

The Mosul Operation and the Status of al-Hashd al-Sha'bi

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Abstract: The operation to liberate Mosul has hit delays due to limited advanced preparations, ISIL resistance, weather conditions, and the inherent challenges of waging a war inside a city. The hopes of scoring a quick victory in Mosul are fading away. There will be slow progress in the elimination of the ISIL threat, and this will in turn complicate the issue of the settlement of refugees. The delay of the success of the operation is encouraging the provision of an official status for al-Hashd al-Sha'bi in Iraq, a new political dynamic in the country. Giving al-Hashd al-Sha'bi an official status will have wide-ranging political and security implications for the future of Iraq. A successful integration of al-Hashd al-Sha'bi into the Iraqi armed forces may contribute to the security of Iraq, but there are certain political and practical hurdles on the way.

THE MOSUL OPERATION THAT BEGAN IN OCTOBER 2016 went well for some time, but the latest news from the operation has shown that ISIL resistance is hampering attempts at moving further. There are several reasons for this: urban operations are especially difficult and there was insufficient preparation for the operation. The attempt to acquire official status for al-Hashd al-Sha'bi should be interpreted in relation to setbacks in the Mosul operation. Along with the military operations taking place, legal and political actions over the future of Mosul and Iraq are hot topics in Iraqi politics today. At this juncture, it is worth assessing the Mosul operation and possible scenarios for Iraq in the aftermath of the operation.

It is generally accepted that the operation started before the US elections to show that the last bastion of ISIL would be eliminated before the end of Obama's tenure. Obama's Administration aimed to refrain from sending American troops as far as possible and built its war policy in coordination with regional allies, both state and sub-state actors. A quick success in the operation would justify the rationale for this policy. Despite earlier success in the Mosul operation, according to latest news, it now seems that it may take months to liberate Mosul from ISIL.¹ Unlike rural areas, ISIL is stubbornly resisting inside the city, while Iraqi armed forces are moving slowly and cautiously due to traps in the city, which increase casualties on the side of the Iraqi forces. Decrease air strike support from the international coalition due to the fear of civilian casualties is one reason for this. The losses of the Iraqi army have been greater than expected, and this reality has a demoralizing effect on the soldiers taking part. Weather conditions and the arrival of winter is also delaying the advances of the Iraqi army inside the city.

Beside resisting inside the city, ISIL has also carried out several car bomb attacks in different Iraqi cities to show that it is still able to carry out asymmetric attacks against its enemies. In addition to these, ISIL prevents civilians from escaping Mosul and other cities using them as human shields. Civilians who attempt to escape the city are targeted by ISIL's snipers. According to the latest UN estimates, more than 120,000 people have left the city. Most of these are Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) sheltered in camps constructed by the UN. Before being admitted to these camps, however, people must go through security checks to verify whether or not they have cooperated with ISIL. In addition to the people escaping Mosul, there are civilians leaving Talafar, the other big city under ISIL control. They also face very difficult conditions on their way to Syria.²

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Despite the resistance inside Mosul, there are reports that differences of opinions have emerged among the ISIL's ranks. According to these claims, some former Baath Party members are reaching out to Iraqi officials and saying that they will end the resistance provided that they receive certain guarantees. In addition to these claims, we should keep in mind that ISIL members who came from European countries and Russia do not have any way of going back or have a future in Iraq and Syria in the case of defeat. This means they have to fight to the end. On the other hand, Iraqi members of ISIL may believe in

a solution which will guarantee their future. After the possible defeat of ISIL, there might be some fighting among the tribes who supported and who opposed ISIL policies. Despite these challenges, there is not a big schism among the ranks of ISIL for the time being.

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The Status of al-Hashd al-Sha'bi

The legal redefinitions that are being adopted in parallel with the Mosul operation will affect dynamics both in Iraq and Syria. Al-Hashd al-Sha'bi (literally, the popular mobilization forces), which was established following the failure of the Iraqi army in the fight against ISIL, gained legal status through a legislation passed in the Iraqi parliament.³

The status of al-Hashd al-Sha'bi following the defeat of ISIL had been an issue of political debate in Iraq. Some people argued that this force should be disbanded after the defeat of ISIL, whereas some others argued for the merger of this force with other Iraqi security institutions. With this legal change, al-Hashd al-Sha'bi has been turned into an official armed force directly under the command of the Prime Minister.

The decision, contrary to the expectation that these units would be disbanded, came with the approval of religious and political leaders. It is said that there were disagreements among Iraqi religious figures about the future of these forces and that the fatwa of al-Sistani urging the continuation of al-Hashd al-Sha'bi activities after the defeat of ISIL came out of necessity. For many people, this decision came about mainly because of Iran's desire to



protect and solidify its interests in Iraq. With al-Hashd al-Sha'bi gaining official status, the new American administration should take into account these groups and the impact of Iran on their members in devising its policies for Iraq and Iran.

