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CTCSENTINEL

OBJECTIVE · RELEVANT · RIGOROUS | DECEMBER 2023 · VOLUME 16, ISSUE 11



FEATURE ARTICLE

How Tehran-Backed Terrorist Organizations and Militias Captured the Iraqi State

MICHAEL KNIGHTS, HAMD MALIK, AND CRISPIN SMITH

FEATURE ANALYSIS

The Path to October 7

How Iran built up and managed a Palestinian 'Axis of Resistance'

PHILLIP SMYTH

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FROM THE EDITOR

In the December feature article, Michael Knights, Hamdi Malik, and Crispin Smith outline how over the past two years Tehran-backed terrorist organizations and militias captured the Iraqi state, a development that could have dramatic implications for the regional terrorist threat, regional stability, U.S. interests, and great power competition in the wake of Iran enabling the second deadliest terrorist attack in history on October 7.

They write that "Iran-backed terrorists and militias lost the 2021 elections in Iraq yet ended up picking the prime minister anyway and taking charge of the world's fifth-largest oil producer. This remarkable reversal of fortunes in 2022 was not delivered via the barrel of a gun but rather a series of cool-headed and coordinated moves by Iran's Revolutionary Guard, by Iranian-groomed and militia-controlled judges, and by militia politicians. The country's oil economy, its freedoms, and its intelligence services are being gutted by militias to ensure their rule is permanent. Yet unprecedented control has not moderated these militias: The Gaza war has shown that these armed factions are also still addicted to militant 'resistance' to the United States. The result is the emergence of a terrorist-run state with greater resources than any of Iran's other proxy networks, hiding behind the façade of a sovereign country."

The attack on Israel on October 7 and its aftermath have underlined the regional threat posed by the broader Iran threat network. Besides Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, a multitude of other Tehran-backed Palestinian armed groups participated in the attack, including Fatah splinters and leftist groups. Phillip Smyth examines how Iran built up and managed a constellation of Palestinian 'Axis of Resistance' groups from across the ideological spectrum and empowered them to launch an attack that killed 1,200 Israelis. He writes: "Iranian assistance allowed its Palestinian proxies to amass the firepower, messaging know-how, and much of the hi-tech equipment necessary to carry out and propagandize the attack."

Austin Doctor and Sam Hunter examine the evolving threat of improvised explosives devices in the United States. They write: "Violent extremists continue to innovate, drawing on emerging technologies and creative problem solving. The onus of initiative requires that the counterterrorism mission community looks over the horizon to identify emerging threats."

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Cover: Members of Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces Shiite group Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq are pictured during a Quds Day march in Baghdad, Iraq, on July 1, 2016. (Hadi Mizban/AP Photo)

Iraq's New Regime Change: How Tehran-Backed Terrorist Organizations and Militias Captured the Iraqi State

By Michael Knights, Hamdi Malik, and Crispin Smith

Iran-backed terrorists and militias lost the 2021 elections in Iraq yet ended up picking the prime minister anyway and taking charge of the world's fifth-largest oil producer. This remarkable reversal of fortunes in 2022 was not delivered via the barrel of a gun but rather a series of cool-headed and coordinated moves by Iran's Revolutionary Guard, by Iranian-groomed and militia-controlled judges, and by militia politicians. The country's oil economy, its freedoms, and its intelligence services are being gutted by militias to ensure their rule is permanent. Yet unprecedented control has not moderated these militias: The Gaza war has shown that these armed factions are also still addicted to militant 'resistance' to the United States. The result is the emergence of a terrorist-run state with greater resources than any of Iran's other proxy networks, hiding behind the façade of a sovereign country.

This study is the fifth in a series of CTC Sentinel articles since 2019 that have detailed the ongoing evolution—in times of triumph and near-defeat—of the self-styled, Tehran-backed resistance (*muqawama*) factions in Iraq. The first article in August 2019 focused on how the *muqawama* had achieved one element of state capture by establishing, formalizing, and assuring Iraqi government funding for the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), Iraq's equivalent of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).¹ A second CTC Sentinel analysis in January 2020 charted the setbacks then suffered by the *muqawama*: failure to evict U.S. forces despite the appointment of a *muqawama*-controlled Iraqi prime minister Adel Abdal-Mahdi from 2018-2019; the collapse of Abdal-Mahdi's militia-run government; and then the U.S. killing of the two icons of the *muqawama*, Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, on January 3, 2020.² A third piece in October 2020 focused on how Iran's most-favored Iraqi armed group, Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH), might adjust to the loss of these leaders and the appointment of an anti-*muqawama* government under Prime Minister Mustafa Kadhim.³

The authors' fourth CTC Sentinel study in October 2021 leveraged the first eight months of synthesized open-source and interview-led intelligence processes operated by the new Militia Spotlight team at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.⁴ This very detailed analysis provided a complete chronology of the post-January 3, 2020, struggle by the IRGC-QF (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force) to restore intra-*muqawama* cohesion and (when needed) to recentralize control of local anti-U.S. militant cells.⁵ In the aftermath of the October 10, 2021, parliamentary elections in Iraq, the *muqawama*'s political coalition was shown to

have been decisively outperformed by the rival Shi`a powerbase of Moqtada al-Sadr.⁶

This study will take forward the chronology of the evolution of the Tehran-backed *muqawama* factions in Iraq, drawing upon two more years' worth of Militia Spotlight synthesized intelligence operations^a spanning from November 2021 to November 2023.⁷ Militia Spotlight's online blog⁸ and group profiles⁹ were established

a Militia Spotlight records publicly available information (such as reported events and attacks, and especially through careful observation of militia communications and propaganda activities). Additionally, the project interviews officials and politicians with direct insight into the internal affairs of militia groups. The Militia Spotlight team undertakes large numbers of anonymized interviews on an ongoing basis. All the interviews were undertaken on deep background due to the severe physical security threat posed by militias, and great care was taken, and is needed in future, to ensure that such individuals are not exposed to intimidation for cooperating with research. The mechanics mainly involve a dense web of communications with Iraqi interviewees using secure messaging applications, amounting to hundreds of specific information requests to verify data and multi-source points of detail, as well as secure transfer of large tranches of data and imagery. The authors use their combined multi-decade track record of interviewing Iraqis to assess information. Militia Spotlight analysis is thus the product of a synthesized open-source intelligence process.

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to track this process in detail and produce evidentiary building blocks, using legal standards of proof and certainty.^b The project collects militia statements in Arabic and other languages, archives evidence that risks being taken offline at a later point, and uses a data fusion process to synthesize information and analyze trends. Drawing on progressively larger networks of contacts, citizen journalism, and an enlarged analytic team, the online collection effort is strongly supplemented by the same kind of detailed interview process with U.S. and Iraqi subjects that underpinned the prior *CTC Sentinel* studies referenced above.¹⁰

The overarching theme of this analysis is, soberingly (in the view of the authors), one of an extraordinary turnaround in favor of the Tehran-backed *muqawama* in Iraq. In late 2021, following electoral defeat, the Tehran-backed Shi'a militias faced the real prospect of political marginalization for the first time since the introduction of democratic majority rule to Iraq.¹¹ Since the first Iraqi elections in 2005, a sectarian majoritarian system was held in place because the Shi'a blocs, with encouragement by Iran's government and Iraq's Shi'a religious establishment, caucused together in selecting a (Shi'a) prime minister by consensus.¹² In the aftermath of the 2021 elections, this arrangement changed for the first time since 2005, as one member of the pan-Shi'a body politic, Moqtada al-Sadr, broke with tradition and sought to form a government with Kurdish and Sunni allies, and without the Iran-backed Shi'a militia politicians.¹³

At this darkest of moments for the *muqawama*, it was not the armed groups (or *fasa'il*) that saved the Tehran-backed Shi'a militias but rather an IRGC-QF-managed combination of made-to-order judicial rulings; targeted political violence; and the cohesiveness of the Shi'a Coordination Framework (al-Etar al-Tansiqi al-Shi'a) that brought together Shi'a politicians like Nouri al-Maliki of the State of Law Alliance, Hadi al-Ameri of Badr Organization,¹⁴ and Qais al-Khazali,¹⁵ the leader of U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organization Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH).¹⁶ Through the resilience of the Shi'a Coordination Framework and the weaknesses of Moqtada al-Sadr's effort, it was the *losers* of Iraq's 2021 elections—the Shi'a Coordination Framework—that formed the Iraqi government under Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani in October 2022.¹⁷

