

# New Exposé on Sudani PMO Eavesdropping Is Suppressed, But Archived Online

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

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

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**A second major report on the political surveillance scandal was quickly muted, in part because it was highly critical of Iranian Qods Force commander Esmail Qaani.**

**A**s the Iraqi judiciary follows up on the country's twenty-first-century rendition of [Watergate \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iraqs-watergate-and-fallout-us-relations\)](#)—a widespread eavesdropping campaign against politicians, militiamen, and their families—a new twist has emerged after a blockbuster exposé article on the issue was quickly suppressed. Last month, the online publication New Region was one of the first to break the story on an eavesdropping operation conducted by the Prime Minister's Office (PMO), identifying Mohammed Johi, deputy director-general of the PMO Administrative Department, as the man running the effort on behalf of Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani's family. On September 24, New Region issued a new exposé that was taken down after just five hours due to political pressure brought by Sudani's defenders in Iran and the Iraqi PMO.

The article was downloaded by many users before the takedown, however, and the full text is mirrored on numerous internet archiving sites. That text has been reproduced below, but several highlights merit further comment.

### Significant Criticism of Qaani

The suppressed article details a very sensitive set of trips to Baghdad made by Esmail Qaani, the head of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force (IRGC-QF), whose goal was to quiet the anti-Sudani revolt within the Coordination Framework (CF), the Iraqi Shia leadership coalition for militia political factions. The writer, Saudad al-Salhy, is known to have good sources within the Iran-backed *fasail* (armed groups); these sources appear

to have used his article to vent their criticism of Qaani to an extent not seen since late 2021, when various militias felt the commander was failing to back them fully after their disastrous results in Iraq's October 2021 election. In this case, Salhy was told by an unnamed CF leader, possibly Qais al-Khazali, that Qaani had annoyed the CF by failing “to show any understanding of the sensitivity of the ‘eavesdropping’ case and the issues it has caused through surveilling wives and family members of the targets.” Salhy then quotes the same unnamed CF leader as saying that Qaani offended the Iraqi leaders because he “was giving orders and not speaking as a sympathetic mediator” when he told CF members to put the eavesdropping scandal behind them and “move on.” Interestingly, Qaani reportedly delivered the “move on” message on behalf of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei—something that Tehran does when it needs the message to be heard and acted upon, and when Qaani’s limited gravitas with Iraqi groups is not sufficient to communicate a tough message.

### **Eavesdropping Details**

The suppressed article also detailed the method used by the PMO eavesdropping cell. According to Salhy, Johi’s cell used simple Call Detail Records (CDRs) sourced from Iraqi telecommunication providers without a court order. These records provide “metadata about phone calls and messages” that “typically show the phone numbers of the caller and recipient, time and date of the call, duration of the call, and location data based on cell towers.” This kind of traffic data can create devastating patterns of evidence about relationships between individuals, including private matters such as visits to mistresses, informants, and money-movers. Salhy’s new piece does not dwell on the other voice recordings and messages from Johi’s cell that investigative judge Ali Chaffat is currently parsing.

### **Explaining the Takedown**

Under Sudani, the PMO has a large and well-funded media operations wing led by Rabee Nader, who previously worked for U.S.-designated terrorist groups Kataib Hezbollah and Asaib Ahl al-Haq. The United States banned Nader from attending last year’s UN General Assembly due to these terrorist associations. This wing may have moved quickly to suppress the new exposé due to its criticism of Qaani and its investigation into the PMO’s complicity in the eavesdropping, including its speculation that Johi’s cell may have “formed and operated with Sudani’s approval, knowledge and protection.” This raises the question of why the article was written in the first place—which might have more to do with Khazali’s growing anger toward not only Sudani, but Qaani too.

## **Recovered Text: Iraq’s Shiite leaders at odds over wiretapping scandal despite Iranian efforts at mediation**

**23 September 2024**

*Summary: Iran’s Quds Force commander Esmail Qaani arrived in Baghdad last week in hopes of defusing tensions between Shiite forces and Prime Minister Mohammed Shia’ al-Sudani over the wire-tapping scandal, several sources told The New Region.*

### **Suadad al-Salhy**

BAGHDAD, Iraq - Iran’s Elite Quds Forces commander Esmail Qaani took a quick and secretive trip to Baghdad on Tuesday in hopes of defusing weeks-long tensions between leaders of the Shiite Coordination Framework and Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia’ al-Sudani, but to no avail, several political leaders told The New Region.

Sudani, who assumed office in October 2022, has been facing his largest crisis yet with his biggest backers, the leaders of the ruling Coordination Framework.

After the exposure of a purported “wiretapping” network last month, allegedly run by several of his office employees inside the government palace where he conducts his daily work, Sudani’s previously strong support base has been

trembling.

The "wiretapping" network, or the "Mohammed Juhi network" as the Supreme Judicial Council called it, was said to be involved in "unclean activities", including wiretapping, espionage, blackmail, and others that targeted political leaders, MPs, judges, and journalists.

Juhi, who is said to lead the network alongside several of the National Intelligence and National Security Services' officers, is the most prominent detainee so far as he was the Deputy Director General of the Administrative Department in Sudani's office and the follow-up officer with members of the parliament.

