

Orbital Fluctuations Among the Iran-Supported Militias in Iraq

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Articles & Testimony

Astronomical models provide a surprisingly helpful illustration of how Iran-backed armed groups wield power in the MENA region.

Serbian astronomer and geophysicist [Milutin Milankovic \(https://www.britannica.com/biography/Milutin-Milankovitch\)](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Milutin-Milankovitch) created a set of concepts that enabled scientists to describe the Earth's revolution around the Sun and how that orbit is affected by Earth's rotation around its own axis. These concepts are useful in describing the variations between the Iraqi militia groups that orbit Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Qods Force (IRGC-QF), helping to describe both the differences between groups and the variations in the closeness between individual groups and the Qods Force at different moments in time.

Few planetary bodies have a completely circular orbit around their star: instead, each is slightly "eccentric", being more elliptical during some circuits and more perfectly circular in others, depending on what other sources of gravity are pulling or pushing them. (In an example of eccentricity, Earth's summers are a few days longer than our winters, and our spring season is a few days longer than our autumn.) So it is with the Iraqi militias that were either purpose-built by Iran (such as the [Badr Organization \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-badr-organization\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-badr-organization), its offshoot [Kataib Hezbollah \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-kataib-hezbollah\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-kataib-hezbollah) (KH), and other parts of the Islamic Resistance) or which were adopted by Iran after the regime change in Iraq (such as the Sadrist breakaways that formed [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) (AAH), [Hezbollah Harakat al-Nujaba \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-harakat-hezbollah-al-nujaba\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-harakat-hezbollah-al-nujaba), or various Turkmen, Christian, Yezidi and Kurdish militias raised since 2014). (For a comprehensive run-through of all these

sub-sets, see Michael Knights, [“Iran’s Expanding Militia Army in Iraq: The New Special Groups \(https://ctc.westpoint.edu/irans-expanding-militia-army-iraq-new-special-groups/\),”](https://ctc.westpoint.edu/irans-expanding-militia-army-iraq-new-special-groups/) CTC Sentinel 12:7, 2019.) To make things easier, these groups will collectively be labeled the *muqawama* (resistance), reflecting their own self-identification, but their unique characteristics will not be overlooked.

System-Wide Trends in Iran-*Muqawama* Relations

The first point to be made is that in our metaphor, Iraqi *muqawama* bodies actually orbit a so-called binary or double star, one being the IRGC-QF and the other being the Iraqi state and the resources it can provide. One of the key system-wide trends visible in recent years has been the growing equalization of these two centers of gravity. At points when the Iraqi state was aligned with U.S.-led occupation forces or, more recently, briefly under the control of an anti-*muqawama* premier, Mustafa al-Kadhimi in 2020-2022, the *muqawama* has relied heavily on Iran for shelter and support. Other times—under *muqawama*-dominated prime ministers in 2012-2014, 2018-2019, and now again under the current “*muqawama* government” (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/muqawama-lauds-resistance-government-iraq>) formed in October 2022—the Iraqi state has itself become more important as a source of support. IRGC-QF seems quite happy for the *muqawama* to be self-financing. (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1057610X.2022.2161136>)

To some extent, conditions within Iran and the IRGC-QF have also affected how “distantly” Iran’s star shined on the militias at various moments. Iran has sometimes imposed its own interests upon the Iraqi militias, most notably in restraining their retaliation after the U.S. killing of IRGC-QF head Qassem Soleimani and his closest Iraqi lieutenant, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, in January 2020. Throughout 2020 and 2021—the latter years of the volatile Trump administration—Iran labored under a maximum pressure sanctions campaign and feared that U.S. strikes would target Iranian territory. This resulted in sustained periods in which Iran engendered resentment (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/muqawama-meltdown-part-1-protesting-election>) among the militias for enforcing restraint by the *muqawama*—both towards the U.S. and towards political opponents (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/sabereen-news-criticizes-iran-lack-support>) who seemed to be gaining the upper hand over the *muqawama*. For instance, the November 7, 2021 drone attack (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/muqawama-meltdown-part-2-drone-attack-prime-minister>) on the house of Iraqi Prime Minister Kadhimi was not approved by Iran and resulted in a firm rebuke by Qaani and tighter control of the *muqawama*’s use of Iran-provided drone systems. (This was not Qaani’s first warning to the *muqawama*. On July 29, 2021, Qaani warned that attacks on U.S. bases would not be tolerated, saying: “Truce-breakers will be held accountable. We gave the drones and we know who has them. We can take them back.” See Michael Knights, Crispin Smith, Hamdi Malik, “Discordance in the Iran Threat Network in Iraq: Militia Competition and Rivalry (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/discordance-iran-threat-network-iraq-militia-competition-and-rivalry>),” CTC Sentinel 14:8, 2021.)

