

IRAQ'S SECTARIAN CRISIS REIGNITES AS SHI'A MILITIAS EXECUTE CIVILIANS AND REMOBILIZE

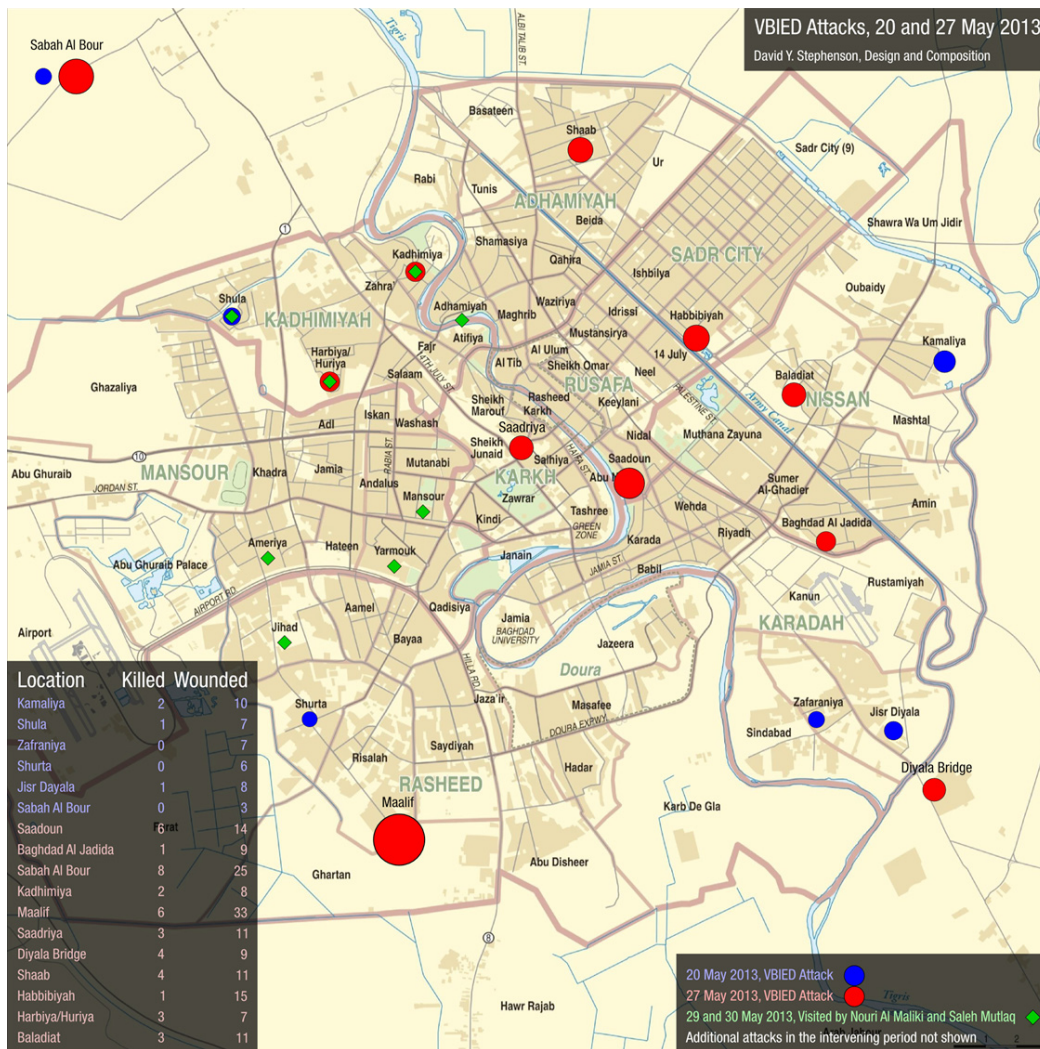
Escalating violence in Iraq crossed a new and very dangerous threshold this week. Al Qaeda in Iraq launched a concentrated wave of car-bomb and other attacks specifically against civilian Shi'a targets in and around Baghdad. Shi'a militias are mobilizing and have begun a round of sectarian killings facilitated by false checkpoints, a technique characteristic of the 2006-2007 period. Prime Minister Nuri al Maliki has taken a number of steps to demonstrate that he remains in control of the situation. The expansion of Shi'a militia activity, however, is likely to persuade many Iraqis that he is either not in control or is actively abetting the killings. The re-mobilization of Shi'a militias in Iraq coincides with the formal announcement by Lebanese Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah of his organization's active military participation in the Syrian civil war. Al Qaeda in Iraq's sectarian mass-murder attacks coincide with the announcement by AQI's affiliate in Syria, Jabhat al Nusra, that attacking Hezbollah is that group's primary target henceforth. The stage appears to be set not merely for the collapse of the Iraqi state into the kind of vicious sectarian killing and sectarian cleansing that nearly destroyed it in 2006 and 2007, but also for the expansion of that sectarian warfare throughout both Mesopotamia and the Levant.

