

Profile: Harakat al-Abdal

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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

An inveterate opponent of the United States and Israel, the enigmatic Harakat al-Abdal may have become an entirely Qods Force-operated, Syria-based entity years ago, posing questions about where its fighters now reside and what became of its PMF status in Iraq.

Name: Harakat al-Abdal; 39th Brigade of the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF)

Type of movement: Political, armed (*fasail*), and social group. Full spectrum of kinetic military operations, information operations (media activities and propaganda), and social operations. Kinetic and information operations against U.S. targets and domestic counter-moderate (protester) operations. Facilitation of drug smuggling routes from Iraq to Lebanon. Joint operations with Iran-backed militias in Iraq and Syria.



Harakat al-Abdal logo

History and objectives:

- Harakat al-Abdal (HA) directly translates to “The Replacement Movement,” but the word “Abdal” likely derives from what Islamic scholars [define \(https://sunnahmuakada.wordpress.com/2013/12/02/hadith-on-the-abdal-the-existence-of-the-abdal-in-al-shaam-al-shareef-syria/\)](https://sunnahmuakada.wordpress.com/2013/12/02/hadith-on-the-abdal-the-existence-of-the-abdal-in-al-shaam-al-shareef-syria/) as the “servants of Allah” or individuals who are “hidden and hold high positions in the spiritual hierarchy.”
- HA is associated with Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Qods Force and is loyal to Supreme Leader Ali

Khamenei. HA members were regularly photographed up until 2019 participating in Qods Day celebrations.



Figure 1. Harakat al-Abdal fighters with portraits of Khamenei and the late Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini on Qods Day, 2016.

- According to HA's media wing, the militia was formed (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TOgi2o33_b0) after the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq with the goal of expelling American forces by launching kinetic operations against them, beginning in Salah al-Din governorate and expanding throughout Baghdad's northern belt.
- Around 2014, HA commenced operations against the Islamic State in Salah al-Din (<https://www.facebook.com/share/16Td4t1BA8/>) and al-Anbar (<https://www.facebook.com/share/v/1BGNWoWn4S/>) governorates. It formed the 39th PMF Brigade that same year, with Baghdad's northern belt being its main area of responsibility.
- HA's objectives expanded to include military operations in Syria (particularly Aleppo and Damascus), where it protected major Shia Muslim shrines and rebuilt some destroyed by the Islamic State. A 2015 report (<https://alkhaleejonline.net/%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A9/%D9%86%D9%82%D9%84-%D8%A3%D9%83%D8%AB%D8%B1-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A3%D9%84%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%85%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%84-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B4%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%B9%D8%A8%D9%8A-%D8%A5%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%AE%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%84-%D9%8A%D9%88%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%86>) indicated that HA fighters were among more than 2,000 PMF fighters transported to Syria via Iraqi and Syrian airlines under direct orders from Iran. Similar reports (<https://www.alarabiya.net/iran/2016/12/21/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%88%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D9%83%D8%B4%D9%81-%D8%B9%D9%86-%D8%AF%D9%88%D8%B1->

<https://www.getty.edu/publications/cultural-heritage-mass-atrocities/part-2/10-bandarin/>) in 2016 claimed that approximately 1,300 HA fighters were already operating in Syria, with many participating in the [Battle of Aleppo](#) (<https://www.getty.edu/publications/cultural-heritage-mass-atrocities/part-2/10-bandarin/>) and organizing frequent flights from Iraq to Syria.

- In 2016, HA [announced](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4SqQePBhTxg) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4SqQePBhTxg>) on a popular *muqawama* (resistance) YouTube channel that it was prepared to train volunteers who were not given the opportunity to enlist in military service. Training was to be done at multiple locations around Baghdad's northern belt. In 2017, [media reports](#) (<https://www.youm7.com/story/2017/10/11/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%B6%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D9%83%D8%B4%D9%81-%D8%B9%D9%86-%D8%A3%D8%B3%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%A3%D9%86%D8%B4%D8%B7%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B1%D8%B3-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AB%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%89-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%89-%D9%81%D9%8A/3452606>) indicated that the IRGC had established training camps for HA just outside Abadan, Iran. HA Members were transported from Basra to the camp to receive military and ideological training before [deploying](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j75O3MfkpaA) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j75O3MfkpaA>) to Syria.
- HA factions in Syria conducted joint military operations against the American military site at al-Tanf alongside the U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization [Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada](#)



Figure 2. June 2020 HA communique promising to conduct military operations against the "Zionist and American enemy" inside and outside Iraq.

