formed in the early times of the post-2003 era and later within the anti-Daesh movement. These pro-Iranian militias under the al-Hashd al-Shaabi have been posing threats within separate contexts to the U.S., Türkiye and the international organizations led by NATO operating in the security realm in the country. Shedding light on the evolution and dynamics of the al-Hashd al-Shaabi first, this study examines the antagonistic pro-Iranian militias as sources of terrorism and instability and puts forward implications through an analytical approach.*

**Article Type:** Research Article

**Key Words:** Pro-Iranian militias in Iraq, al-Hashd al Shaabi, Popular Mobilization Forces.

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### Irak'ta Terör ve İstikrarsızlık Kaynağı Olarak Haşdi Şabi İçindeki İran Yanlısı Hasım Milisler

#### Öz

*2003 sonrası dönemde Irak'taki belirsizlik dolu politik ve güvenlik ortamı, ABD ile İran arasındaki bölgesel mücadelenin sahnesi haline gelen ülkede benzersiz bir istikrarsızlık ve güç boşluğu yaratmıştır. ABD'nin geniş ölçekli bir askeri varlığı bulunurken, İran da Şii politik gruplar*

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ve milisleri desteklemek suretiyle etki yaratmıştır. ABD Silahlı Kuvvetlerinin 2011 yılındaki geri çekilmesi sonrasında, güvenlik ortamındaki bozulma, Daeş'in güç kazanarak ülkenin ikinci büyük kenti olan Musul'u ele geçirmesi ile kendini daha belirgin olarak göstermiştir. Güvenlik sektörünün Daeş'e karşı mücadelede yetersiz olması ile birlikte, ülkedeki milis güçler, hükümet tarafından desteklenen ve finanse edilen Haşdi Şaabi çatısı altında birleştirilmiştir. Daeş ile mücadelede etkili olan Haşdi Şaabi örgütü aynı zamanda, ağırlıklı olarak 2003 sonrası dönemin ilk zamanlarında ve daha sonra Daeş karşıtı akım içinde oluşan batı karşıtı tutumlu İran yanlısı milis güçleri de ihtiva etmiştir. Haşdi Şaabi içindeki İran yanlısı bu milisler, farklı içeriklerde ABD, Türkiye ve başta NATO olmak üzere güvenlik alanında ülkede faaliyet gösteren uluslararası organizasyonlara tehdit teşkil etmiştir. Bu çalışma, analitik bir yaklaşımla, öncelikle Haşdi Şaabi'nin gelişimi ve dinamiklerini ele almak suretiyle, terör ve istikrarsızlık kaynağı İran yanlısı hasım milisleri incelemekte ve çıkarımlar ortaya koymaktadır.

**Makale Türü:** Araştırma Makalesi

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Irak'taki İran yanlısı milisler, Haşdi Şabi, Halkın Seferberlik Güçleri.

**JEL Kodu:** F50, F51, F53

**Yazarın Notu:** Bu çalışma bilimsel araştırma ve etik kurallarına uygun olarak hazırlanmıştır. Bu çalışmada etik kurul izni veya yasal/özel izin gerektirecek bir içerik bulunmamaktadır. Makalenin yazarı olarak, tarafımdan SAVSAD Savunma ve Savaş Araştırmaları Dergisine imzalı beyanım ile, hazırlanma sürecinde çalışma ile ilgili herhangi bir çıkar çatışmasının bulunmadığı bildirilmiştir.

## INTRODUCTION

Iraq has been stricken with instabilities and political turmoil since the U.S.-led military intervention overthrew the Ba'ath regime in 2003. The security situation in the 2003-2011 timeframe was predominantly shaped by the U.S.-led military presence and the activities of Sunni-motivated terrorist organizations with anti-U.S. and anti-Shia sentiments and agendas, as well as those of Shia-motivated militias serving as proxies of Iran and supported by the Tehran administration. Along with the other inherent factors, the wide-scale U.S. military withdrawal in 2011 added to the prevalent power vacuum and the state of instabilities. The Daesh terrorist organization gained ground and captured Mosul, declaring the city the stronghold of its so-called caliphate in 2014. Due to the incapacity and ineffectiveness of the Iraqi security forces, Daesh was defeated through the mobilization of the militias predominated by the Shiite factions under the structure of the al-Hashd al-Shaabi, or the Popular Mobilization Forces, which proved very efficient in fighting against Daesh but were also responsible for countless gross human rights violations and crimes.

The al-Hashd al-Shaabi turned into a source of instability and turmoil to a great degree following the total defeat of Daesh in 2017. Government efforts to impose state control over the militias in this structure were far from achieving success. Especially the pro-Iranian factions overtly supported by the Tehran administration as proxies and having positions with legal visibilities in politics posed terrorism threats to the U.S.-led military

presence aimed at fighting Daesh. The offshoots of these Shiite militias in the north of Iraq recently forged a regional terrorism alliance with the PKK terrorist organization, posing a threat to Türkiye. Moreover, these militias pose potential threats to the international organizations operating in the security realm, NATO in particular, which are likely to assume more dominant roles in helping the Government of Iraq in improving its security sector in the years to come.

A comprehensive literature review preceded this study to discuss the arguments above. Resources utilized within this study are assessed to have analyzed in cohesion the initial conditions in the security realm in Iraq and the developments paving the way to the rise of the al-Hashd al-Shaabi. In particular, the works by Watkins (2020) and Knights (2019) analyze Iran's influence in Iraq and the work by Blanchard (2020) analyzes the points of concern from the U.S. perspective in the security realm comprehensively. Along with the others, the works by Kılıç, Gök and Keskin (2018) and Alaca (2021a) provide a coherent overview of the development of the al-Hashd al-Shaabi. Knights, Malik and Al-Tamimi (2020), Al Jbour (2021), Abbas (2017), Mansour (2021), Rudolf (2020), Alaca (2020), Amnesty International (2017), Alkinani (2021) and Badawi (2021) analyze in their works the evolution, structure, networks and dynamics of the al-Hashd al-Shaabi as well as the illegal activities by the organization. However, the dynamics of al-Hashd al-Shaabi are analyzed in different ways, and this study reconciles all the analyses of these works.

The terrorism threat posed by the pro-Iranian militias to the U.S. military presence in Iraq and the discordance among the anti-U.S. Shiite militias in the wake of the killings of al-Muhandis and Soleimani are analyzed in the contemporary works by Ayaz (2021) and Knights, Smith and Malik (2021). The works by Alaca (2021b) and Jameel (2020) discuss comprehensively the threats by the pro-Iranian militias to Türkiye through a terrorism alliance with the PKK organization in the north of Iraq. Last but not least, the presence of the international organizations led by NATO in Iraq in support of the Iraqi state to enhance the security sector in the face of the deficiencies in the country is thoroughly analyzed in the works by Cherry (2021), Riyad (2021), Knights and Morcos (2021) and Çonkar (2021).

This study reconciles the discussions in the resources above with the other reliable ones through an analytical approach within four themes: (1) the development and dynamics of the al-Hashd al-Shaabi, (2) the threats by the pro-Iranian militias to the U.S., (3) the threats by the pro-Iranian militias

to Türkiye and (4) the presence of the international organizations led by NATO in Iraq and the relevant potential threats. The studies referred to in this study analyze one or two of the themes in their contents. However, this study fills the gap in the literature by bringing together these four themes in one piece of content and placing the news of the latest developments on academic ground.

The study puts forward answers to the following analysis questions:

- How was the previous security situation in Iraq under Iranian influence, and which developments and dynamics paved the way for the birth and rise of the al-Hashd al-Shaabi?

