

Back into the Shadows? The Future of Kata'ib Hezbollah and Iran's Other Proxies in Iraq

By Michael Knights

Kata'ib Hezbollah was Iran's most favored militant group in Iraq from its formation in the mid-2000s until the death of its founder Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis on January 3, 2020. Yet, the activities and influence of al-Muhandis and KH were not synonymous, as has been shown since his death. KH is still the engine room of anti-U.S. attacks in Iraq, but it is less politically agile and operates in a more hostile counterterrorism environment where deniability and secrecy have become more important again. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force is also leaning on a more diversified model in Iraq, drawing on non-KH factions like Saraya al-Jihad and Saraya al-Ashura, and engaging more directly with Iraq's minorities, including Sunni communities and the Shi'a Kurdish Faylis and Turkmen. History may be repeating itself as Iran develops new smaller and more secure Iraqi cells that are reminiscent of the formation of Kata'ib Hezbollah itself.

Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH) is at the forefront of U.S. threat assessments due to an increasing drumbeat of militia attacks on U.S. interests in Iraq and the approaching anniversary of both the December 31, 2019, assault on the U.S. embassy in Baghdad and the January 3, 2020, killing of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force (IRGC-QF) commander Qassem Soleimani and Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) vice chairman Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis.¹ If militias continue to strike U.S. targets, Washington has threatened

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to close the embassy and retaliate against tens of militia targets in Iraq, of which a significant proportion would likely be KH leaders and sites. On October 10, 2020, general spokesman of KH Muhammed Mohyee announced a "conditional truce" with U.S. forces in Iraq in an effort to reduce political pressure on the movement to cease its attacks, which Mohyee admitted had been brought to a head by the U.S. threat.²

Two days later, a senior KH leader Abu Ali al-Askari encouraged Iraqi militias to continue reconnaissance and preparations to strike American targets in Iraq and "Zion-American" aircraft over Iraq if the United States does not withdraw from the country.³ The untidy stream of messages originating from different centers within KH these days is one indication that the group is becoming less cohesive and more erratic.

At this point, it is especially valuable to look closer at KH, separating myth from reality to the greatest extent possible in the case of such a secretive organization. In August 2019, this author concluded that "the central nervous system of IRGC-QF influence in Iraq is Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and Kata'ib Hezbollah," suggesting a synonymous capability, which arguably oversimplified the relationship.⁴ Now, nearly a year after al-Muhandis's death, there has been an opportunity to observe KH operating without the benefit of al-Muhandis's political top-cover. In the author's experience, since al-Muhandis died, there has also been a slight opening-up of Iraqis's willingness to talk privately on the issue of al-Muhandis, KH, and the other *fasa'il* (Arabic for armed groups, used in Iraq to describe the militias that have existed prior to the formation of the PMF). Some KH leaders have become more visible due to their involvement in the PMF, in assaults on the government, or in the suppression of protestors. This has allowed investigation of al-Muhandis's real relationship to KH, the parsing of al-Muhandis's influence versus KH's, and the assessment of KH's future role and relations with the IRGC-QF.

In an intensive multi-year research effort, building on increasingly detailed previous *CTC Sentinel* articles,⁵ the author undertook two interlinked research processes in the 2018-2020 period.

First, the author visited Iraq on six occasions and interviewed over 30 security officials and politicians. The conversations were substantive, usually over an hour of focused discussion on militia issues and particularly KH. The interviewees included very senior politicians, many of which were Shi'a leaders with strong ties to IRGC-QF. Many were interviewed multiple times, with very detailed notes taken. All the interviews were undertaken on deep background due to the severe physical security threat posed by militias, and great care was taken, and is needed in future, to ensure that such individuals are not exposed to intimidation for cooperat-

ing with research.^a

Alongside face-to-face interviews, the author also undertook a dense web of communications with Iraqi interviewees using secure messaging applications, amounting to hundreds of specific information requests to verify data and multi-source points of detail, as well as secure transfer of large tranches of data and imagery. The author used his 16-year track record of interviewing Iraqis to assess information. The below analysis is the product of a synthesized intelligence process.

This article has been broken into eight sections. In Part 1, the article will review how KH was formed, what niche it filled, and what role al-Muhandis played in forming the movement. Part 2 looks at the visible impact of al-Muhandis's death on KH, and Part 3 looks at the internal power balance within KH at the time of writing. Part 4 looks at the significant non-military aspects of the KH family of institutions that survive al-Muhandis, and Part 5 describes the geographic focus of KH military forces. Part 6 looks at the role that KH Special Operations plays in Iranian power projection through missiles and terrorism. Part 7 looks at the narrow but important part that KH plays in the suppression of protests and other human rights violations. Part 8 draws together the study's key findings and suggests the most likely ways that KH, other *fasa'il*, and the IRGC-QF and Lebanese Hezbollah networks will adapt in the near future.

Part 1: Reassessing the Timeline: al-Muhandis, the Fasa'il, and KH

Due to the importance of personal and factional history and relations, it is important to start any exploration of the nature of KH and its relationship with al-Muhandis by going back to the very beginning and taking a fresh look at the history of the movement and its founder. The origins of KH are the Iraqi-formed Islamic Da'awa Party (Hizb al-Da'awa al-Islamiya in Arabic) and the Iran-formed Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq or SCIRI^b (Al-Majlis al-A'ala li-Thawra al-Islamiyya fi al-Iraq). During the years of opposition to the Baathist regime in Iraq (between 1968 and 2003), Da'awa developed its own "mujahideen" covert operations arm.^c Working in concert with Iranian intelligence, the "mujahideen" force undertook a number of terrorist attacks in Kuwait in

- a Iran-backed militias pay close attention to what is written about them and who says it and who interviewers meet. This is especially evident after the July 6, 2020, murder by militiamen of Iraq's premier militia-watcher, Hisham al-Hashemi. Militia monitoring extends to foreign analysts. Answering a question about Western think-tanks, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis noted on January 13, 2019, "They have a writer, Michael Knights, who is an expert who has seen some of my friends but that I have not seen yet. He has great expertise and is truly very specific. He has very specific and exceptional information." See "The Strategic Experts Union Hosting Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis to Discuss Security Challenges," posted to YouTube by "War Media Team – The Popular Mobilization," January 15, 2019, accessed January 18, 2020.
- b SCIRI changed its name to the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (Al-Majlis Al-A'ala Al-Islami Al-Iraqi) in 2009.
- c Walter Posch has also referred to the Da'awa "mujahideen" as an obscure militant fringe of Da'awa and a component of Badr. See Walter Posch, "Iraq and Iraq: Revolutionary Guards and PMUs (translated by Christopher Schonberger)," National Defense Academy (Vienna, Austria), Institute for Peace Support and Conflict Management, 2020, p. 7.

1983.^d One of the Iraqis accused of involvement, and later sentenced to death in absentia by Kuwait,^e was Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis (real name Jamal Ja'far Muhammad Ali Al-Ibrahim).⁷

In parallel to covert operations, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) developed a conventional military wing for SCIRI, the Badr Brigade (Failaq Badr),^e that fought against Saddam-led Iraq as part of the IRGC order of battle in the Iran-Iraq War. Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis was the assistant commander of Badr by 2002, meaning that he ran day-to-day operations.^f Today's head of Badr, Hadi al-Ameri, was al-Muhandis's chief of staff at the time.⁸ Mustafa Abd'al Hamid Hussein al-Otabi (also known as Abu Mustafa al-Sheibani or Hamid Thajeel Wareij Al-Attabi)⁹ commanded the Baghdad "axis" of Badr,¹⁰ and Badr's fourth "division" was commanded¹¹ by Abu Muntadher al-Husseini (real name: Tahseen Abid Mutar al-Abboudi, today's PMF operations director).¹² Al-Muhandis's experience leading Badr—in the war, and in guerrilla operations against Saddam's regime afterward—created networks that would later feed recruits to KH and support its operations.

The 'Incubators' for Special Groups in Iraq

In late 2002, al-Muhandis took leave from Badr, seemingly due to his unwillingness to openly work in Iraq alongside the United States in a post-invasion scenario.¹³ Whether ideologically motivated or due to the risk of arrest for prior terrorist activities, al-Muhandis and al-Sheibani did not enter Iraq with their Badr contemporaries in 2003 but instead worked on immediate post-war priorities such as retribution operations against the Mujaheddin-e Khalq (MeK) (a Saddam-backed Iranian opposition group that was sent into Iran to kill Badr members)¹⁴ and against Iraqi pilots accused of bombing Badr and Shi'a rebels.^g

Al-Muhandis became an independent MP in the January 2005 elections, avoiding U.S. notice until the spring of 2007, by which time he was a second-term MP, having been re-elected in the December 2005 elections. Al-Muhandis was the liaison with IRGC-QF and a security advisor to prime minister Ibrahim al-Ja'afari

- d On December 12, 1983, U.S. and French embassies in Kuwait were struck by suicide car bombs, part of a seven-car bomb attack sequence that was launched by Iran, Lebanese Hezbollah, and Iraqi Shi'a militants. Magnus Ranstorp, *Hizb'allah in Lebanon: The Politics of the Western Hostage Crisis* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 1997), p. 63. See also Robin Wright, *Sacred Rage: The Wrath of Militant Islam* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001), p. 112.
- e Badr changed its name to the Badr Organization of Reconstruction and Development (Munathemaat badr li al-l'mar wa al-Bina'a) in 2012 during its split from its parent organization, the aforementioned Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, formerly known as the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq.
- f Mohammed Baqir al-Hakim, the head of SCIRI, was dual-hatted as the commander of Badr, but he was not involved in military and paramilitary operations in practice. See the detailed 2002 Iraqi intelligence profile of Badr, Harmony document ISGQ-2005-00038283, "Full Translation, Intelligence Services: Study of Badr Corps 9," Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, pp. 6, 32, 73.
- g Very soon after the 2003 U.S. invasion, al-Muhandis and al-Sheibani appear to have played a hand in early covert Shi'a assassination cells like Jaish al-Mukhtar (named after the man who created an armed group to avenge the killing of Imam Hussein) and Saraya al-Qasar (Punishment Battalions), which killed Iraqi pilots. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi political and security figures, 2018-2020 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees).

during his term from May 2005 to May 2006, the main point of contact between the Iraqi fighters and IRGC senior commanders like Qassem Soleimani.¹⁵ Alongside the older soldier-statesman al-Muhandis, the aforementioned Abu Mustafa al-Sheibani was the younger^h logistical commander, leading what the Americans would call “the Sheibani network.”¹⁶

According to multiple well-informed observers, al-Muhandis should be considered a founding father of most of the anti-coalition Shi`a militant groups, credited with implementing IRGC-QF’s up-arming of the Jaish al-Mahdi (JAM) in the 2004 twin uprisings and later the splintering-off of Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) from the ranks of JAM’s hardliners. As one interviewee with a closeness to KH suggested: “Badr was the first incubator ... then the Mahdi Army” [i.e., JAM]. As the quote suggests, both Badr and JAM were used as a recruitment pool for anti-coalition networks directed and administered by IRGC-QF, as Badr had been since the 1980s.

Formation of Kata’ib Hezbollah

The formal establishment of KH, with its prestigious nameⁱ and iconography¹⁷ modeled on Lebanese Hezbollah,^j was driven by a number of developments. As Hamdi Malik has noted, IRGC-QF sought a more disciplined and operationally secure network than JAM or AAH. Between December 2006 and September 2007, a new U.S. special operations task force captured a range of IRGC-QF and Special Group commanders in Iraq.¹⁸ In the same period, al-Muhandis fled Iraq when his identity was publicly revealed and Kuwait prosecuted him (in absentia) for terrorist charges from 1983.¹⁹ Al-Sheibani’s brother was captured by coalition forces in April 2007,²⁰ and Abu Mustapha al-Sheibani was himself designated by the United States as a terrorist in September 2007.²¹

The inner circle of the new KH movement were handpicked

fighters from five groups: Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade,^k Kata’ib Karbala, Kata’ib Zaid ibn Ali, Kata’ib Ali al-Akbar, and Kata’ib al-Sajjad.²² Prior to 2007, these were sometimes referred to in coalition intelligence as “the House of Five.” (Other smaller Shi`a militias included but were not limited to Saraya al-Mukhtar, Saraya al-Qasar, 15th Sha’aban, Harakat Hezbollah fi al-Iraq, and Harakat Sayyid al-Shuhada.) In Iran, at an IRGC-QF camp in Kermanshah, al-Muhandis built the initial cadre, aided by IRGC-QF and Lebanese Hezbollah trainers.²³

KH set a new standard for operational security. Prior to U.S. withdrawal in 2011, KH never became larger than around 400 members.²⁴ Most of the members were Badr veterans with property and family in Iran, but Sadrist hardliners joined as well.²⁵ Entrants were accepted only by the personal recommendation and guarantee of another member, a form of vetting through family and tribal networks.²⁶

In 2007-2011, the remaining years of the U.S. presence, Kata’ib Hezbollah attack cells undertook many of the most advanced and effective attacks against coalition forces: deadly Improvised Rocket-Assisted Mortar (IRAM) attacks on U.S. bases using disguised launch vehicles;²⁷ the hacking of a U.S. Predator control signal;²⁸ and even an Explosively-Formed Penetrator (EFP) attack on a U.K. Hercules aircraft on a runway in Maysan.²⁹ In recognition of this status, KH and al-Muhandis were designated for terrorism by the United States in December 2009, which reinforced the sense that the two were synonymous.³⁰ Until the last U.S. soldier left, KH kept up active “resistance” operations. In June 2011, Kata’ib Hezbollah surged attacks against U.S. forces and killed 15 U.S. personnel in an apparent effort to ensure U.S. departure from Iraq.³¹

