Togo Suffers First Al-Qaeda-Affiliated Jihadist Attack

Jacob Zenn

On November 11, Togo announced that it had suffered the first ever jihadist terrorist attack on its territory. According to the country's security forces, the attack occurred in Kpendjal, in the town of Sanloaga, along Togo's northern border with Burkina Faso. The attack, which commenced from the Burkina Faso side of the border, was repelled, with no loss of life on either side. The Togolese authorities subsequently pledged to continue to develop a strategy to prevent terrorist attacks as well as to invest in development projects in the border region, which would reduce recruitment of terrorist groups ([dw.com/fr](dw.com/fr), November 11).

Togo assesses that one of the reasons why the terrorist attack took place is that Burkina Faso

security forces are absent on the other side of the border. Fortunately for Togo, its military had already been preparing for the eventuality of an attack. For example, Togo's head of state, Faure Gnassingbé, had visited the country's north to mobilize and deploy three contingents of troops to the border with Ghana, Benin, and Burkina Faso (togoweb.net, November 10).

Local experts suggest that the attack in Togo was carried out by the al-Qaeda-affiliated Group for Supporters of Muslims and Islam (JNIM) (Twitter.com/@hamidou41898269, November 10). The closest Burkinabe town to the northern Togo border where the attack took place is Kompienga, which itself suffered a JNIM-claimed attack that killed six Burkinabe soldiers in February 2020 (Twitter.com/@Menastream, February 1, 2020). While that attack was not the first of JNIM insurgents in Kompienga, it was likely not the last. On November 2, for example, another attack occurred in Kompienga at a police checkpoint,

although no claim has been made (Twitter.com/@U2MS2, November 4). Given the history of JNIM operating in Kompienga, it is likely that the group would have subsequently made the move to cross the border into Togo.

The distance of the Togolese border from JNIM's main operating areas around the Malian frontier with Burkina Faso and Niger also implies this latest attack in Togo was carried out by JNIM brigades that were historically part of the Burkina Faso-origin sub-group, Ansaroul Islam (Terrorism Monitor, January 13, 2017). This might also explain why the attack in Togo has not been claimed by JNIM, as it was too geographically attenuated from the group's core, if not also unsuccessful. Nevertheless, the attack represents a trend whereby JNIM's brigades have in the past few years begun probing attacks along the borders of littoral West African states, including also Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, and Ghana (France24.com, May 21).

The attack in Togo does not necessarily forebode an intensification of attacks in the country. After the first JNIM attacks occurred at the borders of neighboring states, they did not continue to escalate. Rather, JNIM's insurgency has mostly intensified in its core areas in the Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger tri-border region. However, a November 14 JNIM attack in Inata in nothern Burkina Faso appears to have eliminated yet another Burkinabe military base, and will put the entire country's security under greater duress (lefaso.net, November 14). This means the Togolese concerns about Burkina Faso's southern borders being unprotected will become even graver. As a result, whether JNIM's brigades in southern Burkina Faso continue to probe or even attack Togo depends, first, on those brigades' desire to expand into Togo and, second, Togo's ability to repel future attacks. Unfortunately for Togo, it is unlikely to be able to depend on Burkina Faso's military to provide a buffer between Kompienga and Togo's northern border.

Jacob Zenn is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor.

Islamic State in Khorasan Province Escalates Anti-Shia Attacks in Afghanistan

Jacob Zenn

After taking over Kabul and conquering virtually all of Afghanistan in August, the Taliban has attempted to portray itself as a movement for "all Afghans." This includes Shias, who other jihadist movements often regard as heretics. The Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP) appears to sense this potential weak point in Taliban ideology by continually targeting Afghan Shias and forcing the Taliban to become the Shias' "protectors."