- What are the structure, networks, and dynamics of the al-Hashd al-Shaabi? What illegal activities have they been implicated in? What are the issues of discordance among the factions in the al-Hashd al-Shaabi?

- What are the threats posed by the pro-Iranian militias in the al-Hashd al-Shaabi to the military presence of the U.S. and its allies? What are the implications in this regard?

- What are the threats posed by the pro-Iranian militias in the al-Hashd al-Shaabi to Türkiye? What are the implications in this regard?

- How is the involvement of the international organizations led by NATO evolving in Iraq in the face of the security sector needs? What are the implications concerning security in this regard?

The first three sections of the study analyze the recent fragile security situation in Iraq, developments paving the way for the rise of the al-Hashd al-Shaabi, as well as the structure and dynamics of the organization.

In the first section, the overall security situation in Iraq is discussed. Having put an end to the Ba'ath regime, the U.S.-led military intervention in Iraq brought perverse political turmoil and overwhelmed the security situation to a great degree. The newly emerging terrorist organizations, fed by the Sunni factions in the country, capitalized on the power vacuum and presented threats. On the other hand, the overthrow of the Ba'ath regime paved the way for increased leverage for the Tehran administration in Iraq as Shiite factions gained ground in the political realm and Shiite militias became more prevalent in the country. The power vacuum and instability in Iraq turned the country into a safe haven for Daesh as the organization seized large territories in several regions, captured the second-biggest city,

Mosul, and declared the so-called caliphate in 2014.

The second section sheds light on the rise of the al-Hashd al-Shaabi. Following the Shiite supreme religious cleric Ayatollah al-Sistani's fatwa and the then PM al-Maliki's call, the already-existing and newly-emerging militias took up arms to fight against Daesh under the umbrella of the al-Hashd al-Shaabi, referred to as the Popular Mobilization Units/Forces by the international community. The al-Hashd al-Shaabi militias proved very efficient in defeating Daesh; however, the militias were responsible for countless war crimes, unlawful killings, and human rights abuses, and no or little state control over the militias existed. Starting in 2017, the Iraqi government attempted to impose state control over the militias and organize them properly. Most of these initiatives achieved limited effect as most militias continued operating autonomously.

The third section briefly examines the structure and dynamics of the al-Hashd al-Shaabi. The breakdown of factions, as well as the conflicting parties under the organization's umbrella are analyzed concisely, and the overview of the involvement in criminal activities is touched upon succinctly.

The following sections of the study focus more on the threat of terrorism posed by the antagonistic pro-Iranian militias within the al-Hashd al-Shaabi.

In the fourth section, the terrorism threat to the presence of the U.S. and its coalition partners in Iraq is analyzed. The section touches upon the Shia-motivated terrorism against the U.S.-led military presence in the post-2003 era and moves on to discuss the recent status of the U.S. military presence in the face of the imminent terrorism threat by the pro-Iranian Shiite militias in the al-Hashd al-Shaabi.

The fifth section examines the terrorism threat to Türkiye posed by the antagonistic pro-Iranian militias in the al-Hashd al-Shaabi by establishing a regional alliance with the PKK terrorist organization in the north of Iraq. The brief history of Türkiye's fight against the PKK precedes in this section. It is followed by the anti-terror campaigns in the north of Iraq and the terrorism alliance between the PKK and the said pro-Iranian militias centered on the Sinjar region.

In the following section, the status of the international organizations led by the NATO Mission in Iraq in the face of the security sector reform

needs of the country is analyzed. Though the roles of nearly all of the foreign forces were transitioned from combatant to advisory, assistance and training roles by the end of 2021, the stance by the pro-Iranian militias within the al-Hashd al-Shaabi towards the international organizations, particularly NATO Mission Iraq, may turn more aggressive and present bolder threats in the following term.

The study concludes by putting forward implications and inferences for the U.S., NATO and Türkiye, which have the most significant involvements in Iraq in the security realm, in light of the discussions in the preceding sections.

### **The Previous Security Situation in Iraq**

Iran shares nearly 1.500 km of border with Iraq and the latter constitutes a buffer and bridge to Lebanon, Syria, and Saudi Arabia for the former. The two countries share the predominance of the Shiite population and a deep-rooted cultural and religious background. For decades, the Ba'ath regime in Iraq threatened the Shiite factions in the country and the Tehran administration through political and military clashes. However, the overthrow of the Ba'ath regime after the U.S.-led military intervention in 2003 led to a system that presented long-term political opportunities for Tehran despite the immediate threats. Following the military intervention, the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) pursued a policy of total termination of the Ba'ath presence in politics. The new government of Iraq, established under the auspices of the CPA, granted key positions to important Shia political figures. The factions that were Iranian allies in the country began to thrive, thereby raising the level of Tehran's leverage with its neighbor.

In the post-2003 term, Iran pursued a three-pillar policy to reduce U.S. leverage and suppress Sunni factions. In the political domain, Tehran forged close ties with Shia-dominated political parties in Iraq to promote its political interests. In the social domain, most projects in sectors ranging from religion to media were sponsored or funded by Tehran. Concerning the security domain, Iran nurtured and supported several paramilitary groups with anti-Sunni and anti-West agendas (Watkins, 2020, 10-12).

The rapid rise of Shiites in the country's politics brought a period of diminished Sunni effectiveness in the political and social sphere. In the face

of the U.S.-led military intervention, many Sunni Arabs joined the already-existing militias and fought against the United States, while new Sunni militias with anti-West agendas emerged. The most well-known of these organizations was the Organization of Tevhid and Jihad, founded in Afghanistan in 2000 and then crossing into Iraq to fight against the U.S. This organization was succeeded by Al-Qaeda in Iraq in 2004. These organizations and other Sunni factions motivated by sentiments against rising Shia influence affected the country's internal security until the 2010s.

The withdrawal of the U.S. troops from Iraq in 2011 and the poor governance of the Al-Maliki government led to the deterioration of the security situation in Iraq. The withdrawal of U.S. troops rendered Iraqi forces weaker and created a power vacuum. Iraqi PM Nuri Al-Maliki's sectarian and divisive policies led to a rise of anti-Shia sentiments within Sunni factions in the same period. The Daesh terrorist organization earned ground in the country and even captured Mosul, the second-biggest city, in 2014 while Daesh-affiliated groups strengthened their positions. Eventually, the Maliki and Abadi governments were not able to manage the security situation adequately (Kılıç, Göç and Keskin, 2018, 47-48).

The pro-Iranian militias labeled as "special groups" and designated as terrorist organizations up to a certain degree by Washington had already earned ground in the country by 2011. Almost all militias had close ties with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' Quds Force of Iran (Knights, 2019, 1). The inability of Iraqi security forces to fight Daesh paved the way for incremental involvement by these pro-Iranian militias in the internal security situation in the country.

### **The Rise of the al-Hashd al-Shaabi**

In response to the capture of Mosul by Daesh, Nouri al-Maliki, the then Prime Minister, called on Iraqi volunteers to fight against Daesh alongside the Iraqi forces. Following this call, Shia supreme religious cleric Ayatollah al-Sistani released what was called a "fatwa" to urge Iraqi men to take up arms against Daesh. As new volunteer fighters joined the already-existing and newly-emerging Shiite militias, the militias were grouped under the umbrella of the al-Hashd al-Shaabi, referred to as Popular Mobilization Units/Forces (PMU/PMF) by the international community (Amnesty International, 2017, 8).