Sectarian violence has escalated sharply in Iraq. On Monday, May 27, al-Qaeda in Iraq conducted a coordinated operation to target Shi'a neighborhoods in Baghdad with numerous and large vehicle-borne explosive devices (VBIEDs).¹ This operation followed a wave of VBIED attacks on May 20 that targeted the lines of communication into Baghdad and some Shi'a populations across Iraq.² An estimated 212 people have died in violent attacks in Iraq since May 20, and another 624 have been injured.³ May's casualties are thus likely to surpass April's, which had made that month the most violent in Iraq since 2008.⁴ Most of these attacks, especially VBIEDs and suicide attacks, conform to the methods usually attributed to AQI. Additional reports from Baghdad and Diyala also indicate that Shi'a militant groups, including the Iranian-backed Sadrism splinter group Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, have begun to mobilize in Iraq to establish checkpoints in Baghdad and to conduct extra-judicial killings (EJKs) against Sunnis. Extra-judicial killings reportedly carried out by militias also occurred in the city of Hilla in central Iraq.⁵ AAH, along with Lebanese Hezbollah and Kata'ib Hezbollah, publically acknowledged its military involvement in Syria in April 2013.⁶ Lebanese Hezbollah has mobilized in Syria throughout May. This regional military activation, as well as the elevated threat to the Iraqi Shi'a population posed by

AQI, lends greater credibility to the reports that Iraqi Shi'a militant groups have mobilized to conduct intimidation and violence against Sunni in the name of defending Shi'a populations.

AQI'S 2013 VBIED CAMPAIGN

Violent attacks by al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) escalated sharply in April and May. AQI has maneuvered among anti-government protests and Iraqi Security Force deployments to project attacks throughout Iraq, most prominently in Baghdad, Salah ad-Din, and Ninewa Provinces. Vehicle-borne improvised-explosive devices (VBIEDs) are re-emerging as a primary attack type, reverting to a trend first seen as the sectarian civil war expanded in 2006. In particular, the two waves of VBIED attacks on May 20 and May 27 demonstrate a concerted effort by AQI to exacerbate sectarian tensions and escalate violence, to fix Iraqi security forces in certain positions and drive them from others, to gain freedom of movement along lines of communication, and to set conditions for deliberate targeting of neighborhoods that were prime locations for sectarian violence in 2006-7. AQI conducted a campaign in July 2012 (under the banner of the Islamic State of Iraq) that focused on Iraqi government officials, security forces,



GRAPHIC 1 | VBIED ATTACKS IN BAGHDAD, 20 AND 27 MAY 2013

Sahwa (Awakening) leaders, and Shi'a civilians in order to limit the reach and effectiveness of Maliki's government and to regain lost territory.⁷ Since that time, AQI has conducted attacks using IEDs, suicide bombers, armed clashes, assassinations, and coordinated simultaneous explosions. The recent waves differ both in the number of VBIEDs used simultaneously and in the specific targeting of Shi'a civilians in known sectarian hot-spots.

