

Ashab al-Kahf's Takeover of the Convoy Strategy

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Brief Analysis

Part of a series: [Militia Spotlight \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/militia-spotlight\)](#)

or see Part 1: [How to Use Militia Spotlight \(/policy-analysis/how-use-militia-spotlight\)](#)

Militia attacks on supply convoys are experiencing a (likely temporary) lull, and the sub-group Ashab al-Kahf appears to have taken the lead.

The self-styled *muqawama* (resistance) factions have long used the "convoy strategy"—attacks on Iraqi trucks that are described as carrying coalition supplies—as a way to demonstrate that they are still actively confronting the United States, often at moments when they have decreased riskier types of attacks such as rocket strikes on U.S. bases. For example, such convoy attacks continued during the conditional ceasefire that [Kataib Hezbollah \(/node/16641\)](#) (KH) implemented from October 2020 to March 2021, probably because they were viewed as highly unlikely to draw retaliation from the outgoing Trump administration.

Except to the poor Iraqis driving the trucks, the convoy strategy has thus always been the fakest of fake resistance activities. Even militias seem less than proud of these attacks and are often at pains to show that they seek to minimize Iraqi casualties. Moreover, some proportion of convoy attacks has always been motivated by mercantile interests, with militia-adjacent gangs intimidating and extorting trucking companies.

Since late summer, convoy attacks of all types have been declining, coincident with a message that Iran's Qods Force leader Esmail Qaani sent to various militia leaders on July 29 warning them to de-escalate. As Figure 1 notes, convoy attack levels do fluctuate, but they have never been as low for as long as the September-November 2021 hiatus. If militias once again surge anti-coalition activities in early 2022, a rise in convoy attacks is highly likely—albeit with minimal impact on the coalition and direct impact on Iraqi drivers as usual.

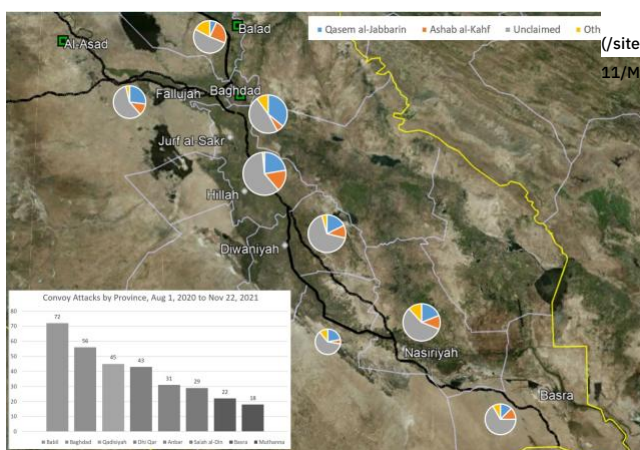


Figure 2: Convoy attack graphs by province. Yellow lines are Iraq's national borders, grey lines are provincial boundaries, and black lines are major trucking highways targeted by attacks. Coalition or U.S. contractor hubs are marked with green squares. Pie charts roughly sized by provincial attack totals. Image by Google Earth.

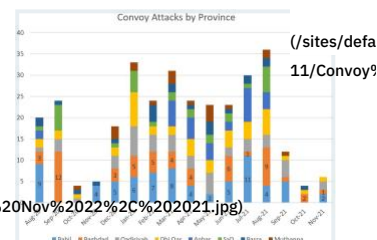
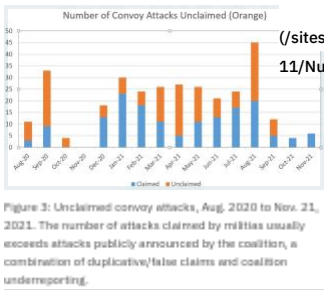


Figure 1: Convoy attacks by province, Aug. 2020 to Nov. 22, 2021.

Concurrently, convoy attack claims by the KH-linked group [Qasem al-Jabbarin \(QJ\) \(/node/16635\)](#) normally the most frequent claimant, have decreased of late, while claims by another prolific claimant—the [Asaib Ahl al-Haq \(/node/16715\)](#)-linked group [Ashab al-Kahf \(/node/16638\)](#) (AK)—have increased. In July, QJ took credit for 47% of all claimed convoy attacks while AK took credit for 29%, a fairly typical split. Yet this split reversed in August: 40% for QJ vs. 55% for AK. And in September-November, AK claimed an average of 77%, while QJ claimed none.

These numbers, coupled with trends in unclaimed and underreported incidents (see Figure 3), suggest that AK may now be claiming all convoy attacks regardless of intent or actual involvement. On November 19, the group posted a Telegram [message \(https://t.me/Alkhuf/413\)](#) (Figure 4) retroactively claiming all convoy attacks in October, even though two of these attacks had already been claimed by Liwa Thar Muhandis on October 28. As the longest-operating and probably most widely recognizable facade group to Iraqis, AK may be taking over the branding of the entire convoy strategy. Moreover, its November 19 message received no pushback from



Liwa Thar Muhandis or other groups, suggesting coordination. AK has also introduced the practice of naming clusters of convoy attacks during this period (e.g., "Operation Palm of Abbas" announced August 15; "Operation Karbala" on September 29).

In the past, the convoy strategy was viewed as a KH-driven operation, with Asaib Ahl al-Haq even deriding it as a kind of fake resistance in the so-called "[Tuna and Noodles](#)" ([/node/16607](#)) saga of late 2020. The KH-linked QJ was the dominant claimant in the western and southern belts of Baghdad (69% of claimed attacks) and Babil province (54%), both of which are adjacent to the KH bomb-making and distribution cell in Jurf al-Sakhar. Yet as Figure 2 shows, AK has consistently been a major adjunct to this effort, claiming most attacks in southern Salah al-Din province (where supply convoys to Balad base were extorted by Asaib Ahl al-Haq) as well as 40% of claims in Babil and 33% of claims in Qadisiyah. Now AK seems to have moved to the fore, possibly

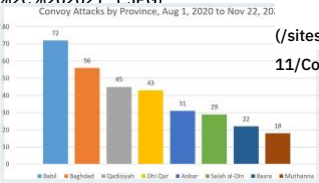


Figure 4: Convoy attacks by province, Aug. 2020 to Nov. 22, 2020.

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