

What Next After the Assassination Attempt on Mustafa al-Kadhimi?

by [Ali Al-Mikdam \(/experts/ali-al-mikdam\)](/experts/ali-al-mikdam)

Dec 4, 2021

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Ali Al-Mikdam \(/experts/ali-al-mikdam\)](/experts/ali-al-mikdam)

Ali Al-Mikdam is an Iraqi writer, journalist and human rights activist interested in Iraqi affairs, gender equality, Iraqi-Iranian politics relations, and pro-Iranian militias in Iraq. He is concerned with victims of forced disappearance and their rights. Due to his opinions he was arrested twice and abducted by unknown militia.



Brief Analysis

The question of how Iraqi militias will respond to their decreased presence in parliament becomes increasingly salient with the finalization of Iraq's election results.

The Iraqi capital, Baghdad, has been in a state of caution, anticipation, and fear of the unknown since the announcement of the preliminary results of the early parliamentary elections in October. This has especially been the case after the results showed that Iraq's militias forces' seats in parliament tumbled in the face of their traditional rival Muqtada al-Sadr. The latter appears energized and firm towards his opponents, especially in two fiery post-election speeches and a series of tweets on the results. His messages all seem to seek extending Sadrist leadership's influence over Shia forces—and especially armed militia groups. He likewise did not hesitate to announce his intention to remove militias' weapons and confine them to the hands of the security establishment.

In the meantime, Iraq's Iranian-backed militias remain armed. With the Federal Court ratifying the final voting results, the confirmation of militias' fewer representatives will likely further aggravate the situation. This is especially the case after representatives of armed forces, led by Kata'ib Hezbollah and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, announced their intention to escalate towards armed conflict if the results exclude them.

Their rhetoric justifies the actions of their supporters, who have camped out for weeks in the vicinity of the Green Zone and periodically threatened to storm the area. The Green Zone is a particularly sensitive area as it includes most of the government headquarters, as well as the Electoral Commission and the United Nations mission. They have also stationed themselves around most of the homes of senior officials, the most prominent of which is the house of Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi, which was subjected to a bombing by drones in an outright

assassination attempt that nearly killed him and wounded seven of his staff.

After the failed attempt to assassinate the Iraqi Prime Minister, intensive security moves began in the Green Zone and across Baghdad. However, after the statement made by the Prime Minister regarding the perpetrators of the recent assassination of intelligence officer Colonel Nibras Farman, some pro-Iranian militias—namely those who had threatened Kadhimi the day before the assassination attempt—seemed to reduce their escalation for the moment.

The widespread popular and international condemnation likewise made an impact on those who carried out this operation and their partners in Iran, forcing Tehran to send the commander of the Iranian Quds Force Ismail Qaani to Baghdad, where he presided over a special meeting with the leaders of the Shia militias.

Tehran has apparently told these militia leaders that they have two options in proceeding: either they sacrifice and disclose who carried out this operation, or that Tehran cut off its relationship with them completely and rearrange its files to deal with other groups in the region. This pressure reflects how Iran now perceives the militias it has backed in Iraq as increasingly outside of their control, and how recent behaviors have become a focus of annoyance for Iran.

This relationship is supposed to be a firm commitment of allegiance to Iran, but in fact the meeting only confirms that there is a rebellion by some militia leaders. Notably, many of the militias that lost votes in the elections—under the direction of their leaders—began building earthen mounds, which are usually only built in the case of armed military clashes. Observers interpreted the mounds as another warning that those parties are ready for confrontation.

What Next for Iraq?

The confrontation will ultimately be between the state and the militias, and blood will be shed. However, the question remains as to whether this be an armed confrontation, and if there will there be violent clashes. While unlikely, forecasts of the present moment—according to the data, leaks, and reports—suggest that an assassination would only be the first step, greatly increasing the odds for a possible confrontation. Those who would carry out these assassinations are themselves the most vulnerable armed groups.

This uptick in independent violent action initially began after the killing of former Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani. And Soleimani's replacement Esmail Qaani has proven that he does not control Iraq's Iranian-backed militias as tightly as his predecessor—language skills, interpersonal relationships, and a common history are all missing in the relationship. This is in part why Hezbollah, Muhammad Kawtharani, and others have been stepping in to fill the void left by Soleimani.

However, given the magnitude of the most recent operation—the attempted assassination of the Iraqi prime minister—Jason Brodsky, a researcher of Shia militias and the IRGC, estimates that Tehran would have at least been aware of the plans. Brodsky also suggests that at worst, Iran knew about the attempted assassination in advance and did nothing about it, indicating Iranian complicity in an attack on the Iraqi state.

