

Iraq's New Regime Change: How Tehran-Backed Terrorist Organizations and Militias Captured the Iraqi State

By Michael Knights, Hamdi Malik, and Crispin Smith

Iran-backed terrorists and militias lost the 2021 elections in Iraq yet ended up picking the prime minister anyway and taking charge of the world's fifth-largest oil producer. This remarkable reversal of fortunes in 2022 was not delivered via the barrel of a gun but rather a series of cool-headed and coordinated moves by Iran's Revolutionary Guard, by Iranian-groomed and militia-controlled judges, and by militia politicians. The country's oil economy, its freedoms, and its intelligence services are being gutted by militias to ensure their rule is permanent. Yet unprecedented control has not moderated these militias: The Gaza war has shown that these armed factions are also still addicted to militant 'resistance' to the United States. The result is the emergence of a terrorist-run state with greater resources than any of Iran's other proxy networks, hiding behind the façade of a sovereign country.

This study is the fifth in a series of CTC Sentinel articles since 2019 that have detailed the ongoing evolution—in times of triumph and near-defeat—of the self-styled, Tehran-backed resistance (*muqawama*) factions in Iraq. The first article in August 2019 focused on how the *muqawama* had achieved one element of state capture by establishing, formalizing, and assuring Iraqi government funding for the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), Iraq's equivalent of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).¹ A second CTC Sentinel analysis in January 2020 charted the setbacks then suffered by the *muqawama*: failure to evict U.S. forces despite the appointment of a *muqawama*-controlled Iraqi prime minister Adel Abdal-Mahdi from 2018-2019; the collapse of Abdal-Mahdi's militia-run government; and then the U.S. killing of the two icons of the *muqawama*, Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, on January 3, 2020.² A third piece in October 2020 focused on how Iran's most-favored Iraqi armed group, Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH), might adjust to the loss of these leaders and the appointment of an anti-*muqawama* government under Prime Minister Mustafa Kadhim.³

The authors' fourth CTC Sentinel study in October 2021 leveraged the first eight months of synthesized open-source and interview-led intelligence processes operated by the new Militia Spotlight team at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.⁴ This very detailed analysis provided a complete chronology of the post-January 3, 2020, struggle by the IRGC-QF (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force) to restore intra-*muqawama* cohesion and (when needed) to recentralize control of local anti-U.S. militant cells.⁵ In the aftermath of the October 10, 2021, parliamentary elections in Iraq, the *muqawama*'s political coalition was shown to

have been decisively outperformed by the rival Shi'a powerbase of Moqtada al-Sadr.⁶

This study will take forward the chronology of the evolution of the Tehran-backed *muqawama* factions in Iraq, drawing upon two more years' worth of Militia Spotlight synthesized intelligence operations^a spanning from November 2021 to November 2023.⁷ Militia Spotlight's online blog⁸ and group profiles⁹ were established

a Militia Spotlight records publicly available information (such as reported events and attacks, and especially through careful observation of militia communications and propaganda activities). Additionally, the project interviews officials and politicians with direct insight into the internal affairs of militia groups. The Militia Spotlight team undertakes large numbers of anonymized interviews on an ongoing basis. All the interviews were undertaken on deep background due to the severe physical security threat posed by militias, and great care was taken, and is needed in future, to ensure that such individuals are not exposed to intimidation for cooperating with research. The mechanics mainly involve 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.

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to track this process in detail and produce evidentiary building blocks, using legal standards of proof and certainty.^b The project collects militia statements in Arabic and other languages, archives evidence that risks being taken offline at a later point, and uses a data fusion process to synthesize information and analyze trends. Drawing on progressively larger networks of contacts, citizen journalism, and an enlarged analytic team, the 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.¹⁰

The overarching theme of this analysis is, soberingly (in the view of the authors), one of an extraordinary turnaround in favor of the Tehran-backed *muqawama* in Iraq. In late 2021, following electoral defeat, the Tehran-backed Shi'a militias faced the real prospect of political marginalization for the first time since the introduction of democratic majority rule to Iraq.¹¹ Since the first Iraqi elections in 2005, a sectarian majoritarian system was held in place because the Shi'a blocs, with encouragement by Iran's government and Iraq's Shi'a religious establishment, caucused together in selecting a (Shi'a) prime minister by consensus.¹² In the aftermath of the 2021 elections, this arrangement changed for the first time since 2005, as one member of the pan-Shi'a body politic, Moqtada al-Sadr, broke with tradition and sought to form a government with Kurdish and Sunni allies, and without the Iran-backed Shi'a militia politicians.¹³

At this darkest of moments for the *muqawama*, it was not the armed groups (or *fasa'il*) that saved the Tehran-backed Shi'a militias but rather an IRGC-QF-managed combination of made-to-order judicial rulings; targeted political violence; and the cohesiveness of the Shi'a Coordination Framework (al-Etar al-Tansiqi al-Shi'a) that brought together Shi'a politicians like Nouri al-Maliki of the State of Law Alliance, Hadi al-Ameri of Badr Organization,¹⁴ and Qais al-Khazali,¹⁵ the leader of U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organization Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH).¹⁶ Through the resilience of the Shi'a Coordination Framework and the weaknesses of Moqtada al-Sadr's effort, it was the *losers* of Iraq's 2021 elections—the Shi'a Coordination Framework—that formed the Iraqi government under Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani in October 2022.¹⁷

The bulk of this analysis looks at what the "*muqawama* government" (as the Shia Coordination Framework styles itself¹⁸) has done with its sudden, uncontested, and unprecedented control of the prime minister's office (and thus, the security services and government agencies), plus the judiciary and the parliament—a full sweep of Iraq's powerbases. The story is one of state capture by Tehran-backed terrorist groups and militias of the world's fifth-largest oil producer,¹⁹ with a population and an economy seven times as large as the Lebanese Hezbollah-controlled Lebanese

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state.^{20c}

The first two sections of the article review the manner in which in 2021-2022 the IRGC-QF/*muqawama* partnership faced—and defeated—their most serious political challenge to date and took power in October 2022. The third section of the study then looks at the first thorny issue they faced in government: whether to evict U.S. forces or adopt a more pragmatic approach. This episode clarified an evolving division of labor between overlapping circles of state capture-focused *muqawama* and militancy-focused *muqawama*, with the latter accepting no immediate removal of U.S. forces in order to support broader state capture by Iran-backed factions. Ensuring that the Tehran-backed *muqawama* would never again face an existential threat was the next order of business, and the fourth section of this study will look at the skyrocketing terrorist and militia penetration of Iraq's intelligence, military, judicial, media, and border agencies since 2022. The fifth section then looks at the greatly expanded economic opportunities now available to Tehran-backed terrorist and militia groups in Iraq as they attain unchecked control of all the organs of the state for the first time, with important implications for the future of counter-terrorism threat financing originating in Iraq. The sixth part of the study analyzes the changing balance of power (since October 2021) within the *muqawama* and also between the Iraqi factions and IRGC-QF. Early indicators from the Gaza war provide useful insights into the extensive overlap between state capture-focused and militancy-focused *muqawama* groups. Predictions, analytic lessons, and ideas for further study close out the article.

Part One. Facing Disaster: Iran-Backed Militias after Iraq's 2021 Elections

As the results from the October 2021 elections began to be tallied, the Tehran-backed militias in the main *muqawama* bloc, the Fateh Alliance (Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), Badr, and Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH)) quickly recognized that a disaster had befallen them.²¹ The failure was not mainly in terms of their own somewhat weak performance, but principally in the form of the very strong result achieved by their main Shi'a political rival, Moqtada al-Sadr, who had accurately understood how to arrange his campaign to win

b 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. Militias 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.

c Iraq has an assessed population of 41,266,109 (2023 est.) and Lebanon has 5,331,203 (2023 est.) Iraq's GDP is assessed at \$390.165 billion (2021 est.) versus Lebanon's \$72.577 billion (2021 est.), and the gap between the two is widening constantly as Iraq reports record budgets and Lebanon's economy collapses.



In this May 7, 2018, photo, Qais al-Khazali, center, the leader of the militant Shi`a group *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq*, or *League of the Righteous*, speaks to his followers during a campaign rally in Baghdad, Iraq. (Hadi Mizban/AP Photo)

the maximum number of seats.^d Of the 329 seats in parliament, al-Sadr's Sairoon list had won 73, placing it far ahead of his Shi`a opponents.²² His closest challenger was former prime minister Nouri al-Maliki, with 37 seats, who was competing separately from the Fateh Alliance. Even when al-Maliki joined with the Fateh Alliance militias, they collectively could scrape together just 65 seats.^e The Fateh Alliance dropped from 48 seats in the 2018 elections to around 20 in the 2021 results.^f The *muqawama* faction that suffered the worst humiliation was Qais al-Khazali's Sadiqoun list, part of the U.S.-designated terrorist movement *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq*,²³ which received just four seats in the October 2021 elections (down from 15 in 2018).²⁴ This was a double-blow because the increasingly prominent al-Khazali had expected not only to grow his parliamentary representation but also to eclipse his Fateh Alliance partner, Hadi al-Ameri's Badr Organization,²⁵ yet the reverse occurred: Al-Khazali's share of the Fateh bloc in parliament shrank from 31 percent in 2018 to 20 percent in 2021.^g Kataib Hezbollah's *Harakat Hoquq* (The Rights Movement) list only won one seat from the 32 races it ran in.²⁶

d Sadr received 900,393 votes and won 73 seats, or 12,334 votes per seat. Fateh got 462,813 votes and 14/15 seats, or around 30,000 votes per seat. Thus, Sadrist efficiency was double that of Fateh.

e This total is by the authors' collective tally, something of an art form as opposed to a science because not all Iraqi parliamentarians openly declare their affiliations until they have won their seats.

f Again, these figures come from detailed analysis by the authors of Iraqi parliamentarian political affiliations and performance, either openly admitted or otherwise.

g Again, based on a combination of admitted and proven alignments ascertained by the authors, AAH dropped from 15 of 48 Fateh seats in 2018, to four of 20 in 2021.

More importantly, all of Moqtada al-Sadr's Shi`a rivals grasped exactly how consequential this loss could be due to new and radical political doctrine espoused by al-Sadr.²⁷ This was the concept of a cross-sectarian, multi-ethnic majority government that would marginalize or even exclude the Fateh Alliance and other Shi`a factions.²⁸ In prior elections, the exact balance between the Shi`a factions was inconclusive because they agreed to collectively select a prime minister by consensus as a sectarian unit. Al-Sadr now threatened to change this equation in partnership with two other winners of the election, who al-Sadr's political scientists had correctly predicted would also perform strongly under the electoral system used in 2021: Massoud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Mohammed al-Halbousi's Sunni Arab Taqadum (National Progress Party).²⁹

From the spring of 2021, Moqtada al-Sadr has begun to strengthen relations with these two players, which was so unsettling to Tehran-backed blocs and Iran itself that the Kurds received both warnings and regular drone attacks to discourage their full commitment to al-Sadr and the possibility that their example would draw in Sunnis in their wake.³⁰ Al-Sadr openly stated that he intended to disassemble the *muqawama's* powerbase within the PMF.^h Thus, al-Sadr and anyone who allied with him credibly threatened to cross two red lines that had been clearly laid out by Tehran-backed blocs and Iran itself: dividing the Shi`a community in government formation and threatening their control of the PMF

h On November 18, 2021, for instance, al-Sadr stated: "If you want to participate in the formation of the government you must do the following: disband all the fasail ... and hand in their arms to al-Hashd al-Sha'abi [i.e., the Popular Mobilization Forces, or PMF]." Quoted in Hamdi Malik and Michael Knights, "A Fake KSS Recruitment Drive," *Militia Spotlight*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, November 27, 2021.

mechanism of state funding and legitimization for *muqawama* militias.¹

The first *muqawama* reaction to the loss was deep shock and existential dread: At one of the first meetings of the Fateh Alliance following the election, Hadi al-Ameri baldly stated: “I will not wait to be slaughtered like a lamb.”² Militia Spotlight spent the last quarter of 2021 recording, in detail, the thrashing around of *muqawama* actors as they ineffectively tried to alter the electoral results. First, in mid-October 2021, Qais al-Khazali led the organization of mass street protests and tried to storm the government center, the International Zone, with an AAH member killed by the security forces.³¹ *Muqawama* conventional and social media boiled with explicit threats against parties accused of corrupting the electoral results: the United States, the United National Assistance Mission in Iraq, and the United Arab Emirates (who were seen by the *muqawama* as supporting an axis between al-Sadr and the (then) incumbent Prime Minister Mustafa Kadhimi).³² In late October and early November 2021, the *muqawama* began to issue death threats against Kadhimi, senior security officials,³³ and undertook a rocket attack on the organization closest to him, the Iraqi National Intelligence Service.³⁴

On November 7, 2021, two explosive drones were used to attack the house of Prime Minister Kadhimi.³⁵ Though *muqawama* leaders denied culpability in the attack, available evidence suggests the drone attack was resourced and directly by an AAH-led, KH-supported consortia of disgruntled *muqawama* factions^k who did not perceive Iran as doing enough to help them in their moment of existential crisis.³⁶ In November and December 2021, *muqawama* propaganda platforms like Sabereen News (affiliated with multiple *fasa'il*) and Unit 10,000 (affiliated with KH) repeatedly issued death threats against Kadhimi-linked intelligence officials and the Iraqi Security Forces protecting the International Zone,³⁷ followed by a rash of assassinations of security officers.³⁸

At this moment, the IRGC-QF faced an institutional failure on a monumental scale. As the authors' prior *CTC Sentinel* pieces noted, even under Soleimani, events in Iraq were slowly trending toward a nightmare scenario for the Iranian regime.³⁹ A Tehran-backed premier, Prime Minister Adel Abdal-Mahdi, had resigned at the end of 2019 with less than two years in office due to mass protests in which Iranian diplomatic facilities in Iraq were repeatedly

attacked and whose example spurred protests in Iran.¹ Then the two most senior IRGC-QF officers in Iraq, Soleimani and Muhandis, were killed;^m the Iraqi *muqawama* was becoming unresponsive to Iranian direction at key moments;ⁿ Iraq's most powerful Shi'a politician Moqtada al-Sadr and the new Sadr-Kurdish-Sunni tripartite bloc appeared intent on providing a full four-year term in office to Mustafa al-Kadhimi, a secular, Western-leaning premier who in his 2020-2021 administration had begun to arrest *muqawama* terrorists and generate significant intelligence on the weaknesses of the Tehran-based proxy networks in Iraq.⁴⁰ For the IRGC-QF—still firmly in charge of Iranian policy in Iraq, based on Militia Spotlight's research^o—the emerging outcome represented looming abject failure.⁴¹

