

Political Role for Militants Worsens Fault Lines in Iraq

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BAGHDAD — It was one of the deadliest insurgent groups in Iraq in recent years, an Iranian-backed militia that bombed American military convoys and bases, assassinated dozens of Iraqi officials and tried to kidnap Americans even as the last soldiers withdrew.

But now the Shiite-led government of Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki is welcoming the militant group into Iraq's political system, a move that could tilt the nation's center of gravity closer to Iran. The government's support for the militia, which only just swore off violence, has opened new sectarian fault lines in Iraq's political crisis while potentially empowering Iran at a moment of rising military and economic tensions between Tehran and Washington.

The militant group, Asaib Ahl al-Haq, broke away from the fierce Shiite militia commanded by the anti-American cleric Moktada al-Sadr, who has strong ties to Tehran. The American military has long maintained that the group, led by a former spokesman for Mr. Sadr, Qais al-Khazali, was trained and financed by Iran's elite Quds Force — something that Iran denies.

Since the American military withdrawal last month, Iraq has been convulsed with waves of attacks that have raised concerns about its political stability. On Thursday, bombings killed at least 68 people, including 44 Shiite pilgrims in a single attack in the southern deserts near Nasiriya. With that backdrop of violence, the Iraqi government can plausibly claim that its overtures to the group are an earnest attempt to make peace with a powerful armed foe while nudging the country closer to a much-needed national reconciliation.

Thousands of other militants, both Sunni and Shiite, have cut deals with the government to stop fighting, and few officials see a meaningful peace in Iraq that does not include reconciling with armed groups. On Thursday, Asaib Ahl al-Haq made another conciliatory gesture, saying it would release the body of a British bodyguard, Alan McMenemy, who was kidnapped in 2007 with four others, only one of whom was released alive.

Yet, critics worry that Mr. Maliki, facing fierce new challenges to his leadership from Sunnis and even his fellow Shiites, may now be making a cynical and shortsighted play for Asaib's support. They say Mr. Maliki may use the group's credentials as Shiite resistance fighters to divide challengers in his own Shiite coalition and weaken Mr. Sadr's powerful bloc, which draws its political lifeblood from the Shiite underclass.

By doing so, Iraq's government could embolden a militia with an almost nonexistent track record of peace while potentially handing Tehran greater influence in a country where the United States spent billions of dollars and lost nearly 4,500 American soldiers in nearly nine years of war.

"I think it is a dangerous step, this move by the government, to join with groups that do not believe in the peaceful political process," said Osama al-Nujaifi, the speaker of Iraq's Parliament and a Sunni Arab. "They use the political with one hand and military forces with the other hand."

Moreover, some American and Iraqi officials are leery about whether Asaib Ahl al-Haq — the name translates as League of the Righteous — is truly ready to forswear violence, especially with thousands of American diplomats and security contractors still in the country. Mr. Maliki's recent attempts to marginalize the country's Sunni minority and consolidate power have amplified their fears and, not coincidentally, precipitated a political crisis.

"They have blood on their hands, and it's not just American blood," a senior United States military official said of Asaib Ahl al-Haq. "I am all for forgiveness and reconciliation, but they are — and I think always will be — beholden to their masters in Iran."

In June, Asaib Ahl al-Haq and other militias said to be backed by Iran conducted rocket attacks on American bases that resulted in the deaths of 13 soldiers, making the month the worst for combat-related deaths for United States forces in Iraq since 2008. Military officials also said the group was responsible for the last American combat death in Iraq, a November roadside bomb attack in Baghdad.

"It's not a good sign that Maliki is so keen to work with a group that has been responsible for the deaths of many Americans," said Marisa Cochrane Sullivan, deputy director at the Institute for the Study of War in Washington and an expert on Asaib Ahl al-Haq. "A.A.H. having a prominent role in the government is not in the interest of the United States."

Asaib Ahl al-Haq's public shift comes at a delicate time for United States interests in the region. A political crisis is consuming Baghdad's government in the wake of the American military withdrawal. Iran, wounded by punishing economic sanctions, recently threatened to close the Strait of Hormuz, a crucial shipping channel for oil in the Persian Gulf, including about 80 percent of Iraq's oil exports.

With American forces gone and new opportunities emerging from Iraq's splintering political landscape, Iraqi officials and political commentators say the leaders of Asaib Ahl al-Haq have caught a whiff of the patronage, money and influence that lie in Iraqi politics. They appear eager to follow the path to power blazed by Mr. Sadr's political compatriots, who control 40 seats in Parliament and seven ministries.

"Maliki has kept at this thing and under the context of the withdrawal has been able to draw them out of the armed conflict," said a Western diplomat familiar with the discussions between Mr. Maliki and the group.

It remains to be seen whether Asaib Ahl al-Haq will be able to make any mark on the political scene now that its main antagonists have left Iraq. Sunni Muslims are wary of the group's history, and Mr. Sadr and his Shiite followers despise it for what they consider to be the group's treasonous public split with Mr. Sadr.

Mr. Maliki's government has avoided any overt pledges to support the group in Iraq's next elections. "We welcome those who want to join the political process and give up their weapons, no matter whether they are Sunni or Shiite," said Hassan al-Suneid, a lawmaker from Mr. Maliki's State of Law coalition.

American officials made efforts to bring a disarmed Asaib Ahl al-Haq into Iraq's government as early as 2009, even releasing Mr. Khazali, and his brother, Laith, from prison.

"Khazali was telling us when he was being interrogated that they were ready to lay down their arms," said a Western diplomat, referring to the group's founder. "We released those guys, and they went back to Iran and didn't exactly lay down their arms."

At an officially sanctioned rally last week in central Baghdad, hundreds of the group's members and supporters gathered in a public square that was previously the stage for pro-democracy demonstrations. For hours, they celebrated the insurgents who fought American troops in Iraq, waving banners and screening triumphal videos of their deadly attacks on American Humvees, tanks and convoys.

Standing in front of Asaib's emblem — a hand making a two-fingered peace sign flanked by silhouetted insurgents — Mr. Khazali praised the Iraqis who had spilled blood fighting American forces, and said that the insurgents had forced the American withdrawal.

Later, in an interview with the group's television station, Mr. Khazali struck a populist tone as he discussed the role it might one day play in Iraqi politics.

"We want the people to concentrate on their power, to correct the errors of the politicians," he said. "We know our strength and how much influence we can have."

Yasir Ghazi and Omar al-Jawoshy contributed reporting.

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