The bulk of this analysis looks at what the “*muqawama* government” (as the Shia Coordination Framework styles itself¹⁸) has done with its sudden, uncontested, and unprecedented control of the prime minister's office (and thus, the security services and government agencies), plus the judiciary and the parliament—a full sweep of Iraq's powerbases. The story is one of state capture by Tehran-backed terrorist groups and militias of the world's fifth-largest oil producer,¹⁹ with a population and an economy seven times as large as the Lebanese Hezbollah-controlled Lebanese

“The story is one of state capture by Tehran-backed terrorist groups and militias of the world's fifth-largest oil producer, with a population and an economy seven times as large as the Lebanese Hezbollah-controlled Lebanese state.”

state.^{20c}

The first two sections of the article review the manner in which in 2021-2022 the IRGC-QF/*muqawama* partnership faced—and defeated—their most serious political challenge to date and took power in October 2022. The third section of the study then looks at the first thorny issue they faced in government: whether to evict U.S. forces or adopt a more pragmatic approach. This episode clarified an evolving division of labor between overlapping circles of state capture-focused *muqawama* and militancy-focused *muqawama*, with the latter accepting no immediate removal of U.S. forces in order to support broader state capture by Iran-backed factions. Ensuring that the Tehran-backed *muqawama* would never again face an existential threat was the next order of business, and the fourth section of this study will look at the skyrocketing terrorist and militia penetration of Iraq's intelligence, military, judicial, media, and border agencies since 2022. The fifth section then looks at the greatly expanded economic opportunities now available to Tehran-backed terrorist and militia groups in Iraq as they attain unchecked control of all the organs of the state for the first time, with important implications for the future of counterterrorism threat financing originating in Iraq. The sixth part of the study analyzes the changing balance of power (since October 2021) within the *muqawama* and also between the Iraqi factions and IRGC-QF. Early indicators from the Gaza war provide useful insights into the extensive overlap between state capture-focused and militancy-focused *muqawama* groups. Predictions, analytic lessons, and ideas for further study close out the article.

Part One. Facing Disaster: Iran-Backed Militias after Iraq's 2021 Elections

As the results from the October 2021 elections began to be tallied, the Tehran-backed militias in the main *muqawama* bloc, the Fateh Alliance (Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), Badr, and Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH)) quickly recognized that a disaster had befallen them.²¹ The failure was not mainly in terms of their own somewhat weak performance, but principally in the form of the very strong result achieved by their main Shi'a political rival, Moqtada al-Sadr, who had accurately understood how to arrange his campaign to win

b Militia Spotlight seeks to capture information from militia sources and compile it as a record of militias “in their own words” and “by their own actions.” The team attempts to lay out its findings with information supporting each step in the team's conclusions' logical chain. Militias Spotlight captures and saves this information, though the platform does not publish every item, name, or other element of information collected. As a baseline, Militia Spotlight aims to demonstrate linkages between militias to the equivalent of a common-law civil case standard of proof—that is, by a preponderance of the evidence that the facts alleged are true.

c Iraq has an assessed population of 41,266,109 (2023 est.) and Lebanon has 5,331,203 (2023 est.) Iraq's GDP is assessed at \$390.165 billion (2021 est.) versus Lebanon's \$72.577 billion (2021 est.), and the gap between the two is widening constantly as Iraq reports record budgets and Lebanon's economy collapses.



In this May 7, 2018, photo, Qais al-Khazali, center, the leader of the militant Shi`a group *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq*, or *League of the Righteous*, speaks to his followers during a campaign rally in Baghdad, Iraq. (Hadi Mizban/AP Photo)

the maximum number of seats.^d Of the 329 seats in parliament, al-Sadr's Sairoon list had won 73, placing it far ahead of his Shi`a opponents.²² His closest challenger was former prime minister Nouri al-Maliki, with 37 seats, who was competing separately from the Fateh Alliance. Even when al-Maliki joined with the Fateh Alliance militias, they collectively could scrape together just 65 seats.^e The Fateh Alliance dropped from 48 seats in the 2018 elections to around 20 in the 2021 results.^f The *muqawama* faction that suffered the worst humiliation was Qais al-Khazali's Sadiqoun list, part of the U.S.-designated terrorist movement *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq*,²³ which received just four seats in the October 2021 elections (down from 15 in 2018).²⁴ This was a double-blow because the increasingly prominent al-Khazali had expected not only to grow his parliamentary representation but also to eclipse his Fateh Alliance partner, Hadi al-Ameri's Badr Organization,²⁵ yet the reverse occurred: Al-Khazali's share of the Fateh bloc in parliament shrank from 31 percent in 2018 to 20 percent in 2021.^g Kataib Hezbollah's *Harakat Hoquq* (The Rights Movement) list only won one seat from the 32 races it ran in.²⁶

d Sadr received 900,393 votes and won 73 seats, or 12,334 votes per seat. Fateh got 462,813 votes and 14/15 seats, or around 30,000 votes per seat. Thus, Sadrist efficiency was double that of Fateh.

e This total is by the authors' collective tally, something of an art form as opposed to a science because not all Iraqi parliamentarians openly declare their affiliations until they have won their seats.

f Again, these figures come from detailed analysis by the authors of Iraqi parliamentarian political affiliations and performance, either openly admitted or otherwise.

g Again, based on a combination of admitted and proven alignments ascertained by the authors, AAH dropped from 15 of 48 Fateh seats in 2018, to four of 20 in 2021.

More importantly, all of Moqtada al-Sadr's Shi`a rivals grasped exactly how consequential this loss could be due to new and radical political doctrine espoused by al-Sadr.²⁷ This was the concept of a cross-sectarian, multi-ethnic majority government that would marginalize or even exclude the Fateh Alliance and other Shi`a factions.²⁸ In prior elections, the exact balance between the Shi`a factions was inconclusive because they agreed to collectively select a prime minister by consensus as a sectarian unit. Al-Sadr now threatened to change this equation in partnership with two other winners of the election, who al-Sadr's political scientists had correctly predicted would also perform strongly under the electoral system used in 2021: Massoud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Mohammed al-Halbousi's Sunni Arab Taqadum (National Progress Party).²⁹

From the spring of 2021, Moqtada al-Sadr has begun to strengthen relations with these two players, which was so unsettling to Tehran-backed blocs and Iran itself that the Kurds received both warnings and regular drone attacks to discourage their full commitment to al-Sadr and the possibility that their example would draw in Sunnis in their wake.³⁰ Al-Sadr openly stated that he intended to disassemble the *muqawama's* powerbase within the PMF.^h Thus, al-Sadr and anyone who allied with him credibly threatened to cross two red lines that had been clearly laid out by Tehran-backed blocs and Iran itself: dividing the Shi`a community in government formation and threatening their control of the PMF

h On November 18, 2021, for instance, al-Sadr stated: "If you want to participate in the formation of the government you must do the following: disband all the fasail ... and hand in their arms to al-Hashd al-Sha'abi [i.e., the Popular Mobilization Forces, or PMF]." Quoted in Hamdi Malik and Michael Knights, "A Fake KSS Recruitment Drive," *Militia Spotlight*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, November 27, 2021.

mechanism of state funding and legitimization for *muqawama* militias.¹

The first *muqawama* reaction to the loss was deep shock and existential dread: At one of the first meetings of the Fateh Alliance following the election, Hadi al-Ameri baldly stated: “I will not wait to be slaughtered like a lamb.”² Militia Spotlight spent the last quarter of 2021 recording, in detail, the thrashing around of *muqawama* actors as they ineffectively tried to alter the electoral results. First, in mid-October 2021, Qais al-Khazali led the organization of mass street protests and tried to storm the government center, the International Zone, with an AAH member killed by the security forces.³¹ *Muqawama* conventional and social media boiled with explicit threats against parties accused of corrupting the electoral results: the United States, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Iraq, and the United Arab Emirates (who were seen by the *muqawama* as supporting an axis between al-Sadr and the (then) incumbent Prime Minister Mustafa Kadhimi).³² In late October and early November 2021, the *muqawama* began to issue death threats against Kadhimi, senior security officials,³³ and undertook a rocket attack on the organization closest to him, the Iraqi National Intelligence Service.³⁴

On November 7, 2021, two explosive drones were used to attack the house of Prime Minister Kadhimi.³⁵ Though *muqawama* leaders denied culpability in the attack, available evidence suggests the drone attack was resourced and directly by an AAH-led, KH-supported consortia of disgruntled *muqawama* factions^k who did not perceive Iran as doing enough to help them in their moment of existential crisis.³⁶ In November and December 2021, *muqawama* propaganda platforms like Sabereen News (affiliated with multiple *fasa'il*) and Unit 10,000 (affiliated with KH) repeatedly issued death threats against Kadhimi-linked intelligence officials and the Iraqi Security Forces protecting the International Zone,³⁷ followed by a rash of assassinations of security officers.³⁸

