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PolicyWatch 2865

Are Shia Dynamics in Iraq and Lebanon Turning Against Iran?

by [Hanin Ghaddar](#)

Oct 5, 2017

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Hanin Ghaddar](#)

Hanin Ghaddar is the Friedmann Fellow at The Washington Institute's Geduld Program on Arab Politics, where she focuses on Shia politics throughout the Levant.



Brief Analysis

If Iraqi Shia reject Tehran's call for a unified bloc in next year's elections, it could have welcome implications for the future of Iranian influence in Baghdad -- and Beirut.

Despite Hezbollah's powerful influence over Lebanon, much of the country's Shia community looks to the Iraqi holy city of Najaf for religious guidance and leadership. Although Najaf was never politically involved in Lebanon the way Iran is, the Shia institutions that call it home were once the only religious -- and thereby social -- reference for Lebanese Shia. Over the years, Hezbollah has used its power to turn many Shia toward Iran's Supreme Leader for guidance, but Najaf's influence endured. Prominent Lebanese religious figures such as Muhammad Mahdi Shamseddine, Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah, and Hani Fahs all had strong connections to Najaf, and their Iraqi-influenced institutions and legacy still hold considerable sway over Lebanon's Shia scene.

The United States and other outside actors have never fully utilized this Iraqi connection when looking to help Lebanon and curb Iran's influence there. Yet new political developments in Iraq could give them a golden opportunity to do so.

IS NAJAF SPEAKING UP?

Since 2003, Iraqi Shia leader Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani has largely avoided taking a stance on domestic or Lebanese politics, preferring to stick with religious and social issues. He did make a notable exception in 2006

after Lebanon's summer war with Israel, when Hezbollah was facing pressure to disarm. At the time, he called on Lebanese clerics to heed his fatwa about abstaining from political office, which many likely interpreted as a shot across Hezbollah and Iran's bow; he also said that Lebanese Shia should choose their own future without truckling to Iran.

The Amal Movement -- Hezbollah's reluctant coalition partner -- publicly agreed with Sistani's point, and other independent or anti-Hezbollah Shia leaders no doubt concurred as well. In general, however, these same leaders believe that their ineffectiveness in pushing for change in Lebanon is at least partly rooted in Najaf's "hands-off" strategy during decisive moments, including the 2005 Cedar Revolution and the events of May 2008. Yet Najaf's willingness to enter the ring may be shifting ahead of Iraq's 2018 parliamentary elections.

Iran wants Iraqi Shia parties to enter the election as one unit under the banner of the National Alliance, a coalition that will reportedly name its new leader soon. Last month, following a series of Iraqi official visits to Saudi Arabia, Tehran dispatched Expediency Council chief Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi to Baghdad. The surprising visit was more than just a chance to convey Iran's concerns about supposed Saudi political meddling -- Shahroudi also wanted to meet with Shia leaders in an attempt to unify them ahead of the elections. He did in fact meet with several, including Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, Islamic Dawa Party leader Nouri al-Maliki, and Ammar al-Hakim, who recently defected from the Iranian-supported Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq to head the new National Wisdom Movement.

But Shahroudi was not welcome in Najaf; he could not arrange meetings with any of the four major religious authorities there. Leading Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr also refused to meet with him.

Another obstacle to Tehran's political plans in Iraq is the wave of anti-Iranian sentiment that followed Hezbollah's recent deal with Islamic State forces in Syria. In August, 308 IS fighters and their families were permitted to evacuate the Qalamoun area along the Lebanon-Syria border to the town of Abu Kamal near the Iraq-Syria border. The operation was carried out using buses and ambulances sent by the Assad regime in collaboration with Hezbollah. This decision outraged Abadi and numerous Iraqi Shia political figures and activists, who considered the deal both dangerous for Iraq and offensive to its people. The resulting tension reached Lebanon's Shia as well, including Hezbollah supporters, some of whom vociferously criticized the group for dealing with IS. This in turn led to an unusual social media dialogue between Iraqi and Lebanese Shia.

