

POTENTIAL CONFLICTS AMONG AND PREDICTIONS ABOUT THE SHIITE IN IRAQ

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Iraq is about to become an internal zone of conflict of the Shiite. On one side, there is Shiite militia that has started to show power under the name of al-Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilization Forces) in the last two years. On the other side, there are Shiite political parties and forces that use this militia for their political purposes. It is foreseen that these conflicts may involve even Shiite religious authority, institutions and organizations. There are two more factors that increase the possibility of a conflict among the Shiite. The first one is the chaos in economy, politics and security in Iraq. The second factor is about the expectations for a new political system in Iraq in the following term. In this study, the predictions about a possible conflict among the Shiite will be evaluated on three dimensions: armed conflict, political conflict and religious conflict.

It is seen that there is no compromise and harmony among Shiite religious, political or military powers in Iraq. Having differences in internal and external alliances, viewpoints, methods and objectives has become an ordinary phenomenon for different Shiite groups in Iraq. On one side, there is Shiite militia that has started to show power under the name of *al-Hashd al-Shaabi* (Popular Mobilization Forces) in the last two years. On the other side, there are Shiite political parties and forces that use this militia for their political purposes. It is foreseen that these conflicts may involve even Shiite religious authority, institutions and organizations. There are two more factors that increase the possibility of a conflict among the Shiite. The first one is the chaos in economy, politics and security in Iraq. The second factor is the expectations for a political system in Iraq in the following term. It is anticipated that new federal structures will come out in Iraq as a result of a new political system. It is thought that this new situation will

restrict the Shiite in political, religious and military terms in the provinces of central and south Iraq. Therefore, this will reduce the economic rent of Shiite powers and increase the number of those who compete for economic interests. This competition will increase the likelihood of conflict. It is said that all Shiite powers now prepare for this conflict. There is general opinion of an upcoming conflict in Iraq, but there is no consensus on what will trigger the conflict. Yet, the time of this anticipated conflict is limited to predictions. There is high possibility for conflicts and new incidents may change the anticipations. It will be better to examine this issue on three interwoven dimensions in order to evaluate the relevant data. These dimensions are armed conflict, political conflict and religious conflict.

Possibilities of Armed Conflicts among the Shiite

First of all, it is very important to understand the dimension of the relations between different Shiite militia and *al-Hashd al-Shaabi*.

Al-Hashd al-Shaabi is a public institution affiliated with National Security Undersecretariat of Iraqi Prime Ministry. It was formed in June 2014 after ISIS occupied Mosul. Its mission is to organize activities and branches of the militia in their fight against ISIS. The administration of al-Hashd al-Shaabi is composed of the representatives of the government and the militia. By formation, the main objective of the al-Hashd al-Shaabi is explained as to arm, train and equip the militia so that they could be used by the government in Iraqi provinces and zones of conflict. However, the leaders of the militia in fact started to impose their demands on the government by taking the government under control. That is, the process was reversed and the militia started to lead the government while it was the government that was supposed to lead the militia. The relations between the militia and the government turned into cooperation in time with payments, arms, ammunition and privileges in governmental institutions and this cooperation has been

minimized in the last period. The militia was gradually out of the control of Iraqi government and started to act with the instructions of their leaders, religious authorities and internal or external contacts and had lower loyalty to the government. Iraqi government did not have any role in planning the activities and war strategy of this militia.

Within this context, it is possible to categorize Shiite militia in al-Hashd al-Shaabi according to the sides they *de facto* take:

a. The militia that have good relations with Iran:

Iranian intelligence and security forces formed the militia years ago in Iraq in order to serve the purposes of the Iranian intelligence in the region and assigned them as military agents. The leaders and members of this militia are loyal to the religious authority (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurists/*Vilayat-e Faqih*) in Iran in terms of belief. Badr Organization (led by Hadi Al-Amiri), Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (led by Qais al-Khazali and Kata'ib Hezbollah (led by Abu

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Mahdi al-Muhandis) are at the top of the list of the ones that are loyal to Iran. These militia groups receive orders and logistical support majorly from Iranian authorities like the Army of the Guardians of Islamic Revolution, intelligence unit or Quds Force. Furthermore, Iran can expand the fields of activity of these militia groups outside Iraq. Iran has recently trained hundreds of people in these militia groups and sent them to Syria in order to support and fight for Bashar al-Assad. Iran controls and gives directions to the militia through Iranian officers that it keeps as advisors in Iraq. It is possible to say

that these militia groups are the least controlled groups in al-Hashd al-Shaabi.

