Policy Analysis

Profile: Ashab al-Kahf

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Brief Analysis

Part of a series: Militia Spotlight: Profiles
or see Part 1: How to Use Militia Spotlight: Profiles

Ashab al-Kahf is the first and best-known of the facade groups used by Iran-backed militias to selectively conceal their involvement in operations. Ashab al-Kahf historically has a strong connection to Asaib Ahl al-Haq.

Name: Ashab al-Kahf (AK), (Companions of the Cave).
Type of Movement: Facade group. Kinetic military operations. Domestic counter-U.S. operations.

History and objectives:
AK is the oldest of the current facade groups, having first appeared in 2019. It is also been continually active for the longest period of time, having operated throughout 2020 to the present. Among Iraqis, AK is among the best-known militia facade groups, and its name is sometimes used as shorthand for new militia groups.

AK claims attacks carried out by fasail. It has claimed IED attacks on convoys since March 2020, and has also claimed at least one rocket attack on the U.S. embassy (November 17, 2020).

The group primarily communicates through branded statements published online, which are then quickly re-posted across the militia networks.

AK initially appeared to have less of a kinetic focus than Usbat al-Thaireen (UT) or Qasim al-Jabarin, but claimed increasing numbers of convoy attacks from November 2020 onward. This may have coincided with a rift between Kataib Hezbollah (KH) and Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) over strategy.

On December 25, 2021, Ashab al-Kahf joined the fierce media campaign to release an imprisoned AAH operator, releasing statements confirming their readiness to take to the streets on Qais al-Khazali’s order.

In December and early January, affiliated media accounts launched thinly veil criticism of KH militia strategy. On or around January 6, 2021, this rift healed. Around that time, AK changed its logo to an image closer in style to other muqawama.

AK also claimed rocket attacks on Turkish forces in Northern Iraq on February 15, 2021.

**Chain of Command:**

- Preponderance of evidence shows AK to be an Asaib Ahl al-Haq affiliate. This is based on:
  - Analysis of posts and accounts promoting AK activity. AAH affiliated media accounts appear to have a particularly close affinity with AK.
  - Content of AK’s own statements.
  - Locations of claimed attacks, close to AAH areas of control.
- Nominally under the Resistance Coordination Committee (al-Tansiqiyya).

**Affiliate relationships:**

- Close links with Asaib Ahl al-Haq. AK channels have expressed affinity for AAH and its leader Qais al-Khazali. AAH channels also fiercely promote AK actions. Ashab al-Kahf was an early (pre-2010) name used by the AAH network.
- Sabereen News. Sabereen appears to post some AK claims and statements on behalf of the group.
- Usbat al-Thaireen. During the spring and summer of 2020, AK and UT appeared to have a close and complimentary relationship as the two primary facade groups claiming responsibility for attacks on the coalition while disseminating muqawama propaganda.

**Subordinates:**

- AK operates its own media channels on Telegram and Twitter.
- AK may directly control roadside bombing and rocket crews, probably drawn from AAH networks, or it may simply be a media operation.
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