

Saraya Awliya al-Dam Finds New Mission in Israel Attacks

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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 brand appears to have been reactivated by its parent organization, Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada, to claim certain attacks on Israel during the Gaza war.

The militia brand [Saraya Awliya al-Dam \(SAD\) \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-saraya-awliya-al-dam\)](#) is one of the oldest yet least consistent facade groups used by the self-styled Iraqi *muqawama* (resistance) to obscure responsibility for their attacks on domestic and foreign targets. Emerging in a brief August-October 2020 series of [roadside bomb attacks \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-saraya-awliya-al-dam\)](#) against Iraqi convoys servicing U.S. logistical supply lines, SAD later reemerged via the much more serious February 16, 2021, [rocket attack on Erbil \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/attributing-erbil-attack-role-open-source-monitoring\)](#) in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. It then tried briefly to [stake out the anti-air part \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/assessing-militia-threats-coalition-aircraft\)](#) of *muqawama* operations against the United States on June 27 of that year, but without following through with any known action.

Back in Action, Allegedly Against Israel

Now SAD appears to back in a new sequence of attack claims, this time focused on Israel. The pattern is clear: this year, the group [has claimed drone attacks on Israel \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/tracking-anti-us-strikes-iraq-and-syria-during-gaza-crisis\)](#) using Iranian-designed Shahed-101 X-tail drones, including strikes on May 30 (against Haifa harbor), June 2 (Haifa refinery and harbor), June 8 (Rabin power plant), and June 14 (a “spy base” in Golan). There is no evidence that any of these claimed strikes reached Israel or cause damage. (See Militia Spotlight’s [attack tracker \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/tracking-anti-us-strikes-iraq-and-syria-during-gaza-crisis\)](#) for full details on all attacks during the Gaza war.)

Anti-Israel attacks are a natural choice for SAD. On September 27, 2021, militia outlet Sabereen News [posted a statement \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/sabereen-news-calls-beheading-iraqi-citizens\)](#) that read, “Saraya Awliya al-Dam reconfirms its oath to...[Qasem] Soleimani and [Abu Mahdi] al-Muhandis to behead anyone who calls for normalization [with Israel] in the land of Ali and Hussein [i.e., Iraq],” referring to the late Iranian general and Iraqi militia chief killed the previous year by a U.S. strike (Figure 1).

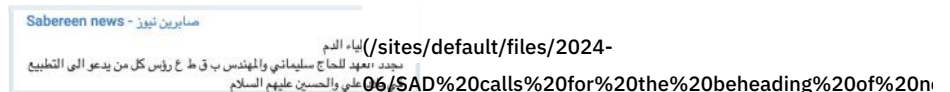


Figure 1: Sabereen reports SAD’s threat to behead Iraqi citizens, September 27, 2021

New Videos

Each of the first three purported attacks on Israel was accompanied by a launch video that showed not only Shahed-101 launches, but also the antics of a small squad of masked commandos standing in a dark, supposedly underground room in which two drones sit next to packing crates. Pictures adorn the walls showing various religious figures and *muqawama* martyrs:

- The May 30 video showed Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, the late president Ebrahim Raisi, and Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani
- The June 2 video showed Soleimani and Muhandis
- The June 8 video showed the following martyrs: Mohammed Jassim Sayyid Mutlaq al-Gharawi (aka Abu Saif al-Gharawi) and Mahdi al-Kinani, both members of Asaib Ahl al-Haq who were killed by the Islamic State in Samarra in 2015; Abu Taqwa al-Saeedi, a Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba member killed by a U.S. strike on January 4, 2024; Abu Baqr al-Saedi, a Kataib Hezbollah member killed by a U.S. strike on February 7, 2024; and Abu Muntadher al-Mohammadawi, a Badr Organization figure killed by the Islamic State in Anbar in 2015

SAD has also resurrected its old anti-air theme. On June 6, it posted an image of a masked commando with an IGLA-9K38 man-portable air-defense systems (MANPADS).

