

Profile: Abna al-Muhandis

by [Michael Knights \(/experts/michael-knights\)](#), [Hamdi Malik \(/experts/hamdi-malik\)](#)

Jul 19, 2024

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/lmht-amt-abna-almhnds\)](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Knights \(/experts/michael-knights\)](#)

Michael Knights is the Jill and Jay Bernstein Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and cofounder of the Militia Spotlight platform, which offers in-depth analysis of developments related to Iran-backed militias.



[Hamdi Malik \(/experts/hamdi-malik\)](#)

Hamdi Malik is an associate fellow with The Washington Institute and cofounder of its Militia Spotlight platform.



Brief Analysis

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

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

A student recruitment and indoctrination group tied to a PMF directorate, with a name that eulogizes a slain U.S.-designated terrorist.

Name: Tajamo Abna al-Muhandis (Sons of Muhandis Gathering)

Type of movement: A social organization linked to the Iraqi government and controlled by members of U.S.-designated terrorist groups such as [Kataib Hezbollah \(/node/16641\)](#) (KH) and [Asaib Ahl al-Haq \(/node/16715\)](#) (AAH). Engages in social operations centered at Iraqi universities, with a focus on identifying skilled candidates for future service in Iran's security and intelligence services. Organizes events and activities targeting both the U.S. presence and Iraqi social and religious moderates. Also supports armed groups that have been sanctioned for human rights abuses against Iraqi youths.

Role: The official mission of Abna al-Muhandis (AAM) includes the following goals:

- Promote and propagate an Iranian version of Shia political Islam and ideology via cultural, artistic, social, and educational activities in Iraqi universities.
- Infiltrate Iraqi universities to train and recruit the future elites of Iraqi society and create a pipeline of new members for the self-styled *muqawama* (resistance).
- In the group's own words, "We aim to avenge the blood of the leaders by representing the principles and values of the valiant martyr of the nation, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis."
- Hold protests and rallies against adversary groups, stage oath-taking ceremonies, commemorate the deaths of terrorist leaders, organize seminars, offer scholarships for Iraqi students to study in Iran, and host technical competitions. Notably, the winner of one such competition was a drone jamming invention.

History and objectives:

- The seeds of AAM were [private security guards inserted into Iraqi universities \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/injecting-new-blood-militias-gradual-takeover-iraqi-higher-education-popular\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/injecting-new-blood-militias-gradual-takeover-iraqi-higher-education-popular) in 2010-14, drawing mainly from KH, AAH, and other Iran-backed



Abna al-Muhandis logo

(/sites/defa
07/Abna%2

militias and enabled by Ali al-Adib, the pro-*muqawama* minister of higher education.

- From 2014 onward, the *muqawama* presence in universities came under the umbrella of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) General Directorate of Social Relations and Services (Al-Mudiriya al-Amma lil Elaqaat wal Khadamat al-Ejtima'ia fi al-Hashd al-Shaabi). Key players in this effort were young *muqawama* propagandists and recruiters closely associated with then-PMF chief Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and his predominantly KH leadership cadre.
- As important young PMF loyalists completed service in the PMF, Muhandis would often ensure they received preferential placement in university courses as a kind of militia "GI Bill," essentially creating fellowships for a new generation of *muqawama* leaders.
- When Muhandis was killed by a U.S. strike in January 2020, AAM was formalized as both a tribute to him and a check on student demonstrators after they brought down the *muqawama*-controlled government during the 2019 Tishreen uprisings.
- The two key founders of AAM were:
 - Muqtada Zaid al-Maqdisi, the most prominent aid to Muhandis in his "Information Group."
 - Hashem al-Haidari, a KH ideologue and founder of the [Ahd Allah Movement \(/node/16734\)](#), a social and propaganda program spreading the idea of *velayat-e faqih* (the doctrine under which Iran's Supreme Leader wields absolute power) in Iraq.
 - Both Haidari and Maqdisi have direct access to organizations funded and run by the Iranian Supreme Leader's office.
- Another founding member of AAM is Moheb Shrad, a prominent KH media specialist who started as a field reporter with militia-linked television channels and ended up working for KH's [al-Etejah TV \(/node/16939\)](#). From there he rose to become one of the most prominent KH media figures, with direct access to the group's leadership.
- Other prominent AAM members are:
 - Moammal Zaid al-Maqdisi: brother to Muqtada al-Maqdisi, studied pharmacy at al-Rafidain University College, a private institution in Baghdad.
 - Raafat al-Yasir: a graduate of the University of Technology in Baghdad, he became an AAH-linked propagandist working in the PMF's media apparatus. He is increasingly close to Muhammad al-Aqabi, head of the PMF's Media Directorate (Mudiryat al-Ealam fi al-Hashd al-Shaabi). Aqabi himself was very close to Muhandis, who picked him for the role of chief PMF propagandist.
 - Mohammad Muhsen Ahmad, a doctor who helped establish AAM when he was a student at Baghdad's Ibn Sina University for Medical and Pharmaceutical Sciences. He currently works as a physician in the Ministry of Defense.
 - Murtadha Musa al-Mayali, a petroleum engineer who graduated from the University of Technology in Baghdad and currently works at the Najaf refinery.
 - Anas Fadhil al-Chali, a prolific writer who provides poetry to various *muqawama* media and propaganda organizations.
- An important early focus for AAM was the recruitment of technical students working on issues relevant to drone and counter-drone warfare, including composite materials, 3D printing, electronics, frequency management, and computer numerical control in precision engineering. AAM and various Iraqi university departments became a feeder pool for terrorist drone units in Iraq and Syria.
- Like the rest of the *muqawama*, AAM appears to have gone through a period of internal discord in 2021-22. On January 6, 2022, the head of the AAM bodyguard unit—a member of both the PMF's 45th Brigade and KH's intelligence arm, Unit 101—was shot dead. Muqtada al-Maqdisi evoked jealous reactions among other *muqawama* media figures during this period, including within the PMF Media Directorate.
- In October 2022, a top *muqawama* propagandist—AAH's Naim al-Aboudi—was appointed as minister of higher education. This move [smoothed the way for AAM \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/injecting-new-blood-militias-gradual-takeover-iraqi-higher-education-popular\)](#) to operate more effectively within the university system, without any opposition from the government.

