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Iranian Militias in Iraq's Parliament: Political Outcomes and U.S. Response

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Brief Analysis

As Washington mulls sanctions on Asaib Ahl al-Haq and similar groups, it should mind the volatility of Baghdad's near-term political situation and the questionable efficacy of 'wing' distinctions.

Among the winners in Iraq's May 12 parliamentary elections was Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), the fastest-rising faction in a powerful coalition of Iranian-allied Iraqi parties. In the days that followed, U.S. legislators passed an amended defense authorization bill that paved the way for the Treasury Department to impose heavy financial sanctions on the group and other accused Iranian proxies. Although this is the right step, any sanctions need to be carefully crafted and timed to avoid an anti-American backlash during Iraq's already-chaotic government formation process.

BREAKDOWN OF IRAN'S COALITION

AH is part of the Fatah (Conquest) Alliance, a coalition that won between forty and forty-seven seats last month, enough for second place among all contenders (pending the outcome of [Iraq's planned recount](#)). AAH won at least thirteen of these seats, and perhaps as many as fifteen, or nearly 30 percent of the alliance's total.

Fatah is led by Hadi al-Ameri of the Badr Organization, arguably the oldest, largest, and most important of the Iraqi Shia groups ideologically, politically, and religiously subservient to Iran. The alliance is primarily made up of groups

modeled on the militia/party model that Hezbollah has long used in Lebanon. In addition to comprising the core of al-Hashd al-Shabi (Popular Mobilization Forces, or PMF), these groups also function as the most powerful elements of direct Iranian influence in the Iraqi political sphere.

Fatah's latest electoral gains include the following:

- Twenty-two seats for Badr
- At least thirteen seats for AAH (aka the League of the Righteous), an Iranian-controlled splinter group formerly affiliated with Muqtada al-Sadr
- Three seats for the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), once a major player in Shia politics until the departure of leader Ammar al-Hakim (see below for more on this defection)
- Two seats for Harakat Jihad al-Binna (Movement of Jihad and Building), a party that has roots in Badr and is close to ISCI
- Two seats for Harakat Babiliyoun (Babylon Movement), a Christian group formed by the Iranian-controlled Kataib al-Imam Ali (Imam Ali Battalion); the party thus holds two out of the five seats allotted to Iraqi Christians
- One seat for Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada (Master of the Martyrs Battalion), a group that split from U.S.-designated terrorist group Kataib Hezbollah
- One seat for Harakat al-Iraq al-Islamiyah (Islamic Movement in Iraq), which split from the Dawa Movement in the late 1980s and was part of the Badr Corps until 2003
- One seat for Tajma al-Shabak al-Demoqrati (Shabak Democratic Assembly), a Badr affiliate that represents the Shabak ethnic minority in northern Iraq.

Two clear trends emerge from these results: the sudden leap by AAH, one of the Fatah Alliance's most unruly elements, and the surprising lack of growth by Badr, which had seemed poised for expansion.

SURPRISE GAINS BY ASAIB AHL AL-HAQ

A AH outperformed many expectations, particularly as it won just a single seat in the 2014 elections. The group is a spinoff of the Mahdi Army (which was led by Muqtada al-Sadr, whose populist Islamist movement Sairoon won the most seats last month, between fifty-four and fifty-six). Formed in 2006-2007 with Hezbollah's assistance, AAH was tasked with fighting the U.S.-led occupation of Iraq and, later, sending thousands of fighters to Syria.

Currently, the group has around 7,000-10,000 fighters, complemented with tanks, light armored vehicles, older artillery pieces, rockets, and improvised rocket-assisted munitions. In addition to maintaining its anti-Western posture, it has been accused of brutal killings throughout Iraq, against both fellow Shia and other sects.

Epitomizing these roots, one of the group's victorious candidates in the Baghdad electoral district was Hassan Salam, a former field commander for Sadr's Mahdi Army. After reportedly running sectarian death squads in that capacity, he joined AAH, serving as one of its main militia commanders and helping with early mobilization efforts for Syria.

The group's dramatic electoral success can be attributed to several factors:

- **Perception of fighting prowess.** AAH portrays itself as having seen the writing on the wall and taken early, effective action against the Islamic State, in contrast to the Iraqi government's foot-dragging approach and military failures (e.g., the loss of Mosul).
- **Strategically focused messaging campaigns.** Following the model of Hezbollah's al-Manar television network and multiple websites, AAH has exhibited an increasingly professional, modern, and varied approach to media. Its Al Ahad satellite propaganda station and advanced social media efforts have put forth polished programs, music videos, and

other products deriding everything from elite corruption to the Kurds. Some of this programing presents AAH as the rising voice for neglected Iraqis. For example, Wajih Abbas, a winning AAH candidate in Baghdad, hosted *Kalam Wajih* (Wajih's Talk), a nightly show that captured around 1 million viewers with incendiary sectarian rhetoric and criticism of the governing elites.