Part Two. Defeat into Victory: Lawfare, not Guns, Wins the Day

Militias Spotlight's insights from winter of 2021-2022 strongly suggest that Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and the IRGC-QF commander Esmail Qaani “gripped” the *muqawama* issue in a decisive manner from December 2021 onwards. It is possible that Iran ceased at this point to try to replace Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis with one man,^p but instead split up the roles^q he played between multiple *muqawama* leaders and factions, an idea explored by Militia Spotlight in a prescient January 2022 piece.⁴²

In a very high-profile January 2022 BBC interview,⁴³ Qais al-Khazali made half a dozen clearly critical statements about Iranian

i In the authors' collective assessment, publicly advocating the issue of PMF disestablishment was a key driver for the coherence of the post-electoral response to al-Sadr's win.

j This underlines the view of not only Fateh and al-Maliki but also Shi'a moderates like Hakim and Abadi. These actors fear a major unrestrained growth of Sadrist power, most having fought to restrain Sadrist militias in the past. Author (Knights) interview, Iraqi Shi'a Coordination Framework interviewee, 2021; exact date, name, and place withheld at request of the interviewee.

k According to Militia Spotlight's investigation at the time of the drone attacks on Kadhimi, the attack was carried out by AAH members Abbas Shams al-Din, aided by team leaders Ali Mohsen Balasim al-Lami and Haider Mohammed al-Khalqani, using facilities and resources provided by Qais al-Khazali and Laith al-Khazali. Of note, KH members secured the launch site. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2021-2022; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees. For open source coverage of the issue, see this report, which reflects U.S. government background briefings: Dan De Luze and Courtney Kube, “Iran likely did not order drone attack on Iraqi prime minister, current, former U.S. officials say,” NBC News, November 13, 2021.

l By 2019, this sense was already building. The Iranian consulate in Basra was burned in 2018 and again in 2019. See “Iraqi protesters set fire to Iranian consulate in Basra,” Al Jazeera, September 7, 2018, and “Protesters burn down Iranian consulate in southern Iraq,” *Guardian*, November 27, 2019.

m The loss of both Soleimani and al-Muhandis, as well as the premierships, opened up space for anti-Iran dissent in 2020. See Ray Takeyh, “Iran is losing its grip on Iraq,” *The Hill*, February 1, 2020, and Namu Abdulla and Mehdi Jedinia, “New Poll: Iran Losing Support of Majority in Iraq,” *Voice of America*, June 16, 2020.

n In the latter half of 2020, the IRGC-QF struggled to discipline *muqawama* cells about not poking the outgoing Trump administration too vigorously, even threatening to withdraw Iran-provided drones. See Michael Knights, Crispin Smith, and Hamdi Malik, “Discordance in the Iran Threat Network in Iraq: Militia Competition and Rivalry,” *CTC Sentinel* 14:8 (2021). By late 2021, following episodes such as the November 7, 2021, drone attack on Kadhimi, the sense of an IRGC-QF loss of control was becoming more mainstream. See Shawn Yuan, “Is Iran losing some of its grip on Shia militias in Iraq?” Al Jazeera, November 12, 2021.

o Militia Spotlight investigated the issue of which Iranian agency led Iranian policy in Iraq, and concluded in the October 2021 *CTC Sentinel* article that “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), IRGC Intelligence Organization, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Lebanese Hezbollah.” See Knights, Smith, and Malik, “Discordance in the Iran Threat Network in Iraq.”

p Based on interviews with Iraqi officials and politicians at the time, there is good evidence that Abu Fadak (Abd'al-Aziz al-Mohammadawi, acting as Popular Mobilization Forces operational commander since February 2020) was given the first chance to try to replicate Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis' “grip” on the Iraqi *muqawama* but he failed during 2020 and 2021 to achieve this due to shortfalls in charisma, religious knowledge, or personal relationships. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2020-2021; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

q Arguably, al-Muhandis served two roles: as the head of the Popular Mobilization Forces and as the head of the anti-U.S. resistance in Iraq.



Abu Alaa al-Wala'i, commander of *Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada*, speaks during an interview with the Associated Press on July 5, 2021, in Baghdad, Iraq. (Khalid Mohammed/AP Photo)

policy in Iraq^r and finished by reflecting that since the deaths of Soleimani and al-Muhandis, “the way the [Iranian] organizations that are dealing with the Iraq case operate has changed dramatically.” He continued: “In my opinion maybe this change was correct and appropriate with this new situation. It’s not confidential that in most cases Mr. Qaani meets with the prime minister and other political figures from different groups and parties and has delivered the message that Iran won’t make decisions for Iraq. And decisions have to be taken by Iraqis. Iran doesn’t interfere. If help is requested by Iraq, Iran will take action. But it does not have a specific position on Iraq.”⁴⁴

These comments contrast very interestingly with the starkly critical AAH public commentary on Iran in mid-November 2021,⁴⁵ right after AAH played a key role in the drone attack on Kadhimi. Something changed appreciably at the start of 2022 in IRGC-QF relations with the Iraqi *muqawama*, with Esmail Qaani receiving a

much better reception immediately afterwards.^s Most likely, based on all the available small indicators and messages gathered at the time from interviews and social media spaces, the change came about because Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei issued a *fatwa*—in the form of a letter—that sternly warned the *muqawama* players to cooperate with each other, with Qaani as his representative.⁴⁶

Role Division Among the Militias

Another strand of the recovery effort was Iran’s extension of a tight, controlling embrace of the military leaders of the *fasa’il* at the forefront of coordinating anti-U.S. actions. These were the same three leaders who had rushed first to meet with Soleimani’s deputy and successor, IRGC-QF commander Esmail Qaani, when he met Iraqi *muqawama* leaders for the first time as the new Quds Force chief in January 2020.⁴⁷ One was Akram Kaabi of Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (HaN, hereafter referred to as Nujaba);⁴⁸ the second was Abu Alaa al-Wala’i of *Kata’ib Sayyid al-Shuhada* (KSS);⁴⁹ and the third was Laith al-Khazali, Qais al-Khazali’s

^r First, Qais al-Khazali openly named Iran as the party that caused the loss of the opportunity to evict U.S. forces in January 2020; then he rebuffed a question about Qaani’s influence by referring to anti-occupation strategy as an Iraqi decision; he stated the Iraqi *muqawama*’s ability to make its own drones without depending on Iran; and he noted “complications” in Iran’s relations with the *muqawama*. All of these are notable, and to come one after the other in a short interview was highly unusual for any *muqawama* faction leader. “A closer look at BBC Persian’s full interview with Asaib Ahl al-Haq leader Qais al-Khazali,” Middle East Center (MECRA), January 23, 2022.

^s Militia Spotlight noticed this in January 2022, though at the time, was unsure how to interpret it. Hamdi Malik and Michael Knights, “Militia Lionization of Esmail Qaani: Consolidation or Covering Embarrassment?” Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, January 24, 2022.

brother, in charge of AAH's paramilitary operations at that point.^t In November and December 2021, both were strengthened in Iraq. Abu Alaa al-Wala'i was boosted with a well-publicized KSS recruitment drive⁵⁰ and an enhanced role for Abu Alaa's relatives in the Sabereen News network.⁵¹ Ashab al-Kahf,⁵² a resistance brand that came under Kaabi's control in late 2021, took over as the most prolific group claiming harassment attacks on U.S. forces in Iraq.⁵³ In December 2021, in the most visible symbol of Kaabi's symbolic leadership of anti-U.S. resistance operations, he gave a speech in front of the flags of the most prolific *muqawama* brands being used to claim kinetic attacks against U.S. targets in Iraq and Syria.^u

In contrast, Katai'b Hezbollah lowered its profile at the same time and may have become more focused on covert operations, especially those against targets outside Iraq. In November 2021, KH claiming of roadside bomb attacks on U.S. supply convoys diminished,⁵⁴ as did its involvement in the main *muqawama* media brand, Sabereen. Furthermore, KH's Qassem al-Jabbarin brand used for claiming attacks became largely inactive.⁵⁵ The only visible actions by KH were those undertaken openly by Abu Fadak (Abd'al-Aziz al-Mohammadawi, acting as the operational commander of the Popular Mobilization Forces since February 2020).⁵⁶ When KH's Special Operations wing next resurfaced, it was to use its Alwiyat al-Waad al-Haq brand to claim drone attacks on the UAE in February 2022, and on U.S. bases outside Iraq, such as a drone attack in August 2022 on Al-Tanf in Syria.⁵⁷

Recovery Through Lawfare and Political Warfare

After restoring a modicum of cohesion and role differentiation to the *muqawama*, the next joint action by the IRGC-QF and the Shia Coordination Framework was ingenious—a novel and highly effective combination of lawfare with kinetic intimidation, intended to break the momentum of the Sadr-Kurdish-Sunni tripartite bloc. As Militia Spotlight has consistently warned, lawfare (“the strategy of using - or misusing - law as a substitute for traditional military means to achieve a warfighting objective”⁵⁸) can be a highly-effective

“The most important tool in the *muqawama*'s 2022 turnaround was Iraq's most senior judge, the Iraqi Supreme Judicial Court's Judge Faiq Zaydan.”

and economic tool of political warfare, especially in Iraq.^v As noted in the October 2021 *CTC Sentinel* article: “Iran is well-versed in this kind 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.”⁵⁹

The most important tool in the *muqawama*'s 2022 turnaround was Iraq's most senior judge, the Iraqi Supreme Judicial Court's Judge Faiq Zaydan,⁶⁰ who (in February 2022) suddenly (and very unusually during a tense government formation interregnum^w) issued a flurry of rulings in his subordinate Supreme Federal Court (FSC) that all, in some way, proved highly damaging to the tripartite bloc's effort to form a government without the *muqawama* factions.⁶¹ Most importantly, the FSC altered the government formation rules so that the tripartite bloc's simple (165-seat) majority was no longer sufficient to form a government and instead a two-thirds (218-seat) majority was needed, making the exclusion of Shi'a Coordination Framework players mathematically impossible due to the balance of seats.^x In Militia Spotlight's assessment, based on an extensive multi-year investigation, Zaydan is one of a number of judges groomed by the Iraqi *muqawama*, specifically by Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis since around 2004. Zaydan was maneuvered by Muhandis to the apex of the Iraqi judicial system, whereupon Muhandis privately

t The AAH military commander, Laith al-Khazali had emerged by 2020 as the most muscular AAH leader, throwing his weight around to the extent that he even physically intimidated the head of the Shi'a religious endowment in Iraq and stole his house in the summer of 2019. This is described in Michael Knights, Hamdi Malik, and Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Honored, Not Contained: The Future of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 23, 2020. He was designated by the United States for serious human rights abuses later that year. “Treasury Sanctions Iran-Backed Militia Leaders Who Killed Innocent Demonstrators in Iraq,” U.S. Department of the Treasury, December 6, 2019.

u The group flags were those of Nujaba, Ashab al-Kahf; Al-Muqawama al-Duwaliya; Liwa al-Thaireen; Liwa Thar Muhandis; Saraya Thawat al-Ashrin al-Thaniya; Rijal Allah; Liwa al-Qasim; and Al-Tashkil al-Waritheen. Crispin Smith and Michael Knights, “Akram Kaabi's Revealing Speech,” Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, December 9, 2021.

v In 2021, the authors noted: “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. Lawfare efforts present the *muqawama* as legitimate upholders of Iraqi law and sovereignty (while discrediting and effectively constraining 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. Militia Spotlight has also observed the militias' fear of domestic and international law being used against them.” Knights, Smith, and Malik, “Discordance in the Iran Threat Network in Iraq.”

w Though Iraq's judiciary is theoretically independent of the executive and judicial branches under the constitutional separation of powers, it nonetheless historically takes the political context into account when considering the timing of important court rulings. Until 2022, it has been customary since democracy came to Iraq in 2005 to not reveal politically sensitive or impactful court rulings during government formation, even when the government formation process has stretched over many months. In Zaydan's case, half a dozen highly impactful *pro-muqawama* verdicts were delivered in the first quarter of 2022. Crispin Smith and Michael Knights, “Remaking Iraq: How Iranian-Backed Militias Captured the Country,” Just Security, March 20, 2023.

x To achieve a two-thirds majority of 218 seats, the tripartite bloc would have had to find another 50 seats, which could only have been pulled together by involving the Shi'a Coordination Framework parties. These figures come from detailed analysis by the authors of Iraqi parliamentary political affiliations and performance, either openly admitted or otherwise.

referred to him as “the guardian of the Shia project.”^y Based on Militia Spotlight’s information, Zaydan remained in close contact with IRGC-QF officials^z and U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organizations such as KH and AAH^{aa} throughout 2021-2022 on the government formation issue.⁶² Zaydan traded made-to-order judicial rulings in return for IRGC-QF and *muqawama* support for Zaydan’s continued leadership of the judicial system.⁶³

In addition to rulings made to frustrate the filling of the key presidential role, and thus stall Moqtada al-Sadr’s government formation efforts, Zaydan and the FSC brought tremendous pressure against al-Sadr’s Kurdish partners. In February 2022, the FSC suddenly (and against usual custom) activated a 10-year old case against Kurdistan’s independent oil exports *during government formation*, with the intent to intimidate the Kurds into withdrawing from the tripartite effort.⁶⁴ In parallel, from March to June 2022, both the *muqawama fasa’il* and Iran militarily attacked the Kurdistan Region, and particularly its energy sites with rocket and drone strikes (and in Iran’s case, directly and overtly with short-range ballistic missiles fired from inside Iran).⁶⁵ Indeed, Nujaba issued its first Kurdish-language communique on March 16, 2022, three days after Iran’s ballistic missile strike on the Kurdistan capital of Erbil, warning the Kurds to abandon the tripartite bloc and efforts to “change the status quo.”⁶⁶ This period of intense multifaceted harassment of the Kurdistan Region underlined just how effectively Iran and the *muqawama* could blend political warfare (including threatened regime change in Kurdistan) and lawfare, economic warfare, and kinetic attacks.