At this moment, the IRGC-QF faced an institutional failure on a monumental scale. As the authors' prior *CTC Sentinel* pieces noted, even under Soleimani, events in Iraq were slowly trending toward a nightmare scenario for the Iranian regime.³⁹ A Tehran-backed premier, Prime Minister Adel Abdal-Mahdi, had resigned at the end of 2019 with less than two years in office due to mass protests in which Iranian diplomatic facilities in Iraq were repeatedly

attacked and whose example spurred protests in Iran.¹ Then the two most senior IRGC-QF officers in Iraq, Soleimani and Muhandis, were killed;^m the Iraqi *muqawama* was becoming unresponsive to Iranian direction at key moments;ⁿ Iraq's most powerful Shi'a politician Moqtada al-Sadr and the new Sadr-Kurdish-Sunni tripartite bloc appeared intent on providing a full four-year term in office to Mustafa al-Kadhimi, a secular, Western-leaning premier who in his 2020-2021 administration had begun to arrest *muqawama* terrorists and generate significant intelligence on the weaknesses of the Tehran-based proxy networks in Iraq.⁴⁰ For the IRGC-QF—still firmly in charge of Iranian policy in Iraq, based on Militia Spotlight's research^o—the emerging outcome represented looming object failure.⁴¹

Part Two. Defeat into Victory: Lawfare, not Guns, Wins the Day

Militias Spotlight's insights from winter of 2021-2022 strongly suggest that Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and the IRGC-QF commander Esmail Qaani “gripped” the *muqawama* issue in a decisive manner from December 2021 onwards. It is possible that Iran ceased at this point to try to replace Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis with one man,^p but instead split up the roles^q he played between multiple *muqawama* leaders and factions, an idea explored by Militia Spotlight in a prescient January 2022 piece.⁴²

In a very high-profile January 2022 BBC interview,⁴³ Qais al-Khazali made half a dozen clearly critical statements about Iranian

i In the authors' collective assessment, publicly advocating the issue of PMF disestablishment was a key driver for the coherence of the post-electoral response to al-Sadr's win.

j This underlines the view of not only Fateh and al-Maliki but also Shi'a moderates like Hakim and Abadi. These actors fear a major unrestrained growth of Sadrist power, most having fought to restrain Sadrist militias in the past. Author (Knights) interview, Iraqi Shi'a Coordination Framework interviewee, 2021; exact date, name, and place withheld at request of the interviewee.

k According to Militia Spotlight's investigation at the time of the drone attacks on Kadhimi, the attack was carried out by AAH members Abbas Shams al-Din, aided by team leaders Ali Mohsen Balasim al-Lami and Haider Mohammed al-Khalqani, using facilities and resources provided by Qais al-Khazali and Laith al-Khazali. Of note, KH members secured the launch site. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2021-2022; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees. For open source coverage of the issue, see this report, which reflects U.S. government background briefings: Dan De Luze and Courtney Kube, “Iran likely did not order drone attack on Iraqi prime minister, current, former U.S. officials say,” NBC News, November 13, 2021.

l By 2019, this sense was already building. The Iranian consulate in Basra was burned in 2018 and again in 2019. See “Iraqi protesters set fire to Iranian consulate in Basra,” Al Jazeera, September 7, 2018, and “Protesters burn down Iranian consulate in southern Iraq,” *Guardian*, November 27, 2019.

m The loss of both Soleimani and al-Muhandis, as well as the premierships, opened up space for anti-Iran dissent in 2020. See Ray Takeyh, “Iran is losing its grip on Iraq,” *The Hill*, February 1, 2020, and Namu Abdulla and Mehdi Jedinia, “New Poll: Iran Losing Support of Majority in Iraq,” *Voice of America*, June 16, 2020.

n In the latter half of 2020, the IRGC-QF struggled to discipline *muqawama* cells about not poking the outgoing Trump administration too vigorously, even threatening to withdraw Iran-provided drones. See Michael Knights, Crispin Smith, and Hamdi Malik, “Discordance in the Iran Threat Network in Iraq: Militia Competition and Rivalry,” *CTC Sentinel* 14:8 (2021). By late 2021, following episodes such as the November 7, 2021, drone attack on Kadhimi, the sense of an IRGC-QF loss of control was becoming more mainstream. See Shawn Yuan, “Is Iran losing some of its grip on Shia militias in Iraq?” Al Jazeera, November 12, 2021.

o Militia Spotlight investigated the issue of which Iranian agency led Iranian policy in Iraq, and concluded in the October 2021 *CTC Sentinel* article that “multiple interviewees in a position to know are unanimous that IRGC-QF still leads Iraq policy for Iran. IRGC-QF primacy in Iraq is still recognized by the Office of the Supreme Leader, Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS), IRGC Intelligence Organization, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Lebanese Hezbollah.” See Knights, Smith, and Malik, “Discordance in the Iran Threat Network in Iraq.”

p Based on interviews with Iraqi officials and politicians at the time, there is good evidence that Abu Fadak (Abd'al-Aziz al-Mohammadawi, acting as Popular Mobilization Forces operational commander since February 2020) was given the first chance to try to replicate Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis' “grip” on the Iraqi *muqawama* but he failed during 2020 and 2021 to achieve this due to shortfalls in charisma, religious knowledge, or personal relationships. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2020-2021; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

q Arguably, al-Muhandis served two roles: as the head of the Popular Mobilization Forces and as the head of the anti-U.S. resistance in Iraq.



Abu Alaa al-Wala'i, commander of Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada, speaks during an interview with the Associated Press on July 5, 2021, in Baghdad, Iraq. (Khalid Mohammed/AP Photo)

policy in Iraq^r and finished by reflecting that since the deaths of Soleimani and al-Muhandis, “the way the [Iranian] organizations that are dealing with the Iraq case operate has changed dramatically.” He continued: “In my opinion maybe this change was correct and appropriate with this new situation. It’s not confidential that in most cases Mr. Qaani meets with the prime minister and other political figures from different groups and parties and has delivered the message that Iran won’t make decisions for Iraq. And decisions have to be taken by Iraqis. Iran doesn’t interfere. If help is requested by Iraq, Iran will take action. But it does not have a specific position on Iraq.”⁴⁴

These comments contrast very interestingly with the starkly critical AAH public commentary on Iran in mid-November 2021,⁴⁵ right after AAH played a key role in the drone attack on Kadhimi. Something changed appreciably at the start of 2022 in IRGC-QF relations with the Iraqi *muqawama*, with Esmail Qaani receiving a

much better reception immediately afterwards.^s Most likely, based on all the available small indicators and messages gathered at the time from interviews and social media spaces, the change came about because Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei issued a *fatwa*—in the form of a letter—that sternly warned the *muqawama* players to cooperate with each other, with Qaani as his representative.⁴⁶

Role Division Among the Militias

Another strand of the recovery effort was Iran’s extension of a tight, controlling embrace of the military leaders of the *fasa’il* at the forefront of coordinating anti-U.S. actions. These were the same three leaders who had rushed first to meet with Soleimani’s deputy and successor, IRGC-QF commander Esmail Qaani, when he met Iraqi *muqawama* leaders for the first time as the new Quds Force chief in January 2020.⁴⁷ One was Akram Kaabi of Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (HaN, hereafter referred to as Nujaba);⁴⁸ the second was Abu Alaa al-Wala’i of Kata’ib Sayyid al-Shuhada (KSS);⁴⁹ and the third was Laith al-Khazali, Qais al-Khazali’s

^r First, Qais al-Khazali openly named Iran as the party that caused the loss of the opportunity to evict U.S. forces in January 2020; then he rebuffed a question about Qaani’s influence by referring to anti-occupation strategy as an Iraqi decision; he stated the Iraqi *muqawama*’s ability to make its own drones without depending on Iran; and he noted “complications” in Iran’s relations with the *muqawama*. All of these are notable, and to come one after the other in a short interview was highly unusual for any *muqawama* faction leader. “A closer look at BBC Persian’s full interview with Asaib Ahl al-Haq leader Qais al-Khazali,” Middle East Center (MECRA), January 23, 2022.