- **Self-branding as an outsider force seeking to destroy corruption.** The group's previously tiny parliamentary presence likely gave voters the sense that it was marginalized, and thus untainted compared to larger parties. AAH candidates made sure to emphasize that line of thinking over and over during the campaign, accusing incumbent parties of rampant graft.
- **Attention to female voters.** The Iraqi parliament requires that one-quarter of its seats go to female candidates. Three of the winning AAH candidates are women. Despite lacking the public exposure or militant history of their male counterparts, they were able to secure seats in Baghdad, Karbala, and Muthanna. This success is due in part to the fact that AAH, much like Hezbollah, has cultivated support for women via its "Women's Department," part of the group's broader efforts to construct a "culture of resistance." In March 2017, AAH combined its anticorruption line and its focus on women by creating the movement "Women United Against Corruption" (Nisaa Mutahadat Dud al-Fasad).

FATAH'S OTHER FACTIONS

Formed in the early 1980s, Badr moved quickly to maintain its military sections and dominate portions of the Iraqi government following Saddam Hussein's 2003 ouster. Later, it ran in the 2014 elections as part of Nouri al-Maliki's State of Law Alliance, gaining twenty-two seats in parliament and control of the Interior Ministry. In parallel to these formal powers, it assumed operational control over the majority of PMF brigades, built up new militia units for Shia ethnic minority groups in northern Iraq, and sent fighters to Syria.

Badr's failure to pick up more seats this year may therefore seem surprising. In all likelihood, it is simply part of the wider trend that characterized this election: namely, voters punishing established parties that adopted conventional platforms.

Badr was not the only Fatah Alliance member with lackluster results: ISCI, Badr's former parent body, won only three seats. As mentioned previously, the group's patriarch, Ammar al-Hakim, split away just before the elections to form Tayyar Hikma al-Watani (National Wisdom Movement). This new party's platform rested on building a civil state, promoting Iraqi nationalist positions, and detaching itself from ICSI's pro-Iranian, Badr-friendly "old guard," which was regularly accused of corruption. Hakim's faction won nineteen seats and has since aligned itself with Sadr's camp.

To be sure, Badr still controls twenty-two of its own seats and can heavily influence the Fatah Alliance's other twenty-five, essentially giving it more seats than any other Shia faction except Sadr's Sairoon list. Even so, the group surely feels threatened by the exploding popularity of AAH and its leader Qais al-Khazali, a former student of Sadr's late father Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr. In Baghdad, for example, AAH's Hassan Salam scored the second most votes behind Badr secretary-general Ameri. And in Babil, AAH won just as many seats (two) as Badr.

Regardless, given Iran's overarching control of both groups, Tehran may be able to seal up any daylight between them. Badr will likely remain Tehran's favorite at the head of the Fatah Alliance, though AAH's victory could mark the beginning of its rise within the Iraqi political sphere.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The United States should maintain focus on AAH given its rapid growth. The amendment to the congressional authorization bill, which also targets AAH ally Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (HHN), has been passed by the House

and is now up for vote in the Senate. It is a well-deserved and long-overdue measure that will certainly hamper the group's financial abilities, but it falls short of a State Department designation as a Foreign Terrorist Organization. Moreover, it touches on particularly sensitive issues at a time when Iraq will be struggling to form its next government and shape its future strategic and military relations with Washington.

One question is whether it is wise to sanction fifteen new Iraqi members of parliament at the moment. Rep. Ted Poe (R-TX), author of the passed House amendment, recently told Al-Monitor that the U.S. government needs to ascertain whether "the political wing constitutes an affiliate or entity controlled by Asaib Ahl al-Haq." Although this distinction may help avoid a potential clash with a powerful bloc in Iraq's parliament, it is a slippery slope and could prove counterproductive.

An alternative approach is to sanction the entire group as Washington did with Lebanese Hezbollah, the organization that AAH and HHN have directly modeled themselves on, fought alongside, and taken orders from. U.S. sanctions against Hezbollah have continued despite its participation in Lebanese elections since 1992 and its possession of multiple seats in parliament.

In reality, AAH's political and military "wings" are overlapping internal divisions within a cohesive organization, not autonomous sections. For instance, Saad Hussein al-Husseini, one of the winning AAH parliamentarians, was an administrative commander for the PMF's 41st Brigade as recently as late 2017. Indeed, the 41st, 42nd, and 43rd PMF brigades served as AAH's de facto campaign headquarters during the elections, materially supporting the group's candidates and trumpeting its past military accomplishments, including attacks on U.S. forces. If AAH leaders can move so fluidly between the military and political "wings," then the U.S. government should logically target them both—otherwise, sanctions may become unworkable and meaningless.

Yet the timing of any such decision is important. Placing sanctions on AAH right away could prove very problematic for the group and Iraqi government, especially if the group winds up controlling a key ministry that requires significant international aid or involves regular international travel. It is now up to the Treasury Department and the rest of the Trump administration to ensure that sanctions are most effectively applied. Given that Iraq faces a contentious vote recount and negotiations over governing coalitions, Washington should consider delaying punitive measures until after the government is formed and AAH's role in it is clear.

Phillip Smyth is a Soref Fellow at The Washington Institute and author of its 2015 study [The Shiite Jihad in Syria and Its Regional Effects](#). ❖



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