Syria and the Islamic State: KH Evolution in 2012-2014

The withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq at the end of 2011 might have left KH without a mission and posed an existential quandary, were it not for the movement’s transnational alignment with the so-called “Axis of Resistance”—Iran, Lebanese Hezbollah, the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria, and related Iran-backed militias and militants. In addition to training and equipping Bahraini and Saudi Shi`a militants³² to fight their respective Sunni-led governments, KH also joined other pro-Iranian factions in its non-state intervention in Syria’s Civil War. In Syria, al-Muhandis and KH would have the opportunity to repay the debt of the Iraqi *fasa’il*

h In Middle Eastern society, and thus in the region’s militant networks, age is often an important indicator of seniority in personal relations. Al-Muhandis was born in 1954, a significant amount older than al-Sheibani, who was born in 1959 or 1960. Within Badr, even a five-year head-start differentiated those who were there as the movement formed versus those of a later generation, or between those who did fight in the Iran-Iraq War, and those who did not. See U.S. Treasury Department designations for birthdates.

i One Iraqi group had previously used the moniker Hezbollah: this was Harakat Hezbollah fi al-Iraq (Hezbollah Movement in Iraq), a tribal militia based in Maysan. It was tied to Abdel-Karim al-Mohammadawi, the so-called “Prince of the Marshes,” but operationally led by Hassan al-Sari, who is discussed later in this study. See Phillip Smyth, “Should Iraq’s ISCI Forces Really Be Considered ‘Good Militias?’” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, August 17, 2016. See also Michael Knights and Ed Williams, “The Calm before the Storm: The British Experience in Southern Iraq,” *Policy Focus* 66, February 2007, p. 15; Colin Freeman, “Iraqi Lord of the Marshes Ordered Killing of Police Chief,” *Telegraph*, June 6, 2004; and Rory Stewart, *Occupational Hazards: My Time Governing in Iraq* (London: Picador, 2006), p. 422.

j KH’s formation bears some strong resemblances to the building of Lebanese Hezbollah. It was an effort by Iran to bring resistance factions under one roof, it built on preexisting groups and clans, it focused on operational security and secrecy, and it required graduation through IRGC-run camps. Matthew Levitt, *Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon’s Party of God Paperback* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2015), pp. 9-15.

k In 2014, Muhanad al-Ghazi described Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas as “the nucleus” of KH, being a Special Group formed with special input from Imad Mughniyeh. Muhanad al-Ghazi, “Special Report on KH-Iraq,” Ahewar, October 2, 2014. This is not the same as the Abu Fadl Al-Abbas brigade that served as a centerpiece for Iraqi fighters in Syria. See Phillip Smyth, “The Shiite Jihad in Syria and Its Regional Effects,” *Policy Focus* 138, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 2015. See also Michael Knights, “Iran’s Foreign Legion: The Role of Iraqi Shiite Militias in Syria,” *PolicyWatch* 2096, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 28, 2013.

(armed groups) to Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah,^l both of which were severely pressured by the near-collapse of Assad's authority.

As Aymenn Al-Tamimi has chronicled, the fighters transferred from Iraq initially operated under "an entity known as al-Quwwa al-Haydariya (The Haydari Force), composed of imported contingents of Iraqi fighters from Kata'ib Hezbollah, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada'. The Haydari Force had a direct relationship with Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and apparently had a wider scale of operations inside Syria beyond the Damascus area (e.g. Aleppo), in contrast with Liwa Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas."³³

In Syria, the best-performing Iraqi units in the Haydari Force were Kata'ib Hezbollah, Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba,³⁴ and the new Abu Mustafa al-Sheibani project,^m Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada (KSS), while some Badr and AAH units sent to Syria were reputedly less effective in this expeditionary role.³⁵ Effective service in Syria propelled KH, Nujaba, and KSS into pole position among the *fasa'il*.³⁶

The need for a larger combat force in Syria was one driver for the expansion of KH from 400 in 2011 to around 2,500 in Syria alone in 2013, albeit with the latter recruiting heavily from Syrian Shi'a from threatened localities such as al-Fu'a and Kafariya in Idlib province.³⁷ According to an Aymenn Al-Tamimi interview with a Syrian KH fighter, the KH formation in Syria was titled "Kata'ib Hezbollah – Syrian Front."ⁿ In later years, KH fighters would move fluidly between allocation to KH units to Syria, and detachment to the Iranian *Ruhollah* (meaning in Farsi spirit of God) division of the IRGC in Syria.³⁸ KH would suffer unprecedented numbers of casualties in Syria compared to the prior losses inflicted on its

covert cells by U.S. forces in Iraq.^p

Al-Muhandis's Elevation During the War Against the Islamic State

Back in Iraq, al-Muhandis had domestic ambitions for KH's next stage. When U.S. leverage began to wane in 2010, al-Muhandis returned to Iraq and ensconced himself in the Green Zone, cultivating a very close relationship with then Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki.³⁹ As the deterioration of security unfolded in 2012 and 2013, al-Maliki began to rely on the *fasa'il* (KH, AAH, KSS, Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (HaN), Kataib al-Imam Ali, and Kataib Jund al-Imam) for auxiliary forces.⁴⁰ Al-Muhandis began to lobby al-Maliki to raise a new state-funded force called the Popular Defense Brigades (Saraya al-Dif'a al-Sha'abi) to operate under the prime minister's command, alongside the conventional armed forces.⁴¹ In this period, KH fighters in Iraq rose in number to around 750 (from 400 in 2011).⁴²

Al-Muhandis jumped quickly on the opportunity of Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's June 13, 2014, *fatwa* (religious edict) for mass mobilization against the Islamic State⁴³ to secure state funding for the 160,000-strong Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF).⁴ A consummate political actor with strong support from IRGC-QF commander Qassem Soleimani, al-Muhandis immediately took control of the PMF as its chief executive and vice chairman, somewhat similar to his aforementioned role as the deputy—but actually the day-to-day leader—of Badr. As this author has detailed in *CTC Sentinel* and later in a major co-authored monograph,⁴⁴ within the PMF al-Muhandis controlled the largest single slice of staff roles, operational commands, combat units, and enablers (missiles, anti-tank, engineering, and intelligence). As later sections will note, KH was at the center of al-Muhandis's network of control and was trusted with the most sensitive roles inside the PMF.

Kata'ib Hezbollah's combat forces enlarged hugely with the formation of PMF brigades 45, 46, and 47 (a total force of around 7,500 fighters), plus the aforementioned KH-Syrian Front force of 2,500 fighters, for a total of 10,000.⁴⁵ This huge and sudden expansion made KH a truly well-known and popular force for the first time, though many of its initial burst of new recruits were still

l As a Badr commander prior to 2002, al-Muhandis had a strong professional relationship with Imad Mughniyeh and other Lebanese Hezbollah operatives, notably Specially Designated Global Terrorists Mohammed al-Kawtharani and Adnan Hussein Kawtharani. On Mughniyeh, see Hamdi Malik, "The Still-Growing Threat of Iran's Chosen Proxy in Iraq," War on the Rocks, October 5, 2020. On the Kawtharanis, see "Action Targets Hizballah's Leadership Responsible for Operations Outside of Lebanon," U.S. Department of the Treasury, October 22, 2013, and "Treasury Sanctions Key Hizballah, IRGC-QF Networks in Iraq," U.S. Department of the Treasury, November 13, 2018.

m Al-Sheibani had become sick around 2010 and struggled to return to his top position in KH due to rivalries with younger commanders. Qassem Soleimani encouraged him to start a new project focused on Syria, which became Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada, which to this day has fraternal relations with KH and shares a common religious reference, a Karbala-based cleric Mohammed al-Safi. Later, around 2014, al-Sheibani handed off command of Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada to Abu Alaa al-Walaji and moved on to a role advising Iraq's Minister of Interior Mohammed Ghabban. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi political and security figures, 2016-2020 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees).

n Al-Tamimi's interviewee listed KH's Syrian battlefields as Aleppo, Deir al-Zor, Albukamal, Idlib, Zabadani, and al-Ghouta. Also, the interviewee names his formation as the "fifth regiment," which may be an allusion to being the fifth regiment of one of KH's PMF brigades (which each have four regiments in Iraq). See Aymenn Al-Tamimi, "Kata'ib Hezbollah's Syrian Wing: Interview," aymennjawad.org, November 17, 2018.

o Interestingly, the fighter interviewed by Al-Tamimi said he was from PMF brigade 46, one of the new KH brigades raised since 2014, underlining that Syrian cadres can come from any KH unit, not just the praetorian eponymously-named PMF brigade 45 – Kata'ib Hezbollah, the original military cadre. Ibid.

p Ali Alfoneh, a meticulous recorder of militia deaths in Iraq and Syria, concludes that between August 2012 and July 2018, KSS suffered 88 killed in Syria. Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba lost 192 killed in Syria according to Alfoneh. Kata'ib Hezbollah fatalities are not known, but must constitute a significant chunk of the 2,129 Iraqi Shi'a militia deaths in Syria that could not be allocated by Alfoneh to other groups, as KH is the only major contributing Iraqi Shi'a militia force not explicitly itemized by Alfoneh by group. The author has been tracking Kata'ib Hezbollah operations since 2008. The U.S. and Iraqi governments never managed to inflict more than a handful of Kata'ib Hezbollah casualties each year from 2007-2011, making the Syrian losses of a different magnitude entirely. See Alfoneh's metrics in Ali Alfoneh, "Iran's Support for Iraqi Shia Militias Ensures Dependency and Loyalty," Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, September 12, 2018, pp. 9-10.

q The PMF are the volunteer forces adopted into government service in June 2014, some of which were pre-PMF *fasa'il* and others who were new volunteers in the war against the Islamic State. For the definitive review of the PMF, its legal basis, organization, strengths, and weaknesses, see Michael Knights, Hamdi Malik, and Aymenn Al-Tamimi, "Honored, Not Contained: The Future of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces," *Policy Focus* 163, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2020.



A supporter of an Iran-backed militia holds a poster of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani and deputy commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis during a protest by pro-Iranian militiamen and their supporters in Baghdad, Iraq, on October 17, 2020. (Khalid Mohammed/AP Photo)

unaware of the nature of the movement^r at the time in the chaos of the 2014 mobilization, when recruits were randomly assigned to PMF units at mobilization hubs like Taji and Samarra.⁴⁶

As Hamdi Malik recently uncovered, the expansion resulted in the refinement of a tiered membership of KH. High-level commanders were referred to as a maternal uncle (*al-Khaal*).^s (Malik states that al-Muhandis had a unique title, “the senior” (*al-Shayeb*)).⁴⁷ The trusted inner circle of KH operators is a layer of mentors called “teachers” (*muallim*).⁴⁸ Reporting to these mentors are “the bodies” (*ajsam*), who are vetted fighters with track record and some knowledge of how KH functions.⁴⁹ The vast majority of today’s KH members are “the numbers” (*arqam*), who are not trusted with information, even the real names of their direct com-

manders.⁵⁰ This new outer layer of members comprises what might be thought of as “big KH,” which is rather different from the tiny, highly-secure pre-2014 movement.

Al-Muhandis’s Changing Relations with KH

The war against the Islamic State brought other important changes for al-Muhandis that created distance between him and KH. Coordinating and managing the vast number of militias through the PMF became a constant drain on al-Muhandis’s time and attention. For the first time, he built strong relationships with key army commanders such as Lieutenant General Abdalamin Yarallah, then Iraqi deputy chief of staff for operations from 2014-2019.^t Al-Muhandis invested a lot of time in personally tightening relations with northern Iraqi Shi`a Turkmen^u and Shi`a Kurds (Fayli),^v plus the

^r As discussed by the author in a prior article in *CTC Sentinel*, “opinion polling from pre-2011 Iraq shows that Iraqis frequently found it hard to differentiate or remember differences between groups like Promised Day Brigades, Kata’ib Hezbollah, or Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq. Respondents were often unaware of the tight connections between Special Groups and the Iranian government.” Drawn from “A Survey of Public Perceptions of the Sadr Trend,” Human Terrain Team System, May 18, 2011, pp. 5-11. This set of surveys asked Iraqi respondents about a range of Shi`a extremist groups, their ties to Iran, and other reputational issues. See also Michael Knights, “Iran’s Expanding Militia Army in Iraq: The New Special Groups,” *CTC Sentinel* 12:7 (2019).

^s When *fasa’il* fighters assaulted the outer defenses of the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad on December 31, 2019, the phrase “the uncle passed here” was graffitied on the wall, sparking speculation that it referred to al-Muhandis or other KH leaders such as Abu Fadak, who will be discussed further below. In fact, it might have referred to any senior KH leader.

^t Yarallah frequently worked with al-Muhandis during the counter-Islamic State battles and found him refreshingly efficient and easy to work with, and (like Yarallah) hard-working. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi political and security figures, 2018-2020 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees).

^u As the author noted previously in *CTC Sentinel*, al-Muhandis came to dominate relations with the PMF Northern Axis, which is led by Abu Ridha Yilmaz al-Najjar and Mohammed Mahdi al-Bayati, both Shi`a Turkmen. See Knights, “Iran’s Expanding Militia Army in Iraq: The New Special Groups.” For background on the Turkmen, see “World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples: Turkmen,” Minority Rights Group International.

^v The Fayli Kurds are Shi`a Kurds, mainly present along the Iranian border, from Khanaqin to Badra. “World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples: Faily Kurds,” Minority Rights Group International.

