

Influential Violent Extremist Organizational Partners of Iran

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Introduction

This paper addresses two key Violent Extremist Organizations (VEOs) with close ties to the Iran regime. More specifically, we examine the organizational and leadership characteristics of the Badr Brigades and Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH) using the Leadership for the Extreme and Dangerous for Innovative Results (LEADIR) project. While much of the discussion on Iranian influence focuses on Hezbollah or the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, we believe both the Badr Brigades and KH warrant attention for at least three reasons. First, both VEOs are highly sophisticated with the operational capabilities to strike US and coalition targets. Second, the leaders of both VEOs function as Partners of Iran and their decision-making reflects the strategic vision of the Iranian regime. Third, in times of increased conflict, both will have increased opportunity to strike our coalition forces currently in the Iraq region.

Badr Brigades and Kata'ib Hezbollah

The Badr Organization (whose military wing is known as the Badr Brigades) was founded in 1983 as the armed wing of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), the largest Shi'ite political party in Iraq. The Badr Brigades are highly departmentalized and centralized compared to other terrorist organizations in the LEADIR dataset, meaning that they have experts who have specialized, discrete functions and are coordinated by a central ruling leadership team. Furthermore, Badr is marked by the extensive training provided to its fighters, including organizational, combat, and ideological training. Due to the political focus of the organization, they rely heavily on funding from the Iranian regime as opposed to engaging in illicit forms of fundraising.

KH was formed in 2007 as an Iraqi Shiite paramilitary group that focused on fight the U.S. coalition in Iraq. The group was considered to have launched some of the most lethal attacks against U.S. forces and capitalized on times of uncertainty inherent in Baghdad and Mosul during recent conflicts to wage their attacks. KH is centralized and organizationally complex (not to the extent of the Badr Brigades, but more than most other VEOs) and utilizes both legal and illegal forms of fundraising, particularly extortion and kidnapping to raise funds.

In the realm of VEOs, both organizations rate highly on organizational sophistication. In other words, both the Badr Bridges and KH include a high degree of centralization, formalization, and specialization (Logan & Ligon, 2019). From a tactical standpoint, this is important since VEOs with high degrees of sophistication have the capacity for complex tactics and operations. For example, sophisticated VEOs are able to pool and redistribute tangible resources (e.g., weapons) and intangible resources (e.g., information) efficiently. One implication of this is that these VEOs have the expertise and capital to strike a wider range of targets such as hard targets (e.g., military, police) or infrastructure targets (e.g., telecommunications, utilities). For example, KH claimed responsibility for an attack killing 6 US soldiers at the Forward Operating Base Loyalty in Baghdad on June 6th, 2011 (START, 2019).

Leadership Influence and Relationships with Iran

In a recent effort, Meredith III and Maloney (2019) reconceptualize violent extremist organizations as one of three variants: proxies, puppets, and partners. Each of these groups acts on in the interests of a State but in varying levels of agency about how the downstream consequences of those actions. Proxies are those VEOs whose actions are in direct alignment and sometimes at the behest of a State; the actions they take are aligned with the ideological, organizational, and tactical objectives of the State Actor they represent. Puppets are VEOs who are unlikely to acknowledge, or are unaware of, their linkage to a State Actor. They may take action that benefits a State, but there is no direct linkage to that state or formal alignment from it. Finally, Partners are VEOs who have the strongest collaborative relationship with a State. These organizations are the rarest type and require the most resources to sustain, as they require alignment between ideological, organizational, and violence goals. While Meredith III and Maloney’s (2019) model describes the organization-level, we believe their line of thinking can be applied to the leader-level given that the leader of an organization can tell you the most about the group’s interests, ideology, likelihood to partner, and norms (Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Hambrick, 2007; Abrahms & Potter, 2015; Bastug & Guler, 2018; Hofmann, 2017). Upon assessing the leaders of the Badr Brigades and KH, we submit that these VEOs fit the conception of Partners of Iran, which will have important consequences in a conflict. The following sections detail the support for this assessment and implications for planners.

