

Iraq's Shiite Militias Are Just Getting Started The Iranian-backed forces that took control of Kirkuk from the Kurds are setting their sights on Baghdad.

By Anchal Vohra



A member of the Popular Mobilization Forces flashes a "V" sign in the northern town of Hatra on April 28.

"We fight tonight," Zakey Kamaal, a Turkmen Shiite with salt-and-pepper hair, told me on Oct. 15. He was dressed all in black to commemorate the killing of Imam Hussein, the 7th-century religious leader whom Shiites consider the rightful leader of the Muslim community, and spoke calmly and with authority. "Peshmerga will walk out without much confrontation," he said.

Kamaal is a commander in the Iran-sponsored Badr Organization, an Iraqi Shiite militia that recently participated in driving the Kurdish Peshmerga from the disputed city of Kirkuk. On the day that I spoke to him, he and six other middle-aged soldiers were war-gaming under a life-size photograph of Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, Iraq's top Shiite cleric. The men were discussing the need to convince their fighters to exercise restraint, so as to allow the Peshmerga to abandon their positions without resistance.

Kamaal was true to his word, Hadi al-Amiri, the head of the Badr Organization, and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, a U.S.-designated terrorist who heads the Iran-aligned Kataib Hezbollah, looked on as the Kurdish flag was lowered and the Iraqi flag was raised at Kirkuk's provincial council building.

Kirkuk has long been disputed between Iraq's central government and the Kurds, but it became a flashpoint after the Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG) Sept. 25 referendum on independence, which included the territory. The vote was widely seen as an attempt by KRG President Masoud Barzani to strengthen his political position in Iraqi Kurdistan, but electoral considerations in the rest of the country also shaped the fallout from the referendum. Iraq's politicians head to the polls next year in national elections to let the referendum pass uncontested would be tantamount to political suicide for Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi.

The Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), the umbrella organization under which Kamaal's group and other militias fall, have emerged as a powerful political actor in the past several years. Following Ayatollah Sistani's 2014 fatwa calling on Iraqis to take up arms against the Islamic State, and with weapons and military training provided by Iran, they fought the terrorist group with fanatical zeal and the victory has empowered them like never before. Now, they are pushing officials in Baghdad to take an uncompromising stance on a range of issues, from ending the Kurds' aspiration for independence to curtailing the U.S.-Iraqi partnership. Abadi is trying to walk a tightrope balancing these sentiments with his own desire to bolster the central government's ties to Washington and Iraq's diverse array of sects and ethnicities. Kamaal professes that the PMF takes orders from Abadi but the truth is more complicated. In reality, they represent a powerful constituency that can pressure the prime minister to adapt to their agenda, and can also act on their own if the government does not support them. The decision of the Badr Organization and other militias to fight the Peshmerga, for instance, preceded Abadi's instructions to send in the Counter Terrorism Service to secure the federal infrastructure in Kirkuk.

The divisions between Abadi and the PMF groups were visible even before the assault on Kirkuk. On Oct. 11, PMF fighters on the ground in Kirkuk told me the operation to re-establish control over the territory "is a matter of a day or two."

But even as the PMF was mobilizing its forces, a source in the Iraqi Defense Ministry was boasting about Abadi's strategy to resolve the crisis measures that included restrictions on KRG airspace and marshaling diplomatic help from Iran and Turkey, but that did not contem-

plate the military action.

"Use of force? No chance," the official said, on condition of anonymity. "Abadi is drawing up a list of things that can be done to teach Barzani." In reality, Abadi was cornered. Turkey didn't cut off the pipeline used by the KRG to supply oil, and the Shiite militia groups pressured Abadi to deliver a quick political resolution or let them handle it.

"We move in when dialogue fails," Kamaal said, by way of explaining the PMF's role in Iraqi politics.

Having crushed the Islamic State in much of Iraq and recaptured Kirkuk, Iraq's Iran-backed militias are now oozing with confidence. They are determined to hold on to the power that their members have fought and died to acquire, and they wish to be seen as a legitimate force not an unorganized, unkempt bunch of fanatics.

To a large extent, this is also about economic survival. Ahmad, a 22-year-old Badr fighter who doubles as a taxi driver, isn't needed as much since the threat of the Islamic State receded. Now, he is only deployed for 15 days per month — but in that time, he earns \$400. Driving a taxi the other half of the month only earns him \$80.

"I can die in war, but the money is very good," he said.

By building political power in Baghdad, the PMF hopes to increase their access to Iraq's patronage networks — which means jobs in the security services or a government ministry for people like Ahmad. And by wresting the oil fields around Kirkuk from the Kurds, the PMF and their allies are also dramatically enlarging the revenues available to Baghdad.

The U.S.-led coalition attributed the fighting in Kirkuk to a "misunderstanding" between the Iraqi security forces and the Kurdish Peshmerga. On the ground, however, the situation looks much different. The assault on Kirkuk couldn't have happened without Iran's nod, and the recapturing of the territory is just the latest in a long list of victories for Tehran in the region. For anyone traveling in Syria, Lebanon, or Iraq, it is easy to see Iranian influence. Either the United States doesn't care about Iran's preeminence, or it doesn't know where to look.

