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Hashd Reforms in Iraq Conceal More Than They Reveal

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Brief Analysis

The reform measures called for by PMF leaders are so opaque that they could enable militia consolidation masquerading as security sector improvements.

On June 3, a new reform memorandum was issued by the head of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces (al-Hashd al-Shabi in Arabic). The one-page document resembles prior PMF statements in two respects. First, it recycles unmet aspirations for security sector reform that have been awaiting implementation for at least a year, or years in some cases. Second, it references a range of secret decrees whose contents are not explained. As U.S. officials head into their formal Strategic Dialogue with Iraq beginning June 10, such statements pose more questions than they answer, underlining the need for the Iraqi government to establish a firmer grip on the reform process and ensure greater transparency over all elements of the security forces.

THE NEW HASHD DIRECTIVE

The June 3 memo was issued in the form of a letter from Faleh al-Fayyad, the chairman of the Hashd Commission in the Prime Minister's office (he also serves as national security advisor and head of the National Security Service, an intelligence organization). The letter signals the recommencement of "Hashd reform" under Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi's new government, making reference to the Popular Mobilization Commission Law (Number 40 of 2016) and Executive Decree 237 of July 1, 2019. The text focuses on the following changes:

- **Removing unit nomenclature.** Fayyad reiterates a longstanding commitment to the cosmetic renaming of PMF units, stating that the current nomenclature will be replaced with brigade numbers alone (e.g., the PMF's 12th Brigade will no longer be referred to as Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba).
- **Incorporating the tribal Hashd.** A committee established under PMF Administrative Decree 2155 (a non-public document) will begin fully incorporating the Tribal Mobilization Forces (al-Hashd al-Ashair) into the PMF by July 3.
- **Depoliticizing the Hashd.** All Hashd members are to disengage from political activities, another longstanding demand by government and religious officials.
- **Clarifying legal and personnel issues.** The memo references two other non-public documents (PMF Administrative Decrees 2153 and 2156) that purportedly help clarify PMF membership, legal status, service conditions, and retirement rights.
- **Closing (some) PMF offices in cities.** Following on a measure called for in previous memos, the letter specifies that "all offices of brigades and regiments" will be closed in urban areas, seemingly carving out the right for higher-level offices (provincial, axis command, and national headquarters) to remain.
- **Reiterating command-and-control.** The memo underlines that the PMF exists under the prime minister's command, prohibits any activities not approved by the premier, and threatens legal repercussions against violators. The Hashd security directorate is given the responsibility for enforcing discipline in the case of "infringement."

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

Fayyad's memo did not come completely out of the blue—in theory, the start of a new government is an appropriate occasion to issue such a document, and previous laws and executive orders have demanded Hashd reforms. In this case, however, the memo was generated without a specific request from the prime minister's office, and it arrived at a moment when Kadhimi's team was greatly distracted by negotiations over cabinet completion and the austerity budget.

The letter's timing may have been driven by Fayyad's desire to improve his standing in the new government, perhaps with an eye toward representing the PMF and various anti-American factions in this week's Strategic Dialogue with U.S. officials. Alternatively, Fayyad and other militia leaders may just be trying to steer Hashd reform in the direction they wish before the new government can focus its attention on the issue.

Whatever the case, it is difficult to assess the memo's substance because it references private administrative decrees that have not even been seen by the Kadhimi government. When Fayyad issued a previous memo on July 29, 2019, he attached all of the supporting documents it mentioned. By failing to do so this time around, he has reinforced the existing uncertainties surrounding PMF reform. Key questions include:

- **Intentions for tribal forces.** Decree 2155 could describe some perfectly innocuous administrative matter, but it is impossible to know for sure because the document has not been disclosed—even the Iraqi government does not seem to fully understand the issue it covers. Fayyad may be trying to lock in the predominantly Sunni tribal Hashd, who are semiautonomous and may aim to break away from the PMF leadership like the "shrine units" (Atabat) did earlier this year. He might also be trying to increase the Hashd payroll by expanding its ranks before austerity measures bite deeply this summer—a highly questionable move at this moment of severe economic stress.

- **Residual PMF presence in cities.** In theory, the new carve-outs for urban headquarters make some sense, since the Hashd Commission is necessarily headquartered in Baghdad. Yet the memo’s provisions on this matter will likely be used to help U.S.-designated terrorist group Kataib Hezbollah and other larger militias on two fronts: keeping their economic ventures running in the cities, and intimidating the government by posting tactical units in sensitive locations (e.g., adjacent to the prime minister’s office, or even within the Republican Palace complex, a key site for government meetings).
- **Policing the Hashd.** The memo’s treatment of discipline underlines the Hashd Commission’s determination not to submit to any judicial or security authority outside its own ranks. Moreover, the key Hashd disciplinary mechanism—the security department—is currently headed by a U.S.-sanctioned human rights abuser, Hussein Falah al-Lami (aka Abu Zainab al-Lami), a Kataib Hezbollah member.

IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

The United States must always respect Iraq’s sovereign rights. Yet as a major donor to the country’s security sector and the leader of the global coalition supporting its recovery from financial crisis and the coronavirus pandemic, Washington has every right to expect the Iraqi government to stay abreast of the decisions being made inside an official organ like the Hashd. Although Prime Minister Kadhimi and his team are understandably distracted by the vital tasks of government formation and economic firefighting, they still need to be fully informed of proposed security changes in advance, and fully in control of Fayyad and the PMF.

Rather than rushing Hashd reform in an opaque manner, the process should be nested within a broader national security reform effort that identifies roles and missions for all components of the armed forces. A deliberate pace, under the full control and oversight of the civilian government, would produce real reforms, not self-serving power moves. In this week’s Strategic Dialogue meetings, U.S. officials should seek assurances that all future reform measures will be coordinated by the Kadhimi government, not simply announced by PMF elements in a manner that presents the prime minister and the international community with a *fait accompli*.

Michael Knights, a senior fellow with The Washington Institute, has conducted extensive on-the-ground research in Iraq alongside security forces and government ministries. Hamdi Malik is a London-based Middle East analyst at IITV. Together with Aymenn Al-Tamimi, they coauthored the recent Institute study [Honored, Not Contained: The Future of Iraq’s Popular Mobilization Forces](#). ❖



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