The net result was to expertly frustrate and goad Moqtada al-Sadr until he made a series of critical errors, most notably his

June 2022 unilateral resignation of all 73 MPs of the Sairoon coalition from parliament, ceding their seats largely to the Shi’a Coordination Framework factions.^{ab} Now armed with the ability to form a government due to the changed balance in the parliament, the Shi’a Coordination Framework immediately flipped to a pro-state, pro-system position, aligning with the security forces against a now (self-) excluded Sadrist street opposition.⁶⁷ In August 2022, Moqtada al-Sadr’s ill-considered invasion and occupation of the International Zone was defeated decisively when the *muqawama* factions deftly provoked⁶⁸ al-Sadr’s mobs to bombard the International Zone with small arms fire and rockets, and then enjoyed the spectacle of Iraq’s senior Shi’a cleric Ali al-Sistani ordering al-Sadr to withdraw his forces in disgrace.⁶⁹ This cleared the way for al-Sadr’s retreat into reclusion; for the October 2022 formation of a *muqawama*-appointed premier, Prime Minister al-Sudani; and (see section 4) for an immediate and widespread purge of the pro-Western security officials that had gradually begun to assert themselves against the *muqawama* under Kadhimi.

All the *muqawama* players were winners in this unlikely reversal of fortunes, but the most visibly successful of them all were former premier Nouri al-Maliki and Qais al-Khazali.^{ac} While Maliki’s utility is obvious—he won far more seats than the Fateh Alliance in the elections^{ad}—al-Khazali’s comeback after his electoral wipeout is worth a closer look. He had been on an upswing in the years^{ae} before the elections, navigating the political environment with skill and energy,⁷⁰ and perhaps exploiting the vacuum left by Soleimani and Muhandis’ killings and by KH’s infighting in 2020-2021.⁷¹ After the October 2021 elections, al-Khazali worked harder than any other player to reverse the outcome, perhaps because a Sadr-led government might have had especially disastrous consequences for al-Khazali.^{af} As noted, al-Khazali was the first to put his own

y The U.S.-designated terrorist Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis privately boasted on multiple occasions to Iraqi leaders that he groomed Zaydan and guided his career from 2004 onwards. Muhandis referred to Zaydan as “his project” and “his man,” stating on multiple occasions to Iraqi leaders that control of the Iraqi judiciary was his objective. Authors’ (Knights, Smith) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2021-2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees. For an analytic summary of Zaydan’s actions in the post-electoral period, see this article in the lawfare journal, *Just Security*, by Smith and Knights, “Remaking Iraq;” and Michael Knights, “Iraq’s Two Coups—And How the U.S. Should Respond,” *Fikra Forum*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, August 2, 2022.

z For instance, Zaydan was photographed praying at a gathering of IRGC and IRGC-QF commanders in Iran on December 26, 2018, sitting between Falah al-Fayyadh, the head of the Popular Mobilization Forces, and future prime minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani. Qassem Soleimani, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, and a number of *muqawama* leaders were also in attendance. See photographs published here at the Iranian Supreme Leader’s official website, available at <https://www.leader.ir/ar/pictures/album/2132/grid> (last accessed June 19, 2023). On other occasions, Zaydan has privately met with IRGC-QF officers such as Soleimani’s assistant Hajji Hamid Nasser and IRGC-QF commander Esmail Qaani (both during government formation in Baghdad in 2022). These meetings took place at the houses of Hadi al-Ameri and U.S.-sanctioned Lebanese Hezbollah operative Mohammed al-Kawtharani. Zaydan also publicly refers to Soleimani and Muhandis by the Iranian and *muqawama* term “the leaders of victory” and Zaydan has a commemorative statue of Muhandis in his home. Authors (Knights, Smith) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2021-2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

aa When Mohammed Shia al-Sudani was appointed prime minister on October 27, 2022, Zaydan was seated beside Qais al-Khazali, the U.S.-designated terrorist, with both heartily celebrating the appointment with laughs and smiles. See video and photos here: Hussein Khzali, “[A very cordial conversation between the trustworthy Sheikh Qais Al-Khazali and the President of the Federal Supreme Court ...],” X, October 27, 2022.

ab Before the resignation, the Shi’a Coordination Framework could muster around 65 seats, but after (following the reallocation of Sadrist seats to second-placed candidates), the Framework could muster around 110. In combination with the collapse of resistance from Kurdish and Shiite tripartite bloc members, forming a two-thirds majority government became possible once again. This is the authors’ calculation, which is not precise due to the manner in which Iraqi MPs can informally caucus with each other, at will.

ac Both al-Maliki and al-Khazali were among the most inveterate and determined opponents of the tripartite bloc because they were the most bitter adversaries of Moqtada al-Sadr, with no possibility of inclusion in an al-Sadr-led order and a high probability that both would have been undermined, prosecuted, or even driven out of Iraq. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2022-2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

ad Al-Maliki won 33 seats in the elections, versus 17 for Fateh. Even after the reallocation of Sadrist seats, Maliki had 37 seats to Fateh’s 29. Though Fateh can call on the support of many other smaller blocs of MPs, so can al-Maliki, and the 37 seats that Maliki holds are indispensable to the Shi’a Coordination Framework. Again, this is the authors’ calculation, taking into account the vagaries of Iraqi parliamentary caucusing.

ae After winning a surprise 15 seats in the 2018 elections, Qais al-Khazali appeared to be the fastest-rising militia politician in Iraq. For a good example of the tenor of reporting on him, 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.

af Originating in the same Sadrist current as al-Sadr, Qais al-Khazali was a favorite student of Moqtada’s father, Mohammed Sadiq al-Sadr, and a bitter personal rival of Moqtada’s. Qais al-Khazali might have been placed under house arrest, driven into exile, or even killed if Moqtada al-Sadr had consolidated power in 2021-2022. This is Militia Spotlight’s assessment based on all the available evidence and the authors’ analytic processes.

protestors in the firing line to protest the elections, and he played the key role in the November 7 drone attack on the then Prime Minister Kadhimi's house, underlining to Iran the potential consequences of politically throwing him and other anti-Sadr factions under the bus.⁷² Al-Khazali was the most prominent of the Shi'a Coordination Framework "hawks" who argued for the need to abandon Iran's long-held default approach—to always keep the Shi'a house united—and instead to defeat and exclude al-Sadr.^{ag} In the summer of 2022, al-Khazali and al-Maliki held their nerve, outlasted al-Sadr, and then outplayed him in the International Zone crisis of August 2022.⁷³

As important, al-Khazali then emerged as the initial backer of Iraq's new "consensus" prime minister, Mohammed Shia al-Sudani, and thus the "earliest investor" in his appointment.^{ah} Since then, al-Khazali has adopted a unique tone with al-Sudani and is the only Shi'a Coordination Framework leader with the *chutzpah* to publicly define and limit al-Sudani's role, which al-Khazali described in a November 2022 television interview as that of a "general manager." This appears to have been a calculated action to show al-Khazali's power, by disparaging Iraq's prime minister—the country's highest executive and the commander-in-chief of the military—by comparing him to a low-ranking bureaucrat.⁷⁴ Al-Khazali demanded that, in contrast to the Constitution's provisions, "the prime minister must not monopolize the state's decisions; rather, [he must] refer to the Coordination Framework ... for strategic decisions, whether political, economic, or security. Organizing the government ... is the prime minister's business."⁷⁵ In January 2023, one of al-Khazali's parliamentarians and a former AAH fighter, Ali Turki, referred to the Sudani government as "the *muqawama* government," stating "the *muqawama* has come to represent the official view of Iraq, and it is the one running affairs today."⁷⁶ Al-Sudani's Prime Minister's Office has never issued a public rebuttal of either statement.

Part Three. Militias in Charge: The Thorny Issue of U.S. Presence

Once ensconced in power following the October 2022 formation of al-Sudani's government, the Shi'a Coordination Framework ran headfirst into one of the strategic decisions that they reserved for themselves rather than al-Sudani to make. This was the evergreen issue of U.S. military withdrawal from Iraq. Following a U.S.-Iraq Strategic Dialogue held by the Kadhimi government in the summer of 2021 in Washington, D.C., the *muqawama* had developed high expectations that a mutually agreed end to U.S. "combat operations" in Iraq on December 31, 2021, actually meant a withdrawal of *all* U.S. forces. The *muqawama* had already been asked by IRGC-QF to postpone their revenge for the killings of Soleimani and Muhandis in order to pass through the erratic end-days of the Trump administration at the end of 2020.⁷⁷ Now, another *muqawama*-set

deadline for U.S. withdrawal had passed without implementation during the government formation process at the end of 2021.

When al-Sudani was appointed eight months later, Qais al-Khazali lost no time in stating in November 2022, with no rebuttal from al-Sudani or any other *muqawama* actor, that al-Sudani "will start a [process of] genuine negotiations. I emphasize it must be genuine and not nominal or deceptive—like what used to happen in the past ... this is a matter we will never compromise on; [ending] the military presence of the United States is non-negotiable."⁷⁸ Yet, less than two months later, AAH⁷⁹ (and KH⁸⁰) reacted in a very restrained manner when al-Sudani announced on January 13, 2023, that the government would not seek the immediate removal of U.S. forces (as per the January 5, 2020, law to "expel all foreign troops from their country"⁸¹) but would instead "determine the missions, the numbers, and places [of U.S. troops in Iraq] and for a specific period of time."⁸² AAH parliamentarian and fighter Ali Turki even told reporters on January 10, 2023, that "there is no problem to sit [negotiating] with the U.S. to exchange interests ... The U.S. forces are in Iraq today to train Iraqi security forces ... We are trying to make the relationship with the United States based on partnership and interests."⁸³

What accounts for this new willingness in AAH and KH statements to equivocate regarding the extent and timing of U.S. withdrawal? The change of government from Kadhimi to al-Sudani was clearly one factor in the *muqawama*'s surprisingly relaxed view. As al-Khazali noted in November 2022: "In the past we had objections [because] the head of the previous government had ill intentions, so we stood against [his moves]. Right now, the prime minister is the prime minister of the Coordination Framework, therefore there is no suspicion about ill intentions."⁸⁴ Qais al-Khazali took note of the lack of strong U.S. reaction to the appointment of an AAH cabinet member, Minister of Higher Education Naim al-Aboudi, as a sign that dealing with the United States might be possible.^{ai}

More broadly, the *muqawama* also seem to have rapidly recognized the need to placate the United States to at least a small degree. The first crisis of the al-Sudani era was the U.S. Treasury's November 2022 limitations on dollar transactions with Iraq, which was a long-scheduled development that caught the new government by surprise and which underlined the need to treat the United States with care in order to maintain access to global financial systems and dollar transfers.⁸⁵ The examples of the 2019 ouster of the *muqawama*-friendly Prime Minister Adel Abdal-Mahdi and the January 3, 2020, airstrikes on Soleimani and Muhandis were still fresh. The Iran-backed^{aj} kidnap-murder on November

ag When outreach began from Moqtada al-Sadr to include Shi'a parties except al-Maliki and al-Khazali, Hadi al-Ameri and Iran considered swallowing the electoral result, which was disappointing but survivable for them both. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2021-2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

ah Above any other faction, Qais al-Khazali pushed al-Sudani's candidacy, overcoming initial resistance within the Shi'a Coordination Framework toward al-Sudani. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2022-2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

ai Washington was not happy but at the same time did not warn Iraq to find another minister, as has happened many times in the past—most notably Hadi al-Ameri being blocked by a U.S. veto from the Ministry of Interior post in 2014. This assessment is based on multiple decades-worth of the team's collective politics-watching across seven government formations since 2005. See also "The U.S. tells Iraq it won't work with some Iraqi officials, Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haq responds," Shafaq News, November 16, 2022.

aj An Iranian national—Mohammed Ali Ridha Hussein—was charged with leading the operation that killed Troell. See Qassim Abdal-Zahra, "Iraq court sentences 5 people to life in prison in killing of US citizen, officials say," Associated Press, August 31, 2023.

7, 2022, of U.S. citizen Stephen Troell in Baghdad^{86 ak} was a new aggravating factor in relations. Overall, most of the *muqawama* leadership pragmatically accepted that al-Sudani could not, in the opening three months of his tenure, secure even a tentative timeline for the departure of U.S. forces.⁸⁷ Furthermore, anecdotal evidence suggests that al-Sudani made one demand of his political masters in the *muqawama*: that no attacks would be undertaken on U.S. diplomatic facilities during his tenure (a deal that was maintained from the beginning of al-Sudani's term in October 2022 until an attack on U.S. Embassy Baghdad on December 8, 2023).^{88 al}

Continuing Violent Resistance under al-Sudani

The outlier in this apparently cozy arrangement was Akram al-Kaabi, who has remained the most trenchant public voice in the *muqawama*, a kind of semi-official spokesman for those in violent opposition to an ongoing U.S. military presence in Iraq, largely because he has no open interests in government to lose.^{am} A week after al-Sudani signaled in mid-January 2023 that he had achieved no timeline for U.S. departure, three Iranian-made Qases-2K drones struck the U.S. point of presence in Al-Tanf, Syria,⁸⁹ an attack claimed under the name of Al-Tashkil al-Waritheen,⁹⁰ one of the brands whose flags hung behind al-Kaabi in his December 2021 speech.⁹¹ The Al-Tashkil al-Waritheen claim issued on January 21, 2023, noted: "No one can stop our operations in any way. We warned a lot against complacency with and kneeling in front of the American occupation in the region, and whoever does not listen to our voice demanding the expulsion of the occupiers will kneel before the bullets of our guns."⁹²

Under the al-Sudani government, anti-U.S. attacks never ceased. Kata'ib Hezbollah, Nujaba, AAH, and KSS began to undertake accelerated⁹³ convoy, drone, and rocket attacks that assuaged the anger of *muqawama* supporters^{an} at the non-withdrawal of U.S. forces, albeit without risking uncontrolled escalation and without overly embarrassing the new Iraqi government.⁹⁴ The *muqawama* targeted Kurdistan infrastructure and government sites from March to May 2022;⁹⁵ Turkish forces in Iraq in December 2021-August 2022;⁹⁶ more remote U.S. bases in Iraq such as Al-Asad⁹⁷ and U.S. bases in Syria such as Al-Tanf, Omar oilfield, and Hasakah⁹⁸ (throughout January-August 2022 in both Iraq and

Syria); and even made an unsuccessful effort to launch a Qasef-2K drone at the U.S. base at Ali al-Salem, Kuwait, in August 2022.⁹⁹ These apparently disparate threat streams kept the *fasa'il* busy, and showed them to be addressing various enemies (the United States, Turkey, Kurdistan, and the Gulf Arabs).