ISKP began its attacks on Shia mosques as early as 2016, when the group killed 14 Shia worshippers during Ashura in Balkh and shot to death worshippers at a Shia shrine in Kabul (aljazeera.com, October 12, 2016). One year later, ISKP continued these attacks against Shias, including at mosques in Herat and Kabul, causing dozens of deaths and forcing some not to attend their mosques (thehindu.com, October 21). Ongoing ISKP attacks against the Shia Hazaras in the period before the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in August also forced the Hazaras to prepare their own self-defence forces (cacianalyst.org, August 26). Two ISKP attacks against Shia mosques in Kunduz and Kandahar in October, which killed over 100 worshippers and occurred after the Taliban consolidated rule over Afghanistan, have only heightened the threat to Shias from ISKP and demonstrated the Taliban's inability to protect them (indiatoday.in, October 18).

On November 12, ISKP extended its attacks on Shias to a roadside bombing of a minivan in western Kabul in a neighborhood where Shia Hazaras live. The attack killed six passengers, including one well-known journalist who was claimed by ISKP one day later. According to the minivan's driver, the ISKP suspect had entered the minivan, traveled a short way, and then exited the minivan to place the roadside bomb (aljazeera.com, November 13).

These ISKP attacks conform with Islamic State ideology and media, which has praised various attacks targeting Shias globally and in Afghanistan itself (Twitter.com/@informazioneA, October 31). As a result, there is no expectation that these attacks will decrease. Afghan Shias accordingly depend on the Taliban for security, but even the Taliban's genuine respect for the Shias and desire to protect them is questionable. In Bamiyan, for example, the Taliban removed a statue of a Shia leader who had been killed by the Taliban in its first period of rule from 1996 to 2001, and replaced the statue with a Koran (trtworld.com, November 12). Memories of the Taliban's former harsh treatment of Afghan Shias, therefore, have not waned, despite Taliban assurances to the Shias that they are "brothers," which primarily reflects the Taliban's recent efforts to gain political legitimacy ahead of the Doha negotiations with the U.S. in 2020 (thehindu.com, May 9, 2020).

Iran could also become a natural defender of Afghan Shias. The Taliban, however, has sought to neutralize potential Iranian interventions in Afghanistan by dismissing reports of the Taliban's discrimination against Shias and calling on Iran to recognize the Taliban's government in the name of mutual security interests (hamshahrionline.ir, October 17). Iranian conservatives, however, point to the possible elevation of the Pashtun language over Persian (or Dari) in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan as well as removing Shia religious jurisprudence and evictions of Hazaras from their lands as evidence that the Taliban, like ISKP, is still anti-Shia (iranintl.com, October 23). Should the Iranian conservatives win out in Iranian internal politics and the Taliban remain unable to prevent ISKP attacks on Shias or to refrain from its own discrimination against Afghan Shias, it cannot be ruled out that Iran would increasingly support Hazara or other Shia militias in Afghanisitan. One brigade that could receive such support is Liwa Fatemiyoun, which is an Iranian proxy in the country that could more assertively defend Afghan Shia interests in the future (dergipark.tr, June 30).

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Pakistan's Deal with Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan: Statesmanship or Surrender?

Syed Fazl-e-Haider

On November 1, supporters of Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) abandoned their two-week long protests and marched to the Pakistani capital Islamabad after the group signed a deal with the government, whose details were initially kept secret. The deal was facilitated by several religious scholars and leaders of the Barelvi school of Islamic thought, including Mufti Muneebur Rehman, Maulana Adil, and Bashir Qadri. As a result of the deal, the two-week-long impasse between TLP and the Pakistani government ended, and TLP supporters vacated the Grand Trunk Road in Punjab province, which leads to Islamabad (Dawn, November 1).

These events began in October when thousands of TLP supporters in Pakistan's eastern city of Lahore in Punjab started marching towards Islamabad to demand the release of the group's leader, Saad Hussain Rizvi, as well as the expulsion of France's ambassador in protest of the blasphemous cartoons published by the French magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in September of last year. At one point, the government had decided to crush the TLP for challenging the writ of the state and demanding the closure of the French embassy in Islamabad and expulsion of the ambassador. After the failures of the police to maintain law and order, the government called in the army and paramilitary forces to stop the thousands of TLP workers marching towards Islamabad. At least seven policemen and dozens of TLP activists lost their lives in the ensuing violent clashes (Dawn, October 28). The government, however, has now suddenly taken a U-turn and reached an agreement with the TLP.

