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Achilles' Heel of Hashd al-Shabi: Ambitions and Weaknesses of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq

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Abstract

This article examines the Iraqi pro-Iran Shia militia group Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), focusing on its growing assertiveness vis-à-vis its partner militias from the Hashd al-Shabi umbrella group. Through the lens of the 'Networks of Rebellion' theory by Paul Staniland, modified to the Iraqi Shia militias' context by Renad Mansour, the article shows specificities of AAH's ideological leaning vis-à-vis its partner militias. Among these are the combination of firm pro-Iran stance, typical for Hashd militias, combined with Iraqi nationalist roots, beginning with the seminars that AAH's leader Qais al-Khazali attended under the patronage of the founder of the modern Sadrist movement. Influenced by its roots and current lack of lucrative high-ranking positions within Hashd, AAH keeps conflicting with other pro-Iran militias, the whole organization failing to display the coherence of its maternal Iranian Revolutionary Guards, regardless of their mutual resemblance. The article concludes with implications these intra-Hashd quarrels present for Western policy makers, especially given the currently weakened Iranian position in the region compared to its increasingly tighter grip on Iraq.

Keywords:

Iraq; Shia; Militias; Hashd al-Shabi; Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq; Qais al-Khazali;
Kata'ib Hezbollah; Badr Brigades.

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Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) is a Shia militia operating in Iraq, where it is currently involved in domestic politics. In the past, the group also used to support the regime of the former Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad, allegedly defending Shia holy sites (Heras 2014). AAH is and has always been an overtly pro-Iran group (Zorri, et al. 2020, 38). Its leader, Qais al-Khazali, admitted he had had personal ties with the late general of the foreign branch of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC-QF), Qassem Soleimani, during the interrogation after his arrest by Coalition forces in 2007 (Roggio 2018). Heras (2014) further corroborates AAH's ties with the IRGC-QF. However, for the following article as well as a coherent and effective US counter-policy towards pro-Iran factions in the country, it is important to note that AAH does not adhere to the Iranian rule of the religious experts' *wilayat al-faqih* (or Velayat-e Faqih in Farsi). In this regard, AAH differs from other important pro-Iranian Shia militias banded under the Popular Mobilization Forces (*Hashd al-Shabi*), most notably Badr Brigades or Kata'ib Hezbollah. AAH instead follows the belief that Ummah (Muslim community) holds the power (Zorri, et al. 2020, 30), which makes the group somewhat less eager to be pro-Iranian in the Iraqi Shia context.

This distinction was important in its early genesis and its distinction from other Iraqi Shia militias. These militias adhere either to *wilayat al-faqih*, forming the core of *Hashd*; to Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani's quietist doctrine¹; or to Shia cleric and populist politician Muqtada al-Sadr's Iraqi nationalist ideas (International Crisis Group 2018, 3–4). AAH's genesis occurred in the context of violent post-2003 Iraq and the shift in intra-state dynamics in favor of the Shia majority. Before its genesis, AAH members were part of the infamous Mahdi's Army (Jaish al-Mahdi or JAM), led by the cleric from a prominent Shia family, Muqtada al-Sadr. However, AAH soon split from the JAM, following their respective leaders' differing ideas on what it means to resist American forces as well as the acceptable amount of Iranian support (Zorri, et al. 2020, 41). While Sadr staunchly opposed deeper Iranian involvement and malign investment in Iraq, Khazali welcomed it (International Crisis Group 2018, 4). AAH, together with Badr Brigades and Kata'ib Hezbollah, have, over the years, become the primary instrument of growing Iranian influence in Iraq².

However, more recently, Hashd militias appear to hide behind the façade of law and order for Iraq and strict adherence to Iran certain friction points. In the past, Hashd militias have been compared to the Iranian Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) in the way they managed to capture the state by abusing the existing law practices within the state (see e.g., Smith and Knights 2025, 667–68 or Al-Aloosy 2023, 210). Smith and Knights (2025, 673–75) label the so-called phenomenon as 'lawfare', i.e. non-kinetic way of launching a hybrid insurgency against the state while existing within

¹ The idea that religious leaders shall stay away from politics, a view that generally poses no threat to Iraqi independence and integrity.