The death of Soleimani also directly affected the closeness of Iran- *muqawama* relations. He was intimately involved in Iraqi affairs, even in the years when he was also managing a major Iranian expansion into civil war Syria. His death in January 2020—and the simultaneous killing of Muhandis—resulted in major shifts in how Iran behaved in Iraq and who it dealt with (<https://ctc.usma.edu/soleimani-dead-road-ahead-iranian-backed-militias-iraq/>). The new IRGC-QF commander, Esmail Qaani, had a less intimate relationship with surviving *muqawama* leaders (<https://ctc.westpoint.edu/discordance-in-the-iran-threat-network-in-iraq-militia-competition-and-rivalry/>), many of whom scattered for months after the killings. With Qaani’s guidance, the role of Muhandis was arguably split into two (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/muhandis-replaced-not-one-man-two>): one man (Kataib Hezbollah’s Abdal-Aziz al-Mohammadawi or Abu Fadak) would take over the formal role of Muhandis as operational commander of the state-funded Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) and one man

(Harakat al-Nujaba leader Akram al-Kaabi) would publicly lead ongoing “resistance” operations to avenge Soleimani and Muhandis, and to compel U.S. forces to leave Iraq. Yet, Iran appears once again to have used its influence to tamp down the potential lethality of “resistance” actions until they became almost cosmetic in nature (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/tuna-and-noodles-saga-findings-war-words-between-militias>)—roadside bomb attacks that were unable to hurt Americans, and rocket and drone attacks that were mostly undertaken in ways intended to reduce the risk of U.S. casualties.

Ultimately, Qaani’s calm methods seemed to pay off in adjusting to the more political challenges that faced (and nearly destroyed) the *muqawama* in 2021-2022. From January 2022 onwards, all *muqawama* criticism of him stopped abruptly (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/militia-lionization-esmail-qaani-consolidation-or-covering-embarrassment>) in a coordinated manner. By April 2022, IRGC-QF appears to have enforced a consolidation of *muqawama* media operations (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/sabereens-suspension-part-1-signs-dissent-and-noncompliance>), resulting in much greater message discipline (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/militias-show-message-discipline-during-sadrists-clashes>). Qaani’s role in enforcing a degree of unity and cohesion among the *muqawama* (via the Coordination Framework bloc or CF) was valuable, and allowed the CF to overturn electoral defeat by changing the modalities of government formation using legal tampering. This was extraordinarily effective and allowed the *muqawama* to seize control of the government formation process in 2022 and, improbably, to emerge on top of the political system (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/scoring-iraqs-new-government-metrics-preserving-us-interests>) with a strong chance of permanently consolidating their grip.

The Heavenly Bodies: Individual *Muqawama* Factions and Iran

Four key militias—AAH, Badr, KH and Nujaba—stand out as particularly important to IRGC-QF, though of course there are many other smaller players and even signs that IRGC-QF has cultivated direct control of militia cells for use in deniable special operations. (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-al-warithuun>)

In today’s highly political environment—when the capture of the Iraqi state is the brightest star in the system—Qais Khazali’s AAH has come to the fore. After a disappointing electoral result in 2021, Khazali pushed the high-risk strategy of confronting Sadr (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/khazali-isolated-over-international-zone-protests>) in the International Zone, which ultimately broke Sadrist resolve and triggered the August 2022 withdrawal of Moqtada al-Sadr’s supporters from parliament. Qais is now the highest-profile politician in Iraq, with the closest relationship to Prime Minister Mohammed Shia Sudani, and Qais’ somewhat reserved approach (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/qais-al-khazalis-show-independence>) to Qaani and the IRGC-QF seems to have won their grudging respect.