Yazidi,^w Shabak,^x and Kaka'i^y communities, who were among the most threatened by the Islamic State. He also invested significant effort in cultivating new relationships with Sunni tribes across northern and western Iraq, notably major power brokers such as former Salah al-Din governor Ahmed al-Jabbouri (also known as Abu Mazen), Mishan al-Jabbouri, Khamis Khanjar, and the Karbouli family in Anbar.⁵¹

Of note, al-Muhandis *built such relationships for IRGC-QF, not for Kata'ib Hezbollah*. Relationships with Sunnis and other minority groups in northern Iraq were co-managed by al-Muhandis and a range of IRGC-QF officers, most notably Iranian ambassador to Baghdad Iraj Masjedi^{52 z} and the IRGC-QF northern Iraq controller Colonel Haj Ali Iqbalpour.⁵³ Al-Muhandis trustees including Shi'a Turkmen commanders Abu Ridha Yilmaz al-Najjar and Mohammed Mahdi al-Bayati were likewise drawn closer to al-Muhandis than to their nominal Badr leaders but not for KH's specific benefit.⁵⁴ These cases underline the way in which al-Muhandis had transcended his primary alignment with KH by the time the war against the Islamic State began to wind down. One Iraqi official with direct experience of KH told the author:

*Muhandis was not part of the KH leadership structure, but he oversaw it and continued to do so until his death. Though he directly supervised KH in Iraq, Muhandis was effectively the leader of all Iranian-affiliated militias in Iraq. His decisions governed all of them, not just KH-Iraq.*⁵⁵

Turning rapidly away from military affairs at the end of 2017, al-Muhandis was in the thick of Iraqi government formation following the June 2018 elections, quite literally vetting the candidates for president and prime minister and acting as a midwife to the process of birthing the new cabinet. Al-Muhandis was one of two major figures influencing Iraq's weak Prime Minister Adel Abd'al-Mahdi on a day-to-day basis, the other being Abu Jihad (real name Mohammed al-Hashemi), the prime minister's chief of staff.⁵⁶ Abd'al-Mahdi was strongly influenced by al-Muhandis and liked him, viewing him as unfairly penalized by the United States for Saddam-era actions in Kuwait.⁵⁷

As the war against the Islamic State tailed off, al-Muhandis began to develop a coercive instrument to force a consolidation process on the fractious militias—the Central Security Directorate of the PMF, under KH official Abu Zainab al-Lami (real name: Hus-

sein Falah Aziz al-Lami).⁵⁸ Al-Muhandis's vision for the PMF was one of consolidation into smaller, stronger units,⁵⁹ with some *fasa'il* detached to free themselves up for international activities in support of the so-called Axis of Resistance.

The IRGC-QF and al-Muhandis continued to trust KH operatives with key tasks—for instance, intelligence support for the October 2019 suppression of protests in Iraq,⁵⁹ and the May 2019 drone attacks on Saudi Arabia, which were facilitated by Kata'ib Hezbollah from within Iraq.⁶⁰ Likewise, Kata'ib Hezbollah secured the Tal Ashtah dispersal airfield—just west of Jawwalah (Rashad), 35 kilometers southwest of Kirkuk city—which the IRGC used to launch and recover surveillance drones⁶¹ “to designate targets for the September 8, 2018, precision rocket strike [by Iran] on the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) headquarters in Koya, in Iraqi Kurdistan, which killed 14 and wounded 42 oppositionists.”⁶² When a U.S. M-1 Abrams tank was partially deconstructed and pieces sent to Iran in November 2017, Kata'ib Hezbollah protected the Iranian technicians undertaking the process at Camp Sa'ad in Baqubah, Diyala.⁶³

KH's Return to Resistance after 2017

From the outset of the return of U.S. ‘boots on the ground’ in Iraq in 2014, KH ensured it was present to ‘shadow’ and observe such forces at every point of presence (except the Kurdistan Region of Iraq).⁶⁴ This staring match gave way to an active effort to expel U.S. forces from late 2017 onwards, as the physical Islamic State caliphate collapsed in Iraq and U.S. forces were no longer needed to support major combat operations.⁶⁵ Israel conducted strikes on KH in Syria in 2018, 2019, and 2020. At least one Israeli strike targeted KH missile transportation units inside Iraq in 2019.⁶⁴ Thus, by the middle of 2019, both the United States and Israel were focused on KH as their main adversary in Iraq, while KH viewed the U.S. Em-

w The Yazidis are a syncretic religion, mainly present in Sinjar, Mosul, and the northern edge of the Nineveh Plains. “World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples: Yezidis,” Minority Rights Group International.

x The Shabak are an ethnic group, almost exclusively present in eastern Mosul and the Nineveh Plains. “World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples: Shabak,” Minority Rights Group International. Al-Muhandis famously aided the 30th and 50th PMF brigades to refuse prime ministerial orders to leave the Nineveh Plains in 2018, even reinforcing them with tanks to bolster their position. See Knights, Malik, and Al-Tamimi, p. 106.

y The Kaka'i are a secretive religion similar in some ways to the Druze, living south of Kirkuk and in the Nineveh Plains. “World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples: The Kaka'i,” Minority Rights Group International.

z Masjedi has handled a lot of stakeholder engagement with provincial governors and Sunni groups, but (like al-Muhandis) he always previously had the figure of Soleimani standing behind him, bringing added authority, Iraq knowledge, and senior leader relationships. For an example of Masjedi's meetings, see Ahmad Majidyar, “Tehran's envoy to Baghdad meets Iraqi leaders in run-up to parliamentary vote,” Middle East Institute, April 6, 2018.

aa Al-Muhandis aimed initially to consolidate the 50-plus PMF brigades into around half that number, with standardized unit sizes. Of the 160,000 personnel in the PMF, he eventually expected to create a more disciplined and well-trained standing force of around 36,000, organized in 12 brigades and three divisions. He envisioned overseeing this core force (the brigades or *katibat*). Other *fowj* (smaller units, literally regiments) within the PMF might exist as reserve elements or part-time forces, and he envisioned that some groups would be absorbed by other services, disestablished or outlawed. He envisioned that a final subset—the “Mujahideen” groups or *fasa'il* al-Jihadiya—would exist outside the state and be tolerated as they undertook their transnational resistance to the United States, Israel, and Sunni Gulf States. The author interviewed many observers with direct access to al-Muhandis to piece together his vision for the PMF. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi political and security figures, plus Western analysts and diplomats, 2019-2020 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees).

ab KH had cells at U.S. points of presence, including Baghdad airport, Taqqudum, Taji, Al-Asad, and Besmaya, specifically to count U.S. forces and profile their movements. Author interview, Iraqi and U.S. officials, 2016-2019 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees).

ac Many interviewees from the Iraqi and coalition sides view the collapse of the ‘caliphate’ in Iraq in the late months of 2017 as the beginning of the end of the unofficial “truce” between KH and the United States. Of note, and perhaps connected, a U.S. army vehicle was destroyed by an EFP munition on October 1, 2017, killing one U.S. soldier, close to Camp Speicher, one of KH's main training hubs. The United States identified an Iranian-backed group—most likely KH—as the attacker. See Michael Knights, “Responding to Iranian Harassment of U.S. Facilities in Iraq,” *PolicyWatch* 3125, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, May 21, 2019.



Muhammed Mohyee, the spokesman of Iraq's Iranian-backed Kata'ib Hezbollah, gives an interview at his office, in Baghdad, Iraq, on December 30, 2019. (Nasser Nasser/AP Photo)

bassy in Baghdad as the controlling force behind the October 2019 protests and behind what was claimed to be an “electronic army of the U.S.”^{ad}

There are strong indicators that KH was gearing up for an escalation with the United States inside Iraq from October 2019 onwards, including the delivery from Iran, through the Iran-Iraq border, of at least four truck containers of unguided rockets of 107mm-, 122mm-, and 240mm-caliber, Manportable Air Defense Systems (MANPADS) and 70 anti-materiel rifles.⁶⁵ The United States attributed a heavy November 7, 2019, rocket attack on U.S. forces⁶⁶ and then the December 27, 2019, killing of an American to KH;^{ae} it retaliated on December 29, 2019, against KH in Syria and Iraq, killing 25 and wounding over 50 KH personnel, including four mid-level leaders.⁶⁷ The United States interpreted the December 31, 2019, assault on the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad as al-Muhandis- and KH-directed retaliation for the strike, which was a contributing factor to the U.S. decision to kill al-Muhandis and Soleimani on January 3, 2020.⁶⁸

Part 2: KH in the Aftermath of al-Muhandis's Death

Until recently, it was difficult to disaggregate the power of al-Muhandis from the power of KH. The death of al-Muhandis on January 3, 2020, alongside his superior Soleimani, gave the first look

ad An anti-U.S. politician refers to the “electronic army of the U.S. embassy” here: Suadad al-Salhy, “Third person dies as protests continue in Baghdad,” Arab News, October 4, 2019. The KH newspaper (al-Muraqib al-Iraqi) refers to “Kadhimi's Electronic Army, which is an integrated program sponsored by experts who work at the U.S. Embassy as advisers while they are officially working for the US Central Intelligence Agency.” See “The government wastes millions of dollars on electronic armies,” al-Muraqib al-Iraqi, July 12, 2020.

ae The U.S. State Department noted: “Most recently, on December 27, 2019, KH launched a rocket attack against an Iraqi military base near Kirkuk, killing Nawres Hamid, an American civilian contractor, and injuring four U.S. service members and two members of the Iraqi Security Forces.” “State Department Terrorist Designation of Ahmad al-Hamidawi,” Office of the Spokesperson, February 26, 2020. U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley said: “We know that the intent of this last attack was in fact to kill.” See Wesley Morgan, “‘The game has changed’: Defense secretary warns of preemptive strikes on Iranian group,” Politico, January 2, 2020.

at KH operating without the benefit of al-Muhandis's considerable political skills. KH did not show itself openly among the gaggle of *fasa'il* commanders^{af} that ran straight to Iran to meet Soleimani's successor IRGC-QF commander, Brigadier General Esmail Qaani, and to shelter and recover.⁶⁹ Of all the *fasa'il*, KH was immediately the most defiant in its tone and public communications, refusing to ‘go to ground’ like most of the other militias. KH has consistently pushed two objectives since the U.S. struck its forces on December 29, 2019, and particularly since al-Muhandis's death—to evict the United States and to prevent a strong pro-Western politician from becoming prime minister of Iraq.

Expelling U.S. Forces

KH has been the most public and persistent advocate of the eviction of U.S. military forces from Iraq, both prior to 2011 and since 2017. Even before al-Muhandis's death, KH undertook a widespread campaign of public and text message threats toward Iraqi MPs to pressure them to vote in favor of expelling U.S. forces from Iraq.⁷⁰ Intense intimidation preceded the January 5, 2020, vote to remove U.S. forces (which had no legal effect because of the lack of a quorum).⁷¹^{ag} (A KH commander Adnan al-Mohammadawi (inaccurately referred to as “Shaykh Adnan al-Hamidawi” in the U.S. identifying information^{ah}) was designated by the United States in connection to this effort.⁷²) KH mounted rallies against the U.S. presence and repeatedly chided other groups over their cautious approach toward the eviction of U.S. forces.⁷³ In early March 2020, KH warned all Iraqis to stay more than 1,500 meters away from coalition facilities by March 15 that year, or risk attack by KH.⁷⁴

KH has been much coy about what attacks it actually undertakes;^{ai} it has not claimed a single attack on the United States, and has actively denied at least one⁷⁵ (a March 11, 2020, rocket attack on Camp Taji, which killed two American troops and one British soldier^{aj}). Clearly some of the 57 known rocket attacks on U.S. and

af These included Abu Ala al-Walal of Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada; Akram Kaabi of Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba; Laith al-Khazali of AAH; and Sheikh Sami Massoudi (deputy Hajj and Umrah commissioner and Iraqi aide to Qassem Soleimani). See Will Fulton, “Leaders of 'Iraqi resistance groups' met in Qom yesterday to discuss events in Iraq and their path forward ...,” Twitter, January 14, 2020.

ag One observer stated that MPs received threatening SMS and WhatsApp messages to attend, yet still did not do so. This is credible from this author's point of view. A Kurdish and Sunni boycott denied the session from reaching quorum but a symbolic motion to evict forces was registered by a large majority of Shi'a MPs. Bilal Wahab, “Here, Photo analysis of #Iraq parliament session on Sunday: 167 MPs needed for quorum; 130 were present ...,” Twitter, January 7, 2020.

ah Also, not to be confused with Ahmad Zalata al-Hamidawi (Abu Hussein, Abu Zeid) that this article describes later on.

ai For what it is worth, the author undertook a straw poll of a handful of intelligence professionals with detailed insights into contemporary attacks in Iraq. The poll suggested that these observers thought around 85 percent of attacks on international sites were undertaken by KH and around 80 percent of convoy attacks, versus only 10 percent of assassinations. If accurate, this indicates a very deliberate and energetic effort to hide KH involvement.

aj The operation appears to have been called “Revenge of the Fallen” and constituted KH's main prompt retaliation for the loss of al-Muhandis. The intent was to launch a 32-rocket salvo from eight four-tube 107mm “quad” launchers emplaced in concealed rising launchers with overhead cover. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi political and security figures, 2020 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees).

coalition forces in the first nine months of 2020⁷⁶ have been undertaken by KH, though what proportion is unclear. (On June 25, 2020, the Iraqi government raided a site in Albu Aitha, just south of Baghdad, and arrested 14 KH members, one of whom was linked by biometric evidence to an unspecified earlier rocket attack.⁷⁷) The extent of KH involvement in the 66 roadside bombings of U.S. or coalition supply convoys in the first nine months of 2020, or three attacks on diplomatic vehicles in the same timeframe, is also not known.⁷⁸

It appears that KH is using a proliferation of new group names to claim the attacks. The method is to create fake groups, claim attacks using these group identities, and thus mask KH's role in the attacks, both to enable KH to remain part of the PMF and avoid political criticism for disturbing the stability of Iraq. Though reflagging with multiple new brands is a technique of causing confusion that has worked well in Bahrain,⁷⁹ the recent trend in Iraq arguably began in May 2019, when a video emerged claiming the establishment of an anti-U.S. Free Revolutionaries Front, that seemed to comprise hardline "splinters" of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, Saraya al-Ashura, Saraya Talia al-Khurasani, Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada, Liwa al-Tafuf, Kata'ib Jund al-Imam, Badr, Kata'ib Hezbollah, Kata'ib al-Imam Ali, and Saraya al-Salam.⁸⁰ Next came the establishment of Usbat al-Thaereen (League of the Revolutionaries) on March 15, 2020, and then the Islamic Resistance Army, another purported mix of existing militias (Badr, KH, AAH, Nujaba, KSS, and Kata'ib al-Imam Ali) announced on April 26, 2020, the 100th day since Soleimani and al-Muhandis died.⁸¹ Since then, the numbers of groups has sky-rocketed, including Saraya al-Muntaqim (Avenger Companies); Ashab al-Kahf (People of the Cave); Thar Muhandis (Revenge for Muhandis); Saraya Thawra Al-Ashreen Al-Thaniya (The Second 1920 Revolution Companies); Saraya Awfiya al-Dam (Battalion of the Guards of Blood); Rab' Allah (God's Fellows); and Qasim al-Jabbarin (Defeaters of the Global Arrogance, the latter referring to the United States).^{ak}