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Why Reconciliation Hurts the Palestinian People

past June, Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) imposed a blockade on Qatar, one of the only Arab countries with remaining ties to Hamas. Around this time, the Palestinian Authority also began punishing Gaza, in order to weaken Hamas, by cutting off electricity, in coordination with Israel, and by refusing to pay government salaries, which account for the livelihoods of a large segment of the Palestinian population. As a result, Hamas found itself backed into a corner with few allies left and a public fed up with the siege.

The three states that helped broker the talks—Egypt, the UAE, and the United States—are well aware of this reality and are trying to take advantage of it. Their overall aim is to neutralize Hamas' power by weakening its popular support and its ability to make the public believe that it is the last resistance movement actively fighting Israel. To accomplish this task, regional and international powers are taking advantage of Hamas' now weak position to co-opt it altogether. They have so far been able to pressure Hamas to give up control of the border crossings into Egypt and Israel, for example, and have even discussed the possibility of Hamas' giving up its military wing, the Ezzedeen al-Qassam Brigades, which, from Hamas' perspective, has played an effective role in garnering concessions from Israel.

Of course, Hamas may be acquiescing only strategically, so that it can appear serious to the Palestinian public about reconciliation and secure an end to the siege. Also, because Hamas is being compromising, the public would blame the other parties and not Hamas if the talks were to fall apart. Although it is possible that Hamas is making such calculations, the group's latest concessions are in line with its increasing acquiescence and its decline as a resistance movement over the past ten years. In 2006, Hamas won legislative elections because it took a hard-line stance on the Israeli occupation and represented an alternative to Fatah. After weathering years of sustained efforts to isolate and neutralize it, Hamas now finds itself moving in Fatah's direction. In May, Hamas amended its charter to accept a two-state solution. The group has also begun to make amends with authoritarian regimes around the region, including in Egypt, Syria, and the UAE, and it may even dismantle or severely limit its military wing. (This is a major demand of the Palestinian Authority, so it is unlikely that a deal could be reached without some aspect of this happening.) In a sense, Hamas' comparative advantage, as the last large-scale resistance movement, no longer holds.

That leaves little in the way, then, of the effort to neutralize Hamas. But ironically,

the one major obstacle to achieving this goal is Israel. Internal dynamics within Israel have pushed its entire political establishment further to the right. Even U.S. President Donald Trump, who considers himself a friend of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, has admitted that Israel is the most difficult actor in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Therefore, any Palestinian reconciliation or compromise built on joint governance by Hamas and Fatah in the West Bank will likely not pass muster with the increasingly hard-line Israeli government. The recent breakthrough between Hamas and Fatah would place 3,000 Palestinian Authority security officers in Gaza in an attempt to convince Israel to end the siege. But hopes are low that Israel will be flexible.

In this light, the current reconciliation talks do not bode well for Palestinian national liberation. Recent research has shown that negotiations and a reliance on international law are strategies that have not achieved much success for the Palestinians in dealing with Israel. Instead, the Palestinians have gained concessions from Israel mostly when they have used coercive measures, such as militant operations or even nonviolent protests that put a strain on the Israeli economy. If Hamas is neutralized, there will be no political alternative to impose pressure on the Palestinian Authority, and those who disagree with increased security coordination between the Palestinian leadership and Israel will feel even less represented. As a result, political mobilization in the Palestinian territories is likely to become increasingly ineffective and sporadic—and thus more violent.

Even if these reconciliation talks truly succeed, living conditions for Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank will improve only marginally. The siege might be lifted to some degree, but the underlying cause of the hardship in the Palestinian territories—the Israeli occupation—will remain. Gazans will still be subjected to Israeli incursions, Palestinians in the West Bank will still face limited mobility and a choked economic sphere, and Palestinians living in Jerusalem will continue to suffer under a targeted campaign of home demolitions. As long as Israel's political establishment maintains its right-wing trajectory, shifts on that front are unlikely. Furthermore, even if Hamas and Fatah unite, they may be presiding over an increasingly discontent populace that sees no remaining alternatives for seeking concessions from Israel. That is why these reconciliation talks represent the beginning of a dangerous stage in the history of the Palestinian national project—a project that will find itself increasingly sidelined.

Arab Craft Glitters Through Generations in Columbia

Arab tradition of crafting fine jewelry taught to Spaniards which took it to isolated Mompo where generations of goldsmiths maintain ancient method.

Lacy spindles of silver and gold have been used to make jewelry in the isolated northern Colombian town of Mompo since the time of the Spanish conquest.



SANTA CRUZ DE MOMPOX - With strong yet delicate hands, Daniel Alfonso Garrido masterfully manipulates fragile threads of gold to craft fine jewelry, perpetuating an ancient Arabic art handed down by generations of Colombian goldsmiths.

Built on an island on the wide Magdalena river, the town's colonial beauty inspired Gabriel Garcia Marquez, the Colombian magic-realist partly setting his "General in his Labyrinth" there. However, tourists make their way here -- four hours upriver by boat, an hour's droning by small aircraft -- for the magic realism of handcrafted jewels.

"It's an Arab tradition, and the Arabs taught it to the Spaniards who, when they conquered us, brought this art to America, and especially to Mompo," the gray-haired Garrido said.

Here, at a counter in his workshop, the 53-year-old goldsmith creates jewels mostly inspired by nature, weaving filigree animals and flowers from precious metals as his father and grandfather did before him.

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