The TLP is a Barelvi Islamist group and has garnered massive popular support across the country by vociferously promoting anti-blasphemy slogans since its emergence in 2015. As a result, it became harder for former Pakistani Prime Minister (PM) Nawaz Sharif and the current Pakistan PM

Imran Khan to deal with the TLP's thousands of religiously motivated activists. Statesmanship demands the government avoid using force against the TLP, which resulted in the government's appeal to the Barelvi leaders and scholars to facilitate a deal between the group and the government.

The Pakistani Government's Deal with the TLP

These recent clashes can be attributed to the detainment of Saad Hussain Rizvi by the present government, led by Imran Khan; this occured in April when Rizvi called for marches to demand the expulsion of the French ambassador. On April 12, thousands of TLP workers blocked major roads and highways across the country in protest over the detention of Rizvi. The TLP's protest created a law-and-order problem and disrupted normal life and business activity in the country (Dawn, April 12). In April, Pakistani authorities declared TLP a proscribed organization under the country's anti-terrorism laws for its alleged involvement in terrorism and its creation of an anarchic structure in the country during the violent protests following the detention of Rizvi. The country's National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA) formally labeled it a terrorist organization (The News, April 16).

A report in the Pakistan daily newspaper, *Dawn*, claims that Pakistani authorities under the deal to end the protests and march to Islamabad agreed to allow the TLP to continue to function as a political party. While the legal cases registered against the TLP under the Anti-Terrorism Act would still be decided by the courts, the government would not pursue charges against the TLP for other minor crimes that are not under the country's terrorism laws (Dawn, November 1). Under the deal, the TLP also agreed to withdraw its demand for the expulsion of the French ambassador from Pakistan (Express Tribune, October 31).

Just one week after the signing of the deal with the TLP, the government followed through with a notification of the revocation of the group's proscribed status (Dawn, November 7). The Punjab provincial government also removed Rizvi from the Fourth Schedule list of the Anti-Terrorism Act of 1997. This removal unfroze Rizvi's assets and his national identity card, and his bank accounts were

unlocked. He had been added to the list on April 16 (The News, November 12).

The TLP's Popular Stand on Blasphemy

Blasphemy is a very sensitive issue in Pakistan with its 97 percent Muslim population. Under the country's own blasphemy laws, disrespecting the Prophet Muhammed and desecrating the Koran are capital offences punishable by death. The TLP has often raised these issues.

Saad Hussain Rizvi's father, Khadim, was a firebrand cleric who founded the TLP in 2015 mainly to defend the country's blasphemy laws. However, the TLP is not like the banned Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) or al-Qaeda because it has no known connections with any terrorist groups in Afghanistan and has not been involved in violent acts of terrorism against the Pakistan state (Dawn, October 31). In addition, unlike other Sunni militant or jihadist groups belonging to the Deobandi and Wahhabi schools of Islamic thought, the TLP belongs to the Barelvi school, which has not generally been involved in jihadist activities.

The TLP emerged as the first militant Barelvi politico-religious party whereas other Barelvi groups, such as Sunni Tehreek (ST) and Jamiat Ulema-e-Pakistan (JUP) in Pakistan, abstain from politics (Samaa tv, April 12). The participation of tens of thousands of people in Khadim Rizvi's funeral prayers in Lahore reflected the massive popular support he had received for his stand on blasphemy (The News, November 22, 2020). Weeks before his death on November 19, 2020, Khadim staged a sit-in for thousands of his supporters at Islamabad's Faizabad interchange to protest the publication of blasphemous caricatures of Prophet Muhammed in France. Three days earlier, the government had signed a deal with Khadim to expel the French ambassador through a parliamentary decision within three months' time, although it eventually delayed the decision in April 2021, and later did not expel the ambassador. Saad Hussain Rizvi succeeded his father and accepted that the French ambassador would not be expelled, despite his father's prior refusal to compromise on this matter (Militant Leadership Monitor, June 4; Quora TV, April 12).