Intimidating the Iraqi Government

KH has been more open in threatening Iraqi government figures and processes. On March 2, 2020, for instance, KH official Abu Ali al-Askari warned Iraqi politicians against choosing Mustafa al-Kadhimi as Iraq's next premier, noting:

*He is one of those accused of helping the American enemy to carry out the crime of assassinating the leaders of victory al-Hajj Suleimani the commander and his companion al-Hajj al-Muhandis. And we only consider his nomination as a declaration of war on the Iraqi people which will burn what remains of the security of Iraq.*⁸²

KH had been extraordinarily hostile toward al-Kadhimi in his capacity as the pro-Western head of the Iraqi National Intelligence Service (INIS).⁸³ In April 2020, around 100 KH fighters (some armed with Rocket-Propelled Grenades, or RPGs) swarmed al-Kadhimi in the International Zone, holding him for an hour and seizing members of his security detail.⁸⁴ KH also used online chan-

nels to leak the names of al-Kadhimi's INIS senior staffers.^{al} Ultimately, however, KH failed to convince other factions to block al-Kadhimi in the face of strong support for his nomination from al-Sistani, Moqtada al-Sadr, and the international community, and he was appointed prime minister on May 6, 2020. KH suffered a signal defeat, being forced to accept the parliamentary appointment of a man it believed was complicit in the targeting of Soleimani and al-Muhandis.^{am}

Unsurprisingly, becoming prime minister did not put al-Kadhimi off-limits to KH intimidation. When KH members were detained by the government on June 25, 2020, KH commander Abu Fadak (Abd'al-Aziz al-Mohammadawi) led a column of around 150 fighters in nearly 30 pickup trucks, with at least one carrying a 23-millimeter twin anti-aircraft cannon and many others bearing armored machine-gun mounts, to the prime minister's residence⁸⁵ and demanded the suspects be released to their custody.^{an}

Power Games Within and Between the Fasa'il

No one in the KH leadership could come close to al-Muhandis in terms of tightness of connection to the IRGC (via Soleimani), sharpness of political instincts, and coalition-building capacity. Other factions sought to exploit this, making a dash for Iran to shelter from potential U.S. follow-on strikes and to meet Soleimani's successor, IRGC-QF commander, Brigadier General Esmail Qaani.⁸⁶ Like the mass mobilization of June 2014, the deaths of the two heavyweights opened an opportunity for individual leaders and *fasa'il* to strengthen their direct ties to the IRGC-QF. The biggest winners were Abu Ala al-Walai of Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada and Akram Kaabi of Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, the two main non-KH 'Haydari' factions with extensive Syrian war service, who were the only leaders photographed with Qaani.⁸⁷

Causes for resentment toward KH were already present prior to al-Muhandis's death, related to its domination of prime PMF offices,⁸⁸ its preferential allocation of paid billets,⁸⁹ its prominent abduction and illegal detention of large numbers of Sunni civilians,⁹⁰ and its tendency for brash stunts that drew negative attention to the PMF, such as fighting Iraqi police in downtown Baghdad⁹⁰ or abducting and ransoming kidnapped Qatari hunters.⁹¹ Since al-Mu-

al After analyst Hisham al-Hashemi was murdered by militias on July 6, 2020, KH Telegram channels and Twitter began disseminating threats bearing surveillance images of National Operations Command director Thiya al-Musawi with the text "Thiya's next." Author interview, Iraqi official, 2020 (exact date, name, and place withheld at request of the interviewee).

am Abu Ali al-Askari regularly accuses the Kadhimi government of complicity. For instance, see "Iraq's intelligence service intriguing Kata'ib Hezbollah," ISWNews, March 5, 2020.

an The 13 KH members who were not specifically mentioned in the arrest warrant were released on June 26, 2020, in an apparent propaganda victory for KH. The remaining fighter was transferred to the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) Central Security Division, which is run by KH member Abu Zainab al-Lami (real name: Hussein Falah al-Lami) and quietly released in September 2020, according to U.S. government contacts. Based on author interviews, multiple U.S. government contacts, 2020 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees). See also Michael Knights, "Punishing Iran's Triggermen in Iraq: Opening Moves in a Long Campaign," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, December 6, 2019.

ao In July 2018, KH fighters engaged in a firefight with police in central Baghdad, then escaped with five stolen cars, and subsequently refused to surrender, even to Iraq's interior minister, who was a senior Badr officer. Knights, Malik, and Al-Tamimi, p. 92.

ak The author would like to thank Crispin Smith and Hamdi Malik for their help with this list, which is drawn from scores of attack claims from rocket and roadside bomb attacks in 2020.

handis died, such stunts have increased in frequency and profile, including blatant (and unsuccessful) efforts to guide the selection of a prime minister, physical intimidation of a sitting prime minister, and KH troops publicly trampling on pictures of al-Kadhimi.⁹²

An early setback came in February 2020 after a committee of Iran-backed *fasa'il*^{ap} was formed to elect a new vice chairman (and operational commander) of the PMF to fill the vacancy left with al-Muhandis's death. Whereas al-Muhandis had the diplomatic skills and the broad acceptance across factions to hold the executive vice chairmanship of the whole PMF, the man they elected, Abu Fadak (who would later lead the convoy of pickup trucks to the prime minister's residence), was subsequently opposed on February 20, 2020, by four shrine foundation Hashd units (the so-called *atabat*) who were excluded from the committee.⁹⁴ Less publicly, there was division within KH itself over Abu Fadak's promotion.⁹³ Though long-identified as al-Muhandis's designated successor at the PMF,⁹⁴ he was opposed by the new KH leader, Abu Hussein⁹⁵ (who will be profiled in the next section), and briefly faced an unsuccessful challenge from Abu Mustafa al-Sheibani, now the elder of the *fasa'il* leadership since al-Muhandis's death.⁹⁶

Part 3: The Post-Muhandis Power Struggle Inside KH

Having reviewed the organizational and political history of KH and al-Muhandis's changing relationship with KH, this article will now catalogue the institutional assets of KH, versus the portfolios that the IRGC-QF and other Iran-leaning *fasa'il* control. This further elucidates the large asset base that can be considered institutionally part of KH.

The KH Shura Council

KH has, from its outset, employed a collective leadership system, which it terms the Shura Council (Majlis al-Shura).⁹⁷ Perhaps reflecting some architecting from Imad Mughniyeh and other Lebanese Hezbollah advisors, the council has some similarities to the Shura Council of Lebanese Hezbollah.⁹⁷ Like the Jihad sub-council in Lebanese Hezbollah, the KH council has two military wings—a KH Special Operations arm (akin to the Islamic Jihad Organization or External Security Organization) and a KH-Iraq Military Office (akin to the Lebanese Hezbollah's Islamic Resistance conventional military wing).⁹⁸ Like the Jihad sub-council in Lebanese Hezbol-

lah,⁹⁹ as the KH Shura Council has always had an external “general supervisor”—usually al-Muhandis until his death, but for stretches an Iraqi-Lebanese cleric called Ayatollah Muhammad al-Sanad (based in Beirut).¹⁰⁰ (KH-Syrian Front is under direct IRGC-QF/Lebanese Hezbollah control and is not administered by the KH Shura Council.¹⁰¹)

The KH Shura Council normally has five members, all of whom are chosen by the IRGC-QF commander.¹⁰² Unlike in Lebanese Hezbollah,¹⁰³ the KH Shura Council is not composed of clerics but instead veteran fighters.¹⁰⁴ The council rarely meets in full, for operational security reasons, and then usually only in Iran.¹⁰⁵ Under Soleimani and al-Muhandis, the Shura Council received firm guidance from above,¹⁰⁶ one close observer noted, with al-Muhandis “supervising the Shura Council members and their decisions, with direct support from Qassem Soleimani.”¹⁰⁷ Today, the general supervisors are unknown, but may include an unnamed Lebanon-based cleric and the less charismatic and knowledgeable IRGC-QF commander, Qaani, who does not speak Arabic.¹⁰⁸

The author's in-depth research^{at} suggests that the current Shura Council is currently composed of the following KH members:

Ahmad Mohsen Faraj al-Hamidawi (also known as Abu Hussein, Abu Zalata, Abu Zeid) is the Secretary General and the Commander of KH Special Operations, one of two military forces in KH.^{au} Abu Hussein is 46 years old at the time of writing. This means he would have reached military age in the early 1990s. His Special Operations branch undertakes operations against U.S. targets and support to foreign Shi'a militants. According to two of the author's contacts with good insight into KH inner politics, Abu Hussein is developing a reputation for being reckless, unpredictable and focused on avenging al-Muhandis.¹⁰⁹ Abu Hussein is the main point of contact with both former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and with Russian diplomats.¹¹⁰

Abd'al-Aziz al-Mohammadawi (also known as Abu Fadak, Abu Hamid) is the Commander of KH-Iraq Military Office, one of two military forces in KH, and also is the acting vice chairman/chief of staff of the PMF. Abu Fadak's career is relatively well known. He is slightly older than Abu Hussein and joined Badr in the late 1980s. He was seconded from Badr by Hadi al-Ameri to work in the Special Groups in 2004-2007 and was one of the first KH members. He served in al-Muhandis's office in Iran and knew both Qassem Soleimani and Imad Mughniyeh personally. Abu Fadak was on course to lead KH but is reported by multiple of the author's contacts to have lost seniority in KH due to his personal involvement in the publi-

ap The committee of *fasa'il* leaders was comprised of Abu Ali al-Basri (of Badr), Abu Muntadher al-Husseini (of Badr), Abu Fadak (of Kata'ib Hezbollah), Abu Iman al-Bahali (of Kata'ib Hezbollah), Abu Ala al-Walal (of Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada), Laith al-Khazali (of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq), and Ahmed al-Asadi (of Kata'ib Jund al-Imam). Knights, Malik, and Al-Tamimi, p. 23.

aq The four *atabat* units were Liwa Ansar al-Marjaiya [Brigade 44], Liwa Ali al-Akbar [Brigade 11], Firqat al-Abbas al-Qitaliyah, aka al-Abbas Combat Division [Brigade 26], and Firqat al-Imam Ali al-Qitaliyah [Brigade 2]. Though Abu Fadak was appointed by the committee, and functions in the role on a day-to-day basis at the time of writing, he was not confirmed by the Iraqi prime minister, cabinet, or parliament. Knights, Malik, and Al-Tamimi, p. 23.

ar Some of the author's contacts alternately use the phrase Majlis al-Amna (council or board of trustees). Author interviews, multiple Iraqi political and security figures, 2020 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees).

as Imam Mughniyeh was the first supervisor, followed by Hassan Nasrallah after the former's death.

at The author has spent the last two years acting as a central node in an investigative analysis effort that includes confidential reporters in Iraq and elsewhere, building an incremental picture on multi-sourced information relevant to the KH leaders. The heart of the effort is linking real names to *kunya*, the Arabic *nom de guerre* used by terrorists and militiamen to conceal their identity.

au The United States has designated Ahmad al-Hamidawi as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) pursuant to Executive Order 13224. “State Department Terrorist Designation of Ahmad al-Hamidawi.”

cized 2015 affair of the kidnapped Qatari hunters.^{av} Abu Fadak and Abu Hussein are reported by multiple of the author's contacts to have bad personal relations with each other.¹¹¹ Abu Fadak's elevation to PMF chief of staff is a return to the fold, albeit in a more public role that is suited to an operative whose identity is well known, who will be frequently photographed, and thus may be considered 'blown' as a covert operator with involvement in more sensitive Special Operations missions.