The Impact of Iran

For many people, the status given to al-Hashd al-Sha'bi for its contribution to the fight against ISIL is mainly an outcome of Iranian pressure. In that regard, the meeting between the leaders of al-Hashd al-Sha'bi and religious authorities in Iraq played an important role in the decision, along with meetings of political figures about the future of al-Hashd al-Sha'bi in Iraq. It is a fact that the backbones of al-Hashd al-Sha'bi are mainly the Badr Brigades and Mahdi Army. The role of Iran in the training and equipping of these forces for many years is known to everyone. So, we cannot ignore the impact of Iran on these people, whether they are part of the Iraqi armed forces or not.⁴

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It is a fact that there are some differences among the members of Al-Hashd al-Sha'bi regarding the religious authority they obey. Some leaders and members of Al-Hashd al-Sha'bi accept the Vilayat-i Faqih, while others do not. In terms of their Shia understanding of Islam, they are closer to Qum than Najaf. In this regard, we can say that maybe half of these people will obey the orders of Khamenei, the religious leader of Iran. If this continues to be the case, Al-Hashd al-Sha'bi in Iraq may even begin functioning similar to the Revolutionary Guards of Iran.

Political Implications

Despite the stated aim of placing these forces under the control of the Iraqi government,

there are certain challenges regarding the implementation of the al-Hashd al-Sha'bi law. If these people come fully under his control, then the Prime Minister will gain political and military strength. But if these people continue to obey the orders of other authorities, then we will soon have an environment in which a militia group will receive salaries from the state and have legal protection, but will continue to pursue their own political agenda.

The political aims of the leaders of some of the Al-Hashd al-Sha'bi units are known to the Iraqi public. The leaders of some of these forces want to become future prime ministers. These military groups are also part of different political institutions in Iraq. The protests organized by Muqtada Sadr in the Green Zone and in the parliament, for example. In order to become part of the Iraqi armed forces, their connections with different political parties should come to an end. The future role of the Al-Hashd al-Sha'bi within the Iraqi political system should largely be determined by their attitude in the wake of this legal change.

The process of merging these groups into the Iraqi security system will not be easy. There are some leaders in charge of these militia groups who do not have a military background. It will not be easy to provide suitable positions for these people. For lay members of al-Hashd al-Sha'bi, joining the armed forces will be a very positive development. The share of Sunni forces among these people will also affect future relationships among different segments of the society in Iraq. The establishment of provincial armed guards have been on the agenda of Iraqi politics for many years, but disagreements among different ethnic and sectarian groups have prevented the Iraqi Parliament from moving forward in that regard.



The Mosul operation and the legal changes to Al-Hashd al-Sha'bi's position have definitely emboldened Prime Minister Abadi. A successful merger of Al-Hashd al-Sha'bi into the Iraqi armed forces will do much to secure the political future of Abadi in the Iraqi political system. According to the current legislation, members of Al-Hashd al-Sha'bi will be subordinated to the Prime Minister. This means that neither the Minister of Defense nor the Chief of Staff will have a direct control over these forces. This will empower the Prime Minister, but on the other hand, it will damage unity among the Iraqi armed forces.

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The Time Factor

We should pay particular attention to the timing of this al-Hashd law. The role played by military groups other than the Iraqi army has increased due to the pace of the Mosul operation and increasing losses by the Iraqi army. Due to past human rights violations by some members of the Al-Hashd al-Sha'bi in places like Fallujah, there have been criticisms made of these groups and it has been decided that these forces will not be directly involved in the liberation of cities like Mosul and Tal Afar, where ethnic and sectarian sensitivities remain high. Within this framework, the anti-ISIL international coalition has refrained from providing air strike support to these groups, and they have mainly been active in rural areas, cutting the supply lines of ISIL. As a result of some Al-Hashd al-Sha'bi leaders making declarations with sectarian connotations regarding Mosul and Tal

Afar, as a result of calls from domestic and international actors, the Iraqi government declared that these forces will not enter city centers. Despite these assurances, there is no military guarantee to prevent these groups from entering Tal Afar.

On the other hand, because of the legal status they gained due to the latest change in the parliament, the increasing losses of the Iraqi army, and delays in the operation to liberate Mosul, Al-Hashd al-Sha'bi have been able to play an increasing role. Under these circumstances, these units can function as part of the Iraqi armed forces against ISIL. In this way, they can increase their successes and consolidate their legitimacy.

Taking into account all of the factors above, we can say that the liberation of Mosul will take longer than first planned and that this will have political implications. The recent decision of the Iraqi parliament on the future status of Al-Hashd al-Sha'bi is a new factor in Iraqi politics. These forces have played an important role fighting ISIL alongside the Iraqi armed forces and have begun to constitute an effective paramilitary force. The integration of these forces into the Iraqi security system will have drastic political implications. A successful merger will contribute to Iraqi security, whereas a problem in this process will add to the security chaos in Iraq. This will consequently enable some domestic and international players to benefit from this chaos.



Endnotes:

- 1- 'The battle for Mosul stalls: 'we are fighting the devil himself', <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/05/battle-for-mosul-stalls-islamic-state-stronghold-iraq>
- 2- 'Thousands of civilians flee towns around Mosul', <http://www.cbc.ca/amp/1.3864039>
- 3- Iraqi parliament votes to merge al-Hashd al-Shaabi with national army <http://www.iraqnews.com/features/iraqi-parliament-votes-merge-al-hashd-al-shaabi-national-army/>
- 4- Baria Alamuddin, 'The dangers of legitimizing 'Al-Hashd Al-Shaabi', <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1016496/columns>

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The Sharq Forum is an independent international network whose mission is to undertake impartial research and develop long-term strategies to ensure the political development, social justice and economic prosperity of the people of Al-Sharq. The Forum does this through promoting the ideals of democratic participation, an informed citizenry, multi-stakeholder dialogue, social justice, and public-spirited research.

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