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'A threat from within': Iraq and the rise of its militias

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The dust had barely settled on the fall of Iraq's second city when the call came. It was June 2014 and [Islamic State](#) had just captured Mosul, the prize in a fight for control of a country already scarred by more than a decade of war.

Just four days after the city's capture, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the most revered Shia cleric in [Iraq](#), issued a fatwa urging Iraqis to volunteer in the fight against the militants. Tens of thousands of mostly young men from the poor Shia south and Baghdad suburbs flocked to recruiting centres, military camps and militia headquarters.





▲Iraqi men marching to a recruiting centre in west Baghdad in June 2014. Photograph: Ghaith Abdul-Ahad/The Guardian

One such gathering took place in a sprawling compound in eastern Baghdad, where a large crowd of young men packed into a lecture hall. Excited to volunteer for the fight against Isis, they came with plastic shopping bags stuffed with clothes and little else. Many of the prospective fighters wore brightly coloured bermuda shorts, their mood as carefree and as boisterous as if they were going on a picnic.

Some were wearing green bandanas with the logo of the Kata'ib Hezbollah militia, formed in 2006 by the military commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and closely associated with Iran's Revolutionary Guards.



▲Iraqi men marching to a recruiting centre in west Baghdad, June

2014. Photograph: Ghaith Abdul-Ahad/The Guardian

The walls around them were lined with pictures of militiamen who fell in the civil war in neighbouring Syria. Muhandis would go on to become the key leader of the Shia militia umbrella organisation the Popular Mobilisation Forces, known as the Hashed al-Shaabi, or the Hashed.

In January this year he was killed in the same US drone strike that took out Iran's top military commander, General [Qassem Suleimani](#). By the time of his death the militias under his command, acting at the behest of Iran, were at the heart of the Iraqi establishment. In killing him, the US disrupted a fiendishly complicated set of power relations. It is on Iraqi soil, and not in Iran, that many fear the impact of the strike will be felt in the long term.



▲ Shia militia commanders on the frontlines against Isis near Falluja, August 2015. Photograph: Ghaith Abdul-Ahad/The

Guardian

“Previously, we chose only people who were committed to protecting the [Shia] sect and observed their religious commitments, who prayed and fasted, but now we are accepting anyone,” said the militia chief’s “recruiting officer” in 2014 . A tall, broad-shouldered man with a thin beard and short-cropped hair, he walked among the rows of enthusiastic young men, jotting down names on a yellow notepad.

Only a few weeks earlier he had been commanding a unit of fighters in Aleppo against Isis, signalling the ever-shifting pace of Iraq’s military and political landscape. “We fought the Americans, and we are fighting Daesh [Isis] in Syria,” he said. “Our experience will make them strong. We will give them the best training anyone can give here. Even army soldiers are joining us – they want to get rid of the corruption that caused the defeat of the army.”



▲Iraqi Shia recruits in a training centre in the east of Baghdad in August 2014. Photograph: Ghaith Abdul-Ahad/The Guardian

The young recruits were joined by veteran Shia fighters such as Abu Hashem, who fought against Saddam Hussein in the 1980s and 1990s under the command of Muhandis. The day Mosul fell, Muhandis called his veteran fighters to come to meet him.

“To be honest, after the fall of Mosul we didn’t go to war because of Sistani’s fatwa,” said Abu Hashem, a white-haired senior intelligence officer in the Hashed. Instead, he said, it was Muhandis who had spurred the older fighters into action. “We met him in his house in the Green Zone and he told us that the Iraqi state had fallen,” Abu Hashem said.

“There is no state,” Abu Hashem recalled Muhandis saying. “I am the state now.”

The extent of Muhandis’ influence over the various and bickering factions that comprised the Hashed is clear from accounts of how he marshalled fighters in the counter-campaign to drive Isis out of Iraq and how he was able to draw on Tehran’s resources to do so.



▲Iraqi Shia recruits in a training centre in the east of Baghdad in August 2014. Photograph: Ghaith Abdul-Ahad/The Guardian

After Abu Hashem and his comrades arrived ready to take up arms in that summer of 2014, Muhandis ordered them to head to the Taji military base north of Baghdad to set up a new force. Their first task was to protect the Shia shrines in Samara and stop the advance of Isis militants to Baghdad.

“When we arrived at the base, we found complete chaos,” Abu Hashem said. “Thousands of young volunteers had gathered there, and no one knew what to do with them.” They were joined by demoralised and broken soldiers, whose units had collapsed, and who had abandoned their armour and weapons in the retreat.