The five groups of militias that constituted the backbone of the al-Hashd al-Shaabi were: (1) the Shiite militias previously active and supported by the IRGC-QF between the U.S.-led intervention in 2003 and the U.S. withdrawal in 2011, (2) the armed factions of the political parties in the country, (3) the Shiite groups that emerged particularly in response to Sistani's fatwa, (4) several smaller groups emerging on tribal lines for local security considerations, and (5) the distinct groups operating in Turkmen areas (Abbas, 2017, 4-5).

The militias under the umbrella of the al-Hashd al-Shaabi are known to have pursued a persistent fight against Daesh. The international efforts in the fight against Daesh paid off to a great degree at the end of 2017, when Daesh had lost more than 90 percent of the territory previously under its control in Syria and Iraq. Though it could still instigate and conduct terrorist actions in other regions, Daesh lost its strongholds, including Mosul. Eventually, the Iraqi state declared victory over Daesh in Iraq (William Center, 2019).

The al-Hashd al-Shaabi fought alongside the Iraqi government forces in the fight against Daesh. The militias proved efficient in retaking territory and ousting Daesh, which earned them praise from the government, parliament, and religious leaders. However, many war crimes and human rights violations by the al-Hashd al-Shaabi were documented. Several Shiite militias under the broader umbrella of the organization were reported to perpetrate crimes and violations such as unlawful killings, tortures, and abuses in the Sunni-dominated areas (Amnesty International, 2017, 10-12).

After the organization's emergence, the status of the al-Hashd al-Shaabi and the integration of the militias into state security forces were continuously in question. Though the al-Hashd al-Shaabi leaders expressed willingness to be integrated into the legal security structure of the state, they wanted to eventually retain autonomy. Following an executive order by the Abadi government and legislation passed in the parliament in 2016, the al-Hashd al-Shaabi was recognized as an independent military force reporting to the Commander-in-Chief of the Iraqi armed forces, which turned the organization into a legitimate armed entity enjoying parity with the Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Interior under the Iraqi National Security Council.

The al-Hashd al-Shaabi also became a force to be reckoned with in the political realm. The organization had close ties with the Fatah Alliance, one of the country's primary political entities, as certain al-Hashd al-Shaabi



leaders had military and political identities within this structure all along (Mansour, 2018). The Fatah Alliance, led by the paramilitary leader of a faction under the broader umbrella of the al-Hashd al-Shaabi, came in second in the general elections in 2018, which consolidated the position and power of the organization to a greater degree (Alkinani, 2018). Despite the political leverage that the organization gained, the Mehdi government formed in the period following the elections continued efforts to impose complete state control on the al-Hashd al-Shaabi (Aboulenein, 2019). PM Mehdi increased efforts to formalize the structure and practices of the organization and even keep in check the leverage of the al-Hashd al-Shaabi leader Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis (Rudolf, 2020, 10-11). The disproportionate and unlawful use of force by the pro-Iranian militias under the organization against the Iraqis during the protests in October 2019 added to the bad reputation of the organization, as pro-Iranian militias were behind most of the killings of some 600 protestors as well as several leaders and activists (Barbarani, 2021).

Among the struggles for power within the organization and inefficient efforts to impose complete state control over the organization, the leader of the Hashd al-Sha'abi, Abu Mahdi al Muhandis, was killed in a U.S. strike in Baghdad on January 3, 2020, which targeted primarily and also killed Major General Qasem Soleimani, the commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' Quds Force of Iran (TRT World, 2020). The death of al-Muhandis paved the way for more significant differences among the organization, which had already been stricken with struggles among power elites, each claiming to represent Shia's core. Certain factions inside the organization were not content with Abu Fadak al-Mohammadawi, the successor of al-Muhandis, and militia groups adhering to al-Sistani decided to resign from the broader umbrella of the organization and operate directly under the Prime Minister.

Iraqi parliament passed legislation for the expulsion of foreign troops, including U.S. forces, on January 5, 2020, which was regarded as a significant initiative by the Fatah Alliance, which had adhering factions both in politics and within the al-Hashd al-Shaabi. Following the killing of al-Muhandis and Soleimani, the pro-Iranian militias ramped up attacks on U.S. forces and assets, mainly within as many as twenty newly-formed and renamed groups. Washington retaliated by adding the pro-Iranian leaders of the al-Hashd al-Shaabi, including Abu Fadak, to the list of Specially Designated Global Terrorists and sanctions (Alaca, 2021, 5-7).

After taking office in May 2020, the al-Kadhemi government

initiated reforms to impose state control on the al-Hashd al-Shaabi. However, Kadhemi was soon confronted and intimidated by the pro-Iranian Shiite leaders' militias in the al-Hashd al-Shaabi, which continued acts of terrorism on many occasions with impunity (Alaca, 2021, 8). After one year of deadlock following the elections in October 2021, Mohammed Shia al-Sudani formed the cabinet with an agenda similar to that of the al-Mahdi government. The new government also projected maintaining and developing the al-Hashd al-Shaabi as a parallel institution without integrating it into the broader military (Wahab, 2022).

### **The Structure and Dynamics of the al-Hashd al-Shaabi**

The al-Hashd al-Shaabi is known to have around 165.000 members, with about 110.000 (56%) of them forming Shiite factions, around 45.000 (36%) of them forming Sunni factions, and some 10.000 (8%) of them being from minorities. Out of all Shiites in the al-Hashd al-Shaabi, nearly 66% constitute the factions following Ali Khamenei with pro-Iranian agendas. In contrast, roughly 25% of them follow al-Sistani and nearly 9% of them adhere to other currents (Al Jbour, 2021, 19-22).

After the defeat of Daesh, the al-Hashd al-Shaabi strayed from its initial purpose to a large extent. Less than sixty thousand people are known to have been members of the al-Hashd al-Shaabi, officially receiving salaries from the government in 2017. However, the unofficial number of members is known to have been more than double, i.e., more than one hundred and fifty thousand.

After the victory over Daesh, inevitable disagreements and divisions emerged within the al-Hashd al-Shaabi. Some groups were no longer operating in compliance with the initial principles of the organization. The main conflict was between the two principal Islamic currents. One main group, previously led by Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, was a staunch supporter of Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. By the time of al-Sistani's fatwa, most of the militias in this group had already pursued years of war against the U.S. presence in Iraq after 2003. The factions in this group occupied key positions both in the Iraqi government and the parliament. They got bigger shares of funding and were shielded from judicial prosecutions and security problems, which let them suppress the opposition and the protest movements through acts of violence with impunity. The Badr Organization, the Kata'ib Hezbollah and the Asa'ib al-Haq are known to be the leading

factions in this group. The other group in the al-Hashd al-Shaabi was led by Ali al-Sistani, the leading figure among the Iraqi Shiite Imams. Al-Sistani and his followers pursued a more national agenda all along against the Iranian influence in the country. The Kata'ib Ali al-Akbar, Kata'ib al-Imam Ali, Liwa Ansar al-Marja'iyya and the al-Abbas forces are known to be the leading factions in this group (Al Jbour, 2021, 13-15).

