

Discordance in the Iran Threat Network in Iraq: Militia Competition and Rivalry

By Michael Knights, Crispin Smith, and Hamdi Malik

Iran-backed militias have been scrambling to recover after the loss of their patriarchs Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis on January 3, 2020. Attempts to preserve a top-down, Iran-directed system of command have met resistance, both from independent-minded upstarts like Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and the fragmenting powerbases within Kata'ib Hezbollah. To track these trends in detail and to an evidentiary level, the Militia Spotlight was stood up at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy in February 2021. This article lays out the project's first eight months of findings, drawn from an open-source intelligence effort that fuses intense scrutiny of militia messaging applications with in-depth interviews of officials with a close watching brief of the militias. The key finding is that while the IRGC-QF (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force) still runs Iran's covert operations inside Iraq, they face growing difficulties in controlling local militant cells. Hardline anti-U.S. militias struggle with the contending needs to de-escalate U.S.-Iran tensions, meet the demands of their base for anti-U.S. operations, and simultaneously evolve non-kinetic political and social wings.

This study builds on a series of *CTC Sentinel* articles since 2019 that have charted the evolution of the self-styled, Tehran-backed resistance (*muqawama*) factions in Iraq that direct attacks on the U.S.-led coalition. In August 2019, at the apex of *muqawama* political power so far, one of these authors (Knights) reviewed the manner in which the armed groups were using the legal, administrative, and funding status of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) to advance a process of state capture.¹ In January 2020, shortly after a U.S. airstrike killed Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the same author described the setbacks that befell the *muqawama* militias as they tried and failed to evict U.S. forces and quash Iraqi protests, finally losing their two iconic leaders to a U.S. airstrike on January 3, 2020.² In October 2020, the next *CTC Sentinel* piece by this author looked at the manner in which Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH), the most prolific Iran-backed militia in Iraq, coped with the death of its overseer al-Muhandis.³ The January 2020 article foresaw the likely development of a roadside bombing campaign against coalition supply routes,⁴ which did occur in the summer of 2020,^a

a From an inaugural convoy attack on July 11, 2020, onward, the number of convoy attacks rose from five that month to 12 in August 2020, and 33 in September 2020. By the end of September 2021, there had been 317 reported convoy attacks in Iraq. Drawn from the Washington Institute attack dataset.

and the October 2020 piece explored the idea that KH and other *muqawama* might be spawning a proliferation of “fake groups”⁵ (media façades used to conceal responsibility for attacks).⁶ The latter piece was published just as a new “conditional ceasefire”⁷ was announced by a new coordination mechanism for the *muqawama* known as the Iraqi Resistance Coordination Committee (al-Haya al-Tansiqiya lil-Muqawama al-Iraqiya, or *Tansiqiya* for short).⁷ The ceasefire became a bitter issue between the *muqawama* factions and would be broken on multiple occasions by dissenting militiamen.

In this article, a strengthened team of analysts will take forward the story of the evolution of *muqawama* groups in Iraq, drilling much deeper into the internal politics and inter-*muqawama* politics that has shaped—and often disrupted—*muqawama* kinetic and information operations in Iraq in the last 12 months. As 2020

b The conditional ceasefire was announced by the Muqawama Coordinating Committee on October 10, 2020. The statement was reposted across numerous Telegram channels. See, for example, Sabereen News (Telegram) at 16.09 hours (Baghdad time) on October 10, 2020. See also John Davison, “Iraqi militias say they have halted anti-U.S. attacks,” Reuters, October 11, 2021.

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came to an end, the authors of this study assembled to form the Militia Spotlight team at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. Observers were initially confused by militia use of façade groups,⁸ which blurred the identity of the militant actors actually undertaking attacks. To counter this, Militia Spotlight undertook content analysis of militia use of social media (Telegram and other platforms), which provided a rich stream of qualitative insights into how the groups cooperated and frequently competed.

Militia Spotlight's online blog⁹ and group profiles¹⁰ were established to track this process in detail and produce evidentiary building blocks, using legal standards of proof and certainty.^c The project collects militia statements in Arabic and other languages, archives evidence that may be taken offline at a later point, and uses a data fusion process to synthesize information and analyze trends. This online collection effort is strongly supplemented by the same kind of detailed interview process with U.S. and Iraqi subjects that underpinned the prior *CTC Sentinel* studies referenced above.¹¹ The below analysis represents the initial eight months of top-level^d findings from the Militia Spotlight program (which began publishing analyses on February 10, 2021).

The overall story is one of increased intra-*muqawama* disagreements over paths of de-escalation or escalation against the U.S.-led coalition, and of competition between the armed groups or *fasa'il*. As anticipated in the October 2020 *CTC Sentinel* analysis,¹² the post-Soleimani and post-Muhandis KH has suffered significant ruptures in its leadership and perhaps in the degree to which that leadership is still trusted by the IRGC-QF.

The article starts with a concise review of militia anti-U.S. operations since January 3, 2020. Part two looks at how Iranian influence adapted during the post-Soleimani era. Part three examines how Iraqi militias tried to coordinate their actions post-Muhandis. Part four explores the difficulties between and within *muqawama* factions post-January 3, 2020. Part five looks at the evolution of *muqawama* information operations in this period. It explores apparent novelties in *muqawama* behavior such as the emergence of numerous façade groups used to claim operations and social media platforms, before linking these innovations to the more prosaic proprietary *fasa'il* networks and areas of responsibility that sit underneath all the razzle-dazzle. Part six examines the evolution of kinetic operations. In part seven, the study closes with predictions

c Militia Spotlight seeks to capture information from militia sources and compile it as a record of militias "in their own words" and "by their own actions." The team attempts to lay out its findings with information supporting each step in the team's conclusions' logical chain. Militia Spotlight captures and saves this information, though the platform does not publish every item, name, or other element of information collected. As a baseline, Militia Spotlight aims to demonstrate linkages between militias to the equivalent of a common-law civil case standard of proof—that is, by a preponderance of the evidence that the facts alleged are true.

d In addition to the findings presented here, Militia Spotlight is also generating timely warning data and other actionable material for relevant authorities. Remarkably detailed material is being generated for use in the blog and profiles and also in special studies. Intelligence community seminars are regularly undertaken. To give an example of the detailed insights, Militia Spotlight has developed very granular understanding of how *muqawama* undertake assassinations, including every stage of warning, approval, and execution. Another example of the detailed profiling undertaken by Militia Spotlight is the authors' studies regarding how *muqawama* media organizations have relocated their facilities and servers multiple times.

about next steps in *muqawama* evolution in the political, social, economic, and military spheres, with particular reference to *muqawama* setbacks in the recently completed October 10, 2021, elections in Iraq and their aftermath.

Below the surface of events and attacks, significant insight was gleaned from careful observation of militia communications and propaganda activities, and by interviewing officials and politicians with direct insight into the internal affairs of militia groups. The Militia Spotlight team undertakes large numbers of anonymized^e interviews on an ongoing basis. When team members visit Iraq, as occurred in the summer of 2021, the conversations are substantive, usually over an hour of focused discussion on militia issues.^f Alongside face-to-face interviews, two of the three authors (Knights and Malik) 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 authors use their combined multi-decade track record of interviewing Iraqis to assess information. Militia Spotlight analysis is thus the product of a synthesized open-source intelligence process.

1. Overview of Militia Anti-U.S. Operations in the Post-January 3 Era

The roots of today's operations by Iran-backed militias are often visible in the environmental factors experienced by such groups and their Iranian supporters in prior months and years. Piecing the chronology together, with hindsight, it is strongly arguable that Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis were executing a strategic plan in Iraq in 2018-2019. With major combat operations against the Islamic State ended and with Iraqi elections looming in May 2018, Soleimani and al-Muhandis pushed forward on three initiatives. First, a rough plan was hatched to consolidate command and control of the PMF, including boiling down the large number of PMF micro-brigades (each well under a third of the size of an Iraqi army brigade) into a more cohesive force mostly under the leadership of KH members.¹³ Second, Soleimani and al-Muhandis invested huge effort in arranging the selection of Iraq's then prime minister, Adel Abdalmahdi, who took office in October 2018.¹⁴

Third, Soleimani and Iran's IRGC-QF (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force) began to recruit for a new resistance effort against U.S. forces in Iraq.¹⁵ As this author noted in *CTC Sentinel* in October 2020, new *muqawama* umbrella groups such as the Free Revolutionaries Front began to emerge in 2019 with the express aim of evicting U.S. forces from Iraq.¹⁵ Kinetic actions against U.S. sites and convoys were greatly intensified from May 2019 onward due to skyrocketing tension between Iran and the

e 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 the future, to ensure that such individuals are not exposed to intimidation for cooperating with research.

f The interviewees include individuals with detailed insight into *muqawama* operations. Many were interviewed multiple times, with very detailed notes taken.

g The authors have closely followed Iraqi politics and interviewed scores of informed observers of the inner workings of the 2018 government formation. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2018-2020, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.



Iran-backed militia fighters march in central Baghdad, Iraq, on June 29, 2021. (Khalid Mohammed/AP Photo)

United States, and then again intensified^h during the Iraqi protests that began the slow collapse of the Abdalmahdi government in November 2019 and sparked protests in Iran itself.

The pantheon of Iran-backed militias in Iraq have passed through a number of stages in the 21 months since a U.S. airstrike killed Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis on January 3, 2020. The first phase was simple revenge. Iraqi militia politicians passed a non-binding motion in Iraq's parliament to evict foreign forces on January 5, 2020, and Iran fired ballistic missiles at the U.S. site at Al-Asad Air Base two days later. A chaotic pattern of revenge rocket attacks by *muqawama* groups unfolded in the early months of 2020 against U.S. bases in Iraq, followed by what appears to have been Kata'ib Hezbollah's planned vengeance for al-

Muhandis, a carefully preparedⁱ series of rocket attacks that killed two Americans and one Briton at Taji in March 2020 undertaken by KH using a new "façade"—Usbat al-Thaireen (UT, League of the Revolutionaries).¹⁶ The United States immediately struck back against KH rocket warehouses on March 13, 2020, seemingly causing no KH fatalities.¹⁷

KH seemed to accept this blow and tailor the resistance effort to less lethal harassment attacks. The main mode of resistance shifted to what became known as the "convoy strategy" against Iraqi civilian trucks servicing the coalition. Under a KH lead, often under the banner of KH's other main façade Qasem al-Jabbarin (QJ, Smasher of the Oppressors),¹⁸ the roadside bombing campaign steadily expanded in the summer of 2020 until the number of attacks on Iraqi-manned trucks equaled those of rocket attacks on U.S. bases. Then, probably in response to intensifying U.S. threats of military and economic retaliation,¹⁹ KH announced a "conditional ceasefire" (i.e., an end to rocket attacks) on October 10, 2020, likely seeking to lower the risk of escalation until the

^h Iran seems to have viewed the protests in Iraq and Iran as sparked by U.S. intelligence action. 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. After the protests began, there was a notable increase in the apparent intended lethality of indirect fire on U.S. bases in November and December 2019 through the introduction of large multiple-rocket launch systems. Drawn from the Washington Institute attack dataset.

ⁱ The Taji attacks were notable in being preceded by two weeks of warning for Iraqi forces to distance themselves from U.S. sites; the development and launch of a new façade group (Usbat al-Thaireen) that announced itself to claim the attack; the unusually meticulous installation of spring-loaded rising rocket cubes under overhead cover to mount the attack; and the accuracy and lethality of the March 11, 2020, strikes. Drawn from the Washington Institute attack dataset.

situation became clearer in the November 2020 U.S. presidential election. The cessation of rocket attacks on the U.S. embassy in Baghdad and the Baghdad Diplomatic Security Center (BDSC) at Baghdad International airport^j probably also reflected rising Iraqi public criticism of the *muqawama* for undertaking resistance operations in central Baghdad.^k As noted, KH's partial ceasefire was not only directly communicated but echoed by the new KH-run coordination mechanism (the aforementioned *Tansiqiya*, which will be discussed in detail below), which emerged to speak for the *muqawama*.

Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq's dissenting role

Not all Iraqi factions went along with KH's partial ceasefire, which represented a complete cessation of lethal attacks on Americans (because no Americans were on the convoys that the *muqawama* continued to strike). Militia Spotlight assesses^l that Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) undertook two controversial rocket strikes (November 17 and December 20, 2020) on the U.S. embassy complex in Baghdad that drew criticism from KH and appears to have been undertaken by AAH in deliberate defiance of the *Tansiqiya's* ceasefire. On February 15, 2021, a new major rocket attack (again assessed by Militia Spotlight as an AAH attack²⁰) was launched against the U.S. base in Erbil, in Iraq's Kurdistan Region, followed by new rocket attacks on Balad Air Base on February 20²¹ and BDSC on February 22.²² AAH may have been seeking to assert an Iraqi leadership role of the *muqawama*, distinct from the IRGC-

QF-directed effort.^m

When the United States retaliated with deadly force on February 26, 2021, against KH and another Iraqi militia, Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada (KSS), on the Iraq-Syrian border,²³ the situation changed again: KH ended the ceasefire on March 3, 2021, and initiated²⁴ a campaign of drone and rocket attacks focused on the remaining U.S. military "points of presence."ⁿ The accuracy of the *muqawama's* first fixed-wing drone attacks allowed strikes on very specific aim-points such as U.S. intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) hangers²⁵ and missile defenses,²⁶ marking an apparent shift to a casualty-agnostic^o but nevertheless pain-inducing campaign of attrition against the U.S. presence in Iraq.^p

After four months of drone attacks,^q the authors understand that Iran stepped in right after the U.S.-Iraq Strategic Dialogue in Washington, D.C., and issued new guidance via IRGC-QF (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force) commander Brigadier General Esmail Qaani on July 29, 2021, to cease use of drones and rockets against U.S. bases.²⁷ Probably driven by backchannel U.S. warnings to Iran to control the drone campaign, the Iranian demarche gradually brought about a decline in the number of drone

j The focus on Baghdad was likely due to the progressive closure of targetable coalition sites at Qayyarah West, K1 in Kirkuk, and Mosul in March 2020, and the closure of coalition training missions in Taji and Besmaya in August 2020. The next most prominent U.S. targets were in Baghdad, but these quickly proved controversial due to collateral damage concerns and political embarrassment to the Iraqi government. Militia attacks then shifted to less sensitive targets such as Al-Asad (a remote base with few civilians nearby) and later the Kurdistan Region (where Arab leaders in Baghdad do not strongly object to disruption or collateral damage).

k In addition to collateral damage, such as the killing of a mother and daughter by militia rockets in Baghdad on July 4, 2020, the regular rocket attacks on the government center and international airport caused global embarrassment to Iraqi leaders. Less obviously, the rocket attacks also resulted in regular, early morning alarms and the use of extremely loud Counter-Rocket and Missile (C-RAM) systems in exactly the areas where Iraqi politicians live and sleep.

l Militia Spotlight assesses AAH responsibility due to extensive monitoring of claims and inter-militia social media. Specifically, Militia Spotlight observed the November 17, 2020, attack initially claimed by Ashab al-Kahf, a façade group with ties to AAH. It also observed significant anger within KH media networks: while Ashab al-Kahf and AAH supported the strike, KH officials and media channels criticized it as a violation of the KH-led truce. This resulted in a media split in which Sabereen (an AAH-led outfit) became increasingly unmoored from KH media networks. Through much of December, Sabereen existed at the center of an active AAH media network, which posted out-of-sync with KH media, even as KH channels ignored many of their rivals' messages and promoted convoy attacks.

m This thesis will be unpacked throughout the analysis, but it is an analytic assessment that leans on the authors' close focus on AAH leader Qais al-Khazali's career and communiques. Al-Khazali is highly ambitious and tries to walk the fine line between Iraqi nationalism and support for the pan-Shi'a "Axis of Resistance." He is the foremost up-and-coming Shi'a politician in Iraq. For a good profile of al-Khazali, see Isabel Coles, Ali Nabhan, and Ghassan Adnan, "Iraqi Who Once Killed Americans Is a U.S. Dilemma as He Gains Political Power," *Wall Street Journal*, December 11, 2018.

n Initially, *muqawama* groups attacked just Al-Asad and Balad, and then ramped up strikes into the Kurdistan Region (Erbil and Harir), before returning to strikes on BDSC from April 23, 2021. Drawn from the Washington Institute attack dataset.

o The term "casualty-agnostic" is chosen because militia rocket and drone attacks are mostly either "aimed off" of populated areas or areas where high casualties might be caused, or else (with drones) seem to precisely strike non-occupied aim-points. Such attacks can easily cause casualties due to the inaccuracy of rockets, or during interception of projectiles (that veer off course), or because targeting data is incorrect or outdated, but the intent is not to maximize lethality. Drawn from the Washington Institute attack dataset, and from the authors' extensive, related investigations into the circumstances, weapons, points of impact, and other features of attacks.

p By striking U.S. ISR assets, which are so-called 'exquisite' platforms that are rare and in high-demand, Iran and its proxies may be attempting a form of "anti-access" warfare to push what they see as the most dangerous U.S. systems (i.e., the drones and other aerial ISR that killed Soleimani and al-Muhandis) out of Iraq. Michael Knights and Crispin Smith, "Iraq's Drone and Rocket Epidemic. By the Numbers," Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 27, 2021.

q The drone threat has been growing for a few years, but quietly and invisibly to general analysts. In October 2019, a drone was used to bomb a pro-protector TV station. An armed quadcopter drone was discovered on a rooftop opposite the U.S. embassy in Baghdad in July 2020. A private security company in Baghdad was struck by militia drone attacks in September 2020. In March 2021, a drone attack was launched against Kurdistan leadership facilities by militias. Drawn from the Washington Institute attack dataset, plus interviews. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple U.S. and Iraqi contacts, 2019-2021, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees. See also Michael Knights, "Exposing and Sanctioning Human Rights Violations by Iraqi Militias," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 22, 2019.

attacks,^r with the apparent outlier of one new double-drone strike on Erbil on September 11, 2021.²⁸

The story of recent militia operations in Iraq thus seems to point to a relatively clear-cut arc of KH and AAH's competition for control over the resistance effort. In the following section, this article will look at how the IRGC-QF sought to reduce such friction and retain sufficient control of the Iraqi *muqawama* groups in 2020-2021.

2. How Iranian Influence Adapted in the Post-Soleimani Era

The months that followed the deaths of Soleimani and al-Muhandis saw the IRGC-QF and the *muqawama* adjust their internal relationships to account for the monumental loss of these two giants. Most militia leaders initially laid low within Iraq^s or sheltered in Iran,²⁹ expecting follow-on U.S. strikes. A select group of *muqawama* leaders visited Soleimani's deputy and successor, Esmail Qaani, with primary favor shown to Abu Ala al-Wal'ai of Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada and Akram Kaabi of Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (HaN, hereafter referred to as Nujaba).³⁰ (KH probably attended, but at that point, KH was settling its internal leadership vacuum and was not then in the habit of exposing its secretary-general's identity in public).³¹

On the surface, little appeared to change after Soleimani and al-Muhandis died, with IRGC-QF and KH remaining the key Iranian and Iraqi players. In the first eight months of Militia Spotlight's collection, a number of theories emerged and were tested concerning IRGC-QF's role in Iraq, including the notion that Qaani had significantly less control of Iraqi groups (compared to Soleimani's and al-Muhandis' combined grip over them) and the notion of significant internecine competition within Iran's security establishment over the Iraqi portfolio. Overall, these theories did not fully reflect the complexities of intra-*muqawama* and Iran-*muqawama* dynamics.

For instance, multiple interviewees in a position to know are unanimous that IRGC-QF still leads Iraq policy for Iran. IRGC-QF primacy in Iraq is still recognized by the Office of the Supreme Leader, Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS),^u IRGC

Intelligence Organization,^v the Ministry of Foreign Affairs,^w and Lebanese Hezbollah.^x Yet, there is evidence that Qaani has less personal sway over Iraqi commanders, which is unsurprising considering Qaani's non-fluency in Arabic and his relatively limited track record with the Iraqi *muqawama* compared to the more charismatic Soleimani. Some *muqawama* actors (notably AAH) have been serially defiant toward Qaani, seeming to grandstand whenever the opportunity has arisen to snub him. However, in most ways, Qaani follows the same playbook as Soleimani, regularly traveling to Iraq for visits that include Najaf (to meet Iraq's clergy), Samarra (to interact with *muqawama* military commanders), Baghdad (to meet political and PMF leaders), and Erbil (to meet Kurdish leaders). As noted above, when Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei wished to convey a firm message to *Tansiqiya* commanders on July 29, 2021, he used Qaani to deliver guidance (to temporarily cease attacks on U.S. sites) rather than Iranian ambassador to Baghdad (and IRGC officer) Iraj Masjedi³² or the MOIS country chief. This underlines the strong argument that Qaani is still the channel for top-level messaging from Khamenei and that IRGC-QF still leads Iran's policy on Iraq.

3. How Iraqi Militias Tried to Coordinate Their Actions Post-Muhandis

Probably the only real innovation³³ of the Qaani era is the *Tansiqiya*, which emerged with a widely shared public statement on the afternoon of October 10, 2020.³⁴ In its debut statement, the *Tansiqiya* reiterated old grievances against the United States and recounted the *muqawama*'s efforts to force the alleged occupiers out of Iraq. The statement then announced a conditional ceasefire

r Drone attacks dropped from six in June 2021 and four in July, and none in August. Drawn from the Washington Institute attack dataset.

s Qais al-Khazali first hid in a shrine in Karbala and then rented a house on a street adjacent to Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, to use the presence of Iraq's senior cleric to avoid being targeted. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2021, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

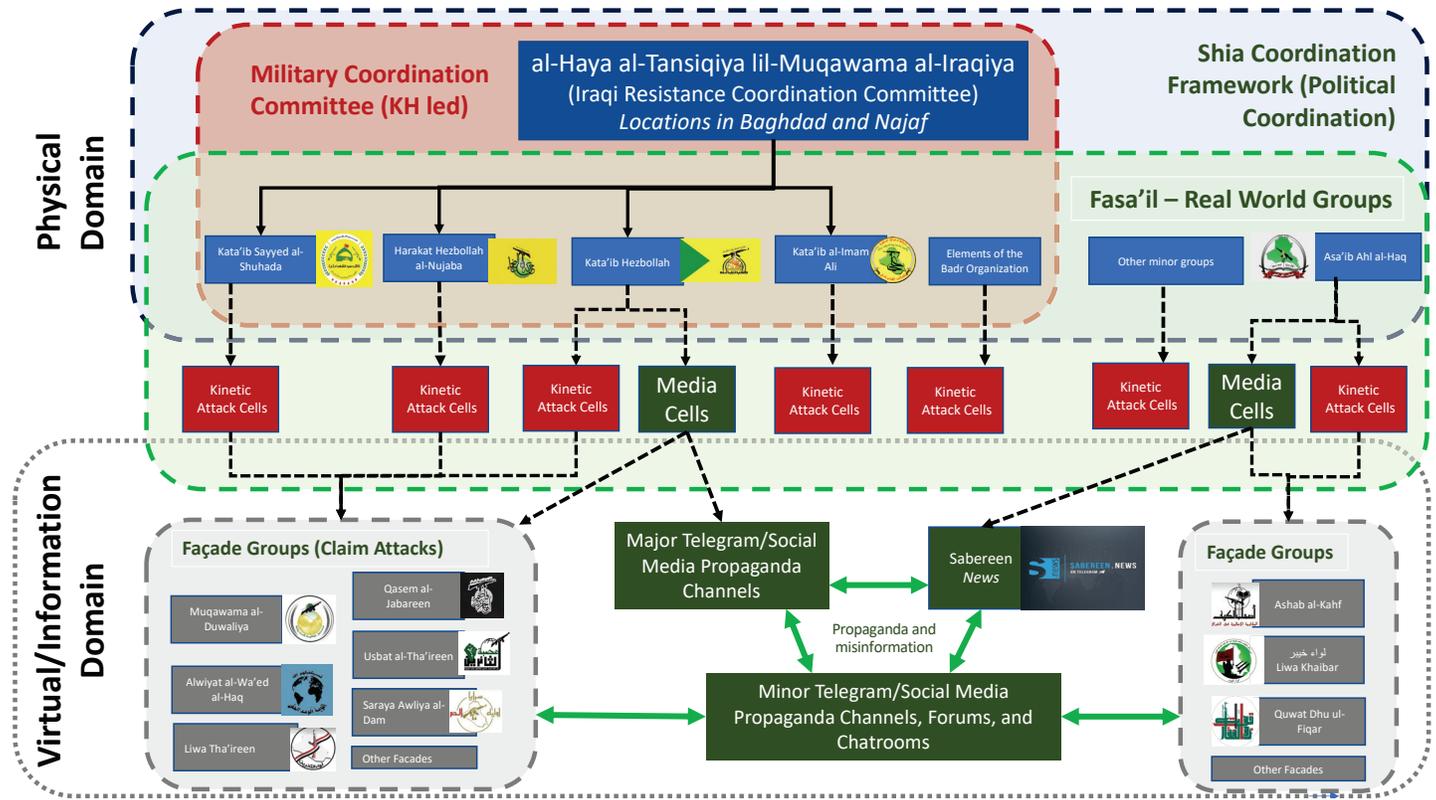
t KH first exposed Abu Hussein's name, and his role as secretary-general, on January 3, 2021, the one-year anniversary of Soleimani and al-Muhandis' deaths. See Kata'ib Hezbollah (Telegram) on January 3, 2021, and Kaf (Telegram) on January 3, 2021.

