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Changing of the Guard: New Iraqi Militia Trends and Responses

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Brief Analysis

In the year since their most iconic leaders were killed, Iran-backed militias in Iraq have been changing in crucial ways, providing rich insights into how Baghdad and its international partners should approach them in 2021.

Iraq has passed through a gauntlet of sensitive anniversaries in the past few weeks, with December 29 marking one year since U.S. strikes killed twenty-five members of the powerful militia Kataib Hezbollah, and January 3 commemorating the deaths of Iranian general Qasem Soleimani and Iraqi militia leader Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. Although nonlethal bombings against Iraqi trucks carrying U.S. equipment continued, no militia rocket attacks were launched against U.S. facilities during the anniversary period, the last being a December 20 salvo targeting the U.S.

embassy in Baghdad.

Even so, this period provides a powerful lens into the trajectory of the country's Iran-backed militias, with the top groups arguing internally over attacks that ranged from massage parlors to American diplomatic facilities, eventually spurring Tehran to intervene and knock heads together. The contours of a new, less kinetic militia strategy may be coming into view, presenting new challenges for the Biden administration and Iraq's other Western partners.

Squabbles Within the Muqawama

Detailed scouring of militia activities, social media posts, and public statements provides a good overview of the rapidly evolving *muqawama*, the groups that wage self-styled “resistance” against the Western military presence in Iraq. Anti-Western militancy is increasingly undertaken by the Tansiqiya, a coordination committee made up of the three main players: Kataib Hezbollah (KH), Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), and Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (HaN). Since shortly after Soleimani and Muhandis were killed by a U.S. strike last January, these groups have sought to dominate public and online spaces in Iraq, maintaining cohesion through a loose coordination mechanism.

They have also argued with each other, however—about KH's November attacks on massage parlors in Baghdad under the banner of the Raba Allah street vigilantes, and about the “conditional truce” that KH spokesman Muhammad Mohi announced with the United States on October 10. This briefly created a schism between the core groups. KH and Nujaba fell in line with guidance from Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force (IRGC-QF), which apparently asked them to avoid killing any Americans in the last few weeks of the Trump administration. Instead, KH seems to have directed the network Saraya Qassem al-Jabbarin to surge roadside bomb attacks against Iraqi trucks carrying supplies for the U.S.-led coalition south of Baghdad.

In contrast, AAH has been much more aggressive against U.S. targets, violating the KH truce by launching rockets at the U.S. embassy on November 17 (for the purposes of deniability, AAH media attributed this attack to the new group Ashab al-Kahf). AAH also removed its personnel from Raba Allah after criticizing KH's late-November attacks on civilians in Baghdad. KH had taken action against people at massage parlors for apparent moral reasons, but AAH was making money from illicit taxation of the targeted businesses and others like them (e.g., prostitution rings, nightclubs, liquor stores). Likewise, KH influence in the powerful militia media outlet Sabereen quickly dropped off as KH contributors seemed to withdraw, leaving the channel dominated by AAH since the end of November.

In response to this messy scene and the resultant pulling apart of the Tansiqiya coordination effort, Iran took action to restore cohesion and placate militia leaders angered by pushback from the Iraqi government. On December 21, IRGC-QF commander Brig. Gen. Esmail Qaani traveled to Baghdad to calm AAH after Iraqi authorities arrested one of its members in connection with the November 17 embassy attack.

Trends in Iraqi Militia Evolution

In deed, much is changing as the Biden administration takes over the Iraq portfolio. Key trends include:

- **Efforts to blur militia responsibility.** As early as October 2019, and probably before, Qasem Soleimani proposed new branding tactics to make it harder for militias to be held accountable by international players, the Iraqi government, or Iraqi public opinion. “New groups” such as Usbat al-Thaireen, Saraya Qassem al-Jabbarin, Ashab al-Kahf, and Raba Allah should be thought of not as discrete organizations, but rather as brands for certain types of activities by KH and other top militias—akin to the numbered task forces assembled in Western militaries for specific tasks, or the “operations rooms” that Middle Eastern jihadists often create to coordinate certain campaigns.
- **“Sub-threshold” kinetic harassment.** Rather than giving militias a green light to resume lethal attacks once the Trump administration is out of office, the IRGC-QF may continue trying to keep them below the threshold of U.S. retaliation,

focusing instead on efforts to strangle coalition supply lines via greatly intensified roadside bombings against Iraqi truckers.