In and after 2016, the Iraqi governments took a set of actions through regulations and executive orders to exert more state control on the al-Hashd al-Shaabi (Knights, Malik and Al-Tamimi, 2020, 7-11). The regulations were intended to achieve a proper command and control structure and internal discipline within the al-Hashd al-Shaabi. However, specific units are known to have committed countless acts of gross human rights violations and criminal actions such as not abiding by government orders, intimidation of key political and religious leaders (Knights et al., 2020, 101-104), illegal seizure of property, refusal to obey government orders to redeploy or disband, unauthorized uses of certain technologies, unlawful use of detention facilities (Knights et al., 2020, 105-108), threatening of foreign states overtly, attacks on foreign states and the U.S. targets in Iraq, unauthorized deployments to Syria, training foreign militias (Knights et al., 2020, 108-111) and self-provision of income through smuggling, illegal taxing, tolling and looting (Knights et al., 2020, 111-116). Especially after 2019, the needs for reforms in the al-Hashd al-Shaabi were more frequently verbalized at the prime ministerial level. The Government Executive Order 331, dated September 17, 2019, granted the al-Hashd al-Shaabi its formal structure (Knights et al., 2020, 12-16) resembling the current one (Knights et al., 2020, 25-26).

The al-Hashd al-Shaabi comprises a set of different systems of the network. Several key position holders in the organization are known to be double-hatted, occupying key positions in the National Security Council, the law enforcement bodies under the Ministry of Interior and the Iraqi Security Forces (Mansour, 2021, 19).

In March 2020, the pro-Sistani militias, referred to as "Hashd-i Marja'iyya", wanted to get separated from the pro-Khamenei militias, referred to as "Hashd-i Velayat-i", by leaving the broader umbrella of the PMF and being subordinated to the Ministry of Defense. This revealed the depth of the division between Khamenei and Sistani in terms of the al-Hashd al-Shaabi<sup>1</sup> as the pro-Sistani factions articulated more vociferously

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<sup>1</sup> The principal rivalry within the Shiite factions of the al-Hashd al-Shaabi comes from the dormant Qom-Najaf rivalry for being the center of Twelver Shi'ism. The Qom represents Iranian Shia as well

that the organization should have been entirely national and freed from any foreign influence all along (Alaca, 2020).

### **The Threat to the U.S. Presence Through Terrorism**

Since the early 1980s, one of the main pillars of Iranian foreign policy has been built on hostility against the U.S. presence and its allies in the Middle East, and Iran has actively employed state-sponsored terrorism against the U.S. Since the U.S. led military intervention in Iraq in 2003, Iraq has been a focal point of the U.S. Iran political rivalry in the broader region of the Middle East. Tehran was behind a vast number of terrorist attacks by the Shiite militias both in the years leading up to 2003 and during the U.S. insurgency campaign in Iraq until 2011. It has been exploiting its leverage and the Shiite militias to counter the U.S. presence in the country until recently (Connable, Dobbins, Shatz, Cohen and Wasser, 2020, 11).

After the U.S. military withdrawal from Iraq in 2011, the main focus of the prospective U.S. military presence in the country was the fight against Daesh. In cooperation with its allies in the Combined Joint Task Force within Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR), the U.S. military was actively involved in countering Daesh terrorism all along. Following the overall defeat of Daesh in 2017, the U.S. military supported the efforts of Iraqi forces to fight the remnants of Daesh in the country as well as providing training, advice, and assistance to more than 200.000 Iraqi security personnel in the timeframe leading up to 2020 (Blanchard, 2020, 36-37).

When the Iraqi parliament passed a resolution projecting the removal of all foreign troops in the country in January 2020, there were just more than 2.500 U.S. soldiers and 500 other foreign soldiers affiliated with the coalition against Daesh (Middle East Monitor, 2021). The Strategic Dialogues between Washington and Baghdad in 2020 and 2021 projected

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as Ayatollah Khomeini's ideal of politically connecting the Shias of Iran and Iraq, referred to as the "wilayat al-faqih" approach. The Najaf represents the Shia in Iraq. The latter was suppressed in Iraq during Saddam's reign and lost its eminence, while the former was up against the enemies of the Shia sect. With the overthrow of Saddam's regime in the wake of the U.S.-led military intervention in 2003, the Najaf was revitalized under the name "Marja al-Akbar" under Ali Al-Sistani's leadership. While the Qom, religiously led by Ali Khamenei, envisions clerical rule; al-Sistani's current position opposes any kind of clerical rule and promotes the separation between politics and religion (Alkinani, 2021).

the withdrawal of the remaining U.S. troops by the end of 2021<sup>2</sup>. Following a series of Military Technical Talks between the Iraqi military authorities and CJTF-OIR, the latter announced the completion of the transition into a non-combatant mission which was to enable, assist and advise Iraqi Security Forces (OIR, 2021).

The U.S. military forces are known to have been targeted by Iran-backed militias on countless occasions in Iraq in the post-2003 era. However, Iran-backed militias led by the Kataib Hezbollah ramped up their attacks in late 2019 and targeted U.S. assets in the country. The Washington Administration retaliated with the killings of Qasem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al Muhandis on January 3, 2020 (Moore, 2020), which created an unprecedented outrage in the Shia communities in Iran and Iraq.

Tehran retaliated with countless missile and rocket attacks, resorting to both national armed capabilities and the militias serving as its proxies in Iraq. In 2020, the pro-Iranian militias within the al-Hashd al-Shaabi, such as Kataib Hezbollah and Asaib Ahl al-Haq, claimed responsibility for tens of attacks. The pro-Iranian militias within the al-Hashd al-Shaabi tried to make the attacks in 2021 look anonymous; however, the attacks were linked to those militias (France24, 2021).

In 2021, the attacks were concentrated more systemically on the locations of the U.S. and coalition troops led by Ayn-el Esed airbase. In addition to conventional means, the militias employed armed UAVs to commit aerial attacks on U.S. targets. In the face of an incremental number of attacks, the Pentagon situated C-RAM air defense systems in critical positions, such as the U.S. Embassy and the U.S. base in the vicinity of the Baghdad Airport. The local logistics companies working for the coalition were also targeted as the logistics convoys were hit by IED attacks (Ayaz, 2021, 5-6).

The Iraqi government proved inefficient in thwarting the terrorist attacks by the pro-Iranian militias within the al-Hashd al-Shaabi in the face of the acts and discourses of intimidation by those factions. Two significant moves against the pro-Iranian factions within the al-Hashd al-Shaabi were far from achieving tangible results. In June 2020, several fighters allegedly

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<sup>2</sup> As of November 2021, four rounds of strategic dialogues had been held between Washington and Baghdad. The rounds took place in June 2020, August 2020, April 2021, and July 2021. The strategic talks focused on political cooperation as well as the U.S. military presence in Iraq. Amid several security concerns, the talks envisioned the withdrawal of the remaining U.S. combat troops from the country by the end of 2021 and the continuation of the U.S. military assistance to the Iraqi military. (FARAS, 2021)

behind some of the attacks were detained but later released without any prosecution. In the same way, Qasim Mahmoud Muslih, the Commander of Al-Anbar Operations in the al-Hashd al-Shaabi, was released without any prosecution soon after his arrest on terrorism-related charges in May 2021. Both events rendered more visible the Iraqi government's inability to crack down on the terrorism-related factions inside the government-funded al-Hashd al-Shaabi due to several inherent factors within the domestic political atmosphere in the country (Aljazeera, 2021).