Sheikh Jassim al-Sudani (also known as Abu Ahmad) is in charge of funding and logistics for KH. He is described as a "founder" of KH, suggesting involvement from the very outset, and was previously in Badr.¹¹² Some online sources describe him as a soldier who was captured in the Iran-Iraq War, suggesting he is in his 50s at the time of writing.¹¹³ He served for a period as a military commander in KH-Iraq.¹¹⁴

Jaafar al-Ghanimi (also known as Abu Islam) is responsible for civil affairs at KH-Iraq and is a former KH secretary general.¹¹⁵ Some online sources describe him as a soldier who was captured in the Iran-Iraq War, and then became a Badr member,¹¹⁶ suggesting he is in his 50s at the time of writing. He is described in other online sources as being from Basra and a graduate in electricity engineering.¹¹⁷

Sheikh Jassim (family name unconfirmed, also known as Abu Kadhim) is the final identified member of the Shura Council. He covers administration, including KH offices of veteran affairs, martyrs and families, and healthcare.¹¹⁸

Other KH Commanders

There are a number of senior KH commanders who are not presently on the Shura Council, though some seem to have rotated through the council in the past. Like the Shura Council members, the below figures would merit the honorific "al-Khaal" (uncle) in the hierarchy discovered by Hamdi Malik.¹¹⁹

Sheikh Adnan al-Mohammadawi (Adan Yousif Jassim, Abu Ammar)¹²⁰ is a former Shura Council member who now runs KH-Iraq's economic authority.¹²¹ He was a member of the KH Special Operations wing and is 42 years old at the time of writing,¹²² suggesting another fighter who would have come to military age in the 1990s. He was captured by the United States in 2009 but released by the government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in 2010.¹²³ As already noted, he was identified by the United States as a key figure in the 2018-2019 effort by KH to intimidate Iraqi MPs into voting to evict U.S. forces.¹²⁴ He is reported by one of the author's contacts to be in charge of the Jurf as-Sakr base complex (see below).¹²⁵

Hussein Falah Aziz al-Lami (also known as Abu Zainab) is the head of the Central Security Division (CSD)^{aw} of the PMF.¹²⁶ He is 51 years old at the time of writing, suggesting he came into military age in the late 1980s. Multiple observers describe him as especially close to KH Secretary General Abu Hussein. Like Abu Fadak, his

involvement with the PMF has "surfaced" him into public and international scrutiny. He appears to maintain very tight relations with two *fasa'il*¹²⁷ that he cooperated with closely to suppress the October 2019 protests in Baghdad,^{ax} namely Saraya Talia al-Khurasani and Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada. Abu Zainab is also reputed to control significant financial reserves and economic projects on behalf of Abu Hussein's network within KH, including oil smuggling operations.¹²⁸

Another KH member who was surfaced through his work with the PMF and its role in suppressing protestors is Adhab Kaytan al-Bahali^{ay} (also known as Sattar Jabbar al-Ta'aban or Abu Iman al-Bahali),^{az} who is the director of intelligence at the PMF.¹²⁹ Compared to other KH senior leaders he is slightly younger, a Shi'a Kurdish (Fayli) transplant from Badr, recruited in Iraqi Kurdistan in the 1990s.¹³⁰ He served in the Badr special operations and intelligence unit from the late 1990s, then in a Ministry of Interior intelligence function, and then PMF brigade 27 after 2014 until being named head of PMF intelligence in 2016.¹³¹ Abu Iman developed the KH technical intelligence branch, and holds a range of sensitive files.¹³² In domestic politics, he gathers compromising material on politicians, ministry directors, and security personnel.¹³³ When protests erupted in October 2019, he collated hit lists of civil society activists and journalists in partnership with IRGC-QF cyber-intelligence officials and a 19-person, Baghdad-based cell of Lebanese Hezbollah media operatives.¹³⁴ His responsibilities include target development against U.S., coalition, and Iraqi Kurdish persons and sites.¹³⁵

Hussein Moanes Jabbar al-Hijami (also known as Abu Ali al-Askari, Abu Musa) is an enigmatic member of KH who is one of the initial cadre of fighters and who was held by the United States from 2009-2010, being released at the same time as Abu Ala al-Wal'ai of Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada.¹³⁶ Moanes is a former Shura Council member who lived in Iran for an extended period and has an Iranian wife.¹³⁷ He is a Special Operations veteran¹³⁸ and is described on KH Telegram channels as the head of security for KH.¹³⁹ Unusually for such a figure, he became very vocal in the aftermath of al-Muhandis's death and was identified by name by the late Hisham al-Hashemi and even photographed.¹⁴⁰ Since then, Hussein Moanes has tried to muddy the picture by denying he was Abu Ali al-Askari, but without success.¹⁴¹

KH's other visible personalities are mostly spokesmen. Mohammed Mohyee is the general spokesman for KH, and Jaafar al-Husseini is the military spokesman for KH-Iraq. Seyyed Dr Jassim al-Jazairi is also used as a spokesman and likely heads the

av Kataib Hezbollah tried to ransom Qatari royals seized by militiamen, but a transfer of \$283 million was stopped by Iraq's intelligence services in the VIP lounge of Baghdad International Airport. Knights, Malik, and Al-Tamimi, p. 109.

aw The first detailed work on the listing of PMF Commission staff directorates was by Jessa Rose Dury-Agri, Omer Kassim, and Patrick Martin in "Iraqi Security Forces and Popular Mobilization Forces – Order of Battle," Institute for the Study of War, December 2017, pp. 29-36. More recently, see Knights, "Iran's Expanding Militia Army in Iraq: The New Special Groups," and Knights, Malik, and Al-Tamimi, pp. 28-29.

ax The United States designated Abu Zainab for human rights abuses due to the October 2019 crackdown. "Treasury Sanctions Iran-Backed Militia Leaders Who Killed Innocent Demonstrators in Iraq," U.S. Department of the Treasury, December 6, 2019. See also Knights, "Punishing Iran's Triggermen in Iraq."

ay Note that Bahali is correct; the other commonly encountered name, Bahadli, is a different name.

az Like many Fayli Kurds (i.e., Shi'a Kurds), Bahali has two legal names due to the Saddam-era forced Arabization of Kurdish persons on their national identity cards. He is commonly known as Abu Iman. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi political and security figures, 2020 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees).

media department of KH.^{ba} Other KH members carefully hide their identities.

For instance, KH keeps the identities of its three PMF brigade commanders (PMF brigades 45, 46, and 47) carefully hidden.¹⁴² The odd KH commander has surfaced to a minimal extent due to their service as PMF directorate commanders^{bb} (which almost guarantees their faces are publicized). The involvement of KH in the crackdown against Iraqi protestors resulted in the surfacing of a few KH regional security commanders.^{bc} Very occasionally one is identified in the course of their duties with formal Iraqi security forces.^{bd} At least one important religious and legal authority for KH has been identified, namely Mohammed al-Safi, a Karbala-based cleric who is also the religious guide for Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada, underlining the shared heritage and worldview of the two movements.¹⁴³ Generally, however, KH hides its leaders very effectively and gives public profile only to officials who no longer play sensitive roles.¹⁴⁴

Part 4: Non-military Aspects of KH

Similar to forerunner movements such as Lebanese Hezbollah^{145be} and the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq,¹⁴⁶ KH has developed significant non-military activities instead of being a purely military actor. The following sections outline the non-military infrastructure and institutions that survived al-Muhandis's death.

Khomeinist Civil Society Activities

The civil side of KH administered by Jaafar al-Ghanimi (Abu Islam) represents an alternative to the dominant Iraqi model of political blocs with associated militias such as Badr, Moqtada al-Sadr's Ahrar bloc, and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq's Sadiqun bloc. This is because KH does not have a parliamentary bloc, unlike all the other major Iran-backed *fasa'il*. Instead, KH has a full range of institutions that recruit Shi'a intellectuals, women, and youth using Khomeinist

ideology.^{bf} The most important are listed here, but there are many more smaller institutions and media platforms besides these:

Al-Zainabiyat Foundation presents itself as an Islamic cultural foundation for women and girls that has been operational since at least 2012 and probably as far back as 2008.¹⁴⁷ It is a Khomeinist institution that encourages women to guide their families toward what it presents as the traditions of Iraqi and Islamic society, and encourages women to have children and play a traditional role within the family. It has a mass mobilization function that can organize female participation in protests.¹⁴⁸

Imam Hussein Scout Association (Khashaf al-Imam al-Hussein) is a Khomeinist feeder organization for the armed wing of KH, preparing children and young men for military service with KH. The organization appears to have been formed in 2011 and mirrors the practices of other Shi'a paramilitary organizations (Iran's Basij, Lebanese Hezbollah, Yemen's Ansar Allah) by basing major activities around summer youth camps in Baghdad, Basra, Najaf, Lebanon,^{bg} and Iran.¹⁴⁹ The KH scouts have been associated for many years with a very vocal KH military commander known as Abu Talib al-Saidi.¹⁵⁰ Of interest, youth are also encouraged on KH Telegram platforms to report the movement of foreign military forces as part of a KH "shadow cell."^{bh}

Academic Elites (Al-Nukhbah) is a Khomeinist university campus-based organization that seeks to groom a new generation of well-educated KH members and KH-leaning professionals. It arranges exchange visits and longer fellowships at universities in Lebanon and Iran, and teaches Farsi courses. The Nukhbah also provides paramilitary and multimedia training.¹⁵¹

Mosques and Husseiniyat Authority and KH Department of Doctrine are Khomeinist institutions that debate religious doctrine in conferences, publish studies pertaining to Islam, and commemorate martyrs.¹⁵²

Target Research Center (Markaz Al-Hadaf) and Guiding Light (Al-Misbah) are clusters of Khomeinist think-tanks and libraries that focus on political theory, in particular the *velayat-e faqih* doc-

ba Jazairi is neither the political nor military spokesman, yet plays a prominent role. He is referenced by KH as a member of its political leadership and was honored by being interviewed by the media arm of office of Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. For the former, see "Mr. Jassim Al-Jazaery: Imam Khomeini united the Islamic ranks by declaring International Jerusalem Day," Kata'ib Hezbollah website, July 27, 2014, and for the latter, see "Mr. Jassem Al-Jazaery: Our experiences in Iraq have taught us that America is a greater demon that cannot be trusted," Office of the Supreme Leader website, December 13, 2017.

bb For instance, Abd'Nuama al-Safir, an al-Muhandis associate but not found in the course of the author's studies to be a KH member, is the director of the PMF Military Engineering Directorate. Knights, Malik, and Al-Tamimi, p. 46.

bc For instance, retired Major General Jaafar Abd'al-Hussein, who earned his promotion to general officer level in the National Security Advisory without attending staff college and who ran KH southern Iraq in 2014, and Ahmad al-Saadi, a mufti from Kadhimiyah who controlled KH in Karkh or western Baghdad. See al-Ghazi.

bd An example is Brigadier General Ali al-Meshari, known also as the "butcher of Basra," a KH commander who leads an auxiliary police force in Basra known as the Shock Force (Quwwat Al-Sadma). See "Brigadier General Ali al-Meshari," originally available at Alhurra's website, but since taken down.

be Lebanese Hezbollah developed five main sub-councils: Political, Military, Parliamentary, Executive, and Judicial.

bf Khomeinist ideology propagates the idea of the *velayat-e faqih* (religious jurisprudence) system that it maintains should be spread to other societies through preaching and armed revolutions. See the original Central Intelligence Agency study of Khomeinism called "Khomeinism: The Impact of Theology on Politics," 1983, via CIA Library, Freedom of Information Act Electronic Reading Room. When asked directly by an interviewer if KH desired the *velayat-e faqih* system in Iraq, KH spokesman Jassim al-Jazairi hedged, saying: "Look, Wilayat al Faqih is only one of many of Islamic theories being proposed ... If the system of Wilayat al Faqih and its values worked properly in Iraq then what is wrong with that. The problem is you cannot force these values on others ... We are advocates of Islam and we defend our religion and its teachings. We believe that Islam is capable of governing and can be successful in this ... If this is successful, it has to come through popular will; if it does not then we support the political process and the political choices of Iraqis. This matter depends on the level of knowledge and awareness of the Iraqi people." "Interview with Dr. Jassim al-Jazairi of Kata'ib Hezbollah," Beladi Satellite Channel, available on YouTube, June 28, 2018.

bg Hezbollah's Imam al-Mahdi Scouts allows KH scouts to use their Khomeinist Scout City in Zawtar, Lebanon. Covering all the points of detail in this paragraph, see "Kataeb Hezbollah: Profile of a Shiite-Iraqi militia handled by the Qods Force to promote Iranian interests in Iraq (Full Version)," Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, July 9, 2020, p. 23.

bh Hamid Malik reports that in late August 2020, Sabreen News, a KH Telegram channel, encouraged youth to "be a resistance [fighter] from where you are and join the shadow cell by sending images, videos or information of every move of the American enemy." See Malik.

trine of theological governance that is practiced in Iran.¹⁵³ These institutes have a network of libraries, galleries, and exhibits that eulogize KH and PMF martyrs and commemorate anniversaries such as the annual Quds Day.¹⁵⁴

KH also has a veritable media empire,¹⁵⁵ which has been built with advice and technical support from Lebanese Hezbollah.¹⁵⁶ This empire includes a Beirut-based satellite TV channel (Al-Etejah, meaning “the direction”), radio (Al-Etejah, Radio Al-Kawthar), a newspaper (al-Muraqib al-Iraqi), plus a large network of websites, Telegram channels, other social media platforms, and affiliates within the broader “Axis of Resistance” (such as the Resistance Media Network and Central Combat Information platform).¹⁵⁷ The profusion of media activity by KH and the subsequent demand for material is probably one reason why KH has so many high-profile spokesmen—the aforementioned Muhammed Mohyee, Sheikh Jaafar al-Husseini, Sheikh Jassim al-Jazairi—and also Abu Ali al-Askari, who is not a spokesman but nonetheless has a high media profile.

