

Shia Militia Takes on the Insurgents

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Supporters of the Badr militia say it's a much-needed security force, but Sunnis allege it is part of the problem.

Leading Shia politicians in Iraq have justified the increasing engagement of the powerful Badr militia in the war against insurgents, as prominent Sunnis look on in alarm.

Mainly active in Shia-dominated southern Iraq, the Badr Organisation, formerly known as the Badr Brigade, is the military arm of the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq, SCIRI, one of the two main Shia parties that make up the United Iraqi Alliance.

Sunnis, feeling isolated since the Shia-controlled United Iraqi Alliance won the elections, are nervous and unhappy about the organisation's mounting influence.

Sheikh Harith al-Dhary , who heads the Muslim Scholars' Association, last week went so far as to accuse the Badr Organisation of being involved in the murder of Sunni cleric Sheikh Hasan al-Naimi, found dead on May 17.

Al-Dhary said there were Badr members in the ranks of the interior ministry's Dhib (Wolf) Brigade, a crack unit set up to fight the insurgents which he blamed for al-Naimy's death.

However, Brigadier-General Abul al-Waleed of the Wolf brigade, insists the militia is quite separate from his commandos.

"The Badr Organisation has not supported us in our assaults on militant strongholds," he said. "Our duties are independent of any party or organisation. And we don't interfere in Badr's affairs."

The Badr Organisation has also rejected the charges, and accused the Muslim Scholars Association of trying to foment a civil war. Shia and Sunni religious figures are increasingly being targeted in Iraq. On the same day al-Naimi's body was found, two Shia clerics were shot, including SCIRI member Mani Hassan.

Badr secretary general and leading SCIRI figure Hadi al-Amiri said Iraq should make use of any available resources to protect itself from such attacks.

"We must invest in the Badr men to defend the soil of Iraq," he said. "They must join the security apparatus in working to achieve security in the country."

Sheikh Humam Hamoodi, a prominent SCIRI figure, insists the Badr militia still has a role to play because insurgents have infiltrated both the Iraqi National Guard and police.

"The Badr Organisation must participate in peacekeeping in the country, because they were the first to stand up against Saddam and resist the Baathists," he said. "They have experience in tension-filled areas and in armed struggle. So they must be respected."

SCIRI was established in Iran in 1982 and received funding from Tehran for years, leading to accusations that the Badr Organisation is a puppet of the Iranians.

Hussein al-Shahristani, a member of the United Iraqi Alliance, insists that despite links with Iran, Iraqi Shias –and their militia forces – do act independently.

“The [election] victory of the Shia list does not indicate Iranian interference in the policy of Iraq,” he said. “The people must be assured that the Iraqi government will not accept any interference from Iran.”

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