Conclusion

The question remains about whether the Pakistani government has "surrendered" to the TLP after being challenged by the group, or whether Pakistan exercised statesmanship to resolve the sensitive religious issue peacefully with the TLP. Likewise, the TLP has seemingly withdrawn its demand of expelling the French envoy for political gains after no longer being a banned group. The deal was essentially a bargain and both parties benefited.

The government could not afford to expel the French ambassador and antagonize the European Union because such a decision could negatively affect the country's exports. On the other hand, the TLP is now preparing for its next elections to be held in 2023, and wanted the government to lift the ban imposed in April 2021 so it could participate in the elections. The government's lifting of the ban has, therefore, placated the TLP.

The TLP will likely become a popular political party, as evidenced by its having received over two million votes in the 2018 parliamentary elections (The News, July 30, 2018). Moreover, although the TLP showed a violent face amid protests, it has never been involved in sectarian killings or claimed attacks on security forces like TTP. In Pakistan, protests of mainstream political parties often become violent with political activists torching vehicles or blocking roads and highways. The TLP deal with the government reflects the TLP's ambition to survive and function as a political party in the national mainstream, and Pakistan's desire to maintain the TLP as a politically active group that will not evolve into yet another Pakistani militant group.

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Emerging Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear Threats from Europe's 'Garage Extremists'

Rueben Dass

In September 2021, a 26-year-old French national, influenced by far-right ideology, was arrested for having successfully manufactured four improvised explosive devices (IEDs) containing uranium in his home (TRIPwire, September 9). Four months earlier, a 16-year-old boy of Syrian origin, who had been radicalized by the jihadist ideology of the Islamic State (IS), was convicted and charged with attempting to carry out an attack in Norway using nicotine poison that he had manufactured in his garage (World Today News, May 27; Norwell, June 30). These two examples highlight the continued threat of so-called 'garage extremists', who are lone actors with little to no connection to a wider terrorist network, but are increasingly taking advantage of technological advancements to manufacture homemade chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) weapons.

Technology, Terrorism, and the Online Factor

The most concerning aspect of the French case was the fact that the suspect had purchased uranium dust and other components for the production of the IEDs on the online purchasing platform eBay (Prothero, September 14). He had also learned how to make the bombs through the internet (TRIPwire, September 9). The ease with which he was able to achieve this dangerous feat, while merely sitting in the comfort of his home, was notable.

The case was similar to an earlier one. In 2018, a Tunisia-born IS sympathizer, Sief Allah, who was living in Cologne, Germany, had plotted to carry out a biological attack using ricin poison. He had purchased more than 2,000 castor beans, the precursor for ricin poison production, from the

internet and had successfully produced 84.3 miligrams of the poison. German security services had stated that Sief Allah was likely to have been following instructions on how to produce and weaponize ricin and manufacture bombs from the internet (dw.com, June 7, 2019). As for the case in Norway, the 16-year old boy of Syrian origin had spent a substantial amount of time online and Norwegian police had found bomb- making manuals on his mobile phone (Nettavisen, March 8; avisa OSLO, February 2).

Technology and the proliferation of information online has lowered the difficulty thresholds in manufacturing crude CBRN weapons and obtaining components for them. The fact that the 26-year-old Frenchman succeeded in manufacturing four homemade dirty bombs purely from components bought online and internet tutorials is testament to this threat. Likewise, the 16-year old boy is believed to have managed to produce nicotine poison mainly from information and resources found online (World Today News, May 27). Despite the fact that he had produced only a small amount of poison, which was of limited lethality, he still had intent. The cases show the degree to which lone actors can capitalize on the availability of information and technological advancements to manufacture unconventional weapons and carry out attacks.