In Militia Spotlight's assessment, they were in no way coordinated by al-Kaabi,¹⁰⁰ but were instead undertaken by a strata of kinetic cells drawn from Nujaba, AAH, KH, and KSS,¹⁰¹ with Qasef-2K attacks signifying special IRGC-QF interest in, and support of, a strike.⁴⁰ The January 20, 2023, Qasef-2K attack on Al-Tanf (claimed under the Nujaba-linked brand Tashkil al-Waritheen) was followed by a March 23, 2023, triple-Qasef-2K strike on a U.S. base in Hasakah, Syria, which struck while U.S. defensive systems were deactivated and killed one U.S. contractor and injured six U.S. persons.¹⁰² The March 23 attack was claimed by a new brand, Liwa al-Ghaliboun (Brigade of the Victors), which Militia Spotlight assesses to be linked to Nujaba and very similar in its use as the Tashkil al-Waritheen brand.¹⁰³

Following a March 24, 2023, retaliatory U.S. strike¹⁰⁴ on *muqawama* forces based in Syria (that killed around 11 persons), the Iraqi *muqawama* went relatively quiet from a kinetic perspective and instead spent the following six months needling the United States with rhetorical threats,^{4p} largely related to the Ashab al-Kahf brand and Nujaba-related media channels. These acts included reminders of pre-2011 deadly attacks on helicopters in Iraq;^{4q} a retrospective claim of an October 2017 killing of a U.S. soldier in Iraq;^{4r} the announcement of new (and so far unused) group names for attacking U.S. targets;¹⁰⁵ and then various protests¹⁰⁶ and recruitment actions in urban areas (Baghdad, Karbala, and Basra).¹⁰⁷

Other Shi'a Coordination Framework parties (and indeed Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani) seem to have become weary of, and perhaps even concerned by, some of the Kaabi network's

ak Militia Spotlight assesses Nujaba and IRGC-QF to have been the executing parties in the attack, which was probably intended to kidnap Troell and present him as a spy. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2022-2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

al Separately, al-Sudani was seemingly unable to prevent arson attacks on the Swedish embassy in Baghdad in response to threatened Qur'an burnings in Stockholm. See Isabella Kwai and Raja Abdulrahim, "Protesters Angry Over Quran Burning Storm Swedish Embassy in Baghdad," *New York Times*, July 21, 2023. Eventually, an unidentified *muqawama* group fired Rocket-Propelled Grenades at the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad on December 8, 2023. See Michael Knights, Amir al-Kaabi, and Hamdi Malik, "Tracking Anti-U.S. Strikes in Iraq and Syria During the Gaza Crisis," Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 24, 2023, updated on December 8, 2023.

am Nujaba does not hold any cabinet positions and does not seem to play the game of controlling government officials. (See the later section on the appointment of special grades.)

an *Muqawama* foot-soldiers sometimes vent extraordinary levels of anger at their leadership if anti-U.S. operations seem to be underwhelming or show signs of political restrictions. For an example, see the video at Hamdi Maliki, "8. The young muqawama members harangued Araj, Ameri and Faleh al-Fayadh . . .," X, July 24, 2021.

40 The Qasef-2K loitering munition (called Ababil-T in Iran) has been shown by Iraqi *muqawama* groups since August 2022, initially almost always KH-controlled cells threatening or undertaking long-range strikes into Syria or the Gulf States. See Hamdi Malik and Michael Knights, "Iraqi Militia Group Makes Credible New Threat Against the Gulf States," Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 3, 2022. The type may have entered use among Nujaba-controlled cells by the start of 2023. See Hamdi Malik and Crispin Smith, "Militias Try to Conceal Iraqi Role in Lethal Strike on American Base," Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 3, 2023.

4p This pattern of substituting glorification of old attacks instead of mounting new attacks (that might cause escalation) is an enduring *muqawama* tactic. In November 2022, as al-Sudani settled in and tensions with the United States needed salving, KH and its media organization Kaf used similar lionization of old pre-2011 strikes on the U.S. See Michael Knights, Aya Yousuf, and Hamdi Malik, "Kataib Hezbollah and Kaf Celebrate Attacks on Americans," Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, November 30, 2022. In this referenced case, KH was memorializing its Improvised Rocket-Assisted Launcher (IRAM) attacks on U.S. bases from 2011.

4q This propaganda effort referenced the notorious shooting down of a U.K. Lynx helicopter in Basra in 2006 using an Iranian-provided Manportable Air Defense System. Hamdi Malik and Michael Knights, "Ashab al-Kahf Threatens U.S. Helicopters," Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 25, 2023.

4r This propaganda effort referenced the mysterious 2017 killing (with an Iran-provided Explosively-Formed Penetrator) of a U.S. soldier in Iraq. Michael Knights and Hamdi Malik, "Ashab al-Kahf Claims Six-Year-Old Unsolved Murder of U.S. Soldier," Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, May 18, 2023.

antics in 2023, which may have been intended to outshine and embarrass them in front of *muqawama* supporters. When the Sudani government temporarily shut down access to the Telegram app in Iraq at the same time as Iraq's defense minister visited the United States, the head of Nujaba's political council, Ali al-Asadi, was quick to threaten the government, calling them "traitors."^{as}

Of all the *muqawama* players, Kaabi, Nujaba, and the Nujaba-controlled Ashab al-Kahf brand have been uniquely hostile to U.S. targets and the U.S. embassy in Baghdad.^{at} This is an interesting example of a faction with very close ties to IRGC-QF (Nujaba) being reined in by other IRGC-QF partners, with Iran apparently standing back or perhaps mediating very quietly behind the scenes.¹⁰⁸ In such cases, the Shi'a Coordination Framework factions who control and milk the resources of the Iraqi state (see Section 5) appear to be Iran's main (or "supported") effort in Iraq: In other words, IRGC-QF and most of the Shi'a Coordination Framework benefit from U.S. economic partnership with Iraq and can tolerate the presence of U.S. forces, which pose no obstacle to the *muqawama*'s control of the country.¹⁰⁹

Part Four. Ensuring Regime Security: The Quest for Control

While the Kaabi network stayed active and cosmetically harassed the U.S. military presence in Iraq, the other *muqawama* factions spent the opening months of the Sudani government seizing control of security agencies. The 30-month Kadhimi premiership had seen a steady cleansing of *muqawama* operators and agents from key security portfolios, largely unnoticed by casual observers of Iraq's security scene.¹¹⁰ From October 2022 onward, the militias set about purging those promoted during the Kadhimi era and installing *muqawama*-friendly officials in key roles.¹¹¹

In the case of the premier intelligence agency, the Iraqi National Intelligence Service (INIS), this effort went far beyond the "undoing" of Kadhimi-era counter-intelligence successes against Tehran-backed militia penetration of domestic intelligence agencies.¹¹² Instead, for the first time, the INIS leadership moved to *muqawama*-adjacent officials, resulting in the downgrading and limitation of a host of sensitive and valuable liaison relationships

with Western intelligence agencies.^{au} To give concrete examples, the Shi'a Coordination Framework factions were careful not to openly install a militia-linked head of the service (and could not agree which faction would provide the candidate),^{av} but unprecedentedly, the senior INIS directorates were split up between Shi'a Coordination Framework factions, albeit seemingly with care not to place known members of U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organizations (such as KH and AAH) in a position to control the "crown jewels" of the U.S.-built INIS organization (such as signals intelligence).¹¹³ Key changes included:

- The INIS Director of Counterintelligence appointed in early 2023 is Faisal Ghazi al-Lami, a nephew of U.S.-designated human rights abuser PMF chairman Falah al-Fayyadh,^{aw} and a long-term protégé of KSS leader Abu Alaa al-Wala'i. The Assistant Director of Counterintelligence, Ali Najim, was nominated by Nouri al-Maliki.¹¹⁴
- The INIS Director of Internal Security Khalid Arab, appointed in early 2023, was nominated by Nouri al-Maliki. The new director's brother is head of security for al-Maliki's Daawa Party, a role that requires a high level of vetting within the *muqawama* and by IRGC-QF.¹¹⁵
- The INIS Director of Surveillance is Wissam al-Mihyawi, nominated by Falah al-Fayyadh.¹¹⁶

The *muqawama* similarly moved quickly to penetrate and compromise Iraq's most effective military force, the U.S.-built Counter-Terrorism Command (CTC).¹¹⁷ Though the force is slated to expand under al-Sudani's military spending plans, it is opening its doors to *muqawama* recruits to an unprecedented extent. Militia Spotlight's research suggests 2,400 of 2,900 new recruits in 2023 were nominated by Shi'a Coordination Framework players including U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organizations Kata'ib Hezbollah and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, and also by non-designated players like al-Maliki and Badr.¹¹⁸ A wide-ranging leadership reshuffle was underway in Iraq's CTC at the time of publication.^{ax} KH military units within the PMF have flaunted their seniority over the CTC and other Iraqi Security Forces since the formation of the Sudani government, engaging in at least two known firefights with

as Nujaba's communique noted: "The invitation of the Iraqi military leaders to the Pentagon ... under the auspices of the High Commissioner, Aunt Alina Romanowski, at a time when Telegram has been banned is a cause for suspicion and a step for handcuffing Iraq that is intended to continue the brunt of the occupation ... Let the conspirators know that the free are aware of what is going on behind the closed doors. There will be a stance that shakes the ground under the feet of the traitors." Hamdi Malik, "Nujaba Leads the 'Big Three' Reaction to Iraq's Telegram Ban," Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, August 10, 2023.

at For instance, Nujaba's Ashab al-Kahf Telegram channel had the distinction of being the first and only *muqawama* entity since al-Sudani took office to actively organize a protest at the U.S. Embassy (on July 14, 2023), albeit which was ultimately blocked by Shi'a Coordination Framework groups such as that led by al-Maliki, Badr, and AAH. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees. See also "Demonstration Alert: U.S. Embassy Baghdad, Iraq (July 14, 2023)," U.S. Embassy and Consulate, Iraq, July 14, 2023.

au Based on Militia Spotlight's interviews, the following countries have all downgraded their intelligence-sharing with INIS since October 2022: United States, United Kingdom, France, Germany, and Canada. This is despite a long-term INIS professional officer being left nominally in charge of liaison with foreign services. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi and Western contacts, 2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

av Instead of al-Sudani officially holding the role of acting INIS director, as Mustafa Kadhimi did for some time when he was prime minister, INIS is (at the time of publication) not helmed by a director, with an al-Sudani relative (Ahmed al-Sudani) as the de facto head, leading the "special office" at INIS. The *muqawama* is cautious about al-Sudani taking INIS under his personal control, for fear of allowing him to develop a personal powerbase. Mohammed Shia al-Sudani's habit of emplacing relatives to watch over agencies is widespread. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi and Western contacts, 2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

aw The United States designated Falah al-Fayyadh for human rights abuses due to the October 2019 crackdown. See "Treasury Sanctions Iran-Backed Militia Leaders Who Killed Innocent Demonstrators in Iraq."

ax The overall commander of the CTC, his operations director, and a number of CTC brigade commanders were replaced in October and November 2023. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi and Western contacts, 2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

military units in the first year of al-Sudani's term.^{ay}

The next agency to be transferred to *muqawama* control was the National Security Service (NSS), a domestic security service with the largest current authorized manpower of any Iraqi intelligence agency,^{az} that has been strongly penetrated by *muqawama* operators since its inception.^{ba} After al-Sudani was appointed as prime minister, leadership of NSS was given to Abu Ali al-Basri (Abdal-Karim Abd-Fadil Hussein), the legendary former head of the Falcons counterterrorism unit, and a Daawa member since the 1970s, with decades-spanning connections to the IRGC-QF and Iran's intelligence services.^{bb} Abu Ali al-Basri was dual-hatted with leadership also of a new Supreme Committee for Combating Corruption,^{bc} which thus far has mainly focused on pursuing former Kadhimi team members under allegations of corruption.¹¹⁹ In partnership with the new Badr leadership of the Commission on Integrity,¹²⁰ the Supreme Committee has shamelessly pinned the blame for the \$2.5 billion Badr-run^{bd} "heist of the century"^{be} on the

exact Kadhimi team members who exposed the fraud.¹²¹ Among the NSS director-level changes made under the Sudani government,^{bf} the most significant is the appointment of AAH fighter Ahmed al-Tayyar as the deputy director of NSS in January 2023.¹²² Other important NSS roles—the director of operations and the head of Baghdad security operations—seem to have also fallen to AAH officials.¹²³

The third major intelligence agency to be extensively restaffed by the *muqawama* was the Ministry of Interior's Federal Information and Investigations Agency (FIIA), Iraq's version of the U.S. FBI, another large agency where (like NSS) the Kadhimi-era effort to remove militiamen had only just begun when the Sudani government came in.¹²⁴ Mohammed Atta, a new al-Sudani-appointed director of FIIA, was nominated by al-Maliki and agreed between all the Shi'a Coordination Framework senior leaders.¹²⁵ The Intelligence and Counter-Terrorism (Abu Ali al-Basri's old Falcons cell) was also placed under new al-Maliki-nominated leadership by the Sudani government, namely an al-Maliki ally called Ali Abdal-Rida, although the unit is actually commanded directly by an Iraqi IRGC-QF officer called Ammar al-Zirjawi, who previously worked directly with Qassem Soleimani.¹²⁶ For old Iraq hands, this will stir up old memories of Abu Ali al-Basri's Office of Intelligence and Security (OIS) in the early 2010s, which al-Maliki built up as a kind of coup-detection capability with advanced communications monitoring and human networks.¹²⁷

Alongside intelligence agencies, the *muqawama* actors also quickly restaffed Iraq's airport, port, border, and customs positions. These are vital roles for counter-intelligence and in the suppression of dissidents, ensuring the government knows exactly who and what is entering and leaving the country (even via the Kurdistan Region).¹²⁸ First, INIS lost its longstanding primacy for security operations within Baghdad International Airport,¹²⁷ with the role given to an AAH-controlled official called Mazin al-Shibli, who previously served as the Director of Iraq's Civil Aviation Authority Operations.¹²⁸ Control of Umm Qasr port and land points of entry have been split among Shi'a Coordination Framework actors from Badr, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, Kataib Jund al-Imam, and Ahmed al-Asadi's PMF Brigade 6,¹²⁹ with observers from the prime minister's office in each area.¹³⁰

A further aspect of regime security, reflecting the impact

ay KH has clashed with CTC and the Federal Police on many occasions since October 2022, including as KH has reestablished checkpoints in central Baghdad for the first time since the Kadhimi team took over in May 2020, and at the Speicher base in March 2023 and in the Albu Aitha area of Baghdad in May 2023. Amir al-Kaabi and Michael Knights, "Kataib Hezbollah's Escalating Feud with the Iraqi Security Forces," *Militia Spotlight*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, May 19, 2023.