u The Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) mission in Iraq remains focused on threats that can affect the Iranian homeland, such as dissidents, Kurdish oppositionists, and the like. MOIS has an economic security focus, including aspects of the Iran-Iraq religious tourist trade and general trade. In parallel with these aims, MOIS has money-making schemes inside Iraq. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2021, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

v The IRGC Intelligence Organization (IRGC-IO) has professional equities in Iraq, particularly ensuring that Iraqi airspace is not used to attack Iran, through the use of shared radar data to understand Iraq's air picture and make Iraq's Directorate General of Intelligence and Security (DGIS) aware of foreign uses of its airspace. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2021, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

w Iran's former Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif was embarrassed by the *muqawama* (and perhaps, by extension, the IRGC-QF) when in July 2020, militias launched a rare daytime rocket attack on the Baghdad International Zone in the middle of the foreign minister's visit to Baghdad. See "Rocket attack hits Baghdad as Iran's Zarif visits," i24 News, July 19, 2020.

x Lebanese Hezbollah's interaction with the *muqawama* is worthy of a standalone piece, but briefly, Militia Spotlight has been surprised by the less prominent than expected political role of Lebanese Hezbollah in Iraq. Since the deaths of Soleimani and al-Muhandis, Lebanese Hezbollah does not appear to have filled in any significant gap. Some senior Lebanese Hezbollah leaders like Hassan Nasrallah and Mohammed Kawtharani are treated with respect by Iraqi factions, but they do not rival the IRGC-QF in Iraq. Very small numbers (tens) of Lebanese Hezbollah Unit 3800 advisors are present, as discussed elsewhere in this study, and Lebanese Hezbollah may have been highly influential on *muqawama* media operations and the sourcing of drone parts. Overall, however, Lebanese Hezbollah seems to be in Iraq to make money: the vast majority of interview material gathered relating to the activities in Iraq of Lebanese Hezbollah relates to corrupt deals to leach money off the Iraqi state (via welfare fraud and national identity cards and pensions illegally given to Lebanese persons, and via diversion of oil and gas byproducts (heavy oil, sulfur) to Lebanese Hezbollah). Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2020-2021, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees. See also Matthew Levitt, "Hezbollah's Regional Activities in Support of Iran's Proxy Networks," Middle East Institute, July 26, 2021, p. 34.



Militia Spotlight graphic (created by Crispin Smith) showing the assessed relationships between different levels of the muqawama pantheon in Iraq, including the basic nature of the overlap between the Tansiqiya, the fasa'il, kinetic and media cells, and online façade brands.

suggesting the *Tansiqiya* would suspend attacks in return for a clear plan for U.S. troops to leave.³⁵ The following morning, KH spokesman Mohammed Mohi told Reuters that “The factions have presented a conditional ceasefire ... It includes all factions of the (anti-U.S.) resistance, including those who have been targeting U.S. forces.” Mohi did not, however, “specify which groups had drafted the statement.”³⁶

Tansiqiya communiqués

Compared with individual militias and their propagandists, the *Tansiqiya* communicates in public relatively infrequently. Including the October 10, 2020, statement, Militia Spotlight is aware of nine statements. These statements tend to respond to major paradigm changes in U.S.-*muqawama* relations, or political events with a bearing on U.S. withdrawal. In general, topics of *Tansiqiya* statements relate to high-level military strategy and political affairs. Statements appear to be released on closed Telegram or other messaging groups, and are then disseminated broadly by *muqawama* Telegram channels. Notably, channels affiliated with KH and Nujaba are almost always the first to “break the news” of a new statement, raising the possibility that statements are released to these groups first (or exclusively).³⁷

The *Tansiqiya*’s second statement³⁸ was on February 27, 2021, and responded to the first airstrike of the Biden presidency, which targeted KH and KSS positions in Syria two days prior. The statement noted the existence of the alleged ceasefire put in place months earlier, criticizing the United States for violating it and the Iraqi authorities for allowing it to go ahead.³⁹ In response to the February 25 U.S. strike, the *muqawama* militias placed themselves

on a war footing. On March 3, a militia (highly likely to have been KH) launched an unusual early morning, daylight rocket attack on a major U.S. installation. A new *Tansiqiya* statement⁴⁰ on March 4 formally ended the ceasefire and laid out new rules of engagement, saying “we are facing a new page from the pages of the resistance, in which the weapons of the *muqawama* will reach all occupation forces and their bases in any part of [Iraq]. The *muqawama* has the legal and national right and popular support for doing this ... The *muqawama* sees confrontation as the only option.”⁴¹

The next statement came on April 6, 2021, commenting on the then-ongoing Strategic Dialogue between the United States and Iraq, laying out demands from the process and threatening further reprisals if U.S. withdrawal was delayed.⁴²

On May 20, the *Tansiqiya* held a street demonstration and rally in support of Gaza (during the May 2021 conflict). As Militia Spotlight noted: “At the event, a statement was read by Nasr al-Shammari (Nukaba’s spokesperson) while Muhammad Mohi (KH’s spokesperson) stood behind him. The reading was introduced as ‘the statement of al-Haya al-Tansiqiya lil-Muqawama al-Iraqiya,’ and Shammari concluded it with the same sign-off.”⁴³

The *Tansiqiya*’s next statements both related to the Iraqi Prime Minister’s visit to Washington, D.C. On July 23, 2021, the *Tansiqiya* laid out—in detail⁴⁴—requirements for the *muqawama* to be satisfied of U.S. good faith in any withdrawal process, while reaffirming the *muqawama*’s continued intent to fight U.S. forces in the absence of any withdrawal.⁴⁵ Then, as the Washington meetings concluded on July 28, the *Tansiqiya* criticized⁴⁶ the dialogue and called for all foreign forces and aviation to be removed from Iraq, threatening aviation by noting that “any foreign flight in Iraq will

be treated as hostile.⁴⁷ The *Tansiqiya's* most recent statements (at the time of writing) comprised an unusually concentrated burst of three post-election threats, released once the scale of the defeat of *muqawama*-aligned blocs became clear. The *Tansiqiya* used its statements to link the election results to an alleged agenda to disestablish the PMF. On October 12, 2021, the *Tansiqiya* reflected its shock by saying “we cannot accept” the election result, and attacked the electoral winner, Moqtada al-Sadr.⁴⁸ On October 17, the *Tansiqiya* explicitly alleged vote-tampering by “foreign hands” with the complicity of the government and its electoral commission, requiring the commission to “correct its path” or face a “crisis.”⁴⁹ On October 18, the *Tansiqiya* laid the groundwork for demonstrations, with the *Tansiqiya* adopting a firm but more measured appeal to the electoral commission and expressing solidarity with the security forces.⁵⁰

Military committees

Though there have been proto-*Tansiqiya* type umbrellas of resistance factions since 2018⁵¹ and a pan-*muqawama* anti-protest “crisis cell” in 2019,⁵² today's *Tansiqiya* is a more organized model that lives up to its title as a coordination mechanism. The *Tansiqiya* has a small number of headquarters in which its top-level leaders typically meet. The *Tansiqiya* has a rudimentary de-confliction mechanism based on committees organized by region. This reflects a strong geographic territoriality^y that underpins how the *muqawama* de-conflict their kinetic operations (to ensure synergy and avoid disrupting each other's operations). Using geolocated attack data, Telegram claims of attribution, and other means of verification, Militia Spotlight assesses that:

- A leadership committee (Militia Spotlight's nomenclature) of a set of top Shi'a leaders from a select group of *fasa'il*^z meets on an as-needed basis to discuss strategy and adjust or de-conflict their activities. Kata'ib Hezbollah chairs the political committee, with a senior chairman's role for Ahmad Mohsen Faraj al-Hamidawi (also known as Abu Hussein, Abu Zalata, and Abu Zeid), the KH secretary-general and the commander of KH Special Operations.^{aa}
- The western committee (Militia Spotlight's nomenclature) covers Anbar and is headed by Kata'ib Hezbollah, aligning

with KH's self-styled Jazira Operations Command.⁵³ This committee has exclusive control of attacks against the U.S. site at Al-Asad Air Base.^{ab}

- The central committee (Militia Spotlight's nomenclature) covers Baghdad and the road systems linking Baghdad and Basra. Nujaba has some kind of coordinating authority for attacks on BDSC, while KH (during periods when attacks on the U.S. embassy are sanctioned by Iran) leads on embassy strikes from launch points in Albu Aitha, Doura, and East Baghdad.^{ac}
- KH also oversees the “convoy strategy” of roadside bombings from its Jurf as-Sakr base, south of Baghdad, undertaking most^{ad} of the small numbers of real *muqawama* convoy attacks (as opposed to false claims, double-reporting, and mafia-style criminal attacks).^{ae}
- The expansive northern region (Militia Spotlight's nomenclature), including the areas bordering the Kurdistan Region, is nominally coordinated by KSS and includes local PMF brigades linked to the *muqawama* such as Liwa al-Shabak/Quwat Sahl Nineveh (PMF brigade 30), Babiliyun (brigade 50), and Quwwat al-Turkmen (PMF brigade 16,

y This territoriality applies to both operations against U.S. targets and also assassinations. If a *muqawama* cell wishes to kill an individual, it first checks in with the *fasa'il* that is recognized as controlling the area. The “*amni*” (intelligence chief) of the ground-holding *fasa'il* is consulted for permission to do the hit in his area, and he usually obliges and provides target intelligence, surveillance assistance, and a security cordon in certain cases. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2020-2021, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

z According to interviews with Iraqis in a position to know, the membership of the *Tansiqiya*, the *fasa'il* representatives, comprise: Ahmad Mohsen Faraj al-Hamidawi (also known as Abu Hussein, Abu Zalata, Abu Zeid), the KH Secretary General and the Commander of KH Special Operations; PMF operational commander and KH veteran Abd'al-Aziz al-Mohammadawi (Abu Fadak); KSS leader Abu Ala al-Walaji; Adnan al-Bendawi (Abu Kawthar), the “jihadist assistant” to Nujaba's Akram al-Ka'abi; and Ali al-Yassiri of Saraya Talia al-Khurasani (PMF brigade 18). Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2020-2021, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

aa 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.”

ab In an exception that proves the rule, KSS requested KH's permission to launch an attack on Al-Asad in early July 2021 as a revenge attack for the death of a KSS member in the U.S. airstrike on June 27, 2021. According to the author's (Knights) interview data, KSS asked Qassem Muslih, the local PMF axis commander and leader Liwa al-Tafuf, and he gained permission from KH. The truck-based rocket launcher was brought from Suqr (Falcon) base in Baghdad to its launch point in Baghdadi on July 7, 2021. This is the attack referenced here: Chad Garland, “Two wounded in rocket attack on Iraqi base housing US forces,” *Stars and Stripes*, July 7, 2021.

ac The June 25, 2020, arrest of a Kata'ib Hezbollah in Albu Aitha is a public case where this launch area was used. The individual was seized on the basis of biometric ties to rocket attacks, and he was arrested on a KH base in Albu Aitha where rockets were stored, close to launch points. In the October 2020 *CTC Sentinel* article on Kata'ib Hezbollah, one of the authors (Knights) details other uses of the Doura area as a launch point for attacks on the U.S. embassy. Michael Knights, “Back into the Shadows? The Future of Kata'ib Hezbollah and Iran's Other Proxies in Iraq,” *CTC Sentinel* 13:10 (2020): pp. 8, 14-16.

ad Detailed interviews by one of the authors (Knights) on the roadside bombing campaign give the sense that Kata'ib Hezbollah does most of the real anti-coalition convoy bombings itself. In particular, one well-placed interviewee estimated the proportion to be 70 percent KH attacks and 30 percent outsourced via teaming arrangements, including AAH and members from PMF units stationed in southern Iraq. Author (Knights) interview, single Iraqi contact, multiple sessions with significant detail, 2021, exact dates, name, and places withheld at request of the interviewee.

ae In the first quarter of 2021, there was a weekly average of seven reported convoy attacks and in the second quarter a monthly average of six. Multiple interviewees suggested that the number of actual proven anti-coalition convoy attacks each week was two or fewer, mostly undertaken by KH. They characterize the balance as false or duplicate reporting, or criminal actions that are disguised within the *muqawama* effort but which are actually simply extortion operations against trucking firms that are not carrying coalition supplies. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2021, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

based in Tuz and Kirkuk).^{af}

- AAH, meanwhile, has typically ridden roughshod over these lines, striking the aforementioned coalition annex at Baghdad airport (BDSC) and the U.S. embassy, and using its own local networks around Mosul to direct attacks on Erbil (seeming to draw upon KSS support to do so),⁵⁴ and on Balad Air Base (sometimes utilizing sites where Badr is considered dominant).^{ag}

At military committee level, IRGC-QF or Lebanese Hezbollah^{ah} advisors are sometimes present to offer advice on technical aspects or operational security.^{ai} The representatives from *muqawama* factions on the military committees are typically the “*amni*” (intelligence chiefs) responsible for the operational area in question (say, for instance, Al-Asad Air Base). An action is proposed, including a target, day and time, and this sets in motion preparatory activities such as selection and reconnaissance of an attack type, and sourcing and staging of weapons. (See the later section on kinetic operations.) In all the military regions, KH appears to be the predominant influence within the military committees, and the supposed “lead” of KSS in the north and Nujaba in Baghdad may be exaggerated or symbolic—i.e., nominally giving one region to each of the triad of most-trusted IRGC-QF partners: KH, KSS, and Nujaba.