“Those of us who knew how to drive a tank took over abandoned army tanks and started forming new tank battalions and teaching the young volunteers. Others set up a radio and communications network. I had spent my life in intelligence, so I was assigned to run the security and the intelligence apparatus.”

Many of the veteran fighters were men in their 50s and 60s, but their younger relatives joined them too. “Each one brought two or three sons. A lot of the young had come with their older fathers or uncles,” Abu Hashem said.

When Muhandis arrived, the organisation was there for him on the ground. According to Abu Hashem and other commanders, Iranian flights soon started delivering weapons to the newly opened airport in Najaf.

“One of the ministers in the government at that time used to be head of logistics in the [Shia political party and military group] Badr Corps. He sat on the floor in a white *dishdasha*, picked up phones

and arranged for shipments of pickup trucks, munitions and weapons, then distributed them among the different factions.”

With weapons, cars and men came Iranian advisers. They dispersed across the country in a wide geographic arch from Diyala in the east to the western border with Syria. Their voices could be heard on the military radio directing mortar fire in Falluja, installing thermal cameras in a small besieged village in the west of Mosul and accompanying the advance of an Iraqi special forces brigade in Tikrit.



▲Members of the Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, on the frontlines against Isis, in Diala province to the east of Baghdad, in July 2014.

Photograph: Ghaith Abdul-Ahad/The Guardian

“The reality is, without the Iranians we wouldn't be able to do anything,” Abu Hashem said. “If the Iranian advisers weren't there, the battalions wouldn't attack. Their presence gave the men confidence in the early days.

“Suleimani had a halo around his head, and he became the symbol that everyone was devoted to. And [Muhandis] was negotiating these multiple factions that were unruly and difficult to control. He was like a music conductor.”

The Hashed was never a single fighting force but a heterogenous umbrella for multiple militias and paramilitary units. Some were well organised, battle hardened and had a clear hierarchy; others consisted of a few dozen men hired by a local warlord or tribal sheikh.

The factions can be roughly divided into three categories. First there are the military wings of the parties that dominated Iraqi politics since 2003 and played a significant role during the civil war. The remnants of Muqtada al-Sadr’s Mahdi army, since renamed as the Peace Battalion, is the most well-known.

Second are the smaller, more radical groups, including Kata’ib Hezbollah and Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq. They refer to themselves as the “loyalist factions”, closely follow Iranian leadership religiously and politically, and their fighters came of age in the civil war in Syria. Following the defeat of Isis in 2017, this group of loyalist factions sent aligned MPs to Iraq’s parliament, and they have become in effect a militia with their own political wing.

Lastly are the factions formed by the clergy in the influential shrine cities of Kerbala and Najaf or by tribes, who have no clear political agenda beyond the preservation of their founders’ interests.

“When we formed the Hashed, we tried to replicate the experience of the *Basij* [the Iranian Revolutionary Guard], but we failed in one thing, and that is the multiplicity of factions,” Abu Hashem said.

“Some of the battalions have just a few dozen men, but they insist on fighting under their flag and refuse to accept the command of others.”

Divisions within the Hashed over command, strategy and the division of its loot, as well as which religious authority its factions followed – Sistani in Iraq or Iran’s supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei – had long been rife, but Muhandis had some key advantages in his leadership. Since his death, the pro-Sistani factions have detached themselves from the Hashed leadership, which they now perceive as unacceptably aligned with Iranian interests rather than their own.

“When [Muhandis] wanted a certain faction to do something, during the fighting, he had to convince, urge, kiss them on the shoulders, and dangle many rewards before they did his biddings,” said a member of the Hashed shura council, a consultancy council that includes all the senior commanders of the Hashed.

“[Muhandis] had no faction of his own, and this was why he could run the Hashed and everyone listened to him, no one could outbid him. He had been in the Shia struggle for 30 years doing this job,” he said.

Under his watch, the Hashed grew to a formidable force, playing an essential role in the defeat of Isis. By the end of 2019 it was fielding tens of thousands of men, with tanks, artillery and an intelligence network, along with a sophisticated propaganda arm and extensive commercial interests.

“Muhandis turned a bunch of militiamen into an establishment, he created all these militias – he is the cook. He institutionalised them and enrolled them in politics, appointed them ministers, made

them wear suits, and helped them realise the potential of being a stakeholder in the state and think of their political future after they were just a bunch of gunmen,” said the Shura council member.

From a governance point of view, Muhandis’s “cooking” had profound consequences for Iraq.