Thus, while Iran is quite confident about its ability to influence Lebanon's May 2018 parliamentary elections, getting its way in Iraq's April 2018 contest may prove more challenging. Sistani's rhetoric has recently changed, while Abadi, Sadr, and Hakim have all expressed interest in distancing their country from Iran and emphasizing Iraqi national identity rather than Shia identity in their campaigns. Najaf clearly agrees with this view and will probably support any Shia coalition that goes the Iraqi nationalist route.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN IRAQ AND LEBANESE SHIA

Compared to their Lebanese counterparts, Iraqi Shia seem more willing and able to stand up to Iran. This may be partly due to the powerful presence of major religious institutions in Najaf and Karbala, the city that holds their collective Shia history. Moreover, despite all their difficulties, Iraqi Shia still see their country as prosperous and independent. Yet Lebanese Shia have failed to compose a national identity of their own, instead associating themselves with the Palestinians, the Syrians, and now the Iranians to protect themselves against marginalization and injustice. Even those factions who actively oppose Hezbollah have mainly presented themselves as a Shia rather than Lebanese alternative.

To foster a viable alternative to Hezbollah, the international community has persistently tried to work with such factions inside Lebanon, investing copious funds in development, social, and political projects that openly criticized

the group and its Iranian patron. Until very recently, however, Lebanese Shia were not really looking for a political alternative. The majority of them were satisfied with Hezbollah's "resistance" rhetoric and the political power that it provided, viewing the group as an acceptable authority that provided social services to needy Shia. In contrast, foreign donors were giving money to many figures who were not considered credible or reliable by the Shia community, and there seemed to be no real strategy for strengthening mechanisms that would give Shia a proper place in Lebanese civil society.

More broadly, anti-Hezbollah initiatives failed because they tried to replace one Shia group with another instead of pushing a Lebanese nationalist platform. This was a mistake -- one that Iraqi Shia may now be ready to avoid after years of watching the region's sectarian fragmentation benefit Iran.

Indeed, as more Shia civil groups in Iraq come to embrace their nationalist identity, some of their leaders -- particularly Abadi, Sadr, and Hakim -- could be considering an alternative political alliance. Despite their differences and weaknesses, these leaders may strike Iraqi Shia as a better choice than Maliki and the Iranian-backed Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs), who are widely associated with corruption, violence, and sectarianism. Although it might be very difficult for these men to see eye-to-eye and actually win the elections, supporting such a movement may be the best bet for Washington and its allies given their continued lack of a long-term strategy for countering Iran in the region.

The future of Iranian influence in Iraq will depend on the outcome of next year's election, and if Tehran's favored candidates do not win out as a dominant bloc, it will feel the consequences in Lebanon as well as Iraq. Accordingly, the international community should consider several steps in the coming months: encouraging an Iraqi political alliance that can challenge Iran-backed candidates; empowering Abadi and state institutions; emboldening Najaf to flex itself politically; and calling for more cross-sectarian cooperation. If Shia parties remain separate or ally with Sunni, Kurdish, or secular blocs to form a cross-sectarian government (an idea that both Abadi and Sadr are considering), they could strengthen U.S.-Iraqi cooperation, raise debates about the fate of the PMUs, and generally make things more challenging for Iran.

The prospects for positively affecting Lebanon's election are much dimmer, but the international community should not lose contact with independent Shia there given Najaf's potential willingness to spur them into future action. Amal leader Nabih Berri might not come back for another turn as Speaker of the Parliament, so foreign outreach should focus on cultivating new partners -- especially ones who believe that the gap between Amal and Hezbollah is growing because of the Syria war and Iran's increased influence. Hezbollah is still the only real alternative for Lebanese Shia at the moment, but that may not be the case indefinitely if respected Shia authorities in Najaf and elsewhere increase the pressure on Iran and its regional proxies.

Hanin Ghaddar, a veteran Lebanese journalist and researcher, is the Friedmann Visiting Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖



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