Pre-election focus on political considerations

Another trend spotted by Militia Spotlight is the growing discomfort caused by *muqawama* kinetic actions that was felt by Shi`a politicians from large parties (like Badr) ahead of the October 10, 2021, elections. This has boosted efforts by Shi`a politicians to shape militia operations. The main vehicle has been the pan-Shi`a leadership group known as Shia Coordination Framework (al-Etar al-Tansiqi al-Shia), a talking shop of around nine majority-Shi`a

af Smaller local PMF brigades, including PMF brigades 16, 30 and 50, provide enormous benefits to the *muqawama*: they provide reconnaissance capability and local knowledge to the *fasa'il* and their attack cells. They also provide cover for infiltrating and exfiltrating cells that can hide among “legitimate” PMF units, or lay-up at PMF bases and safe houses. All the while, the smaller militias provide legitimacy for *muqawama* actions (as representatives of the local, often minority, communities) while helping set up alternative power structures that undermine the legitimate authorities. See, for example, Kamaran Palani, “Iran-backed PMFs are destabilising Iraq’s disputed regions,” Al Jazeera, May 8, 2021. On the most important small PMF unit, see John Foulkes, “Iran’s Man in Nineveh: Waad Qado and the PMF’s 30th Brigade,” *Militant Leadership Monitor* 12:5 (2021).

ag In interviews, Camp Ashraf is a recurring theme as a hub of *muqawama* planning and logistic activity for rocket and drone attacks. At least one rocket attack on Balad was fired from within or close to Camp Ashraf. Most other attacks on Balad are fired from the AAH-controlled areas east of the Tigris, and one well-placed interviewee identified AAH’s PMF brigade 43 as responsible for rocket attacks on Balad. In Militia Spotlight’s assessment, attacks on Balad (where the presence of U.S. technicians is sporadic) are driven by a witches’ brew of commercial extortion and political motives.

ah Though Lebanese Hezbollah’s military training role can be valuable to its recipients in Iraq, Militia Spotlight generally assesses that LH’s post-Soleimani political role in Iraq does not appear to be as great as suggested in pieces such as this: Suad al-Salhy, “Exclusive: Iran tasked Nasrallah with uniting Iraqi proxies after Soleimani’s death,” Middle East Eye, January 14, 2020.

ai One obvious reason to involve such advisors would be to advise on how to probe, test, and defeat counter-rocket or counter-drone defenses, which would be of significant value to other military actors like Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah.

political parties (including Badr and AAH) that has been meeting a couple of times each month since the October 2019 mass protest movement began.^{55 aj} Indeed, the only time AAH leader Qais al-Khazali has mentioned being in the “*Tansiqiya*,” he explicitly referenced “al-Etar al-Tansiqi al-Shia,” not the military organ called al-Haya al-Tansiqiya lil-Muqawama al-Iraqiya.⁵⁶

This political level appears to have been emphasized since the May 26, 2021, face-off between *muqawama* factions and the government over the arrest of a senior KH-supported militiaman, Qassem Muslih.⁵⁷ *Muqawama* factions were embarrassed^{ak} by the episode, which publicly undermined their claim to be legal organs of the state (via their PMF role) and under the prime minister’s control. After May 26, there are multiple accounts⁵⁸ that Badr Organization leader Hadi al-Ameri has played an expanded role in advising the *muqawama* leaders on the political repercussions of their actions.

4. Difficulties Between and Within *Muqawama* Factions

The *Tansiqiya* has not been uniformly successful in marshaling the *fasa'il*. A key weakness has been the apparent absence of, or very weak connection to, AAH and its leader Qais al-Khazali. It is unclear if AAH was excluded or never actually wanted to join the KH-run body. There is no clear evidence to suggest that AAH ever formally joined the *Tansiqiya* but many indicators that AAH has instead jealously guarded and highlighted its ability to operate autonomously from IRGC-QF and to be unwilling to enter into ceasefires with the U.S.-led coalition.^{al} AAH has even actively disrupted the ceasefire, with the balance of evidence suggesting that AAH broke the *Tansiqiya*’s partial ceasefire twice by rocketing the U.S. embassy in Baghdad on November 17, and December 20, 2020, coincident with Esmail Qaani transiting Baghdad to encourage compliance with the *Tansiqiya*’s conditional ceasefire. Then, as AAH broke the ceasefire again with a February 2021 series of

aj These meetings do not usually coincide with visits into Iraq by Esmail Qaani, and normal meetings do not involve Iranian or Lebanese Hezbollah participants. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2020-2021, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

ak Iraqis with access to the discussions within militia leadership on May 26, 2021, describe the very delicate situation of the *muqawama*. They feared looking weak if Muslih was not immediately released, yet they did not want a release to appear to have been under extra-legal pressure from militias, lest they damage their status as part of the state through the PMF. The solution they sought was for Prime Minister Kadhimi to immediately release Muslih on a technicality and detail for the public the purported wrong procedures used. When Kadhimi refused, the militias were forced to wait for the whole pre-trial detention period for Muslih’s release before he was released by the judiciary (not Kadhimi’s executive branch). During that time, Hadi al-Ameri led a camp that internally criticized KH’s military mobilization in the International Zone. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, in great detail, 2021, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

al For instance, on November 19, 2020, just after an AAH rocket attack that fell during Esmail Qaani’s visit to Baghdad, Qais al-Khazali noted: “I sent a clear and frank message to Mr Esmail Qaani ... the Americans occupy our country not yours, those martyred in Qaim were our sons ... then the matter is related to us, regardless of other calculations, so please from now on if someone came to you, embarrassed you, please no one talks to us and we won’t listen... our motives are national 100%...” Qais al-Khazali interview, Iraq Media Net, November 19, 2020, see 27:13.

rocket attacks, AAH and KH engaged in a public war of words over *muqawama* strategy (which Militia Spotlight termed the “Tuna and Noodles saga”⁵⁹). This episode saw KH media channels criticize AAH’s rocket attacks for only damaging parked cars, and AAH media channels lampoon the KH convoy strategy for “targeting convoys of tuna and noodles.”⁶⁰ In essence, both sides criticized the seriousness of the other’s resistance effort.

This sequence of February 2021 rocket strikes ended up being very consequential, triggering the new Biden administration’s use of military force in the counter-militia airstrike on February 26, which spurred the KH-led *Tansiqiya* to ramp up rocket (and drone) attacks on U.S. sites from March 4, 2021, onward, carrying the risk of U.S. casualties and retaliation. Even after March 4, both KH and AAH undertook parallel indirect fire attacks, with AAH sometimes appearing to pre-empt or overshadow KH operations.^{am}

KH reliability on the decline

This post-March 4, 2021, period has highlighted new weaknesses at the heart of the *Tansiqiya* system. As noted, the May 26, 2021, mobilization of the *muqawama* against the Iraqi government center was a demonstration of the volatility and poor political instincts of KH military leaders in the post-Muhandis era, resulting in veteran militiamen like Badr’s Hadi al-Ameri being tapped to cast a political eye over *Tansiqiya* operations.^{an} Yet, even this expedient showed poor results. The sharp increase in *muqawama* drone operations in June 2021 (11 drones used in six attacks)^{ao} led to new U.S. airstrikes on June 27, 2021.⁶¹ Escalation continued in July, with four more drone attacks, part of a retaliatory dynamic driven by lower-level

muqawama leaders.^{ap}

In response, Esmail Qaani visited Iraq on July 29, 2021, to address both the political Shi`a leaders and the gathered military committees of the *Tansiqiya* (in Baghdad and Najaf, respectively). In a tough tone, Qaani delivered a message from Khamenei that urged the continuation of the conditional truce, and ordered the cessation of attacks on U.S. sites, “especially drone attacks.” Ordering the *muqawama* to pivot to elections preparations, Qaani warned: “Truce-breakers will be held accountable. We gave the drones and we know who has them. We can take them back.”⁶² As KH is the key operator of fixed-wing drones in Iraq, Qaani’s warning was undoubtedly aimed at them.^{aq}

Against a backdrop of unprecedented public *muqawama* appeals to their leadership for retaliation,⁶³ another less obvious reason for ongoing non-compliance by KH may have been the severe internal ructions being suffered within KH at the time. Coincident with Qaani’s July 29, 2021, visit, Kata’ib Hezbollah held an internal leadership vote⁶⁴ for its secretary-general role, with the incumbent Abu Hussein (Ahmad Mohsen Faraj al-Hamidawi) getting only 14 votes versus 19 for his challenger,^{ar} another KH Shura Council member called Sheikh Jassim al-Majedi (Abu Kadhim).^{as}

am For instance, AAH likely knows when KH is going to strike and seems to have preceded KH attacks with its own AAH strikes on both June 6, 2021, and June 9, 2021. On both occasions, a double attack took place, in each case with a rocket attack on a typical AAH target (i.e., Balad) preempting a later drone attack on Al-Assad (June 6) and BDSC (June 9). The balance of evidence suggests this is competitive behavior, not coordinated behavior. Drawn from the Washington Institute attack dataset.

an Hadi al-Ameri cast interesting light on this incident at the August 31, 2021, Rafidain Center For Dialogue Forum in Baghdad, noting: “It was a wrong decision by the Government and the Prime Minister to detain Qasem Muslih ... It was also wrong by us (PMF) to spread our forces in the city. I ordered every single person to act peacefully and to manage themselves, and they did it.” The video of the conference can be found at “Live: inside the Baghdad Forum for Dialogue, a special meeting with the president of the Fatah Alliance, Hadi al-Ameri,” posted to Facebook by Rudaw News at 20:56 (Baghdad time) on August 31, 2021.

ao Drone attacks in June 2021 included: June 6, two-drone strike on al-Asad Air Base; June 9, strike on BDSC; June 15, two-drone strike on BDSC; June 20, strike on al-Asad Air Base; June 22, strike on BDSC in Baghdad; June 27, four-drone strike close to leadership complexes in Erbil. Drawn from the Washington Institute attack dataset. See also Knights and Smith.

ap Militia Spotlight has observed a number of occasions in which *muqawama* members appear to have criticized leaders or other groups for insufficient efforts at resisting the United States. After the June 28, 2021, U.S. airstrike that resulted in the death of two *fasa’il* soldiers, some *muqawama* affiliates felt disappointed with what they saw as lack of retaliatory actions by *muqawama* leaders. When the leader of the Badr organization, Hadi al-Ameri, and the head of the PMF commission, Falih al-Fayyadh, attended the funeral of those killed in the U.S. strike, young *muqawama* members yelled at them, saying “we don’t want condemnation ... either take revenge or don’t come [to these funerals] anymore... If Abu Mahdi was around, he’d tell us this is the [American] embassy and we’d burn it.” See video posted to Alfaqaar (an AAH affiliated Telegram channel), at 02:14 hours (Baghdad time) on June 30, 2021. The caption reads “One of the Supporters of the PMF during the funeral of the martyrs of the American bombing in al-Qaim: ‘if Abu Mahdi [al-Muhandis] was here he would have shaken the [U.S.] embassy.’”

aq As the primary user of fixed-wing drones, KH was likely the group addressed by Khamenei. Other groups might also have been intended audiences, but in a month when as many as ten drones were used, KH is highly likely to have been the main audience for the guidance. Drawn from the Washington Institute attack dataset.

ar In October 2020, one of the authors collated what was known about KH’s Shura Council, listing it as having five members. Since then, subsequent fieldwork in Baghdad uncovered that KH’s Shura Council has five deputy secretary-generals (the five listed in the October 2020 piece) but far more than five members. The vote count (14 plus 19) from the June 29, 2021, leadership vote suggests the KH Shura Council has at least 33 members if all members voted in this important event and if only two candidates were fielded. The number might be higher if some members were absent or abstained or if other candidates also competed. Most likely, the number is 33 or close to that number. For the initial treatment of the KH Shura Council, see Knights, “Back into the Shadows?” p. 9.

as Sheikh Jassim al-Majedi (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. Knights, “Back into the Shadows?” p. 9.

