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Iran Is Losing Iraq's Tribes

by [Phillip Smyth](#)

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Brief Analysis

Angry over Iranian militia abuses and Baghdad's sundry failures, a number of powerful tribes are setting aside their traditional sectarian loyalties and pushing to safeguard their basic needs, sometimes violently.

Between escalating nationwide protests and this weekend's resignation of Prime Minister Adil Abdulmahdi, the latest events in Iraq have put a spotlight on the future of Iranian influence over Baghdad. Tehran is often depicted as a puppet master operating completely subservient Shia militias and other proxies in service of its goals in Iraq. Yet many of these actors also have tribal loyalties that are increasingly coming into conflict with their Iranian loyalties—partly in response to actions that proxy groups have taken against tribal leaders, and also because the militias have largely failed to provide adequate security or curb corruption. Thus, even as Tehran continues its bid to integrate and control the Iraqi government, the strength of Shia and mixed tribes may be a source of leverage over the proxies charged with carrying out that mission, including the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF).

THE KHAFAJI CONUNDRUM

One of southern Iraq's major Shia tribes, the Khafaja exemplify two key trends: how tribes tend to back the strongest horse, and how Tehran's efforts to pressure them can backfire. During the rule of Saddam Hussein, elements of the Khafaja contributed thousands of fighters to his armed forces, both during the Iran-Iraq War and when their Shia coreligionists in the south launched a rebellion in 1991. Later, however, as the post-2003 U.S. occupation came to a close and the Syrian uprising escalated into war, numerous sections of the tribe began to align

more closely with Iranian-backed organizations.

In 2012, for example, tribal cleric Sheikh Auws al-Khafaji split from Iraqi Shia leader Muqtada al-Sadr and formed the Iranian-backed Quwat Abu Fadl al-Abbas (QAFA), a group used to recruit and deploy fighters in support of Syria's Assad regime. Another top tribal figure, Sheikh Raad al-Khafaji, reportedly served as a commander in one of Iran's most loyal and ideologically fervent proxies, the U.S.-designated terrorist group Kataib Hezbollah.

Yet the tribe's attitude began to shift against such links in February 2019, when the PMF arrested Sheikh Auws and shut down QAFA. This [militia crackdown](#) was apparently spurred by his accusation that Tehran had been involved in assassinating fellow tribe member Alaa Mashzoub, a novelist known for criticizing Iranian interference in Iraq. Previously, QAFA had avoided publicizing tribal issues, while the outspoken Sheikh Auws had focused on sectarian and security matters. After his arrest, however, tribal concerns took center stage.

In Basra, for example, Khafaji leaders gave the central government a forty-eight-hour deadline to disclose the sheikh's whereabouts and physical condition, while local tribal authority Adil al-Khafaji threatened to close down border posts with Iran in response to the arrest. The Baghdad section of the tribe called for his release as well, launching protests outside the Green Zone and near QAFA's shuttered headquarters in the capital.

In May, the tribe announced that Sheikh Auws had been released and the charges against him dropped, but reconciliation with Tehran was hardly apparent. Two months later, the sheikh's sister and her family were reportedly kidnapped in Ahvaz, Iran. Although they soon escaped their captors, the incident may have been Tehran's way of warning him to be more cooperative, or at least passive. Far from backing down, however, the sheikh spoke out in support of the anti-government and anti-Iran protests that exploded throughout the country this fall, using his social media accounts to argue that the demonstrators have legitimate demands. Likewise, other members of the Khafaja tribe, particularly youths, have erected banners around Baghdad in support of the protests.

AWAKENING OF THE MIXED TRIBES

While certain tribes most relevant to this discussion are solidly Shia in composition, others are more mixed, with significant Sunni sections. Some of these tribes are now downplaying sectarian differences and adopting a more unified approach in response to mounting anger over Iranian/proxy pressure, a sense of neglect by Baghdad, and lingering worries about security.

The Khazraj. This tribe is based north of Baghdad in Salah al-Din province, with Shia members concentrated around Dujail and most Sunni members living near Tikrit. For reasons explored below, various members have had numerous run-ins with Iranian-controlled PMF elements.

In March 2015, *Al-Arab* reported that the Iranian-controlled militia Saraya Talia al-Khurasani (the PMF's 18th Brigade) had kidnapped Khazraji tribespeople and killed an unknown number of Shia members. In response, local Khazraji residents kidnapped militia members.

Similar reprisals occurred when tribesman Hussein al-Faisal al-Khazraji, a lieutenant colonel in the Interior Ministry, was assassinated by "unknown gunmen" in July 2018. The killers were widely suspected to be members of Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), a top Iranian proxy that forms the PMF's 41st, 42nd, and 43rd Brigades. When the colonel's funeral procession returned from Najaf to Dujail, AAH kidnapped two prominent Khazraji sheikhs; they were later found executed. The incident sparked days of fighting that left four AAH members and three tribespeople dead. Khazraji leaders publicly called on AAH to pull out of Dujail and other Shia-majority tribal areas, arguing that the group's forces should be replaced by Muqtada al-Sadr's militia Saraya al-Salam—a clear message in support of Iran's major Shia rival and the faction from which AAH splintered.

According to *al-Quds al-Arabi*, the clashes were only the latest episode in an overlooked conflict that the Khazraj and

AAH had been fighting for at least a year. AAH reportedly assassinated multiple tribespeople affiliated with Saraya al-Salam and the Iraqi security forces. The group has also been accused of engaging in criminal activities targeting tribal members and their land holdings.