² For putting profound emphasis on these three Shia armed groups when describing Iranian influence, see for example chapter in the book 'Rebel Governance in the Middle East' concerned with malign influence of those particular militias on Iraqi stability and ability to govern (Al-Aloosy 2023).

the state with the aim of regime change from within. Employing lawfare, Hashd militias have been able to overcome several setbacks, among those the 2019 popular Tishreen protests against Hashd's corrupted practices, significant electoral losses from the 2021 parliamentary elections, or the fact that the competing Shia anti-Iran Sadrist trend managed to come out of these elections with the highest number of votes.

Considering the uncontested fortunes Hashd militias experienced in Iraq in recent years (2022-2025), it is even more surprising that at the end of June 2025, the head of the Supreme Judicial Court, Jassim Mohammed al-Amiri, resigned, allegedly for health reasons. The judge was seen as issuing biased rulings, favoring Hashd al-Shabi's political wings over other Iraqi political actors, adding to the long-standing controversy of the Iraqi Supreme Judicial Court being at the center of many crises and political turmoil (Abdul-Zahra 2025). Notably, Smith and Knights (2025) describe the judicial body in similar terms, arguing that over the years, it has been won over by Hashd militias, either by blackmailing or bribing several key judges. The subsequent phase, triggered by Sadr Shia anti-Iran political party's resignation from politics on the pretext of protesting Hashd's corrupted practices, thus unwilling to form a coalition with Hashd parties (Taib Menmy 2024), is described by the authors as 'bloodless coup' (Smith and Knights 2025, 671; 679). Pro-Iran forces specifically pointed at that time at Sadr's lower-class Shia followers, overflowing the International Green Zone in protest of Sadr's resignation, claiming Hashd and its less powerful allies defended law and security against anti-system forces (Smith and Knights 2025, 669; for more detailed ethnographic insight into the dynamics of 2022 violent clashes between Hashd forces and Sadrist protesters, see also Foltyn 2023).

The recent setback in the area key to exerting a grip on Iraq, the Supreme Judicial Court, thus poses a threat to this monopoly and somewhat relaxes the above-mentioned assumptions that Hashd is another IRGC³. In line with Fanar Haddad's analysis (2018), I argue that although it might seem so, the reality is much more complicated, as Hashd militias form a block from sometimes diverging entities which do not even uniformly adhere to the wilayat al-faqih ruling system and tend to have diverging tendencies (see e.g., Foltyn 2023, 22), unlike the much more coherent IRGC. Previously, the lack of grasp on pre-Hashd Iraqi Shia militias was obvious during the US capture of Khazali (2007-2010), who warned the interrogators about the Iranian nuclear program and mentioned petty conflicts within the radical Shia camp. The interrogators were nevertheless more interested in the momentarily tactical advantages Khazali would grant them on the ground and failed to pay attention to this retrospectively key intel (Roggio 2018).

³ Although the main judge behind Supreme Court's politicization and recent more and more obvious shift towards Tehran, Faiq Zaidan (see e.g. Uysal 2023), remains in power, marking Jassim Mohammed al-Amiri's departure all but decisive regarding independent judiciary in Iraq.

To help turn the tide of deepening Iranian influence within Iraq, the following article presents rifts and frictions within the Hashd pro-Iran camp, namely between AAH and other essential militias such as Badr Brigades or Kata'ib Hezbollah. The argument builds on different ideological foundations of essential Hashd components, as AAH traces its origins towards lower Shia classes, similarly to the Sadrist trend. Essentially, then, AAH has historically clashed with the Sadrist trend over the role of Iran in Iraqi politics and to extend over their own financial interests (Al-Salhy 2022) rather than on what form the political system should take. The Sadrist roots, together with long-standing staunchly pro-Iran stance, make AAH the possible Achilles' heel of Hashd al-Shabi in case the US or allied forces were to project their interests non-kinetically against Hashd in Iraq. In the following chapters, the article presents the analysis of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, founded as an Iranian proxy, following up on its current rebranding into a relatively more independent, less eagerly pro-Iran actor. Subsequently, the cases of clashes over influence, both political and economic, with other Iranian affiliates are presented, providing the reader with a clear idea of precisely why Hashd fails to be another IRGC. The article concludes by suggesting the advances of non-kinetic policy against diverging Hashd components.