Resisting a palace coup that might have had Iranian backing,^{at} Abu Hussein did not accept the vote, splitting KH's Shura Council and triggering extended mediation between Brigadier General Hajji Hamid Nasser (the IRGC-QF commander for Iraq) and KH leaders.⁶⁵ Amidst the KH leadership crisis, Abu Hussein's faction within KH broke into the PMF administration department on August 7, 2021, and forced staff to hand over a full electronic register of all official and unofficial members of the PMF, with the stated motive of proving that AAH was being given more paid billets than KH.⁶⁶ (On August 8, PMF Chairman Falah al-Fayyadh issue an internal memo that ordered guards to exclude KH members from entering the administration offices.⁶⁷) These events reveal deep divisions between and within the *fasa'il*, schisms that Iran is struggling to manage.

5. Information Operations: As Important as Kinetic Effects

One of the more novel features of *muqawama* activity in the post-January 3, 2020, era has been the dynamic expansion of militia activities in the information space, specifically the aforementioned utilization of numerous façade groups and media fronts. In an era of setbacks for the militias,⁶⁸ the *muqawama* ramped up their information operations^{au} to offset real-world weaknesses. In fact, information operations are so intertwined with the *muqawama*'s kinetic and socio-political operations that it can be hard to determine at times whether information operations play a supporting role or have become the main effort. To give one example, following the arrest for murder of the KH-linked *muqawama* leader Qassem Muslih on May 26, 2021, the *muqawama* leaders quickly realized that they were not going to be able to secure Muslih's immediate release. With great agility, the *muqawama* switched their focus to an information operations-led strategy to (successfully) create the public and international impression that Muslih *had* been released.⁶⁹ Perception trumped reality, especially as the information operation was built upon the pre-existing bias in Iraqi and international observers that the Iraqi government is weak.

Key concepts: Soft war and lawfare

Two concepts appear to have shaped how the *muqawama* view information operations. The first is Iran's conception of soft war ("*jang-e narm*" [Persian] or "*harb na'ima*" [Arabic]) characterized by information warfare and the development of a network of covert and overt media actors.⁷⁰ In December 2020, Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei laid out a framework for avenging Soleimani, highlighting the importance of "soft power" non-kinetic actions as perhaps the most appropriate response to the United States

at It seems unlikely that the KH leadership vote and Qaani's visit was coincidental. Instead, it is likely that the vote was intended to occur during the visit, and that Qaani did not prevent this. The apparent result—against Abu Hussein—was probably not an unexpected outcome but Qaani may not have been prepared for an extended non-acceptance of the result. As a result, the balance of evidence suggests that the vote at least appeared to be Iran-supported.

au The term "information operations" is defined by the U.S. Department of Defense as "the integrated employment, during military operations, of IRCs [information-related capabilities] in concert with other lines of operation to influence, disrupt, corrupt, or usurp the decision making of adversaries and potential adversaries." "Joint Publication 3-13: Information Operations," U.S. Department of Defense, November 20, 2014, p. ix.

and allies.⁷¹ Earlier in 2020, Khamenei claimed that "the online space could become a tool to punch the enemy in the mouth,"⁷² calling those "fighting the enemy" in the online space "officers of the soft war."⁷³ This terminology has been echoed proudly by Iraqi *muqawama* activists.⁷⁴

The second key concept is lawfare ("the strategy of using - or misusing - law as a substitute for traditional military means to achieve a warfighting objective"⁷⁵). The *muqawama* expend considerable time and effort broadcasting their interest in law and their role as its defenders, while using legal arguments and Iraqi institutions in an attempt to discredit military and political opponents.⁷⁶ Lawfare efforts present the *muqawama* as legitimate upholders of Iraqi law and sovereignty (while discrediting and effectively constraining^{77 av} opponents). This helps maintain wider societal approval—a vital part in *muqawama* efforts to capture the Iraqi state. Militia Spotlight has documented the *muqawama*'s embrace of lawfare, and their fascination with the use of lawsuits and quasi-legal propaganda to achieve strategic ends.⁷⁸ Militia Spotlight has also observed the militias' fear of domestic and international law being used against them.⁷⁹

Disinformation and deception tactics

The *muqawama* demonstrate considerable tactical proficiency in the information space. One tactic is the aforementioned use of façade groups, which are electronic brands (such as Ubat al-Thaireen,⁸⁰ Saraya Qassem al-Jabbarin,⁸¹ Ashab al-Kahf,⁸² and Raba Allah⁸³) that are used by *fasa'il* to issue coded admissions of their involvement in kinetic attacks. This allows the militia to enjoy the benefits of the attack (demonstrating resistance, satisfying supporters, pressuring the government and coalition) while mitigating any risks (delaying retaliation while the coalition determines the "real" perpetrator, avoiding arrest and prosecution, and dodging popular disapproval). Throughout 2020 and early 2021, façade groups used Telegram^{aw} and other social media to claim rocket and convoy attacks in the hours following an attack event. Often the façade's Telegram and social media platforms are created in the hours before the group's first claim, but pre-made unique iconography of each group^{84 ax} and the rapid growth of their

av The *muqawama* knows that its status as an organ of the Iraqi state (via the PMF) complicates efforts to counter it. By claiming attacks on its militias are attacks on the Iraqi state, the *muqawama* attempts to constrain the United States while building popular sympathy. In the aftermath of U.S. strikes, for example, *muqawama* statements and propaganda highlight the targeted militia's role within the Iraqi security forces. (Notably, Iran has done the same, most recently referring in its letter to the United Nations Security Council to the U.S. strike "against Iraqi forces.") See "Letter dated 12 March 2021 from the Permanent Representative of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General and the President of the Security Council," Islamic Republic of Iran, March 12, 2021.

aw Statements are usually disseminated via Telegram message in combination with an image that packages the text of the statement in a processed document format. The statements will often be signed "*al-muqawama al-islamiyya fi Iraq*" (the Islamic Resistance in Iraq) in addition to the façade group name. They generally begin with a Qur'anic verse and usually display the façade group's logo.

ax In general, characteristic images of fists, rifles, and globes predominate, all of which are common images in Iranian threat network iconography. The logos resemble (among others) the IRGC logo, the Lebanese Hezbollah flag, various Iraqi *fasa'il* (including KH, AAH, Nujaba, and Badr), and Yemen's Ansar Allah. Additionally, many Iraqi façade group logos incorporate the words "*muqawama al-islamiyya*" into the design.

media following suggests pre-preparation of façade brands for later use. Some groups have been used to claim strings of attacks, while other groups appeared for one or two attacks only before the brand name and associated media accounts fall into disuse.^{ay}

Muqawama disinformation campaigns fall into several categories. Attacks on the U.S.-led coalition may be deliberately faked^{as} or accidentally overreported^{az} but not corrected,^{as} or the impact of the attack exaggerated.^{ba} *Muqawama* media also create false narratives around real events and people^{bb} or fabricate entire events.^{bc} The rapid “viral” spread of disinformation campaigns can have real-world effects: they can incite protests, further rounds of attacks, and lead to extrajudicial killings. Fake news promulgated between militia accounts is picked up by local and then international media and reported on as fact,^{bd} contributing to

wider misconception and decision-maker uncertainty. In one case, for example, the *muqawama*'s false narrative (that Qassem Muslih was arrested in a joint U.S.-Iraqi raid linked to maximum pressure on Iran) was re-posted on elite diplomatic message boards, where it played into the preconceptions of a very senior European diplomat and resulted in him withholding statements of support for the Iraqi government for a vital half-day window until it was proven to him that no Americans were involved (they were not) and Muslih was arrested on an Iraqi warrant for murder (he was).^{as} The *muqawama* also target Iraqis with their information operations. *Muqawama* propagandists have targeted Iraqi security forces with information campaigns warning them to stay away from coalition forces (lest they become collateral damage).^{as} Threats from infamous façade group brands like “Ashab al-Kahf” are used to threaten and coerce contract workers on military bases and embassies.^{as}

Muqawama media campaigns also regularly cross the line between the information space and real-world intelligence activities and support to kinetic operations. Information operations channels and networks (discussed below) use their research functions as a social intelligence and targeting capability, for instance researching the social media profile of political opponents or civil society activists that the *muqawama* wish to intimidate, typically also researching their family, neighbors, and workplaces. When the *muqawama* want to muzzle an adversary or drive them out of Iraq, the information space (particularly Telegram and social media) is used to warn and threaten.^{as} The information space is also used to target international players: for instance, threatening U.N. election workers in an attempt to reduce their freedom of movement, make some personnel leave Iraq, or discredit efforts to monitor federal elections and lay the groundwork for delegitimizing the result.^{as}

The muqawama information operations mechanism

In the first eight months of operations, Militia Spotlight took a close look at how *muqawama* information operations are organized and resourced with particular focus on which elements of the system are cooperative or competitive with each other. One top-level finding is that information operations is an area in which Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah play a very active support role. In the same manner that Lebanese Hezbollah built robust information operations capabilities in the 1990s,⁹⁰ the IRGC and (in another niche contribution) Lebanese Hezbollah has provided the Iraqi *muqawama* with strong financial and technical assistance, often delivered through the Iran-linked Iraq Radio and Television Union⁹¹

ay The Qasem al-Jabbarin and Ashab al-Kahf brands have both been used extensively to claim convoy attacks, while Usbat al-Thaireen was used for a large number of rocket attacks in 2020. Groups like Saraya Awliya al-Dam, Awlu al-Azam, Kareem Darsam, Liwa Khaibar, Fasa'il al-Muqawama al-Duwaliya, and Saraya Thair al-Shuhada have been used for smaller numbers of claims.

az For example, interpreting the testing of the alarms in a coalition site as a sign of an ongoing attack.

ba Generally, militia media channels attempt to report the scale of the attack (i.e., the number of projectiles) accurately (though the damage and effect of the event will generally be exaggerated). During a major escalation in July 2021, for example, militia accounts from across the *muqawama* appear to have banded together to exaggerate and inflate the scale and effect of a series of attacks launched in retaliation for U.S. airstrikes at the end of June 2021. See Hamdi Malik and Crispin Smith, “Are the Muqawama Signaling De-Escalation?” Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, July 9, 2021.

bb Militias have also attributed fake remarks to current and former U.S. officials to create animosity toward them among the wider Iraqi population. For example, in June 2020, *muqawama* social media (in conjunction with *muqawama* TV stations) claimed that former U.S. ambassador to Baghdad Douglas A. Silliman had asked for the assassination of Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the highest Shi'`a authority in Iraq, in order to finish Shiism and Islam in Iraq. See Shaajab News (a *muqawama* Telegram news and propaganda channel), posted at 21.25 (hours) on June 27, 2021. “The former US ambassador to Iraq, Douglas Silliman, calls for the killing of Sistani and the end of Islam, Shiites and the PMF...” The *muqawama* attributed other negative events in Iraq to the United Kingdom. On July 19, 2021, an Islamic State suicide bomber killed at least 35 people in Baghdad Sadr's city. The *muqawama* linked this incident to the U.K. ambassador. See, for example, KyankF (a KH-affiliated Telegram propaganda channel), posted at 23.46 (hours) on July 19, 2021, presenting a photoshopped (fake) image of the British ambassador taking a selfie in front of the destruction caused by the Islamic State bombing. For a reference to the bombing, see “Suicide attack in Iraq's Sadr City kills at least 35, wounds dozens -sources,” Reuters, July 20, 2021.

bc The United States is regularly accused of launching attacks on militia positions on occasions when there was no attack. For instance, on January 19, 2021, the Unit 10,000 *muqawama* channel claimed that U.S. aircraft had struck the KH Jurf as-Sakr base, while actually an electricity pylon had been damaged to the west of Jurf by Islamic State fighters. See Crispin Smith, “Pylon-Gate’: Reconstruction of a Muqawama Disinformation Operation,” Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 12, 2021.

bd For instance, top-tier Western print and broadcast media were fooled into reporting that Qassem Muslih was released on May 26, 2021. The false militia narrative was then conferred the credibility of top-tier news networks. Michael Knights, Crispin Smith, Alex Almeida, and Hamdi Malik, “Muqawama Fake News Surrounding Qasim Muslih's Arrest (Part 1): International Zone Claims,” Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, May 28, 2021.

be It is a common practice for militias before attempting to assassinate an individual to “name” them on the *muqawama* social media platforms as a foreshadowing of the attack, to drive out or change the behavior of the individual, or to spread awareness that the *muqawama* undertook the eventual assassination attempt. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2021, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

bf Sabereen News recently accused an official in the Baghdad office of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) of being a Mossad agent, because she had once allegedly represented Israel in international organizations.

