

Shia strength - Iraqi militants adapt to the US drawdown

Key Points

- Iranian-backed Shia militants in [Iraq](#) are responsible for a disproportionately high number of the US casualties suffered in recent months.
- Kataib Hezbollah, the most sophisticated group, is considered a direct extension of Iran's Qods Force and could become involved in international operations in support of Iranian goals.
- Asaib Ahl al-Haq and Promised Day Brigades are Iraqi Shia insurgent groups, whose links to [Iran](#) peaked in 2008 and have slowly reduced since then.

Iraq's 'special groups', such as Kataib Hezbollah and Promised Day Brigades, have stepped up attacks as US forces look to withdraw. *Michael Knights* looks at Iran's support for the Shia militants, their operations and their post-US future.

The US military suffered its heaviest monthly casualties in [Iraq](#) in three years in June, when 14 of its soldiers were killed in action. At least 12 of them were killed by Iranian-backed 'special groups', prompting fresh complaints from the US that [Iran](#) was encouraging its Iraqi allies to step up their attacks as the scheduled withdrawal of all US forces from [Iraq](#) looms.

The surge in attacks highlighted the threat posed by Shia militants, especially if the US and Iraqi governments sign an agreement allowing US forces to stay beyond the 31 December withdrawal deadline. Even if the US leaves as previously agreed, [Iran](#) is expected to continue to back Iraqi proxies in order to influence the political situation and retain an ability to strike Western assets in the country and possibly elsewhere.

Formations

Coalition officers began to publicly highlight Iranian support for Shia militants in 2005, complaining that a type of improvised explosive devices (IED) known as explosively formed projectiles (EFP) were being smuggled in from [Iran](#). Previously used by the Iranian-backed Lebanese group [Hizbullah](#), these devices are improvised off-route mines that fire slugs of metal capable of penetrating some armoured vehicles.

The term 'special group' was first used in a US military press briefing on 2 July 2007, when spokesman Brigadier General Kevin Bergner accused [Iran](#) of backing Iraqi Shia militants by supplying weapons, training and between USD750,000 and USD3 million a month in financing. "These special groups are militia extremists funded, trained and armed by external sources, specifically by Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps [IRGC] Qods Force operatives,"

Brig Gen Bergner said. The Qods Force is the arm of the IRGC tasked with supporting foreign groups such as [Hizbullah](#) and Hamas.

Brig Gen Bergner said Qods Force involvement had been detailed by Qais al-Khazali and Lebanese national Ali Musa Daqduq, who were arrested on 20 March 2007 in connection with an attack that killed five US soldiers in Kabala at the beginning of the year. "Daqduq and Qais Khazali state that senior leadership within the Qods Force knew of, and supported planning for, the eventual Karbala attack," he said.

Khazali was formerly a senior member of the movement led by anti-US Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, which periodically took up arms against coalition forces from 2003 onwards. He was expelled in August 2004 for refusing to accept Sadr's ceasefire with the coalition, and formed an independent group, Asaib Ahl al-Haq (league of the righteous). The US government has said that Abdul Reza Shahlai (alias Hajji Yusif), a deputy commander of the Qods Force, assisted the group.

Despite the arrest of its leader, Asaib Ahl al-Haq continued its operations, kidnapping a British IT consultant and his four British bodyguards at the Ministry of Finance on 29 May 2007 and using them to leverage Khazali's release. The Iraqi government freed Qais in January 2010, a few days after the IT consultant was released, presenting the move as part of a reconciliation process, rather than a prisoner exchange. Daqduq remains in US custody and has never been charged.

Another figure the US has identified as a key link between the Qods Force and the special groups is Jamil Jafar al-Ibrahimi (alias Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis), a former Iraqi parliamentarian who is wanted in [Kuwait](#) in connection with a series of bombings on 12 December 1983. The US government designated him as a threat to Iraq's security in July 2009, saying he was an advisor to Qods Force commander Brigadier General Qassem Soleimani and that he facilitated weapon shipments and training for Iraqi Shia militants.