Genesis and Early History

In 2004, shortly after Muqtada al-Sadr's loosely controlled JAM was founded and started fighting the Coalition forces in Iraq, Khazali was banished from JAM. The conflict occurred over the alleged Khazali's refusal to follow orders from Sadr, whom he perceived as paranoid and incompetent. This was confirmed in the declassified interrogation of Khazali during his arrest in 2007-2010 (Zorri, et al. 2020, 41). Sadr has always had a complicated relationship with Iran and IRGC-QF, sometimes reluctantly accepting its patronage, other times furiously arguing against the Islamic Republic's involvement in Iraqi matters (O'Leary and Heras 2021, 50–52). The AAH leader Qais al-Khazali, on the other hand, never had any problem accepting Iranian patronage, which led to direct leadership from the IRGC-QF and Lebanese Hezbollah during the early days of the group's existence.

It is important to note here that the IRGC-QF applies against Iraqi Shia Militias what Zorri, Sadri and Ellis (2020, 10–11) describe as the 'Empower-Divide-Control' approach. It is a key principle in the successful effort of the IRGC-QF to penetrate radical Shia space in Iraq. Iranians usually start new or win over existing Shia militias; sow dissent among them or use existing frictions to split the group; and finally abuse the resulting power dilemma by offering weakened groups vast Iranian resources, while manipulating the installed second-tier leaders. Notably, not always must leaders be second-tier. In the case of several most prominent and, in the Iraqi society, most entrenched Shia militias, their leaders are or until recently were figures of profound importance, cooperating with Iran since the 1980s. Such figures are Hadi al-Amiri, leader of Badr Brigades, or the late leader of Kataib Hezbollah (KH), Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. Nowadays, Qais al-Khazali belongs in this camp,

following Iran far too long to be simply discarded as another obedient servant. Zorri, Sadri and Ellis (2020, 37) even place AAH next to the Shia militias Badr Brigades and Sadrist Saraya al-Salama (Peace Brigades), each, at times, representing an important Iraqi Shia political party. The former used to represent the SCIRI/ISCI party (Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq/Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq) before launching its own political activities, whereas the latter represents the Sairoon coalition⁴, specifically its Sadrist component. AAH, as the last piece of the puzzle, was used to fulfill armed tasks of the oldest Iraqi Shia political party, the Da'wa party, although AAH militarily represented the Da'wa party only unofficially, unlike the other prominent militias.

⁴ Currently rebranded to 'Shiite National Movement', following yet another Sadr's retirement-return move between 2022 crisis and 2024 (Al-Jazeera 2024). It should be noted that Sadr's militias or political wings, although possessing different names at different times, are essentially still military and political segments of the Shia Iraqi nationalist movement around his person.

However, already in the 2014 Iraqi parliamentary elections, AAH founded its own political party, al-Sadiqun (the Honest Ones), running independently. Perhaps due to winning only 1/329 seats in the parliament, in the next elections (2018), al-Sadiqun joined the Fatah Alliance. This coalition has been, since its inception, composed of pro-Iranian winners over ISIS: political wings of groups such as Badr, KH, or AAH. The Fatah Alliance ended up second, with the Da'wa party ending up fifth with 25 seats and losing 67. This raises the question of where the AAH loyalty currently lies, since joining Fatah contributed to the Da'wa party's defeat in 2018. The truth might be more nuanced. Recent smirky AAH campaign against its political opponents, including old videotapes of its Shia rivals allegedly supporting the Ba'ath party, spared the Da'wa. However, only on the pretext of the Da'wa not crossing AAH's interests (Malik 2024). Later on, AAH and Da'wa joined voices to criticize AAH's fellow Hashd militia, Badr Brigades, marking the relationship between AAH and Da'wa at least pragmatically still alive (Al-Kaabi, et al. 2024).

