

Qaani's Surprise Visit to Baghdad and the Future of the PMF

by [Farzin Nadimi \(/experts/farzin-nadimi\)](#), [Hamdi Malik \(/experts/hamdi-malik\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Farzin Nadimi \(/experts/farzin-nadimi\)](#)

Farzin Nadimi, an associate fellow with The Washington Institute, is a Washington-based analyst specializing in the security and defense affairs of Iran and the Persian Gulf region.



[Hamdi Malik \(/experts/hamdi-malik\)](#)

Hamdi Malik is an Associate Fellow with the Washington Institute, specializing in Shia militias. He earned his doctorate at the school of social, political and global studies, Keele University. 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. He is the coauthor of the Institute's 2020 study "Honored, Not Contained: The Future of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces."



Brief Analysis

The commander's trip was aimed at uniting Shia militias against the United States and domestic political rivals, but facts on the ground show that the post-Soleimani Qods Force is losing its touch in Iraq.

On March 30, Brig. Gen. Esmail Qaani, head of the elite Qods Force branch within Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), paid an unannounced visit to Iraq. He met with several senior officials and militia commanders during the brief trip, including Hadi al-Ameri (head of the Badr Organization), Ammar al-Hakim (leader of the National Wisdom Movement), and Mohammed Redha al-Sistani (son of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani).

The main thrust of the quiet visit, which received almost no media coverage in Iran, was twofold: to unite Shia militia groups for the new era that has been unfolding since the U.S. assassination of Qods Force commander Qasem Soleimani and Kataib Hezbollah commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis in January; and to galvanize support against Prime Minister-designate Adnan al-Zurfi, whom Tehran and its proxies perceived as pro-American. Qaani failed on both fronts, however. Although Zurfi stepped down this week, neither of Iran's favored candidates (Abdul Hussein Abtan and Qasim al-Araji) took his place. Instead, another official **deemed sympathetic toward U.S. interests** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iraq-goes-from-zurfi-to-kadhimi-u.s.-policy->

implications)—intelligence chief Mustafa al-Kadhimi—was chosen. More broadly, differing reactions among top militias indicate that the Qods Force will have a difficult time reconstituting its power in Iraq, despite Tehran’s efforts to prepare the way by sending Supreme National Security Council secretary Ali Shamkhani to Baghdad earlier in March.

PRIME MINISTER SHUFFLE REVEALS FAULT LINES

Qaani’s visit was followed by an unprecedented communique on April 4, signed by eight of the main pro-Iran militias in Iraq’s Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF): Harakat Asaib Ahl al-Haq, Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada, Harakat Ansar Allah al-Awfiya, Harakat Jund al-Imam, Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, Kataib al-Imam Ali, Saraya Ashura, and Saraya al-Khorasani. The statement denounced the continuing U.S. military presence in Iraq and called Zurfi an American agent.

Given its proximity to Qaani’s visit, the communique was presumably prepared with the IRGC’s knowledge. Yet Kataib Hezbollah (KH)—the leading militia considered closest to the Qods Force—was conspicuously absent from the list. The group also stood apart on the choice of Zurfi’s replacement. All of Iraq’s Shia, Kurdish, and Sunni parties agreed to let Kadhimi have the next shot at forming a government, but KH rejected him as pro-American, even accusing him of giving the United States classified information that facilitated the killing of Soleimani and Muhandis.

For its part, the IRGC seems to be playing a risky double game in Iraq. Although it eventually accepted Kadhimi as a compromise in order to block Zurfi and avoid further stalemate, it is simultaneously preparing KH behind the scenes for a potential strategic showdown at a later stage. On April 6, KH issued a statement announcing its resolute stance against any “imposed government” that supposedly has dubious or threatening intentions. This statement came out at the same time that news of Kadhimi’s imminent nomination was circulating.

The militia is also unhappy that its candidate for PMF chief of staff, Abdul Aziz al-Muhammadawi (aka Abu Fadak), was rejected by other factions. The PMF’s pro-Sistani militias (the so-called “shrine units”) openly rebuffed his candidacy, while powerful pro-Iran factions such as the Badr Organization have been distancing themselves from PMF matters for a while now.