^s Militia Spotlight noticed this in January 2022, though at the time, was unsure how to interpret it. Hamdi Malik and Michael Knights, “Militia Lionization of Esmail Qaani: Consolidation or Covering Embarrassment?” Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, January 24, 2022.

brother, in charge of AAH's paramilitary operations at that point.^t In November and December 2021, both were strengthened in Iraq. Abu Alaa al-Wala'i was boosted with a well-publicized KSS recruitment drive⁵⁰ and an enhanced role for Abu Alaa's relatives in the Sabereen News network.⁵¹ Ashab al-Kahf,⁵² a resistance brand that came under Kaabi's control in late 2021, took over as the most prolific group claiming harassment attacks on U.S. forces in Iraq.⁵³ In December 2021, in the most visible symbol of Kaabi's symbolic leadership of anti-U.S. resistance operations, he gave a speech in front of the flags of the most prolific *muqawama* brands being used to claim kinetic attacks against U.S. targets in Iraq and Syria.^u

In contrast, Katai'b Hezbollah lowered its profile at the same time and may have become more focused on covert operations, especially those against targets outside Iraq. In November 2021, KH claiming of roadside bomb attacks on U.S. supply convoys diminished,⁵⁴ as did its involvement in the main *muqawama* media brand, Sabereen. Furthermore, KH's Qassem al-Jabbarin brand used for claiming attacks became largely inactive.⁵⁵ The only visible actions by KH were those undertaken openly by Abu Fadak (Abd'al-Aziz al-Mohammadawi, acting as the operational commander of the Popular Mobilization Forces since February 2020).⁵⁶ When KH's Special Operations wing next resurfaced, it was to use its Alwiyat al-Waad al-Haq brand to claim drone attacks on the UAE in February 2022, and on U.S. bases outside Iraq, such as a drone attack in August 2022 on Al-Tanf in Syria.⁵⁷

Recovery Through Lawfare and Political Warfare

After restoring a modicum of cohesion and role differentiation to the *muqawama*, the next joint action by the IRGC-QF and the Shia Coordination Framework was ingenious—a novel and highly effective combination of lawfare with kinetic intimidation, intended to break the momentum of the Sadr-Kurdish-Sunni tripartite bloc. As Militia Spotlight has consistently warned, lawfare (“the strategy of using - or misusing - law as a substitute for traditional military means to achieve a warfighting objective”⁵⁸) can be a highly-effective

“The most important tool in the *muqawama*'s 2022 turnaround was Iraq's most senior judge, the Iraqi Supreme Judicial Court's Judge Faiq Zaydan.”

and economic tool of political warfare, especially in Iraq.^v As noted in the October 2021 *CTC Sentinel* article: “Iran is well-versed in this kind of soft war (‘jang-e narm’ [Persian] or ‘harb na’ima’ [Arabic]) characterized by information warfare and the development of a network of covert and overt media actors.”⁵⁹

The most important tool in the *muqawama*'s 2022 turnaround was Iraq's most senior judge, the Iraqi Supreme Judicial Court's Judge Faiq Zaydan,⁶⁰ who (in February 2022) suddenly (and very unusually during a tense government formation interregnum^w) issued a flurry of rulings in his subordinate Supreme Federal Court (FSC) that all, in some way, proved highly damaging to the tripartite bloc's effort to form a government without the *muqawama* factions.⁶¹ Most importantly, the FSC altered the government formation rules so that the tripartite bloc's simple (165-seat) majority was no longer sufficient to form a government and instead a two-thirds (218-seat) majority was needed, making the exclusion of Shi'a Coordination Framework players mathematically impossible due to the balance of seats.^x In Militia Spotlight's assessment, based on an extensive multi-year investigation, Zaydan is one of a number of judges groomed by the Iraqi *muqawama*, specifically by Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis since around 2004. Zaydan was maneuvered by Muhandis to the apex of the Iraqi judicial system, whereupon Muhandis privately

t The AAH military commander, Laith al-Khazali had emerged by 2020 as the most muscular AAH leader, throwing his weight around to the extent that he even physically intimidated the head of the Shi'a religious endowment in Iraq and stole his house in the summer of 2019. This is described in Michael Knights, Hamdi Malik, and Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Honored, Not Contained: The Future of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 23, 2020. He was designated by the United States for serious human rights abuses later that year. “Treasury Sanctions Iran-Backed Militia Leaders Who Killed Innocent Demonstrators in Iraq,” U.S. Department of the Treasury, December 6, 2019.

u The group flags were those of Nujaba, Ashab al-Kahf; Al-Muqawama al-Duwaliya; Liwa al-Thaireen; Liwa Thar Muhandis; Saraya Thawat al-Ashrin al-Thaniya; Rijal Allah; Liwa al-Qasim; and Al-Tashkil al-Waritheen. Crispin Smith and Michael Knights, “Akram Kaabi's Revealing Speech,” Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, December 9, 2021.

v In 2021, the authors noted: “The *muqawama* expend considerable time and effort broadcasting their interest in law and their role as its defenders, while using legal arguments and Iraqi institutions in an attempt to discredit military and political opponents. Lawfare efforts present the *muqawama* as legitimate upholders of Iraqi law and sovereignty (while discrediting and effectively constraining opponents). This helps maintain wider societal approval—a vital part in *muqawama* efforts to capture the Iraqi state. Militia Spotlight has documented the *muqawama*'s embrace of lawfare, and their fascination with the use of lawsuits and quasi-legal propaganda to achieve strategic ends. Militia Spotlight has also observed the militias' fear of domestic and international law being used against them.” Knights, Smith, and Malik, “Discordance in the Iran Threat Network in Iraq.”

w Though Iraq's judiciary is theoretically independent of the executive and judicial branches under the constitutional separation of powers, it nonetheless historically takes the political context into account when considering the timing of important court rulings. Until 2022, it has been customary since democracy came to Iraq in 2005 to not reveal politically sensitive or impactful court rulings during government formation, even when the government formation process has stretched over many months. In Zaydan's case, half a dozen highly impactful *pro-muqawama* verdicts were delivered in the first quarter of 2022. Crispin Smith and Michael Knights, “Remaking Iraq: How Iranian-Backed Militias Captured the Country,” Just Security, March 20, 2023.

x To achieve a two-thirds majority of 218 seats, the tripartite bloc would have had to find another 50 seats, which could only have been pulled together by involving the Shi'a Coordination Framework parties. These figures come from detailed analysis by the authors of Iraqi parliamentary political affiliations and performance, either openly admitted or otherwise.

referred to him as “the guardian of the Shia project.”^y Based on Militia Spotlight’s information, Zaydan remained in close contact with IRGC-QF officials^z and U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organizations such as KH and AAH^{aa} throughout 2021-2022 on the government formation issue.⁶² Zaydan traded made-to-order judicial rulings in return for IRGC-QF and *muqawama* support for Zaydan’s continued leadership of the judicial system.⁶³

In addition to rulings made to frustrate the filling of the key presidential role, and thus stall Moqtada al-Sadr’s government formation efforts, Zaydan and the FSC brought tremendous pressure against al-Sadr’s Kurdish partners. In February 2022, the FSC suddenly (and against usual custom) activated a 10-year old case against Kurdistan’s independent oil exports *during government formation*, with the intent to intimidate the Kurds into withdrawing from the tripartite effort.⁶⁴ In parallel, from March to June 2022, both the *muqawama fasa’il* and Iran militarily attacked the Kurdistan Region, and particularly its energy sites with rocket and drone strikes (and in Iran’s case, directly and overtly with short-range ballistic missiles fired from inside Iran).⁶⁵ Indeed, Nujaba issued its first Kurdish-language communique on March 16, 2022, three days after Iran’s ballistic missile strike on the Kurdistan capital of Erbil, warning the Kurds to abandon the tripartite bloc and efforts to “change the status quo.”⁶⁶ This period of intense multifaceted harassment of the Kurdistan Region underlined just how effectively Iran and the *muqawama* could blend political warfare (including threatened regime change in Kurdistan) and lawfare, economic warfare, and kinetic attacks.

The net result was to expertly frustrate and goad Moqtada al-Sadr until he made a series of critical errors, most notably his

June 2022 unilateral resignation of all 73 MPs of the Sairoon coalition from parliament, ceding their seats largely to the Shi’a Coordination Framework factions.^{ab} Now armed with the ability to form a government due to the changed balance in the parliament, the Shi’a Coordination Framework immediately flipped to a pro-state, pro-system position, aligning with the security forces against a now (self-) excluded Sadrist street opposition.⁶⁷ In August 2022, Moqtada al-Sadr’s ill-considered invasion and occupation of the International Zone was defeated decisively when the *muqawama* factions deftly provoked⁶⁸ al-Sadr’s mobs to bombard the International Zone with small arms fire and rockets, and then enjoyed the spectacle of Iraq’s senior Shi’a cleric Ali al-Sistani ordering al-Sadr to withdraw his forces in disgrace.⁶⁹ This cleared the way for al-Sadr’s retreat into reclusion; for the October 2022 formation of a *muqawama*-appointed premier, Prime Minister al-Sudani; and (see section 4) for an immediate and widespread purge of the pro-Western security officials that had gradually begun to assert themselves against the *muqawama* under Kadhimi.

