"Saraya Ababil" Claims Baghdad Drone and Rocket Attack

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Brief Analysis

Part of a series: Militia Spotlight
or see Part 1: How to Use Militia Spotlight

A minor facade group claimed drone and rocket attacks on Baghdad Airport this week indicating a return to the muqawama's facade strategy and a role for AAH in the latest escalation.

On January 7, 2022, Saraya Ababil (the "Ababil Companies" or "SA") claimed responsibility for two drone attacks and one rocket attack on U.S. positions in Baghdad airport. This claim was made via a video clip and Telegram post first made by Sabereen News (Figure 1). The video included claims of two drone attacks on January 4 and 5, 2022, and a claim of rocket attack using two 240mm rockets on January 4.

Facts
Summary
1. Sabereen News posted the video at 09.43 hrs Baghdad time on January 7, 2022. The video was reposted by many muqawama Telegram channels, but major Kataib Hezbollah (KH) channels including Unit 10,000, Kaf, and others chose to remain silent.
2. The video carries the SA logo. Sabereen's caption noted the video shows "the targeting of [U.S. forces at Baghdad Airport] by fixed wing "Murad-5" drones by an unknown group calling itself Saraya Ababil."

3. Saraya Ababil was first used as a "facade" name on September 1, 2021. The group has previously claimed attacks on U.S. convoys, in a video carrying the same SA logo as the January 7, 2022 video.
4. The group is associated with a Telegram channel, Radea ("Deterrence") created on September 1, 2021. This channel launched with an explicit statement that the channel exists to broadcast Saraya Ababil.
5. During its posting history, Radea has broadcast a number of items indicating an affinity for Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), including a video showing AAH's rocket capabilities.

Analysis
Limited evidence indicates SA a "facade group" run by AAH. To start with, Ababil is the name of an AAH's manufactured improvised rocket-assisted munition (IRAM). The IRAM Ababil was unveiled in 2015 by Qais al-Khazali, the leader of AAH (Figure 2).

Telegram Channel
SA's name first appeared on September 1, 2021. A Telegram channel called Radea ("Deterrence") was created on that day. The first channel's post reads “Radea's platform... is launched by broadcasting a clip of... Saraya Ababil"
Around one hour later a clip showing purported convoy attacks in Baghdad, Fallujah, and Salah al-Din province was posted on Radea's channel (Figure 4). This clearly indicates that Radea is a Telegram platform created to promote SA.

**Logos**

Both Radea and SA have unique logos (Figure 5). The design is very different from usual *muqawama* logos (which contain similar elements to the IRGC logo). The Radea and SA logos are circular, with the name of each respective group written in the center in red. The round shape in both logos seem to represent a clock or a target, with crosshairs/hour markers around the edge. (It is possible this design element was chosen due to the groups posting about the countdown to a December 31, 2021 deadline for U.S. troops to leave Iraq). Both logos also incorporate
stylized shapes representing wings of a bird, which seems to be an allusion to the "Ababil", the miraculous birds which based on Quran protected Kaaba in Mecca from an army which intended to destroy the structure by dropping small clay stones on the army.

**Radea’s Content**

A number of Radea’s posts about the Iraqi *muqawama* relate to AAH. These posts include a clip of AAH’s IRAM, Ababil, posted November 20, 2021 (Figure 6).

In another clip posted on September 3, 2021, a group of AAH’s fighters in Syria are seen reading Islamic recitations (Figure 7). Radea introduces them as Ekhwat Zainab (Zainab’s brothers). Ekhwat Zainab is the name AAH’s fighters in Syria call themselves,
Radea does not post frequently, but in those posts the channel never mentioned other major Iraqi muqawama groups such as KH or Harakat al-Nujaba (HaN).

**Initial Conclusions**

- **A possible return to the facade strategy.** The attribution of drone and rocket attacks is the second time in a week that facade groups have been used to claim an indirect fire attack on U.S. positions (the first was Qasem al-Jabbarin's (QJ) claim of a rocket attack on Al-Asad Air Base on January 5, 2022). While once common, the use of facade groups to claim these attacks had become less common in the second half of 2021, and the latest claims may indicate a return to the muqawama's strategy of using facade groups to publicize attacks while avoiding retaliation.

- **It is likely that Saraya Ababil is linked to AAH.** This conclusion is based on links between SA’s media channel and AAH content, and the lack of interest which KH channels showed in the SA attack claim (by comparison, the QJ claim was well publicized by KH channels). While this does not preclude the attack being carried out by another group, it indicates a likely
AAH role in related information operations – Militia Spotlight has previously reported on similar AAH activity.

- The video is part of wider information operations and misinformation efforts.

Notably the January 7 video claims that the drone attack targeting Baghdad airport occurred on January 4, 2022. Some *muqawama* media channels had claimed drones targeted Baghdad airport on January 4, but these claims went unsubstantiated (2 drones were shot down on the approach to Al-Asad Air Base in Anbar on that date, and 4x 240mm short-range rockets were also fired at Baghdad airport on the night of January 4). However, 2 drones were also shot down on the approach to Baghdad airport on January 2. The drones depicted in the January 7 video appear to match images from the failed January 2 attack. It is possible that *muqawama* is using the January 4 date in order to give the appearance that at least one of their drone attacks successfully, where in reality all of the fixed wing drones have been successfully countered.
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