

The Holy Shrine Units' Announcement Will Change the Rules of the Game in Iraq

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Brief Analysis

Sistani's call for Iraqis to participate in the elections along with a recent announcement about the formation of the Holy Shrine Units as independent entities from the PMF are likely to have a major impact on the Iraqi political and social scene.

For years, the Supreme Marja'iyya of Najaf has been attempting to distance itself from politics amid the sense of failure and frustration that has afflicted the Iraqi people in general, and its followers in particular, due to the disastrous political process it "sponsored" immediately after 2003. Now, however, it looks to be reassuming its role of "caretaking" and "guidance," as indicated by two major events of direct political and security significance that occurred within the span of nearly three days last week.

The first was when the Marja'iyya heeded local and international political calls and issued guidance urging Iraqis, and specifically its followers, to vote in the elections. In its address, it called for "real change in state management and to keep corrupt hands out of the government." It also urged its followers to "transcend national borders for a better future...and avoid the danger of falling into pits of chaos and political stalemate." We thus have a political text par excellence that not only talks about elections, but also criticizes the political process. It urges Iraqis towards change (real, not figurative), not only in the government, but also in the state that suffers from the rule of corruption right down to the bone.

The Marja'iyya's clear and powerful call comes as a response to the government's concerns, as well as to many of the forces wishing for local and international change. It was a response to avoid the potential risks stemming from the current political forces' betting on expected low rates of participation in the upcoming October 10 elections to reinforce their dominance over the political scene. This would lead to what the Marja'iyya calls "political stalemate,"

as it is very likely that the Tishreen Movement's forces will revolt after the election results are tallied. What further heightens these concerns is that every poll conducted up until now predicts low rates of participation, especially in Tishreen Uprising hotspots.

The second event, which occurred only two days ago, was the formal announcement by the Holy Shrine Units, or Atabat, four armed factions formed back in April 2020, declaring their separation from the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). Given the significance of the announcement and its likely aftermath, the symbolism and reverberations of this event may surpass those of the call for Iraqis to participate in elections, and mark a milestone in Iraq's post-2003 political trajectory. These four militias—which include Liwa Ansar al-Marja'iyya, Liwa Ali al-Akbar, Firqat al-Abbas al-Qitaliyah, and Firqat al-Imam Ali al-Qitaliyah—have been effectively attached to the holy shrines in Najaf since their formation after ISIS's occupation of Mosul. The groups had formally split from the institutional PMF organization and became associated with the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces (the Prime Minister) in April 2020. However, the recent announcement made by the leader of the Firqat al-Imam Ali al-Qitaliyah, Maytham Al-Zaidi, in Karbala last week about the official adoption of the name “Holy Shrine Units” is significant in terms of its location, timing, and subject matter, all of which may overturn the current balance of power.

Symbolism of the HSU

There are several layers of symbolism in this event, with the first being location: Al-Zaidi made his announcement from Karbala at the Al-Abbas Shrine, which is one of the holiest sites for Shiites in the world in general and for Iraqis in particular. No less key is the timing: this announcement was made at the conclusion of the Arba'een pilgrimage, after these factions, in cooperation with the Iraqi Armed Forces, succeeded in maintaining the security of millions of pilgrims who flocked to Karbala from within Iraq and abroad in one of the largest annual pilgrimages in the world.

The announcement also came only two days after PMF Chairman Falih Al-Fayyadh stated that “there are no HSU ; the PMF is one,” and some days before the date of the Iraqi parliamentary elections. Thus, the connection seems clear between this announcement and resolutions of the first Atabat conference held in Najaf at the beginning of last December. Not only did this conference ban Atabat fighters from involving themselves in political work, as stipulated in the nation's current constitution, but it also forbade them from candidacy in the elections. This is in stark contrast to the behavior of the PMF and their leaders, who violated the constitution by running as candidates in the elections.

The framing of the announcement itself is likewise significant. The name “**Holy Shrine Units 0**” was not selected at random, especially since the street name for these armed units had been “Marja'iyya Units.” Defending the holy shrines and sites from ISIS's threats during its continuous advance towards Samarra, Baghdad, and Karbala in June 2014 was one of the motives driving young Shia men to volunteer and fight ISIS, in addition to defending Iraq in general. Iraq's holy shrines still hold a special place in the hearts of Iraqis in general and Shiites in particular. For this reason, the religious management of these sacred mausoleums was overseen by the Marja'iyya of Najaf. Though the holy shrines are administratively connected with the government office of the Shia Endowment Diwan, their religious and logistical management fall under the Marja'iyya of Najaf.