The statement also said he established his own militant group in early 2007, an apparent reference to Kataib Hizbullah, which the US government designated on the same day. It noted that Kataib Hizbullah used EFPs and improvised rocket-assisted mortars (IRAM), which consist of explosive-filled cylinders attached to rocket motors and are typically fired in barrages from the back of trucks.

Speaking from [Iran](#), Muhandis denied US allegations and any involvement in the Kuwaiti bombings in an interview published by McClatchy in February 2010. He described the claim that he was an advisor to Brig Gen Soleimani as "ridiculous", but admitted having extensive contacts with Iranian officials from his time with the Badr Corps, a Shia Iraqi force that was based in [Iran](#) from the 1980s until the US invasion of [Iraq](#) in 2003. Muhandis said he left the Badr Corps in 2003.

The US military has supported its allegations that the Qods Force is facilitating attacks in [Iraq](#) by releasing images showing Iranian weaponry found in [Iraq](#), which have included factory-fresh small arms, mortars, rockets, explosives and man-portable air defence systems (MANPADS). Combating Terrorism Center, an academic institution at the US Military Academy in West Point, released a report in October 2008 that included extracts from detainee interrogation reports describing the training programmes and cross-border

smuggling operations through which the Qods Force helped establish, finance and arm Shia militant cells in [Iraq](#) between 2005 and 2007.

Numerous US and [UK](#) military intelligence analysts have told *Jane's* that the allegations are further supported by a vast quantity of still classified material, including the interrogation reports of Daqduq, senior special group members such as Kazali, and five Qods Force operatives detained in Arbil in 2007. They say that large quantities of classified signals intelligence and visual observation data have also been gathered. This, they say, has allowed arms shipments and people to be tracked as they crossed into [Iraq](#) from [Iran](#) and followed as they pass along chains of handlers, safe houses and arms caches, in the process helping to map special group networks.

Iranian surge

A US government intelligence analyst who focuses on the Qods Force told *Jane's* that Iranian support for Iraqi militants increased in the second half of 2006, when Brig Gen Soleimani was "riding high" in the aftermath of the war between [Hizbullah](#) and [Israel](#) and given "a blank cheque and carte blanche" to push the US out of [Iraq](#).

The number of EFP attacks in [Iraq](#) began to rise after the end of the war in [Lebanon](#) in July 2006. According to figures from security company Olive Group, there were 42 EFP attacks on average a month from August to October 2006. By July 2007, the monthly total had risen to 88 attacks per month. Coalition and Iraqi security forces also began to find more Iranian-provided weapons. The Combating Terrorism Center report noted that nine caches of Iranian weapons were found from July to December 2006, while 43 major caches were discovered in the first half of 2007.

Weapons intelligence imagery seen by *Jane's* confirms that the caches included large quantities of weapons that US and [UK](#) intelligence analysts assessed to have been produced by [Iran](#) in 2006 and 2007. The weapons included many 107 mm artillery rockets with closely clustered Iranian Defence Industries Organisation (DIO) lot numbers and production dates between 2005 and 2007, as well as rounds and fuses for 60 mm and 81 mm mortars with DIO lot markings and 2006 production dates. Significant quantities of newly produced plastic explosives that coalition technicians chemically matched to the Iranian version of C4 were found with production dates from 2006.

The Iranian surge slowed in the first half of 2007, as inter-Shia rivalries became increasingly violent. A string of Shia leaders were killed in EFP attacks in late 2006 and early 2007, including two provincial governors and two provincial police chiefs. Shia factions engaged in gunfights in the shrine city of Karbala in August 2007, prompting Iraqi political and religious leaders to call on [Iran](#) to cease fuelling the violence. In the same month, Sadr announced a ceasefire, making it easier to identify renegade members of his Jaish al-Mahdi militia.

Between March and May 2008, the Iraqi government launched a series of security offensives that led to intense fighting with Shia militants, including Jaish al-Mahdi. According to the Olive Group, EFP usage rose to an average of 120 incidents a month across [Iraq](#) in the second quarter of 2008, while 1,100 rockets were fired in Baghdad between March and May 2008. The Shia militants' stockpiles of munitions were also depleted by the loss of many caches. According to the Combating Terrorism Center report, 98 special group caches were found in the first half of 2008, more than double the number in the previous six months.