Israel's February 21 Strike on Abu Kamal

The SAD facade has most regularly been tied to [Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-kataib-sayyid-al-shuhada\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-kataib-sayyid-al-shuhada) (KSS), a U.S. designated Foreign Terrorist Organization (<https://ofac.treasury.gov/recent-actions/20231117>) since November 17, 2023, and the faction that commands the 14th Brigade of the Iraqi government's Population Mobilization Forces (PMF). In February 2021, the United States launched lethal airstrikes on KSS personnel as retaliation for the group's [assessed involvement \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/erbil-rocket-cell-insights-haidar-hamza-al-bayatis-confession\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/erbil-rocket-cell-insights-haidar-hamza-al-bayatis-confession) in the February 16 rocket attack on Erbil airport. At the time, one of the group's members, Haidar Hamza Abbas Mustafa al-Bayati, [was captured and made a confession \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/erbil-rocket-cell-insights-haidar-hamza-al-bayatis-confession\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/erbil-rocket-cell-insights-haidar-hamza-al-bayatis-confession) in relation to the attack.

Now Israel seems to have followed the same pattern. On June 21, 2024, an explosion in Abu Kamal, Syria, claimed the life of a KSS member, according to the group. This was probably an Israeli airstrike, though *muqawama* channels quickly speculated that it may have been a U.S. strike, and (unsubstantiated) rumors spread of a militia counterstrike on the American-manned al-Tanf garrison in south Syria.

If SAD is under the control of KSS, this strike may have been in response to the recent spate of SAD operations against Israel. On January 24, KSS leader Abu Ala al-Walai (real name Hashim Bunyan al-Siraji) [announced \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/can-iraqs-militias-imitate-houthi-successes-sea\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/can-iraqs-militias-imitate-houthi-successes-sea) the start of the second phase of Iraqi *muqawama* operations in solidarity with the Gaza war: "[This phase] will include enforcing the blockade on Zionist maritime navigation in the Mediterranean Sea and render the [Israeli] entity's ports out of service...This will continue until the unjust siege on Gaza is lifted and the horrific Zionist massacres against its people are stopped." SAD's actions seem to fit what he was talking about, albeit with a four-month time lag.

Why Does SAD Issue Claims Separately from the Islamic Resistance in Iraq?

SAD was an inconsistent presence in the anti-U.S. attacks of 2020-21, dropping in and out. It may show the same lack of staying power in the current wave of anti-Israeli attacks. KSS has always been one of the messier *muqawama* outfits, showing its dysfunction in the arms depot fires that [showered Baghdad with deadly rockets \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/militias-are-threatening-public-safety-iraq\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/militias-are-threatening-public-safety-iraq) and the [nepotistic failures of Abu Ala's son Jaafar \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/ofac-designates-iraqi-militiamen-part-2-kss-and-abu-ala-al-walai\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/ofac-designates-iraqi-militiamen-part-2-kss-and-abu-ala-al-walai). KSS claims have often overreached, including its threats against aircraft.

Even so, the brand's current reemergence is intriguing: if SAD members are KSS, have they been taking part in the wider campaign conducted under the umbrella brand the [Islamic Resistance in Iraq \(/node/18416\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/facade-group-linked-iran-claims-five-attacks-americans-iraq-and-syria) until now, in line with Abu Ala's exhortation? If not, why did they join now? Or if they were part of these attacks all along, why did they break out their own brand now? Does it indicate a rift or a need to gain more direct credit, as [Nujaba \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/facade-group-linked-iran-claims-five-attacks-americans-iraq-and-syria\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/facade-group-linked-iran-claims-five-attacks-americans-iraq-and-syria) and [Kataib Hezbollah \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/kataib-hezbollah-publicly-mocks-asaib-ahl-al-haq-cowardice\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/kataib-hezbollah-publicly-mocks-asaib-ahl-al-haq-cowardice) have [occasionally sought \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/signs-iranian-coordination-iraqi-base-attacks-and-messaging\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/signs-iranian-coordination-iraqi-base-attacks-and-messaging) by claiming attacks also branded by IRI? The recent SAD attacks do not appear to have been claimed by IRI, nor were they undertaken in partnership with IRI, as the [joint attacks with the Houthis \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iraqi-groups-and-yemens-houthis-claim-more-joint-attacks-israel\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iraqi-groups-and-yemens-houthis-claim-more-joint-attacks-israel) have been. ❖

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