KH Economic Activities

Though KH has long been the IRGC-QF’s primary partner force in Iraq, it does not necessarily follow that KH has pole position in the vast money-making schemes of the *fasa’il*.¹⁵⁸ Al-Muhandis was sometimes accused of being especially partial to KH and its recruits were prioritized for inclusion in the registered numbers of the PMF (versus other factions who had significant numbers of unregistered, and thus unpaid, volunteers).¹⁵⁹ Overall, however there has been a careful division of economic spoils between Iraq’s militias, initially overseen and balanced by al-Muhandis and Soleimani.¹⁶⁰ ^{bi} The division of spoils is implemented through the *wakala* system (referring to the representatives of each militia in ministries, government branches, and local government).^{bj} Most of the militia rackets in Iraq are linked closely to the control of terrain and infrastructure,^{bk} and this is one reason for the enduring geographic spheres of influence^{bl} assigned to militias in “liberated” Sunni areas of western and northern Iraq, and even within Baghdad city.¹⁶¹

Institutions are also key terrain: for instance, Kata’ib Al-Imam

Ali’s leader, U.S.-designated terrorist Shibl al-Zaydi,¹⁶² had a special interest in the Ministry of Communications and its contracts,¹⁶³ and most recently, QiCard, the main e-payment vendor for social security,^{bm} is suspected^{bn} of being tapped by militias in schemes where false beneficiaries were created en masse.^{bo}

In contrast to more conventional patronage-based militias,^{bp} it is much harder to paint a picture of KH economic activities. Numerous KH leaders seem to play an economic role, suggesting significant resources but also multiple power bases with their own funding streams.¹⁶⁴ As noted, Adnan al-Mohammadawi manages KH’s “economic authority,” with main activities in Baghdad and Basra.¹⁶⁵ At the same time, KH Secretary General Abu Hussein and his close associate Abu Zainab al-Lami seem to have a separate economic office as well, possibly relating to stipends transferred from the IRGC-QF.¹⁶⁶ Sheikh Jassim al-Sudani (Abu Ahmad) acts as a treasurer for KH and disperses funds to KH members and institutions.¹⁶⁷ Less solidly, three other figures in KH are reported to play a finance role: Ahmed al-Eithawi (Abu Hassanein), Sheikh Adnan al-Maliki, and Khaleen Ismail (Abu Mustapha), who are responsible for fundraising within the membership.¹⁶⁸

A rare *known* case of KH involvement in a commercial matter is the long-running saga of ground services at Baghdad International Airport.¹⁶⁹ In 2018-2019, KH forced its way into the running of ground handling services, fee collection, the VIP lounge, and an airport hotel.¹⁷⁰ In addition to using the contracts to gain control over sensitive sites—such as the air traffic control tower and, ironically, “Kilometer One,” the private VIP road on which Soleimani and al-Muhandis were killed—the KH negotiators sought a 20 percent share of revenues.¹⁷¹ KH tried to hide its involvement throughout, switching from one commercial partner to another; employing a cabinet-level official to unknowingly lobby on KH’s behalf; and mounting an intimidation bombing attack on a rival bidder in one of Najaf’s most exclusive and well-protected elite neighborhoods.¹⁷² Underlining KH’s vulnerability to exposure, KH was forced by the government in late September 2020 to close its known offices in the airport and its partners were removed from various functions at the airport, being replaced by Sadrist-linked companies.¹⁷³ ^{bq}

bi For instance, in 2019, al-Muhandis arranged for 5,000 more Sadrist members of Saraya al-Salam to be registered. See Table 3.1 on page 62 of Knights, Malik, and Al-Tamimi.

bj *Wakala*, meaning representative in Arabic, is widely used in Islamic Finance, where a representative is appointed to undertake transactions on another person’s behalf. In the Iraqi governance context, *wakala* is used to describe the representative agents for parties and militias. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi political and security figures, 2019-2020 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees).

bk In no particular order, militias make money in Iraq at local level through the following rackets, and others not listed: control of ports and border crossings; payment for non-existent services to local governments and ministry branches; illegal taxation of trucking, religious tourism and markets; theft of government property such as cars and engineering vehicles; diversion of oil and oil products for sale inside and outside Iraq; skimming life support and fuel allocated to fictional PMF “ghost soldiers;” and confiscation and auctioning of real estate, especially in areas with displaced populations. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi political and security figures, 2018-2020 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees).

bl The areas of control of different Iraqi militias were described in depth in Knights, “Iran’s Expanding Militia Army in Iraq: The New Special Groups,” and Knights, Malik, and Al-Tamimi, pp. 40-43.

bm QiCard is a popular debit card in Iraq that many government departments now use to directly deposit electronic payments to pensioners, as opposed to the cash payment systems used until 2019. Beneficiaries must show government ID to cash out.

bn The CEO of QiCard, Baha Abd’al-Hussein, was arrested on September 17, 2020, in Baghdad for suspected fraud. See “First arrests in Iraq PM’s anti-corruption drive: sources,” AFP, September 19, 2020.

bo Fictional pensioners are created and loaded into the payroll system, which is exactly what has occurred across multiple militia-influenced government branches. The cards are taken to banks where militia members use fake ID linked to the card to withdraw the cash. The author is aware of one \$32 million per month scheme at a single Iraqi ministry. Other ministries and security forces are also using QiCard and are likely to also be under pressure to allow militias to abuse the system, and the author has been told by contacts that this is the case. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi political and business figures, 2019 and 2020 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees).

bp For instance, Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq (dominating the highways north of Baghdad and some border crossings to Iran) or Badr (working with AAH to dominate Basra’s ports and land border posts, and dominating the economic life of Diyala province). Knights, “Iran’s Expanding Militia Army in Iraq: The New Special Groups.”

bq It is quite likely that KH will try to re-infiltrate under new commercial fronts.

Another case that sheds interesting light on KH's political-economic *modus operandi* is that of Falah al-Jazairy, one-time mayor of Baghdad's city council, a major potential source of civil contracts. According to multiple well-placed contacts with direct experience of Iraqi investigations, when al-Jazairy faced ousting^{br} due to opposition within the council, KH warned his opponents: "Falah belongs to us. Leave him alone. If you touch Falah, you are touching us."¹⁷⁴ What this case suggests, and which a range of interviewees flagged with the author, is that KH operates a hidden influence network based on covert sponsorship, partnership, blackmail, and intimidation¹⁷⁵—an important hidden layer of the movement that does not correspond to the levels of membership identified by Hamdi Malik such as *al-Khaal*, *muallim*, *ajsam*, and *arqam*.

Part 5: KH Military Infrastructure and Roles

As the above section suggests, KH has historically appeared less focused on venal money-making schemes than is typical for *fasa'il*, with KH more focused on strategic portfolios and terrain. This strategic focus may be apparent in KH's geographic focus, which is mostly limited to a triangular zone between the KH base at Jurf as-Sakr (in southern Baghdad) and the Iraq-Syrian border crossing points of Akashat (bypassing the U.S.-backed garrison at Al-Tanf)¹⁷⁶ and Al-Qaim (adjacent to Albu Kamal in Syria). This so-called "land bridge"¹⁷⁷ between Iran and Assad-controlled Syria is not the commercially richest real estate in Iraq—far from it—but it is of vital interest to Iran, the "axis of Resistance," the United States, and Israel.

The Jurf as-Sakr Redoubt

The Jurf as-Sakr site, 40 kilometers southwest of Baghdad, is the principal military hub for KH and has been discussed in detail in a prior *CTC Sentinel* study by the author.¹⁷⁸ Built on villages from which the Sunni population was expelled and not readmitted,¹⁷⁹ Jurf has become an exclusive KH principality in which government forces cannot enter and where KH formally acquired land use rights from the government.¹⁸⁰ It is the site of KH's extensive private prisons (holding well over 1,000 illegal detainees)¹⁸¹ plus medical rehabilitation housing for fighters. Both PMF brigades 46 and 47 are headquartered in Jurf.¹⁸²

Jurf is the hub of munitions manufacturing, storage, and testing facilities that KH operates in the rural southern arc of Baghdad, in some cases reusing Saddam-era military industrial sites.^{bs} KH worked hard to ban U.S. drone overflights of Jurf as-Sakr from March 2019 onwards,¹⁸³ months before the site was used to launch two explosive drones toward Saudi Arabian oil pipeline pumping stations on May 14, 2019.¹⁸⁴ The March 13, 2020, U.S. airstrikes on the Jurf area struck materials described by the United States as the "Jurf as-Sakr propellant production and advanced conventional weapons storage site," the "Al-Yowm al-Azran rocket motor

test facility," the "Musayyib terrorist weapons storage site," the "Arab Hawar terrorist rocket storage site," and the "Jurf Improvised Rocket-Assisted Mortar (IRAM) storage site."¹⁸⁵

Also on March 13, 2020, the United States struck a site further west that it termed the "Karbala Kata'ib Hezbollah advanced conventional weapons storage site," which was collocated with the uncompleted Karbala airport and where non-KH PMF troops from an Atabat brigade were reportedly struck and three civilians wounded.¹⁸⁶ KH also claims to operate a "medium range rocket facility" at Ain al-Tamur (70 kilometers west of Karbala, southwest of Lake Rezzazah) and a munitions factory at Zaafaraniyah (just outside urban Baghdad, 10 kilometers to the southeast).¹⁸⁷ The Iraqi government arrested one suspected KH rocketeer and 13 other KH members on June 25, 2020, at a rocket storage site in Albu Aitha, 20 kilometers south of Baghdad.¹⁸⁸

Western Anbar and Albu Kamal Bases for KH

KH has worked hard to develop its presence in Anbar, an area to which it is entirely alien as there is virtually no Shi'a population there. KH has been deploying to western Anbar since 2013, and has used the area to reach Syrian battlefields.¹⁸⁹ Though Anbar is theoretically under the command of both a three-star military headquarters (Anbar Operations Command) and the PMF (West Anbar Operations Command or axis), there is also an underlying KH-dominated zone (which the group calls the KH Jazeera Operations Command) that spans the Jurf-Akashat-Qaim area.¹⁹⁰ In this area, KH has invested great effort in removing adversaries (for instance, ousting the Anbar Operations Command leader, and both customs posts at the Akashat and Qaim end) and building up covert influence networks.¹⁹¹ KH has developed a large informant and influence network in Anbar that spans the Anbar Operations Command, Anbar Police, National Security Service, provincial and district officials, and the 8th and 14th Iraq army divisions.¹⁹²

The western Anbar bases of KH and closely allied militias were detailed in an August 2019 study for *CTC Sentinel* by this author.¹⁹³ It consists of two sub-sectors: the eastern Al-Qaim border crossing on the Euphrates, facing the Albu Kamal areas in Syria,¹⁹⁴ and the western Akashat sub-sector (headquartered in Rutbah).¹⁹⁵ The main KH headquarters in Al-Qaim is the base for PMF brigade 45, the praetorian KH fighting force, and was struck by U.S. forces on December 29, 2019, killing the PMF brigade 45 commander, Kadhim Alwan (Abu Ali al-Dibi).¹⁹⁶ KH forces (mainly from PMF brigade 46) control Highway 20 (which parallels the Iraq-Syria border between the two sub-sectors,¹⁹⁷ and ranches between the highway and the border.¹⁹⁸ These rural areas, close to the Iraq-Syria oil pipeline corridor (and its coaxial road), are used to move missile or rocket forces to Syria.¹⁹⁹ (Of note, an earlier August 25, 2019, airstrike (apparently Israeli) struck moving vehicles that were positioned about halfway between two of the sites hit later by the United States on December 29, 2019, underlining Israel's intense focus on the chain of bases.²⁰⁰)

Immediately over the border, a few kilometers west of the Husaybah customs point and linked by dedicated tracks, is KH's Imam

br The KH threat saved Jazairy from being ousted by rival factions in the summer of 2019 but could not save Jazairy from eventually being removed during the October 2019 riots. See "Iraqi provincial council sacks Baghdad governor," Xinhua, October 6, 2019.

bs The Musayyib, Latifiyah, and Iskandariyah areas—adjacent to Jurf—were the heart of Saddam's large military industries, including rocket testing and munitions and fuel production. For a comprehensive list of facilities, see Central Intelligence Agency, Addendums of the Special Advisor to the DCI on Iraq's WMD, "Annex D Iraq's Military Industrialization Facilities" and "Annex E Iraq's Military Industrialization Facilities," March 2005, pp. 43-53.

bt During the pre-2011 period, the author spent time on the ground in the exact area of the strikes. The ranches in this area are traditional smuggler staging bases that appear to have been taken over by Kata'ib Hezbollah and Liwa al-Tafuf (brigade 13). For detail on their operations in Anbar, see Knights, "Iran's Expanding Militia Army in Iraq," pp. 5-6.

Ali base, just outside the Syrian town of Albu Kamal.^{bu} After the Aleppo campaign at the end of 2016, KH-Syrian Front concentrated its military efforts in Syria on the Deir ez-Zor area and the town of Albu Kamal, which was captured from the Islamic State in September 2017.²⁰¹ On June 18, 2018, Israel struck KH in Albu Kamal for the first time, hitting the original KH headquarters close to the border,²⁰² and then struck the Imam Ali base on September 8, 2019,²⁰³ January 5, 2020,²⁰⁴ and March 11, 2020.²⁰⁵ The latter strike hit 15 structures in the broader Albu Kamal area, including warehouses at the Imam Ali base, another KH site in the industrial quarter, two Fatimiyoun sites, and Hezbollah Harakat al-Nujaba base in Albu Kamal town, and two Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada base just southeast of Albu Kamal town.²⁰⁶ According to press reporting based on satellite imagery, the Imam Ali base may have significant underground facilities, including perhaps a tunnel to the Iraqi side of the border.²⁰⁷ In Mayadin, 50 miles north of Albu Kamal, KH is reported to have other warehouses at a site called al-Haydaria.²⁰⁸

There may also be a southern Anbar aspect to KH operations. Though nominally within the Atabat zone of responsibility (the Anbar-Karbala/Najaf border),²⁰⁹ the town of Nukhayb, dominating the trade highway to Saudi Arabia and an important bypass around Baghdad toward Syria, has had a KH presence since 2011.^{bv} Nukhayb was reportedly given over to KH as its exclusive operational zone in 2016, whereupon it took over all six major military sites in the town.²¹⁰ In addition to strong rumors about possible use of Nukhayb as a training site for Iran-backed Shi'a Saudi terrorists,²¹¹ it may have been a launch pad for drone attacks on Saudi oil facilities.^{212 bw}

Despite its major investment in Anbar, KH has arguably failed to dominate the environment as completely as it might have hoped. Both the U.S. sites at Al-Asad and Tanf remain; Iraq Counter-Terrorism Service and customs personnel are returning to Al-Qaim;²¹³ local Iraqi forces have been restaffed with capable commanders,^{bx} and local communities in populated parts of Anbar are beginning to

protest the extent of militia presence and control of territory.^{by} Most significantly, Israeli and U.S. attacks have shown that Anbar is very exposed to aerial attacks, resulting in Iran and its militias pulling back some key assets to southern Iraq in 2019-2020.²¹⁴

Part 6: Power Projection and Missiles

During al-Muhandis's tenure at the head of the Iraqi *fasa'il*, IRGC-QF began to project power against its enemies from Iraq. In addition to attacking U.S. and other Western targets in Iraq and reinforcing other Axis of Resistance forces in Syria, Iraq was used as launch pad for attacks into the Sunni-led Gulf States. Terrorist training facilities and long-range strike systems became operational on Iraqi territory. KH has been associated with key attacks such as the May 14, 2019, drone attacks on Saudi Arabia^{215 bz} and support to militant groups in Bahrain,²¹⁶ but there are signs that other Iraqi *fasa'il* (such as Saraya al-Jihad, see below) are also now working on these portfolios.