The concentration of VBIED attacks in late May 2013 demonstrates AQI's capacity to stage in the locations around the outskirts of Baghdad (the Baghdad belt) from which it had launched attacks in 2006-7, to procure the components necessary to build VBIEDs in large numbers, and to project force into Shi'a communities and mixed areas within Baghdad. Moreover, the campaign has deliberately escalated violence and selected targets to shape

not only the perceptions of Iraqi Sunnis, but also those of Iraqi Shi'a, who may begin to lose faith in the Maliki government if attacks are allowed to continue.

Wave of VBIED attacks: May 20

A wave of 11 VBIED attacks and seven additional explosions struck urban centers across Iraq on Monday, May 20 resulting in at least 60 deaths and 178 injuries. Two other VBIEDs were defused before they could explode on their targets. Six of the VBIEDs detonated in predominantly Shi'a neighborhoods along the periphery of Baghdad city.⁸ These events, depicted on the map above, accounted for a small percentage of the total casualties on that day, yielding one death and 21 injuries.⁹ The low casualties may indicate AQI's difficulty entering Shi'a neighborhoods to hit prime targets. In light of the wave of attacks a week later that did

hit such targets, however, it is more likely that AQI was using the first series of attacks to establish access routes into Baghdad and test its ability to synchronize operations. The neighborhoods chosen represent the outer rim of Shi'a communities in Baghdad that are most easily accessible from main supply routes and proximate Sunni neighborhoods. The attacks collectively illustrate a campaign to attack a very selective target set just inside the city rim.

Other VBIEDs on May 20 in the cities of Basra, Mahmoudiyah, Wasit, Hilla, Balad, Samarra, and Baiji, accounted for the majority of the casualties. The most lethal attack occurred in Hilla city, Babel Province, where two car bombs exploded in a market near the Shi'a Wardiya mosque, killing 22 and wounding 77.¹⁰ Targeting of religious sites clearly indicates AQI's intent to elicit a sectarian response, particularly given the centrality of the Samarra mosque bombing in 2006 to the subsequent mobilization of Shi'a militias for sectarian combat. Additionally, the car bomb in Balad on May 20 targeted a bus full of Iranian pilgrims bound for the Shrine of Imam Mohammed, leaving four dead and 10 wounded. This incident, along with another attack on Iranian pilgrims at the Samarra mosque on May 25, feed into the justifications being proffered by Shi'a fighting groups in support of their activities.¹¹ Key figures within Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq have used these attacks recently as rallying cries to defend holy sites. Iran has also responded to previous attacks by launching probes into the deaths of pilgrims in Iraq. Iran's Director General of the Hajj and Pilgrimage Organization in charge of Holy Sites Masoud Akhavan announced in December 2012 that Iranian security companies were escorting Iranian pilgrims into Iraq.¹² This practice may also be a vehicle by which Iran could funnel IRGC-QF augmentation into Iraq, for which there is historical precedent. It also explains AQI's focused targeting of these pilgrims.

Comparing the VBIED attacks on May 20 to concurrent attacks using improvised explosive devices (IED) and adhesive explosive devices (AED), the VBIEDs were used to target large numbers of civilians, while IEDs and AEDs were often used for targeted killings or attacks against security force patrols or members of the Sahwa (Awakening). The Samarra VBIED on May 20 targeted Sahwa as they gathered to receive their salaries.¹³ VBIEDs have also been used in 2013 to target ISF at security checkpoints, but in May 2013

they have largely been used to target Shi'a civilians.

Wave of VBIED attacks: May 27

Two days after Iraqi security forces moved to conduct operations in western Anbar, AQI launched a second wave of 13 VBIEDS and one additional explosion on May 27 that killed 36 and wounded 147.¹⁴ This time, all 14 attacks occurred in the vicinity of Baghdad, indicating a deliberate shift to focus upon the capital region.¹⁵ Within Baghdad, the map above demonstrates a geographic shift from the periphery to the center, in particular to neighborhoods at the heart of the sectarian strife in 2006-7 such as Saadoun (in Rusafa), Khadimiya, Huriya, Saadriya (in central Karkh), and Shaab (just outside of Sadr City). Attacks in Habbibiyah in Sadr City may also be meant to show the government and Shi'a militant groups that AQI can attack even into the heart of their territory.

