

Militias Demonize USAID After U.S. Citizen Gunned Down in Baghdad

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Brief Analysis

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

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

Media outlets run by Iran-backed groups have justified the killing by claiming that the targeted civilian was a spy.

On November 7, Stephen Troell, a U.S. citizen and aid worker, was [shot dead \(https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-shootings-iraq-baghdad-3b6502ed249f7045221f1abb908d9618\)](https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-shootings-iraq-baghdad-3b6502ed249f7045221f1abb908d9618) while driving his car in Baghdad. A high-ranking police official [described \(https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/%D8%AA%D8%AD%D9%82%D9%8A%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%88%D9%89-%D8%A8%D9%85%D9%82%D8%AA%D9%84-%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%B1%D9%83%D9%8A-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A8%D8%BA%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%AF\)](https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/%D8%AA%D8%AD%D9%82%D9%8A%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%88%D9%89-%D8%A8%D9%85%D9%82%D8%AA%D9%84-%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%B1%D9%83%D9%8A-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A8%D8%BA%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%AF) the incident to the news site al-Araby: "The attackers' car was traveling in the area without registration plates and with people carrying guns. They passed several checkpoints before reaching the scene, which reinforces the theory that they belong to an armed group...[since that would allow them] to move freely with weapons and a car without registration plates."

In subsequent social media posts, Iraqi *muqawama* (resistance) groups characterized the victim as an employee of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), which appears to be incorrect. Al-Ghadeer, a television network

belonging to the Iran-backed Badr Organization, claimed that Troell was “a member of an American development organization working for USAID” (Figure 1), while cross-*muqawama* network [Sabereen News \(/node/16673\)](#) claimed that he “worked for USAID.”

Such claims are important because the *muqawama* axis views USAID as an enemy. Nasr Media, an Iranian Farsi-language Telegram channel affiliated with Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, likewise posted that Troell was working for USAID, then went on to spread false information about the organization and imply that it provided cover for CIA activities: “USAID seemingly helps underdeveloped countries...It was established under the Marshall Plan after the Second World War, then it started to work toward increasing American influence in Europe. At first it was one of the branches of the CIA, but in 1961 it became an apparently independent



Figure 1: Al-Ghadeer TV claims that Troell worked for USAID, November 7, 2022.

organization" (Figure 2).

Similarly, Hazem Ahmad Fadhalah, an influential *muqawama* strategist who runs the Telegram channel Kitabah wa Tahlil (Writings and Analysis), called Troell a “U.S. intelligence officer” working for the “spying organization USAID” (Figure 3).

Previously, on October 19, Kitabah wa Tahlil had posted a screenshot of a tweet by U.S. ambassador Alina Romanowski announcing extra funding for Iraq channeled via USAID. Fadhalah then commented on the tweet: "When the U.S. embassy talks about a grant to Iraq, this means support for the institutions of spying, infiltration, obscenity, and spreading liberalism, i.e., civil society organizations, because the appropriate cover for funding [these

organizations] is grants" (Figure 4).
 (/sites/default/files/2022-
 The episode demonstrates several key facets of *muqawama* propaganda and communal beliefs. First, although the entire USAID connection is erroneous, this matters little to *muqawama* commentators, who uncritically take it as a factual departure point. Second, they instinctively provide justifications for the slaying of an unarmed man, as opposed to criticizing the unlawful killing, in a sense taking ownership of the murder. Third, the incident may signal that militias are commencing an "area denial" approach to make movements by Western diplomats and citizens much more difficult in Iraq, with NGO activity being identified as a legitimate target for attacks. Since the new Sudani government took office, militia checkpoints have reappeared in certain areas of Baghdad such as Karada and Palestine Street. Troell's murder may foreshadow broader attacks on Iraqi and Western opponents as the militias regain full freedom of movement, which they last enjoyed in early 2020. ❖

Figure 2: Nasf Media implies that USAID is a cover for CIA activities, November 7, 2022.

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