Officials and politicians familiar with the investigations told The New Region that at least four top senior Coordination Framework leaders and their families were targeted by the Juhi Network. Leaders of the Coordination Framework who spoke to The New Region said that the extensive security facilities that Juhi and his team were receiving to practice their work "freely" for more than a year inside the prime minister's office suggest only two possible scenarios.

Either the network was operating throughout that period using the broad powers and wide human, financial, and security resources granted to the prime minister's military and private offices without Sudani's knowledge, which would be "a grave national security breach that cannot be overlooked," or the network was formed and operated with Sudani's approval, knowledge, and protection, which they would consider "a major betrayal of trust and a crossing of one of the biggest red lines guaranteed constitutionally, religiously, and morally."

However, tensions between Sudani and his key Shiite backers, including Nouri al-Maliki, Iraq's former prime minister and leader of the State of Law Coalition, and Qais al-Khazali, leader of Asaib Ahl al-Haq and Sudani's main government sponsor, have been at their highest levels since the network was exposed.

Qaani, who is Iran's point of contact with Tehran-backed Iraqi political and armed forces and successor to the influential late Qasem Soleimani, arrived in Baghdad on Tuesday "to discuss the latest regional and domestic developments," familiar sources told The New Region. During his extremely secretive three-day trip, Qaani met with most of the leaders of the Shiite armed factions linked to Iran, leaders of the Coordination Framework, and Faiq Zidan, head of the Supreme Judicial Council.

Ever since Soleimani was killed in a US strike just outside Baghdad International Airport, Iranian officials, especially those of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) have kept a low profile during their visits to Iraq. Qaani is no exception, and on numerous occasions, his visits to Baghdad have been kept completely secret from the media.

Settling the outstanding issues between Sudani and his Shiite backers was one of the most prominent issues raised during Qaani's meetings last week, leaders who participated in a number of these meetings told The New Region. According to them, Qaani did not get into the details of the case, nor did he dwell on the reservations and concerns of the Coordination Framework leaders that were affected.

In fact, several leaders who attended the meetings told The New Region that he did not appear to show any understanding of the sensitivity of the "eavesdropping" case and the issues it has caused through surveilling wives and family members of the targets.

He just wanted to close the file and move forward without causing any harm to Sudani and his government, they said.

However, all Qaani achieved was a promise to calm the situation until the investigations were completed and the judiciary announced their results, the leaders said.

"He [Qaani] delivered a message from Sayyed Ali Khamenei saying that this is your government, it is a good government, so correct its mistakes and move on," one of the leaders who met Qaani told The New Region. "The man was giving orders and not speaking as a sympathetic mediator to the affected parties, so they did not discuss any

resolutions with him.”

To them, Qaani’s tone and approach was not very convincing and they did not see him as someone who had come with an intention to solve the problems.

“In fact, his [Qaani’s] intervention only increased the leaders’ resentment and made them feel that their dignity had been compromised,” the leader said. “So they treated him in kind. They offered hospitality and simply said they would await the results of the investigation.”

### **A complete lack of clarity**

The Supreme Judicial Council has not disclosed any information regarding the developments in the investigations with the accused - at least eight to date.

However, judicial sources told The New Region that the preliminary investigations are still ongoing and that no one can communicate with the accused, including their families and personal lawyers, until the time comes for their referral to trial and their statements are recorded before the judge of the Criminal Court.

On Friday, the investigating judge in charge, Ali Jafat, subpoenaed Haider al-Sudani, director general of the eavesdropping department in the Iraqi intelligence service, sources said. However, the judiciary’s insistence on conducting investigations away from the political and media circles has created an overwhelming fog in the political scene.

The leaders of the Coordination Framework themselves have said that they still do not know the actual size of Juhi’s network or the extent of the damage it might have caused.

The only certainty that the leaders of the Coordination Framework have so far had is that they were being “surveilled” and that a number of MPs and government officials were being blackmailed as a result of the surveillance, three leaders of the Coordination Framework and two senior officials, one of them close to Sudani, told The New Region.

“There was no eavesdropping in the traditional sense of eavesdropping. There were no known eavesdropping devices that the intelligence service possesses, such as vehicles or drones equipped for this purpose, as is rumored,” a senior official familiar with the ongoing investigations told The New Region.

"The Juhi network used telecommunication companies operating in Iraq to monitor the phones of the targeted leaders and MPs and the people around them,” the source said. "It is certain that the phones of the targeted leaders and that of their families and those who communicate with them have been monitored and calls have been recorded."

Maliki and Khazali are among the Shiite leaders said to have been targeted by the Juhi network, along with their families and staff, sources told The New Region.

Sources close to the two men denied that they had filed lawsuits against Juhi and his network yet. However, a leader close to Maliki told The New Region that the lawsuit is ready, but Maliki’s legal representative will not file it until they receive the final results of the investigation.

“The case is very big and very serious. We still do not know what exactly the case we are dealing with is. Is it eavesdropping? Espionage? Blackmail? Administrative corruption? Or all of them combined,” the leader said.