Tehran-backed militias formed several coalitions and initiatives under the broader term of "muqawama", meaning resistance, against the so-called antagonists led by the U.S. in Iraq in the post-2003 era and several other geographies in the region. However, the growing anti-U.S. sentiments among the Shiite militias supported by Tehran led to the self-styled development of a new coalition called al-Haya al-Tansiqiya lil-Muqawama al-Iraqiya, meaning the Iraqi Resistance Coordination Committee (IRCC). The new coalition was regarded as an innovation in the era of Esmail Qaani, who succeeded the late Qasem Soleimani as the new commander of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF). The IRCC, or the Tansiqiya, emerged in October with a series of public statements and reorganized the pro-Iranian Shiite factions in the political, military and information domains to coordinate all kinetic and non-kinetic moves against the U.S. presence in Iraq (Knights, Smith and Malik, 2021, 5-6). While the Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH) and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) militias formerly formed the backbone of the IRCC, the participation of the group of Harakat al-Nujaba (HaN) strengthened the alliance.<sup>3</sup> Close to thirty new paramilitary and propaganda groups with different names emerged and started working in favor of the anti-U.S. campaign through kinetic actions and various propaganda and information operations in the virtual domain (Badawi, 2021).

The Iran-aligned militias and their counterpart factions in politics also juxtaposed the withdrawal of the U.S. and NATO from Afghanistan in mid-2021 with the diminishing combatant role of the U.S. led coalition in Iraq, thereby conducting messaging activities stressing the ineffectiveness of military activities and the weakness of the U.S. as a security partner. The withdrawal from Afghanistan set a new model for the militias, and they were encouraged to ramp up the attacks to coerce the U.S. troops to withdraw from Iraq (O'Donnell, Shaw, and Ullom, 2021c, 49-50).

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<sup>3</sup> The three organizations operating within and affiliated with the PMF were designated as foreign terrorist organizations on July 2, 2009, January 3, 2020, and March 5, 2019 respectively. (US Department of State, 2021)

### **The Terrorism Alliance Against Türkiye**

Since the mid-1980s, Türkiye has been fighting against the PKK terrorist organization, recognized as a terrorist entity also by the majority of the Western World, the USA, the EU, and NATO, neutralizing more than 43.000 terrorists and suffering in return a heavy toll of more than 8.000 military/security and close to 6.000 civilian casualties, along with huge economic losses (Şener, 2020).

The fight against the PKK has followed a checkered pattern. Though Turkish Security Forces have struck many successful blows on the organization, the PKK has capitalized on the instabilities and power vacuums in Iraq and Syria and has been fed by outside support, mainly from the antagonists in both countries (MFA, 2021). Following a huge number of operations against the PKK both within its boundaries and in the north of Iraq till 2012, Turkish Security Forces cracked down on the PKK's presence and actions in the southeastern cities in the 2015-2016 timeframe, which was followed by a series of operations in Syrian territories both against the PKK's affiliates in Syria and Deash in 2016-2020 timeframe<sup>4</sup>. Starting in 2018, the Turkish Armed Forces conducted a set of land and air operations in the north of Iraq providing a safe haven to the PKK. With the Operations Tigris Shield, Claw, Claw-2, Claw-3, Claw-Eagle, and Claw-Tiger in the 2018-2020 timeframe (Aslan, 2020), the Operations Claw-Lightning and Claw-Thunderbolt in 2021 (Kasapoğlu, 2021) and the Operation Claw-Lock in 2022 (Gemici, 2023), the Turkish Armed and Security Forces have strived to counter the PKK threat at its source by eliminating its operational capacity and preventing the network from pouring into Turkish territory.

With its tough geography, the north of Iraq served as a safe haven for the PKK over the years as the organization established several terrorist camps, especially in the areas of Hakurk, Qandil, Metina, Zap, Sinat, Avashin-Basyan, Gara, Haftanin, and Sinjar. PKK capitalized on the power vacuum in those areas, procured supplies and secured illegal taxes from the locals by force, which culminated in mass migrations of the locals out of these areas. With a view to countering the terrorism threat at its source, the Turkish Armed Forces conducted numerous exceptional military operations in these areas; however, the operations achieved short-lived successes rather than the total elimination of the terrorist organization for several reasons

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<sup>4</sup> The Turkish Armed Forces conducted Operation Euphrates Shield in 2016, Operation Olive Branch in 2018 and Operation Peace Spring in 2019 in Syrian territories (Bayır, 2021, 30-33). However, Türkiye is at odds with a number of countries in the West, led by the USA, concerning the recognition of the PKK-affiliates in Syria as a terrorist organization.

(Kızılcık, 2021).

Over the past two years, the Turkish security forces have intensified military operations in the north of Iraq by entering places previously regarded as inaccessible and destroying the dens of terrorists in Zap, Avashin-Basyan, Metina, and Gara thanks to developments in the national defense industry. Since the eradication of PKK's leverage in these areas to a certain degree, potential new operations in Makhmour, Qandil, and Sinjar have been on the agenda (Usta, 2021). Among these, a potential military operation to Sinjar has been a bone of contention both in Türkiye-Iraq relations and in the domestic politics of the latter.

The pro-Iranian militias within the al-Hashd al-Shaabi have lately been targeting Türkiye's military presence in the north of Iraq which aims at fighting against the PKK threat and providing training to the forces of the Iraqi Kurdish Regional Government. The discourses and actions of the pro-Iranian factions in the al-Hashd al-Shaabi not only target Türkiye directly but also derail relations on the Ankara-Baghdad line.

In line with its incremental military presence in the north of Iraq and campaigns to attack the network of the organization at its source, Ankara has hardened its stance against the PKK presence in Sinjar<sup>5</sup>, which provides a safe passage for the organization from the camps in the north of Iraq into Syrian territories.

To prevent the Sinjar region from becoming another stronghold like Qandil for the PKK, Türkiye has supported the agreement between the Baghdad and Erbil administrations in October 2020. The Sinjar Agreement has aimed to normalize conditions and restore stability in the region by expelling the PKK and the al-Hashd al-Shaabi forces. The Sinjar has been the focal point of the tactical alliance between the PKK and the pro-Iranian militias under the umbrella of the al-Hashd al-Shaabi but acting outside its chain of command. In particular, the group called the Sinjar Resistance Units (also called YBŞ) is known to have been officially funded from the economic resources of the al-Hashd al-Shaabi.

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<sup>5</sup> Thousands of Yazidi people, regarded as infidels, were exposed to enslavement and mass killings by Daesh in Sinjar in 2014. The PKK-affiliated groups in the region were allegedly the only factions to resist the Daesh campaign and provide shelter to the Yazidis after Peshmerga forces of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) had fled the region. The PKK-affiliated groups allegedly played a key role alongside the al-Hashd al-Shaabi and the Peshmerga in retaking the region from Daesh. Following the illegitimate unilateral declaration of independence by the KRG, Iraqi forces dominated by the al-Hashd al-Shaabi expelled the Peshmerga from the region, thereby consolidating the positions of the PKK and the al-Hashd al-Shaabi in the region (Jameel, 2020).



As Turkish Security Forces intensified the campaigns against the PKK in the north of Iraq and Turkish officials signaled a potential operation to the Sinjar region, the pro-Iranian militias led by the Asaib Ahl al-Haq publicized messages of threat against Ankara. The threat of the militias transformed from rhetoric into reality when the Turkish military base in Bashiqa near Mosul was attacked on April 14, 2021. Though the attack remained anonymous at the beginning, many findings suggested that the pro-Iranian militias within the al-Hashd al-Shaabi were behind the attack. In addition, the Harakat al-Nujaba faction of the al-Hashd al-Shaabi released videos in which they threatened Türkiye stating that any potential move by Türkiye in Iraq would have consequences.

