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Can Asaib Ahl al-Haq Join the Political Mainstream?

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Brief Analysis

The Iraqi militia seeks to follow peers like the Sadrist movement and Badr Organization, but it must first back up its rhetoric with moderating actions.

Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) is one of Iraq's most notorious Iran-backed militias, on the verge of being sanctioned by the U.S. government for its many documented terrorist activities. Now its leader, Qais al-Khazali, is trying to "mainstream" his brand. For the United States, the key question is whether to level sanctions against him or his movement or both, or to hold the threat of sanctions over his head, pending signs of less-destructive behavior.

Shia Iraq's Military-Political Actors

Since 2003, a number of Iraqi actors have gradually transitioned from militias into political blocs. The first and most successful was the Sadrist movement, led by Muqtada al-Sadr, and a splinter called Fadhila. These groups maintained large militias in the 2004-2008 period but chose to disarm most of their forces due to a combination of military and political pressure from internal stakeholders, Iraq's government, and the United States. Today, al-

Sadr's movement comprises the biggest bloc in parliament, with fifty-four seats, and the largest protest movement in the country. Meanwhile, it still maintains a powerful 12,000-strong militia called Saraya al-Salam, which has been legally part of Iraq's security forces since the June 2014 government activation of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF).

The next militia to edge onto the political spectrum was the Badr Organization, an Iran-backed paramilitary opposition group that chose to compete in all of Iraq's post-2003 elections. Today, it leads the second-largest bloc in parliament. Badr is also a major force provider in the PMF, with double the militiamen of Saraya al-Salam.

These Shia militia entrants are now joined by AAH, a Sadrist splinter movement created by Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah in 2006. The movement's head, Khazali, is gradually seeking distance from his pro-Iran military identity in order to establish himself as a nationalist Iraqi Arab political leader.

Qais al-Khazali's New Clothes

A number of themes can be extracted from recent Khazali speeches on January 5 and January 23, which were delivered against the backdrop of the respective anniversaries of the 2011 departure of U.S. forces from Iraq and the 2018 Iraqi announcement of victory against the Islamic State:

- **Distancing from Iran.** Seeking separation from Iranian politics, Khazali said, "I have not lived in Iran for seventeen years. It may be the case that I visit Iran once or twice annually to take my children on holiday as I cannot visit any other country." He sought to affirm his stance by saying that "if a war breaks out between the United States and Iran outside Iraq, then it is not related to us."
- ***Velayat-e faqih* rule in Iraq.** Referring to the doctrine granting Iran's Supreme Leader his authority, Khazali noted, "It is not possible for us to have *velayat-e faqih* in the same manner as it exists in Iran." He also said, "Part of our social identity is the higher Shia religious authority in Najaf, and therefore the marja [Shia clerical rank equivalent to grand ayatollah] in Najaf cannot play the role of *velayat-e faqih* in Iraq."
- **PMF.** Khazali added: "We cannot switch the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces for Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps because one of the most important reasons for the survival of the IRGC is the existence of *velayat-e faqih* in Iran."
- **Hezbollah.** On the Lebanese Hezbollah model, Khazali said: "The Shia in Iraq cannot behave in the same way as the Shia in Lebanon because we are the majority in Iraq, whereas they are the minority in Lebanon." Khazali added, "We are a state!"—implying that Shia in Iraq have already achieved a status superior to Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Overall, Khazali is seeking to develop a new identity and a visionary brand to allow him to compete for youth attention with his longtime rival al-Sadr. He advocates strengthening the state as the best way to prevent foreign interference from any direction—the United States, Iran, or Sunni actors. A xenophobic populist, Khazali wants to extend the "Islamic resistance" brand into the economic field by excluding foreign investment from Iraq's critical infrastructure.