Ideology and Constituency: Prerequisites for AAH-pivoted Intra-Hashd Conflicts

In the pre-ISIS and early ISIS period of Iraq (roughly 2011-2014), AAH participated in many purges in the Anbar and Diyala regions, as well as in Baghdad and southern Basra. The purges were conducted to suppress growing Sunni resentment towards what many perceived a sectarian-driven policies of then-Iraqi PM Nuri al-Maliki. The late PM even openly encouraged AAH members to join the Iraqi security apparatus, which he then used in his sectarian goals (Heras 2014). Notably, ISIS was able to spread so quickly through the Sunni parts of Iraq in no small part due to Maliki's politics, alienating all but Shia pro-Iranian Iraqis. Sunni Iraqis perceived ISIS as a lesser of two evils compared to the Iraqi security apparatus, in the beginning of the 2010s already firmly in the hands of Shia leaders advocating sectarian behavior (Zorri, et al. 2020, 50). AAH was one

of the heaviest Shia catalysts of sectarian violence⁵. For the involvement in numerous lethal suppressions of demonstrations and its use of violence against civilians, in 2019, the US Treasury Department imposed sanctions on al-Khazali and his brother, and in 2020, the US State Department designated AAH and both Khazalis as terrorists ([Knights 2023](#)).

By supporting the sectarian violence and creating a constant security dilemma, together with its strategy 'Divide-Empower-Control' described above, Iran heavily contributed to the ISIS resurgence and the subsequent need to create militias to protect Baghdad and conduct a counteroffensive. Its preference for a weak Iraq, divided over sectarian lines, is clear from the fact that the most prominent Iraqi Shia militias supported by Iran also contributed heavily to the poor security situation in the first place. Through militias such as AAH, Badr Brigades, or KH, Iran managed to entrench itself in Iraq even more, creating an aura of indispensability. It is believed that even a firm critic of Iranian (American, or any other) influence in the country, Muqtada al-Sadr, knows that Iraq in its current state cannot exist without Iran ([O'Leary and Heras 2021](#), 70–71). With its overall weakness, militias such as AAH and others, pro-Iranian or not, are the alpha and omega of the current Iraqi ability to defend its territory. They effectively *are* the state.

However, AAH has a history of disobedience towards the Iraqi state and, recently, on certain occasions, towards their Iranian patrons as well ([Knights 2023](#)). This might suggest growing independent tendencies within the militia, perhaps following the Sadrist movement example, which also used to accept more Iranian patronage than it does nowadays. Furthermore, similarly to its group of JAM/Sadrists origin (and contrary to, for example, KH), AAH possesses a constituency of followers from the civil sphere, running social services and providing job opportunities⁶. This tendency is described as a 'parochial network', contrasting the 'vanguard network' with its vertical chain of command, a handful of elite fighters, and a weak social base, typical for the above-mentioned KH ([Mansour 2021](#)).

The idea of parochial-vanguard dichotomy in the Iraqi context comes from an influential Chatham House study ([Mansour 2021](#)), although the idea itself dates back a bit further. In the book 'Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse', Paul Staniland categorizes rebel groups into four types based on relative levels of vertical and horizontal control. The two types often used for the Iraqi context by experts such as Mansour, Michael Knights, and others are typical for dominantly possessing either vertical ('vanguard') or horizontal ('parochial') networks, not both (those would be 'integrated' networks, see Staniland 2014). Knights (2024, 4) emphasizes that Hashd groups should be understood as more or less freely moving on the parochial-vanguard scale, rather than rigidly performing

⁵ Together with Badr Brigades, for example, which during the fight with ISIS overran the city of Fallujah and had summarily executed civilians for an alleged collaboration with ISIS ([Steinberg 2017](#), 5–6).

⁶ The services in question are linked to Lebanon Hezbollah-style modus operandi of military and civil sphere, with the latter 'providing social services, schools, and mosque refurbishment to Iraq's rural poor' ([Zorri, et al. 2020](#), 41).

either network's tasks. Nevertheless, the idea behind the distinction remains, implicating certain strong and weak points of each Hashd group depending on the level of embeddedness in society on one hand and specialization regarding Iranian kinetic regional interests on the other. One such weak point is the constituency from which the 'parochial' network draws its legitimacy. Behind all the glamorous wealth and recent aggressive tendencies to grab power from other Hashd groups, AAH possesses an ideology blend of resistance rhetoric and reliance on Iraqi nationalism to the extent arguably not present within other pro-Iran Hashd powerhouses.