On the other hand, some militia groups were formed in 2003 after Saddam Hussein regime was overthrown in Iraq. These militia groups were formed by the religious and political Shiite leaders and are not loyal to Iran's directions and policy. However, these groups sometimes receive political and logistical support from Iran due to their relations. Reasonably, they have relations with Iranian political and security institutions. These militia leaders and members adopt the ideology of *Vilayat-e Faqih* in terms of

religious belief. Islamic Resistance Liva Yevmul Maud and Saray al-Salam can be given as examples to such groups. The latter was formed after ISIS invaded Mosul in June 2014 and includes one part of Mahdi Army which was dissolved in 2008. All these groups are affiliated with Sadr Organization and their leader is Muqtada al-Sadr. These groups cooperate and coordinate more with Iraqi government.

b. The Militia Affiliated with Iraqi Religious Authorities: Religious authorities and administrations of sacred places in Iraq formed these militia groups. These groups were formed after ISIS invaded Mosul. These groups were majorly formed for volunteers who would fight against ISIS. These militia groups receive orders and logistics support from the religious authority they are affiliated with. Abu al-Fadhl al-Abbas affiliated with Atabal Abbasiyyah and Ali Al Akbar Brigade affiliated with Atabal Alawiyyah can be shown as examples. These groups work in coordination and cooperation with the Iraqi government.

As understood from this classification, it is seen that the militia groups do not act independently, but are led from inside and outside of Iraq. A slightest disagreement or rivalry among these political or religious entities should be considered as a possibility that an armed conflict may break out among these groups. Today, especially Shiite opponents like Muqtada al-Sadr explicitly mentions that there are illegal militia groups in Iraq. Sadr shows that the members of these groups are 'bad guys' and suggests that these groups commit crimes. From this viewpoint, it is possible to say that a rivalry has recently started among the Shiite. This rivalry may turn into armed conflicts with the dissolution of Iraq and formation of a large federal structure. In the meantime, if Iraq is separated, it is probable that the conflicts will be aggravated considering that the party with military power will be strong and hold Shiite region of Iraq in its hands since it can be said that the power that dominates over Shiite region will not share the prosperities of Iraq with other

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groups. Also, it is anticipated that the groups close to Iran will dominate over Shiite region seeing that they have a relatively stronger structure than the other groups.

On the other hand, it is claimed that some Shiite militia groups in Shiite regions of Iraq are called ‘war amirs’ and gain ground by threatening. It is said that some militia groups turn out to be a mafia now. It is also mentioned that these militia groups in the central and southern regions of Iraq extort money from businessmen and merchants. Even according to some information, it is suggested that certain for-

eign investment companies in Iraq provide money, thus indirect protection for these militia groups and guarantee that they will not be harmed. All these actions are legitimized under the argument of ‘fight against ISIS’. Therefore, it is said that these militia groups will aggravate the political and religious conflicts in order to ensure their survival and keep the needs for these groups when the fight against ISIS is over and the scenario of division is brought to the agenda. Thus, the financial sources of the leaders and members of these groups will be maintained.



Possibilities of Political Conflicts among the Shiite

Political and armed struggles were nested after the former regime was overturned in April 2003. This made it harder to even classify the political parties in Iraq and it could not be understood whether the militia had political parties or vice versa. Almost all political parties in Iraq have armed groups affiliated with them. Especially the parties that have a religious structure take the lead. These religious parties signed agreements with the militia after ISIS invaded Mosul. The parties financially and morally support the militia groups in terms of politics and media. In return, the militia groups protect and militarily support these parties. As is known, former Iraqi Prime Minister and current Vice president Nouri al-Maliki leads the State of Law Coalition. It is possible to say that Nouri al-Maliki is in cooperation with Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, Kata'ib Hezbollah and Badr Organization which are the closest groups to Iran. For example, Badr Organization