az NSS had 12,840 authorized personnel at the end of the Kadhimi era, on par with the other largest agency: the Federal Information and Investigations Agency of the Ministry of Interior. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

ba NSS was built and staffed by Daawa Party officials under the al-Maliki premierships (2006-2014) and led for years by Falah al-Fayyadh. Michael Knights and Alex Almeida, "Kadhimi's Rolling Reshuffle (Part 1): Military Command Changes," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 14, 2020; Michael Knights, "Kadhimi's Rolling Reshuffle (Part 2): Protecting Iraq's Economic Institutions and Borders," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 15, 2020.

bb Abu Ali al-Basri (not to be confused with the deputy operations chief for the PMF, who has the same kunya or nom de guerre) is a long-term Daawa party clandestine resistance fighter who served alongside Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis on the side of Iran during the Iran-Iraq war, and who worked against the Saddam Hussein regime with IRGC-QF and other Iranian security agencies. For an entertaining account of Abu Ali al-Basri's life and times, see Margaret Coker, *The Spymaster of Baghdad: A True Story of Bravery, Family, and Patriotism in the Battle against ISIS* (New York: Dey Street Books, 2021).

bc The commission includes the investigators of counter-corruption cases and the departments charged with recovering the country's stolen funds. This is effectively a slightly better thought-out framework for the same kinds of politicized anti-corruption operations undertaken by the now-outlawed Committee 29 of the Kadhimi government. See Sinan Mahmoud, "Ex-intelligence chief picked to lead Iraq's anti-corruption team in power play by PM," *National*, November 17, 2022.

bd *The Guardian* newspaper's investigation found that "the scheme was allegedly masterminded by a well-connected businessman and executed by employees in the tax commission, who enjoyed the support of an Iran-aligned political faction called Badr." See Simona Foltayn, "'Heist of the century': how \$2.5bn was plundered from Iraqi state funds," *Guardian*, November 20, 2022.

be The heist was a multi-year (2015-2021) effort by Badr officials at the Tax Authority, to access a tax deposit account where new investors would place money in escrow to guarantee tax payments until they exited Iraq. Badr began to use this money in dollar auctions initially, using it to float currency speculation and replacing the monies before they were noticed missing. In 2020-2021, efforts were accelerated to empty the tax deposit account. Nicholas Pelham, "The Baghdad job: who was behind history's biggest bank heist?" *Economist*, July 27, 2023.

bf These NSS changes since October 2022 comprise the director positions for administration, security, technical affairs, provincial affairs, and the Baghdad and Basra local directorates. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

bg One of the authors (Knights) observed the OIS undertaking its activities in Iraqi security headquarters during his work with Iraqi headquarters in 2011-2012 period.

bh The U.S.-provided PISCES (Personal Identification Secure Comparison and Evaluation System) watch-listing system means that Baghdad officials are alerted about all persons entering Kurdistan via an airline or an official point of entry, allowing travel bans and arrest warrants to be readied for use when they arrive. It was installed in Iraq in 2007.

bi As noted before, al-Sudani relatives are dotted throughout sensitive offices, to give the prime minister insight into *muqawama* activities. These include: Sami al-Sudani as general supervisor of the Customs Authority and the Border and Ports Authority; and Ahmed Shamkhi al-Sudani as general supervisor of the Passports, Nationality and Residency Directorates at the Ministry of Interior. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2022-2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

of protests between 2019 and 2022 on the psyches of both the *muqawama* and the Iranian regime, has been the controlling of public spaces, especially online communities.¹³⁰ Under the Sudani government, this effort has been led by Iraq's Communications and Media Commission (CMC),¹³¹ whose board was taken over by a majority group of Shi'a Coordination Framework officials after al-Sudani took office.¹³² The new CMC board includes officials from U.S.-designated terrorist group Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq^{133bj} and from Iraqi Radio and Television Union,¹³⁴ an offshoot of Iran's U.S.-sanctioned Islamic Radio and Television Union (IRTVU).^{bk}

On March 16, 2023, a draft of a new CMC regulation policy on digital content (Regulation No. 1 of 2023 for Digital Content in Iraq)¹³⁵ was leaked¹³⁶ and quickly drew criticism from 12 international organizations for its threatened crackdown on freedom of expression and online dissent.¹³⁷ CMC also serves a powerful defensive purpose for *muqawama* information operations. It controls the Iraqi internet domain (.iq)^{bl} that many *muqawama* channels are forced to use due to international domain seizure and blocking actions against them.¹³⁸ The CMC has also increased its efforts to block overseas content for Iraqi internet users and introduced a platform for citizens to denounce users or nominate candidate materials for blocking.¹³⁹

Developing the Parallel Military

Alongside deepened intelligence community penetration and digital regulation by militias, the *muqawama* factions have also taken steps since October 2022 to bolster their key security powerbase, the PMF.¹⁴⁰ Since the January 2020 death of Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the role of acting operational commander of the PMF passed to Kata'ib Hezbollah's Abu Fadak, a trustee of Qassem Soleimani and al-Muhandis.^{bm} Abu Fadak fared quite well during the Kadhimi era, with the PMF being off-limits to Kadhimi's security sector reform efforts and with internal chaos weakening Abu Fadak's rivals inside KH.¹⁴¹ He spent much of 2021 and 2022 undermining potential future rivals for control of the PMF—the so-called “shrine militias”

answering to the senior Shi'a cleric Ali al-Sistani^{bn}—and trying (with limited success) to achieve greater personal control of KH-led elements of the PMF influenced by his rival Abu Hussein, such as the Central Security Directorate.^{bo}

Under the Sudani government, with no fear about the future dissolution of the PMF, Abu Fadak appears to be executing the expansion and professionalization plans that al-Muhandis sketched out in his executive orders 237 and 331 (as PMF deputy chairman) in 2019.¹⁴² The greatly expanded three-year national budget passed by the Sudani government in June 2023¹⁴³ included a near doubling of registered PMF fighters (from 122,000 to 238,000); the provision of long-term government benefits to these personnel; expansion of the PMF civil works and industrial base; and unprecedented intelligence-gathering arrangements that are excluded from civilian oversight.^{bp} The PMF, and particularly Abu Fadak's KH cadre in the PMF, have shown off increasingly sophisticated drone systems, including Iranian-provided Mohajer-6 unmanned combat aerial vehicles (as opposed simply to one-way loitering munitions).¹⁴⁴

The first year of the al-Sudani government also saw authorization of a 50-fold increase in the number of PMF officer trainees put through Ministry of Defense academies^{bq} and the graduation of PMF general officers (including U.S.-designated terrorists and human rights abusers)^{br} through Iraqi staff colleges.¹⁴⁵ Based on Militia Spotlight's multiple studies on these developments, the authors assess that PMF senior commanders are being groomed to command higher headquarters of the Iraqi military, including non-PMF army and federal police units, akin to the way officers in Iran's IRGC can control units of the regular Iranian army, navy, and air forces.¹⁴⁶ The use of Iraqi Ministry of Defense training and educational sites is likely a stop-gap measure until the PMF training directorate (intended by al-Muhandis to include six sub-directorates that included a PMF command and staff college and a

bj CMC board member Mahmoud al-Rubaie served as spokesman for the political office of the U.S.-designated terrorist group Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq before his appointment to the CMC board; and Mohammad al-Hamad, a figure close to al-Maliki, is now deputy head of the Iraqi Radio and Television Union, an offshoot of Iran's Islamic Radio and Television Union (IRTVU). See Michael Knights, Hamdi Malik, and Crispin Smith, “Profile: Communications and Media Commission,” Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, May 15, 2023, updated August 10, 2023.

bk In October 2020, the U.S. Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control designated Iran's Islamic Radio and Television Union (IRTVU) and other Iranian entities for obtaining American voter registration data in order to influence U.S. elections and incite unrest. On June 22, 2021, the U.S. Justice Department seized 33 website domains related to IRTVU. The shutdowns included a list of Iraqi websites connected to Iran-backed *muqawama* (resistance) groups and the Iraqi Radio and Television Union, an offshoot of IRTVU. See Hamdi Malik, “Understanding Iran's Vast Media Network in Arab Countries,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 2, 2021.

bl The CMC controls the .iq domain, giving it responsibility over the hosting of media outlets tied to designated terrorist organizations—for instance, al-Etejah Television, affiliated with Kataib Hezbollah, and Kaf, KH's official platform. See Ranw Hassan, “How Militia Digital Media Avoid Domain Seizure and Blocking,” Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 2, 2023.

bm Abu Fadak was known to both Soleimani and al-Muhandis throughout his career with KH and IRGC-QF. KH is discussed in detail in the author's (Knights') CTC Sentinel piece on KH: Michael Knights, “Back into the Shadows? The Future of Kata'ib Hezbollah and Iran's Other Proxies in Iraq,” CTC Sentinel 13:10 (2020).

bn Even as the broader *muqawama* was fighting for its political life, Abu Fadak was plodding along with his gradual strengthening of KH control within the PMF, marginalizing his main personal rival for leadership, Maytham al-Zaidi, the Sistani-supported head of the al-Abbas Combat Division (PMF brigade 26). Hamdi Malik, “Abu Fadak Tries to Split the Shrine Units,” Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, January 11, 2022.

bo The Abu Hussein wing of KH still seems to control the PMF Security Directorate under Abu Zaydan al-Lami, who is linked to Abu Hussein's wing of KH. For background on these wings, see Knights, “Back into the Shadows?”

bp The PMF received a \$305 million capital investment for industrial development (via its new Muhandis General Company, which will be discussed below) and a \$1.2 million intelligence source payment fund not subject to parliamentary audit (the “Secret Expenses for PMF”), a privilege previously extended to just one organization, the Iraqi National Intelligence Service. Amir al-Kaabi and Michael Knights, “Extraordinary Popular Mobilization Force Expansion, by the Numbers,” Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 3, 2023.

bq From eight to 412, likely rising to 824 in 2024. See Amir al-Kaabi and Michael Knights, “Mainstreaming Hashd Commanders (Part 2): Fifty-Fold Increase in Officer Training,” Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 15, 2023.

br On February 11, 2023, the Iraqi Defense University for Higher Military Studies inducted U.S.-designated human rights abusers Laith al-Khazali (a member of the militia Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and brother to its likewise designated leader, Qais al-Khazali) and KH's likewise U.S.-designated Abu Zainab al-Lami. The intake also included Sami Massoudi, Iraq's deputy Hajj and Umrah commissioner and a former aide to Qassem Soleimani. See Michael Knights and Amir al-Kaabi, “Mainstreaming Hashd Commanders (Part 1): Advanced Education for Senior Militiamen,” Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 15, 2023.

junior officer academy) can be developed.¹⁴⁷ An investigative report by Iraq Oil Report quoted one officer cadet describing the 2023 officer training as “the fruit that Hajj Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and Qasem Soleimani ... put in so much effort to achieve.”¹⁴⁸ The overall objective of the *muqawama* is clearly to develop the PMF into a clone of the IRGC: a parallel military with greater political support than the conventional armed services, and (as the section below details) with its own economic conglomerates.

Part Five. Sharing the Spoils: Militia Control of a Top-Five Oil Exporter

Muqawama control of Iraq’s government—now without even a notional sharing of the spoils with Moqtada al-Sadr—puts the Iraqi militias into a league of their own as *the* economic powerhouse of Iran’s partner forces. Iran’s longest-serving proxy, Lebanese Hezbollah, and Iran’s newer Yemeni partner, the Houthi movement,¹⁴⁹ are economic minnows compared to the Iraqi state. The Shi’a Coordination Framework-led government’s first budget is the largest in Iraq’s history: \$152 billion in annual spending for three consecutive years, a roughly 50 percent increase from the last authorized Iraqi budget from 2021.¹⁵⁰ In contrast, a bankrupt Lebanon’s expected spending was under \$2 billion in 2022,¹⁵¹ and the country went \$72 billion further into debt due to massive financial losses since 2021.¹⁵² The Houthi enclave in Yemen also has a measly budget of around \$2 billion per year.¹⁵³

Controlling the PM’s Office and “Special Grades”

Muqawama control of the Iraqi prime minister’s office, *and* the parliament that sets budgets, *and* the judiciary that can be used to block spending, means that the Tehran-backed armed factions now have all the keys to the system and can accelerate their asset-stripping of the Iraqi state. In Iraq, control of ministries means control of jobs and contracts, and this control increasingly has less to do with openly appointing a minister^{bs} and more to do with what share of “special grades” (director-generals, deputy director-generals, and general managers) in the ministry goes to one’s faction.¹⁵⁴ No *muqawama* faction “owns” a whole ministry, top to bottom, and instead they spend an inordinate amount of time and energy competing over, blocking, negotiating, and eventually sharing economic opportunities generated through ministry spending.¹⁵⁵ The appointment of “special grades” is an issue where the Shi’a Coordination Framework and al-Sudani’s prime minister’s office argued for a while before—as with control of INIS—al-Sudani gave way and let the factions begin a feeding frenzy of controlling and replacing mid-level ministry officials,¹⁵⁶ *bt*

bs In one exception, AAH openly took the Minister of Higher Education position through its member Naim al-Aboudi, resulting in grave complications in U.S. government relations with the ministry. “The U.S. tells Iraq it won’t work with some Iraqi officials, Asa’ib Ahl Al-Haq responds.”

bt A blanket special grades review by the Sudani government, announced in November 2022, was an ingenious way to ensure all special grades would either have to align with a sponsoring faction or fail to pass the review. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees. See also Patricia Karam, “Sudani’s Premiership Is Failing in the Iraqi Fight Against Corruption,” Arab Center, July 12, 2023.

replacing militia bodyguards to watch them,^{bu} and even engaging female officials in protective marriages to militiamen.^{bv}

The process of horse-trading for “special grades” is arranged at the Prime Minister’s Office, with the Shi’a Coordination Framework factions sending representatives to deal with the “neutral” broker, Abdal-Karim al-Sudani, another relative of Prime Minister al-Sudani and his security advisor and personal office manager.¹⁵⁷ To give an example, Abdal-Karim al-Sudani receives nominations and guidance regarding the hiring and firing of “special grades” allocated to U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organization AAH in government formation or subsequent deals, and these nominations are delivered by U.S.-designated human rights abuser Laith al-Khazali (a senior AAH member and brother to its likewise designated terrorist leader, Qais al-Khazali).^{bw}