By choosing a new name, these factions aim to avoid the embarrassment that the common moniker “Marja'iyya Units” might cause, as Najaf has repeatedly stressed that it had not originally called for the formation of any forces. Rather, in the fatwa on “Sufficiency Jihad” after ISIS's occupation of Mosul, among other events, the Marja'iyya called for volunteers to defend Iraq. Thus, this new name gives Najaf greater room to maneuver and avoid directly intervening in politics, the most important distinction between the Shia Marja'iyyas of Najaf and those in Qom.

Substantial Implications and Repercussions

The attempt by the four factions representing the HSU to stress their difference and separation from the PMF is due to current events. In fact, this desire goes back to the early days of the PMF's formation in November 2016. The essential difference between the two lies in the split between the spiritual Marja'iyya to which the various member factions of the PMF adhere. As opposed to the Sunni or Christian forces within the PMF, the loyalties of the PMF faction leadership were split in 2016, with the majority of them following the Supreme Leader of Iran in Qom and the minority following Ayatollah Sistani. Even then, it was truly bizarre that the majority of PMF leaders, especially the most influential of them, claim to follow the Marja'iyya of Khamenei instead of Sistani, as it was the latter whose fatwa originally brought their forces into existence. The other paradox is that a majority of the Shia PMF fighters—along with majority of Shia both in Iraq and globally—follow the Marja'iyya of Sistani, in contrast to the majority of PMF leaders who follow the Marja'iyya of Qom.

Were the difference in the PMF leaders' Marja'iyya was merely related to religious, spiritual, and devotional issues, then the matter could end there. However, the divide is much deeper than that, and goes beyond the traditional and historical competition between the Marja'iyyas of Najaf and Qom. Rather, at its heart, the divide is related to the idea of bearing arms outside the scope of the state. The Marja'iyya of Najaf has historically and traditionally avoided interfering in matters of governance and eschewed the idea of transnational religion. In this way, we can understand the harsh criticism leveled at pro-Iran armed factions last August by Mr. Yasseri, representative of the Marja'iyya and leader of the Liwa Ansar al-Marja'iyya, who said:

“Those loyal to anyone other than the nation are committing a grievous treason. It is a grand deception and trick. We have learned the same from the example of Imam Hussein... That the voice, guidance, or direction would come to us from beyond our borders is not the creed of Hussein. Rather, we reject affiliation and allegiances. We declare as loudly as possible, without fear or hesitation, that he who is loyal to another nation is a traitor!”

As the Marja'iyya of Qom is based upon the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist (vilayat-e faqih) rejected by the Marja'iyya of Najaf, it still believes in the principle of exporting the Iranian Islamic Revolution, and thus believes in transnational religion. Accordingly, for the Iraqi armed factions sympathetic to it, the fighting does not end with the expulsion of ISIS, nor with the protection of the holy shrines. Rather, they will fight in the name of the religion and sect wherever the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution sends them, whether in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, or Afghanistan. From the viewpoint of the HSU leaders, this is a clear violation of their religious mandate on one hand, and of the Iraqi constitution on the other, which forbids sending any armed Iraqi forces abroad. Thus, Al-Zaidi stated last week from the Al-Abbas Shrine's pulpit:

“This name, slogan, and sashes that these four groups wear... are lawful and in accord with the Sharia. The lawful aspect is clear to everyone in terms of their connection to the Marja'iyya. As for the legal aspect, the Atabat have earned this from the satisfaction, acceptance, and support of the Commander-in-Chief of the Iraqi Armed Forces.”

The name “Holy Shrine Units” indicates that these shrines remain protected not by the Iraqi security forces but rather by the armed factions of the Marja'iyya of Najaf. Consequently, there is no longer a need for any other armed factions supposedly formed to drive out ISIS (which has been defeated) and protect the holy shrines from any future security threat, especially during the various pilgrimage seasons, such as this year's Arba'een pilgrimage. These factors only reinforce the clarity of this message.

What also strengthens the force of the Atabat's message is that the Units possess outstanding fighting capabilities, armored forces, as well as the acknowledged support of Muqtada Al-Sadr's “Saraya Al Salam” (Peace Companies). These elements may ultimately tip the scales of power away from other armed factions, as it is very likely that other groups will join the Atabat, which will further enfeeble the legal, religious, and military legitimacy of other armed

factions.

In conclusion, it seems that the Marja 'iyya of Najaf has decided to throw its spiritual, moral, and financial weight towards rescuing the state and preventing another Iranian or Lebanese-style revolution from occurring in Iraq. It seems to grasp that its years-long patience and reliance upon its moral weight and guidance via Friday sermons did not stop Iran from extending its reach within the body of the Iraqi state. Iran's deep expansion of influence into Iraq was publicly rejected by scores of youths who revolted in southern regions during October 2019, and who seem ready to rise up again with a vengeance if real change does not occur or if the status quo remains. Regardless of one's opinion on the extent to which religious intervention in matters of the Iraqi state should be accepted or rejected, it is likely that these recent developments will alter the rules of the game in Iraq. ❖

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