Making Sense of the Initial Wave of Militia Attacks in Iraq and Syria in Early 2022

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The process of assuaging the militia support base has been carefully stage-managed in the first week of 2022, with Iran and Nujaba setting the ground rules.

For many months, the muqawama has been promising its support base that heavy blows would be struck against the U.S. military presence in Iraq if there was no large-scale withdrawal of U.S. forces by December 31, 2021. Muqawama leaders can probably sense growing discontent in their militant base that they have over-promised and under-delivered on real resistance to the U.S. since the killings of Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis on January 3, 2020. Now the militia base also has reason to doubt their leadership’s potency, and to doubt Iran’s support for the Iraqi muqawama, after the collapse of the muqawama's parliamentary representation in
the October 10, 2021 elections, and the collective *muqawama* and Iranian failure to overturn or modify the results.

On November 7, Militia Spotlight assesses that the assassination effort on Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi, mounted by elements of *Asaib Ahl al-Haq* and *Kataib Hezbollah*, was a danger sign for Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps - Qods Force (IRGC-QF) that the *muqawama* were becoming erratic and ungovernable. Against this backdrop, it was important for *muqawama* leaders and for IRGC-QF to deliver a visible campaign of unified and credible-looking resistance actions after the December 31, 2021 deadline for U.S. withdrawal.

**Phase 1: Nujaba opens the indirect fire campaign, December 27-January 3, 2021**

Militia Spotlight assesses that Iran’s IRGC-QF stepped up its game on December 9, using an Iran-backed speech to vault Akram al-Kaabi of Hezbollah Harakat al-Nujaba into the limelight as the most trusted spokesman of the *muqawama* forces in Iraq. Behind the scenes, Militia Spotlight assesses that the ground rules for this start-of-year surge were set by IRGC-QF and Nujaba. Until the completion of the January 3 commemoration ceremonies for Soleimani and Muhandis, at which numerous militia leaders would be physically concentrated, the balance of available evidence suggests that only Nujaba was initially allowed to undertake limited and low-risk indirect fire (rocket, mortar or drone) strikes. (Kataib Hezbollah (KH) and Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) were instead firmly encouraged to initially hold back from indirect fire and instead lead a burst of convoy attacks using Qasem al-Jabbarin and Ashab al-Kahf monikers, where the chance of killing Americans was non-existent due to their non-presence on such convoys). Indirect fire targets included:

- **Rocket strikes on the Turkish base in Zilkan, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.** Two heavy rocket strikes were launched, on December 27 and January 3, assessed as being Nujaba operations.

- **Rocket and mortar strikes on U.S. bases in eastern Syria.** Three strikes involving around sixteen munitions were undertaken on December 31, January 1 and January 2, assessed as being Nujaba operations. U.S. forces engaged rocket cells with counter-battery fire on January 2.

- **One drone strike on U.S. diplomatic site in Baghdad.** On January 2, two drones were targeted on the Baghdad Diplomatic Security Center at Baghdad International Airport (BDSC, erroneously called Victory or Victoria by militias). Both drones were intercepted. This strike, assessed as Nujaba, used similar drones to those used in the June 26, 2021 drone attack on leadership locations in the Kurdistan Region.

**Phase 2: KH and AAH are admitted to the campaign, January 4**

Figure 1: Drone wreckage from Jan 2, 2022 strike on BDSC. The type is similar to the drones used on Erbil on June 26, 2021.
From January 4, with Iraqi *muqawama* leaders back on home turf and Iran-based commemorations concluded, the naughty children of the *muqawama*. KH and AAH, were allowed to join the indirect fire campaign with the grown-ups, Nujaba. The permitted operating areas for KH and AAH were west of the Tigris: BDSC, Al-Asad Air Base in Anbar, and the Anbar-adjacent Al-Tanf coalition base in Syria. In the last two days, the following indirect fire targets were struck:

- **Al-Asad hit twice in two days.** Al-Asad was targeted by two drones (both intercepted) on January 4 and up to twelve rockets on January 5, both assessed to be KH operations. (Of note, Qasem al-Jabbarin made a very unusual claim of an indirect fire attack for the rocket attack).
- **BDSC attacked with heavy rockets.** On January 4, the BDSC diplomatic facility was targeted with four 240mm short-range rockets.
- **One or two Syria attacks continue in parallel.** At least one and perhaps two rocket attacks were launched at U.S. bases in eastern Syria. U.S. forces engaged indirect fire cells with defensive airstrikes on January 5.
- **Escalated convoy attacks also continued in parallel.**
What next and what have we learned so far?

The remaining likely targets to be struck, possibly in the next 24 hours, are Al-Tanf in Syria and U.S. bases in the Kurdistan Region. Militia Spotlight assesses that AAH and KH will be involved in the former, and Nujaba in the latter. Other attacks on BSDC and convoys may proceed in parallel. As AAH appears to be the most risk-tolerant of the muqawama actors when it comes to causing U.S. casualties, it will be interesting to see the degree of care they take to maximize or minimize U.S. casualties, which may itself be an indicator of to what extent they have been brought back under centralized IRGC-QF influence since November 7.

The attack campaign undertaken since December 31 has generated a lot of coverage within the militia propaganda milieu, which appears to be a primary aim. The attacks themselves have seemingly been carefully coordinated, or even stage-managed, and not optimized to cause U.S. casualties. Militia leaders such as Akram al-Kaabi are promising more strikes and presenting the last week’s strikes as the beginning of an open-ended kinetic effort to remove U.S. forces, but they also give the sense that the situation does not need to escalate if the U.S. does not retaliate disproportionately, and if muqawama supporters seem satisfied with the performance.

Figure 3: Al-Asad drone wreckage, January 4, 2022
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