Chain of command:

- **Kataib Hezbollah.** Since its inception, AAM has been shaped by loyalists to Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis (most of whom came from KH backgrounds) and supported by KH-linked leaders and organizations (e.g., Hashem al-Haidari and Ahd Allah).
- **PMF.** AAM is organizationally linked to the PMF and is thus a paid organ of the Iraqi state. The PMF General Directorate of Social Relations and Services is under the overall control of U.S.-designated human rights abuser Faleh al-Fayyad and U.S.-designated terrorist Abu Fadak. The directorate is led by Ali Shaker Qasem al-Khafaf, another close associate of Muhandis.
- **Ali al-Kindi** is the head of AAM.
- **Founders.** AAM will likely continue to be influenced by its founders Muqtada al-Maqdisi, Hashem al-Haidari, and Moheb Shrad.

Affiliate elements:

- **Minister of Higher Education Naim al-Aboudi.** A member of the U.S.-designated terrorist group AAH, Aboudi [facilitates AAM activities \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/injecting-new-blood-militias-gradual-takeover-iraqi-higher-education-popular\)](#) within

Iraqi universities.

- **Professors and departments.** [Numerous professors and faculty members \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/injecting-new-blood-militias-gradual-takeover-iraqi-higher-education-popular\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/injecting-new-blood-militias-gradual-takeover-iraqi-higher-education-popular) have been identified with AAM, especially within the civil engineering department of the University of Technology in Baghdad and within Basra University.
- **Muqawama media channels.** AAM receives strong and favorable coverage from Lebanese Hezbollah's al-Mayadeen TV, KH's al-Etejah TV, AAH's al-Ahd TV (</node/17268>), and many others.
- **Ahd Allah.** The social movement facilitates and supports the work of AAM.
- **Raba Allah.** AAM has supported mob violence undertaken by the KH-controlled group [Raba Allah \(/node/16671\)](/node/16671), including against moderate television stations such as MBC, Al-Arabiya, and Dijlah.

Subordinate elements:

- AAM has a webpage, a minor Facebook account, and a small presence on Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube.



PART OF A SERIES

[Militia Spotlight: Profiles \(/policy-analysis/series/militia-spotlight-profiles\)](/policy-analysis/series/militia-spotlight-profiles)



[How to Use Militia Spotlight: Profiles](/policy-analysis/how-use-militia-spotlight-profiles)

[\(/policy-analysis/how-use-militia-spotlight-profiles\)](/policy-analysis/how-use-militia-spotlight-profiles)



[Profile: Abna al-Muhandis](/policy-analysis/profile-abna-al-muhandis)

[\(/policy-analysis/profile-abna-al-muhandis\)](/policy-analysis/profile-abna-al-muhandis)



[Profile: Lions of the Ougaidat Brigade](/policy-analysis/profile-lions-ougaidat-brigade)

[\(/policy-analysis/profile-lions-ougaidat-brigade\)](/policy-analysis/profile-lions-ougaidat-brigade)

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Responding to the Islamic State Attack in Oman](#)

Jul 24, 2024

♦
Aaron Y. Zelin,
Elizabeth Dent

[\(/policy-analysis/responding-islamic-state-attack-oman\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[The Netanyahu Visit, U.S.-Israel Ties, and the War on Hamas](#)

Jul 23, 2024

♦
Stuart Eizenstat,
Morgan Viña,
Dennis Ross

[\(/policy-analysis/netanyahu-visit-us-israel-ties-and-war-hamas\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[To Stop Israeli Attacks on Yemen, Enforce Sanctions on the Iran-Houthi Link](#)

Jul 22, 2024

♦
Michael Knights

[\(/policy-analysis/stop-israeli-attacks-yemen-enforce-sanctions-iran-houthi-link\)](#)

TOPICS

[Military & Security \(/policy-analysis/military-security\)](#)

[Terrorism \(/policy-analysis/terrorism\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Iraq \(/policy-analysis/iraq\)](#)