All the *muqawama* players were winners in this unlikely reversal of fortunes, but the most visibly successful of them all were former premier Nouri al-Maliki and Qais al-Khazali.^{ac} While Maliki’s utility is obvious—he won far more seats than the Fateh Alliance in the elections^{ad}—al-Khazali’s comeback after his electoral wipeout is worth a closer look. He had been on an upswing in the years^{ae} before the elections, navigating the political environment with skill and energy,⁷⁰ and perhaps exploiting the vacuum left by Soleimani and Muhandis’ killings and by KH’s infighting in 2020-2021.⁷¹ After the October 2021 elections, al-Khazali worked harder than any other player to reverse the outcome, perhaps because a Sadr-led government might have had especially disastrous consequences for al-Khazali.^{af} As noted, al-Khazali was the first to put his own

y The U.S.-designated terrorist Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis privately boasted on multiple occasions to Iraqi leaders that he groomed Zaydan and guided his career from 2004 onwards. Muhandis referred to Zaydan as “his project” and “his man,” stating on multiple occasions to Iraqi leaders that control of the Iraqi judiciary was his objective. Authors’ (Knights, Smith) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2021-2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees. For an analytic summary of Zaydan’s actions in the post-electoral period, see this article in the lawfare journal, *Just Security*, by Smith and Knights, “Remaking Iraq;” and Michael Knights, “Iraq’s Two Coups—And How the U.S. Should Respond,” *Fikra Forum*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, August 2, 2022.

z For instance, Zaydan was photographed praying at a gathering of IRGC and IRGC-QF commanders in Iran on December 26, 2018, sitting between Falah al-Fayyadh, the head of the Popular Mobilization Forces, and future prime minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani. Qassem Soleimani, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, and a number of *muqawama* leaders were also in attendance. See photographs published here at the Iranian Supreme Leader’s official website, available at <https://www.leader.ir/ar/pictures/album/2132/grid> (last accessed June 19, 2023). On other occasions, Zaydan has privately met with IRGC-QF officers such as Soleimani’s assistant Hajji Hamid Nasser and IRGC-QF commander Esmail Qaani (both during government formation in Baghdad in 2022). These meetings took place at the houses of Hadi al-Ameri and U.S.-sanctioned Lebanese Hezbollah operative Mohammed al-Kawtharani. Zaydan also publicly refers to Soleimani and Muhandis by the Iranian and *muqawama* term “the leaders of victory” and Zaydan has a commemorative statue of Muhandis in his home. Authors (Knights, Smith) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2021-2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

aa When Mohammed Shia al-Sudani was appointed prime minister on October 27, 2022, Zaydan was seated beside Qais al-Khazali, the U.S.-designated terrorist, with both heartily celebrating the appointment with laughs and smiles. See video and photos here: Hussein Khzali, “[A very cordial conversation between the trustworthy Sheikh Qais Al-Khazali and the President of the Federal Supreme Court ...],” X, October 27, 2022.

ab Before the resignation, the Shi’a Coordination Framework could muster around 65 seats, but after (following the reallocation of Sadrist seats to second-placed candidates), the Framework could muster around 110. In combination with the collapse of resistance from Kurdish and Shiite tripartite bloc members, forming a two-thirds majority government became possible once again. This is the authors’ calculation, which is not precise due to the manner in which Iraqi MPs can informally caucus with each other, at will.

ac Both al-Maliki and al-Khazali were among the most inveterate and determined opponents of the tripartite bloc because they were the most bitter adversaries of Moqtada al-Sadr, with no possibility of inclusion in an al-Sadr-led order and a high probability that both would have been undermined, prosecuted, or even driven out of Iraq. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2022-2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

ad Al-Maliki won 33 seats in the elections, versus 17 for Fateh. Even after the reallocation of Sadrist seats, Maliki had 37 seats to Fateh’s 29. Though Fateh can call on the support of many other smaller blocs of MPs, so can al-Maliki, and the 37 seats that Maliki holds are indispensable to the Shi’a Coordination Framework. Again, this is the authors’ calculation, taking into account the vagaries of Iraqi parliamentary caucusing.

ae After winning a surprise 15 seats in the 2018 elections, Qais al-Khazali appeared to be the fastest-rising militia politician in Iraq. For a good example of the tenor of reporting on him, see Isabel Coles, Ali Nabhan, and Ghassan Adnan, “Iraqi Who Once Killed Americans Is a U.S. Dilemma as He Gains Political Power,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 11, 2018.

af Originating in the same Sadrist current as al-Sadr, Qais al-Khazali was a favorite student of Moqtada’s father, Mohammed Sadiq al-Sadr, and a bitter personal rival of Moqtada’s. Qais al-Khazali might have been placed under house arrest, driven into exile, or even killed if Moqtada al-Sadr had consolidated power in 2021-2022. This is Militia Spotlight’s assessment based on all the available evidence and the authors’ analytic processes.

protestors in the firing line to protest the elections, and he played the key role in the November 7 drone attack on the then Prime Minister Kadhimi's house, underlining to Iran the potential consequences of politically throwing him and other anti-Sadr factions under the bus.⁷² Al-Khazali was the most prominent of the Shi'a Coordination Framework "hawks" who argued for the need to abandon Iran's long-held default approach—to always keep the Shi'a house united—and instead to defeat and exclude al-Sadr.^{ag} In the summer of 2022, al-Khazali and al-Maliki held their nerve, outlasted al-Sadr, and then outplayed him in the International Zone crisis of August 2022.⁷³

As important, al-Khazali then emerged as the initial backer of Iraq's new "consensus" prime minister, Mohammed Shia al-Sudani, and thus the "earliest investor" in his appointment.^{ah} Since then, al-Khazali has adopted a unique tone with al-Sudani and is the only Shi'a Coordination Framework leader with the *chutzpah* to publicly define and limit al-Sudani's role, which al-Khazali described in a November 2022 television interview as that of a "general manager." This appears to have been a calculated action to show al-Khazali's power, by disparaging Iraq's prime minister—the country's highest executive and the commander-in-chief of the military—by comparing him to a low-ranking bureaucrat.⁷⁴ Al-Khazali demanded that, in contrast to the Constitution's provisions, "the prime minister must not monopolize the state's decisions; rather, [he must] refer to the Coordination Framework ... for strategic decisions, whether political, economic, or security. Organizing the government ... is the prime minister's business."⁷⁵ In January 2023, one of al-Khazali's parliamentarians and a former AAH fighter, Ali Turki, referred to the Sudani government as "the *muqawama* government," stating "the *muqawama* has come to represent the official view of Iraq, and it is the one running affairs today."⁷⁶ Al-Sudani's Prime Minister's Office has never issued a public rebuttal of either statement.

Part Three. Militias in Charge: The Thorny Issue of U.S. Presence

Once ensconced in power following the October 2022 formation of al-Sudani's government, the Shi'a Coordination Framework ran headfirst into one of the strategic decisions that they reserved for themselves rather than al-Sudani to make. This was the evergreen issue of U.S. military withdrawal from Iraq. Following a U.S.-Iraq Strategic Dialogue held by the Kadhimi government in the summer of 2021 in Washington, D.C., the *muqawama* had developed high expectations that a mutually agreed end to U.S. "combat operations" in Iraq on December 31, 2021, actually meant a withdrawal of *all* U.S. forces. The *muqawama* had already been asked by IRGC-QF to postpone their revenge for the killings of Soleimani and Muhandis in order to pass through the erratic end-days of the Trump administration at the end of 2020.⁷⁷ Now, another *muqawama*-set

deadline for U.S. withdrawal had passed without implementation during the government formation process at the end of 2021.