Iranian Missiles and Drones

The main hub for Iranian missiles inside Iraq is now the Maysan-Dhi Qar-Wasit triangle, not western Anbar. The missile caching system is built around a longstanding relationship²¹⁷ between Saraya al-Jihad (PMF brigade 17) leader Hassan al-Sari (real name Hassan Radi Kazim Kat'e al-Sari²¹⁸) and IRGC-QF Brigadier General Ahmad Forouzandeh,²¹⁹ who has commanded the southern Iraq axis of IRGC-QF operations in Iraq since 2002.²²⁰ While not a member of KH, Hassan al-Sari has functioned since the early 2000s as the key southern Iraq logistician for the Special Groups and then KH, playing an important role in the Special Groups and Sheibani Network.²²¹ The day-to-day custodian of the IRGC-QF missile force in Iraq is Hamad Mohsen Mujabir (Abu Iman al-Darraji), who also has a nominal role as the PMF director of intelligence in Basra.²²²

Missiles and larger rockets are now moved from Iran into Iraq in parts, where possible broken down into warhead, fuel, and body, which allows smaller and less conspicuous vehicles (like water or oil tankers) and smaller shipping containers to be used.²²³ Advanced types inside Iraq are believed to include Kheiber-1 (302mm, 65 miles); Badr-1 and Badr-1P (210mm rocket, 90-mile range); and possibly Raad-500 (1,100lb high explosive, 350 miles).^{224 ca} Warheads and rocket bodies are often kept separated in sites in Kumayt (near Amarah), Batha (near Nasiriyah), and Numaniyah (near

bu KH spokesman Jassim al-Jazairi stated that the Imam Ali base was just 1,500 meters over the border and counted as an Iraq-based border force, not a force inside Syria per se. "Interview with Dr. Jassim al-Jazairi of Kata'ib Hezbollah."

bv KH was moving fighters into Syria via Nukhayb since the start of the Syrian Civil War in 2011. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi and U.S. contacts, 2012-2014 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees).

bw Of note, Iraq's government (unsuccessfully) ordered KH to withdraw from Nukhayb just weeks after the Saudi oil pipelines were struck from Iraq in May 2019. Baraa Al-Shammari and Muhammad Ali, "The Iraqi 'Hezbollah Brigades' holds its headquarters close to the Saudi border," *Al-Araby al-Jadeed*, July 15, 2019.

bx The Anbar Operations Command (AOC) is (at the time of writing) led by Maj. Gen. Hamid al-Nams al-Jabbouri, former police chief in Salah al-Din and Nineveh who is widely seen as capable. The Jazira and Bayda Operations Command is (at the time of writing) Maj. Gen. Ahmed Salem Bahjat. These, and other subordinate division and police commanders, are experienced Iraqi army officers appointed from within the Anbar units (such as 7th Iraqi army division, AOC, and Anbar Police Command). Author interviews, multiple Iraqi and U.S. contacts, 2019-2020 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees).

by Al-Karabila tribesmen and related political figures in Al-Qaim called for the withdrawal of KH and Liwa al-Tafuf (PMF brigade 13) in late April 2020 over long-standing claims of land confiscation and unauthorized land and housing use by the militias. See "Sunni party calls for the withdrawal of Shiite brigades from Anbar 'immediately,'" *Shafaq News*, April 22, 2020.

bz The author has also received firm indications from multiple contacts with insight into the September 14, 2019, Abqaiq attack that Iraq (Nukhayb or Muthanna) may also have been a launching point for some of the delta-wing Iranian drones used in that later attack. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi and U.S. contacts, 2019-2020 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees). For a view on the delta-wing drones, see Rory Jones and Sune Engel Rasmussen, "What We Know About the Saudi Oil Attacks," *Wall Street Journal*, September 20, 2019.

ca One contact of the author also reported anti-shipping missiles being brought into southern Iraq, and multiple interviewees talked about unnamed Iranian drone types. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts in 2020 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees).

Kut), with each site having a network of satellite-dispersal points and workshops to assemble missiles or rockets.²²⁵ A cadre of technically proficient weapons assemblers are retained full time in Abu Iman al-Darraji's network, and their skills and loyalty are retained by being given a house, a fulltime salary, and frequent changes of phone.^{cb} The cases of al-Sari and al-Darraji underline how personal relationships often trump ephemeral organizational labels. Iran is quite capable of combining two adjacent networks—al-Sari/al-Darraji and KH—to handle its missile forces in Iraq.

Support to Foreign Terrorists

A second mechanism for power projection from Iraq is the training and arming of terrorists and militants outside the country. As Matt Levitt wrote in *CTC Sentinel* in February 2020, a shift to “non-Iranian and non-Lebanese Shi'a militants” is a likely evolution of tradecraft in Iran-backed foreign operations.²²⁶ Once again, KH shares this portfolio with a pantheon of trusted IRGC-QF partners. KH has reportedly been involved in the media training, military training and arming of Bahraini militants, and likely Saudis also, as the author and Matt Levitt detailed in *CTC Sentinel* in January 2018.^{cc} Abu Iman al-Darraji also appears to be a major player in hosting and training foreign volunteers from the Gulf States and Yemen,^{cd} operating what the author believes is the largest Iran-backed foreign fighter training site, located in Kumayt, Maysan.^{ce}

Hassan al-Sari and Abu Iman al-Darraji also appear to play a role in the routing of IRGC-QF materiel from Iran to Umm Qasr^{cf} in Basra, Iraq, and thereafter to Oman, for onward carriage to Ye-

men.^{cg} The author was told that IRGC-QF operations focused on Jordan uses U.S.-designated terrorist Shibl al-Zaydi's car import and export operations as a cover to reconnoiter Israeli tourist targets in Jordan and to scout border crossing points for explosive shipments via Wadi Assad, a valley linking Jordan and Iraq.²²⁷

Abu Mustafa al-Sheibani also continues to play a role in external operations from an Iraqi base, working with the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS or Ettela'at) as opposed to the IRGC-QF, and focused on developing intelligence and logistical penetration of the Gulf States.²²⁸

Part 7: The KH Role in Domestic Politics

Under Soleimani and al-Muhandis, KH became the vanguard of a militia network that came very close to complete domination of Iraq's government in the late summer of 2019.²²⁹ Since then, popular protests, the killing of Soleimani and al-Muhandis, and the appointment of Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi have begun to roll back these militia gains.²³⁰ As KH showed in the early months of 2020, it is not afraid to influence national politics and dictate its preferences on issues as consequential as the selection of Iraq's prime minister, and it did not hesitate to physically threaten the Iraqi premier. Thus far, its political intimidation has achieved little, but with Iraqi elections due in 2021 or 2022—and with mounting domestic and international pressure to rein in militias^{ch}—KH and its partners may still choose to fight reforms head-on. What role might KH be expected to play in domestic political violence?

KH's Threat to the Iraqi Government

As seen in its show of force immediately outside the Iraqi prime minister's residence on June 25, 2020, KH can quickly muster and deploy “flying columns” of fighters mounted in “technical” pickup trucks (often with heavy machine guns and even 23mm cannons) and drive them to the heart of the International Zone (IZ). When the Iraqi government arrested 14 KH members nominally serving within the PMF earlier that day, Abu Fadak's response had been tribal: for the show of force he had gathered other unit members from the detainee's base at Albu Aitha to get their people back.^{ci} KH can draw fighters from its headquarters inside the IZ, though it is noteworthy that Abu Fadak brought most of his column on June 25, 2020, from outside the zone, suggesting that perhaps the raw numbers of fighters inside the IZ are lower than apocryphally

cb The author learned from two contacts that the engineers are retained by the al-Sari and al-Darraji network with this financial support. Author interviews, two Iraqi contacts, 2020 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees). Being given a house also makes these men more eligible for marriage, which is difficult for many poorer Iraqis who live with their families and cannot afford to save up for a house. “Settling down” young men is viewed as a way to make them more dedicated, predictable, and careful.

cc Kata'ib Hezbollah is judged by Bahraini authorities to have been responsible for developing Bahrain's first Explosively-Formed Penetrator (EFP) fabrication cell, which managed to forward some EFPs to Saudi Arabian Shi'a militants in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia in 2017. See Michael Knights and Matthew Levitt, “The Evolution of Shi'a Insurgency in Bahrain,” *CTC Sentinel* 11:1 (2018). See also “The IED Threat in Bahrain: A comparative analysis of components documented in the Gulf region,” Conflict Armament Research, December 2019.

cd Abu Iman al-Darraji is reported to have been close to Bahraini and Saudi Shi'a clerics, including Nimr al-Nimr, the very prominent Saudi Shi'a cleric executed by the Saudi Arabian authorities in 2016. “Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr: Saudi Arabia executes top Shia cleric,” BBC, January 2, 2016.

ce The location is a disguised farm at which Bahraini, Saudi and Yemeni personnel are trained in intakes that number in the tens (i.e., 20-30), often separated into classes by nationality. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi political and security figures, 2020 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees).

cf The U.S. Treasury recently identified two IRGC-QF front companies that use Iraq's port to ship Iranian materiel to Yemen: the Kosar Company and Al-Khamael Maritime Services. See “Treasury Designates Vast Network of IRGC-QF Officials and Front Companies in Iraq, Iran,” U.S. Department of the Treasury, March 26, 2020.

cg Abu Iman al-Darraji's affiliates, moving between Iraq, Lebanon, and Dubai, are reported to own three cargo ships. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi political and security figures, 2019-2020 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees).

ch For instance, on September 13, 2020, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani gave a message to Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert, the Special Representative for Iraq and head of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI), calling for reforms to limit militia influence. The message was endorsed by Iraq's prime minister, president, and parliamentary speaker. See Mustafa Habib, “The New ‘Gertrude Bell’: It's been years since a diplomat attracted so many headlines in Iraq,” Iraq media Platform, October 13, 2020.

ci Abu Fadak's mustering of the detainee's unit members south of Baghdad and his storming of the International Zone on a direct line of advance between Albu Aitha, southern Baghdad, and then the prime minister's residence reminds the author of many tribal mobilizations to recover arrested tribal members from government detention. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi political and security figures, 2019-2020 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees).

reported.^{cj}

In greater Baghdad, KH can draw on supporters in its many sites in the Palestine Street area (east of the Tigris River, near Tahrir Square), including the main KH mosque, the Baqiyatalah mosque.²³¹ (Note that Palestine Street was where KH fighters fled for protection with five stolen cars after they engaged in a shootout with police in 2018.²³²) Farther out, KH could draw on reinforcements and heavy weapons from around two dozen outposts and checkpoints on the Baghdad outskirts and from the Jurf as-Sakr base complex, which is an hour's drive away. Yet, in any confrontation with the Iraqi government, the most potent weapon KH enjoys is still the "fear factor" it projects onto Iraqi military commanders standing in its way—that if KH does not get you today, it will assuredly kill you one day if you oppose it.²³³ This reputation is the center of gravity of KH's power and influence and must be reversed.

The KH Role in Suppressing Protests

Though KH did play an important role in coordinating and targeting the crackdown on protests in October 2019, the group left the sniping and beating of civilians largely to Badr^{ck} and other *fasa'il*.^{cl} KH operatives such as Abu Iman al-Bahali focused on targeting protest leaders, and leveraging unique relationships with Iranian and Lebanese Hezbollah technical intelligence and cyber units.²³⁴ In the future, KH is likely to stay focused on the higher-end aspects of repression, such as identifying ringleaders and compromising their electronic communications. To give one example, in October 2019, KH covertly assisted with the donation of protest placards that contained RFID tags [passive tracking devices similar to anti-theft tags in merchandise or library books] to track protestors.²³⁵

In another example of the important role of trusted but less visible IRGC-QF partners, additional attention should be focused on Kadhim al-Jabiri, the commander of Saraya al-Ashura (PMF brigade 8) and also nominally the director of training for the PMF.²³⁶ Operating between three houses in Baghdad and a former Saddam

family ranch in Doura, south Baghdad,^{cm} al-Jabiri has taken the leading role in identifying civil society and political figures for assassination or incarceration in Baghdad.^{cn} (In Basra, Abu Mustafa al-Sheibani plays the same role in targeting activists,²³⁷ and in other southern Iraq areas, the targeting of activists is led by Jassim al-Maliki, an aide to Abu Iman al-Darraji.²³⁸) Al-Jabiri operates a secret prison on the south side of the Karrada Peninsula in Baghdad that belongs to Hassan al-Sari and Saraya al-Jihad.²³⁹

New Deniable Networks

Whereas *fasa'il* like Saraya Talia al-Khurasani and Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada openly murdered Iraqis in the streets a year ago,²⁴⁰ today the killers of protest leaders are increasingly faceless. This is because the impunity enjoyed by militias is no longer assured and therefore deniability is important once again. Kadhim al-Jabiri's network perhaps foreshadows the next evolution of Iraqi militias in the IRGC-QF stable. Al-Jabiri's key subordinate, Sarhan Toman al-Shibli, appears to be focusing on recruiting young individuals with no track record and no prior prison terms (i.e., no biometrics in U.S. or Iraqi databases).²⁴¹ These operators undertake a targeted killing for a cash bounty and lay low in a different city or abroad for a few months with a monthly payment of around \$1,500.²⁴² According to the author's interviews, a similar type of arrangement seems to be used in Basra (for instance, by al-Sheibani's contract killers, Thar Allah (God's Revenge))^{243co} and in southern Iraq by Abu Iman al-Darraji's group.²⁴⁴