Prospects for the AAH Bid

In exchange for accepting his trend within the political mainstream, Khazali is offering an array of inducements for the Iraqi state and the international community. Since April 2018, he has professed a willingness to hand his group's arms back to the Iraqi state and to incorporate its militias into the Iraqi security forces. Following the May 2018 elections, Khazali's al-Sadiqoun list received 15 seats in Iraq's 329-seat parliament. Al-Sadiqoun achieved its rapid growth in seats, up from only a single seat in 2014, through a mix of smart positioning of young candidates—especially women—and militia intimidation and vote tampering at polling stations in Baghdad. The AAH cabinet member Abdul-Amir Hamdani, who serves as minister of culture, tourism, and antiquities, is a well-qualified

archaeologist, an appointment designed to cast the movement in the best possible light.

The main obstacle for Khazali is that AAH's actions remain at odds with its leader's words. Throughout its history, AAH has killed Iraqis—including from its own Shia constituency—who stood in the group's way. In the mid-2000s, AAH led the sectarian cleansing campaign in Baghdad, and in January 2007 worked with Iran to orchestrate and carry out the cold-blooded kidnapping and murder of five U.S. soldiers in Karbala. But even the "new" AAH—supposedly in evidence since the raising of the PMF in 2014—is credibly accused of murdering dozens of distinctively dressed counterculture youth, as well as singers, nightclub workers, alcohol vendors, civil society workers, journalists, and social media female activists. AAH fighters are also credibly accused of extorting politicians and the owners of casinos, restaurants, and nightclubs, as well as importing drugs to Iraq and charging truckers large tolls. Riyadh al-Adhadh, chair of the Baghdad Provincial Council, was openly abducted by AAH in 2014. In 2016, AAH seized and looted Iraq's largest refinery at Baiji, ripping the key equipment from the facility and selling it to the highest bidders.

This thuggish behavior persists even more recently. In the May 2018 elections, AAH members staked out voting booths in Sunni areas of northern and eastern Baghdad and literally guided the hands of hundreds of voters to their candidates' names using physical intimidation. Out in the rural areas, AAH has been even more overtly violent. In July 2018, the group kidnapped local Iraqi army officers and Sunni tribal leaders in the Dujail area, north of Baghdad. Where AAH militias hold control in northern Diyala, the group has deliberately recruited Islamic State fighters around Jalula and Khanaqin because of their anti-Kurdish stance, leading to a resurgence of local violence against Kurdish communities.

Recommendations for U.S. Policy

The jury is still out concerning whether either Muqtada al-Sadr's movement or Badr has truly joined the notional Iraqi political mainstream, given that both retain significant armed forces and both refuse to fully subordinate themselves to the state. All this being true, the United States regards both Sadr's movement and Badr as legitimate political actors and indispensable components of the partisan landscape in Iraq. Therefore, the core question for U.S. policymakers is whether Washington should treat AAH the same as these actors, or instead level terrorist designations against Qais al-Khazali and his group, as it did other Iran-backed entities such as Kataib Hezbollah and Hezbollah Harakat al-Nujaba?

Iraqi officials point to al-Sadr's movement and Badr as embryonic examples of partial moderation that can be built upon. For its part, the United States should use the leverage created by the threat of sanctions to indirectly nudge AAH's behavior in the right direction. Specifically, the United States should quietly signal that it is closely watching AAH in Iraq's provinces and cities, and is factoring the movement's actions into U.S. sanctions decisionmaking, potentially including a negative review of Khazali's personal file. Washington should also quietly communicate that it will be watching Khazali's gestures regarding the U.S.-Iraq military partnership to defeat the Islamic State. The AAH leader has hinted that the presence of U.S. advisors and trainers may be acceptable, describing the subject as a "military-technical issue," not a political one. If U.S. forces are evicted from Iraq as a result of agitation by militiamen like Khazali, Washington would have little to lose by levying the full weight of sanctions against him and his movement.

Michael Knights is a senior fellow with The Washington Institute who has worked in all of Iraq's provinces and most of its hundred-plus districts since 2003. Frzand Sherko is an Iraq-based strategic scholar and political analyst specializing in the intelligence and security affairs of the Kurdistan region of Iraq, greater Iraq, and the wider Middle East. ❖



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