

Who Are Nujaba and Why Did the U.S. Just Strike Them?

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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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The group's cadres are the most reckless of Iran's terrorist proxies in Iraq and have been the proximate cause of almost all recent U.S. strikes.

On January 4, an American strike killed at least one senior commander from [Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba \(HaN\) \(/node/16716\)](#), a U.S.-designated terrorist organization in Iraq. The operation took place in Baghdad and came just hours after the anniversary of the January 3, 2020, U.S. targeted killings of Iranian general Qasem Soleimani and Iraqi militia leader Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. What led Washington to take this bold step, and why was HaN targeted?



(/sites/default/files/2024-01/GC_YUfJWgAAwtSO_0.jpg)

Figure 1: The remains of a HaN vehicle struck by up to four U.S. AGM-179 JAGM munitions in central Baghdad on January 4, 2024.

As the Militia Spotlight [profile of the group \(/node/16716\)](#) explains, HaN is perhaps the most aggressive anti-American Iran-backed militia in Iraq. Its leader, Akram Kaabi, has positioned himself to be the "face" of the armed "resistance" to the U.S. presence there. Moreover, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force (IRGC-QF)—once commanded by the late Soleimani—has repeatedly boosted Kaabi [at public events \(/node/17179\)](#), while high-level Russian officials have [publicly engaged him \(/node/17900\)](#) in Moscow.

Unlike other U.S.-designated terrorist groups in Iraq—such as [Kataib Hezbollah \(/node/16641\)](#) (KH), [Asaib Ahl al-Haq \(/node/16715\)](#) (AAH), and [Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada \(/node/16731\)](#) (KSS)—Kaabi's movement does not have a political party. HaN talks and acts as if it has little to lose by angering the United States and Israel, while other Iraqi militias have been more circumspect and cautious—especially AAH and its leaders Qais and Laith al-Khazali, whom HaN has [openly taunted as cowards \(/node/18509\)](#) for failing to attack American forces.

Militia Spotlight assesses that HaN is responsible for most of the attacks on U.S. bases in Syria north of the Euphrates (Conoco, Omar, al-

Shadadi, Kharab al-Jir/Rmelan, Tal Baidar, and al-Malikiyah), as well as attacks on U.S. sites in Iraqi Kurdistan (Erbil, Harir). Since October 17, when militias began their latest wave of strikes in response to Israel's ground operation in Gaza, HaN has carried out at least 95 out of 136 total attacks against U.S. forces (69 percent). While avowedly anti-American terrorist groups like KH have coasted along by providing only minimal support to Hamas and the "axis of resistance," HaN has gone all-in.



(/sites/default/files/2024-01/Akram%20Kaabi.jpg)

Figure 2: U.S.-designated terrorist Akram Kaabi with Russia's deputy foreign minister in Moscow, January 2023.



Figure 3: Nujaba terrorist and Iraqi-government-paid PMF commander Mushtaq Taleb al-Saeedi (aka Abu Taqwa al-Saeedi).

Nujaba's actions are also the proximate trigger for six of the seven rounds of U.S. strikes conducted in response to militia attacks since October 27. In those six cases, HaN members either launched reckless salvos of unguided rockets that only failed to kill U.S. personnel by blind luck, or launched more precise attacks that deliberately caused casualties (e.g., a December 25 drone strike in Erbil seriously injured a U.S. service member). This behavior is in line with the group's past actions—in March 2023, for example, an advanced HaN drone attack in Kharab al-Jir/Rmelan killed one American.

In contrast, KH has been the proximate cause of just one U.S. strike: a December 20 operation conducted after the militia launched two al-Aqsa 1 rockets against al-Asad Air Base. This was not KH's first use of such rockets, so the U.S. strike was a kind of "banked" response meant to warn the group to knock it off—a message that KH quickly heeded.

The Nujaba operator killed in this week's U.S. strike, Mushtaq Taleb al-Saeedi (aka Abu Taqwa al-Saeedi), was deputy head of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) Baghdad Belt Operations and also played a role in the 12th PMF Brigade run by HaN. He was known to distribute advanced Iranian conventional weapons (drones and missiles) warehoused in the Baghdad Belts area. In addition to the confirmed death of one assistant, Ali Nayef Arraf (Abu Sajjad), unconfirmed reports indicate that a third person was with Saeedi at the time and was injured by the strike.

By killing an important HaN figure after tracking his vehicle, the United States is sending a strong signal that it is willing to go further. Indeed, no group deserves this kind of lethal targeting more urgently than Nujaba, at least based on its recent activity. Other militia actors likely have mixed reactions: they are somewhat jealous of the group's track record and its closeness to the IRGC-QF, so some of them may be silently pleased to see HaN being reined in, but they might also be jealous of the propaganda potential Nujaba will reap from its high-profile "martyrs." In any case, HaN now has a big decision to make: go with its natural instinct to escalate, or switch to clearly symbolic attacks that avoid casualties in order to de-escalate with the United States. ❖

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