There are also signs that KH is developing "arms-length" relations with a pantheon of street vigilante groups that Hamdi Mailk described as "pro-Iran thuggish youth groups."²⁴⁵ Malik lists these as "Rab'a Allah (God's Fellows), Jabhat Abu Jeddah (people of lighters front), al-Zelm al-Khashnah (tough guys), Fariq Fatemiyoun al-Maydani (Fatemiyoun field group), Jond Soleimani (Soleimani's soldiers), Shabeebat al-Safwa (youth of purity)."²⁴⁶ These

cj Iraqi and U.S. government persons have suggested to the author figures of between 2,000 and 6,000 militiamen based inside the one-by-two-mile International Zone. To the author, this seems far too high considering the housing requirement for such a force and the absence of evidence that such a force is in place on a daily basis. (In the author's view, the number is more likely in the high hundreds but less than 1,000). KH is mainly present in four locations: a headquarters behind the Prime Minister's Office; some compounds in "Little Venice" on the east side of the zone; some improvised barracks west of the Republican Palace, near the arch on Haifa Street; and outposts in the apartment blocks across Kindi Street from the U.S. Embassy. KH has villas in the old ISCI complex under the 14th July bridge. Abu Iman al-Darraji has around 200 fighters in the zone as does Kadhim al-Jabiri. Author interviews, multiple U.S. officials and multiple Iraqi political and security figures, 2018-2020 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees).

ck Badr generally supplied counter-protest forces through the formal security forces it controlled, including through a new unit raised in October 2019 called the Law Enforcement Forces (LEF). For a detailed exposé on the LEF, see "Watch: The naked boy that toppled a significant officer and ignited the Iraqi street," Al Jazeera, August 2, 2020.

cl Sayyid al-Shuhada provided many snipers, while Saraya Talia al-Khurasani held down larger areas in southern Baghdad. Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq controlled Iraqi protests in Maysan. See Knights, "Punishing Iran's Triggers in Iraq."

cm This ranch is used to launch drones that overfly the U.S. embassy, protest sites, and Iraqi government facilities. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi political and security figures, 2019 and 2020 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees).

cn Al-Jabiri's activities include misdirection, splintering opponents (such as the Kadhimi government and Moqtada al-Sadr's movement), and the infiltration of protest movements. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2020 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees).

co With regard to Basra assassinations, journalist Suadad al-Salhy was told "the real instigator of these assassinations is using a new tactic by hiring killers who have criminal records." See Suadad al-Salhy, "Power and protest: Who ordered the killing of Basra's activists?" Middle East Eye, September 10, 2020.

groups attack TV stations^{cp} and even political party offices^{cq} that criticize KH and other militias. As Hamdi Malik has noted, KH social organizations like self-identified members of the Zaynabiyat woman's foundation take part in such arson attacks,²⁴⁷ suggesting other KH youth and student groups could also be used to mobilize vigilantism.

A very similar model of forming multiple deniable front organizations seems to be emerging for attacks on U.S. and other Western targets. In the author's view, backed by the views of his own network of close observers,^{cr} KH remains the mobilizing force behind rocket attacks on coalition sites and attacks on coalition-linked trucking, but it cannot claim attacks and must distance itself from them due to the growing domestic stigma around such actions, which kill more Iraqis than foreigners and which are complicating Iraq's efforts to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic and the oil price crash and normalize its relations with the international community.

It appears that Qassem Soleimani foresaw this need months before his death. As the major protests began in October 2019 and escalation with the United States loomed, he recommended a shift to deniable attacks.²⁴⁸ Based on investigative reporting with Iraqi sources, Reuters reported the following meeting taking place in October 2019:

At the Baghdad villa [in October 2019], Soleimani told the assembled commanders to form a new militia group of low-profile paramilitaries - unknown to the United States - who could carry out rocket attacks on Americans housed at Iraqi military bases. He ordered Kata'ib Hezbollah - a force founded by Muhandis and trained in Iran - to direct the new plan, said the militia sources briefed on the meetings. Soleimani told them such a group "would be difficult to detect by the Americans," one of the militia sources told Reuters.²⁴⁹

This may go some way to explaining the aforementioned profusion of new groups claiming attacks on foreign targets. This effort is led today by one of Soleimani's close aides, known as Hajj

cp Hamdi Malik writes about Rab' a Allah's threats against Al-Hurra television channel when they criticized KH's Abu Fadak. He notes that another group, Jabhat Abu Jeddah (people of lighter's front), threatened to set fire to another TV station. See Hamdi Malik, "Kata'ib Hezbollah-affiliated Rab' a Allah (God's Fellows) threatens @alhurrahiraq," Twitter, September 25, 2020.

cq KH threatened the Kurdistan Democratic Party offices in Baghdad, which were then burned down on October 17, 2020, by a mob from the vigilante groups referenced by Hamdi Malik in this paragraph. See Seth Frantzman, "Pro-Iranian militias accused of attack on Kurdish party, civilians in Iraq," *Jerusalem Post*, October 18, 2020. After the attack, Kata'ib Hezbollah's Telegram channels noted: "Any attempts by Kadhimi's intelligence service to arrest protesters will result in torching the rest of party offices belonging to the Zionist-affiliated separatists." Quoted in Hamdi Malik, "Kata'ib Hezbollah affiliated platforms threaten to attack more Kurdish offices," Twitter, October 17, 2020.

cr As noted before, the author's straw poll of a handful of intelligence professionals suggested that around 85 percent of attacks on international sites were undertaken by KH and around 80 percent of convoy attacks, versus only 10 percent of assassinations.

Hamid,^{cs} who instituted a new intake of Iraqi recruits under the name of Al-Warithuun (The Inheritors) for training at an IRGC-QF camp in Dezful in northwestern Iran.²⁵⁰ Following the post-2011 wars in Syria and Iraq, there are now a significant crop of experienced young fighters to choose from. If, as some reports suggest, groups like al-Jabiri's have recently been reinforced with shipments of silencers, anti-materiel rifles, and even MANPADS,²⁵¹ the outline of a more covert terrorist-type threat may be coming into view in Iraq.

Part 8 (Conclusion): Kata'ib Hezbollah and the Fasa'il in a Post-Muhandis World

Ever since Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and Kata'ib Hezbollah were designated on the same day in 2009 by the U.S. government, they have been viewed synonymously by many analysts, including this author.^{ct} Yet, while al-Muhandis did help create KH and did oversee its activities, the two became increasingly distinct after the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq in 2011. Al-Muhandis exercised his political role as the coordinator of all the Iraqi Shi'a militias and eventually all the PMF components. This means that his death struck not just KH but them all, loosening their ties, removing an important conflict resolution mechanism, and leaving them harder to control. Abu Fadak is a completely different type of player: less capable, not broadly accepted, more narrowly associated with KH and not even dominant *within* KH, and backed by a less powerful IRGC-QF leader.

As one U.S. intelligence official noted to the author: "Muhandis knew how to herd the cats of KH. They knew better than to argue with him. KH is not a cat to be herded since he died."²⁵² An Iraqi government official with excellent access to *fasa'il* actors went further:

Kata'ib [Hezbollah] are wild. They are doing their own thing. Like cowboys. They are reckless, and always looking for new things to do in Iraq and Syria. Uncoordinated things. And this is pissing off the others [political factions] who think they have a political future, but who are afraid to lose their hardline voter base.²⁵³

The loss of KH's overseer—al-Muhandis, the soldier-statesman—is evident in the setbacks that are now mounting up: the collapse of the Adel Abd'al-Mahdi premiership, the failure to replace him with another pro-Iran politician, the ascension of al-Kadhimi as premier, and now a firm pattern of appointments and government steps to rein in militias.²⁵⁴ Though KH remains the premier

cs According to the author's contacts, this may be Hamid Abd'al-Lahi, described as the commander of IRGC-QF's Unit 400, which is responsible for overseas assassinations. Hamid Abd'al-Lahi is reputed to be close to Abu Hussein, the current secretary general of KH. It may be that IRGC-QF is establishing a "school for assassins" to support an elimination campaign in Iraq. Hamid Abd'al-Lahi is referenced in Dilshad Al-Dalawi, "After being included in the lists of terrorism 'Al-Hamidawi' has a long record of crimes in Iraq," Al-Ain, February 28, 2020. See also author interviews, multiple Iraqi and Western officials and security experts, 2020 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees).

ct To give just one example, if a reader peruses Stanford University's profile of KH, they will find a firm statement of fact that "Muhandis was the founder of KH and served as its leader until he was killed in a drone strike in January 2020." Perhaps this is true in some sense, but the reality is much more complex. "Kata'ib Hezbollah," Center for International Security and Cooperation (CISAC), Stanford University.

counter-U.S. force in Iraq, probably linked to a high proportion of recent anti-U.S. rocket and roadside bomb attacks, it has lost its political edge. The dominant militant wing within KH—Abu Hussein and Abu Zainab al-Lami—has little ongoing connection to the political process now that al-Muhandis is dead. They are highly committed *muqawamists*^{cu} (i.e., committed to the transnational anti-U.S./Israel/Saudi “resistance” camp) and specifically to evicting U.S. forces from the Middle East and avenging Soleimani, al-Muhandis, and KH casualties. There are early signs that KH is becoming isolated and unresponsive to signals from partners, including Iran.^{cv}

One option for the IRGC-QF, MOIS, and Lebanese Hezbollah is to “go it alone” in some of their activities in the weak state environment of Iraq. In re-treading the history of al-Muhandis, KH, and other Iran-backed *fasa’il*, it becomes clear that Iranian and Lebanese leaders did not just work indirectly, channeling their influence through al-Muhandis or another central point. From the outset, they have also worked directly with an array of Iraqi militia leaders and they are increasingly doing so. Powerful Lebanese Hezbollah operatives such as the Kawtharani brothers (see footnote l) are today capable of directly influencing many militias in Iraq, even Sadrist elements,^{cw} and Lebanese Hezbollah increasingly uses Iraq as a cash cow.²⁵⁵ Building on al-Muhandis’s efforts described in *CTC Sentinel* in August 2019,²⁵⁶ the IRGC-QF can directly influence northern Iraqi militias from a range of minorities—Shi’a Kurds (Fayli) and Shi’a Turkmen, Yazidi, Shabak, and (most no-

tably) Sunni Arabs and Turkmen. IRGC-QF front companies have learned how to navigate Iraq’s ports as if they were extensions of Iran, partnering with individual Iraqis as opposed to major factions or militias.²⁵⁷ Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah do not necessarily have to work through Iraqi factions to use Iraq as a power projection hub and can use Iraqis of any sect or ethnicity as agents or terrorists.

IRGC-QF clearly has more irons in the fire than just KH, and it could choose to blend some familiar and some novel elements to create a new kind of resistance front in Iraq. This study has drawn attention to two non-KH leaders who may emerge as more important players in the future: Abu Iman al-Darraj of Saraya al-Jihad and Kadhim al-Jabiri of Saraya al-Ashura. Both are entrusted by the IRGC-QF with key duties that span counter-protest, counter-U.S., and regional force projection portfolios. Like al-Muhandis and al-Sheibani, they are both products of the continual splintering of the root organization, Badr, which is rapidly disintegrating into more and more factions.^{cx} Likewise, if KH advanced conventional weapon sites become too closely observed, the IRGC-QF might be able to “plug-in” to facilities maintained by other *fasa’il*, such as Kata’ib Sayyid al-Shuhada’s section of Camp Saqr in southern Baghdad,²⁵⁸ or Kata’ib Al-Imam Ali’s large compound of buried ammunition storage “igloos” in Suwayrah airport.²⁵⁹

As one well-informed Iraqi noted:

*Iran doesn’t have a favorite group at the moment and the Supreme Leader is displeased with all Iraqi militias and only trusts and will depend on Lebanese Hezbollah. Iran continues to support the various militias and has not cut any of them off, however they are selecting talented and willing individuals and organizing small groups and supporting these, who go by various names. They don’t have much hope for the current militias.*²⁶⁰

Having emerged out of anonymity around 15 years ago, KH and other top-tier IRGC-QF proxies in Iraq may once again be ordered to atomize, reconfigure, and sink back into the shadows. It should not be surprising if today’s greatly enlarged KH itself begins to fall victim to factionalism and defections, especially due to the absence of either Soleimani or al-Muhandis as a peacemaker. The aforementioned formation of Al-Warithuun (The Inheritors) could be a signpost of a shaving-off of younger, talented, and anonymous operators that is highly reminiscent of the formation of KH itself. **CTC**

cu *Muqawama* means resistance (to the United States, Israel, and other enemies of the Axis of Resistance).

cv To give some examples, immediately after meeting with IRGC-QF commander Qaani on April 2, 2020, KH signaled that it would cease attacks on U.S. forces as it was retreating and it was a violation of Islamic custom to attack a retreating enemy. Quoted in David M. Witty, “Iraqi Kata’ib Hezbollah militia to US President: we will not attack US forces in Iraq if ...” Twitter, April 2, 2020. Then on June 26, 2020, Iran did not condemn the Iraqi government raid on Kata’ib Hezbollah facilities and described it as an internal Iraqi matter. See “Kataeb Hezbollah: Profile of a Shiite-Iraqi militia handled by the Qods Force to promote Iranian interests in Iraq (Full Version),” Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, July 9, 2020, p. 54. Most interestingly, Iran condemned the September 2020 advanced roadside bomb (EFP) attack on a U.K. diplomatic convoy in Baghdad, which is the closest Iran gets to publicly rebuking KH. See “Iran condemns the targeting of delegations and diplomatic missions in Iraq and addresses a request to Baghdad,” Shafaq News, September 17, 2020.

cw For instance, Adnan Hussein al-Kawtharani runs a private prison in the Saraya al-Salam (PMF brigade 313) base at the cigarette factory on the northeastern edge of Sadr City in Baghdad. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2019-2020 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees).

cx The main camps visible in Badr are Hadi al-Ameri; National Security Advisor Qassim al-Araji; Mohammed al-Ghabban; Abu Muntadher al-Husseini; and Abu Ali al-Basri. Author interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2019-2020 (exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees).

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2 Muhammed Mohyee, “The Resistance Announces a Condition Ceasefire Against the Foreign Forces, Kata’ib Hezbollah communique,” October 10, 2020, sent to the author by an Iraqi contact in PDF format.

3 Abu Ali al-Askari made the new threats on his Telegram account on October 12, 2020.

- 4 Michael Knights, "Iran's Expanding Militia Army in Iraq: The New Special Groups," *CTC Sentinel* 12:7 (2019).
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