Overall, the large 1,200-strong Prime Minister’s Office (a formal entity, hence capitalized) is seeded with political appointees from the Shi’a Coordination Framework, many of whom were still in place after three years of attempted house-cleaning by Kadhim. To give one high-profile example of a new appointee, al-Sudani’s head of communications is a young *muqawama* propagandist called Rabea Nader,¹⁵⁸ who is the former head of news and current affairs at AAH’s al-Ahd TV¹⁵⁹ and a former employee of KH’s al-Etejah TV.¹⁶⁰ Nader’s appointment received strong endorsement from *muqawama* platforms, particularly KH’s Hadaf Center for Strategic Studies,¹⁶¹ which referred to Nader as the “a son of the great mentor ... al-Shayeb [an epithet referring to al-Muhandis]”¹⁶² (Of note, Nader was one of four al-Sudani team members denied visas to the United States to attend the U.N. General Assembly in New York in October 2023.)¹⁶³

Muqawama Milking of the Oil Industry

To gain a better understanding of how exactly the *muqawama* factions are monetizing state capture, one can look at Iraq’s Ministry of Oil (MoO), which is responsible for earning and collecting 85 percent of the government’s budget, and 42 percent of gross domestic product (GDP).¹⁶⁴ Though Nouri al-Maliki was assigned first-among-equal status in the MoO^{bx} within the *muqawama* carve-up of ministries, even the wily former premier

bu In the experience of Militia Spotlight’s team, which goes back 20 years in some cases of continual work on Iraq, Iran has frequently used the provision of bodyguards as a kind of protection racket—accept them into your household and be safe, but lose privacy and control—and it seems to have passed on this method to its partner militias. This is Militia Spotlight’s assessment based on all the available evidence and the authors’ analytic processes.

bv One high-ranking female minister became a second wife to an AAH militia leader for the purposes of protection. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

bw Both Qais and Laith al-Khazali belong to the U.S. designated foreign terrorist organization AAH, and each is also individually designated as sanctioned individuals. For Qais, see “Designation of Qays al-Khazali as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist,” U.S. Department of State, January 10, 2020. For Laith, see “Treasury Sanctions Iran-Backed Militia Leaders Who Killed Innocent Demonstrators in Iraq,” U.S. Department of the Treasury, December 6, 2019.

bx In Iraq, cabinet roles are split up in government formation through a kind of points system that is derived from how many seats in parliament each bloc has, with each ministry costing a certain number of points to control the minister. In the October 2022 government formation, al-Maliki seems to have got the Ministry of Oil. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2022-2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

has struggled to achieve pre-notification or veto power over ministry-related actions and personnel changes initiated by other Shi'a Coordination Framework players (i.e., AAH, Badr). As an MoO employee explained to one of the authors (Knights): "Iraqi technocrats would like to be independent and get on with their jobs but that requires a boss who protects them. It wasn't perfect under Kadhimi and the former minister [Ihsan Ismail], but it was much better and sometimes officials could appeal to them for protection. Now that's all gone. The boss cannot protect them, so they seek a patron, to make their own top cover. The lesson we have all learned under al-Sudani is that you need a militia protector—all the way from minister to director-generals, commission managers, and department heads."¹⁶⁵ Another 2023 interviewee from MoO noted: "They look at every [director-general] and put them on probation. If they have a militia, they leave them alone, but if they don't, they remove them."¹⁶⁶

This is not a new system but the scale is new, including a top-to-bottom review of all director-generals from October 2022 onward as a means of forcing technocrats to align with militias, most of all the dominant *muqawama* factions.¹⁶⁷ Many MoO officials who previously looked to, for instance, cleric Ammar al-Hakim's faction for political protection have now migrated toward more muscular militias such as Badr and, most frequently, AAH.¹⁶⁸ Thus, the head of Iraq's Petroleum Contracting and Licensing Directorate switched after October 2022 from Badr protection to AAH, sensing Qais al-Khazali's growing power.^{by} The most powerful individual in the MoO now is not the minister—a conflict-avoiding technocrat called Hayan Abdal-Ghani—but rather Bassim Khudair, an ambitious deputy minister whose power has been supercharged by support from Qais al-Khazali, Hadi al-Ameri, and the Iranian embassy in Baghdad.¹⁶⁹

In a recent show of power, a highly qualified MoO technocrat was removed from his position for being "too pro-Western" and for criticizing Chinese and Russian oil reservoir management practices.¹⁷⁰ Iran is now targeting Iraq as a major market for Iranian energy sector services and equipment, both of which are under-utilized in Iran due to U.S. sanctions, and directors are feeling increasing pressure to favor Iranian, Russian, and Chinese partnerships.^{bz} Foreign nations are learning that the way to win business in Iraq is to work with *muqawama* partners.^{ca}

Oil smuggling is a huge potential money-maker, and it is in the shared interest of all the Tehran-backed militias to ensure that malleable officials lead the State Oil Marketing Organization (SOMO) and the Basra Oil Company (BOC), which jointly oversee the export of around 3.4 million barrels per day of oil production, or three percent of global production).¹⁷¹ Under Kadhimi, efforts were made by enterprising SOMO and BOC officials, with cover

by The man did not change, but his allegiance did. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

bz The Iranian embassy in Baghdad is increasingly directly involved in guiding contract awards, in one case even subverting the result of a closed bid for oilfield services. Author (Knights) interview, Iraqi oil sector contacts, 2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

ca Different *muqawama* players seem to have different "territories" and serve as the point of entry for different vendor nations. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

from their minister and prime minister, to track and report illicit oil cargoes and ship-to-ship transfers moving in Basra and in Iraqi waters.¹⁷² This tracking and reporting is much less active now,^{cb} spurring fears^{cc} that illicit smuggling of Iraqi oil—often mixed with sanction-busting Iranian crude^{173 cd}—will increase to the endemic levels last seen in the mid-2000s.¹⁷⁴ Indeed, within the first year of al-Sudani's term, the *muqawama* factions fought a sharp bureaucratic war over control of the Oil Products Distribution Company, a lucrative portfolio due to its potential abuse as a means of making oil volumes disappear within Iraq.^{ce}

In particular, the *muqawama*'s growing post-October 2022 control of investment licenses (issued via provincial and ministry-level investment commissions^{cf}) also grants a new unchecked capacity to divert subsidized straight-run fuel oil and heavy fuel oil to investment projects that do not exist (say, an asphalt plant or a brick factory), whereupon militias can sell the oil locally or export it.¹⁷⁵ Oil traders are beginning to shun Iraqi exports of fuel oils because of worsening oversight of, and a post-October 2022 influx of militia-linked companies into, the Iraqi export system in Basra.¹⁷⁶ Concern is focused on the illegal smuggling of stolen or fraudulently obtained Straight-Run Fuel Oil and Heavy Fuel Oil exported by *muqawama*-linked traders, and the related risk of co-mingled Iranian oil being added to such flows and presented to international buyers as Iraqi oil, thus disguising the smuggling of U.S.-sanctioned Iranian oil.¹⁷⁷

Terrorist Threat Financing via Investment Licenses

With relevance far beyond the oil sector, investment licensing is a prize that the *muqawama* were briefly denied during the Kadhimi era.^{cg} This resulted in severe tensions between the Kadhimi team

cb In terms of officials at all levels of the ministry reporting in less detail, querying fewer cases, and thus detecting less oil smuggling in and through Iraqi waters. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi, international diplomatic, and oil sector contacts, 2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

cc There is rising interest in 2023 in ensuring, through investigations, the composition and origin of oil apparently exported by Iraq, a reaction to increased concern about co-mixing of Iranian liquids and stolen Iraqi liquids into apparently licit flows. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi, international diplomatic, and oil sector contacts, 2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

cd Key concern focuses on militia and Iranian-smuggled Heavy Fuel Oil and Straight-Run Fuel Oil that may have been fraudulently obtained from Iraqi fields or refineries, or pre-loaded on Iraqi tankers at Iranian ports.

ce Al-Maliki struggled to control the appointment of a new deputy minister in charge of potentially lucrative distribution rackets, falling prey to rival efforts by Qais al-Khazali and Hadi al-Ameri. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi, international diplomatic, and oil sector contacts, 2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

cf An early action of the al-Sudani government was to remove authorities from the National Investment Commission, which had successfully blocked some corruption activities under the Kadhimi government. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2022-2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

cg This was achieved by technocrats who, with some prime ministerial backing, were able to freeze the granting of new investment licenses that appeared fraudulent in design. To give a metric: 45 major investment licenses were granted in nine months under the *muqawama*-controlled Adel Abdal-Mahdi government in 14 months, versus five licenses granted by the Kadhimi team in 26 months. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2021-2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

and the *muqawama* players.¹⁷⁸ In one case, Badr's Hadi al-Ameri and Kata'ib Hezbollah's Abu Fadak¹⁷⁹ tried multiple times to gain a license for a two million donum (494,000 acre) dairy and chicken farm in Samawa.¹⁸⁰ To give a sense of why this project was fraudulent, it was a project 55 times larger than the largest dairy farm in Iraq, yet supported by almost no planning documents.¹⁸¹ This led the government to conclude that it was an effort to gain access to free land, duty-free exemption to import almost unlimited quantities of goods from Iran,¹⁸² and rubber-stamped visas to import low-cost foreign labor.¹⁸³ When the license was refused, the investment official in charge was told by a Badr intermediary "you'll leave [this job] on your back" (i.e., dead or injured).¹⁸⁴ Similar land grabs were attempted with regard to extremely valuable Baghdad Airport or west Baghdad land parcels;¹⁸⁵ with large blocks of units in the new city of Besmaya;¹⁸⁶ and in agricultural projects in the fertile middle Euphrates.¹⁸⁷ When the National Investment Council (NIC) head was offered to stay on under the Sudani government, they were told "you can stay, but your previous strategies will not work under this government. The [prime minister] cannot protect you."¹⁸⁸

The ultimate expression of the *muqawama*'s economic ambition is the repeated efforts that the militias have made to duplicate the model of IRGC's Khatam al-Anbiya conglomerate. (This was the most successful state-owned company in Iran since 1990, receiving over \$50 billion worth of contracts for the Revolutionary Guard since its formation in 1991 and sanctioned by the United States, the United Nations, and the European Union as a commercial extension of the IRGC.¹⁸⁹) In each of the last two elections in Iraq, the front-running candidates for prime minister were asked by IRGC-QF and the *muqawama* whether they would support the creation of an Iraqi equivalent of Khatam al-Anbiya, and in both 2018 and 2022, the premiership went to the candidates who said yes.¹⁹⁰ Though Adel Abdal-Mahdi was prevented from making good on this promise by strong warnings from the Trump administration

against forming the company, in November 2022 al-Sudani announced the formation of "the Muhandis General Company for Construction, Engineering, and Mechanical, Agricultural, and Industrial Contracting" (or the Muhandis General Company, MGC, hereafter).¹⁹¹

Named after the late U.S.-designated terrorist Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis,^{cm} the company is a unique commercial entity of a kind never before seen in Iraq. As shown in its articles of incorporation,¹⁹² the company is officially owned by the PMF. As its unwieldy full name implies, MGC can work in any sector. Uniquely for an Iraqi state company, MGC does not need cabinet or parliamentary approval to receive free land, state capital, or state-owned enterprises, or to undertake construction and demolition. In December 2022, the MGC received 1.2 million acres of government land along the Iraqi-Saudi border at no cost—an area half the size of Lebanon, and similar to prior mega-land grants pursued by *muqawama* actors such as Badr and KH.¹⁹³ Even before MGC was formed, a PMF force had preemptively seized and cordoned off the Muthanna land parcel.^{cn} The stretch of Muthanna province seized happens to be strategically located in an area where Iraqi militias have fired drones into Saudi Arabia and the UAE on multiple occasions since 2019.^{co}

Although the Sudani government has reacted to international alarm about the Muhandis General Company by trying to bury the story and slowing its growth,^{cp} the history of the *muqawama*'s economic efforts in Iraq suggests that it will keep trying to make an Iraqi Khatam al-Anbiya, which it views as the spoils of war owed to the PMF, much like the IRGC saw Khatam al-Anbiya as its reward for fighting the Iran-Iraq War.¹⁹⁴ The Muhandis General Company is itself not the first name used in Iraq since 2018 to pursue this dream: Once it was called the Motassim project, then the Al-Rashid,¹⁹⁵ and it may change names again, hoping to avoid notice with a lower-profile approach or by being split into multiple companies.¹⁹⁶ In the assessment of Militia Spotlight, a version of the Muhandis General Company is likely to recur because the idea has not been rejected by top Iraqi leaders. One al-Sudani government official quite candidly told one of the authors (Knights): "The idea is to keep them [the *muqawama*] busy so they do not attack anyone."¹⁹⁷

ch The largest such farm ever operated in Iraq was 36,000 donums in size.

ci For instance, the Badr/KH dairy and chicken farm project intended to import 500,000 tons of Iranian steel, duty-free, which is enough to build five Gerald R. Ford-class aircraft carriers, the largest warships in the world. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2021-2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

cj Without evidence of project financing or designs, Badr, AAH, and other Shi'a Coordination Framework parties all sought 1,000 donum parcels on land adjacent to Baghdad Airport, each one equivalent in size to the New York Financial District or the City of London. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2021-2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

ck Abu Fadak's business front, Haider al-Yaqubi, demanded for KH 5,000 housing "starter home" units intended for Iraqi married couples. Eventually, pressure results in a smaller number of units being allocated, many of which were then used by KH-related criminals as bordellos for foreign prostitutes brought into Iraq, using the employment visas associated with investment licenses. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2021-2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

cl These projects could be very competitive: AAH disrupted plans for a cultural heritage village in the Iraqi marshes of Diwaniyah in order to keep hold of rich fishing areas it had illegally seized. In Wasit, Badr leader Hadi al-Ameri and Kataib Al-Imam Ali (PMF brigade 40) leader Shibl al-Zaidi fought a bitter influence battle over developing a large dairy farm the area, while Shibl prevailing due to Lebanese Hezbollah support. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2021-2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

cm Though al-Muhandis means engineer in Arabic, the company is clearly named after Muhandis the man because the word engineering is repeated in its full name: the Muhandis General Company for Construction, Engineering, and Mechanical, Agricultural, and Industrial Contracting.

cn The Prosperity Palace, the prime west Baghdad real estate seized on behalf of the Muhandis General Company on April 24, 2023, is equivalent to a chunk of historic downtown Baghdad the size of 20 New York City blocks, the entire grounds of Buckingham Palace, or the U.S. Capitol.

co The May 2019 drone attacks on the Saudi east-west pipeline and the September 2019 drones on Abqaiq oil processing center were launched from Muthanna. This was also where the drone attacks were launched on Riyadh on January 23, 2021, and Abu Dhabi on February 2, 2022. Crispin Smith, Hamdi Malik, and Michael Knights, "Profile: Alwiyat al-Waad al-Haq," Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 1, 2021. See Isabel Coles and Dion Nissenbaum, "Saudi Pipeline Attacks Originated From Iraq," *Wall Street Journal*, June 28, 2019.

cp An al-Sudani government official told one author (Knights) that land would now be allocated to different entities in order to make it appear the project of a Khatam al-Anbiya-style, PMF-owned conglomerate was dead. Author (Knights) interview, Sudani government interviewee, 2023; exact date, name, and place withheld at request of the interviewee.

