

Iran Makes Second Effort to Recover IRGC Officer from Iraqi Custody

by Michael Knights (/experts/michael-knights)

Jan 23, 2025

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.



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 regime wants Baghdad to hand over the officer who orchestrated the 2022 murder of U.S. citizen Stephen Troell—not the first time it has leveraged Iraqi militia factions to seek his release.

On December 20, the FBI unsealed its criminal case against Iranian national Mohammad Reza Nouri (aka Muhammad Rida Husayn, Ali Asghar Nuri, and Abu Abbas) in connection with his alleged role in orchestrating the November 7, 2022, **murder of American Stephen Troell** (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/militias-demonize-usaid-after-us-citizen-gunned-down-baghdad) in Baghdad. In the case, **Nour is described** (https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/captain-islamic-revolutionary-guard-corps-irgc-charged-murder-and-terrorism-offenses) as a captain in Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force (IRGC-QF) and an “advisor to armed militia groups in Iraq.” The **twenty-eight-page unsealed deposition** (https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/media/1381856/dl) by an FBI special agent provides extensive detail on Nouri's command of the nine-man Iraqi cell (drawn from multiple unnamed “militias”) that sought to kidnap at least three people and murder at least seven others (including U.S. citizens) in a campaign intended to avenge the death of Qods Force commander Qasem Soleimani and build leverage over the United States through hostage-taking.

With strong U.S. urging, Iraqi authorities captured four Iraqi suspects from the nine-man cell in the weeks after the killing: Haydar Yousef Akab Hachem, Muhammad Qasim Salih Mahdi, Ali Malik Hamid Majid, and Ali Jamil Ajeel Saghi. They also apprehended one Iranian (Nouri) on March 26, 2023. Days after Nouri's arrest, three officials approached the Iraqi judiciary to seek his release: Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani, an IRGC-QF colonel known as Hajji Jawad (Nouri's direct commander), and Jawad al-Talibawi, deputy head of the Iran-backed militia Asaib Ahl al-Haq. This high-ranking delegation made the argument that detaining the four Iraqis for Troell's slaying would be enough to satisfy the Americans, so the Iranian should be released.

Instead, the judiciary (with strong U.S. urging) held on to Nouri and the four Iraqis. All five (at the time publicly unnamed) were found guilty of acts of terrorism and **sentenced** (https://apnews.com/article/iraq-us-citizen-killing-conviction-baghdad-c52f519807a28669add89a9a3b16bb61) to life imprisonment by the Karkh Criminal Court on August 31, 2023—a notable compromise given that their actions were **legally punishable by death** (https://www.unodc.org/uploads/icsant/documents/Legislation/Iraq/Iraq/English/Act_No._13_2005_ENG.pdf). That October, the five names were leaked to the public, though identifying photographs of the men were not made available and no confessions were televised (another unusual aspect of the case).



Figure 1: A photo of IRGC-QF captain Mohammad Reza Nouri with Qasem Soleimani included in the U.S. government deposition.



Figure 2: Mohammad Reza Nouri with Nujaba head Akram Kaabi.

In June 2024, the case took another turn: the Persian-language satellite network **Iran International** (/sites/default/files/2025-01/Nouri%20and%20Akram%20Kaabi.jpg) (https://x.com/raad_arabi/status/1800558502777168232?s=12) reported that the IRGC-QF, together with the Iranian judiciary and Foreign Ministry, had sought to recover Nouri. According to the network, Kazem Gharibabadi, the assistant to the judiciary's head of international affairs, claimed that Tehran had successfully fought Washington's efforts to get Nouri extradited to the United States, describing him as a “media advisor.” Moreover, according to al-Sharqiya News, Gharibabadi also indicated that Iran had shifted the jurisdiction of Nouri's charges from Iraqi anti-terrorism law to criminal law in late 2023.

At the time, Iran International connected Nouri to the U.S.-designated terrorist organization **Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (/node/16605)**. Iran's Tasnim News Agency published pictures of him next to Akram Kaabi, Nujaba's secretary-general (Figure 2).



Figure 3: November 26, 2023 re-categorization of the sentences of the five Troell-related convicts from terrorism to criminal charges, signed by Najm Ahmed, deputy head of the Court of Cassation. Posted by End Impunity Iraq.

Recently, Tehran has been seeking Nouri’s release again, this time as one of over a hundred Iranians listed as part of a prisoner swap with Iraq. The two countries have a mechanism for exchanging sentenced prisoners so they can serve their sentence in their homeland. Nouri’s name appeared on a new list of such prisoners that Iran submitted to Iraq’s Justice Ministry. Judges are now feeling pressure to approve the request, in particular after Prime Minister Sudani visited with Nouri’s relatives during a mid-January trip to Iran.

U.S. pressure has thus far prevented Sudani from securing Nouri’s release. Maintaining this pressure is vital if Washington hopes to prevent the Iran-backed Coordination Framework from sending Nouri home before he can be extradited to the United States and tried for his deadly crimes against American citizens. U.S. officials should also push Baghdad to identify the four convicted Iraqis by image in order to aid surveillance and ensure they have not been quietly released. Likewise, future amnesties in Iraq should be carefully monitored for any signs of their release. Moreover, the remaining five attackers at large—including Ali Abdal-Ridha Salih Alwan al-Batbuti (aka Ali Fafona), a son-in-law of AAH’s Jawad al-Talibawi and the man who actually shot Troell—should be vigorously pursued if they reappear in Iraq. Indeed, the Troell case should be treated as a bellwether for whether the Sudani government and future Iraqi administrations are serious about being a friend and partner of the United States. ❖

PART OF A SERIES

Militia Spotlight (/policy-analysis/series/militia-spotlight)

How to Use Militia Spotlight
(/policy-analysis/how-use-militia-spotlight)



Iraqi Militia Leader Labels President Trump an "Idiot," Threatens U.S. Forces
(/policy-analysis/iraqi-militia-leader-labels-president-trump-idiot-threatens-us-forces)



Iran Makes Second Effort to Recover IRGC Officer from Iraqi Custody
(/policy-analysis/iran-makes-second-effort-recover-irgc-officer-iraqi-custody)

RECOMMENDED

ARTICLES & TESTIMONY
 Hamas May Be Cheering, But It Is Writhing in Pain
Jan 26, 2025
•
Ehud Yaari
(/policy-analysis/hamas-may-be-cheering-it-writhing-pain)



BRIEF ANALYSIS
 Iraqi Militia Leader Labels President Trump an "Idiot," Threatens U.S. Forces
Jan 26, 2025
•
Hamdi Malik
(/policy-analysis/iraqi-militia-leader-labels-president-trump-idiot-threatens-us-forces)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY
 Expect the Unexpected with Trump and the Gulf
Jan 24, 2025
•
Simon Henderson
(/policy-analysis/expect-unexpected-trump-and-gulf)

TOPICS

Military & Security (/policy-analysis/military-security)

Terrorism (/policy-analysis/terrorism)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Iraq (/policy-analysis/iraq)