(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-kataib-sayyid-al-shuhada>). By the end of 2017, HA was reported (<https://aawsat.com/home/article/1006036/%D8%AE%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B7%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%25%20D9%8A%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%20%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D9%85%D8%B7%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%AF%D9%85%D8%B4%D9%82-%C2%AB%D9%82%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%87%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%B6%C2%BB>) to have approximately 1,000-1,500 fighters in Syria, particularly active in the Badia desert region adjacent to Iraq.

- Along with other Iran-backed militias such as Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-harakat-hezbollah-al-nujaba>) and Kataib al-Imam Ali (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-kataib-imam-ali>)

[analysis/profile-kataib-al-imam-ali](#)), HA fighters were reportedly targeted by an Israeli airstrike near Abu Kamal, Syria, on September 9, 2019. HA vowed (<https://www.alsumaria.tv/news/security/318266/%D8%AD%D8%B1%D9%83%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%84-%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%B9%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%86-%D9%84%D9%84%D8%B1%D8%AF-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%8A%D9%84-%D8%A8%D8%B9%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%87%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%81%D9%87%D8%A7-%D9%81%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%88%D9%85%D8%A9>) to retaliate from Syria and stated that the Assad regime would not prohibit them from launching attacks on Israel.

- In September 2019, the Iraqi News Network [reported](#) (<https://aliraqnews.com/%D9%85%D8%B7%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%88%D8%B4%D8%B9%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A8%D8%B9%D8%AF%D9%85-%D8%B4%D9%85%D9%88%D9%84-%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%B4/>) the establishment of a coordination council made up of Iraqi armed factions affiliated with Iran. HA Secretary-General Abu Akram al-Majdi was one of the leaders of this [council](#) (<https://shafaq.com/ar/%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%80%D9%86/%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%A8%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%82%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%85-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B4%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%B9%D8%A8%D9%8A-%D9%88%D8%B8%D9%87%D9%88%D8%B1-%D9%85%D8%AC%D9%84%D8%B3-%D8%AC%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%AF>) along with [Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis](#) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/muhandis-replaced-not-one-man-two>), [Qais al-Khazali](#) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-long-will-qais-al-khazali-hide-iran>), [Abu Ala al-Walai](#) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/ofac-designates-iraqi-militiamen-part-2-kss-and-abu-ala-al-walai>), [Akram Kaabi](#) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/akram-kaabi-shown-pretending-assemble-drone-fired-israel>), and [Ali al-Yasiri](#).
- HA's offices were [reportedly](#) (<https://carnegieendowment.org/middle-east/diwan/2019/11/how-deep-is-anti-iranian-sentiment-in-iraq?lang=ar>) among the various PMF sites burned down during the [Tishreen protests](#) (<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/09/iraq-five-years-after-tishreen-protests-impunity-reigns-supreme/>) in October 2019.
- In 2020, HA Deputy Secretary-General Kamal al-Hasnawi [threatened](#) (<https://hawarnews.com/ar/159845742038126>) to target foreign forces in Iraq, [telling](#) (<https://shafaq.com/en/Iraq/Al-Abdal-movement-ready-to-Expulse-foreign-forces-by-force>) Shafaq News that Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi's government "failed to withdraw the foreign forces, so we will push the resistance groups to target those forces as occupation forces, and arms of the resistance are ready to expel those forces." In December of that year, HA claimed to [target](#) (<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2020/08/iranian-backed-front-group-claims-to-target-american-supply-convoy-in-iraq.php>) an American convoy in al-Muthanna governorate and emphasized that it would continue targeting American assets unless the United States withdrew from Iraq. (The Muthanna attack was subsequently claimed by [Ashab al-Kahf \(/node/17145\)](#)).



Figure 3. Domestically manufactured rocket produced by Harakat al-Abdal, 2017.