took part in the elections with the State of Law Coalition led by Nouri al-Maliki. From this viewpoint, it is seen that the militia groups adopt a similar approach to Nouri al-Maliki's domestic and foreign policy. It is possible to say that current Iraqi Prime Minister Haider el-Abadi acted independently from the government by observing the attitudes of Nouri al-Maliki even though he is in the same political party (Dawa Party) as Nouri al-Maliki. Maliki now tries to form a strong structure in order to be prepared for the possible conflicts among the Shiite in Iran. Within the same context, several Shiite groups follow the same line as Maliki. However, as of the current situation, every group takes a different position depending on the force and dimension of the militia groups as well as their proximity to Iran. Therefore, potential armed conflicts among the Shiite may lead to political disagreements as well. Political disagreements may be seen as a result of potential armed conflicts among the Shiite that aim to have a share in the gov-

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ernment after a separate federal structure is formed for the Shiite in Iraq.

On the other hand, this situation may form a basis for the conflicts among the Shiite religious functionaries. Indeed, each Shiite party has Islamic ideology and religious authority. For example, the religious authority that Dawa Party follows is Mahmoud Shahroudi, Iranian Shiite religious functionary of Iraqi origin. Islamic Virtue Party follows Mohammad al-Yaqoubi. Muqtada al-Sadr accepts Ayatollah Qasim al-Hairi as a religious authority. Moreover, some Iraqi Shiite political groups adopt the ideology of *Vilayat-e Faqih* and perform an attitude in line with Iran. For example, Badr Organization carries the photos of Khamenei in the battlefield. Any future conflict among these religious authorities may lead to political, even armed conflicts.

Possibilities of Religious Conflicts among the Shiite

The Shiite conflict has two historical roots. One of them

is that Iran tried to affiliate the Shiite to the religious authority in Qom, Iran and aimed to turn this city into the most important and biggest religious symbol. Therefore, Qom was going to replace the city of Najaf in Iraq which had the most important Shiite religious authority. Accordingly, it will be better to say that Iran wanted all the Shiite to adopt the ideology of *Vilayat-e Faqih*. Thereby, all the Shiite was going to pledge loyalty to the religious authority in Iran and Iran's religious leader was going to replace the religious authority in Najaf. Since Shah's regime was overthrown in Iran in 1979, Iran has made great efforts to reach these two goals. It is thought that Iran would reach these two goals, gain dominance over the region and serve its national interests. At this point, it is seen that a new movement started among the Shiite in Iraq and it was called to adopt the ideology of Iraqi Shiite: *Vilayat-e Faqih*. Efforts are also made so that the Iranian religious leader Ali Khamenei can replace Najaf-based religious author-

ity in Iraq. The Shiite parties and militia groups make this propaganda with Iran's direct support. Some Shiite groups try to stand out against this movement.

In addition, there is also a financial aspect of this issue. Decreasing number of the followers of any religious authority means that the income of that religious authority decreases as well, because every Shiite gives one fifth of their income to religious authorities under the name of *Khums* according to the Shiite belief. Since the Shiite gives *Khums* to the religious authority they are affiliated with, they will have to transfer the *Khums* to a new religious authority that they follow if they change their religious authority. Therefore, this political and financial rivalry pursued within a religious framework is another important point that will cause the Shiite groups to oppose each other and may start an armed conflict.

Conclusion

Iraqi regime changed with the U.S. invasion in April

2003. Since then, Shiite powers in Iraq have gone through several political crises and some of these crises have turned into armed conflicts. The most significant example of the political-armed conflicts among the Iraqi Shiite was the one in 2005-2007 between the Mahdi Army affiliated with Sadr Organization and Badr Organization affiliated with the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). On the other hand, conflicts called 'Battle of Basra' (*Sevlet-ul Fursan*) broke out in 2008 between the Mahdi Army (and its collaborators) and the government (and armed groups supported by the government). These crises were sometimes aggravated or alleviated by internal and external interventions. At this point, Iran's interventions had the biggest role in influencing these crises in a positive or negative way since Iran sees itself as the side that protects all Shiite powers in Iraq. However, if there are political, armed and religious conflicts among Shiite powers in Iraq in the future, it is possible that

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Iran will give up protecting all Shiite parties in these potential conflicts and support only one side. Regarding Iran's objectives and tendencies in Iraq, it is likely that this situation will turn into an overt conflict among the Shiite in Iraq.

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