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# Rise Of Shiite Militias Could Fracture Iraq

**BY HAMZA HENDAWI AND QASIM ABDUL-ZAHRA**

Associated Press

BAGHDAD — Emboldened by a call to arms by the top Shiite cleric, Iranian-backed militias have moved quickly to the center of Iraq's political landscape, spearheading what its Shiite majority sees as a fight for survival against Sunni militants who control of large swaths of territory north of Baghdad.

The emergence of the militias as a legitimate force enjoying the support of the Shiite-led government and the blessing of the religious establishment poses a threat to Iraq's unity, planting the seed for new sectarian strife and taking the regional Shiite-Sunni divide to a potentially explosive level.

Iraq's Shiite militias attacked U.S. forces during the eight-year American presence in the country. They also were in the lead in the Sunni-Shiite killings of 2006-07, pushing Iraq to the brink of civil war. Their death squads targeted radical Sunnis and they orchestrated the cleansing of Sunnis from several Baghdad neighborhoods.

More recently, Shiite militias have been battling alongside the forces of President Bashar Assad and Lebanon's Shiite Hezbollah against mostly Sunni rebels and militants in neighboring Syria. Some of them have returned home to Iraq — first to fight Sunni militants in Anbar province, and now on Baghdad's northern fringes and in Salahuddin and Nineveh provinces.

Those are the areas where the Sunni militants from the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, or ISIL, captured cities and towns in a lightning offensive last week. Among their gains were Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city, and Tikrit, the hometown of Saddam Hussein.

Security officials said Shiite militiamen have been fighting for months on the government's side against ISIL fighters in areas west of Baghdad in mainly Sunni Anbar province as well as parts of

Diyala province northeast of the capital. They also have been fighting Sunni militants south of Baghdad. Their involvement, however, has never been publicly acknowledged by the government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki.

Their enhanced role in the fight against the Sunni militants will deepen Iran's influence in Iraq, giving the non-Arab and mostly Shiite country a role similar to the one it plays in Syria. Tehran has thrown its weight behind Assad's government in his struggle against mostly Sunni rebels and militants from al-Qaeda-inspired or linked groups.

Shiite militiamen interviewed by The Associated Press in the past two days talk of undergoing training in Iran and then being flown to Syria to fight on the government's side. Once there, they say they are met by Iranian operatives who give them weapons and their assignment.

The militiamen, interviewed separately, paint a picture of their groups as being inspired by what they call a "grave" threat to their community. They say they have been motivated by the call to arms by their most revered cleric, the Iranian-born Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani.

Ominously, they don't see the ISIL as their sole enemy; they also list Iraqi Sunnis whom they accuse of supporting the al-Qaeda-inspired group in areas now under the militants' control.

Their comments also suggest a high level of acquiescence by al-Maliki's Shiite-led government. Six years ago, the government battled the Shiite militias in Basra to establish his authority and project his image as a national leader.

Now, al-Maliki publicly meets with militia leaders, like Qais al-Khazali of the Iranian-backed Asaib Ahl al-Haq, or League of the Righteous, a group that staged some spectacular attacks against U.S. troops before their withdrawal in 2011.

Hadi al-Amiri, a Shiite Cabinet minister who once led the Badr Brigade militia, created

by Iran and trained by its Revolutionary Guard in the 1980s, is now a close ally of al-Maliki and personally directs battles against militants in Diyala province northeast of Baghdad, where he won a parliament seat in April elections.

After years of repeated assurances that the Badr Brigade had ceased to exist as a militia, bearded men in military uniform bearing its insignia appeared on state-run TV last week, standing shoulder-to-shoulder with army troops.

The militiamen and their leaders offer a glimpse of what may be in store following the fighters' public empowerment. "Anyone who supports or sympathizes with the ISIL is a terrorist," Abu Wareth al-Moussawi, a spokesman for the Iraqi al-Nugabaa militia, told the AP from Iran. "We will never allow ISIL to control Iraq, and we will target anyone who supports it."

Jassim al-Jazaeri, a senior leader of the Iranian-backed Hezbollah Brigades, a Shiite militia based in southern Iraq, blames the loss of territory in the north partially on Sunni political leaders. "We know that ISIL has a base of support in Mosul," he said.

Since al-Sistani made his call to arms Friday through a representative, Shiite militias have flexed their muscles on the streets of Baghdad and in cities across the mostly Shiite south, including Basra. There were parades of pickup trucks carrying armed fighters chanting Shiite slogans and vowing to crush the ISIL.