“These questions have been raised in almost every meeting of the leaders of the Coordination Framework since the network was uncovered, so we all decided to wait for the results of the investigations to get the necessary answers,” he added.

### **Is there a technical capacity for eavesdropping?**

The most frequently asked question in politicians' private and public sessions for weeks has been about the size and type of technical capabilities of the Juhi network.

Leaders of the Coordination Framework who have been subjected to surveillance, as they prefer to go with at this stage, say that the information they obtained indicates that Juhi's network used Call Detail Records (CDRs) of the mobile phone companies operating in Iraq, two leaders of the Coordination Framework told The New Region.

CDRs are logs generated by telecom companies that contain metadata about phone calls and messages. These records typically show the phone numbers of the caller and recipient, time and date of the call, duration of the call, and location data based on cell towers.

While CDRs do not record the content of conversations, they still contain sensitive information as they can reveal where a person was at a specific time, which could allow the tracing of their movements. Additionally, they can reveal contacts frequently communicated with, providing insight into one's social connections and relationships.

Through analyzing patterns in call frequency, timing, and locations, it would be possible to infer someone's daily routine or behavior. In the hands of authorities, CDRs are often used for surveillance, especially in cases related to national security or criminal investigations. However, misuse or unauthorized access can easily infringe on privacy rights.

According to the applicable Iraqi law, mobile phone companies are not allowed to share these records with any party, including the government, except with judicial permission and for legal or security purposes. Juhi and his team did not acquire a court order to get their hands on these records, but they somehow obtained them and used them, affected leaders told The New Region. Assuming that CDRs are the tool used by Juhi's network to monitor its targets, this raises dozens of questions, including how and where they got access to them and what their purpose was in targeting the people they did.

Other uncertainties revolve around the identity of those capable of obtaining such data as well as the ethical aspects of telecommunications companies' sharing such confidential data with them. "The case is very embarrassing. An employee with limited powers cannot do all this alone. The investigation is in Zidan's hands, and he has only revealed a small portion of the investigation results to us so far," a senior Coordination Framework leader told The New Region.

"We know that Juhi is one of the pawns in this game, so we are waiting to see what Zidan will reveal because our goal and priority now is to find out the mastermind behind this operation and we will not accept Juhi being presented as a scapegoat to cover up for someone else," he added.

### **Shrapnel hits in every direction**

Sudani's previous allies and new opponents have not settled for targeting his cabinet's work with corruption allegations, they have gone a step further by trying to strip him off of all his allies. Falih al-Fayadh, head of the Popular Mobilization Authority (PMA) and one of Sudani's most prominent Shiite allies who has refused to abandon him to this day, is next on the list.

Fayadh is one of the main sponsors of Sudani's alliances with the ruling Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in Erbil on the one hand, and the Sunni political and tribal forces in Nineveh, Salahadin, Anbar, and northern Baghdad on the other hand. Dropping Fayadh and removing him from the equation would strip Sudani of his last Shiite support base.

A parliamentary movement led by MP Yasser Sukhil, head of the State of Law parliamentary bloc and Maliki's son-in-law, has been seeking for two weeks to force the government to implement the State Council's decision to refer heads of independent bodies and governors to retirement upon reaching the age of sixty. Fayadh, who is now 68 years old,

would be the first target of this law if applied. Last week, 160 MPs boycotted the parliament's sessions in protest against the legislature's failure to vote on obligating the government to implement the decision.

Qaani also discussed this issue with several leaders of the Coordination Framework in an attempt to spare Fayadh, but to no avail, a senior PMA official close to Fayadh told The New Region. "There is a semi-final decision to dismiss Fayadh by the leaders of the Coordination Framework to punish him for standing with Sudani," the official said. "Maliki and Khazali have been seeking to remove him for a long time, but now they have a strong justification and legal cover to do so." "Fayadh will be one of the victims of the battle between Sudani and leaders of the Coordination Framework," he said.

### **The battle with Sudani is no longer solely Shiite**

The battle sparked by the "wiretapping" scandal was intra-Shiite until last week, but the entry of Mohammed al-Halbousi, the former Speaker of Parliament, who was dismissed on charges of forgery in November 2023, into the fray and his public comments about Juhi's network targeting him, have expanded the battlefield and took it out of the Shiite space. Halbousi, one of Khazali's most prominent new allies, broke his long silence and jumped into the heart of the crisis just one day after Qaani's departure, suggesting that there is coordination between him and Khazali.

Expanding the scope of the battle and taking it out of the Shiite camp gives it a national dimension, reduces the pressure-applied on Iranian-backed Shiite leaders, and makes it difficult for any of its parties, including the judiciary, to rely on any proposed settlement.

"We want the security services to monitor the enemy... not to carry out the desires of (someone) to monitor and follow the movements of the country's leaders, political forces operating in the country, ministers, and public figures because of fear of them or fear that they do not support the government," Halbousi said in a televised interview broadcasted on Friday. "[The case] is espionage, eavesdropping and twisting of wills... I am one of the affected ... I will certainly not give up my right," he said.

The New Region reached out to two sources within Sudani's office for comment but they did not offer any insight on the matter. ❖

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