Despite reconciliation meetings between the antagonists, tensions persist today. In the words of one Shia Khazraj and former Saraya al-Salam fighter who wished to remain unnamed, “Even if it is calm with [Iran-backed groups in our areas], we no longer want them...Our protests deal with many issues...This issue is another of importance.”

The Shammar. Since 2016, members of this tribe have helped lead Iraq’s broader shift toward stronger tribal identity as a social and political focal point. One of the largest tribes in the Middle East, the Shammar’s influence extends through Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iraq, and Syria, with Sunni and Shia members holding a diverse array of loyalties. For instance, some Shammar Shia became leaders in the most staunchly sectarian Iranian militias; some Sunni Shammar joined the Islamic State; other Sunnis joined anti-IS militias; and some shifted from supporting Free Syrian Army rebel factions in Syria to backing more tribally oriented militias that focus on protecting and projecting regional Shammar interests (e.g., Quwat al-Sanadid).

The latter shift carried over into Iraq proper, particularly after IS kidnapped more than thirty Shammar tribespeople and launched attacks in areas north of Baghdad in spring and summer 2018. When the central government and Iranian proxies failed to respond adequately to these incidents, it served as a tipping point for many Shammar.

Today, Hussein Alwan—a former fighter with Sadr’s Mahdi Army who held affiliations with multiple Iran-backed militias in the past—serves as a leader and spokesman for Shia Shammar seeking greater protection, services, and recognition from the Iraqi government. In a series of interviews with the author, he stated, “Sunni or Shia, we would do anything for our tribe...The army and the [PMF] are not doing enough for security...We are already commanders in these [PMF] groups, but we need a force of our own...to send a message.” In July 2018, sections of the tribe sent that message by forming Liwa Shammar Baghdad. Although this brigade has not been deployed militarily, its supporters continue to protest the tribe’s poor living conditions—a campaign that has led some Shammar to show up at recent mass demonstrations in Baghdad and other cities.

TRIBAL MOBILIZATION AND VIOLENCE

A part from displaying support for the national protests, some tribal elements have played a major role in the uprising’s more violent strains. In Baghdad, Basra, Dhi Qar, and Maysan, these elements have taken the lead in crafting protest tactics, shutting down roads, and even retaliating against Iranian-backed groups.

The tendency toward vengeance arose after numerous protestors were killed by government security forces and Iranian-backed PMF units. Since then, tribal groups have come to define the confrontations in Baghdad, acting as the main voice pushing the government to rein in its forces and the PMF. In other instances, the response has been more forceful—on October 25, some tribespeople chose to avenge fallen members by burning more than a dozen Iranian-backed organizational headquarters across southern Iraq.

SADR’S GRIP SLIPPING?

Muqtada al-Sadr has attempted to act as the political face for those protesting Iranian influence and the government’s abuses. Yet while his influence over national politics is still potent, his control over his tribal allies may be more limited. The Baghdad slum of Sadr City—a core support zone for him, and home to thousands of tribespeople who moved from rural areas—has seen some of the heaviest protests. According to a November 20 *New York Times* report, a Sadr-linked protest leader relied on a network of tribal contacts to mobilize demonstrators there, as opposed to using Sadr’s own offices. Indeed, many of the rallies that shook Baghdad in mid-October were organized through such links after tribespeople were among those injured or killed earlier that month.

Questions about Sadr’s authority over Shia tribes also arose when an AAH commander and his brother were killed in Amara that same month following the reported deaths of ten protesters. According to some activists, the incident arose from clashes between Saraya al-Salam and AAH, indicating that certain members of his militia may be acting on their own out of concern for their local and tribal interests. Since then, Sadr has said he may call on Saraya al-Salam to “protect protests” while pushing demonstrators to maintain a nonviolent approach—perhaps an effort to reclaim his position among increasingly autonomous tribal factions. Such maneuvers may just increase the potential for violence, especially against a backdrop of longstanding Sadrism antipathy toward Tehran, tribal calls for vengeance, Abdulmahdi’s ouster, a lack of substantive changes, and heavy-handed security responses by Baghdad and Iranian proxies.

U.S. POLICY OPTIONS

In seeking creative ways to at least temporarily wean Shia and Sunni tribes away from Iran, policymakers should address the actual issues on which these factions are currently focused. For example, the United States has long concentrated on providing security and military solutions to the central government in Baghdad. Yet by broadening this focus to include retraining and equipping some sections belonging to local Shia tribes, Washington could do much more to demonstrate its soft and hard power while countering Iran’s.

Perhaps most important, a constant thread among disaffected Shia tribal groups has been the lack of services and jobs. In the past, many tribes created their own patronage networks within the Iraqi government in order to fulfill those needs, but they are increasingly being locked out. Iran’s growing patronage networks have not done much to satiate those needs either. In such a political environment, properly executed U.S. aid can go far, particularly via European, international, and vetted local NGOs that focus on training tribal figures in governance, service provision, and the supply of needed infrastructure equipment. This effort would require a more detailed focus in Washington, not just on the grand strategic level, but also at the town and village level.

Finally, U.S. officials should recognize that tribal issues are rarely addressed in Arabic-language publications and television programming. Elevating and publicizing these issues in independent U.S.-based/backed outlets such as Alhurra Iraq would give the tribes another voice. It would also show that U.S. involvement is much lighter and more considerate than Iran’s heavy-handed, often ineffective approach.

Phillip Smyth is a specialist on Iranian proxy groups and a Soref Fellow at The Washington Institute, where he created the [Shia Militia Mapping Project](#). ❖



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