Even so, this does not mean that an operation like the assassination of the Iraqi prime minister with a drone attack that Tehran may have not known about in advance was conducted by explicitly rogue actors. In the midst of the investigative measures, the author contacted a security official from within the investigative committee on the incident of the attempted assassination of the Iraqi Prime Minister.

The source confirmed that the main accused parties are Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, Kata'ib Harb Allah and Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada. The security official noted that Iran was aware of a general escalation against the Prime Minister in advance and seemed not to have an issue with this, but it was unclear if it was aware of a specific plan to target Al-

Kazemi's residence with drones.

The high-ranking security official stressed that whoever killed the colonel in the intelligence service (Nebras) from a militia group, a situation made clear by the surveillance footage, and that it was the same party that sought to assassinate the Prime Minister—directing the accusation against the Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and Kata'ib Hezbollah movements. The official added, "The elections showed that the militias loyal to Iran do not have a popular base, and they also lost their political base as seats in the parliament. The events that took place on the evening of Friday November 5 clearly showed that the Iraqi security forces are capable of confronting the militias to the end and that they will prevent any new attempt by the militias to enter the green Zone." On November 5, clashes took place between the Iraqi security forces and demonstrators rejecting the election results trying to enter the Green Zone. According to the statistics of health centers in Baghdad, about two people were killed and 346 wounded, including 276 wounded in the security forces.

The author likewise contacted the Political Bureau of the most prominent party in the accused militias, the Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq militia, and asked them about their position on the accusations leveled against them regarding the assassination, especially since they are the militia most affected by the results of the Iraqi elections. They declined to respond, as is often the case with militia leaders. The military wing of the same faction likewise declined to respond, while not denying their connection to what they were accused of.

Even as the government is investigating the attempted assassination, militias are directly challenging the legitimacy of the election results. Earlier, Secretary-General of the Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq militia, Qais al-Khazali reportedly met with the UN envoy Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert in a private meeting. The militia's spokesman for its Political Bureau, Mahmoud al-Rubaie, stated in a televised interview that they had briefed the envoy during the meeting on evidence proving that there was fraud in the elections. Al-Rubaie claimed that the envoy was shocked by what she saw and assured them that she would present these results to the Security Council and relevant authorities such as the Elections Commission. The interview resulted in sharp incitement against the mission and protesters carrying placards accusing the mission of plotting against them at their sit-in sites in the Green Zone.

In response to the tensions unfolding in Iraq, the Special Envoy Hennis-Plasschaert stated in her speech to the Security Council that the parties rejecting the election results had launched their sit-in demonstration, and that those demonstrations had escalated intensely on November 5. In her words, the subsequent November 7 assassination attempt was tantamount to a direct attack on the state, and that it was a heinous act that can only be condemned in the strongest terms. Hennis-Plasschaert added that under no circumstances should terrorism, violence, or any other illegal acts be allowed to derail the democratic process in Iraq. She likewise added that any illegal attempts aimed at prolonging or discrediting the process of announcing the election results, or worse, such as changing the election results through intimidation and pressure, will only lead to counterproductive results. She also confirmed that the conduct of the elections was fraught with difficulties. She qualified the statement, however, by emphasizing that the process was managed well technically, and is something for which the High Electoral Commission deserves appreciation.

The content of the envoy's speech is a completely different story from the version presented by the Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq militia, another warning sign that these armed factions are seeking to change the rules of the game and potentially leading to a clash. Concerns about this potential have also been raised by the U.S. State Department, which released a statement on the embassy website. The American Embassy in Baghdad advised American citizens not to travel to Iraq due to "terrorism, kidnapping, armed conflict, unrest and the emerging Coronavirus, as well as the limited ability of the American mission to provide support to American citizens, stressing to avoid areas of demonstrations and to exercise caution in the vicinity of large gatherings or protests."

The escalating events in Iraq raise a number of questions, the most prominent of which is that despite the Iraqi

government's assurances, why did the government not take decisive measures against those parties that have targeted Kadhimi and other security officials? And what is the extent of the coming confrontation?

According to Al-Rajeh, Al-Sadr is going to form a national majority government "as he described it," which will not appeal to the political wings of the Shia militias, which are instead likely to demand a consensus government in which they participate, despite losing the elections. These demands may cause greater tension between the Shia forces, especially since some Shia factions have openly announced their intention to fight the American forces in the event that those forces do not withdraw from Iraq at the end of this year.

These demands have appeared in conjunction with Al-Sadr's calls to dissolve these factions and hand over their weapons to the state. The factions have categorically rejected this and confirmed that their weapons will only be delivered to the hands of the absent Imam (the awaited Mahdi), meaning that they will refuse to hand over its weapons to anyone until the Day of Resurrection. At a time when news indicates that the U.S. forces will remain in Iraq as advisors and provide intelligence services, this confirms that a confrontation is inevitable, especially in light of escalating Shia militia media discourse. ❖

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