A new online facade group Rijal Allah has undermined the Kataib Hezbollah (KH) narrative of the April 22 rocket attack on Baghdad Airport. Claiming the attack for itself and undercutting a previous KH effort to pretend the attack was a far-fetched conspiracy involving Iraq’s Kurds.

At least three rockets landed in the perimeter of Baghdad International Airport late on April 22, 2021. Iraqi security officials said on April 23 that the rockets landed near the part of the airport that houses United States forces. An Iraqi military statement said there were no casualties. The attack was quickly covered by muqawama (resistance) media, but initially no group claimed the attack. In recent weeks a number of attacks on coalition forces went unclaimed (including the attack on Erbil airport on April 14), while there has been a rise in reports of fake attacks (i.e., non-existent attacks falsely documented by militia social media accounts).

The earliest “claim” attributing the April 22 attack came in the early hours of April 24. At 05.22 (Iraq time), the Unit...
Telegram account posted a message claiming the Baghdad Airport attack had been carried out by a Kurdish group. Unit 10,000 is an influential media account, believed to be affiliated with Kataib Hezbollah (KH), and with “insider” access to muqawama information. The group has previously also spread disinformation and fake news. The Arabic language message read: “Kurdish armed groups calling themselves the "Protectors of the Kurdistan State" adopted the attack at Baghdad airport yesterday, and consider it a response for the targeting of Erbil airport and vowed more attacks on Baghdad !!!!”

A document written in Sorani Kurdish was attached to the post. The logo at the top of the document depicts the shape of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq in the colors of the Iraqi Kurdish flag, with the words “pârezarâni gal-i kurdistân” (“Protectors of the People of Kurdistan”).

The Unit 10,000 claim was repeated by a small number of smaller Telegram channels, several of which are likely Unit 10,000 proxy accounts.

Later on Saturday, April 22, a competing claim emerged. At 19.42 (Iraq time), a new Telegram channel, “Fasail Rijal Allah” (“Faction of the Men of God”) posted a Quranic verse. One minute later, at 19.43, the account posted a statement claiming the April 22 Baghdad Airport attack. The Arabic language statement read:

“In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful, it is they who will suffer a dreadful torment [NB – Quranic quote, Surat al-Naml verse 5].

Trust in God Almighty.

At exactly 23.50 hours on 4/22/2021, your sons in the Men of God [Rijal Allah] faction were able to target the American occupation base in Baghdad ((Victoria)) with eight 107mm rockets that hit the targets with high accuracy. This is base in which the US occupation take refuge from our anger, and we promise you we will pursue them so that its protection is no protection from God’s command.”[NB – Victoria Camp is the muqawama’s preferred term for U.S. forces at Baghdad Airport, recalling the pre-2011 U.S. labelling of segments of Baghdad Airport as Camp Victory]

The statement claims that eight rockets hit targets. This is inaccurate. Though the perpetrator attempted to fire eight rockets, only three were successfully launched. The remainder failed to fire.

Ten minutes after the new Rijal Allah account posted, at 19.53 (Iraq time), Sabereen News and the “Team of Brothers of Electronic Jihad” Telegram accounts simultaneously rebroadcast
the Rijal Allah claim. Despite Sabereen News’ prominence as a militia channel and source of information, only a handful of accounts reposted or commented on the attack, perhaps indicating some kind of dissonance about the validity or wisdom of making the claim.

This is not the first time that Sabereen has posted claims that not all the muqawama media seemed to support. While some claims are rebroadcast by large numbers of militia media accounts, including by other high profile accounts like Unit 10,000, sometimes Sabereen will post a claim by a facade group (with an accompanying unique Telegram channel and logo) which is ignored by other major militias and media accounts. This was the case during the Erbil attack in February 2021, where Sabereen broadcast claims by Saraya Awliya al-Dam – but these claims were ignored by major (KH-affiliated) channels.

The Rijal Allah claim undermined the effort - a rather poor effort - to blame the Baghdad Airport attack on Kurdish militants. Such a Kurdish militant attack on Baghdad airport would be unprecedented and is instead clearly the invention of muqawama groups seeking to foment tension with Kurdish and justify their rocket and drone attacks on Kurdish territories. It is quite possible that this episode suggests an effort by KH-affiliated channels to push the Kurdish angle, while Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) channel Sabereen preferred to see a muqawama faction openly claim the Baghdad Airport attack. This would fit with AAH’s penchant for independent action that undermines KH’s leadership of the muqawama factions.

As discussed earlier the rockets attacks on U.S. forces are increasingly going unclaimed. It is possible that the militias have moved to a model of deception which saturates the info environment with fake attacks. Fakes and unclaimed attacks are not new but they’re increasingly common following the Natanz explosion. It is possible this is the beginning of a new trend. It is highly likely the muqawama and Iranian elements recognize that named facade groups are increasingly helping with attribution, not hindering (Iran has made statements to this effect at the UN, and has protested about increased attribution of militias as "Iran-supported"). A combination of “unclaimed” hits with a rise in faked attacks may be the newest stage in Iranian deniability. The “fake saturation” model had previously been used with convoy attacks (although facade groups continue to openly claim these types of attack in both Syria and Iraq.)
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