Comparing Far-right and Jihadist CBRN Cases

With regards to the far-right, CBRN terrorism has predominantly been a lone actor phenomenon as compared to one that is coordinated or directed by any particular group. Although he was believed to have been a member of a far-right group called the National Socialist Knights, the 26-year old Frenchman was likely to have manufactured the explosives alone (Daily Sabah, September 9). He had reportedly possessed Nazi paraphernalia and a Ku Klux Klan jacket in his home, and had plotted to use the homemade explosives against public buildings (Prothero, September 14; Bonaventure, September 8). There has been no evidence thus far of any group directing his actions.

In contrast, in the jihadist milieu, CBRN terrorism was initially a group-driven phenomenon with both al-Qaeda and IS having shown intent in the use and development of CBRN weapons. Over time, however, it became a lone actor phenomenon, in which isolated individuals were being guided in manufacturing and carrying out attacks via online chatting platforms by 'virtual planners' located in conflict zones in the Middle East. Now, it has become even more isolated, with supporters and sympathizers of jihadist groups such as IS with minimal connection to the group chatting and motivating each other to commit such attacks.

In the Norway case, the 16-year-old boy had been in contact with a fellow IS sympathizer on the encrypted chat platform Telegram. Norwegian police had discovered that the individual he contacted seemed to have a marked influence on his decision-making and actions in preparing and plotting for a poison attack (World Today News, May 27). The Norway case can be compared to earlier jihadist-inspired CBRN cases, such as the 2017 Sydney chemical attack plot, involving two IS operatives in Syria who virtually directed two brothers of Lebanese origin in Sydney via Telegram to create an improvised chemical dispersion device using highly toxic hydrogen sulfide gas (abc.net.au, August 4, 2017). This shows the shift of jihadist-inspired CBRN plots toward becoming more isolated, as occurred in Norway. Nevertheless, external influence still remains a key factor.

An Accelerating and Diffuse Threat

The two cases from France and Norway highlight a threat posed by 'garage extremists' in Europe, who are mostly young individuals capitalizing on technological advancements to engage in the manufacture and plotting of attacks involving CBRN weapons from their own garages. In some ways this is not new, but the level of potential lethality and the advanced nature of their plotting is a concerning development. The combination of the proliferation of manuals and information on the development of IEDs and toxins online, the ease of availability of precursor materials on online purchasing platforms, and the widespread propaganda output from militant groups belonging to either end of the ideological milieu presents an ever accelerating and diffuse threat landscape.

Despite these trends, successfully manufacturing and carrying out a mass casualty CBRN attack is no simple feat due to the various challenges associated with the procurement of certain CBRN precursor agents and the construction of a weapon

that is able to deliver the agent in lethal amounts. However, manufacturing crude weapons and carrying out a limited casualty attack with readily available agents, such as plant-based toxins (ricin, abrin), toxic chemicals (nicotine, hydrogen sulfide), and simple dirty bombs is attainable. Perseverance, precision, caution and a little luck would likely do the trick. Thus, the threat of attacks involving homemade biological or chemical agents or improvised radiological devices perpetrated by lone actors, or 'garage extremists,' requires monitoring by security agencies.

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Assassination Attempt against Prime Minister Al-Khadimi Highlights Intra-Shia Divisions in Iraq

Rami Jameel

A loud explosion was heard in the early hours of November 7 in the fortified area in Baghdad known as the "Green Zone." This was followed by heavy gunfire in the Green Zone, which hosts government offices and U.S. and other Western diplomatic missions. The Iraqi government announced that there was a failed assassination attempt against Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi carried out by a drone at his house. Al-Kadhimi appeared shortly afterwards to confirm that he was safe and sound and to call for calm (rudaw.net, November 7).

There was no claim of responsibility for the attack, but it occurred amid rising tensions between al-Kadhimi, who is a moderate Shia, and radical Iran-backed Shia militias. The latter did very poorly in the October parliamentary elections and lost most of the seats they had won three years ago. Although al-Kadhimi did not take part in the October elections nor did he openly support any party, the militias accused him and the electoral commission of rigging the elections. The anti-

American Shia cleric, Moqtada al-Sadr, who is a political ally of al-Kadhimi, won the most seats (almasryaalyoum.com, October 12).