In August 2008, Sadr announced he was disbanding Jaish al-Mahdi and forming a smaller, more disciplined successor called Liwa al-Yawm al-Mawud (Promised Day Brigades), which he threatened to unleash if the US did not withdraw from [Iraq](#) as agreed.

Second surge

Although the special groups got little publicity in the three years that followed the security offensives, they remained active. In a February 2010 press conference, the then US military commander in Iraq General Ray Odierno said the security operations "had a significant impact on Shia militia elements operating mainly in the south and Baghdad. We saw the breakup of many of the militia elements. But the result of that has been the establishment of some groups - specifically Kataib Hizbullah as well as the Promised Day Brigades - that continue to get funds and training inside of [Iran](#) to conduct operations in [Iraq](#). We still have EFPs explode just about every day in [Iraq](#). We still uncover Iranian rockets and other goods that are made and individuals that are trained in [Iran](#)."

There was another surge in Shia militant activity in the first half of 2011. The number of EFP incidents, for example, increased from an average of 11 attacks per month in the first quarter of 2011 to 23 in the second quarter, according to Olive Group figures.

Indirect fire attacks also increased significantly, although it is very difficult to confirm the actual number of rockets and mortar rounds hitting US bases due to incomplete reporting. US military intelligence analysts told *Jane's* that Shia groups carried out as many as 40 to 50 rocket and mortar attacks on US bases in June, none of which were recorded in unclassified statistics. Diplomats living in Baghdad's International Zone told *Jane's* that the area was struck by 17 salvos in July, a major increase on the two to three salvos usually fired into the zone each month.

Shia militant attacks also became increasingly lethal. One US soldier was killed in action in March, five in April, two in May and 14 in June. Nearly all of them died in the Shia-dominated southern provinces where special groups operate.

The casualties prompted fresh US complaints about Iranian support to the militants. "We are seeing a sharp increase in the amount of munitions coming across the border, some manufactured as recently as 2010," spokesman Major General Jeffrey Buchanan said in an interview. General Lloyd J Austin III, the US commander in [Iraq](#), noted: "We are seeing more powerful EFPs, and they [the militants] seem to have matured the ability to aim these things a bit more."

Networks of networks

Special group operations were detailed to *Jane's* by US and Iraqi military intelligence officials during a visit to [Iraq](#) in July. The sources, who cannot be identified for security reasons, said Kataib Hizbullah was the most advanced faction of the special groups and acts as a direct extension of the Qods Force in [Iraq](#). A US intelligence officer told *Jane's* in 2010 that the group numbered somewhere between 500 and 1,000 operatives. The consensus amongst US intelligence officers canvassed by *Jane's* was that, unlike most special group operatives, who are loosely affiliated to Sadr's movement, the majority of Kataib Hizbullah's personnel served with the Badr Corps before 2003.

One US intelligence analyst said Kataib Hezbollah operatives are often armed similarly to IRGC and [Hizbullah](#) commando units. He said they have Iranian copies of the Heckler & Koch MP5 submachine gun and the Chinese Type CQ assault rifle (itself a copy of the US M16A1), plus body armour, optical sights and night-vision equipment. US officers have said that the group has used Russian RPG-29 anti-tank rocket launchers, which are capable of defeating explosive reactive armour, a claim confirmed by imagery on the group's website. Videos released by the group also show its operatives using MANPADS, either the Chinese QW-1 or Iran's Misagh-1 variant. On 17 December 2009, the Wall Street Journal reported that Kataib Hezbollah has also been responsible for intercepting the data feed from US drones. Detained Shia militants have also recounted how they were trained to use large calibre sniper rifles in [Iran](#), according to the Combating Terrorism Center report.

