

Akram Kaabi's Visit to Moscow and Its Aftermath

by [Erik Yavorsky \(/experts/erik-yavorsky\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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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)

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Russia now feels emboldened to openly host Iraqi "resistance" leaders with no government role—including designated terrorists—to discuss their shared interest in confronting the West and working together in Syria and Iraq.

On November 26, Akram Kaabi, the leader of Iran-backed Iraqi militia [Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba \(HaN\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-harakat-hezbollah-al-nujaba), traveled to Moscow for meetings with three Russian officials: Mikhail Bogdanov, the longtime deputy foreign minister with responsibility for the Middle East and now Vladimir Putin's special representative for the Middle East and Africa; Vitaly Naumkin, an Arabist in Putin's "Valdai Club" of advisors and director of the Institute of Oriental Studies at the Russian Academy of Sciences; and Albir Krganov, a Tatar imam who serves as the Mufti of Moscow and chairman of the Spiritual Assembly of Muslims of Russia, one of the country's three main Muslim organizations. Kaabi was also interviewed by RT, and he undoubtedly spoke with Russian intelligence officials in unpublicized meetings.

Kaabi's engagement with this high-profile array of hosts apparently included discussions on Syria, where HaN has long been the most active contingent deployed by the Iraqi *muqawama* (resistance). Notably, he also gave a speech at the Global Christian Union and met with Alexei Cherkizov, who develops Russian-language tuition at Damascus University in addition to serving as Moscow's point of contact with Syria's ministers of education and higher education. Indeed, Syria remains a preoccupation for Kaabi and HaN: most recently, a [three-drone attack \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/transnational-muqawama-show-disapproval-warithuun-attack-al-tanf\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/transnational-muqawama-show-disapproval-warithuun-attack-al-tanf) was launched against the U.S. garrison at al-Tanf last week by [Tashkil al-Waritheen \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-al-warithuun\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-al-warithuun), a facade group that Militia Spotlight assesses to have "a strong affiliation or command relationship" with HaN.

Kaabi's November trip was illuminating on other issues as well, especially his talk with Bogdanov. During that meeting, the HaN leader rejected the U.S. presence in Iraq, declaring that his group would "not allow the United States to encroach on Iraq's land and wealth by continuing its occupation." For his part, Bogdanov stated that HaN "has played an important and effective role in countering terrorism" and expressed interest in deepening relations with Iraq in various domains. HaN's subsequent press release framed the trip as an attempt to build a "new chapter" in the Russia-Iraq relationship—a point reiterated on December 8, when Russian ambassador Elbrus Kutrashev [spoke of \(https://shafaq.com/en/Iraq-News/Russia-s-Ambassador-the-US-imposes-its-weapons-and-services-on-the-Iraqis\)](https://shafaq.com/en/Iraq-News/Russia-s-Ambassador-the-US-imposes-its-weapons-and-services-on-the-Iraqis) Moscow's willingness to expand relations with Baghdad, particularly in the area of arms sales. As for Kaabi's other meetings, HaN noted that he and Krganov mutually valued "the role of Russia and Iran in preventing...distortions" of "divine religions by the West."

A New Level of Russia-Militia Contact

Previously, Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) chairman and [U.S.-designated human rights abuser Faleh al-Fayyad \(https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm1231\)](https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm1231) was the only significant *muqawama* figure to travel to Moscow for meetings, and then only as an Iraqi state employee. He last visited there on May 30, 2022, where he participated in talks with Bogdanov on counterterrorism cooperation. Previously, on September 2, 2019, he [traveled \(https://www.newarab.com/news/iraqi-militia-leader-visits-moscow-undisclosed-visit\)](https://www.newarab.com/news/iraqi-militia-leader-visits-moscow-undisclosed-visit) to Moscow on behalf of then-prime minister Adil Abdulmahdi to request air defense systems following a string of alleged Israeli strikes against PMF facilities.

To be sure, Russian diplomats often meet with *muqawama* leaders inside Iraq. [Asaib Ahl al-Haq \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-asaib-ahl-al-haq-0\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-asaib-ahl-al-haq-0) leader Qais al-Khazali, a [U.S.-designated terrorist and human rights abuser \(https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm847\)](https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm847), holds regular discussions with Russian ambassadors in Baghdad, [most recently \(https://twitter.com/alialakbar7900/status/1590764636764151810?s=46&t=3jcSC-JVsBwPxXdh1oK_hQ\)](https://twitter.com/alialakbar7900/status/1590764636764151810?s=46&t=3jcSC-JVsBwPxXdh1oK_hQ) on November 10 with Ambassador Kutrashev. The Russian embassy has only increased its engagement of *muqawama* actors since the Ukraine war began, appearing to materially support their pro-Russian propaganda operations across the Middle East—all part of the Kremlin's broader effort to shape the narrative on Ukraine in a region where it sees greater potential for success. This spate of [remarkably pro-Russian coverage \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/russia-love-sabereens-ukraine-coverage\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/russia-love-sabereens-ukraine-coverage) has been most prominent in major *muqawama* outlets such as [Sabereen News \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-sabereen-news\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-sabereen-news).

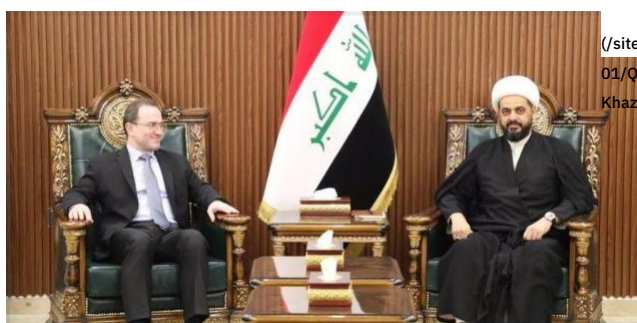


Figure 1. Russian ambassador Elbrus Kutrashev meets with U.S.-designated terrorist and human rights abuser Qais al-Khazali on November 10, 2022.

/sites/default/files/2023-01/Qais%20al-Khazali%20with%20Russian%20Am%20to%20Iraq%20Elb

Militia Spotlight assesses that Kaabi's visit signals a new intensification of this trend, whereby Moscow now feels free to court specific *muqawama* leaders who have no government role, who are fully outside the official PMF chain of command, and who have been designated as terrorists and human rights abusers by the U.S. government. Unlike under former prime minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi, Moscow will now face no diplomatic repercussions from Baghdad for openly engaging with Iraqi militias under what Asaib Ahl al-Haq calls Sudani's "*muqawama* government (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/muqawama-lauds-resistance-government-iraq>)."

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