When al-Sudani was appointed eight months later, Qais al-Khazali lost no time in stating in November 2022, with no rebuttal from al-Sudani or any other *muqawama* actor, that al-Sudani "will start a [process of] genuine negotiations. I emphasize it must be genuine and not nominal or deceptive—like what used to happen in the past ... this is a matter we will never compromise on; [ending] the military presence of the United States is non-negotiable."⁷⁸ Yet, less than two months later, AAH⁷⁹ (and KH⁸⁰) reacted in a very restrained manner when al-Sudani announced on January 13, 2023, that the government would not seek the immediate removal of U.S. forces (as per the January 5, 2020, law to "expel all foreign troops from their country"⁸¹) but would instead "determine the missions, the numbers, and places [of U.S. troops in Iraq] and for a specific period of time."⁸² AAH parliamentarian and fighter Ali Turki even told reporters on January 10, 2023, that "there is no problem to sit [negotiating] with the U.S. to exchange interests ... The U.S. forces are in Iraq today to train Iraqi security forces ... We are trying to make the relationship with the United States based on partnership and interests."⁸³

What accounts for this new willingness in AAH and KH statements to equivocate regarding the extent and timing of U.S. withdrawal? The change of government from Kadhimi to al-Sudani was clearly one factor in the *muqawama*'s surprisingly relaxed view. As al-Khazali noted in November 2022: "In the past we had objections [because] the head of the previous government had ill intentions, so we stood against [his moves]. Right now, the prime minister is the prime minister of the Coordination Framework, therefore there is no suspicion about ill intentions."⁸⁴ Qais al-Khazali took note of the lack of strong U.S. reaction to the appointment of an AAH cabinet member, Minister of Higher Education Naim al-Aboudi, as a sign that dealing with the United States might be possible.^{ai}

More broadly, the *muqawama* also seem to have rapidly recognized the need to placate the United States to at least a small degree. The first crisis of the al-Sudani era was the U.S. Treasury's November 2022 limitations on dollar transactions with Iraq, which was a long-scheduled development that caught the new government by surprise and which underlined the need to treat the United States with care in order to maintain access to global financial systems and dollar transfers.⁸⁵ The examples of the 2019 ouster of the *muqawama*-friendly Prime Minister Adel Abdal-Mahdi and the January 3, 2020, airstrikes on Soleimani and Muhandis were still fresh. The Iran-backed^{aj} kidnap-murder on November

ag When outreach began from Moqtada al-Sadr to include Shi'a parties except al-Maliki and al-Khazali, Hadi al-Ameri and Iran considered swallowing the electoral result, which was disappointing but survivable for them both. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2021-2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

ah Above any other faction, Qais al-Khazali pushed al-Sudani's candidacy, overcoming initial resistance within the Shi'a Coordination Framework toward al-Sudani. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2022-2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

ai Washington was not happy but at the same time did not warn Iraq to find another minister, as has happened many times in the past—most notably Hadi al-Ameri being blocked by a U.S. veto from the Ministry of Interior post in 2014. This assessment is based on multiple decades-worth of the team's collective politics-watching across seven government formations since 2005. See also "The U.S. tells Iraq it won't work with some Iraqi officials, Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haq responds," Shafaq News, November 16, 2022.

aj An Iranian national—Mohammed Ali Ridha Hussein—was charged with leading the operation that killed Troell. See Qassim Abdal-Zahra, "Iraq court sentences 5 people to life in prison in killing of US citizen, officials say," Associated Press, August 31, 2023.

7, 2022, of U.S. citizen Stephen Troell in Baghdad^{86 ak} was a new aggravating factor in relations. Overall, most of the *muqawama* leadership pragmatically accepted that al-Sudani could not, in the opening three months of his tenure, secure even a tentative timeline for the departure of U.S. forces.⁸⁷ Furthermore, anecdotal evidence suggests that al-Sudani made one demand of his political masters in the *muqawama*: that no attacks would be undertaken on U.S. diplomatic facilities during his tenure (a deal that was maintained from the beginning of al-Sudani's term in October 2022 until an attack on U.S. Embassy Baghdad on December 8, 2023).^{88 al}

Continuing Violent Resistance under al-Sudani

The outlier in this apparently cozy arrangement was Akram al-Kaabi, who has remained the most trenchant public voice in the *muqawama*, a kind of semi-official spokesman for those in violent opposition to an ongoing U.S. military presence in Iraq, largely because he has no open interests in government to lose.^{am} A week after al-Sudani signaled in mid-January 2023 that he had achieved no timeline for U.S. departure, three Iranian-made Qases-2K drones struck the U.S. point of presence in Al-Tanf, Syria,⁸⁹ an attack claimed under the name of Al-Tashkil al-Waritheen,⁹⁰ one of the brands whose flags hung behind al-Kaabi in his December 2021 speech.⁹¹ The Al-Tashkil al-Waritheen claim issued on January 21, 2023, noted: "No one can stop our operations in any way. We warned a lot against complacency with and kneeling in front of the American occupation in the region, and whoever does not listen to our voice demanding the expulsion of the occupiers will kneel before the bullets of our guns."⁹²

Under the al-Sudani government, anti-U.S. attacks never ceased. Kata'ib Hezbollah, Nujaba, AAH, and KSS began to undertake accelerated⁹³ convoy, drone, and rocket attacks that assuaged the anger of *muqawama* supporters^{an} at the non-withdrawal of U.S. forces, albeit without risking uncontrolled escalation and without overly embarrassing the new Iraqi government.⁹⁴ The *muqawama* targeted Kurdistan infrastructure and government sites from March to May 2022;⁹⁵ Turkish forces in Iraq in December 2021-August 2022;⁹⁶ more remote U.S. bases in Iraq such as Al-Asad⁹⁷ and U.S. bases in Syria such as Al-Tanf, Omar oilfield, and Hasakah⁹⁸ (throughout January-August 2022 in both Iraq and

Syria); and even made an unsuccessful effort to launch a Qasef-2K drone at the U.S. base at Ali al-Salem, Kuwait, in August 2022.⁹⁹ These apparently disparate threat streams kept the *fasa'il* busy, and showed them to be addressing various enemies (the United States, Turkey, Kurdistan, and the Gulf Arabs).

In Militia Spotlight's assessment, they were in no way coordinated by al-Kaabi,¹⁰⁰ but were instead undertaken by a strata of kinetic cells drawn from Nujaba, AAH, KH, and KSS,¹⁰¹ with Qasef-2K attacks signifying special IRGC-QF interest in, and support of, a strike.⁴⁰ The January 20, 2023, Qasef-2K attack on Al-Tanf (claimed under the Nujaba-linked brand Tashkil al-Waritheen) was followed by a March 23, 2023, triple-Qasef-2K strike on a U.S. base in Hasakah, Syria, which struck while U.S. defensive systems were deactivated and killed one U.S. contractor and injured six U.S. persons.¹⁰² The March 23 attack was claimed by a new brand, Liwa al-Ghaliboun (Brigade of the Victors), which Militia Spotlight assesses to be linked to Nujaba and very similar in its use as the Tashkil al-Waritheen brand.¹⁰³

Following a March 24, 2023, retaliatory U.S. strike¹⁰⁴ on *muqawama* forces based in Syria (that killed around 11 persons), the Iraqi *muqawama* went relatively quiet from a kinetic perspective and instead spent the following six months needling the United States with rhetorical threats,^{4p} largely related to the Ashab al-Kahf brand and Nujaba-related media channels. These acts included reminders of pre-2011 deadly attacks on helicopters in Iraq;^{4q} a retrospective claim of an October 2017 killing of a U.S. soldier in Iraq;^{4r} the announcement of new (and so far unused) group names for attacking U.S. targets;¹⁰⁵ and then various protests¹⁰⁶ and recruitment actions in urban areas (Baghdad, Karbala, and Basra).¹⁰⁷

Other Shi'a Coordination Framework parties (and indeed Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani) seem to have become weary of, and perhaps even concerned by, some of the Kaabi network's

ak Militia Spotlight assesses Nujaba and IRGC-QF to have been the executing parties in the attack, which was probably intended to kidnap Troell and present him as a spy. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2022-2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

al Separately, al-Sudani was seemingly unable to prevent arson attacks on the Swedish embassy in Baghdad in response to threatened Qur'an burnings in Stockholm. See Isabella Kwai and Raja Abdulrahim, "Protesters Angry Over Quran Burning Storm Swedish Embassy in Baghdad," *New York Times*, July 21, 2023. Eventually, an unidentified *muqawama* group fired Rocket-Propelled Grenades at the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad on December 8, 2023. See Michael Knights, Amir al-Kaabi, and Hamdi Malik, "Tracking Anti-U.S. Strikes in Iraq and Syria During the Gaza Crisis," Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 24, 2023, updated on December 8, 2023.

am Nujaba does not hold any cabinet positions and does not seem to play the game of controlling government officials. (See the later section on the appointment of special grades.)

an *Muqawama* foot-soldiers sometimes vent extraordinary levels of anger at their leadership if anti-U.S. operations seem to be underwhelming or show signs of political restrictions. For an example, see the video at Hamdi Maliki, "8. The young muqawama members harangued Araj, Ameri and Faleh al-Fayadh . . .," X, July 24, 2021.

40 The Qasef-2K loitering munition (called Ababil-T in Iran) has been shown by Iraqi *muqawama* groups since August 2022, initially almost always KH-controlled cells threatening or undertaking long-range strikes into Syria or the Gulf States. See Hamdi Malik and Michael Knights, "Iraqi Militia Group Makes Credible New Threat Against the Gulf States," Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 3, 2022. The type may have entered use among Nujaba-controlled cells by the start of 2023. See Hamdi Malik and Crispin Smith, "Militias Try to Conceal Iraqi Role in Lethal Strike on American Base," Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 3, 2023.