The other known special groups - Asaib Ahl al-Haq and the Promised Day Brigades - vary greatly in their capabilities and enjoy less direct relations with the Qods Force than Kataib Hezbollah, according to Iraqi military intelligence offices interviewed by Jane's in July. They said the most effective Asaib Ahl al-Haq and Promised Day Brigade cells are typically led by men in their mid-30s or early 40s known as an 'abi' (meaning a person of high standing) who are placed on a payroll by Qods Force middlemen. Out of this stipend, the abi must pay his subordinates and cover any other costs incurred in carrying out a set number of attacks per month.

Cross-border smuggling

The abis buy their weapons locally or receive them from the Qods Force, the Iraqi intelligence officers said. In the latter case, the abis must still pay middlemen who smuggle the weapons into [Iraq](#). This diversity of sources explains why arms caches often include a mix of newly-produced Iranian weapons alongside rusted pre-2003 munitions.

At the time of writing, the middlemen continue to receive weapons from [Iran](#), including 122 mm and 240 mm Falaq-1 unguided artillery rockets, according to both US and Iraqi officers. US military intelligence analysts told Jane's that newly produced 122 mm rockets are still regularly imported from [Iran](#) because the ones available in [Iraq](#) are typically in poor condition and often unreliable.

There has been longstanding debate among intelligence analysts over whether Iraqi militants are able to produce their own EFPs or remain dependent on devices supplied by [Iran](#). Multiple US military intelligence personnel confirmed that EFPs found in [Iraq](#) often differ in their characteristics and quality, suggesting they have not been mass produced in [Iran](#). However, the same sources point to the discovery of complete EFP devices or their components in caches and vehicles near the Iranian border as evidence that some are still being imported. They say that EFPs continue to be found that bear the signs of mass manufacturing and factory quality control, notably exact replication of the weight, thickness, depth and diameter of high-quality copper liners, plus repetitive machine-produced marks.

In an attempt to explain this mix of mass-produced and at least partly homemade EFPs, a US intelligence analyst speculated that only Kataib Hezbollah cells still use EFPs imported into [Iraq](#) as completed devices.

More basic items such as Kalashnikov assault rifles, hand grenades, plastic explosives, light mortars and machine guns are still brought across the border for special groups, as are basic

electronic systems like global positioning system devices, batteries and radios, according to Iraqi military intelligence personnel.

US officers told Jane's that they do not understand why weapons and equipment that are readily available in [Iraq](#) are still smuggled in from [Iran](#). However, private security analysts supporting oil industry operations have previously told Jane's that members of the Qods Force network sell weapons to criminals on a freelance basis. They say that there is significant evidence of local criminals buying EFPs in 2008 and 2010 to intimidate foreign companies as part of their extortion schemes.

Anti-armour attacks

Olive Group figures show that the most significant EFP hotspot is now the Expressway 1 corridor, which runs from the northernmost US logistical hub at Balad (just north of Baghdad), west around the capital and down to [Kuwait](#). The areas around the towns of Al-Diwaniyah and Suq al-Shuyukh are particularly dangerous for US convoys.

According to US military intelligence personnel, on 11 June 2011 militants based in Suq al-Shuyukh tried to attack a US convoy with 16 EFPs that had been 'daisy chained' together to fire simultaneously, but the devices were detected and defused by US military route clearers. However, Olive Group statistics suggest that in the first half of 2011 around 60% of EFPs were not detected and detonated. Iraqi military intelligence personnel say that, in Basrah, there are three cells using EFPs - one each from Kataib Hizbullah, Asaib Ahl al-Haq and, to a lesser extent, Promised Day Brigades - that switch between half a dozen chokepoints where US military traffic moves on a daily basis. These groups do not appear to be co-ordinated and sometimes strike similar areas in a given month.

Shia militants also use EFPs on the eastern bank of the Shatt al-Arab river in order to keep US patrols away from smuggling routes, according to US military intelligence personnel. The US servicemen said that some devices are poorly constructed, but most function effectively and produce cohesive copper slugs with significant armour-piercing effect. A number of US and private security company sources added that EFP cells operating in Basrah and Maysan configure most of their devices for specific attacks, for example, by positioning and firing them so they penetrate the less well-protected windows of specific types of armoured vehicles, the location of which varies significantly from one model to another.

