



Policy Analysis /

Muqawama Fake News Surrounding Qasim Muslih's Arrest (Part 1): International Zone Claims

by [Michael Knights](#), [Crispin Smith](#), [Alex Almeida](#), [Hamdi Malik](#)

May 28, 2021

Also available in

[Arabic](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Knights](#)

Michael Knights is the Boston-based Jill and Jay Bernstein Fellow of The Washington Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of Iraq, Iran, and the Persian Gulf states. 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.



[Crispin Smith](#)

Crispin Smith is an associate at a Washington-based national security law group. His research focuses on Iraqi security, human rights, and law of armed conflict issues. 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.

[Alex Almeida](#)

Alex Almeida is the head security analyst at a leading risk advisory firm.



[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

Part of a series: [Militia Spotlight](#)

or see Part 1: [How to Use Militia Spotlight](#)

The first wave of post-arrest deception operations tried to give the false impression that militias controlled the Baghdad zone containing the prime minister's residence, the U.S. embassy, and other sensitive sites.

On May 26, the Iraqi state arrested militia leader Qasim Muslih in connection with the May 9 murder of activist Ehab al-Wazni. As with the June 2020 arrest of a [Kataib Hezbollah](#) (KH) rocket cell leader, Muslih's detention spurred *muqawama* (resistance) factions to flood the International Zone (IZ) and pressure the government into releasing him. This time, however, a strong military cordon blocked these groups from reinforcing the smaller militia bodyguard forces inside the IZ. To offset this failure, militias undertook an active propaganda effort involving the use of video footage and stills to falsely suggest they were once again able to achieve freedom of movement inside the zone.

One example was a video of militia members at the "July 14 crossroads" at the center of the IZ, showing them demolishing temporary fencing erected around the monument and exposing posters of late militia leaders Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and Qasem Soleimani (Figure 1).

A post by [Sabereen News](#) (Figure 2) described these militiamen as having "entered the Green Zone," while in fact they were a small bodyguard group already inside the IZ. In other posts, Sabereen publicized false claims that militias had cordoned off the prime minister's office, an evident effort to create the sense that they were successfully repeating the same intimidation tactics they used in June 2020.

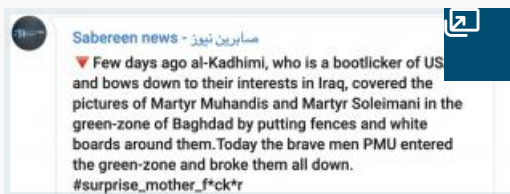


Figure 2: Sabereen post on militia action inside the IZ, May 26, 2021

A second video showed militiamen in multiple pickup trucks with twin 23 mm antiaircraft



Figure 1: Militia members demolish billboards at July 14 monument, May 26, 2021

cannons and rocket-propelled grenades, in an attempt to suggest a powerful militia presence inside the IZ. Yet based on the position of landmarks, the video was clearly taken on a highway outside the IZ, showing vehicles driving away from the zone (Figure 3). Al-Rahman Mosque and a nearby tower are visible ahead and to the right of the convoy, and later in the video, the Baghdad Clock Tower appears behind the convoy.

Various other videos and images of militiamen—particularly those belonging to [Kataib al-Imam Ali](#) (Figure 4)—were disseminated across multiple *muqawama* networks and channels, with the apparent intent of demonstrating the pervasiveness of their deployments and their ability to penetrate the IZ at will. Most images bore captions claiming to be from inside the IZ.

Telegram channels also



Figure 3: Video grab of militia truck driving west outside IZ,

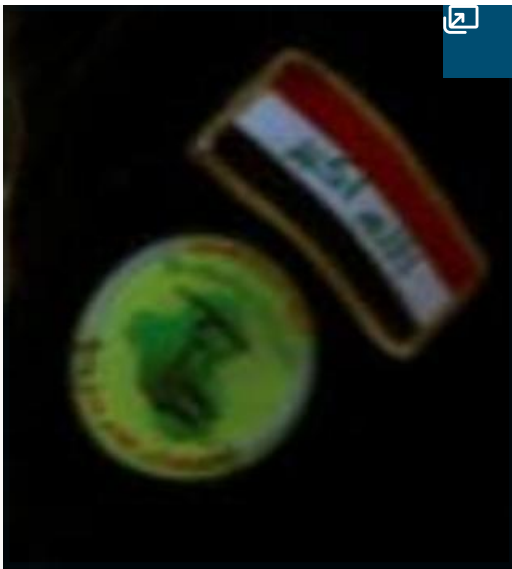


Figure 4: Kataib al-Imam Ali patch visible at outer perimeter of IZ, May 26, 2021

misrepresented the armored vehicles deployed by the Iraqi Army to reinforce the government. Accounts declared them to be T-90 main battle tanks that the PMF Armored Division or *muqawama* groups had sent to the streets of Baghdad (Figure 5). In fact, they were Iraqi Army T-72 and BMP-3 vehicles sent by the Baghdad Operations Command armored reserve. For Iraqis following the story, such false reports may have added to the pervasiveness of the *muqawama* show of force, despite the deployments in reality being a show of government strength.

As usual, the militias' misreporting of what was happening in the IZ and their reuse of old



Figure 5: False Sabereen claim that "the 9th armoured regiment which belongs to the Iraqi *muqawama* factions and which includes T90 tanks now is in Baghdad's streets".

footage shows how their disinformation operations benefit from the fact that non-experts (including most Iraqi citizens and

local/international media) often have difficulty telling which force is which. Because international news outlets need to be able to extract valuable data from imagery and distinguish false reports from true, Militia Spotlight will soon be producing a recognition guide for Baghdad security forces, vehicles, equipment, and uniforms. The Iraqi government's weakness in social media and traditional media outreach has likewise opened up disinformation opportunities for militias, who have the advantage of telling a weary public and jaded international community what they expect to hear about state weakness.

([Part 2](#) of this report looks at *muqawama* efforts to falsely claim that Muslih was immediately released from government custody.) ❖



[View/Print Page as PDF](#)

SHARE



EMAIL ALERTS



[Sign Up](#)



TO TOP

PART OF A SERIES

Militia Spotlight

How to Use Militia Spotlight



A Fake KSS Recruitment Drive



Ashab al-Kahf's Takeover of the Convoy Strategy

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Kurds Are Fleeing Iraq in the Face of Uncertainty

Dec 7, 2021

Yerevan Saeed

ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

Lebanon Stands at a Crossroad Between a Painful Revival and a Complete Submission to Iran

Dec 7, 2021

Hanin Ghaddar



BRIEF ANALYSIS

The Future of al-Tanf Garrison in Syria

Dec 6, 2021

Grant Rumley,
David Schenker

TOPICS

Arab & Islamic Politics

Democracy &
Reform

Military & Security

Terrorism

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Iran

Iraq

STAY UP TO DATE



SIGN UP FOR EMAIL ALERTS



THE
WASHINGTON INSTITUTE
for Near East Policy

1111 19th Street NW - Suite 500
Washington D.C. 20036
Tel: 202-452-0650
Fax: 202-223-5364

[Contact](#)

[Press Room](#)

[Subscribe](#)

The Washington Institute seeks to advance a balanced and realistic understanding of American interests in the Middle East and to promote the policies that secure them.

The Institute is a 501(c)3 organization; all donations are tax-deductible.

[About TWI](#) /

[Support the Institute](#)



© 2021 All rights reserved.

[Employment](#) /

[Privacy Policy](#) /

[Rights & Permissions](#)