The main purpose of these threats and acts of intimidation is to prevent the Turkish Armed Forces and the Peshmerga forces from making a move toward Sinjar. The rationale is that Sinjar is at the crossroads of the access of the pro-Iranian militias to their affiliates and regions of leverage in Syrian territories. In the same way, the region provides a safe passage for the PKK to have access to its affiliates in Syrian territories. Since Türkiye fights against the PKK, the region-based alliance between this terrorist organization and the pro-Iranian militias in the al-Hashd al-Shaabi places these militias at the anti-Türkiye camp, aiding and abetting terrorism in the wider region (Alaca, 2021b, 6-11). The U.S. state intelligence reports also verify this terrorism alliance in the region (Hernandez, 2022). However, Ankara proves resolute in countering the PKK threat even in the face of all these threats, with the increasing number of military operations in the region securing critical points and neutralizing top PKK figures.

Given the diplomatic statements from the side of Iran criticizing the latest military operations by the Turkish armed and security forces against the PKK in the north of Iraq, Tehran is likely to continue its covert support to the pro-Iranian militias in attacking and targeting the Turkish presence in the area (O'Donnell, Shaw, and Ullom, 2021b, 45-46).

### **The Precarious Stance Against the International Organizations**

Since 2003, Iraq has always been subject to foreign influence from several international actors in many domains. While the U.S. presence in the country was predominant all along, the West-led foreign influence in the country was centered on the fight against Daesh, led by the efforts of the global coalition following the control of large territories by Daesh in 2014.

Following the defeat of Daesh in 2017, international actors focused more on the economy and security sector reforms in Iraq.

Iraq's security structure was crippled after the U.S.-led intervention in 2003 and later on was dependent on military assistance from the U.S. to a great degree (Riyad, 2021, 8-10). Following a series of milestone developments such as the withdrawal of the U.S. combatant forces in 2011, the fall of Mosul to Daesh in 2014 and the defeat of Daesh mainly through the employment of the al-Hashd al-Shaabi in 2017, the Iraqi security forces became more dependent on the military advice and assistance of the West-led international actors and the need for a security sector reform in the country manifested itself more visibly.

The Security Sector Reform (SSR) needs in Iraq emanate from some pressing challenges ranging from (1) the weak security institutions crippled by corruption, instability, and insufficient administrative skills to (2) the financial resources in decline; and (3) the lack of national reserves resulting in the permanent mobilization of all security forces thereby placing a huge burden on the economy to (4) the duplicative and overlapping missions and roles of security forces and intelligence agencies including the armed forces under the Ministry of Defense, the law-enforcement forces under the Ministry of Interior, the Counter-Terrorism Service, and the al-Hashd al-Shaabi.

International organizations have been helping the Iraqi government reverse the effects of these challenges. The U.S.-led coalition in Operation Inherent Resolve, previously formed to fight against Daesh, transitioned its Task Force Iraq into the Military Advisory Group (MAG) providing advice and operational-level lethal support. The UN Development Programme and the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAM-I) have been providing training in security and justice sector reforms (Knights and Morcos, 2021). The European Union and NATO have been engaged in non-combatant, capacity-building, and advisory missions in Iraq as well. The European Union Advisory Mission in Iraq (EUAM Iraq) and NATO Mission Iraq (NMI) have been operating in the country since 2017 and 2018, respectively. These missions have focused more on the capital and its vicinity in their operations and activities and have fallen short of extending the reach of the missions to other regions of the country and other factions of the security environment (Cherry, 2021, 4-6).

However, NATO Mission Iraq has been bound to be the most prominent international initiative in Iraq. Though NATO was engaged in

limited training activities in the country in the 2003-2011 timeframe, the alliance strived to meet the requests of the Baghdad administration by training and advising a considerable portion of the Iraqi security forces in the 2015-2018 timeframe. In October 2018, NATO's initiative in the country was transitioned into NATO Mission Iraq which projected non-combatant, capacity-building, advisory and training activities in tandem with the other international organizations. In response to the requests of the Baghdad administration, NATO decided to expand NATO Mission Iraq in a way that displayed its long-standing commitment to the capacity-building of the Iraqi Security Forces. NATO is bound to increase the number of personnel from around 500 to around 4,000 in the mission, work together with the Ministries of Interior and Justice in addition to the Ministry of Defense and other agencies, and expand the activities of training and advice to regions of the country other than Baghdad and its vicinity (Çonkar, 2021, 8-9).

The U.S. military recently completed the transition from its combat mission in the country to the mission of advising and enabling Iraqi security and armed forces to provide security and fight the remnants and sleeper cells of Daesh. The transition will not bring along any reduction in the number of U.S. troops as roughly 2,500 of them are envisioned to remain in the country within advisory and training missions primarily in the Military Advisory Group of Operation Inherent Resolve and secondarily in NATO Mission Iraq.

The enhancement of the NATO Mission Iraq, which is still tentative, and the advisory mission under Operation Inherent Resolve are bound to replace the U.S. national military presence in the country. The termination of the U.S. combatant mission was a political move to fend off pressure from pro-Iranian militias and their offshoots in the parliament. However, pro-Iranian factions and militias are assessed to view with a jaundiced eye the end of the U.S. combatant role and the transfer of troops to training and advisory missions under NMI and OIR (Arraf, 2021).

While NATO Mission Iraq is a strategic-level mission focusing on advising at the ministerial level (NATO, 2021) and the Military Advisory Group under Operation Inherent Resolve focuses more on the operational level advising without any combatant role (Staff CJTF-OIR, 2021), the antagonists with sentiments against the foreign military presence in Iraq are likely to lump the two missions together and even lump the advisory missions under these two umbrellas with the combatant roles previously assumed under Operation Inherent Resolve.

The pro-Iranian factions are known to have perceived NATO's initiative to enhance and enlarge its mission in the country as an intention to assume the role of Operation Inherent Resolve. NATO and the U.S. conducted messaging activities to make it more clear that the roles of OIR and NMI are different and that the enhancement of NMI is not intended to assume the responsibilities of OIR (O'Donnell, Shaw, and Ullom, 2021a, 14).

NATO's messaging activities to reassure Iraqi society may have certain shortfalls as they have not been perfectly coordinated with Iraqi officials and do not address the concerns of the Iraqis about the foreign military presence in the country (Thruelsen, 2021). The pro-Iranian factions in politics and the militias on the ground are likely to capitalize on the shortfalls of NATO's messaging, exploit them, and target the non-combatant advisory missions under NATO and OIR both in the political and security realms.

Since the pro-Iranian militias are against any security sector reform move that will damage their gains, the government support behind them, and the freedom of movement they have, any guidance by NATO Mission Iraq to the ministries and institutions in the field of security, relevant rhetoric, and potential media coverage in this context may ignite the dormant aggression, and NATO Mission Iraq may be directly targeted by the pro-Iranian militias.

## CONCLUSION AND EVALUATION

Following the U.S. led military intervention in 2003, major changes took place in Iraq's internal political and social dynamics. The power vacuum in the political and security environments led to the emergence of terrorist organizations and irregular militias. Within the scope of its regional policy, Iran has increased its influence on Shiite society as well as the political and security environments in Iraq. The multi-ethnic social structure and sectarian division have been the biggest obstacles to stability in Iraq, and the country's security sector has been greatly affected by this instability. The al-Hashd al-Shaabi, which was organized through a religious and political initiative when the inadequate and ineffective security structure could not prevent the rise of the Daesh terrorist organization, is a formation that emerged as a reflection of the internal political and social realities of Iraq in the security realm.

The al-Hashd al-Shaabi was largely instrumental in neutralizing

Daesh and liberating Mosul; however, in the post-Daesh period that started with the neutralization of the great threat, the al-Hashd al-Shaabi militias did not want to give up their gains emanating from the crisis period. The al-Hashd al-Shaabi, which includes long-established militias formed with anti-U.S. agendas in the first years of the post-2003 period as well as the militias that were just formed upon the call of religious and political leaders in 2014, led to further polarization in Iraq's security sector.