Since an EFP hit a bus and killed 14 people in Basrah on 11 April, Shia militants have increased their use of RKG-3 armour-piercing hand grenades for attacks in urban areas in an apparent effort to limit civilian casualties, according to private security analysts closely tracking threat trends in Basrah. The grenades are typically thrown at the gunners protruding from the final vehicle of US convoys.

So-called 'complex attacks' involving combinations of roadside bombs, small arms, RPG and indirect fire are also increasing across the Shia south as insurgents learn that US forces are less likely to retaliate under their existing rules of engagement, according to US military intelligence personnel.

Two US intelligence officers independently told Jane's that there are also strong indications that some Shia militant cells - most likely affiliated to Kataib Hizbullah - are experimenting with Iranian guided anti-tank missiles. One said that a "modern wire-guided missile" was

unsuccessfully used against a US convoy in Maysan on 23 February 2011. He said the missile was not of a type used by the Iraqi military before the invasion, but declined to elaborate. The other officer confirmed that the missiles were newer types that [Iran](#) had also provided to the Lebanese Hizbullah. He said these include the Iranian licensed-produced versions of the Russian Konkurs (AT-5) and Metis (AT-13) systems, as well as the Toophan-3, an unlicensed Iranian copy of the US tube-launched optically tracked wire-guided (TOW) system.

Indirect fire

The workhorse of the Shia militant indirect fire cells remains the 107 mm rocket, according to all the US and Iraqi military intelligence personnel interviewed by Jane's. Longer range 122 mm rockets are typically reserved for attacks against targets where it is difficult to launch short-range weapons. Iranian-made 240 mm Falaq-1 rockets are much rarer, though a small number have been fired in 2011 at US bases along the Expressway 1 corridor between Al-Diwaniyah and Al-Hillah, according to Olive Group reporting. A variant of the Soviet BM-24 rocket, the Falaq-1 delivers a comparatively large warhead over short-ranges (8-10km). Some dedicated cells have been captured with GPS devices, US military 1:250,000 maps and spirit levels for accurate sighting, an Iraqi military intelligence officer said.

Baghdad's International Zone remains the main target for indirect fire attacks in the capital. It was hit with a barrage of 34 rockets on 9 June, according to Olive Group statistics. Such salvos are rare as insurgents find it difficult to set up large banks of rockets without being detected. To counter this weakness, Shia militants have experimented with simultaneously firing from multiple positions or from unconventional launch locations, such as rooftops, according to US military intelligence personnel.

More alarmingly, Iraqi forces have discovered a number of pre-positioned banks of up to 50 launch rails built into concrete foundations and facing the International Zone, according to one US military intelligence officer. The discovery of a small number of such sites indicates that other launch sites are being prepared as part of a deliberate programme to develop the infrastructure needed to subject the International Zone to crippling levels of indirect fire, as was seen periodically in 2006.

A suspected Kataib Hizbullah cell operating in rural areas of Basrah province demonstrated significant adaptability during the first six months of the year, according to multiple US and private security intelligence personnel. Based in Muhandis' childhood neighbourhood in Basrah city, the cell avoided setting a pattern by regularly altering its launch times and locations. Multiple attacks were simultaneously launched from different locations and very close range 107 mm rockets were interspersed with long-range 122 mm attacks, including one that used a homemade multiple rocket launcher comprising a two-tonne civilian tipper truck and 16 rockets. Rockets were fired at Basrah Air Station at very low trajectories and from multiple directions simultaneously in an apparent attempt to minimise the risk of interception by the facility's radar-guided close-in weapons system.

In recent months, US bases in central and southern [Iraq](#) have been subjected to very accurate 60 mm and 81 mm mortar fire from Shia neighbourhoods, according to one US military intelligence analyst. In April, for instance, more than 20 mortar rounds were fired at a small US base inside a far larger Iraqi army complex in Taji from nearby Shia communities. Almost all the rounds landed inside the US perimeter, according to the analyst.

IRAM threat

Despite all the sophistication shown by special group rocket and mortar teams, IRAM attacks have inflicted the heaviest casualties on US forces. With their large improvised warheads filled with plastic explosive, IRAMs deliver even more short-range punch than 240 mm rockets.