The attack also occurred two days after clashes between security forces and Iran-backed Shia militia supporters protesting the election results. Two people were killed and dozens injured in the clashes, and militia leaders considered al-Khadimi responsible (aljazeera.net, November 5). Al-Kadhimi did not accuse any group in the attack against his house, but fingers were pointed toward the militias. The whole escalation indicates the depth of the intra-Shia division and clash of interests in Iraq, especially after the October elections. [1]

Elections, Power, Money, and Militias

The October early elections were called after a period of instability caused by a wave of street protests in Baghdad and the predominantly Shia southern Iraq in late 2019. One result of the protests was the resignation of al-Khadimi's predecessor as prime minister, Adel Abdul-Mahdi. The protests were fueled by high unemployment, poor public services, and public anger with endemic corruption in government (arabi21.com, April 12).

The protesters, who were mostly Shia, directed their anger against the whole political class and Iran, which they saw as the dominant power of a corrupt system through its influence on all major Shia parties in Iraq. The Iran-backed Shia militias played a major role in suppressing the demonstrations after they labeled the protests as a foreign sponsored conspiracy. Most of those militias had raised their profile since the civil war started in neighboring Syria where they fought, as part of the Iranian war effort, on the side of the government of President Bashar al-Assad (alarabiya.net, June 9, 2014).

The militias' role became even more prominent in Iraq itself during the war against the Islamic State from 2014 to 2017. In 2016, the Iraqi parliament, with its Shia majority and amid a Sunni boycott, passed legislation that legalized the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMFs) as an official umbrella for the predominantly Shia militias (aljazeera.net, November 26, 2016). A coalition of major Shia

militias came second in the 2018 elections, not far behind al-Sadr, who leads a large militia himself. Abdul-Mahdi became the compromise prime minister and both blocs' representatives received senior positions and maintained access to state budget and resources. (hathalyoum.net, May 14, 2018). For the militias, that meant the beginning of an era where they would be able, like other established parties, to exploit their share in government to build a patronage base and expand their support base within the public. The protests, however, challenged and jeopardized that system.

Al-Kadhimi and the Militias

Al-Kadhimi's relations with the Iran-backed Shia militias have been tense. He was selected last year as a compromise transitional prime minister to organize early elections. His appointment in this position, moreover, came with the support of all major factions, including the Iran-backed shia militias, to end the political deadlock.

Although al-Khadimi, who is the former head of the intelligence service, came from within the political system and became something of a caretaker prime minister, many in the anti-militia protest movement hoped that he was going to confront the militias and bring to justice those militia members and leaders who had been accused of killing protesters. Al-Kadhimi never went that far in confronting the militias, but he engaged in several significant confrontations with them. The most prominent clashes with the militias occurred in June 2020, when al-Khadimi ordered a raid on a group of militia members who were plotting to launch rocket attacks on Iraqi and U.S. forces and the U.S. embassy (aljazeera.net, June 29, 2020)

In addition, earlier this year, al-Khadimi ordered the arrest of a prominent militia commander, Qassim Musleh, who was believed to be involved in planning attacks on U.S. targets in western Iraq (arabi21.com, May 27; The Jamestown Foundation).

On both occasions of challenging the militias, al-Kadhimi seemed to have eventually backed down in the face of immense reaction from the militias. Aware of his weak position, he even extended an olive branch and sought to emphasize his friendly

relations with leaders of the militias. Nevertheless, in the eyes of the militias, al-Khadimi's moves were clear signals of what he could do if he gained more power.