Part Six. Defined by Resistance: The Future of Anti-U.S. and Anti-Israel Operations

An influential model introduced by Chatham House in February 2021 suggested that Iraqi militias can be categorized as “parochial”¹⁹⁸ (militias focused primarily on political and economic activities such as Badr and AAH) or “vanguard”¹⁹⁹ (militias focused primarily on resistance activities, such as KH, Nujaba, and KSS). As Militia Spotlight noted as long ago as the October 2021 *CTC Sentinel* article, those distinctions are much less apparent when Tehran-backed militias are investigated in detail.²⁰⁰ Most of the so-called “vanguard” are highly active in the “parochial” business of state capture and asset-stripping, including all the different wings of KH.²⁰¹ Conversely, there are almost no purely “parochial” militias within the Shi’a Coordination Framework: As the authors noted in their October 2021 *CTC Sentinel* piece, AAH and even Badr sometimes act more as “drivers of rhetorical and kinetic escalation due to their domestic political and factional needs” as self-styled *muqawama* players.²⁰²

Since the return of anti-U.S. militancy in Iraq between 2017^{ca} and 2019,²⁰³ the “vanguard” forces in Iraq have been exceptionally compact, for operational security and because only a handful of small cells need to be ready at any moment to strike out at U.S. bases, Gulf States, or other shared enemies of the Iraqi *muqawama* and Iran.

In Militia Spotlight’s assessment, KH, AAH, Nujaba, and KSS all continue to undertake kinetic violence until the time of publication.²⁰⁴ Akram al-Kaabi may have been boosted as the most visible spokesman of the kinetic resistance factions since December 2021,²⁰⁵ but Militia Spotlight considers a substantive Kaabi leadership role to be very unlikely based on an accumulation of evidence that groups such as KH, AAH, or KSS would not place their kinetic attack cells under the control of an outsider and a rival, even if pressured to do so by IRGC-QF.²⁰⁶ It is much more likely that Kaabi, Nujaba, and Nujaba-linked media and brands (such as Ashab al-Kahf) are simply the most vocal and visible elements of the kinetic arm of the *muqawama*.²⁰⁷ Kaabi directly controls some very active kinetic cells, as does Laith al-Khazali and senior AAH fighters, and likewise Abu Hussein of KH and Abu Alaa al-Wala’i of KSS. None of these players are entirely “parochial.”²⁰⁸

The post-October 7 Gaza crisis provides some interesting new data on the issue of militant “vanguard” activities by all the *muqawama* factions, including Badr²⁰⁹ and AAH.²¹⁰ An early analytic ‘cut’ of the greatly intensified kinetic attacks undertaken against U.S. sites in Iraq and Syria during the 2023 Gaza crisis provides further evidence of orchestration and cohesiveness. From October 7-17, the *muqawama* postured and prepared, but did not strike U.S. bases until October 17-18, 2023,²¹¹ the tempestuous night of the Al-Ahli Hospital explosion in Gaza. Militia Spotlight’s daily monitoring of the anti-U.S. attacks thereafter has picked out the following trends in the kinetic behavior of the *muqawama* factions:

- **Badr:** The Gaza crisis has even seen the most genuinely parochial militia, Badr, openly call for attacks on U.S. bases and U.S. persons if the United States actively participates

in the conflict.²¹²

- **AAH:** Qais al-Khazali has been very cautious to appear as the least kinetically focused *muqawama* leader, but also one with enough apparent independence to impudently preempt major speeches by Iran’s Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei or by Lebanese Hezbollah’s Hassan Nasrallah.²¹³ AAH’s military wing under Laith al-Khazali tends to operate wherever it wishes, working across the agreed boundaries, albeit with greater reticence to openly claim kinetic attacks, especially against diplomatic targets in its traditional area of operations in Baghdad.^{cr} During the Gaza crisis in the fall of 2023, Qais al-Khazali and AAH have been openly mocked by other *muqawama* militants for not pulling their weight in anti-U.S. attacks.²¹⁴
- **Nujaba and KSS:** In contrast, Nujaba’s Akram al-Kaabi and KSS’ Abu Alaa al-Wala’i have shown great deference toward Iran and Hezbollah, and also with open commitment to kinetic operations: Indeed, both men made well-publicized visits to Lebanon after October 7, 2023, and Kaabi followed a Khamenei speech on November 1, 2023, with an open call to “liberate Iraq militarily” from the U.S. presence.²¹⁵ Nujaba probably undertook one of the two attacks on the first night of intensified Gaza-related anti-U.S. strikes—the October 18 drone attack on the U.S. site at Harir, Iraq.²¹⁶ KSS was added by the United States to the Specially Designated National list on November 17, 2023, because it “has planned and been involved in attacks against U.S. personnel in Iraq and Syria.”²¹⁷
- **KH:** The most interesting full-spectrum response has come from KH, which led its post-October 7 reaction with a rare public statement by KH Special Operations head Abu Hussein,²¹⁸ but which also saw their Hoquq parliamentary bloc call for legislative efforts to remove U.S. forces,²¹⁹ all while Abu Fadak placed the PMF on a wartime footing in case of an attack on Iraq by Israel, a stance that was then mirrored by the Sudani government and the non-PMF regular military.²²⁰ KH is perhaps the only *muqawama* actor to balance being a key kinetic actor—striking the first blow (at the U.S. site at Al-Asad)²²¹ of the Gaza-related attack series—with a role in political warfare and exploitation of the crisis for state capture purposes, by strengthening the PMF’s leadership of the security sector.²²²

Though the various *muqawama* factions have jockeyed and tried in small ways to outshine each other, the strong overall impression since the Gaza crisis began is one of strenuous exertion to maintain cohesion and unity.²²³ This is probably a deliberate effort, led by IRGC-QF.²²⁴ The post-October 17 strikes on U.S. bases in Iraq and Syria (numbering 117 at the time of writing on December 19) have mostly been claimed under a single new “purpose-made”

cr On October 19, 2023, an unknown actor is assessed to have fired a warning rocket (one of 15 in the cube of launch-tubes) at the U.S. annex in Baghdad airport on October 19, 2023, with no subsequent claim for the attack. See Knights, al-Kaabi, and Malik, “Tracking Anti-U.S. Strikes in Iraq and Syria During the Gaza Crisis.” AAH has historically been connected to many attacks in Baghdad, including U.S. diplomatic and airport sites. This assessment is the result of a synthesized intelligence process, drawing together weapons intelligence, historic attack patterns prior to October 18, 2023, militia ground-holding locations, social media intelligence, and claims.

cq The first post-2011 anti-U.S. ‘resistance’ attack was probably the October 1, 2017, roadside bombing that killed U.S. soldier Alexander Missildine. See Knights and Malik, “Ashab al-Kahf Claims Six-Year-Old Unsolved Murder of U.S. Soldier.”

online brand (i.e., a Telegram channel) that emerged on October 18 called the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, or IRI (Al-Muqawama al-Islamiyah fi al-Iraq), linked to an IRGC-QF-chaired Al-Aqsa Flood Coordination Room in Baghdad, and intended to demonstrate intra-*muqawama* solidarity.²²⁵ The first time that Nujaba is assessed to have used the IRI brand, it also (erroneously it seems) co-claimed using the Tashkil al-Waritheen brand²²⁶ (which was previously used for Nujaba-linked attacks on U.S. bases in Kuwait and Syria²²⁷). Mostly, however, the use of the generic IRI “press release” for attacks has been impressively uniform, with practically no competing claims and a close correlation between claimed and proven attacks.^{cs} In Militia Spotlight’s view, this is a strong indicator of both a “guiding hand” (i.e., IRGC-QF, which typically is involved in coordinated actions)²²⁸ and a high degree of intra-*muqawama* cohesion²²⁹—almost the opposite of the discord that was documented in the authors’ October 2021 *CTC Sentinel* article.^{ct}

The anti-U.S. strikes since October 18, 2023, suggest an unchanged geographic division of labor when it comes to threatening U.S. forces since the October 2021 *CTC Sentinel* piece, a trend that has been sustained under the time of writing. In the October 2021 study, Militia Spotlight described the system of military committees in detail,²³⁰ and based on the authors’ information collection, the system remains active and largely unchanged.²³¹ This means a leadership committee (now likely renamed the Al-Aqsa Flood Operations Room) chaired by Kata’ib Hezbollah, advised by an IRGC-QF “connection officer,” and attended by KH, Nujaba, KSS, AAH, and Badr.²³² In terms of geographic areas of responsibility, KH seems to strike the U.S. sites at Al-Asad and Tanf, south of the Euphrates,^{cu} while Nujaba and KSS cover the U.S. targets north of that river, within Iraq and Syria.^{cv} As in 2021, AAH may not be fully integrated into such deconfliction measures²³³ and may have

“The turnaround of *muqawama* fortunes in 2022 was not delivered via the barrel of a gun but rather by a series of cool-headed and coordinated moves by Qaani, Judge Faiq Zaydan, Hadi al-Ameri, Nouri al-Maliki, and Qais al-Khazali.”

been involved in strikes in October-December 2023 that occurred outside of the Islamic Resistance in Iraq claim mechanism.^{cw}

A final and possibly controversial observation regarding *muqawama* strikes on U.S. sites during the Gaza crisis (at least until the time of writing on December 19) has been an apparent “casualty-limiting” intent witnessed across most strikes, whereby the intent usually appears performative but is mostly not optimized to cause U.S. fatalities (and thus trigger significant U.S. retaliation).²³⁴ Casualty-maximizing tactics—such as the ‘swarming’ of drones to overwhelm base air defenses—have been rarely (or arguably not at all)^{cx} observed since October 17, 2023.^{cy} Targeting has often been focused on emptier parts of bases or indeed on evacuated sites.^{cz} Rockets have achieved uncommonly low numbers of hits within base complexes.^{da} There have also been unusual indications of the

cs Depending on counting rules, the ‘Islamic Resistance in Iraq’ has probably claimed between 66 percent and 84 percent of proven strikes against or near U.S. bases in Iraq and Syria between October 18 and November 15, 2023. In the first 58 strikes claimed by the ‘Islamic Resistance in Iraq,’ Militia Spotlight assesses 54 to have been genuine claims of an attack at the location mentioned, often with relatively accurate data on the weapons used. Indeed, KH even boasted of the manner in which its attack claims were confirmed one-for-one by U.S. government admissions. See Ameer al-Kaabi and Michael Knights, “Kataib Hezbollah Publicly Mocks Asaib Ahl al-Haq for Cowardice,” Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, November 30, 2023. This kind of coordinated, authoritative, unchallenged claim mechanism seems, in Militia Spotlight’s assessment, to be good evidence of an external guiding authority (i.e., IRGC-QF). The Washington Institute tracker lists these claims. See Knights, al-Kaabi, and Malik, “Tracking Anti-U.S. Strikes in Iraq and Syria During the Gaza Crisis.”

ct It may be that less cooperative actors, like Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq, still undertake outlier actions that may be less fully coordinated than KH, Nujaba, and KSS. This is Militia Spotlight’s assessment based on all the available evidence and the authors’ analytic processes.

cu KH seems to operate largely out of the Euphrates River Valley in Anbar and Syria, using western Iraq as needed. This assessment is the result of a synthesized intelligence process, drawing together weapons intelligence, historic attack patterns prior to October 18, 2023, militia ground-holding locations, social media intelligence, and claims.

cv Nujaba and KSS operate from the Euphrates Valley in Syria, from Sinjar in Iraq, and from northern Iraq, leading operations in Iraqi Kurdistan and the so-called Eastern Syria Security Area, north of the Euphrates. This assessment is the result of a synthesized intelligence process, drawing together weapons intelligence, historic attack patterns prior to October 18, 2023, militia ground-holding locations, social media intelligence, and claims.

cw Two attacks since October 19, 2023, were not claimed by the Islamic Resistance of Iraq, and both were in AAH’s historic operating area of Baghdad: the October 19 single-rocket attack on a U.S. site at Baghdad airport and the December 8 rocket-propelled grenade attack on the U.S. Embassy. In Militia Spotlight’s assessment, these events, both of which displayed cosmetic similarities to previous AAH attacks in Baghdad, deserve closer scrutiny by counterterrorism analysts. Knights, al-Kaabi, and Malik, “Tracking Anti-U.S. Strikes in Iraq and Syria During the Gaza Crisis.”

cx Due to the sensitivity of technical details regarding drone and anti-drone warfare, it is hard to find evidence of any significant drone swarm since October 17-18, 2023, in Iraq or Syria. Anecdotal reporting, often in veiled terms, suggests once or twice there have been small salvos of two to three drones arriving on target at the same time, but this is still very restrained enemy activity. This is Militia Spotlight’s assessment based on all the available evidence and the authors’ analytic processes.

cy There have been no drone salvos greater than three, and most have been single or double strikes. See Knights, al-Kaabi, and Malik, “Tracking Anti-U.S. Strikes in Iraq and Syria During the Gaza Crisis.”

cz In the authors’ view, drones have aided casualty-limiting measures, such as the selection of uninhabited aim-points. This assessment is the result of a synthesized intelligence process, drawing together weapons intelligence, historic attack patterns prior to October 18, 2023, militia ground-holding locations, social media intelligence, and claims.

da In the authors’ view, rocket salvos have often been aimed-off, with an improbably low number of rockets landing on bases (compared to typical 107mm and 122mm salvos). This assessment is the result of a synthesized intelligence process, drawing together weapons intelligence, historic attack patterns prior to October 18, 2023, militia ground-holding locations, social media intelligence, and claims.

repeated non-detonation of drone warheads.^{db} In Militia Spotlight's view, this is another strong indicator that the IRGC-QF have achieved enough control over tactical and technical choices that they once again have a more effective "safety catch" on the escalatory risks posed by Tehran-controlled militias in Iraq and Syria.²³⁵ This appears to have been especially common across attack cells.²³⁶ In the Nujaba or KSS areas, there is more of a question-mark, and it is notable that most U.S. retaliatory strikes have followed large rocket salvos on U.S. bases assessed to be within the Nujaba and KSS areas of operation, suggesting greater risk acceptance by these groups to undertake less predictable attacks using unguided weapons.^{dc}

Analytic Conclusions and Lessons

The Militia Spotlight team's prior October 2021 analysis in CTC Sentinel described a loss of cohesion within the *muqawama* and between its factions and the new IRGC-QF commander Esmail Qaani during his first year in the job. At the point of writing that article, the *muqawama* had almost hit rock bottom, which occurred when their electoral defeat became clear. This near-death experience for the so-called post-2003 "Shi`a project"^{dd} of Iran and the *muqawama* factions seems to have fostered realism and unified the various players against common enemies: Moqtada al-Sadr, the Barzani family leadership of the Kurdistan Region, Mohammed al-Halbousi's leadership of the Sunnis, and the former Kadhimi government officials. The turnaround of *muqawama* fortunes in 2022 was not delivered via the barrel of a gun but rather by a series of cool-headed and coordinated moves by Qaani, Judge Faiq Zaydan, Hadi al-Ameri, Nouri al-Maliki, and Qais al-Khazali.