Figure 1. The Manifestation of VEOs Leaders as Partners and Application to Iranian Leaders

	Ideological	Organizational	Violence
Partner Criteria	Adherence to the ideology of the State over pragmatic strategy or personal goals	Explicit connection to the State (seeks to expand State influence through conventional gains)	Tactics promote/further the long-term goals of the State
al-Amiri (Badr Brigades)	Views Ali Khamenei as representative of “the Islamic nation”	Provides basic services in Iraq to garner support among Iraqi Shiites	Tactical focus on Iraqi Sunnis consistent with the regional pro-Shia strategy
al-Muhandis (KH)	Believes in establishing a Shiite theocracy and considers himself to be a representative of Ali Khamenei	Viewed as “right-hand man” to Suleimani (Quds Force) and Hezbollah’s Unit 3800	Tactical diversity to promote regional goals as well as viewed as an elite fighting force

There are three primary considerations that a VEO leader weighs when making decisions: ideological, organizational maintenance, and violence goals (Ligon & Derrick, 2015). Hadi al-Amiri is the founder and current leader of the Badr Brigades, while Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis is the founder and current leader of the KH. Given that they are founders of their organizations, they likely hold strategic influence, and it is useful to examine their decision-making inputs based on their backgrounds and interests. Both al-Amiri (Badr Brigades) and al-Muhandis (KH) have decision-making inputs that align with the Iranian regime. Ideological driven decisions are guided by belief-based principles and values. Given the shared stated vision of both al-Amiri and al-Muhandis to form a Shia State, each of these leaders has a life history that would support a close ideological alignment with Iran's objectives in the region. In fact, al-Amiri referred to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei as "the leader not only for Iranians but the Islamic nation" (Filkins, 2013).

Next, organizationally, Iran is similar to and supportive of both groups, albeit differently. For instance, al-Amiri has close ties with the current commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force, Qassem Suleimani. Similar to the Revolutionary Guard, the Badr Brigades are large in members (> 10,000 members) and bureaucratically structured. In recent years, the Badr Brigades have grown in popularity across Iran and Iraq. For instance, there were over 7,000 applicants to the Badr Brigades following a 2014 fatwa was issued to combat the Islamic State (Fick, 2014). Once recruited into the organization, fighters for the Badr Brigades develop combat expertise by coordinating and training with Iran's Quds Force as well as Hezbollah. In fact, one senior Badr Brigades official notes that Iran "helped the group with everything from tactics" to "drone and signals capabilities, including electronic surveillance and radio communications" (Parker, Dehghanpisheh, & Coles, 2015). More recently, the Badr Brigades have sought to expand their political influence in Iraq. In 2014, Badr joined the Iraq ruling council government after winning 22 seats in the parliamentary election. Much of this political support is due to the Badr Brigades providing security and other basic services to the Shiites across Iraq – who make up a majority of their population (Beehner, 2006). Given the political and military similarities, many view the Badr Brigades and their leader, al-Amiri, as comparable to Iran's longstanding VEO Partner Hezbollah and their leader, Hassan Nasrallah.

Like the Badr Brigades, KH and its leader al-Muhandis have ties to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force and Hezbollah. In fact, al-Muhandis is described as the "right-hand man" of the commander of the Quds Force, Qassem Suleimani (Strouse, 2016). Furthermore, KH sent fighters to defend Assad in Syria at the request of Suleimani. Although KH is much smaller than the Badr Brigades and includes an estimated 1,000 fighters (Mapping Militant Organizations, 2019), KH is known as the most elite and secretive of the Shiite militia groups operating in Iraq (Dehghanpisheh, 2014). KH has limited participation in Iraqi politics and does not provide services like the much larger and complex Badr Brigades. The primary similarities between KH and the Badr Brigades are in relation to training and fundraising. For example, KH receives training from both the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force and Hezbollah. KH has reportedly established close ties to Hezbollah's military wing devoted to training Iraqi Shiite militias, Unit 3800 (Levitt & Smyth, 2015).