Inna Rudolf follows Mansour in his differentiation between 'parochial' AAH and 'vanguard' KH by suggesting that, nowadays, there are precisely these two main contenders over the future course of Iraqi Shia 'Axis of Resistance': KH and AAH. The former is the main avatar of Iranian influence in the country, spreading the Islamic Republic's influence and arguing for wilayat al-faqih within Iraq and Shia jihad abroad (Rudolf 2024, 15–20). The latter argues for an Iranian advisory role and help, but not for its control over internal Iraqi affairs, which is linked to the Khazali's role as a student of the founder of the Sadrist movement, Muqtada's father, Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr. He taught his disciples that wilayat al-faqih is a noble goal to follow, but only when conditions are met to avoid the resulting regime being over-occupied with its own survival rather than guiding its citizens (Ibid. 13). Sadr the elder's teachings thus lie somewhere between the full acceptance of Iranian wilayat al-faqih and Ali Sistani's quietism, mixing Shiism with Iraqi nationalism. Sadr the elder's teachings shaped his son Muqtada (O'Leary and Heras 2021, 2), but also his protégé Qais al-Khazali. This is not to say that Khazali conflicts with Iran, but he is becoming more overtly pro-Iraq, showing signs of growing independence, and was occasionally willing to criticize late IRGC-QF leader Ismail Ghani. Other times, AAH acted independently on Iran when it broke the ceasefire Islamic Republic ordered its affiliates, responding to the assassination of Soleimani and Muhandis in January 2020. AAH even accused KH, following the Iranian order, of succumbing to foreign influence (Rudolf 2024, 11–16)⁷.

Naturally, this somewhat schizophrenic attitude, reaching to both Iraqi Shia nationalists as well as adherents to the Iranian wilayat al-faqih system, makes AAH unique in the camp of otherwise staunchly pro-Iran militias. Badr Brigades, operating in Diyala province and enriching itself from direct illicit economic cooperation with IRGC over Iraq-Iran borders (Al-Aloosy 2023, 207–8), or Kata'ib Hezbollah, formed to spearhead spec-ops in Iraq and abroad on behalf of the Hashd formation, are clear Iran-backed militias, benefiting to the highest possible extent from the Islamic Republic's patronage. Notably, both militias were even founded by the

⁷ AAH has not been uniformly accepted as the least pro-Iran Hashd militia, which is the premise lying in the core of my argument. Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi in past explicitly linked AAH to Khomeinist wilayat al-faqih (Al-Tamimi 2014). I argue that rather than showing my (and by extension others') mistaken arguments, Tamimi reporting AAH's adherence to wilayat al-faqih is linked to both the inherent AAH's closeness to its Iranian patron, but also to the fact that Tamimi wrote the report in 2014. Given that tendency to independent behavior within AAH can be observed growing gradually over time, Tamimi's point corroborate rather than dispute my argument. Furthermore, already then Tamimi reported that AAH not only proclaimed its loyalty to IRGC-QF and by extension Tehran, but also utilized images of late Sadr the elder to boost the impact on its original constituency (Ibid. 2014). Such images can be regularly found on the internet, further supporting the claim that AAH draws inspiration and indeed legitimacy from late elder Sadr's teachings and constituency.

IRGC, either in the 1980s to fight against Saddam forces in the Iraq-Iran war (Badr), or as a small, well-trained special force within the broader movement of Hashd militias (KH). On the other hand, AAH's local origins might explain the following chain of differences with other militias and disobedience to Iran.

Growing AAH's Assertiveness, or Theater for Divergent Constituencies?