Radical and anti-American Shiite leader Muqtada al-Sadr, whose Mahdi army fought some street battles against the Americans, has called for parades of Shiite militiamen across Iraq next weekend, evidence of their empowerment.

"The defense of Iraq and its people and holy sites is a duty on every citizen who can carry arms and fight terrorists," said al-Sistani's representative, Sheikh Abdul-Mahdi al-Karbalai, in a Friday sermon. "They must volunteer in the security forces for this holy cause."

## CPS Re-Examining Child Endangerment

DENVER (AP) — A Colorado man loses custody of his children after getting a medical marijuana card. The daughter of a Michigan couple growing legal medicinal pot is taken by child-protection authorities after an ex-husband says their plants endangered kids.

And police officers in New Jersey visit a home after a 9-year-old mentions his mother's hemp advocacy at school.

While the cases were eventually decided in favor of the parents, the incidents underscore a growing dilemma: While a pot plant in the basement may not bring criminal charges in many states, the same plant can become a piece of evidence in child custody or abuse cases.

"The legal standard is always the best interest of the children, and you can imagine how subjective that can get," said Jess Cochrane, who helped found Boston-based Family Law & Cannabis Alliance after finding child-abuse laws have been slow to catch up with pot policy.

No data exist to show how often pot use comes up in custody disputes, or how often child-welfare workers intervene in homes where marijuana is used.

## Foes Of Gay Marriage Vow To Fight On

For foes of same-sex marriage, their losing streak keeps growing. Some sense a lost cause, others vow to fight on.

On Election Day in 2012, they went 0-for-4 on state ballot measures. A year ago, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the federal government must recognize same-sex marriages. And over the past seven months, more than a dozen federal and state judges have struck down part or all of state-level bans on gay marriage, with no rulings going the other way.

Faced with these developments, some longtime opponents of gay marriage now say that its nationwide legalization via a Supreme Court ruling is inevitable. Others refuse to concede, and some leaders of that cohort will be rallying Thursday at a March for Marriage in Washington that they hope will draw many thousands.

The event's main sponsor is the National Organization for Marriage, which engaged in several successful state campaigns against gay marriage prior to the 2012 votes in Maine, Maryland, Minnesota and Washington state that reversed the tide.

NOM is promoting the march with a website that evokes a "road to victory" and a video featuring dramatic background music.

## Hamas militants Accused Of Kidnapping

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israel's prime minister on Sunday accused the Hamas militant group of kidnapping three Israeli teenagers who disappeared over the weekend, as the military arrested dozens of Palestinians and closed off West Bank roads in a frantic search for the youths.

The crisis escalated already heightened tensions between Israel and the new Palestinian government, which is headed by Western-backed President Mahmoud Abbas but backed by Hamas. Israel, which considers Hamas a terrorist group, has condemned the alliance and said it holds Abbas responsible for the teens' safety.

"Hamas terrorists carried out Thursday's kidnapping of three Israeli teenagers. We know that for a fact," Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said. "Hamas denials do not change this fact."

Speaking in English, Netanyahu also tried to rally international opinion against the new Palestinian government. His calls for the international community to shun the government have been ignored so far.

"Instead of abiding by his international obligation to disarm Hamas, President Abbas has chosen to make Hamas his partner," he added. "I believe that the dangers of that pact now should be abundantly clear to all."

## Pope Laments A 'Tired' Europe; Decries Joblessness

**BY FRANCES D'EMILIO**  
Associated Press

ROME (AP) — Pope Francis on Sunday criticized Europe for becoming what he called "tired" because of low birth rates and the increasing numbers of young people who neither work nor study.

Francis delivered the harsh assessment as he visited an ancient Rome basilica in Trastevere, a traditionally working-class neighborhood that is also home to a Catholic organization, Sant'Egidio Community, whose volunteers help the elderly, immigrants and other needy.

Francis said Europe often "discards" both its elderly, by shunting them aside, and its young, by failing to provide work.

"A people which doesn't care for its elderly, which doesn't take care of its young people, is a people without a future, a people without hope," Francis said.

The pope said by helping both young and old, "you begin to renew society."

As he did earlier in the day, when he addressed tens of thousands of faithful in St. Peter's Square, Francis asked for others' prayers.