(which is led by an Iraqi IRGC officer)^{bg} and its parent organization, the Islamic Radio and Television Union (IRTVU).^{bh}

In addition to the television channels^{bi} openly developed by the *fasa'il* with Iranian and Lebanese Hezbollah support,^{bj} there is now (in iNEWS TV, which is controlled by KSS)⁹² also a *muqawama* television channel that appears specifically aimed at a more liberal youth demographic. (The iNEWS TV channel employs female presenters who do not wear the Islamic hijab⁹³ and features entertainment shows that are normally not run by Islamic channels⁹⁴ in an attempt to reach beyond the current *muqawama* base and expose Iraqi youth to pro-*muqawama* narratives.)

Beyond television, the *muqawama* have built out a social media conglomerate in the shape of Sabereen News,⁹⁵ created in January 2020, which has grown into a major propaganda and disinformation tool with more than 100,000 subscribers. The channel is a combined news service, propagandist, and social media targeting cell. The channel's large reach allows it to enjoy significant network effects, capitalizing on information received from an array of *muqawama* affiliates and sympathizers. Careful observation of Sabereen's posting patterns and content (and, equally importantly, observation of how other channels engage with Sabereen) led Militia Spotlight to conclude that Sabereen is heavily influenced by AAH.^{bk} Militia Spotlight also views Sabereen as strongly supported by Iran, including through funding and technical assistance (arranged via Iraqi Radio and Television Union leader Sheikh

Hamid al-Husseini),^{bl} and through the basing of Sabereen servers in Kermanshah, Iran.^{bm} The significance of Sabereen is not lost on the *muqawama* themselves, and Sabereen has received plaudits for its role amplifying the propaganda effect of attacks, promoting militia causes, and even operating as a kind of virtual *fasa'il*. In September 2021, one influential *muqawama* media figure heaped praise on the channel via Facebook, saying "I'm not exaggerating today if I say that the activity of Sabereen News is equivalent to a *fasa'il* on the ground. The channel was not satisfied with being the most prominent means of dissemination of the *muqawama* operations in Iraq, and so went beyond even the Palestinian media platforms to be the first channel to cover the news of the Palestinian *muqawama* ... [Sabereen] was able to besiege and detect Zionist and American activities."⁹⁶

Meanwhile, for every "Sabereen News," there are hundreds of mid-sized media accounts that promote proprietary militia interests on an hourly basis. These channels are often closely linked in with real-world *fasa'il* members and their kinetic activities.^{bn} So-called "electronic armies" are also key players. These organizations are presented as specialists in online hacking and cyberwarfare (not unlike Israel's Unit 8200), though in reality the electronic armies are mostly troll farms engaged in attacking opponents on social media, carrying out open-source internet research, and intimidating (and inciting violence against) opposition activists.⁹⁷ Blending middle-aged veterans of kinetic operations with young tech-savvy unemployed university graduates recruited via student groups and university campuses,⁹⁸ these "electronic armies"⁹⁹ represent the cutting edge of Iran-backed recruitment operations in Iraq. Reaching out into all communities—Shi`a, Sunnis, Christians, seculars, and even non-Iraqis—the networks talent-spot capable journalists and influencers on platforms like Clubhouse and Twitter.¹⁰⁰ The most successful influencers work their way up to significant stipends of \$2,000-\$5,000 per month and prestige items like Toyota Land Cruiser cars and even bodyguard-drivers.¹⁰¹

bg Militia Spotlight noted that the Iraqi Radio and Television Union "is headed by Hamid al-Husseini, an Iraqi cleric who has close ties to the Supreme Leader's office. According to conversations with reliable sources in the Iraqi government, he has confided to people in his circles that he is a colonel in the IRGC—a connection that began forming after he fled Iraq during Saddam Hussein's era." Hamdi Malik, "Understanding Iran's Vast Media Network in Arab Countries," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 2, 2021.

bh "The Iranian Islamic Radio and Television Union (IRTVU) and International Union of Virtual Media (IUVM) were designated pursuant to E.O. 13848 for being owned or controlled by the IRGC-QF. The IRGC, including the IRGC-QF, has been designated under multiple authorities since 2007." "Treasury Sanctions Iranian Entities for Attempted Election Interference," U.S. Department of the Treasury, October 22, 2020. See also "United States Seizes Websites Used by the Iranian Islamic Radio and Television Union and Kata'ib Hizballah," U.S. Department of Justice, June 22, 2021.

bi Over the past decade, Kata'ib Hezbollah, Asaib Ahl al-Haq, and Harakat al-Nujaba have all launched TV stations this way. These media platforms both feed and are fed by social media networks, producing and disseminating propaganda and disinformation. KH runs Al-Etejah TV. See Hamdi Malik and Crispin Smith, "Profile: Al-Etejah Satellite Television," Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, August 1, 2021. Nujaba runs Nujaba TV. See Hamdi Malik, "Profile: Al-Nujaba Satellite Television," Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, July 22, 2021. AAH runs Al-Ahd TV. See Michael Knights, "Profile: Asaib Ahl al-Haq," Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 27, 2021.

bj For the most part, these TV stations are launched by or with the help of the Iraqi Radio and Television Union, an offshoot of the IRGC-affiliated Islamic Radio and Television Union (IRTVU). Hamdi Malik, "Understanding Iran's Vast Media Network in Arab Countries," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 2, 2021.

bk Militia Spotlight logically links Sabereen to AAH because of Sabereen's repeated preferential treatment of AAH leaders and initiatives at times when most or all other *muqawama* media were critical of AAH. See Knights, "Profile: Asaib Ahl al-Haq."

bl Sabereen and its intelligence and cyber branches receive various types of support from the IRGC and Lebanese Hezbollah, including funding, surveillance training and equipment, technical advice and security, server hosting, and hacker support (including rapid sanitization of online presence by *muqawama* entities). Sheikh Hamid al-Husseini lives on an AAH-secured street in an affluent area of Baghdad. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2021, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

bm Sabereen servers have been relocated four times, most recently to Iran. This is a strong indicator that Sabereen, regardless of AAH relations with other *fasa'il*, continues to work closely with Iranian agencies and Lebanese Hezbollah. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2021, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

bn Militia channels compete over demonstrating their level of access to the operators and planners of the attacks; inaccurate reporting risks harming their credibility. Telegram account holders often attempt to demonstrate their closeness to the military operators by hinting at knowledge of upcoming attacks, or revealing insider information about the attacks in their aftermath. The propagandists sometimes receive credit for their efforts. See, for example, Cotherion (Telegram propaganda account) posted 00:43 hours on August 16, 2021, "Shabab al-Islam dedicates an upcoming IED operation to Cotherion, and others engaged in 'virtual' (electronic) jihad."

6. Kinetic Operations: *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*

As the above section made clear, some of the outward-facing aspects of today's *muqawama* operations give the sense of being a new and complex effort, while in reality the system is underpinned by the proprietary structure and resources of the individual *fasa'il*. In its first eight months of operation, Militia Spotlight looked deeply into the granular issues of *muqawama* kinetic cell recruitment, structure, de-confliction, tactics, and support functions. The picture that emerged was much more familiar and prosaic than the team initially expected. In essence, perhaps unsurprisingly, not much has changed in the way that *fasa'il* undertake indirect fire and roadside bombings, with the minor variation of the introduction of drones.^{bo} The methodology developed by Militia Spotlight during eight months of trials in a real-world analytic laboratory suggests that when attributing attacks to specific *fasa'il*, what matters most is where the attack happens (reflecting proprietary areas of operation) and which media façade *first* claimed or eulogized the attack.^{bp}

Proprietary single-fasa'il operations

Militia Spotlight assesses that attacks on U.S. sites are mostly single-*fasa'il* operations using that *fasa'il*'s own organic attack and support capabilities. Though an attack may be claimed under the name of, say, Qasem al-Jabbarin, Militia Spotlight assesses that the actual perpetrator of the operation is a pre-existing *fasa'il* that uses a new façade to claim its actions (i.e., that façades such as QJ are merely information operations brands without real-world kinetic branches and that no major new *fasa'il* have emerged in the last two years).^{bq}

Attacks that are claimed are most often indirectly claimed by *fasa'il* through the use of proprietary single-*fasa'il* propaganda channels. This a critical indicator of the competitive and proprietary nature of the *fasa'il*, even those operating within the *Tansiqiya*. In the midst of an effort to blur their responsibility for attacks, individual *fasa'il* still want to individually brand attacks and claim credit in a way that is discernable to their inner circles and followers. For instance, based on sustained monitoring of Telegram platforms^{br} fused with other methods of collection, including anonymized interviews in Iraq, Militia Spotlight assesses that:

bo The introduction of one-way suicide drones (or loitering munitions) is a step forward in *muqawama* accuracy, but it does not necessarily require a major change in how indirect fire cells operate. This is because the drones are not controlled by a ground station throughout their flight and do not transmit video throughout, but are instead "fire and forget" pre-programmed, GPS-guided drones that do not have to be "flown" or recovered. Except for some training on pneumatic launch, *muqawama* drone attack cells do not need to be specially trained. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple U.S. and Iraqi contacts, 2021, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

bp The logic being that the information operations group that first receives notification of the attack or unique access has a special connection to the real-world *fasa'il* undertaking the specific attack.

bq In other words, all the kinetic attacks are undertaken by KH and other familiar *fasa'il* with the new "groups," in fact, just being new covers or branding.

br Though specific monitoring methods and tools used by the authors need to be protected, key platforms include Telegram, Facebook and Twitter. Online forensic analysis of postings, cross-referenced with historic data and information derived from interviewees with direct insight into *muqawama* information operations, provides the data required for assessments.

- Kata'ib Hezbollah claims its roadside bomb attacks via its exclusive use of the Qasem al-Jabbarin brand and claims rocket attacks via its exclusive use of Usbat al-Tha'ireen brand, and has claimed drone attacks on Saudi Arabia through its exclusive use of the Alwiyat al-Waad al-Haq (AWH, True Pledge Brigades) brand.
- Nujaba uses Fasa'il al-Muqawama al-Duwaliya (MD, International Resistance Faction) as a channel for exclusively claiming Nujaba attacks.
- Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq exclusively uses Ashab al-Kahf (AK, Companions of the Cave), Liwa Khaibar (Khaibar Brigade), and Quwwat Dhu al-Faqar (Zulfiqar Force) to claim its kinetic operations.

Teaming arrangements

In many areas, kinetic operations involve "teaming" arrangements put in place by KH to draw on the broader *muqawama*, albeit under KH's strong hand. For instance, KH appears to have a monopoly on the operation of fixed-wing drones.^{bs} When such systems are used, KH appears to play a coordinating role, in some cases with assistance from IRGC or Lebanese Hezbollah advisors.¹⁰² The broader logistical system that supports drone attacks uses three lines of supply: one operated by KH between Albu Kamal in Syria and the launch areas near Al-Asad Air Base, east of the Euphrates River; and two from Iran's Ahvaz and Kermanshah regions, utilizing Badr^{bt} and smaller KH-overseen *muqawama* groups with long-term ties to IRGC-QF.¹⁰³

In northern Iraq, KSS seems to play a special facilitating role at the Mosul and Nineveh Plains end of a supply chain for rockets and drones, with a broader KH-overseen network moving weapons using PMF minority units from sites such as the Badr-run Camp Ashraf in Diyala and the Turkmen PMF Martyr's Camp near Tuz Khurmatu.¹⁰⁴

Likewise, KH runs the roadside bombing operations against convoys, and undertakes many of these attacks using their own KH Special Operations attack cells, but some attacks are undertaken

bs The main fixed-wing drone used is similar to the Houthis-operated Sammad-1, a three-meter wingspan drone called KAS-04 by the U.S.-led coalition. The June 9 and June 15 drone attacks in 2021 against the coalition annex in Baghdad International Airport used smaller drones that appear to be reverse-engineered U.S. Switchblade or Coyote loitering munitions, which Iran-backed militias have captured in Syria. The June 27, 2021, Erbil attacks involved a third family of drones to be exposed this year in Iraq, which carry warheads bearing Iranian manufacturing labels with a variety of body, wing, and motor components. All of the drones appear to be GPS-guided with a pre-programmed set of waypoints. A final set of drones used largely for short-range operations in Baghdad are custom-made quadcopters with advanced battery management systems and numerous high-end design features and components. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple U.S. and Iraqi contacts, 2021, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees. See also Farzin Nadimi and Michael Knights, "Militias Parade Under the PMF Banner (Part 1): Drone Systems," Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, July 3, 2021.

bt For instance, there is strong consensus that Badr-operated PMF logistical convoys are used to make Iran-to-Iraq journeys carrying *muqawama* weaponry without fear of customs inspection. These convoys carry in-kind aid or purchased foodstuffs from Iran. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2021, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

in collaboration with smaller *fasa'il*^{bu} and even AAH.^{bv} As is often the case in Iraq, there do not appear to be any hard and fast rules about who can work with whom or where, only generally observable trends that will more often be accurate than not. The key finding is that KH considers itself dominant and not the equal of any other *fasa'il*, a position that AAH seems to flatly reject.