The attempts by the Iraqi governments to bring the al-Hashd al-Shaabi under state control have largely proved inefficient and insufficient. The armed militias have political offshoots within Iraq's hybrid political structure and are provided covert law and jurisdictional immunity through the loopholes in the political and jurisdictional systems. The state-funded militias have remained outside the control of the state and have become the principal actors in illegal activities. The factions within the al-Hashd al-Shaabi that resist being brought under control and are the focal point of terrorist activities, even tending to intimidate the Iraqi government with their activities and rhetoric, are the militias that are largely supported by Iran and used as proxies on the field.

Iraq has been an arena of the struggle for the sphere of influence between the U.S. and Iran in the post-2003 period. The militias, which were supported by the Tehran administration and which carried out terrorist attacks targeting the U.S. military since the first years of their presence in Iraq, took their places in the al-Hashd al-Shaabi in different forms after 2014 and assumed a big role in the fight against Daesh. After 2017, when Daesh was largely neutralized, the anti-U.S. agenda of the pro-Iranian militias gained weight as they continued terrorist activities. Just at the beginning of 2020, the killing of the al-Hashd al-Shaabi leader al-Muhandis and the Commander of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF) Qasem Soleimani by the U.S. in a military operation was countered by Iranian military attacks and the increasing continuation of terrorist attacks by the pro-Iranian militias. In particular, the terrorist attacks by the pro-Iranian militias posed a great threat to the U.S. armed forces and the coalition forces under Operation Inherent Resolve. The termination of the combatant role of U.S. military presence in Iraq by the end of 2021 following the strategic talks between the U.S. and the Iraqi al-Kadhimi government in 2020 and 2021 is seen as a gain in their favor by the Tehran administration and the political factions and militias it supports in Iraq. Despite the end of the U.S. combatant presence in Iraq, the U.S. military logistics activities in Iraq and military advisory services within NATO and OIR are likely to continue. It is assessed that the future potential political

tensions between the Washington and Tehran administrations may feed the aggressions of the Iranian-backed militias against the non-combatant military presence of the U.S. and that these militias may continue to pose a threat to the overall security of the U.S. presence on a case-by-case basis.

The Iran-backed militias have recently become an undeniable threat to Türkiye in the north of Iraq. In recent years, the Turkish armed and security forces, which have pursued an effective fight against the PKK terrorist organization at home and abroad, have largely neutralized the organization by concentrating their efforts on neutralizing high-level figures of the organization with special operations and neutralizing the terrorist organization at its sources outside its borders to prevent its infiltration into the country. Following a set of successful military operations against the terrorist camps in the north of Iraq, a possible military operation in the Sinjar region, which is a strategic region of note for the terrorist organization's passage to Syria to establish connections with its affiliates here, has been on the agenda of Türkiye. In the Sinjar region, the pro-Iranian militias that form a regional alliance with the PKK terrorist organization and the government-funded regional militias under the umbrella of the al-Hashd al-Shaabi intertwined with the PKK openly threaten Türkiye's military presence in the north of Iraq and a possible operation against Sinjar. The threats even transitioned from rhetoric to reality when the terrorist attack on one of the Turkish bases in the north of Iraq was linked to the pro-Iranian militias. Losing momentum in the face of the deteriorating situation in its interactions with the other actors in the region led by the Kurdish Regional Government, the PKK is likely to cling to its alliance with the said pro-Iranian militias which are, in this regard, likely to continue posing threats to Türkiye. The military presence in the north of Iraq has been a bone of contention on the Ankara-Baghdad and Ankara-Tehran lines and it remains to be seen how Ankara will respond to the threat posed by the militias supported by Iran and funded by the Iraqi government.

The militias behind the terrorist activities targeting the U.S. military presence in Iraq and those posing a great threat to the Turkish military presence in the north of Iraq through a regional alliance with the PKK are fed by the same network of organizations led by the Kata'ib Hezbollah, Asaib Ahl al-Haq and Harakat al-Nujaba, which operate together both under the structure of the al-Hashd al-Shaabi and within the Iraqi Resistance Coordination Committee. At this point, the existence of this terrorist alliance refutes the misconception by the international community that the PKK is a threat only to Türkiye. The PKK and these pro-Iranian militias are

threats to the U.S., Türkiye and NATO at the same time. Ankara, Washington and Brussels should consider pursuing a common comprehensive policy to counter the threats by these militias and the PKK in Iraq in the central regions and the north.

International organizations led by NATO have been operating in the security realm in Iraq to boost improvements in the security sector. In line with the reduction and eventual termination of the combatant roles of the U.S. military and its allies in the coalition for OIR in Iraq, the advisory and training roles within NATO Mission Iraq and the Military Advisory Group of OIR have gained more prominence. NATO Mission Iraq has the leading role and is planned to be enhanced in number and scale-wise to reach regions other than the greater area of Baghdad and other realms of governance. While the missions of international organizations have not been mainly targeted by the actions and discourses of the pro-Iranian militias, especially NATO Mission Iraq and the Military Advisory Group of OIR, are likely to be targeted in the long term.

The scope of the threat by the pro-Iranian militias to NATO and Türkiye in the following term will be affected by the determinants and parameters of the internal politics of Iraq and the political competition between the Tehran administration and the West led by the U.S. However, the antagonistic pro-Iranian militias are highly likely to continue posing threats to the instability of Iraq and the security of the military presence of the West, aimed at improving the crippled security sector in Iraq.

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## GENİŞLETİLMİŞ ÖZET

### Irak'ta Terör ve İstikrarsızlık Kaynağı Olarak Haşdi Şabi İçindeki İran Yanlısı Hasım Milisler

#### Giriş

Irak'ta 2003 sonrası politik ve güvenlik ortamı, genel olarak ülkedeki ABD askeri varlığı ve İran'ın etkisi ile şekillenmiştir. İstikrarsızlık ve güç boşluğu ile nitelendirilebilen bu ortam, 2011 yılında ABD Silahlı Kuvvetlerinin Irak'tan çekilmesi ile farklı boyutlar kazanmıştır. İstikrarsızlık ortamı ve güç boşluğu, Irak'ta Daeş'in güç kazanmasına ve ülkenin ikinci büyük kenti Musul'u ele geçirmesine zemin hazırlamıştır. Ülkenin yetersiz güvenlik sektörü nedeniyle, Daeş ile mücadele için hükümet ve dini lider al-Sistani'nin çağrılarıyla ülkedeki milisler Haşdi Şaabi, Halkın Seferberlik Güçleri, adı altında birleştirilmiştir. Daeş'in etkisiz hale getirilmesinde etkili olan Haşdi Şaabi milisleri, birçok yasadışı faaliyet ve insan hakları ihlallerine de imza atmıştır.

Haşdi Şaabi milisleri içerisinde, 2003 sonrası dönemin ilk zamanlarında veya Daeş'e karşı mücadele çağrısı sonrasında kurulan Batı karşıtı tutumlar sergileyen İran yanlısı milisler de bulunmaktadır. Diğer Haşdi Şaabi milisleri gibi hükümet tarafından desteklenerek finanse edilen ve siyasi arenada da temsil edilen bu milisler, özellikle Daeş'in büyük oranda etkisiz hale getirildiği 2017 yılından sonra ABD, Türkiye ve başta NATO olmak üzere ülkede güvenlik ortamında faaliyet gösteren uluslararası örgütlere karşı farklı içeriklerde tehdit teşkil etmektedir.