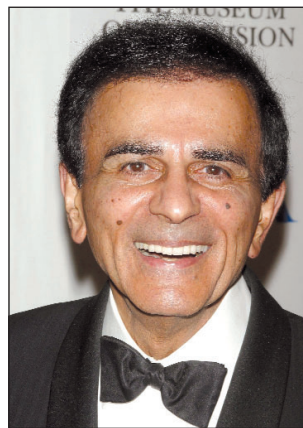
"You need to pray for me in overtime," Francis quipped.

Last week, Francis canceled two days of meetings after coming down with what the Vatican would only describe as a "mild" illness. He was back in the public eye Wednesday, appearing to hold up well in the hot, humid heat during his weekly audience.

Earlier Sunday, Francis announced he had accepted an invitation to go to Albania in September. In August, he flies to South Korea for events that include a jamboree with Catholic youths.

## Kasem Was An Island Of Calm

**BY ANTHONY MCCARTNEY AND DAVID BAUDER**  
AP Entertainment Writers



MYLAN RYBA/GLOBE PHOTOS VIA ZUMA PRESS/MCT  
**Casey Kasem, the voice of the syndicated show "American Top 40" died Sunday morning at age 82.**

LOS ANGELES (AP) — In pop culture, Casey Kasem was as sweet and dependable as a glass of warm milk and a plate of chocolate chip cookies, which only made the ugliness of his last few years of life seem more bizarre and tragic.

The radio host of "American Top 40" and voice of animated television characters like Scooby-Doo's sidekick Shaggy died Sunday morning at a hospital in Gig Harbor, Washington. He was 82. He suffered from a form of dementia, and his three adult children from his first wife fought a bitter legal battle with Kasem's second wife, Jean, over control of his health care in his final months.

That made Kasem a fixture on news outlets that feed on the sleazier side of celebrity life at a time when it wasn't clear he was aware of it or even able to understand.

This wouldn't seem all that remarkable for a bad-behaving pop star or actor who shed spouses with the frequency of changing characters. But this was Casey Kasem, whose work epitomized the gentler, romantic side of pop culture, of a time when stars were admired for their celebrity and worshipped for their talent.

"American Top 40," with Kasem's soft, homey voice counting down the hits, was a refuge from shock jocks or the screaming big-city radio voices. It was dependable, broadcast on some 1,000 stations at its peak, so if you were driving in Connecticut or Kansas, California or Kentucky, you could always take a

measure of the pop charts with Casey.

Kasem weaved stories around the songs, anecdotes about interactions with fans or gee-whiz tales about how stars got their starts. Seldom was heard a discouraging word, unless it was a starting point for a narrative about coming back from hardship, the darkness before the dawn.

Interspersed in the countdowns were the long-distance dedications, songs played for a long-lost or distant lover in the hope a heart would be stirred. You'd wince at some of the hokey song selections, but only the truly cynic would laugh at the emotion that spilled out of the letters Kasem read.

At the end of the show, always, would come Kasem's signature words of advice: "Keep your feet on the ground, and keep reaching for the stars."

On the first "American Top 40" in July 1970, Kasem

counted down to Three Dog Night's "Mama Told Me Not to Come" at the No. 1 spot. As the years went on, Kasem progressed through disco and punk, arena rock and rap. All were welcome under Casey's big tent.

Kasem was of Lebanese descent, born in Detroit as Kemal Amin Kasem, and he spoke out on issues promoting greater understanding of Arab-Americans throughout his life. He made his name as a disc jockey, and when his career blossomed in the Los Angeles area, he took on other voice work. He was Robin in the animated "Batman" series. He once said his work on "Scooby-Doo" would outlast anything he did.

He was succeeded at "American Top 40" in 2004 by Ryan Seacrest, a fan who said he used to imitate Kasem counting down the hits when he was a boy.

"When decades later I took over his AT40 countdown show, it was a surreal moment," Seacrest said in a statement. "Casey had a distinctive friendly on-air voice, and he was just as affable and nice if you had the privilege to be in his company. He'll be greatly missed by all of us."

"Scooby-Doo" may last longer, but we'll bet Kasem will most be remembered for "American Top 40" and his place in the continuum of pop music accounting, from "American Bandstand" to "Soul Train," "Total Request Live" to Spotify playlists.

Hard feelings being what they are, it's difficult to imagine the fight between the people Kasem is leaving behind will simply end with his death. Kasem, at least, is at peace.

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