AQI's ability to plan and execute 13 simultaneous VBIED attacks at strategically selected sites within Baghdad is also noteworthy. VBIEDs are among the most expensive and complex improvised weapons systems, capable of achieving massive effects in isolation, and often historically reserved for that purpose. The use of so many VBIEDs in a single day demonstrates a high degree of technical and organizational skill and suggests the ability to produce VBIEDs in large numbers and rapidly. It indicates the dramatic extent to which AQI appears to have recovered from the defeats inflicted on it in 2007 and 2008.

AQI attacks did not slow after May 27, moreover. Attacks have continued over the last three days, including six more VBIEDs in the vicinity of Baghdad, and one in particular against a wedding in Jihad on May 30 that claimed 20 casualties.¹⁶ Jihad is another predominantly Shi'a neighborhood in southwestern Baghdad that was heavily contested in 2006-7, and sufficiently Shi'ified through migrations and extra-judicial killings that it supported Moqtada al Sadr in the Baghdad Uprising in 2008.¹⁷ This attack occurred one day after a VBIED attack in the market of Jihad, which killed 16 and wounded 45. Cumulatively, these two events claimed the greatest number of casualties over the last ten days.¹⁸



GRAPHIC 2 | SHI'A MILITANT ATTACKS IN BAGHDAD, MAY 2013

SHI'A MILITANT RESPONSE

The recent bombing waves in Baghdad have gripped residents with fear of sectarian war. Their sentiments are reminiscent of the atmosphere that engulfed the city in 2006 as broader conflict loomed. As a result of the deteriorating security in Baghdad, commercial activity in the city has been declining.¹⁹ Social media posts and isolated reports have been circulating since the beginning of the week that Iraqi Shi'a militias, primarily Asai'b Ahl Al-Haq (AAH), have been patrolling streets of Baghdad, setting up "false checkpoints," and conducting extra-judicial killings against Sunnis.²⁰ Residents have been expressing fear of extra-judicial killings since early May.²¹ **The evidence is clear; Shi'a militants have mobilized in Baghdad and are conducting executions of civilians.**

Several attacks over recent days bore the signature of Shi'a militant groups. On May 28, the bodies of two university students were found in northern Baghdad in Agarguf area of the Mansour District with hands bound behind them, shot in the chest and head.²² They had been thrown from an unmarked vehicle according to witnesses, who also noted that false checkpoints had been set up in the same area. Agarguf area was used by Shi'a militant groups to dump hundreds of bodies in 2007. Three people had been kidnapped by armed persons in an unmarked vehicle on the evening of May 26 at al-Mu'atham bus stop in central Baghdad, which is frequently used by students.²³ It is possible that these events, both involving signature tactics of Shi'a militant groups, had the same victims. Additionally, on May 26, armed persons wearing police uniforms invaded a home in al-Za'franiya in southeast Baghdad, dragging the owner outside and shooting him.²⁴ The method of



PHOTO 1 | MEMBERS OF ASA'IB AHL AL-HAQ IN PARADE ON 4 MAY 2013

attack and geographic location correspond with historical patterns of Shi'a militancy and make attribution to Sunni terrorist groups implausible. Sunni mosques were also attacked in the Baghdad neighborhoods of Mansour²⁵ and Saydiyah²⁶ and twice in Diyala²⁷ province,²⁸ which clearly points to Shi'a militancy.

Morality policing executions have also been reported in areas of Baghdad just outside of Sadr City. On May 14, unidentified armed men attacked a police checkpoint in Zayunah, handcuffing security personnel but leaving them unharmed.²⁹ Afterwards, the same gunmen traveling in an SUV raided five liquor stores and killed 12 people. A week later, on May 22, unidentified armed men attacked a brothel in Zayunah and killed five men, five women, the owner, and his wife with silenced weapons and knives.³⁰ Also on May 22, unidentified armed men travelling in a car shot a liquor shop owner while driving near a market in al-Shaab, in northeast Baghdad.³¹ Zayuna and al-Shaab are predominantly Shi'a neighborhoods, and militia activity there most likely indicates the militia's intent to re-establish control.

