

On the Murder of Husham al-Hashemi

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Jul 7, 2020

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Michael Knights is the Jill and Jay Bernstein Fellow of The Washington Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of Iraq, Iran, and the Persian Gulf states. He is a co-founder of the Militia Spotlight platform, which offers in-depth analysis of developments related to the Iranian-backed militias in Iraq and Syria.



Brief Analysis

On July 6, 2020, Iraq's most prolific security commentator Husham al-Hashemi was assassinated in Zayouna, a social melting pot neighborhood of east Baghdad. **At 8:19 pm (//3)**, he arrived outside his home, driving his own unarmored white SUV. Seconds before, two motorbikes pulled up, each carrying two young men. They knew that he was coming and they knew where he would park his car.

Before he had even driven into his space, the shooter was on him, peppering the driver-side window with bullets, coming close to finish the job with multiple pistol shots through the shattered glass. The shooter stowed his pistol in the seat storage of the bike and got on behind the waiting driver, and seconds later the second bike, maybe filming the scene or maybe a back-up security team, also drove away. His three boys watched him dragged, bloodied and nearly dead, from the car. He died in a hospital shortly after.

Husham left behind a wife and four young children, along with many friends across the political spectrum and across the world. I had known him for about six years. Husham was a bit of an enigma at first: an Iraqi security analyst with contacts, a strong work ethic and good analytical instincts—a potent combination and a very rare one.

A former inmate of [Camp Bucca \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/al-hawl-camp-a-potential-incubator-of-the-next-generation-of-extremism\)](#), a U.S. detention center in Iraq, Husham had seen a little of the Iraqi Salafist insurgency from the inside, though it was never clear how deep his involvement was. He studied the Islamic State in Iraq and his analysis was sought after by think-tanks and grant-funded research projects because he brought an Iraqi voice to a subject that was, and still is, dominated by non-Iraqi researchers.

One of the most intriguing aspects of his work was his interactions with the [Popular Mobilization Forces \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/the-challenge-of-sovereignty-the-pmf-and-iranian-entrenchment-in-iraq\)](#) (PMF, or Hashd al-Sha'abi in Arabic). After the fall of Mosul, he was proud of the PMF and viewed them as part of the loosely coordinated Iraqi and international effort aimed at defeating the Islamic State. He was granted interviews with senior PMF leaders, including the U.S.-designated terrorist [Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/how-the-u.s.-government-should-think-about-iraqs-popular-mobilization-force\)](#).

As an American, I had no desire (and questionable legal leeway) to interview Muhandis, so I was fascinated to read his writings on the top-level thinking within the PMF. It was hard not to be jealous of Husham's access, but also impossible to resist his abundant charm and generous nature.

After the [Islamic State's territorial caliphate \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/Terrorism-Extremism-Coronavirus-ISIS-AI-Qaeda-Resurgence-COVID-19\)](#) was defeated in Iraq in 2017, I sensed a gradual change in Husham's view of Muhandis and the Iran-backed groups within the PMF. He had always known of their ties to Iran, their gangster-ism, and their attacks on Sunni civilians (not that it mattered, but Husham was from a mixed Shia-Sunni background). After the recapture of all Iraq's cities, Husham began to sense—as many Iraqis did—that the reputation of the PMF was being damaged by Muhandis' Iran-backed militias. He was an advocate of “normalizing” the PMF under state control, and his thinking helped Iraq and its aid partners to conceptualize how security sector reforms might help put arms under the control of the state.

This Iraqi nationalist position became something more intense after the Iran-backed elements within the PMF started killing tens of [young Iraqi protesters in October 2019 \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/protests-in-iraq-against-domestic-corruption-and-iranian-influence\)](#). I was struck by the change Husham's tone, privately and on his prolific twitter feed. A journalist himself, with children just a decade younger than the protesters being killed, Husham went “all-in” with the protests. He threw caution to the wind at a time when the militias ran Prime Minister Adel Abdulmahdi's government.

At the time, I wondered how long he could last. His explicit calls for militias to be brought to justice seemed too bold and too prominent not to be answered violently. By the end, Husham was recklessly brave, both with his own personal security and with his words. If there was a living martyr in Iraq—conveying the sense of a dead man walking since the protests—it was Husham.

Husham was not in the inner circle of the new prime minister—Mustapha al-Kadhimi—but they were both writers, both keen observers to the Iraqi security scene, and both Iraqi nationalists who wanted arms under the control of the state. They were also both intensively harassed and threatened by militias like [Kata'ib Hezbollah \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/the-tight-rope-detering-militias-while-supporting-reformists-in-iraq\)](#). On June 26, Kata'ib Hezbollah responded to the arrest of some of its members by driving a thirty-vehicle armed column through the International Zone, the government and diplomatic district of Baghdad, in a show of strength aimed at intimidating Kadhimi.

On July 3, Husham was reportedly likewise threatened by Kata'ib Hezbollah spokesman Hussein Mounis (Abu Ali al-Askari), according to [phone messages \(https://www.alhurra.com/iraq/2020/07/06/%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%84-%D9%84%D9%87-%D8%AD%D8%B1%D9%81%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%B3%D8%A3%D9%82%D8%AA%D9%84%D9%83-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%85%D9%86%D8%B2%D9%84%D9%83-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%B4%D9%85%D9%8A-%D9%83%D8%B4%D9%81-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%85-%D9%87%D8%AF%D8%AF%D9%87-%D8%A3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D9%85%C2%A0\)](#) seen by a colleague of Husham's. On July 5, Husham [called out the \(https://twitter.com/hushamalhashimi/status/1279661732743589888\)](#) militias for firing a rocket at the International Zone that wounded a little Iraqi girl. In my view, having monitored seventeen years of Shia militia targeted killings of Iraqi academics, doctors, journalists and soldiers, Kata'ib Hezbollah clearly killed Husham to send a message to the Kadhimi government and to other Iraqi commentators: back off, stop trying to place arms under the control of the state.

The Islamic State affiliated media outlet, *Quraysh*, [applauded Husham's killing \(//C:/Users/Michael%20Knights/Documents/Iraq%E2%80%99s%20protestors,%20journalists%20and%20security%20agencies%20knew%20Husham,%20as%20did%20nearly%20\)](#) but did not claim it. This is the point that events have reached in today's Iraq: both the Islamic State and their putative enemies in Kata'ib Hezbollah have the same Iraqi nationalist on their hit lists. I cannot think of a better eulogy for him than the curses of Kata'ib Hezbollah and the Islamic State. If a man is judged by the reputation of his enemies, Husham was doing a great service to Iraq at the time of his death and in his passing.

Iraq's protesters, journalists, and security agencies knew Husham well, as did nearly all the governments of the international Coalition. If Husham can be killed, then anyone can be killed in today's Iraq. A weak response may convince militias that they are safe to go even further. Everyone, from every angle, must lend their voice and their efforts to finding and prosecuting

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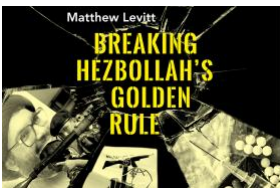
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