Al-Kadhimi's Strong Allies

Al-Kadhimi has enjoyed continuous U.S. support. Interestingly, he has also received unwavering support from Moqtada al-Sadr, who is currently in a critical position in Iraqi politics. Al-Sadr has always been anxious about the empowerment of rival Shia militias, which in many cases, occurred at the expense of al-Sadr's own militia. Recent analyses have considered al-Sadr's political and electoral gains as somewhat good news for the U.S., but that is not necessarily true. The U.S. is, in fact, the main ideological enemy of al-Sadr's movement, which dates back not only to al-Sadr's militia's uprisings in 2003 and 2004 against the U.S.-led coalition forces, but further to the founding principles of the Sadrist movement that was established by his late father in the 1990s. [2]

Al-Sadr is less dependent on Iran compared to other militias, most of which were originally created by Iran itself. Al-Sadr, on the other hand, leads not only a militia but a grassroots movement. However, al-Sadr's independence does not make him an enemy of Iran. Indeed, he visits Iran frequently and has famously been greeted with honor publicly by Iran's leaders (alaraby.co.uk, September 11, 2019). Therefore, it is not realistic to believe that al-Sadr would ever side with the U.S. in any effort to attack or even weaken Iran strategically. His dispute with the Iranians is primarily over who should dominate Shia politics in Iraq.

Then, during the elections, he came in first, with more than 70 seats in the 329 seat parliament. Many thought his first choice would be to appoint one of his immediate followers as prime minister. This, however, would be hard to do for al-Sadr given that all the other Shia parties are deeply worried about what this would mean for their own future. Hence, speculation shifted to the idea that al-Sadr would support al-Kadhimi himself for a second, full four-year term in office.

The Potential Anti-PMF Alliance

The Shia militias' concerns over the election results are not merely about losing senior government posts and the financial implications of that. Rather, their main concern is that a political pact to end their legal mandate and subsequently disband them might be taking shape. In addition to al-Sadr's big win in the Shia areas, other parties that emerged as clear winners in the Kurdish and Sunni areas are also not on friendly terms with the militias, including the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), led by the Barzani family, which won most seats in the Kurdish semi-autonomous region in northern Iraq (aawsat.com, November 12).

Although the KDP has historic ties to Iran, it is a strategic ally of Turkey, and not Iran. The KDP leaders have frequently criticized the Shia militias and have given refuge in their areas to anti-militia activists. In the predominantly Sunni areas in western Iraq, the speaker of parliament, Muhammad al-Halboosi, won most seats by defeating the U.S.-sanctioned wealthy businessman, Khamis al-Khanjar, who was a favorite of the militias (independentarabia.com, October 13). [3]

An alliance of al-Sadr with his grassroots supporters in the Shia areas, the U.S.-backed al-Kadhimi, and the anti-militia Kurdish and Sunni parties would be potentially devastating to the Iran-backed Shia militias. Such an alliance could secure not only a majority in parliament to form the government, but could nullify the PMF's legal authority and lead to a crackdown on the militias. Such a scenario would be a dramatic development and would put al-Sadr and al-Kadhimi at conflict with Iran itself. However, the clash of interests among the Shia factions has reached a critical point, and al-Sadr does not want his clear electoral victory to be compromised, while the nearly wounded al-Kadhimi after the attack on his house is not expected to give any ground to the militias.

What Does Not Kill Al-Khadimi Makes Him Stronger

The attack on al-Kadhimi's house occurred as tensions were escalating even further between the militias and the Iraqi Prime Minister. Two days earlier, supporters of the militias, who had been protesting the election results for weeks, tried to invade the Green Zone. The security forces clashed with the protesters, and a number of them were killed and injured. Qais al-Khazali, the leader of one of the most prominent militias, appeared at the scene of the clashes and blamed al-Kadhimi for the killing of the demonstrators and vowed to make him pay the price (ahlualhaq.com, November 5).

However, when al-Kadhimi's house was attacked, the militia leaders, including al-Khazali, vehemently denied any involvement (alarabiya.net, November 7). Others in the militias went further to quickly nurture a conspiracy theory, accusing an unspecified party of working to destabilize Iraq. That, however, is a reference to Iran's enemies, such as the U.S., which supposedly is working to escalate the struggle between al-Kadhimi and the militias (annabaa.com, November 9).

Other militia supporters even suggested that the whole story of the drone attack was fabricated by al-Kadhimi himself! Al-Khadimi, according to that claim, tried to evade responsibility for the recent killing of protesters while also boosting his popularity. This is because the attack was considered an attack on Iraqi national sovereignty (arabtimenews.com, November 8).