In an incident that went unreported by the mainstream media, 17 IRAMs were launched against US facilities adjacent to Baghdad International Airport, wounding 20 US nationals, on 3 January, according to US and private security contractors. Kataib Hizbullah released footage purportedly showing an IRAM attack on that date, although stated that it targeted Forward Operating Base Kusla, south of Baghdad.

Even more seriously, an IRAM attack on Forward Operating Base Loyalty in east Baghdad killed six US soldiers and injured another nine, one of whom subsequently died. Kataib Hizbullah again claimed the attack and released a video showing IRAMs being launched in an urban area. The group also claimed another IRAM attack that killed three US soldiers at a US base in Badrah, near the Iranian border, on 29 June.

The heavy casualties inflicted on the US military by Shia militants prompted drastic changes to force protection measures. Displays of force by low-flying fast jets and attack helicopters have been reinstated, while counter-indirect fire patrolling by ground and helicopter forces has been also increased, despite Iraqi complaints that they violate the terms of the US-Iraqi security agreement.

Most importantly, Iraqi and US military intelligence personnel say, the US military has reinstated a programme of raids, arrests and air strikes against special groups. The only incident to have been reported by the mainstream media was an Apache helicopter strike that targeted an indirect fire cell in Basrah on 15 June. According to both US and Iraqi military intelligence officers, this was the suspected Kataib Hizbullah cell that had proved so effective over the previous six months. An unprecedented sharp drop in rocket attacks in the province in the wake of the air strike appears to corroborate how extensive the cell's operations had been.

Iraqi military intelligence personnel said that US forces have also been involved in seizing a suspected special group trainer (an Iranian national) in Diyala on 25 May. US military intelligence personnel added that the US carried out an air strike on a suspected weapons shipment in Musharrah, a notorious cross-border smuggling node in Maysan province. Iraqi military intelligence personnel also described the detention in July of a suspected bomb-making cell near Al-Qurnah, another well-known smuggler transshipment point in northern Basrah province.

Beyond the deadline

This more aggressive US response has set the scene for an intensified struggle. The Shia militants will try to continue their attacks to show the Iraqi government that they will not tolerate a new agreement that allows some US forces to remain in the country in 2012 and so that they can claim to have forced the foreigners to withdraw. "Whoever stays in [Iraq](#) will be treated as an unjust invader and should be opposed with military resistance," Sadr warned in

a statement released on 8 August. "A government which agrees for them to stay, even for training, is a weak government."

The ability of the special groups to escalate their campaign of violence against any US forces that remain in the country in 2012 remains unclear. While they would probably step up rocket attacks on the International Zone, it is not known whether they have sufficient stocks to allow a sustained campaign similar to the 1,100-rocket blitz maintained from March to May 2008. Nevertheless, any US military personnel involved in providing air support, training or weapons to the Iraqi military in 2012 are likely to continue to be targeted with rockets, mortars and EFPs.

Many observers expect the Qods Force to continue to support Iraqi proxies even if the US military completes its withdrawal at the end of 2011. This would allow [Iran](#) to order attacks on residual foreign interests in [Iraq](#), thereby slowing its re-emergence as a regional power and demonstrating its ability to retaliate if tensions over Iran's nuclear programme escalate.

However, Iraqi tolerance of Iranian support for non-state armed groups is likely to decrease after the US troops that justified their campaigns of violence are gone. Kataib Hizbullah may have been trying to capitalise on an Iraqi nationalist issue when it released a statement in July warning [Kuwait](#) against continuing to build port facilities that threaten to restrict Iraq's access to the Gulf.

The statement nevertheless mentioned the group's main ally, saying: "The Iraqi people cannot forget the Kuwaiti assistance against our neighbour [Iran](#) [in the 1980s]". This hinted at the possibility that Kataib Hizbullah could become involved in international operations, just as the Lebanese Hizbullah and Iranian-backed Iraqi Shia militants affiliated to the Al-Dawa group did when they attacked the US and French embassies in [Kuwait](#) city in 1983. n

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