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How Iran Employed Iraq's Muqawama in its Post-Natanz Response

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Brief Analysis

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Iran's post-Natanz face-saving effort saw the Iraqi muqawama falsely claim retaliation attacks against Israeli and U.S. targets in Iraq, underlining a case of centralized Iranian direction of muqawama information operations, and coordination of Iraqi muqawama actions with broader kinetic operations by Iran's Axis of Resistance.

On April 11, 2021 the Islamic Republic of Iran [announced](#) that Natanz nuclear site had been attacked. First [Israeli](#) and then Iranian media [attributed](#) the attack to Israel. Israeli public broadcaster Kan [said](#) the Mossad was behind the attack. This was a humiliating blow to the Islamic Republic, especially because (in July 2020) the same nuclear facility was previously targeted, causing [significant damage](#) to Iran's main nuclear fuel enrichment site. Alireza Zakani, head of Iranian parliament research center reacted to the second Natanz explosion by describing Iran as "[heaven for spies](#)".

In order to respond to the attack and to show Iran's ability to retaliate against Israel, the Islamic Republic quickly mobilized its resources. On 12 April, 2021 an Israeli-owned ship was attacked off the coast of UAE. Israeli officials believe that [Iran was behind the attack](#). Also, on 13 April Iran announced the country will start enriching some uranium to 60% levels.

The Islamic Republic also mobilized the Iraqi muqawama. Specifically, this took the form of a coordinated effort among the Iraqi muqawama social media channels to spread news of attacks against the U.S.-led coalition there. Fake news disseminated by muqawama Twitter and Telegram accounts is nothing new, but after the Natanz attack there was [an uptick in frequency of fake attacks](#) for a few days, and in apparent coordination of fake news campaigns. Two of the most prominent are detailed below.

April 13: Fake attack on Israeli Intelligence

On April 13, [Unit 10,000](#) posted a message on its Telegram channel at 21:01 local time, claiming that a center for information and special operations belonging to Mossad in northern Iraq was attacked and that a number of Israeli forces had been killed and injured (Figure 1).

Other Iraqi muqawama Telegram accounts affiliated with various Iran-backed militias quickly followed suit. At 21:02, [Sabereen News](#) reposted the exact message without giving credit to Unit 10,000; an indication that this was an information operation directed from above (i.e., by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, which is generally able to compel a degree of coordination across the fasail). (Figure 2). In order to reach an international audience, Sabereen then posted the message in Farsi and English.

Next, Press TV [an Iranian state-owned English-speaking network] through its "PTVbreaking" Twitter account posted news of the attack. This was quickly retweeted and prominently pinned by the main Press TV Twitter account, which is followed by more than 252,000 persons.

The IRGC-affiliated Fars News Agency then picked up the fake news and published it in Farsi. This prompted the Israeli Jerusalem Post to run the story, citing Fars News. Other outlets such as Russia TV Arabic also published the news.

April 15 - 16: Fake attacks on al-Asad Air Base

In another coordinated information operation in which various Iraqi muqawama propaganda channels took part, two fake attacks were claimed on al-Asad Air Base.

The first fake attack was claimed in the evening of April 15 at around 20.10 by a group of [Kataib Hezbollah](#)-affiliated channels. These claims led to a flurry of propaganda imagery and posts from across the Kataib Hezbollah online networks. At 20.45, however, Sabereen posted a statement confirming that the attack had not happened for the time being.

Hours later, at 03.41 on April 16, Sabereen broke the (fake) news of a drone attack on al-Asad Air Base (Figure 3). This news was widely circulated by militia accounts. Dozens of muqawama social media channels and Telegram accounts aggressively published fake details about the attack, building an iterative and interwoven narrative. According to these posts, high value targets such as the airbase operations center and anti-missile systems had been



Figure 1: 21.01hrs Unit 10,000 post, April 13, 2021



Figure 2: 21.02hrs Sabereen post, April 13, 2021

bombed. Once again Sabereen published the news in Farsi and English. Iranian news agencies such as Irna and Mehrnews published the fake news, citing Sabereen. Taken together, the result appeared to be a plausible developing story – despite no drones or rockets having been fired. Only two days before, the muqawama launched a (real) attack on U.S. forces in Erbil airport, using a suicide drone.

Other fake attacks have included claimed rocket attacks against Balad airbase and certain IED attacks against convoys. But the fake news coexists with real attacks: two separate (real) rocket attacks have been launched against Baghdad airbase in the second half of April.

These events also show how Iran and its allies continue to integrate various propaganda wings and information operations networks with real world effects. The combination of real and fabricated attacks is intended to confuse militia opponents while falsely demonstrating a “robust” response to the Natanz attack to pro-Iranian regime and muqawama audiences and beyond. This hybridization of information and kinetic operations will almost certainly continue in coming months as it is cheap, multiplies the propaganda value of militia operations, while adding a layer of deception. ❖



Figure 3: 03.41 Sabereen post on April 16, 2021, breaking the (fake) news of a drone attack on al-Asad Air Base



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