The failure to follow direct orders from Tehran at the beginning of 2020 or criticism of IRGC-QF late-leader Ghani are only a tip of the iceberg regarding AAH's divergence from other Iraqi militia adherents to Iran. Starting after Soleimani and Muhandis' departure by MQ-9 Reaper drone in January 2020 and subsequent loss of two individuals able to hold together quarreling Hashd personalities, it began pushing for more power. In a move aimed towards pushing its own candidate onto the position of the new speaker of the parliament, AAH did not shy from attacking other militias, using dubious old videotapes of competing candidates allegedly celebrating the Ba'ath party. It is noteworthy that the opposing candidate was, among others, supported by Badr Brigades, the oldest and one of the most prominent Hashd militias, and also the prime target of AAH's 2023 smirky campaign (Malik 2024). Verbal attacks from AAH directed towards Badr and its leader, Hadi al-Ameri, labeled 'traitors', continued at the beginning of 2024. So did AAH's encroachment on Badr's traditional stronghold in the Diyala governorate. Repercussions of Ameri's actions directed to sustain his influence included assassinations of several of his relatives, coinciding with political fallout between Badr and AAH (Al-Kaabi. et al. 2024). Discords between those two Hashd segments, in fact not unique for AAH vis-à-vis competing 'vanguard' forces but present between, for example, Badr and KH's Hashd chief of staff, Abu Fadak, during the 2022 post-election crisis, show the loose nature of intra-Hashd processes (Foltyn 2023, 22). As such, the umbrella organization fails to display the coherence and unanimous devotion to Iranian interests typical of the IRGC.

Yet, the biggest contenders are not AAH and Badr. These appear to be in line with Mansour's analysis of 'parochial' AAH and 'vanguard' KH. In 2023, verbal exchange between these two started with KH's downplay of AAH's jihadist credits regarding the latter's fight against US forces stationed in the country, followed by AAH blaming KH for 'endangering' the resistance movement by publicly revealing its members (MEMRI 2023). The statements can be interpreted as KH apparently disagreeing with AAH's participation in politics and with their manner of shifting responsibility to attacks onto shadow groups. These tensions are not a coincidence, as Malik suggests that AAH is attempting to rip Hashd al-Shabi from KH's influence and grant the status of Hashd leader to one of its members. For this goal, another dirty campaign was launched, this time using (or abusing) photos of current Hashd chairman Faleh al-Fayyad shaking hands with Sunni Anbar tribal leader, blamed by pro-Iran Shias for facilitating Islamic State's rise a decade ago (Al-Kaabi and Malik 2024).

To sum up this chapter, AAH is becoming more overt in their discords with fellow pro-Iran militants. The reason behind this behavior shift, however, is difficult to establish without proper empirical evidence. It could be that AAH is becoming more Iraqi-nationalist, as suggested above in this article, by its adherence to Ummah rather than wilayat al-faqih, based on Sadrist populist roots. However, the personal ambition of Qais al-Khazali and the simple greediness of its members, both elite and ordinary, cannot be due to article design, either confirmed or ruled out as the primary factor. Furthermore, the latter explanation is suggested by authors cited throughout this chapter, hinting at AAH's feeling of exclusion from inner Hashd circles and their attempts to push back against established actors such as Badr or KH. A similar point is made by Hudhaifa Ebrahim (2024), linking various Hashd leaders' (incl. Khazali's) current inactivity vis-à-vis the rest of the Axis of Resistance to the wealth Khazali, Amiri, and others managed to accumulate over the years. Profit from the current corrupted reality means abandonment of previous ideological zeal, which means more room to drive a wedge between Hashd components. To make this point clear, considering US interests in the region is the purpose of the final chapter.

Conclusion: Towards A More Stable Iraq

The simplified view of the Iraqi context regarding the differences within the Shia camp has cost the US a lot. Roggio (2018) argues that the US failed to take advantage of petty conflicts within the Shia camp while it still had a significant amount of 'boots on the ground', especially during the 2007-2010 surge. Currently, there is a difference between KH⁸, firmly in the Iranian grip and under its control, operating through its 'vanguard network' as described by Mansour (2021); and AAH, operating increasingly independently, which could potentially cause US' misreading of the situation by blaming Iran for deeds of its militias it increasingly fails to control. Such deeds would be either violent or, more likely, seemingly peaceful, as AAH's ultimate ambition seems to remain increasingly institutionalized in the political process while grabbing more and more power at the expense of others. Understanding the situation as it is and following the shifting alliances within the Iraqi Shia camp is thus of profound importance to the US's ability to assess each violent – or indeed suspiciously peaceful – incident in the region correctly.