4p This pattern of substituting glorification of old attacks instead of mounting new attacks (that might cause escalation) is an enduring *muqawama* tactic. In November 2022, as al-Sudani settled in and tensions with the United States needed salving, KH and its media organization Kaf used similar lionization of old pre-2011 strikes on the U.S. See Michael Knights, Aya Yousuf, and Hamdi Malik, "Kataib Hezbollah and Kaf Celebrate Attacks on Americans," Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, November 30, 2022. In this referenced case, KH was memorializing its Improvised Rocket-Assisted Launcher (IRAM) attacks on U.S. bases from 2011.

4q This propaganda effort referenced the notorious shooting down of a U.K. Lynx helicopter in Basra in 2006 using an Iranian-provided Manportable Air Defense System. Hamdi Malik and Michael Knights, "Ashab al-Kahf Threatens U.S. Helicopters," Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 25, 2023.

4r This propaganda effort referenced the mysterious 2017 killing (with an Iran-provided Explosively-Formed Penetrator) of a U.S. soldier in Iraq. Michael Knights and Hamdi Malik, "Ashab al-Kahf Claims Six-Year-Old Unsolved Murder of U.S. Soldier," Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, May 18, 2023.

antics in 2023, which may have been intended to outshine and embarrass them in front of *muqawama* supporters. When the Sudani government temporarily shut down access to the Telegram app in Iraq at the same time as Iraq's defense minister visited the United States, the head of Nujaba's political council, Ali al-Asadi, was quick to threaten the government, calling them "traitors."^{as}

Of all the *muqawama* players, Kaabi, Nujaba, and the Nujaba-controlled Ashab al-Kahf brand have been uniquely hostile to U.S. targets and the U.S. embassy in Baghdad.^{at} This is an interesting example of a faction with very close ties to IRGC-QF (Nujaba) being reined in by other IRGC-QF partners, with Iran apparently standing back or perhaps mediating very quietly behind the scenes.¹⁰⁸ In such cases, the Shi'a Coordination Framework factions who control and milk the resources of the Iraqi state (see Section 5) appear to be Iran's main (or "supported") effort in Iraq: In other words, IRGC-QF and most of the Shi'a Coordination Framework benefit from U.S. economic partnership with Iraq and can tolerate the presence of U.S. forces, which pose no obstacle to the *muqawama's* control of the country.¹⁰⁹

Part Four. Ensuring Regime Security: The Quest for Control

While the Kaabi network stayed active and cosmetically harassed the U.S. military presence in Iraq, the other *muqawama* factions spent the opening months of the Sudani government seizing control of security agencies. The 30-month Kadhimi premiership had seen a steady cleansing of *muqawama* operators and agents from key security portfolios, largely unnoticed by casual observers of Iraq's security scene.¹¹⁰ From October 2022 onward, the militias set about purging those promoted during the Kadhimi era and installing *muqawama*-friendly officials in key roles.¹¹¹

In the case of the premier intelligence agency, the Iraqi National Intelligence Service (INIS), this effort went far beyond the "undoing" of Kadhimi-era counter-intelligence successes against Tehran-backed militia penetration of domestic intelligence agencies.¹¹² Instead, for the first time, the INIS leadership moved to *muqawama*-adjacent officials, resulting in the downgrading and limitation of a host of sensitive and valuable liaison relationships

with Western intelligence agencies.^{au} To give concrete examples, the Shi'a Coordination Framework factions were careful not to openly install a militia-linked head of the service (and could not agree which faction would provide the candidate),^{av} but unprecedentedly, the senior INIS directorates were split up between Shi'a Coordination Framework factions, albeit seemingly with care not to place known members of U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organizations (such as KH and AAH) in a position to control the "crown jewels" of the U.S.-built INIS organization (such as signals intelligence).¹¹³ Key changes included:

- The INIS Director of Counterintelligence appointed in early 2023 is Faisal Ghazi al-Lami, a nephew of U.S.-designated human rights abuser PMF chairman Falah al-Fayyadh,^{aw} and a long-term protégé of KSS leader Abu Alaa al-Wala'i. The Assistant Director of Counterintelligence, Ali Najim, was nominated by Nouri al-Maliki.¹¹⁴
- The INIS Director of Internal Security Khalid Arab, appointed in early 2023, was nominated by Nouri al-Maliki. The new director's brother is head of security for al-Maliki's Daawa Party, a role that requires a high level of vetting within the *muqawama* and by IRGC-QF.¹¹⁵
- The INIS Director of Surveillance is Wissam al-Mihyawi, nominated by Falah al-Fayyadh.¹¹⁶

The *muqawama* similarly moved quickly to penetrate and compromise Iraq's most effective military force, the U.S.-built Counter-Terrorism Command (CTC).¹¹⁷ Though the force is slated to expand under al-Sudani's military spending plans, it is opening its doors to *muqawama* recruits to an unprecedented extent. Militia Spotlight's research suggests 2,400 of 2,900 new recruits in 2023 were nominated by Shi'a Coordination Framework players including U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organizations Kata'ib Hezbollah and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, and also by non-designated players like al-Maliki and Badr.¹¹⁸ A wide-ranging leadership reshuffle was underway in Iraq's CTC at the time of publication.^{ax} KH military units within the PMF have flaunted their seniority over the CTC and other Iraqi Security Forces since the formation of the Sudani government, engaging in at least two known firefights with

as Nujaba's communique noted: "The invitation of the Iraqi military leaders to the Pentagon ... under the auspices of the High Commissioner, Aunt Alina Romanowski, at a time when Telegram has been banned is a cause for suspicion and a step for handcuffing Iraq that is intended to continue the brunt of the occupation ... Let the conspirators know that the free are aware of what is going on behind the closed doors. There will be a stance that shakes the ground under the feet of the traitors." Hamdi Malik, "Nujaba Leads the 'Big Three' Reaction to Iraq's Telegram Ban," Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, August 10, 2023.

at For instance, Nujaba's Ashab al-Kahf Telegram channel had the distinction of being the first and only *muqawama* entity since al-Sudani took office to actively organize a protest at the U.S. Embassy (on July 14, 2023), albeit which was ultimately blocked by Shi'a Coordination Framework groups such as that led by al-Maliki, Badr, and AAH. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees. See also "Demonstration Alert: U.S. Embassy Baghdad, Iraq (July 14, 2023)," U.S. Embassy and Consulate, Iraq, July 14, 2023.

au Based on Militia Spotlight's interviews, the following countries have all downgraded their intelligence-sharing with INIS since October 2022: United States, United Kingdom, France, Germany, and Canada. This is despite a long-term INIS professional officer being left nominally in charge of liaison with foreign services. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi and Western contacts, 2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

av Instead of al-Sudani officially holding the role of acting INIS director, as Mustafa Kadhimi did for some time when he was prime minister, INIS is (at the time of publication) not helmed by a director, with an al-Sudani relative (Ahmed al-Sudani) as the de facto head, leading the "special office" at INIS. The *muqawama* is cautious about al-Sudani taking INIS under his personal control, for fear of allowing him to develop a personal powerbase. Mohammed Shia al-Sudani's habit of emplacing relatives to watch over agencies is widespread. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi and Western contacts, 2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

aw The United States designated Falah al-Fayyadh for human rights abuses due to the October 2019 crackdown. See "Treasury Sanctions Iran-Backed Militia Leaders Who Killed Innocent Demonstrators in Iraq."

ax The overall commander of the CTC, his operations director, and a number of CTC brigade commanders were replaced in October and November 2023. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi and Western contacts, 2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

military units in the first year of al-Sudani's term.^{ay}

The next agency to be transferred to *muqawama* control was the National Security Service (NSS), a domestic security service with the largest current authorized manpower of any Iraqi intelligence agency,^{az} that has been strongly penetrated by *muqawama* operators since its inception.^{ba} After al-Sudani was appointed as prime minister, leadership of NSS was given to Abu Ali al-Basri (Abdal-Karim Abd-Fadil Hussein), the legendary former head of the Falcons counterterrorism unit, and a Daawa member since the 1970s, with decades-spanning connections to the IRGC-QF and Iran's intelligence services.^{bb} Abu Ali al-Basri was dual-hatted with leadership also of a new Supreme Committee for Combating Corruption,^{bc} which thus far has mainly focused on pursuing former Kadhimi team members under allegations of corruption.¹¹⁹ In partnership with the new Badr leadership of the Commission on Integrity,¹²⁰ the Supreme Committee has shamelessly pinned the blame for the \$2.5 billion Badr-run^{bd} "heist of the century"^{be} on the

exact Kadhimi team members who exposed the fraud.¹²¹ Among the NSS director-level changes made under the Sudani government,^{bf} the most significant is the appointment of AAH fighter Ahmed al-Tayyar as the deputy director of NSS in January 2023.¹²² Other important NSS roles—the director of operations and the head of Baghdad security operations—seem to have also fallen to AAH officials.¹²³