Hadi al-Ameri’s Badr Organization also has a leading political role in the CF and key command positions in the PMF headquarters (<https://etc.westpoint.edu/discordance-in-the-iran-threat-network-in-iraq-militia-competition-and-rivalry/>). Hadi’s strength since 2003 has been when operating on the political spectrum, not at the sharp end of armed resistance, and his skills and relationships are in high demand again. While Qais Khazali has undoubtedly grown in power, he failed to finish off Hadi in the 2021 elections—where Badr did at least as well as AAH. The Badr leader has good ties to all players—including Western governments and Kurdish factions who still cold-shoulder Qais. Qaani and all Iranian actors still have warm ties to Hadi and Badr.

While AAH and Badr play largely in the political sphere—with offshoots in big-money corruption and organized crime ventures—KH and Nujaba think of themselves as players largely outside of traditional politics. In recent years, KH succumbed to considerable internal discord. (This is chronicled in great detail in Michael Knights, Crispin Smith,

Hamdi Malik, “[Discordance in the Iran Threat Network in Iraq: Militia Competition and Rivalry](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/discordance-iran-threat-network-iraq-militia-competition-and-rivalry) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/discordance-iran-threat-network-iraq-militia-competition-and-rivalry>),” CTC Sentinel 14:8, 2021.) One can identify at least [three major camps](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/exposing-kataib-hezbollahs-royal-family-insights-recent-leaks) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/exposing-kataib-hezbollahs-royal-family-insights-recent-leaks>) within KH: the Hoquq bloc that holds (but does not actively use) six seats in parliament; the Abu Hussein (Ahmad Mohsen Faraj al-Hamidawi) wing, and the Bassem Mohammed Hasab Al-Majidi wing, backed by Abu Fadak. Even so, KH remains greatly trusted by Iran for discrete military tasks—precision strikes on [U.S.](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/kataib-hezbollahs-role-august-15-al-tanf-attack) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/kataib-hezbollahs-role-august-15-al-tanf-attack>) and [Gulf targets](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iraqi-militia-group-makes-credible-new-threat-against-gulf-states) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iraqi-militia-group-makes-credible-new-threat-against-gulf-states>) from Iraq—but its overall utility in politics is limited.

Akram al-Kaabi and Nujaba seem to have [gained in stature](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/muhandis-replaced-not-one-man-two) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/muhandis-replaced-not-one-man-two>) since the deaths of Soleimani and Muhandis, which Kaabi quickly used as an opportunity to demonstrate ongoing loyalty to IRGC-QF, regardless of the consequences (such as the potential for follow-on U.S. strikes). In December 2021, Kaabi was recorded addressing an IRGC-QF and *muqawama* audience in front of the [flags of all the remaining active anti-U.S. resistance groups](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/akram-kaabis-revealing-speech) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/akram-kaabis-revealing-speech>). The question for analysts is whether Kaabi is actually trusted with real authority or is just being used as a [public face](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/akram-kaabis-visit-moscow-and-its-aftermath) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/akram-kaabis-visit-moscow-and-its-aftermath>) for the *muqawama*. With anti-U.S. “resistance” operations devolving into largely performative stunts, the kinetic resistance is (for now) a less important asset for Iran, albeit one that will be preserved for future use. At the very least, Kaabi’s small militia showed cohesion and unity at a time when KH was showing itself to be a “hot mess” incapable of internal discipline.

Conclusions: The Astronomy of Iraqi Militias Today

I ran is one of two stars at the center of the *muqawama*’s solar system, and the militia-captured Iraqi state is another, and the latter is arguably growing brighter. Going forward, the IRGC-QF may be quite satisfied to see the *muqawama* bodies orbit more closely in sync with the Iraqi state and its resources. The closest factions to the IRGC-QF are AAH, in the political space, followed by Badr. In terms of paramilitary operations—which are temporarily less in demand—the most useful player for Iran is probably still KH, yet the most publicly visible player is Nujaba. In this setting, even smaller militias tend to be alike to moons, caught in the gravity of one or more of the four larger militias and often relying on them for resources and political support. (The grouping of militias in this manner can be best understood geographically, and is laid out in detail here: Michael Knights, “[Iran’s Expanding Militia Army in Iraq: The New Special Groups](https://ctc.westpoint.edu/irans-expanding-militia-army-iraq-new-special-groups/) (<https://ctc.westpoint.edu/irans-expanding-militia-army-iraq-new-special-groups/>),” CTC Sentinel 12:7, 2019.)

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