- **Soft power “hard slaps.”** In a December 16 speech, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei announced that Iran and its partners **would increasingly use soft power** to thwart American “imperialism” and evict U.S. forces from the Middle East. General Qaani reportedly discussed this 2021 game plan with *muqawama* leaders when he visited Iraq on December 21. The new approach will likely combine intensified non-kinetic and less-kinetic activities, including mob violence, arson, social welfare programs, political protests, social media campaigns, parliamentary action, targeted lawsuits (aka “lawfare”), and electoral campaigns. On January 3, KH secretary-general Abu Hussein al-Hamidawi (real name Ahmad Mohsen Faraj al-Hamidawi) appeared in a public address for the first time, a step that AAH called “the beginning of a new era for the *muqawama*.” This may indicate that even the most militant factions are considering a more overt role in the parliamentary election scheduled for later this year.

Implications for Western Policy

Collectively, the United States, the thirteen-nation Military Advisor Group, the UN, the EU, NATO, and their associated international financial institutions represent Iraq’s most powerful and best-intentioned partners. Under the Biden administration, the focus of U.S. policy and leadership on Iraq may shift back to a “country strategy” perspective, as opposed to the Trump prism of “maximum pressure” against Iran. Nevertheless, out-of-control Iranian-backed militias still present many threats that Biden’s team cares deeply about: the undermining of fledgling democracies by authoritarians (akin to Russia’s electoral interference), the targeting of political activists (like the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi), the worsening of endemic corruption at a moment of economic crisis, and, of course, the protection of U.S. persons abroad.

For these and other reasons, Washington will still be expected to assist international efforts aimed at reducing the *muqawama* threat. And the evolving nature of this threat will require an evolving toolkit that includes the following:

- **Evidence-based accountability.** Iran-backed militias are trying to have their cake and eat it too, claiming attacks through new facades like Ashab al-Kahf in order to show their supporters that they are still “resisting,” but retaining enough deniability to avoid negative fallout such as military retaliation, legal challenges, or public relations damage. To gather the evidence needed to hold these groups accountable, human rights-focused governments in the West should embrace powerful intelligence collection methods that combine social media monitoring, artificial intelligence tools, and expert analysis.
- **Non-kinetic responses.** Information operations against militias—such as releasing evidence of their corruption and human rights abuses—can do at least as much long-term damage as kinetic strikes. International players should also make greater use of “lawfare.” Once the Popular Mobilization Forces were incorporated as a formal Iraqi military organ, the state technically became liable for the illegal actions of all PMF militias. This raises the possibility of foreign nations and individual victims bringing civil lawsuits in foreign courts, whether based on the U.S. government’s Global Magnitsky sanctions or other measures. At the same time, the international community should continually strengthen Iraqi judges and courts so that they can gradually take the lead on punishing militia crimes.
- **Free and fair elections.** Much of the current tension between the United States, Iraq, and Iran grew out of the poorly executed, militia-dominated elections of 2018 and the militia-compromised government that emerged. Iraq is due to hold its next election in the latter half of 2021, so the international community should ensure that observation efforts are well-resourced and help Baghdad bring its ongoing biometric voter card drive to satisfactory completion. The United States and other players also need to reach agreement on how they will respond if proven human rights abusers such as KH and HaN participate in the political process.
- **“Gray zone” competition with a light touch.** Although rifts within the *muqawama* appear to close up whenever the

armed factions are under pressure, the [fault lines run deep](#) and tend to widen when the United States does not act too overtly. The political ambitions of AAH leader Qais al-Khazali and other militia actors may be a zero-sum game—for instance, KH has been actively undermining [rivals like PMF chairman Faleh al-Fayyad](#). American and international covert action should focus on exacerbating these natural tensions, as opposed to presenting *muqawama* factions with a shared external enemy.

- **The pressure of U.S. expectations.** Iraqi policymakers do not always follow U.S. advice or appreciate U.S. nagging, but they do want Washington to keep (privately) pushing the government to improve its control over militias. Iraqi leaders often use such foreign hectoring to bolster their domestic case for action and to seek greater support from religious authorities.

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