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Shiite Militia Drives Back Islamic State, but Divides Much of Iraq

By KAREEM FAHIM

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Shiite militia fighters of the Badr Organization celebrating in Diyala Province after defeating Islamic State militants. The militias are feared by Sunnis who accuse them of summary killings.

At their victory rally, the Shiite militiamen used poetry, song and swagger to sweeten their celebration of an ugly battle. More than a hundred fighters from the militia, the Badr Organization, had been killed in the farms and villages of Diyala Province in recent fighting against the Sunni extremists of the Islamic State. During the battle, thousands of residents had

been forced from their homes — including Sunni families who accused Shiite paramilitary groups like Badr of forced displacement and summary executions.

But the militias had pushed the Islamic State back from key areas in a crucial battle. So on Monday, the Badr Organization convened in a mosque at Camp Ashraf, its base in Diyala, to celebrate its “liberation” of the province — and to serve notice that it was the vanguard force battling the Islamic State, also known as ISIS or ISIL.

Speaking at the rally, to an audience that included giddy fighters barely past their teens, the head of the Badr Organization, Hadi al-Ameri, boasted of the towns his men and allied militias had set free. “These were big operations that others must learn lessons from,” he said.

But even as Mr. Ameri was fishing for broad support and recognition, his group stands among the most divisive in Iraq, accused of atrocities against Sunnis and known for its close ties to Iran. The new government of Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, which has promised to rule inclusively, has been under pressure to distance itself from retaliatory attacks against Sunnis by both Shiite and Kurdish militiamen.

At the same time, Mr. Ameri’s boast rings true: His militia has been among the most effective fighting forces against the Islamic State, gaining ground even as the Iraqi Army has faltered in many places despite support from American airstrikes and trainers.

Now, the Badr Organization’s leaders have asserted that their fighters and other allied militias — organized under the banner of “popular mobilization” forces — are ready to advance to neighboring provinces and other Iraqi cities menaced by the Islamic State: a shadow army to Iraq’s official security forces, flush with its own success.

At their celebration on Monday, the militia’s leaders were feeling expansive. Tribal sheikhs had been invited to Camp Ashraf from around the country, some milling around a small photo exhibit of the Diyala battles. Journalists had been asked to join as well, to listen to speeches and to tour the liberated villages.

A group of young fighters in fatigues gathered in a circle, singing religious hymns, and broke to join the mob that formed around Mr. Ameri, the guest of honor.

Standing in front of a backdrop that said “Diyala Wins. Iraq Wins,” Mr. Ameri lightly admonished supporters who chanted his name, telling them to praise Iraq instead. He reached out to Sunnis, pledging that Diyala would be a “safe area,” and responded to the accusations of atrocities by his fighters, warning that there would be consequences for abuses, including kidnappings and killings, though he did not explicitly acknowledge that they had happened.

“We are determined to complete our mission,” Mr. Ameri added, listing other Iraqi provinces that his fighters would liberate soon. “God willing, we will defeat Daesh in Iraq,” he said, using the Arabic acronym for the Islamic state.

His fighters seemed to be spoiling for the coming battle. Haidar Aidan, 25, described eight days of grueling work in the village of Mansouriya, dodging snipers and defusing explosive devices. Twenty-five other Badr fighters, he said, had been killed there.

Families had been displaced, but Mr. Aidan seemed confident that they would be able to return soon, echoing the assurances of his superiors. Now that Mr. Ameri had declared the province free of Islamic State militants, “we will go find other places to liberate,” he said.

Ali Jassim Kadham, another fighter, also said it was important to return Sunni families to their homes. But his talk of reconciliation faded as he spoke about Sunni tribes who he asserted were allied with the Islamic State.

Collaborators were worse than the terrorists, he said, warning, “Their punishment will be more severe than Daesh’s.”

Fears of retaliation by the militias in Diyala grew last month after residents of the Sunni-majority village of Barwanah accused Shiite militiamen of executing 72 people. Mr. Ameri and other Badr officials have denied that their fighters were responsible, even as they have promised to clamp down on abuses.

A local Badr leader in Diyala, Harath al-Rubai, said he had been in Barwanah on the day the executions occurred, checking the identity cards of refugees from other villages.

He said he had heard about the killings only the next day. “I don’t know how and when they were killed,” he added. The government has promised a full investigation into the allegations.

Erin Evers, a researcher for Human Rights Watch, said it was dangerous for the government to outsource military operations to Badr and other militias in Diyala, a mixed province home to Sunnis, Shiites, Kurds and Turkmen.

“It’s a place where anywhere you light a match, it’s guaranteed to start a fire,” she said. She said her organization had received reports that the militias, with the cooperation of some Iraqi security forces, had been “disappearing” people in the province for at least the last year and a half.

Salah al-Jabouri, a Parliament member from Diyala, said there had been attempts by “bad people” in the militias to alter the province’s demographic balance by not allowing Sunnis to return to their homes. “Violations against Sunni society in Diyala will weaken the strength of the popular mobilization and make Daesh stronger,” he said.

But there were few signs of tension as Badr militiamen, accompanied by Iraqi security forces, led journalists on a tour of the province in a heavily armed convoy on Monday. A militia anthem blared from speakers on a truck toward the head of the convoy, catchy but dark, a warning to Badr’s enemies: “Fight them!” men sang. “Kill them!”

The fighters proudly showed off the Sudour irrigation dam, which the Sunni extremists had taken over, causing water shortages in the region. The water was flowing again, and a bridge over the dam that was damaged had been temporarily repaired, allowing passage over the waterway.

The Badr Organization's signs were freshly planted along the roads of Muqdadiya District, in a show of authority.

Things appeared to be slowly returning to normal even in villages like Al Aqoud, where a battle between the militias and militants had left stores burned and some homes in rubble.

One shopkeeper, Hafiz Hussein, said that some of the residents, especially Sunni neighbors, were frightened by the Shiite militias and had fled. He said he hoped they would return.

For many who had stayed, the militias had brought only relief. "Daesh was like hell," he said.