“The fact is that you have some military factions that receive their salaries from the Iraqi state but don’t follow the military chain of command of the commander in chief,” said an Iraq analyst, who requested anonymity.

“They act according to their alliances with the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, and serve the larger Iranian strategy in the region, and their own commercial interests. They constitute a threat to the state of Iraq from within.”

In the months leading up to Muhandis’ death, its fighters were on the back foot, denounced in a series of mass demonstrations by protesters who had grown weary of their immense power in all echelons of Iraqi life – and with it, the wealth the militias had acquired through often corrupt means.

But the US strike not only triggered a battle for control, it also revived the group with a new sense of purpose.





▲Members of the Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, on the frontlines against Isis, in Diala province to the east of Baghdad, in July 2014.

Photograph: Ghaith Abdul-Ahad/The Guardian

The deaths of two of the region's most influential commanders enabled the Hashed to regain the initiative with key displays of force: tens of thousands of men marched on the streets in demonstrations condemning the US attack, and a week-long funeral was held for Muhandis.

More ominously, the pro-Iranian militias stepped up killings and kidnappings of activists, started firing rockets at the US embassy in the Green Zone and at military camps, and targeted supply convoys with improvised explosive devices (IEDs). So emboldened have the various factions become in 2020 that Iraqis speak of their country effectively being two parallel states – one with a weak government at its helm and the other at the mercy of militias.

The killing of the two commanders helped shift the narrative, observers said, from one of “the people v a kleptocratic regime” to one in which, according to a close friend of Muhandis, “everything was an American plot to weaken Iran and its allies, first by mass demonstrations, assassinations and eventually military confrontations”.

Then in April a new prime minister, Mustafa al-Kadhimi, was

named, ending a five-month stalemate that followed the resignation of the former prime minister, Adel Abdul-Mahdi. An urbane former intelligence chief, Kadhimi is the first prime minister since 2005 not to belong to any of the Islamist parties.

The challenges facing him are formidable, from an economy in tatters due to the collapse in oil prices and endemic corruption to a failed healthcare system unable to deal with the coronavirus, and continuing anti-government demonstrations in Baghdad and other cities.

But the premier's most fearsome task is trying to negotiate a new path for the country between a belligerent US and a defiant Iran, whose influence on Iraqi politics and security remains profound. Any future confrontation or war between the two countries is bound to take place on Iraqi soil.

"The assassinations of Suleimani and Muhandis broke the rules of the game that allowed both Iran and the US to exist together in Iraq and support each other's factions during the fighting, not just because they faced the same enemy but because these were the rules that allowed Suleimani to travel across Iraq while the Americans were maintaining bases nearby," said another source close to Muhandis and to the political leadership. "In a second all these rules were destroyed, and now they need to set up new rules."

The shura council member said: "Everyone was looking at Iran, what it would do [and] how it would retaliate, but the reaction is here in Iraq. These factions have weapons, and they are well trained and violent, any one of them can take action either to avenge the killing of Muhandis and Suleimani or to show the

leadership in Iran that he is their new man in Iraq. Any of these factions can start a war.”

And yet at the same time, nine months on from the US airstrike, the different factions are more divided than ever, even as they have been emboldened and given new purpose by his death.

“The killing of Suleimani disrupted the flow of the decision process for these factions, and they don’t act according to a general strategy,” the government official said.

He said Kadhimi believed that any direct confrontation with the factions was dangerous and could have serious political and security repercussions, with no guaranteed positive outcome.

He pointed to a raid in June on a militia cell in south Baghdad as an example. A unit from the counter-terrorism force raided a farmhouse and detained a group of Iraqi and Lebanese militiamen, accusing them of planning to fire a barrage of Katyusha rockets at the heavily fortified Green Zone. The same night, hundreds of members of the militia gathered on the streets in a show of force, while others moved on the strategic targets in the Green Zone. The next day the men were released.

“They sent a strong message to the prime minister, by coming close to his house, and he found himself alone,” the government official said. “The units he requested from the minister of defence never arrived. In a way the factions exposed their cards, showing the major positions they hold within the Green Zone and how will they react in any future confrontation.”

Kadhimi’s strategy, according to the official, is based on strengthening the army by advancing young officers, expanding the power of the counter-terrorism force and exploiting the rift

between the pro-Sistani forces and the loyalist factions.

A senior Iraqi army officer said: “I sometimes think that the only solution to this crisis, of two states and two armies is a military solution. First we close Baghdad, issue an ultimatum for Hashed units to either join regular forces or we fight you.

“It will cause a bloodbath, but better to have two weeks of war than to keep postponing the confrontation.”

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