- In 2020, Hasnawi warned (<https://www.iraqcharter.org/%D8%B3%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%82-%D8%AA%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%AD-%D8%A8%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B4%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%B9%D8%A8%D9%8A>) that resistance factions would continue to target U.S. troops with domestically developed weapons, arms smuggled from Syria, and weapons obtained from Iran. He also mentioned that these attacks would be tightly coordinated with other PMF factions.
- In 2021, HA evacuated (<https://eyeofeuhrates.com/ar/news/2021/03/04/1274>) one of its strongholds in Abu Kamal as U.S. airstrikes continued to target Iran-backed militias in Syria.
- In 2022, some Iraqi media claimed (<https://www.north-pulse.net/?p=44322>) that HA forces in Akashat (a town in Anbar province) had launched the drones involved in targeting (<https://www.militarytimes.com/newsletters/2022/08/15/us-drone-attack-targets-us-base-in-syria-no-casualties/>) American troops at al-Tanf on August 15 of that year.
- In 2024, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported (<https://www.alhurra.com/lebanon/2024/11/15/%D8%B4%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%83%D8%A9-%D9%82%D8%AF%D9%8A%D9%85%D8%A9-%D9%85%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%83%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AA%D9%8A%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%8A%D8%B3%D8%B9%D9%89-%D8%AD%D8%B2%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%87-%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D8%A3%D9%87%D9%8A%D9%84-%D9%82%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%87-%D8%A8%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84->

%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AE%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA%D8%9F) that HA, among other Iran-backed militias, had established illicit drug smuggling routes stretching from Iraq to Syria and as far as Lebanon, with multiple drug manufacturing hubs throughout. Among the most popular drugs trafficked by this network was Captagon (<https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/07/border-traffic-how-syria-uses-captagon-to-gain-leverage-over-saudi-arabia?lang=en>).

- In December 2024, shortly after the fall of the Assad regime in Syria, a statement (<https://www.facebook.com/share/18bxsWLaxq/>) appeared on an HA-affiliated Facebook group calling for the militia and other groups to cooperate on all self-styled *muqawama* actions against the “occupation,” particularly in Aleppo and Idlib.

The Republic of Iraq
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جمهورية العراق
الأمانة العامة
لحركة الأبدال

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

قال الله تعالى: (وَتُرِيدُ أَنْ نَمُنَّ عَلَى الَّذِينَ اسْتُضِعُوا فِي الْأَرْضِ وَنَجْعَلَهُمْ
أَيِّمَةً وَنَجْعَلَهُمُ الْوَارِثِينَ) (القصص: 5)

فالمقاومة هي وعد رباني بتحرير الشعوب من الطغيان.

قال أمير المؤمنين علي "عليه السلام": (اعلموا أنكم إن اتبعتم طالع الدنيا أضلُّكم
عن سبيل الهدى، وإن نهضتم بحقٍ أمطرت السماء عليكم عدلها).

نبارك الى احرار العالم الجمهورية الإسلامية الإيرانية لبنان المقاومة واليمن
السعيد السيد الحوثي أنصار الله والمقاومة الإسلامية في العراق وكل
الشعوب الساندة للمقاومة في غزة النصر الكبير، ومع هذا التطور المهم
نعلم اننا سنعلق عملياتنا العسكرية ضد الكيان تضامنا مع إيقافها في
فلسطين، ولتعزيز استمرار الهدنة في غزة، لكن ليعلم الكيان الغاصب أن أية
حماقة منه في فلسطين او المنطقة ستقابل برد قاس، ما زالت صواريخنا
ومسيراتنا بجهوزيتها الكاملة، فإن عادوا عدنا.

الامانة العامة

للمقاومة الاسلامية

حركة الابدال

19 رجب 1446

Figure 4. January 2025 HA communique threatening to attack Israel with drones and missiles if the Gaza ceasefire collapses.

- On January 19, 2025, after an announced ceasefire in Gaza, HA released an official statement (<https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1LpfCmHMAC/>) congratulating Iran, the Lebanese "resistance," the Yemeni Houthis, the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, and other "resistance" factions for this "victory." The statement noted that HA

would suspend all its military operations in accordance with this ceasefire, but added, “Any aggression in Palestine or the region will be met with a harsh response. Our missiles and drones are fully prepared—if they return, so will we.” This is one of the few indicators that HA still exists.