Additionally, several assassinations this week fit patterns of violence historically characteristic of Shi'a militant groups. On May 26, the imam of the al-Qadisiyah Mosque was attacked by unidentified armed men with silenced

weapons while driving in Diyala Province.³² The same day, unidentified armed individuals shot a policeman in al-Waziriyah, in the northeast quadrant of Baghdad, again using silenced weapons, and a primary school teacher was killed with silenced weapons in al-Qahirah, a neighboring area in the northeast of Baghdad.³³ On May 27, another teacher was shot with silenced weapons near the militia stronghold of Khalis in Diyala.³⁴ Additionally, in an assassination that drew more public attention to this rise in targeted killings, Abbas Ja'far, the brother of a famous soccer player, was shot on May 25 by two armed men on a motorcycle outside his home in Habibiyah, a neighborhood in eastern Baghdad abutting Sadr City.³⁵ Two other attacks involved drive-by shootings of civilians in Jisr Diyala in southeast Baghdad, one a civilian as he was leaving his home, and another the owner of a grocery store.³⁶ Other variants of these militia signature attacks included the killing of four civilians as they exited a taxi in al-Kadhimiyyah, north of Baghdad, and the killing of two owners of a goldsmith shop in al-Mashtal, on the rim of southeast Baghdad. Some of these instances clearly demonstrate sectarian violence because they hit obviously Sunni targets. Others, in predominantly Shi'a areas of Baghdad, instead demonstrate intra-Shi'a violence.

Other attacks likely conducted by Iraqi Shi'a militias can be



PHOTO 2 | LEADERSHIP OF ASA'IB AHL AL-HAQ ON 4 MAY 2013

detected by method and by target. The most recent target set has included cafés, where larger groups congregate. They include an improvised explosive device (IED) attack on a café in the western Baghdad neighborhood of Amriyya on April 18 that killed 27 people.³⁷ Another café attack took place in Baghdad in the nearby Jamia neighborhood on May 5 (killing or wounding 15 people) and another on May 29 in the Hib Hib area in Diyala province that resulted in 22 people killed and wounded.³⁸ While these attacks have not been clearly attributed, they differ from attacks customarily attributed to AQI, such as car bombs, suicide bombings, and attacks against Iraqi Shi'a targets. These attacks all took place in predominantly Iraqi Sunni locales. In four of them, IEDs were used; in the fifth, the attack on the Ihsan mosque in Mansour, was conducted by hand grenades. On May 31, police sources in Babil revealed that gunmen killed four people in Hilla.³⁹ The sources describe the gunmen as traveling with impunity and using silenced weapons, killing former members of the Baath party and one shop owner in Hilla — again, hallmarks of Shi'a militia rather than AQI activity. This comes one week after the VBIED attack upon a Shi'a mosque there.

It is conceivable that AQI has conducted these attacks to instigate retaliatory violence. Their divergence from AQI's attack methods and their locations, however, make it much more likely that they are reprisal attacks by Shi'a militant

groups. The widespread perception among the public that Shi'a militias conducted these attacks is a major driver and amplifier of fear among the population.

AAH has been in the spotlight of renewed militant and political activities since April 2013. The group itself confirmed its role and participation in military activities in Syria along with other Shi'a groups.⁴⁰ Moreover, and in a major projection of force and political prominence, AAH organized a massive, campaign-style rally in Baghdad on May 4. The event was held in a government-owned soccer stadium in Baghdad, the Sina'a Club Stadium on the border of Sadr City, and was ostensibly to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the group. Members of the Iraqi Council of Representatives are reported to have attended.⁴¹ Photos of the gathering reveal the presence of AAH's senior leadership, parades, large attendance, tribal figures, and sophisticated organizational capabilities. During the event, AAH's intentions and capabilities for increased activity were made clear. AAH leader, Qais Al-Khazali, called on members of "the resistance across the spectrum" to maintain readiness and warned politicians who are connected to "regional agendas" that they will be pursued regardless of whether they are "in fortified areas, secured hotels, or armored vehicles."⁴² The resistance is the title used by AAH to describe itself, as well as the word Iranian and Lebanese Hezbollahi leaders use referring

to the “axis of resistance” against Israel and its allies. Al-Khazali also urged anti-government protesters to refrain from sectarian slogans and to reject the killing of ISF members. Those statements came under attack by some Iraqi politicians who also condemned the government for allowing the event to happen.⁴³ AAH ability to hold events in government-owned facilities is attributed to its relations with Maliki. He has welcomed them into the political process and views them as a countervailing force against the Sadrist Trend, led by Muqtada Al-Sadr, from which the group split in 2004.

