

Overlap Between the Islamic Resistance in Iraq and the Popular Mobilization Forces

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Brief Analysis

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

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

The "Islamic Resistance" brand mourned the loss of government-paid PMF personnel who were killed while preparing a terrorist attack on international advisors.

On December 3, a U.S. airstrike in Kirkuk killed five members of the Iran-backed militia [Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba \(/node/16716\)](#) (HaN) as they were preparing to launch a one-way attack drone. Social media affiliated with HaN immediately mourned the dead fighters without mentioning that they were members of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), the official militia umbrella organization paid for and avowedly commanded by the Iraqi government. The usual course of action for Iranian proxies in this kind of incident is to hide under the umbrella of legitimate Iraqi national forces, thereby creating confusion and avoiding potential consequences. This time was different, however.



Figure 1: Sabereen News commemorates five dead IRI operators who were also PMF members.

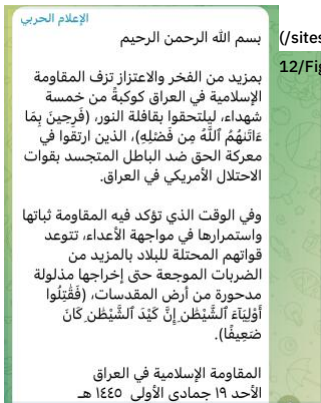


Figure 2: IRI statement claiming the five Kirkuk "martyrs."

Shortly after the U.S. strike, [Sabereen News \(/node/16673\)](#) and other platforms close to HaN identified the slain operators as part of the [Islamic Resistance in Iraq \(/node/18416\)](#) (IRI) brand and claimed that they were killed while conducting their duty (Figure 1). This was followed by an official IRI statement: "With all pride and privilege, the Islamic resistance in Iraq is celebrating five of its martyred operators who joined the convoy of light (rejoicing in what Allah has bestowed upon them of his bounty) who ascended in the battle of good against evil represented by the U.S. occupation in Iraq. In time, the resistance ensures that it is constant and consistent in facing the enemy. We promise their occupational forces of our country more severe attacks until they are humiliated and expelled from the land of holies. So fight against the friends of Satan. Indeed, the plot of Satan has never been weak" (Figure 2).

On December 4, the five fighters were buried in Najaf after a funeral service in Baghdad. Their coffins were covered with HaN's flag, not the Iraqi or PMF flag. This was presumably done to separate them from the wider PMF umbrella and suggest that they were not part of any official Iraqi security agency (Figure 3). Similarly, [al-Nujaba TV \(/node/16912\)](#) claimed that the fighters were part of "the resistance" and avoided mentioning the PMF. For example, the channel declared, "With great presence, the resistance commences the funeral of the martyrs killed in the U.S. aggression incident in Kirkuk."



Figure 3: The HaN flag on the coffins of PMF members who were killed as they prepared a drone attack on U.S. forces.

In a contradictory approach, however, other *muqawama* (resistance) platforms identified the fighters as PMF members and claimed they were killed while performing duties for a legitimate Iraqi security agency. On December 4, Al-Ghadeer TV, a channel of the Iran-backed [Badr Organization \(/node/17003\)](#), reported the following: "Five martyrs were the victims of U.S. aggression against the sons of the PMF in Kirkuk. The U.S. occupation continues to violate Iraqi sovereignty and target a group of the sons of PMF" (Figure 4). [Al-Ahd TV \(/node/17268\)](#), an organ of the militia [Asaib Ahl al-Haq \(/node/16715\)](#) (AAH), made similar claims: "A brutal airstrike. America repeats its aggression on the PMF...Violating Iraqi sovereignty is an unforgivable crime."

In other words, the *muqawama* still cannot make up their minds: are they a disciplined front that uses facade tactics to blur accountability, or a collection of competing factions trying to outdo each other and win the title of the "truest" resistance group? The Kirkuk airstrike provided an opportunity for HaN to advertise its work alone without being part of the IRI umbrella brand. This effort included covering the coffins of its operators in the HaN flag and using social media platforms to promote their role and affiliation. Yet such tactics also created a chain of evidence that proves a nexus between the U.S.-designated terrorist group HaN, the Iraqi state-funded PMF, and the attack claim mechanism IRI. ❖

Figure 4: Badr's al-Ghadeer TV identifies dead HaN

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