Finally, the levels of violence they are willing to endorse and toward what types of targets connote goals and capabilities. For example, attacks on hard targets such as police and military are important for VEOs to project an image of strength and "underscore its credentials as a meaningful force, establishing a benchmark of power that it has then used to build morale among existing members and attract new recruits" (Libicki, Chalk, & Sisson, 2007, p. 63). Assuming their ideological mission requires such attacks, the only reason a violent extremist organization does not strike hard targets is that they do not have the capabilities and resources to do so (Kilberg, 2012). In the past, both al-Amiri and al-Muhandis have focused on targets aligned with Iranian interests. For al-Amiri and the Badr Brigades, much of this was sectarian violence on the Sunni population in Iraq. Such violence runs

counter to Iran's "official position," but consistent with their regional pro-Shia strategy and focus on protecting regional interests and investments – particularly in Iraq and Syria (Sowell, 2015). Furthermore, violence against Sunnis is consistent with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' mission of being viewed as a unified Shia front in the region. Despite having the capabilities to attack high-value targets (e.g., Coalition Forces), Badr forces have mostly avoided such attacks. This is likely because the Revolutionary Guard and Tehran do not want to risk counter-measures against Badr -- one of their top Partners--for such short-term gains.

Al-Muhandis and KH have displayed tactical diversity by targeting both Iraqi Sunnis as well as more high-value targets. For example, in June 2016, KH militants kidnapped over 1,500 displaced civilians fleeing Al Anbar, Iraq (START, 2019). This type of violence is consistent with Iran's regional mission described above. KH's original modus operandi, however, was the use of complex attacks on Coalitions forces during the Iraq War. Between 2007 and 2008, for example, KH was notorious for their use of roadside bombings on US troops. Then, in 2009, KH hacked a US predator drone video feed, allowing them to monitor US military operations (Strouse, 2010). These types of attacks suggest high levels of specialization and expertise among the KH ranks and support their label as one of the elite pro-Shia VEOs in Iraq.

Implications

In sum, both the Badr Brigades and KH are strategically important VEOs for their Iranian regime and their leaders act as partners to further Iranian interests. Currently, the U.S. and our Allies still have troops and support personnel in Iraq. The U.S. has approximately 5,200 troops stationed in Iraq, mainly in an advisory and support role to the Iraqi government and their fight against the Islamic State (Abdo 2019). The U.S. allies that are present are at a much smaller number than the U.S., but not insignificant numbers. An example of this is the United Kingdom's troops in Iraq, which has approximately 400 troops currently in Iraq, who also serve in a support role (Sabbagh & Wintour, 2019). Any escalation of interactions between the U.S. and Iran above traditional non-kinetic interactions will likely result in Iraqi paramilitary groups retaliating on U.S. troops on behalf of Iran.

The Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), while not covered in our analysis, are tied to KH through al-Muhandis: he serves as the leader of KH and the deputy commander of the PMF. The leader of the PMF Qais al-Khazali is also close to Suleimani and has threatened U.S. forces if they do not leave Iraq. This is a real threat since the PMF are "practically as powerful" as the Iraqi military (Abdo 2019). KH has also been known to attack U.S. troops, being cited as launching some of the "most lethal attacks" against U.S. troops in Iraq (Khedery, 2015). In the case of escalation with Iran, Coalition troops in Iraq will likely be targeted by KH and PMF, but it is unlikely they will be targeted by the more powerful Badr Brigades. Due to the political interest that the Badr Brigades has taken in recent years, they will likely be sidelined as long as possible during an escalation between Iran and the US. However, given their Partnership status, it is also likely that could be a threat to Coalition Forces in the region if given the signal from Iran to do so. One off-ramp for the more moderate members of the Badr Brigades, however, is to emphasize their continued interest in power in a safe and reconstructed Iraq (Pfaff, 2019).

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