#### Irak'ta Önceki Güvenlik Ortamı

2003 yılında ABD liderliğinde Irak'a askeri harekât sonrasında Baas rejiminin yıkılması ile Irak'taki Şii fraksiyonlar yükselişe geçmiştir. Ülkedeki Şii yükseliş, Sünni tandanslı terör örgütlerinin ortaya çıkmasına neden olmuştur. İran'ın etkisiyle Irak içinde oluşan Şii milisler, Batı karşıtı tutumları gereği ABD ve Batı askeri varlığına karşı terör faaliyetleri gerçekleştirmiş; aynı zamanda da ideolojik karşıtlık gereği Sünni tandanslı örgütlerle de gayrimeşru bir şekilde mücadele etmişlerdir. Daeş'in Irak içinde varlık gösterdiği ilk dönemde, bu Şii milisler Daeş'e karşı da mücadele etmiştir.

### **Haşdi Şaabi'nin Yükselişi**

Daeş'in güçlenerek Musul'u ele geçirmesine karşılık Irak güvenlik güçlerinin etkisiz kalması ile, Şii lider Sistani ve Irak hükümetinin çağrularıyla ülkedeki milisler Haşdi Şaabi, Halkın Seferberlik Güçleri, adı altında seferber edilmiştir. Daeş'in 2017 yılında büyük oranda etkisiz hale getirilmesinde büyük pay sahibi olan milisler, aynı zamanda sayısız yasa dışı faaliyet ve insan hakları ihlalleri de gerçekleştirmiştir. Politik arenada da temsil edilen milisler, hükümet tarafından finanse edilmektedir. Irak hükümetleri tarafından, milisler üzerinde tam bir devlet otoritesi kurmaya yönelik bir dizi girişim gerçekleştirilse de düzenlemeler arzu edilen sonuçları doğuramamıştır.

### **Haşdi Şaabi'nin Yapısı ve Dinamikleri**

Hali hazırda, Haşdi Şaabi'nin büyük çoğunluğunu Şii milisler, geri kalanını Sünni ve diğer milisler oluşturmaktadır. Şii milislerin çoğunluğunu ise İran yanlısı milisler oluşturmaktadır.

2017 yılında, Daeş'in büyük oranda etkisiz hale getirilmesi sonrasında, Haşdi Şaabi içindeki Şii milisler arasında güç ayrılıkları baş göstermiştir. İranlı Şii lider Hamaney ve Iraklı Şii lider Sistani'ye biat eden milisler farklı kamplara ayrılmıştır. Sistani yanlısı milisler, 2020 yılında Haşdi Şaabi'den ayrı hareket etmeye başlamıştır. Irak Hükümetleri, Haşdi Şaabi'yi daha iyi kontrol edebilmek için bir dizi düzenleme yapmışsa da milisler birçok yasa dışı faaliyet ve insan hakları ihlallerinin faili haline gelmiştir.

### **Terör Üzerinden ABD Varlığına Tehdit**

İran yanlısı milisler, önceki dönemlerde olduğu gibi, ABD başta olmak üzere Batı askeri varlığına karşı terör eylemleri düzenlemiştir. 2020 yılı başında, ABD'nin bir özel operasyonu ile Haşdi Şaabi lideri el-Mühendis ve İranlı komutan Kasım Süleymani'nin öldürülmesi, ABD askeri varlığına karşı terör olaylarında artışa yol açmıştır. İran yanlısı Şii milisler, Irak Direniş Koordinasyon Komitesi adı altında birleşme yoluna giderek saldırılarını artırmıştır. Washington yönetimi ise, Irak Hükümetinin talebi üzerine ve iki yönetim arasındaki stratejik görüşmeler neticesinde, 2021 yılı sonunda Irak'taki askeri varlığının muharip rolüne tamamen son vermiştir.

### **Türkiye'ye Karşı Terör İttifakı**

Türk Silahlı Kuvvetleri ve güvenlik güçleri, PKK terörüne karşı yurt içi ve yurt dışında son zamanlarda etkili harekâtlara imza atmıştır. Özellikle, Irak kuzeyindeki başarılı harekâtlar sonrasında, örgüt için önem arz eden Sinjar bölgesine muhtemel bir askeri harekâtın sinyali, Türkiye'yi PKK ile bölgede ittifak içinde olan İran yanlısı milisler ile karşı karşıya getirmiştir. Bu milisler, Türkiye'yi söylemleri ile tehdit ederken, 2021 yılı içinde Türkiye'nin Başika'daki askeri üssüne yönelik gerçekleştirilen bir saldırı ile bu milislerin bağlantılı olduğuna yönelik bulgular tespit edilmiştir. İran yanlısı milisler, Irak kuzeyi genelinde ve Sinjar bölgesi özelinde PKK ile işbirliği itibarıyla Türkiye'ye karşı tehdit teşkil etmektedir.

### **Uluslararası Örgütlere Karşı Belirsiz Tutum**

Irak'ta NATO başta olmak üzere, uluslararası örgütler, güvenlik sektörünün geliştirilmesi için Irak hükümetine destek maksadıyla faaliyet göstermektedir. Bu kapsamda faaliyet gösteren en etkili misyon NATO Irak Misyonudur. 2018 yılından itibaren bugünkü görünümü ile faaliyet gösteren misyonun, 2021 yılında Irak Hükümeti tavsiyesi ve NATO'nun kararı ile genişleyerek ülkenin farklı bölgeleri ve farklı bakanlıklarında da danışmanlık ve eğitim faaliyetlerini sürdürmesi beklenmektedir. Şu ana kadar, İran yanlısı milisler, NATO Irak Misyonu ve diğer uluslararası örgütlerin misyonlarını doğrudan hedef almasalar da, Batı yanlısı tutumları gereği ve güvenlik sektörü reformlarının kazanımlarına zarar vereceği gerekçeleriyle, bu misyonlara da tehdit teşkil edebilir.

### **Sonuç ve Değerlendirme**

İran yanlısı milisler, aynı güç merkezi tarafından yönlendirilmektedir. ABD askeri varlığına karşı terör faaliyetleri icra eden milisler ile Irak kuzeyinde PKK ile işbirliği içinde olan ve Türkiye'yi tehdit eden milisler, aynı milis ailesinden gelmektedir. Bu bağlamda PKK'nın yalnızca Türkiye'ye bir tehdit olduğu zeminde bir argümandır. PKK ve İran yanlısı milisler, oluşturdukları terör ittifakı ile aynı anda Türkiye, ABD ve NATO'ya tehdit teşkil etmektedir. Bu terör ittifakına karşı üç yönetim de ortak strateji ve tutum oluşturmalıdır.

ABD'nin muharip askeri varlığının sona ermesi ile özellikle NATO Irak Misyonunun önemi daha da artacaktır. NATO Irak Misyonunun, ülkedeki muharip askeri varlıktan farklı olduğuna kani olunması, bu

misyonun İnan yanlısı milisler tarafından bu zamana kadar doğrudan hedef alınmamasını sağlamıştır. Ancak, NATO Irak Misyonunun genişlemesi ile birlikte, güvenlik sektörü reformuna büyük oranda karşı olan milislerle çatışan angajmanları, misyonun hedef alınmasına zemin hazırlayabilecektir.

Irak'taki güvenlik durumu, güvenlik sektörünün durumu ve İnan yanlısı milislerin tutumları, ABD-İnan ilişkilerinin seyri ve iç politik dinamikler gibi değişkenlerden etkilenecektir.