7. Next Steps for the *Muqawama* in Iraq

The post-January 3, 2020, history of the Iraqi *muqawama* has been largely characterized by disagreements over paths of de-escalation or escalation, and by competition between the *fasa'il*. As clearly anticipated in the October 2020 *CTC Sentinel* analysis,^{bw} the post-Soleimani and post-Muhandis KH has suffered significant ruptures in its leadership and perhaps in its relations with IRGC-QF. As Soleimani and al-Muhandis recognized, the Iraqi *muqawama* is misfiring, after having grown too large, too corrupt, and too divided into personal fiefdoms. KH never played well with others, being prickly toward both foreign rivals like Lebanese Hezbollah advisors and domestic pretenders to the throne such as AAH. Today's "big KH" (estimated at 10,000 personnel versus 400 in 2011¹⁰⁵) is difficult to control and deeply riven by a leadership challenge to Abu Hussein. KH's utility to IRGC-QF could eventually be supplemented or even surpassed by non-KH veteran leaders^{bx} and smaller, better-led *muqawama* cells,^{by} particularly Nujaba (and its

Iran-favored leader Akram al-Ka'abi^{bz} and perhaps also KSS (and Abu Alaa al-Wala'i).^{ca}

Creation of new IRGC-QF proxies?

Iranian dissatisfaction with Iraq's greatly expanded *muqawama* factions has been growing for some time. In 2018, IRGC-QF appears to have begun a recruitment effort^{cb} that targeted dedicated *wala'i* fighters^{cc} who were younger, less tainted by corruption, and not known to Iraqi or U.S. authorities for terrorism offenses. These new cross-cutting cells—with names like Warithuun (The Inheritors),¹⁰⁶ Zulfaqar (named for Imam Ali's Sword),¹⁰⁷ Liwa al-Golan (Golan Brigade),¹⁰⁸ Haris al-Murshid (Guard of the Supreme Leader),¹⁰⁹ and Fedayeen al-Khamenei (Khamenei's Men of Sacrifice)¹¹⁰—recur in interviews on militia groups in Iraq (and in some open-source reporting¹¹¹) but usually only in older reporting from 2018-2019. Interviews suggest that talent-spotting, team-building, and even some activation of such groups did occur and even resulted in attacks on U.S. sites in Iraq in 2019.^{cd}

Though seemingly paused by the deaths of Soleimani and al-Muhandis, the IRGC-QF search for dependable younger fighters and their combination in new cross-*fasa'il* tactical cells may have recommenced. Interview material from Iraqi contacts suggests that some cross-*fasa'il* operations restarted in April or May 2021.¹¹² The most common unit name associated by interviewees with these operations is "Zulfiqar."¹¹³^{ce} Whereas the earlier generation of cross-

bu For instance, the authors' (Knights) interview data suggests that fighters from Ansar Allah al-Tawfiya (PMF brigade 19) have been identified operating in support of KH roadside bombings in southern Iraq. What this interview data suggests is that KH uses willing operators from a number of smaller groups, perhaps to exploit their local ties along the highways of southern Iraq. Author (Knights) interview, single Iraqi contact, multiple sessions with significant detail, 2021, exact dates, name, and places withheld at request of the interviewee.

bv The involvement of AAH in growing numbers of roadside bombing activities is credible. In Q3 (third quarter) 2021, the average number of convoy attacks in Iraq by AAH-linked façades (especially Ashab al-Kahf) was five per month, versus 3.3 per month in Q2 2021, 3.6 in Q1 2021, and 1.3 in Q4 2020. Drawn from the Washington Institute attack dataset.

bw The article noted: "Though KH remains the premier 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* (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." Knights, "Back into the Shadows?" pp. 17-18.

bx For instance, Hadi al-Ameri, whose own political party Badr is slowly declining and who thus needs to demonstrate to Iran that he is a responsive and loyal proxy who listens closely to Iranian needs and guidance.

by One of the author's (Knights) August 2019 *CTC Sentinel* article lists such smaller *fasa'il*: "Newer Special Groups assessed to be primarily loyal to Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and willing to provide material support to IRGC-QF include (from most militarily capable to least) Harakat al-Abdal (PMF brigade 39), Saraya al-Jihad (PMF brigade 17), Liwa al-Tafuf (brigade 13) and the less capable Liwa al-Muntadher (brigade 7), Ansar Allah al-Tawfiya (brigade 19), Saraya Ansar al-Aqeeda (brigade 28), Kata'ib Ansar al-Hujja (brigade 29), Quwwat al-Shahid al-Sadr al-Awwal (brigade 25), Quwwat al-Shahid al-Sadr (brigade 35), and Kata'ib al-Tayyar al-Risali (brigade 31)." Michael Knights, "Iran's Expanding Militia Army in Iraq: The New Special Groups," *CTC Sentinel* 12:7 (2019).

bz Akram al-Ka'abi is one to watch. He recurs in interviews as the Iraqi *muqawama* leader most trusted by Iran. Those interviewed by one of the authors (Knights) were quite consensual that Ka'abi is seen by IRGC-QF as loyal, ideologically pure, and relatively non-corrupt. One interviewee made the interesting claim that Ka'abi models himself on Hossein Taeb, the IRGC Intelligence Organization commander. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2021, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

ca Abu Alaa also recurs in one of the authors' (Knights) interviews as being highly trusted and favored by Iran. Like Ka'abi, he provided good service to Iran in Syria, which seems to be a marker of reliability for IRGC. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2021, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

cb Qualifying characteristics include ideological commitment to the *veleyat-e faqih* model of Islamic jurisprudence and 'good' war service since 2011 in Syria and Iraq. The *fasa'il* reportedly nominate candidates to IRGC-QF liaison officers, and these persons are sent to Iran, Lebanon, or Syria for further assessment, ideological development, and paramilitary training. They return to Iraq and re-enter their old professions (usually in the PMF) to await tasking, and receive a \$600 per month bonus (versus their base PMF pay of 1.2 million dinars or \$822 per month). Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2021, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

cc In the words of one interviewee, Iran is seeking "the elite elements of the ideological *wala'i*." Author (Knights) interview, single Iraqi contact, 2021, exact date, name, and places withheld at request of the interviewee.

cd The existence of some new cross-cutting cells was a recurring feature when interviewees discussed the late Soleimani/Muhandis era *muqawama* operations in Iraq. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2021, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

ce Zulfiqar is the name of Ali ibn Abi Talib's bifurcated sword, and is therefore significant in Shi'a iconography and naming convention—particularly relating to military items and operations. (The Iranian main battle tank is also known as the Zulfiqar.) The Iraqi references to a group named Zulfiqar do not relate to the Syrian-based group Liwa Zulfiqar. See Phillip Smyth, "Hizballah Cavalcade: Liwa'a Fulfiqar: Birth of a New Shia Militia in Syria?" *Jihadology*, June 20, 2013.

fasa'il recruits seemed to work directly for IRGC-QF, today's cross-*fasa'il* cells are built within the *Tansiqiya* military committees, involving negotiated temporary and covert secondments of some operators from supporting *fasa'il* to the attacking *fasa'il*, before returning to their original posting. The motive for this change of procedure could be operational security, as the teams do not know each other, the secondments blur attribution, and attackers can be drawn from outside the geographic area of the attack (complicating recognition by locals and CCTV).¹¹⁴ The same methods could be used to talent-spot operators for IRGC-QF or Lebanese Hezbollah operations, including external operations outside Iraq.¹¹⁵

Muqawama priorities

Reflecting on the Soleimani-Muhandis agenda in 2018-2019, one can expect some of the same objectives to be pursued in coming years, albeit with a more defensive mindset of hanging onto as many gains as possible for as long as possible. The *muqawama* still have considerable paramilitary clout, but they have many worries now that were far less pronounced in their heyday in the summer of 2019. The movement lacks the inspired leadership needed to herd the many ill-tempered and willful cats of the *muqawama*.¹¹⁶ The *muqawama* are afraid of many things: U.S. airstrikes, Israeli covert actions, arrest by the government, a clash with other Shi'a security forces, protestors, and the Shi'a religious establishment.¹¹⁷ The *muqawama* are already deeply splintered and fear greater fragmentation.¹¹⁸ The key thing for them now is arguably preservation of gains, not expansion.

Sustainment of the PMF structure, for instance, is absolutely critical to the *muqawama*. In addition to 165,000 jobs^{cf} (supporting 990,000 persons at an average family size of six¹¹⁹), the PMF provides numerous tangible and intangible benefits to the *muqawama*. One is control of bases and the right to legitimately store heavy weapons, as shown when KH rocketeers arrested on June 25, 2020, claimed that their site was a PMF base and that the rockets there were PMF munitions.¹²⁰ A second benefit is the use of PMF-registered vehicles, which can pass through checkpoints and border crossings without being stopped or searched.¹²¹ A third benefit is the "get out of jail free" card that the opaque nature of PMF membership provides, namely that any individual given a PMF membership card can try to claim the right to be tried under a PMF tribunal rather than Iraqi civilian or military courts.^{cg} The *muqawama* can be counted upon to rally and closely cooperate whenever the PMF structure is threatened with reduction in size or budget or privileges (such as effective impunity from Iraqi law). As most of the *muqawama*'s financial hustles are linked to territorial

control of Iraq's liberated areas and borders,^{ch} the *muqawama* can be expected to pull together to resist removal of their garrisoning duties¹²² at economic hubs.

State capture or societal capture?

Since the collapse of Abdalmahdi's ill-fated 2018-2020 government, the *muqawama* have become less likely to regain control of the prime minister's office, with other Iraqi factions and international players keenly aware of the lessons of this two-year period when the *muqawama* effectively ruled the Iraqi state from the top.^{ci} Though it should be expected that *muqawama* players will attempt to shape government formation in the wake of the recent October 10, 2021, elections,¹²³ it is more likely that the *muqawama*'s main effort will be a gradualist, broad-based, and bottom-up approach to state capture—recognizing the need to adjust tactics from the days of Soleimani and al-Muhandis.

Conventional politics may not be the most promising avenue for *muqawama* groups to use for expansion. Their disappointing results in the October 2021 Iraqi elections—first results showing as few as 17 winners from the Badr and AAH list (versus 48 in the 2018 elections)—underline the difficulties faced by the *muqawama* in parliamentary politics.¹²⁴ The elections also saw KH's first political project underperform. Kata'ib Hezbollah operative Hossein Moanes Faraj al-Mohammadawi (Abu Ali al-Askari)¹²⁵ formed the Harakat Hoquq (The Rights Movement) electoral list, which only secured one seat in the 2021 elections (out of 32 fielded candidates, with Moanes failing to win a seat).^{126 cj}

Instead, the *muqawama* will probably now prioritize a bottom-up approach to building their political base. Kata'ib Hezbollah provides a clear example of the broadening of non-kinetic activities by *fasa'il*. Under the KH Shura Council, there are two powerful clusters of non-kinetic activities:

- **Media operations.** One is an information operations-focused media cell that includes the KH media wings such as Kaf (various platforms), Kyan kF, Unit 10,000, Shabakat al-Ilam al-Muqawama, many other social media channels, and Al-Etejah TV.¹²⁷
- **Cultural and social operations.** Alongside this is the KH cultural and social wing, under the leadership of Maytham

cf In June 2019, Hashd chair Faleh al-Fayyad reported that the number of registered Hashd members was 135,000. In September 2021, 30,000 new billets were temporarily added ahead of the Iraqi elections. See Michael Knights, Hamdi Malik, and Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Honored, Not Contained: The Future of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces," *Policy Focus* 163 (2020): pp. 58, 61, 143.

cg As was the case in both June 2020 (with the Albu Aitha case) and May 2021 (with the Qassem Muslih case). On August 31, 2021, at the Rafidain Center For Dialogue Forum in Baghdad, Hadi al-Ameri noted about the latter case: "It was a wrong decision by the Government and the Prime Minister to detain Qasem Muslih, Muslih is a part of the PMF, and we should have handled the situation in a way." The video of the conference can be found at "Live: inside the Baghdad Forum for Dialogue, a special meeting with the president of the Fatah Alliance, Hadi al-Ameri," posted to Facebook by Rudaw News at 20:56 (Baghdad time) on August 31, 2021.

ch Militias focus on control of economic hubs. These include checkpoints and border points of entry (where trucking can be taxed); scrap metal yards, where wartime detritus can be monetized; oil and gas production sites (where oil products can be diverted); offices controlling real estate (which can transfer ownership of vacant property); and offices administering government payroll and pensions or the issuance of identity cards (which can be used to defraud the government). For further reading on militia money-making schemes, see Knights, Malik, and Al-Tamimi, pp. 112-117, and Renad Mansour, "Networks of power: The Popular Mobilization Forces and the state in Iraq," Chatham House Research paper, February 25, 2021.

ci This assessment, first outlined in a January 2020 *CTC Sentinel* article, reflects regular and intensive interviewing by one of the authors (Knights) throughout the Abdal-Mahdi government, including with Abdal-Mahdi himself and almost every senior Iraqi official. The piece noted: "In the view of the author, based on years of close observation of Iraqi leadership dynamics, with Soleimani at his back, al-Muhandis had become the single most important man in Iraq." See Michael Knights, "Soleimani Is Dead: The Road Ahead for Iranian-Backed Militias in Iraq," *CTC Sentinel* 13:1 (2020): pp. 6-7.

cj Using the Iraqi Higher Electoral Commission provisional results, Militia Spotlight carefully monitored the Baghdad (Rusafa) district 4 winners (Moanes' constituency), and he was not among the elected MPs.