MILITARY IMPLICATIONS OF QAANI’S VISIT

The general’s trip took place amid increased tensions between Iran and the United States, as well as accelerated consolidation of American military forces into two bases: al-Asad and Erbil. U.S. media reports suggest that at least some elements of the Trump administration favor military action to seriously degrade KH in Iraq, and even to hit Iranian military targets if more American personnel fall victim to militia rocket attacks.

Meanwhile, Maj. Gen. Mohammad Bagheri and other top Iranian commanders have warned against any action that threatens “Iran’s security.” He has also denied any role in recent rocket strikes in Iraq or any Iranian intention to attack “foreign forces” in the region. Besides wording such statements to avoid attribution in future attacks, Iranian officials still seem unsure as to whether the increased U.S. military presence in the region is “psychological warfare” or a preparation for real action against their proxies in Iraq and Syria.

REPAIRING CRACKS IN THE “RESISTANCE” FRONT

In addition to falling short in persuading Iraq’s Shia parliamentary blocs to choose an openly pro-Iranian, anti-American candidate for prime minister, Qaani found his credibility further shaken when Sairoon leader Muqtada al-Sadr reportedly refused to meet with him. Such a snub would have been inconceivable when Soleimani was in charge. Other Shia groups close to Iran went so far as to criticize the visit, calling it an attempt to interfere in Iraq’s internal affairs.

Given this reaction, Tehran will no doubt go into overdrive in the coming weeks to reassert its position in Iraq. This

includes creating and investing in a new generation of more radical militant groups such as Asbat al-Saerin and Ashab al-Kahf, to better confront a more consolidated, well-defended U.S. presence in Iraq.

Formed in mid-March, Asbat al-Saerin claims to be a completely new “resistance” faction, though all indications point to KH as its creator or patron. The group took responsibility for the recent Camp Taji attack that killed two American troops and one British soldier. Likewise, Ashab al-Kahf is an emerging group that has released threatening videos; some have shown unconfirmed attacks against a claimed American convoy, while others displayed a warehouse full of 122 millimeter rockets. Such activities should be viewed alongside KH’s April 6 statement claiming that it would refrain from attacking U.S. forces while they were retreating from their original bases—leaving the door open for resumed attacks once they settle into their new locations.

CONCLUSION

The signs of deep resentment among pro-Sistani and pro-Iran militia units suggest an eventual bifurcation in the PMF ranks, and Kadhimi’s appointment could accelerate that process. Such a scenario would deeply damage the organization’s **legitimacy as an official Iraqi military body (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/honored-not-contained-the-future-of-iraqs-popular-mobilization-forces>)**. Although the PMF is dominated by Iranian-backed factions, much of the general population still admires it as the fruit of Sistani’s 2014 fatwa asking all able-bodied Iraqi men to take up arms and fight the Islamic State. If factions supervised by Sistani’s assistants decide to withdraw from the PMF, it would tarnish the organization’s public reputation.

Although Iranian officials no doubt prefer a powerful PMF aligned with their policies, they may distance themselves from the organization if it becomes so weakened and disarrayed that it hinders their grand objectives in Iraq. In that case, Tehran may return to the era of small-scale militia groups operating covertly using guerrilla warfare tactics.

For now, Iran will likely push for continued rocket attacks against American targets to inflict both psychological and physical pain on U.S. strategy in Iraq, using rebranded or splinter groups that are difficult to track. Such attacks may gradually increase in quantity and lethality, targeting not only the remaining U.S. military bases, but also the embassy complex in Baghdad.

Thus, while the United States should continue pushing for a friendly government that is acceptable to all Iraqi ethnic and political groups, it should also keep taking whatever measures are necessary to secure its personnel. In addition, it should continue attributing any threatening Shia militia activity to Iran.

Farzin Nadimi is an associate fellow with The Washington Institute, specializing in the security and defense affairs of Iran and the Gulf region. Hamdi Malik is a London-based Middle East analyst at Iran International TV whose research focuses on the transformation of Shia militias in Iraq. ❖

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Farzin Nadimi

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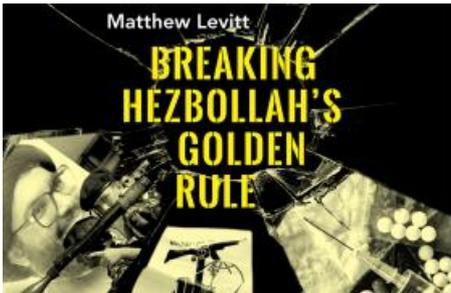
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