Spread of “false checkpoints”

Since 2007, Baghdad’s security procedures have incorporated a vast network of street checkpoints manned by Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) members. The purpose of those checkpoints is to look for car bombs and capture wanted individuals. Reports describing “false checkpoints” suggest that some are not manned by ISF members, but instead by personnel in civilian clothes who may or not be security officials. Reportedly, these checkpoints have been inspecting identification cards and inquiring about the sectarian affiliation of passengers. There are also reports that the militias have kidnapped and killed people based on their identity and that the targeting has primarily been of Iraqi Sunnis.⁴⁴ The areas where those checkpoints are reported to have operated are concentrated in western Baghdad, which has neighborhoods that are mixed between Iraqi Shi’a and Iraqi Sunnis.

This way of operating closely echoes events in 2006-7, during which Shi’a militia groups established checkpoints in Baghdad at which they stopped cars, checked identification cards, and kidnapped and then executed Sunnis. They manned those checkpoints either in militia garb or dressed as Iraqi Security Forces. In 2006, the ISF was infiltrated by these militias and tolerated such checkpoints within sight of their official locations or operated them.

Further reports surfaced on May 30 detailing that individuals in civilian clothes have been present at multiple official Baghdad checkpoints; the Iraqi Ministry of the Interior described the individuals as “belonging to formation within the Ministry of Interior.”⁴⁵ The MoI spokesperson added that the ministry relies on

members from intelligence or other departments who are sometimes tasked with verifying identification cards. According to the same report and citing an unnamed senior security source, militias have been active in both the Rusafa and Karkh sections of Baghdad, but the report asserted that talks of false checkpoints are “exaggerated and intended to spread an atmosphere of fear among citizens.” Despite the explanation offered by MoI, the presence of civilian-clothed individuals is bound to stoke the fears of populations that encounter such checkpoints. It may, indeed, feed speculation that the MoI has become re-infiltrated by militias or is itself engaging in sectarian violence.

Allegations of militia reactivation in Baghdad have been emerging since early May. On May 8, just four days after the AAH parade in the soccer stadium, Iraqiyya issued a statement condemning the government for tolerating rhetoric and threats from Iraqi Shi’a militias, including AAH, Kata’ib Hizballah (KH), and the Mokhtar Army (an Iraqi Hezbollah unit which was formed in February 2013). Iraqiyya posited that statements from these militias are “directly or indirectly tied to those events that resulted in the death of innocent youth.”⁴⁶ Iraqiyya may have been referring to increased attacks on cafes where youth congregate.

On May 21, Muqtada Al-Sadr, issued a statement in which he urged followers to “ostracize extremism and what is issued from some of those who belong to Wahhabism or what is issued by some Shi’a militias.”⁴⁷ With this statement, Sadr attempted to take the middle ground in condemning Sunni extremist groups while also criticizing Shi’a groups. Sadr’s critique of groups like AAH is natural. They are rivals and they compete over turf in Baghdad and elsewhere in southern Iraq. Their rivalry is two-fold, as the leader of AAH, Qais al-Khazali, views himself as the heir to Sadr’s father Ayatollah Mohammed Sadiq Al-Sadr. Muqtada al-Sadr stands to lose if AAH mobilizes while the Sadrist Trend does not. AAH is also the Sadrists’ primary political, military, and increasingly social competitor; this competition is very likely to continue in the future.