Chain of command:

- **Abu Akram al-Majdi:** Majdi is HA's last known secretary-general and has strong ties to Iran. In 2016, some PMF fighters were reportedly transported (<https://hathalyoum.net/articles/1018829-%D9%88%D9%83%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A9-%D8%B5%D8%AF%D9%89-%D8%A7%D8%A8%D9%88-%D8%A7%D9%83%D8%B1%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%AC%D8%AF%D9%8A-%D9%8A%D9%82%D9%88%D9%85-%D8%A8%D8%B2%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%AC%D8%B1%D8%AD%D9%89-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B4%D8%AF>) to hospitals in Iran for treatment. Majdi visited these hospitals to check on their health. He has also visited HA fighters in Syria (Figure 5).
- **Kamal al-Hasnawi:** Hasnawi is HA's last known deputy secretary-general and its official spokesman. He issues political statements online, speaks at PMF-sponsored events, and articulates and defends HA's positions during television interviews.
- **Jaafar al-Musawi:** Musawi is HA's last known military commander and reportedly (<https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AE%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B7%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%87%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%81>) a former member of Kataib Hezbollah. He is also a commander in the PMF (see below).
- **Popular Mobilization Forces:** Because HA is a PMF brigade, its military activities are formally under the command and control of the Iraqi prime minister and the PMF leadership, including PMF Chairman Faleh al-Fayyad (a U.S.-designated human rights abuser (<https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm1231>)) and Deputy Chair Abdul-Aziz al-Mohammadawi (aka Abu Fadak, a U.S.-designated terrorist (<https://2017-2021-translations.state.gov/2021/01/13/terrorist-designation-of-abd-al-aziz-malluh-mirjirash-al-muhammadawi/>)). Jaafar al-Musawi has tactical leadership of this brigade.
- **Islamic Resistance in Iraq:** HA regularly claims to be part of this umbrella group (aka al-Muqawama al-Islamiyah fi al-Iraq (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-islamic-resistance-iraq>)), as seen in a June 2020 announcement (<https://www.mawazin.net/Details.aspx?jmare=80415>) in which the militia promised to conduct military operations against the “Zionist and American enemy in Iraq and outside of it.”



Figure 5. HA leader Abu Akram al-Majdi (center, hand on chest) near Idlib, Syria, 2016.

Affiliate relationships:

- **Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada:** HA has a clear and convincing record (<https://www.youm7.com/story/2017/10/11/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%B6%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D9%83%D8%B4%D9%81-%D8%B9%D9%86-%D8%A3%D8%B3%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%A3%D9%86%D8%B4%D8%B7%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B1%D8%B3-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AB%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%89-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%89-%D9%81%D9%8A/3452606>) of cooperating with the U.S.-designated terrorist group KSS (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-kataib-sayyid-al-shuhada>) (14th PMF Brigade) in joint kinetic military operations and illicit drug smuggling in Iraq and Syria.
- **Saraya al-Jihad:** HA has a clear and convincing record (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-expanding-militia-army-iraq-new-special-groups>) of cooperation with Saraya al-Jihad (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-saraya-al-jihad>) (17th PMF Brigade) in Anbar province and Syria.
- **Liwa al-Tafuf.** HA has a clear and convincing record of cooperation with Liwa al-Tafuf (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-liwa-al-tafuf-13th-pmf-brigade>) (13th PMF Brigade) in Anbar province and Syria.
- **Kataib al-Imam Ali.** HA has a clear and convincing record of cooperation with Kataib al-Imam Ali (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-kataib-al-imam-ali>) (40th PMF Brigade) in Abu Kamal, Syria.
- **Al-Abarr Cultural Foundation:** This organization hosts (<https://www.facebook.com/share/p/12GQZLx4s8x/>) talks and

other events where HA members and Islamic Resistance in Iraq leaders are present. Al-Abrar is a popular community organization, and its Facebook group (<https://www.facebook.com/ALABRARFOUNDATION/>) has around 8,800 followers.

Subordinate relationships:

- HA's main office is in Samawa, south of [Baghdad](https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1ADTw2wclT/) (<https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1ADTw2wclT/>), though it has other known branches in Basra and [Dhi Qar](https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61568317685850) (<https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61568317685850>) and may have additional offices, including in the capital.
- HA has an office on Amir Abad Street in downtown Abadan, Iran, headed by a person with the nom de guerre Abu Fatima.
- HA had a Syria affiliate—Kataib Safin—that may still exist inside or outside that country.
- HA has multiple Facebook accounts; the oldest one has around 3,000 followers while the most active has around 1,000. Curiously for a PMF unit, these accounts became largely inactive in 2022-25.
- HA has a main YouTube channel with around 500 subscribers. This account likewise ceased to be active in 2022-25.



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