⁸ Or groups formed from KH after its leader Muhandis died together with then-leader of IRGC-QF general Soleimani in January 2020 during the US drone assassination.

The argument advanced throughout this article emphasizes that, as a 'parochial' network, AAH is rendered more vulnerable to its constituency's attitude towards it, likely limiting its potency in acting on Iran's behalf, no matter the dire situation of ordinary lower-class Iraqi Shia. Such vulnerabilities are easily exploitable if one wishes to showcase AAH's and Khazali's hypocritical face to its constituents (for a showcase, see e.g. [Malik and Knights 2025](#)), possibly stripping the group of public approval

and shifting an increased amount of lower-class Iraqi Shia towards the Sadrist camp. It is important not to make the mistake of assuming that Sadrists, not least Muqtada himself, accept US presence in Iraq or that they would make any meaningful ally to US interests. However, as much as Sadrists oppose the US, they hold similar resentment towards Iran, essentially being the lesser evil for US interests compared to groups such as AAH. The policy proposal is linked to Mansour's (2021, 32) concluding remarks that, guided by a clear strategy offered by the vanguard-parochial distinction, the policy makers are being offered an option to calibrate their actions against each Hashd component accordingly, instead of trying to either surgically remove the component or co-opt it within the system.

In general, the US should use any weapon it can against the growing political power of Iran in Iraq and at the same time omit the counterterrorist, kinetic strategy wherever possible, favoring broader, politically oriented approaches. This is especially true as the kinetic way might be tempting given that other Iranian proxies in the region were recently weakened by precisely this 'iron fist' approach. However, the US burned itself in Iraq already once, and as Smith and Knights (2025), Al-Aloosy (2023, 204–9), or others⁹ show, Hashd militias are embedded in the Iraqi system to such an extent that the two are difficult to distinguish. In case of kinetic operations, they would a) overcome existing differences and band together, which might perhaps apply even to otherwise anti-Hashd Sadr, and b) mobilize resources to such an extent that even Hezbollah was not able to.

In the current situation, by no small means due to the lessons learned from Hezbollah's and indeed Iranian loss to Israeli technological superiority, Hashd militias exercise restraint towards both US and Israeli forces (Cafero 2025). In case of hasty airstrikes due to a misread situation, however, this could change, especially given the lack of control the government exerts over Hashd in similarly tense situations (for the comparison with the 2022 crisis, see e.g. Foltyn 2023, 17). In such a scenario, the victims would consist not only of Hashd leadership, but due to the sensitive context given previous Western engagement in Iraq, also US and Israeli PR, and, as always, Iraqi civilians. Non-kinetic approach and asymmetric, hybrid actions aimed against Hashd domestic legitimacy, utilizing existing rifts between quarrelling Hashd factions, instead of traditional 'smart bombs', is thus the US's biggest chance to reverse Iraq's current course. This is, however, a goal whose fulfillment would take time to accomplish, resembling Selin Uysal's long-term proposal of generational change favoring Western-groomed judges in the highest ranks of Iraqi courts instead of those overtly favoring Iranian interests (Uysal 2023).

⁹ See e.g. the analysis of informal competing networks in Iraq by Maria Luisa Fantappie (2024).

Such solutions require careful calibration of the US's actions, but in a country where kinetic operations failed from the very beginning of the 'War on Terror', they should be deemed necessary. This is especially true as hints on possible Hashd disarmament following the fate of the Axis of resistance elsewhere in the region would not mean their actual disappearance, but rather formal incorporation of these malign actors into Iraqi structures, as suggested by an Iraqi politician close to Hashd political parties (Rasheed 2025). Since Hashd tentacles now reach deep into various Iraqi economic and security sectors (Al-Aloosy 2023, 204–9; Smith and Knights 2025), this would mean finalizing almost 25 years of Iran's attempts to capture its Arab neighbor and the final nail to the coffin of Iraqi independence.

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