The Iraqi government has made a number of announcements to reassure the public and assuage its fears. The cabinet announced on May 28 that it will “pursue all types of militias

and firmly strike anybody who violates public order.”⁴⁸ Additionally, Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki visited the areas in western Baghdad where most militia activities are reported to have taken place.⁴⁹ He inspected checkpoints in Jihad, Amriyya, Mansour, Adel, Huriyya, Kadhimiyah, Taji, and Al-Adhamiyah on May 29. His deputy, Saleh Al-Mutlaq, visited the Saydiyah area on the same day. These are the mixed areas where much of the sectarian violence occurred in 2006-7 and where the public is most concerned about militia activities. The Ministry of Interior (MoI) denied the presence of false checkpoints and urged citizens to contact authorities with information regarding their presence.⁵⁰ The Baghdad Operations Center, which absorbed ISF headquarters in Rusafa (East Baghdad) and Karkh (West Baghdad) last week, announced a travel ban for all unregistered vehicles starting at 0600 on Friday, May 31.⁵¹ Vehicles without license plates have been cited in reports of kidnapping and executions.

Maliki has recently ordered a major shift of key leaders across the security sector, ostensibly in response to heightened security concerns.⁵² Those major changes may signal his lack of confidence in their leadership for the security of Baghdad. The leadership changes might also have been a prerequisite for moving trusted leaders into vital positions in the provinces, where Maliki had begun to conduct more aggressive offensive operations after the Hawija incident. Such a hypothesis would seem more plausible if former trusted leaders emerge in new positions, and some of them have. It is also likely that Maliki's recent restructure of Iraqi Security Force leadership heralds a new security strategy for Baghdad.⁵³ It is not clear what new strategy he might have intended, but he has at this point either tolerated the mobilization of militias or lost control of their activities in Baghdad.

The possible reactivation of militias poses a serious challenge for him as a security breakdown in Baghdad will be seen as a major setback to ISF and the prime minister. Maliki has hitherto been able to isolate Baghdad from the protesting provinces. The large range of AQI and the reemergence of the militias links the violence in the capital and the provinces in ways he will not likely control. In that light, Maliki's strategic embrace of AAH in 2012 in order to limit Muqtada al-Sadr's influence may backfire in 2013. Sadr may be marginalized, but so too may be Maliki.

And there is evidence that Sadr is losing control of his militias as well. In a significant development, a member of the Sadrist trend office in Mahmudiyah organized a parade.⁵⁴ The date of the parade is not known, but on May 30 Muqtada Al-Sadr warned his followers to refrain from any action “that reignites sectarianism” and declared that organizing parades is his sole responsibility. He further disowned the actions of the organizer, Karim Al-Araji, and stated that Araji acted independently. The Mahmudiyah event carries a number of implications. It is a mixed area in the Baghdad belt and since 2006 has continued to be on the fault line of sectarian tensions. The parade suggests that, with reports emerging about militia activation, organizers perceived a need to project force to compete with reported activities by AAH. They may have acted independently of Sadr's control but his statement demonstrates that he is concerned about ceding ground to AAH's mobilization. For AAH, discontented members of the Sadrist trend would be prime recruitment targets that could significantly enhance the capabilities of the group.

For its part, AAH has denied involvement in operations in Baghdad.⁵⁵ Its spokesperson, Ahmed Al-Kanani, stated with regard to false checkpoints that AAH “in cooperation with the security apparatus investigated the news of a false checkpoint in Al-Liqa Square in Iskan and other areas in Baghdad, but did not find any trace of them.” AAH's political bureau chief, Adnan Faihan Al-Dulaimi added on May 30 that the group is not involved in any activities, but warned that the current conditions are similar to the ones that appeared in 2006.⁵⁶ Al-Dulaimi emphasized that AAH “is ready for it [mobilization] and we are ready to protect our people.”

Despite the withdrawal of U.S. forces and AAH's ostensible transition to a socio-religious and political role, AAH has remained an active militant group that did not disarm.⁵⁷ Moreover, as the group has been playing an active role in the Abu Al-Fadhel Al-Abbas Brigade (AFAB) in Syria, with responsibility to protect the Sayyida Zeinab shrine in Damascus, AAH has been activated for battle since 2012. This mobilization for Syria reduces the obstacles to taking up arms in Iraq.