The Iran-Backed Shia Militias' Strategic Next Steps

Losing the elections was a major blow to the Shia militias. In dealing with this, they have thus far pursued a three-pronged strategy. First, they politically formed a coalition of almost all other Shia parties, except al-Sadr's party. Their coalition has been operating under the leadership of al-Sadr's staunch enemy, former prime minister Nouri al-Maliki, who came in second in the Shia areas in the elections. The main claim of this political group is to reject the results of the elections and call for a full recount, but at the same time defy al-Sadr's claim of a majority within the Shia community by forming an even larger bloc with all their parliamentary seats combined (annaharar.com, October 16).

The second part of the militias' strategy is to threaten to resort to violence. Instead of stating that clearly, however, they use carefully crafted expressions. These include a warning about likely "dire consequences" on the security and stability of

Iraq if election results are not changed (alarabiya.net, October 12.)

The third element of the militias' strategy is to organize public protests and sit-ins. However, unlike the anti-government protests of 2019 or those organized by al-Sadar's supporters in recent years, the militias' protests were not large enough to have an impact. There was also criticism that many protesters were in fact members of the militias and on the PMF's payroll and were merely following orders to pretend to be civilian protesters (annaharar.com, October 25).

Despite all the militias' efforts, reversing the result of the elections was difficult and another move seemed looming. On November 4, al-Sadr travelled from his base in the Shia holy city of Najaf to Baghdad to meet with the biggest winners in Sunni and Kurdish areas obviously to agree to the terms of forming the new government (alsumaria.tv, November 4). The militias' protesters, however, escalated the situation and tried to invade the Green Zone and clashed with the security forces, which resulted in al-Sadr having cut his visit short and call for calm (baghdadtoday.com, November 5).

On the following day after the attack on al-Kadhimi, General Esmael Qaani, commander of al-Quds Force in the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC-QF), also arrived in Baghdad. He met with al-Kadhimi to condemn the attack and claimed that it was not done with Iranian approval (alarab.co.uk, November 8). Iran's National Security Advisor, Ali Shamakhani, had meanwhile suggested that the attack was somehow linked to Western think tanks (arabicrt.com, November 7).

Conclusion

Since 2003, Shia factions with strong ties to Iran managed with the help of extensive Iranian mediation to agree to forming and dominating governments that included positions for the Kurds and Sunnis. The current intra-Shia struggle has proven to be at its most crucial point in years. Iran's task is harder than ever to find a political deal that ensures its strategic interests and those of its Iraqi allies. Iran must convince the militias that they should accept losing without resorting to violence in

return for a solid commitment from al-Sadr and the next prime minister that the government will not crush the militias.

Iraqi Shia militias and Iran, meanwhile, accuse the U.S. of pursuing a strategy that allegedly aims to incite a conflict in Iraq. The U.S. in fact is facing challenging questions about who and what to support in Iraq. In addition to the challenge of Iran and its allies, the threat of IS and Sunni jihadists has not completely disappeared. The outcome of the ongoing intra-Shia struggle in Iraq, therefore, will play a decisive role in shaping the future of the regional conflict in Iraq and the wider Middle East.

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Notes

[1] In general Iraqi voters vote along sectarian lines. The Shia constituency is the largest in Iraq. More than half of the members of parliament represent Shia majority areas in central and southern Iraq. The other two sizable constituencies are the Kurds, who are concentrated in the north, and the Sunnis, who are concentrated in the west of the country.

[2] Moqtada al-Sadr's father, Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, founded his movement on the foundation of opposing the U.S. He famously introduced the chant "No, no to America. No, no to Israel" and led his followers in chanting during religious gatherings and ceremonies. He was assassinated, likely by Saddam Hussein's government, in February 1999.

[3] Khamis al-Khanjar is Sunni, but he was sanctioned by the U.S. Department of the Treasury for corruption alongside Shia militia leaders in 2019.