Kata'ib Hezbollah operative Hossein Moanes Faraj al-Mohammadawi (Abu Ali al-Askari), the founder of the Harakat Hoquq (The Rights Movement) electoral list, center, salutes his supporters at an election rally before parliamentary elections in Baghdad, Iraq, on September 3, 2021. (Hadi Mizban/AP Photo)

al-Aboudi. This wing includes a fast-growing civil society arm that comprises the Harakat Ahd Allah al-Islamiya (HAAI), a social and cultural foundation;^{ck} the Sharia Youth Gathering¹²⁸ and its subordinate Jihad al-Binaa employment and civic works program,^{cl} Imam Hussein Scouts Association;¹²⁹ and other cultural and sports programs;^{cm} plus the Majlis al-Tabiat al-Thaqafiyya (Cultural Mobilization Council); the Zainabiyat women's organization; and other cultural organizations and institutes.¹³⁰ In the political sphere, KH has street vigilante movements that can be turned to protest and counter-protest activities, namely Raba Allah¹³¹ and Ahl al-Ma'arouf,¹³² and a cyber-arm, the Fatemiyoun Electronic Squad,¹³³ that supports smear and intimidation campaigns against activists, media personalities, and politicians.

ck "HAAI was established on November 3, 2020, by Sayyed Hashem al-Haidari, an influential *muqawama* ideologue. He was secretary-general of Kataib Hezbollah (KH) between 2016 and 2018." Hamdi Malik, "Profile: Ahd Allah Islamic Movement," *Militia Spotlight*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, May 5, 2021.

cl "Jihad al-Binaa (the Construction Jihad) [is] a development foundation engaged in providing services such as water facilities for poor communities." See Hamdi Malik, Crispin Smith, and Michael Knights, "Profile: Sharia Youth Gathering," *Militia Spotlight*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 29, 2021.

cm These include Muasasat al-Shabab al-Riyadhi (the Athlete Youth Organization), which is engaged in youth sport activities such as soccer tournaments, and Muasasat Ibn al-Jawad al-Thaqafiya (Ibn al-Jawad Cultural Foundation), which organizes cultural activities such as poster competitions. Malik, Smith, and Knights, "Profile: Sharia Youth Gathering."

The future of anti-U.S. operations

The *muqawama*'s future posture toward the U.S. military presence in Iraq is less easy to predict than their desire to cling to their advantages and build new constituencies. Since the deaths of Soleimani and al-Muhandis, Iran has sought to restrain uncontrolled escalation between the Iraqi militias and the United States. Neither Iran's closest proxies (such as Kata'ib Hezbollah) nor its more autonomous affiliates (such as Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq) have ever been comfortable with externally imposed restraint.^{cn} Whenever they have not been actively restrained, the *muqawama* have escalated, like a horse that runs faster and faster until reined in. The October 10, 2020, "conditional ceasefire" was a temporary cessation of attacks on U.S. points of presence if the United States agreed to "retreat" from Iraq.¹³⁴ Badr and AAH's Fateh Alliance welcomed¹³⁵ the withdrawal of all coalition "combat forces" from Iraq by the end of 2021 that was agreed in the U.S.-Iraq Strategic Dialogue in Washington, D.C., on July 26, 2021.¹³⁶ Yet Hadi al-Ameri, Fateh's leader, outlined a maximalist interpretation of withdrawal to include all forces when he addressed the Rafidain Center For Dialogue Forum in Baghdad on August 31, 2021. Al-Ameri noted:

The era of foreign forces in Iraq is over. We are asking that now is the time for all NATO forces to leave the country, and we support the latest agreement that the Government made, and we will demand that the Government live up to the agreement. On the 31st of December, 2021, there will be no

cn Qais al-Khazali is defiant in public about making his own decisions on ceasefires with U.S. forces. See footnote al.

*foreign forces.*¹³⁷

Admittedly, al-Ameri was making a televised address less than six weeks before a general election, but his comments (contrasted with his July 27, 2021, recognition of the Strategic Dialogue as “a national achievement”¹³⁸) underline the contending pressures faced by *muqawama* leaders. At one end of the spectrum, most KH leaders reject all U.S. military presence but have also periodically honored the conditional ceasefire recommended by Iran and confined their attacks to what might be termed ‘fake resistance’^{co} by striking only Iraqi trucks with no risk of harming Americans. This dichotomy is one factor slowly tearing KH apart.

Meanwhile, these so-called “vanguard”¹³⁹ militias focused primarily on resistance activities (for instance, KH) are becoming more parochial, with their hardline vanguard elements peeling

co This is a term regularly used within the Militia Spotlight team, conveying the *muqawama*'s use of such tactics to appear to be resisting the United States, while actually minimizing the risk of killing or hurting Americans and thus drawing retaliation onto the *muqawama* or Iran.

away from new non-kinetic branches focused on political, social, and economic activities. At the other end of the spectrum, the so-called “parochial”¹⁴⁰ militias focused primarily on political and economic activities (i.e., AAH and Badr) are sometimes the drivers of rhetorical and kinetic escalation due to their domestic political and factional needs. The *muqawama*—the resistance—struggle with the idea of a post-resistance era in which their *raison d'être* could be undermined.

Given these dynamics, any shift from Iran's de-escalatory position, perhaps linked to a failure of U.S.-Iran nuclear talks—or a more significant loss of Iranian influence over *muqawama* factions—could trigger a sustained escalation of *muqawama* operations against the U.S.-led coalition in 2022 and beyond. Anti-coalition operations are, in reality, at a very low point today, with many escalatory courses of action at the disposal of the militias. Unless actively restrained by Iran or by Iraqi government actions, in the coming years the *muqawama* is likely to pose a greater threat to U.S. and Iraqi interests than it did in the 2020-2021 period. **CTC**

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- 103 The October 2020 *CTC Sentinel* article provided granular detail on the role of Saraya al-Ashura (PMF brigade 8) and its leader Kadhim al-Jabiri, and Saraya al-Jihad (PMF brigade 17) and its leader Hassan al-Sari in the logistics network supporting *muqawama* rocket, drone, and assassination efforts. See Knights, "Back into the Shadows?" p. 16.
- 104 Militia Spotlight has looked closely at KSS networks in eastern Mosul and Nineveh Plains, and at the KH-run Martyr's Camp near Amerli, Tuz Khurmatu district. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2021, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.
- 105 Knights, "Iran's Expanding Militia Army in Iraq," p. 2.
- 106 Knights, "Back into the Shadows?" p. 18.
- 107 Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2021, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.
- 108 Author (Knights) interview, single Iraqi contact, multiple sessions with significant detail, 2021, exact dates, name, and places withheld at request of the interviewee.
- 109 Author (Knights) interview, single Iraqi contact, 2021, exact date, name, and places withheld at request of the interviewee.
- 110 Author (Knights) interview, single Iraqi contact, 2021, exact date, name, and places withheld at request of the interviewee.
- 111 Elias.
- 112 Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2021, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.
- 113 Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2021, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.
- 114 Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2021, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.
- 115 Matthew Levitt, "'Fighters Without Borders' – Forecasting New Trends in Iran Threat Network Foreign Operations Tradecraft," *CTC Sentinel* 13:2 (2020).
- 116 This characterization is based on the author team's overall assessment of the difficulty of marshalling the personalities and powerbases of the *muqawama*.
- 117 Based on the author team's daily monitoring of *muqawama* propaganda and communiques, their video and written materials, and near-constant dialogue with Iraqi politicians and officials dealing directly with the *muqawama*. The key worries of the *muqawama* are not hard to discern based on their reactions and sensitivities.
- 118 Based on the author team's daily monitoring of *muqawama* propaganda and communiques, their video and written materials, and near-constant dialogue with Iraqi politicians and officials dealing directly with the *muqawama*. The key worries of the *muqawama* are not hard to discern based on their reactions and sensitivities.
- 119 Knights, Malik, and Al-Tamimi, p. 143.
- 120 Knights, "Back into the Shadows?" pp. 14-16.
- 121 Note footnote bt regarding PMF food convoys. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2021, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.
- 122 For further reading on which PMF units garrison which areas—which remains current in October 2021—see Knights, "Iran's Expanding Militia Army in Iraq."
- 123 See, for example, KyankF (a KH propagandist) (Telegram) at 02:06 hours (Baghdad time) on September 12, 2021. The post includes an image of a suicide drone launching with the caption "the largest bloc" (using the term used for political blocs in parliament and implying military intimidation will play a role in government formation).
- 124 Qassim Abdul-Zahra, "Partial results show pro-Iran groups losing Iraq election," *Washington Post*, October 11, 2021. For Fateh early results, see the respected Iraqi political scientist Sajad Jiyad, "So my rough tally for seats ...," Twitter, October 11, 2021. See also the respected Iraqi political analyst Farhad Alaaldin, "The #Iraqelection2021 resulted in two main factions ...," Twitter, October 13, 2021.
- 125 For detailed discussion of the role of Moanes (Abu Ali) in Kata'ib Hezbollah, see Knights, "Back into the Shadows?" p. 10. Since that article, strong verification of Moanes' dual identity as Abu Ali al-Askari has been uncovered in interviews with Iraqis in a position to know

- Moanes' activities. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2018-2020, exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.
- 126 Hamdi Malik, "Hossein Moanes Sparks Angry Words Between Kataib Hezbollah and Asaib Ahl al-Haq," *Militia Spotlight*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 14, 2021.
- 127 Michael Knights, Crispin Smith, and Hamdi Malik, "Profile: Kataib Hezbollah," *Militia Spotlight*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 1, 2021. See also Crispin Smith and Hamdi Malik, "Profile: Unit 10,000," *Militia Spotlight*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 25, 2021.
- 128 Hamdi Malik, Crispin Smith, and Michael Knights, "Profile: Sharia Youth Gathering," *Militia Spotlight*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 29, 2021.
- 129 Hamdi Malik, Crispin Smith, and Michael Knights, "Profile: Imam Hussein Scout Association," *Militia Spotlight*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 29, 2021.
- 130 Knights, Smith, and Malik, "Profile: Kataib Hezbollah."
- 131 Malik, Smith, and Knights, "Profile: Raba Allah."
- 132 Knights, Smith, and Malik, "Profile: Kataib Hezbollah."
- 133 Hamdi Malik, "Profile: Fatemiyoun Electronic Squad," *Militia Spotlight*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 26, 2021.
- 134 See, for example, Sabereen News (Telegram) at 16.09 hours (Baghdad time) on October 10, 2020. See also Davison.
- 135 Malik and Knights.
- 136 "Joint Statement on the U.S.-Iraq Strategic Dialogue," U.S. Department of State, July 26, 2021.
- 137 The video of the conference can be found at "Live: inside the Baghdad Forum for Dialogue, a special meeting with the president of the Fatah Alliance, Hadi al-Ameri," posted to Facebook by Rudaw News at 20:56 (Baghdad time) on August 31, 2021.
- 138 Malik and Knights.
- 139 Coined by Renad Mansour, in Section 3 of "Networks of power: The Popular Mobilization Forces and the state in Iraq," Chatham House Research paper, February 25, 2021.
- 140 Ibid.