While al-Khazali is dynamic and remarkably confident, the experienced heads like Hadi al-Ameri have also proven their value within an IRGC-QF-orchestrated effort and should not be overlooked as key players within the *muqawama*. Al-Ameri may be older than al-Khazali by 20 years (al-Ameri is 49 versus al-Khazali's 69), but he has proven to be a wily old fox when it comes to the asset-stripping of the Iraqi state, drawing on a (literal) wealth of

track record in illicit business activities,^{de} most famously the so-called "Heist of the Century" in which Badr officials at Iraq's Tax Authority methodically found ways to successfully empty \$2.5 billion from the state's coffers, even as Kadhimi-era officials tried numerous ways to block their efforts.^{df} As a result, Badr still has a powerful war chest; significant paramilitary capabilities;^{dg} and good relations with Iran. Able to work with anyone—and go toe-to-toe with anyone^{dh}—Hadi al-Ameri has, for example, gained valuable director-general slots in the Ministry of Oil by allying with Qais al-Khazali and Mohammed Shia al-Sudani to outmaneuver al-Maliki in the first half of 2023.²³⁷

Kata'ib Hezbollah is also arguably in a much-improved position from its fractious state when the authors published their last *CTC Sentinel* article in October 2021. This is arguably because the role division within KH has become clearer after firm intervention from the office of Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei:^{di} there is a special operations wing under the strong family network of Abu Hussein, the KH Shura Council secretary general and head of KH-Iraq Special Operations.^{dj} Abu Hussein's wing of KH solidified after a period of post-Muhandis incoherence.^{dk} Abu Hussein's ally, PMF head of security Abu Zainab al-Lami, became a staff college graduate²³⁸ and a leading player in Baghdad real estate corruption.²³⁹ Another Abu Hussein trustee, Hossein Moanes Faraj al-Mohammadawi (also known as Abu Ali al-Askari), is now a prominent parliamentarian, able to live a relatively normal

db In the authors' view, there are some indications that warheads have experienced an improbably high number of non-detonations, suggesting deliberate casualty-limiting. This assessment is the result of a synthesized intelligence process, drawing together weapons intelligence, historic attack patterns prior to October 18, 2023, militia ground-holding locations, social media intelligence, and claims.

dc This is an interesting issue that requires further analysis. Basic correlation of U.S. retaliation and the preceding attacks on U.S. sites that are temporally connected to retaliation show that (from October 27 to December 11, 2023), five of six U.S. retaliatory strikes fell after what Militia Spotlight assesses to be Nujaba or KSS attacks. These cases (October 26 and 30, November 7 and 12, and December 3, 2023) were typically large unguided rocket salvos where the attacker appeared to have taken no effort to minimize or control the risk of U.S. casualties. Only in one of six U.S. retaliatory actions was KH the target, which followed apparent use of Al-Aqsa-1 heavy artillery rockets against the U.S. site at Al-Asad in November 20, 2023. Knights, al-Kaabi, and Malik, "Tracking Anti-U.S. Strikes in Iraq and Syria During the Gaza Crisis."

dd Using the phrase that many Shi`a officials privately use, to describe the idea that the Shi`a will use their demographic majoritarian status to collectively dominate the prime ministership and the government. This assessment is based on multiple decades-worth of the team's collective politics-watching across seven government formations since 2005.

de Hadi al-Ameri was Minister of Transport from 2010-2014, and his protégé in the minister's office, Sadiq al-Saadawi, is now the Minister of Transport under al-Sudani. The Badr network has significant experience in running ministries for their benefit, and milking control of ports, real estate, and projects. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2020-2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

df As noted earlier, *The Guardian* investigation identified Badr officials as the key players in the heist. See Foltayn.

dg Worthy of a separate study, Badr's drone and rocket systems, hidden away in bases such as Camp Ashraf in Diyala, are assessed by Militia Spotlight to be substantial. Of note, Israel struck Camp Ashraf in July 2019 as it tried to interdict the flow of precision weaponry and advanced conventional munitions to Syria and Lebanon via the "land bridge of Iraq." See Michael Knights and Alex Almeida, "Militias Are Threatening Public Safety in Iraq," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, August 14, 2019. Later, Mohajer-6 ground station units were shown at Ashraf in June 2021. See Farzin Nadimi and Michael Knights, "Militias Parade Under the PMF Banner (Part 1): Drone Systems," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, July 3, 2021.

dh To give an example, Hadi al-Ameri likens his key money-men and corrupt officials to his own son Mehdi, and warns other *muqawama* players to stay away from them or he will target their friends. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2020-2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

di Disciplining of KH leaders in late 2021 and Khamenei's letter, delivered in January 2022, appear to have been mechanisms used in this process. See Malik and Knights, "Militia Lionization of Esmail Qaani."

dj On October 10, 2023, Abu Hussein led the *muqawama* response, speaking as KH secretary general and on behalf of the KH special operations wing. His group probably fired the opening salvo as well, against Al-Asad on October 17-18, 2023. Amir al-Kaabi and Michael Knights, "Iran-Backed Militias Applaud Hamas, Threaten Americans," Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 13, 2023.

dk Abu Hussein survived a tough year in 2021 when his leadership was challenged, possibly with IRGC-QF encouragement. See Hamdi Malik, Michael Knights, and Crispin Smith, "Exposing Kataib Hezbollah's Royal Family? Insights from Recent Leaks," Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 9, 2022.

political life, out of the shadows, while still burnishing his resistance credentials using the online Abu Ali al-Askari persona.^{dl} Other KH Shura Council and mid-level officials have been given prestigious and financially rewarding security roles.²⁴⁰

The other main wing of KH—the more favored and predictable PMF wing led by Abu Fadak—seems to have ceased feuding with Abu Hussein’s power base and instead focused on state capture and profiteering. Abu Fadak now has effective control of most of KH’s intelligence and military assets,^{dm} and some of its international money-laundering networks.^{dn} Within Iraq, he has tried, with Hadi al-Ameri’s active assistance, to push the development of numerous PMF-owned economic projects,^{do} most notably the Muhandis General Company, and has further extended his (Abu Fadak’s) trustees into roles of strategic and economic value. Abu Fadak has thus presided over a period of stability, growth, and now professionalization of the PMF, and he now faces no challengers in this role.²⁴¹

Looking Ahead

In the opening year of the al-Sudani government, the “pie” of Iraq’s economy and government jobs was big enough to accommodate all the *muqawama*’s looters, and a three-year package of back-to-back record-spending budgets is intended to keep the factions satisfied.²⁴² Completion *within* the *muqawama* seems muted at the moment: Badr and AAH are playing well, the wings of KH seem content with their role division and respective spoils, and the Nujaba and KSS cells are busy with anti-U.S. attacks. What could change this placid picture?

The December 2023 provincial elections are one potential divider. Demonstrating his trademark optimism, Qais al-Khazali is planning to compete the December 2023 provincial elections separately from Hadi’s Badr and Falah al-Fayyadh in Diyala province, the birthplace and tribal base of both Ameri and al-Fayyadh.²⁴³ This suggests a clear test of relative strength is imminent.²⁴⁴ Both al-Ameri and al-Fayyadh are older generation leaders from the “outside resistance” to Saddam and the new-school of former Sadrists (like Qais and Laith al-Khazali, and Akram al-Kaabi) are gunning for them, as are younger IRGC-QF trustees such as Abu Alaa al-Wala’i, Abu Hussein, and Abu Zainab al-Lami.²⁴⁵ This generational divide may be a future faultline, and the older tribal-backed veterans may prove more durable than expected,

dl Hussien Moanes is nowadays spotted at Baghdad restaurants and adopting more regular patterns of activity. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

dm These include headquarters functions linked to Abu Fadak, such as KH Unit 101, an intelligence body; the three KH brigades of the PMF (45, 46, and 47); and various PMF directorates including missiles and drones. This is Militia Spotlight’s assessment based on all the available evidence and the authors’ analytic processes.

dn Abu Fadak seems to have control of some money exchange houses and dollar smuggling to Iran, working through Sheikh Adnan al-Mohammadawi (Adnan Yousif Jassim, Abu Ammar), a former Shura Council member who runs KH-Iraq’s economic authority. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2022-2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

do Abu Fadak has ambitions to build a military industrial base with Iranian assistance. This is likely to involve the Iraqi Military Industrial Commission, and various engineering, imaging and technology departments at Iraqi universities. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2022-2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

especially as they have a long track record with Iranian leaders. A change of Supreme Leader in Iran, when Khamenei passes, could tip the balance to the new generation.^{246 dp}

For counterterrorism analysts, the effective loss of the Iraqi state to Tehran-backed terrorist groups and militias to an unprecedented degree is pregnant with implications, especially in the fields of counter-terrorism threat financing. In general, the intelligence resources dedicated to counter-threat financing in Iraq should be greatly boosted because of the order-of-magnitude increase in the funds that might increasingly be available to the Axis of Resistance due to the Iran-led bloc’s inheritance of uncontested control of a three-year program of \$456 billion of approved government spending.^{dq}

Any major Iraqi company working in a key industry (such as oil exports) who has received significant contracts since October 2022 should be thoroughly investigated, especially if they previously had no track record in the sector where they have been awarded work by the al-Sudani government. Oil smuggling originating in, or passing through, Basra’s offshore areas requires very close monitoring by the United States, because (as noted earlier) the Iraqi government is no longer effectively keeping watch. The Iraqi Oil Tankers Company, the General Company for Ports in Iraq, and all companies involved in refining, oil transportation, vessel management, and ship-to-ship transfers in Iraqi waters.

Another necessary focus area is the project to build a Khatam al-Anbiya-type conglomerate, perhaps in component pieces initially and with efforts made to better hide its existence. Major company formation (especially when the PMF is involved), investment licenses, and land grants should all be closely watched by the U.S. Treasury, anti-corruption and anti-terrorist watchdogs, and citizen journalists. In particular, great attention should be paid to the development of PMF-owned or militia-owned complexes near Iraq’s borders—facing Saudi Arabia, in western Anbar, or elsewhere probably functioning as large free-trade zones or logistical transshipment sites but ideal for dual-use as advanced conventional munitions storage and launch locations.^{dr}

Engagement of Iraqi government organs should be much more carefully vetted due to extraordinary and accelerating penetration of these agencies by U.S.-designated terrorist organizations, U.S.-designated human rights abusers, and U.S.-designated corrupt actors. The most important is the need to pay more attention to the judiciary. Analysts should focus much more effort on Faiq Zaydan and other senior and mid-level judges, working on a smart assumption that al-Muhandis probably did not plant just one seed in the judiciary (Zaydan) but many. U.S. security assistance to

dp The publication Amwaj made interesting points that al-Ameri and al-Fayyadh only survived attempts to exclude them because of mediation from the Office of the Supreme Leader, who favored inclusivity of these older leaders. “The secret Arab visitors in Iran and the ‘liberation’ of Jerusalem,” Amwaj, November 7, 2023.

dq Calculated by multiplying the three-year package of approved \$152 billion annual budgets.

dr The Imam Ali base in Albu Kamal in Deir ez-Zor, Syria, is a good model for this kind of complex that may be replicated in Iraq. A notional equivalent of the Imam Ali base in Iraq would be expansive, with multiple bermed-off or fenced sub-compounds, possibly also with a rail link and truck-yards. Numerous storage containers would be present, some fully or partially buried. For discussion of Imam Ali base, see Tal Beeri, “The Imam Ali base in AlBukamal – A Central Military Anchor in the Iranian Corridor to Syria and Lebanon,” Alma Research and Education Center, March 23, 2023.

Iraqi security forces must also be reassessed in light of the new and significant *muqawama* penetration of agencies such as INIS, CTC, and Baghdad International Airport.

From a great power competition perspective, Iraq falling under the control of anti-U.S. forces should be an issue of great significant and growing interest. The most vocally anti-U.S. resistance leader in Iraq, Akram Kaabi, is now a welcomed visitor in Moscow since 2022,²⁴⁷ and the relationship between the Iraqi *muqawama* and Russia rapidly bloomed after the *muqawama* wholeheartedly supported the invasion of Ukraine.²⁴⁸ The Russian embassy in Baghdad has continually deepened these ties, particularly since the Gaza crisis began, providing opportunities to exploit Iraqi anger to weaken U.S. “soft power” in Iraqi society.²⁴⁹ The Iraqi *muqawama*’s role in supporting anti-U.S. operations in Syria is an obvious initial point of collaboration, and at least one effective anti-U.S. attack in Syria (at the Rmeilan Landing Zone in March 2023) has contained hints of Russian support for a lethal “offset action” to pay the United

States back for its provision of lethal support to Ukraine.^{ds}

More focused on economic fruits, China has also created deep inroads with the *muqawama* factions, receiving their support for China’s Belt and Road Initiative sub-projects in Iraq,²⁵⁰ for Chinese oil-for-infrastructure loans,²⁵¹ and for preferential—often corrupt—Chinese access to energy contracts.^{dt}

As Iran and its Axis of Resistance tighten their ties to Russia and China, an Iraq dominated by the *muqawama* is in danger of being drawn into this loose anti-Western coalition in the future. **CTC**

ds In the post-strike press conference, Pentagon reporters had correctly ascertained from sources that the strike occurred when base anti-drone defenses were offline for maintenance. See “Pentagon Press Secretary Brig. Gen. Pat Ryder Holds an On-Camera Press Briefing,” U.S. Department of Defense, March 24, 2023.

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