AAH has overtly linked the conflict in Syria to the one in Iraq. According to AAH's political deputy Al-Dulaimi,

“The Sayyeda Zeinab shrine has had symbolic importance for Muslims all over the world and the targeting of this shrine by Takfiri extremists will result in a disaster, because an attack on it will be followed by a similar attack on the Imam Askari shrine in Samarra. An attack on the Imam Askari shrine in Samarra will inflame the sectarian crisis in Iraq.”⁵⁸ The line of argument serves AAH well by justifying mobilization in both Syria and Iraq.

Dulaimi stated in the same interview that “[AAH] is alongside Iraq’s security forces and emphasizes the existing political process in this country.” With the escalation of attacks by AQI, it is also increasingly likely that AAH and other Iraqi Shi’a militant groups will perceive the need to defend predominately Iraqi Shi’a areas throughout Iraq; and in Baghdad especially. Attacks against Iraqi civilians have continued despite the efforts of Iraqi Security Forces to contain them. In 2006, when ISF was unable to contain the civil war in Baghdad and Diyala, Iraqi Shi’a militant groups mobilized to provide protection. Although the ISF’s capabilities have vastly improved since 2006, the continuation of AQI attacks in Baghdad will reduce the confidence of the population and set conditions for the return of Iraqi Shi’a militias as defenders of the Shi’a.

AAH mobilization in Baghdad comes as other Iranian-backed groups have increased their involvement in the Syrian conflict. Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah made two visits to Tehran in April, the first to meet with IRGC-Qods Force Commander Qassem Suleimani and the second to meet Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei.⁵⁹ Afterwards, Nasrallah admitted his fighters’ involvement in Syria, announced that “Hezbollah could become more deeply involved in the future,” and said that Syria had “real friends” who would aid it.⁶⁰ He further stated that there would be “very serious repercussions” if the shrine of Sayyida Zeinab was destroyed or damaged. This announcement was concurrent with Hezbollah’s sending of numerous reinforcements, probably more than two thousand, to assist regime forces in besieging the strategically important town of Qusayr.⁶¹

In Qusayr, Hezbollah met fierce resistance, with estimates of over 50 militants killed in action between May 18-21.⁶² On May 24, 75 fighters had been reported killed to that point in the month.⁶³ The next day, Nasrallah officially signaled his “undying loyalty” to the Syrian regime; this shift in rhetoric

is notable, from a commitment primarily to defending Lebanese civilians in Syria and religious sites using veiled language to an explicit and overt commitment to defending the Syrian regime.⁶⁴

Compounding Hezbollah’s official commitment to the ongoing Syrian civil war, the group has come into direct conflict with Sunni-oriented extremist elements. Jabhat al-Nusra, the al-Qaeda affiliated rebel organization, announced on May 15 that targeting Hezbollah would be their top priority.⁶⁵ Jabhat al-Nusra has also clashed with the Abu Fadl al-Abbas (AFAB) brigade, which is a Shi’a Syrian militant group affiliated AAH. AFAB and AAH, like Hezbollah, are all Iranian-linked militant organizations. This signals a broadening conflict between Sunni and Shi’a militant groups expanding across the Iraqi and Syrian fronts.

Iraqis, and particularly the people of Baghdad, have proven resilient in the face of violence since 2008, but their reaction to increased attacks and the news of Iraqi Shi’a militias resurgence indicate genuine concern. The overt mobilization of Iraqi Shi’a militias has already included: public military parades, increased inflammatory and threatening rhetoric, leaflets and night letters dropped demanding the departure of Iraqi Sunnis, assassination of local Sunni clerics, and possible retaliatory attacks that target Iraqi Sunni areas.⁶⁶ If AAH has mobilized, other Iraqi Shi’a militias like KH and Sadr’s Promised Day Brigade will feel pressured to take part in order to burnish their credentials as protectors of the Iraqi Shi’a, which could escalate quickly to sectarian war, not only in Iraq, but throughout the region.

NOTES

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