The third major intelligence agency to be extensively restaffed by the *muqawama* was the Ministry of Interior's Federal Information and Investigations Agency (FIIA), Iraq's version of the U.S. FBI, another large agency where (like NSS) the Kadhimi-era effort to remove militiamen had only just begun when the Sudani government came in.¹²⁴ Mohammed Atta, a new al-Sudani-appointed director of FIIA, was nominated by al-Maliki and agreed between all the Shi'a Coordination Framework senior leaders.¹²⁵ The Intelligence and Counter-Terrorism (Abu Ali al-Basri's old Falcons cell) was also placed under new al-Maliki-nominated leadership by the Sudani government, namely an al-Maliki ally called Ali Abdal-Rida, although the unit is actually commanded directly by an Iraqi IRGC-QF officer called Ammar al-Zirjawi, who previously worked directly with Qassem Soleimani.¹²⁶ For old Iraq hands, this will stir up old memories of Abu Ali al-Basri's Office of Intelligence and Security (OIS) in the early 2010s, which al-Maliki built up as a kind of coup-detection capability with advanced communications monitoring and human networks.¹²⁷

Alongside intelligence agencies, the *muqawama* actors also quickly restaffed Iraq's airport, port, border, and customs positions. These are vital roles for counter-intelligence and in the suppression of dissidents, ensuring the government knows exactly who and what is entering and leaving the country (even via the Kurdistan Region).¹²⁸ First, INIS lost its longstanding primacy for security operations within Baghdad International Airport,¹²⁷ with the role given to an AAH-controlled official called Mazin al-Shibli, who previously served as the Director of Iraq's Civil Aviation Authority Operations.¹²⁸ Control of Umm Qasr port and land points of entry have been split among Shi'a Coordination Framework actors from Badr, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, Kataib Jund al-Imam, and Ahmed al-Asadi's PMF Brigade 6,¹²⁹ with observers from the prime minister's office in each area.¹³⁰

A further aspect of regime security, reflecting the impact

ay KH has clashed with CTC and the Federal Police on many occasions since October 2022, including as KH has reestablished checkpoints in central Baghdad for the first time since the Kadhimi team took over in May 2020, and at the Speicher base in March 2023 and in the Albu Aitha area of Baghdad in May 2023. Amir al-Kaabi and Michael Knights, "Kataib Hezbollah's Escalating Feud with the Iraqi Security Forces," *Militia Spotlight*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, May 19, 2023.

az NSS had 12,840 authorized personnel at the end of the Kadhimi era, on par with the other largest agency: the Federal Information and Investigations Agency of the Ministry of Interior. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

ba NSS was built and staffed by Daawa Party officials under the al-Maliki premierships (2006-2014) and led for years by Falah al-Fayyadh. Michael Knights and Alex Almeida, "Kadhimi's Rolling Reshuffle (Part 1): Military Command Changes," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 14, 2020; Michael Knights, "Kadhimi's Rolling Reshuffle (Part 2): Protecting Iraq's Economic Institutions and Borders," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 15, 2020.

bb Abu Ali al-Basri (not to be confused with the deputy operations chief for the PMF, who has the same kunya or nom de guerre) is a long-term Daawa party clandestine resistance fighter who served alongside Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis on the side of Iran during the Iran-Iraq war, and who worked against the Saddam Hussein regime with IRGC-QF and other Iranian security agencies. For an entertaining account of Abu Ali al-Basri's life and times, see Margaret Coker, *The Spymaster of Baghdad: A True Story of Bravery, Family, and Patriotism in the Battle against ISIS* (New York: Dey Street Books, 2021).

bc The commission includes the investigators of counter-corruption cases and the departments charged with recovering the country's stolen funds. This is effectively a slightly better thought-out framework for the same kinds of politicized anti-corruption operations undertaken by the now-outlawed Committee 29 of the Kadhimi government. See Sinan Mahmoud, "Ex-intelligence chief picked to lead Iraq's anti-corruption team in power play by PM," *National*, November 17, 2022.

bd *The Guardian* newspaper's investigation found that "the scheme was allegedly masterminded by a well-connected businessman and executed by employees in the tax commission, who enjoyed the support of an Iran-aligned political faction called Badr." See Simona Foltayn, "'Heist of the century': how \$2.5bn was plundered from Iraqi state funds," *Guardian*, November 20, 2022.

be The heist was a multi-year (2015-2021) effort by Badr officials at the Tax Authority, to access a tax deposit account where new investors would place money in escrow to guarantee tax payments until they exited Iraq. Badr began to use this money in dollar auctions initially, using it to float currency speculation and replacing the monies before they were noticed missing. In 2020-2021, efforts were accelerated to empty the tax deposit account. Nicholas Pelham, "The Baghdad job: who was behind history's biggest bank heist?" *Economist*, July 27, 2023.

bf These NSS changes since October 2022 comprise the director positions for administration, security, technical affairs, provincial affairs, and the Baghdad and Basra local directorates. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

bg One of the authors (Knights) observed the OIS undertaking its activities in Iraqi security headquarters during his work with Iraqi headquarters in 2011-2012 period.

bh The U.S.-provided PISCES (Personal Identification Secure Comparison and Evaluation System) watch-listing system means that Baghdad officials are alerted about all persons entering Kurdistan via an airline or an official point of entry, allowing travel bans and arrest warrants to be readied for use when they arrive. It was installed in Iraq in 2007.

bi As noted before, al-Sudani relatives are dotted throughout sensitive offices, to give the prime minister insight into *muqawama* activities. These include: Sami al-Sudani as general supervisor of the Customs Authority and the Border and Ports Authority; and Ahmed Shamkhi al-Sudani as general supervisor of the Passports, Nationality and Residency Directorates at the Ministry of Interior. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2022-2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

of protests between 2019 and 2022 on the psyches of both the *muqawama* and the Iranian regime, has been the controlling of public spaces, especially online communities.¹³⁰ Under the Sudani government, this effort has been led by Iraq's Communications and Media Commission (CMC),¹³¹ whose board was taken over by a majority group of Shi'a Coordination Framework officials after al-Sudani took office.¹³² The new CMC board includes officials from U.S.-designated terrorist group Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq^{133bj} and from Iraqi Radio and Television Union,¹³⁴ an offshoot of Iran's U.S.-sanctioned Islamic Radio and Television Union (IRTVU).^{bk}

On March 16, 2023, a draft of a new CMC regulation policy on digital content (Regulation No. 1 of 2023 for Digital Content in Iraq)¹³⁵ was leaked¹³⁶ and quickly drew criticism from 12 international organizations for its threatened crackdown on freedom of expression and online dissent.¹³⁷ CMC also serves a powerful defensive purpose for *muqawama* information operations. It controls the Iraqi internet domain (.iq)^{bl} that many *muqawama* channels are forced to use due to international domain seizure and blocking actions against them.¹³⁸ The CMC has also increased its efforts to block overseas content for Iraqi internet users and introduced a platform for citizens to denounce users or nominate candidate materials for blocking.¹³⁹

Developing the Parallel Military

Alongside deepened intelligence community penetration and digital regulation by militias, the *muqawama* factions have also taken steps since October 2022 to bolster their key security powerbase, the PMF.¹⁴⁰ Since the January 2020 death of Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the role of acting operational commander of the PMF passed to Kata'ib Hezbollah's Abu Fadak, a trustee of Qassem Soleimani and al-Muhandis.^{bm} Abu Fadak fared quite well during the Kadhimi era, with the PMF being off-limits to Kadhimi's security sector reform efforts and with internal chaos weakening Abu Fadak's rivals inside KH.¹⁴¹ He spent much of 2021 and 2022 undermining potential future rivals for control of the PMF—the so-called “shrine militias”

answering to the senior Shi'a cleric Ali al-Sistani^{bn}—and trying (with limited success) to achieve greater personal control of KH-led elements of the PMF influenced by his rival Abu Hussein, such as the Central Security Directorate.^{bo}

Under the Sudani government, with no fear about the future dissolution of the PMF, Abu Fadak appears to be executing the expansion and professionalization plans that al-Muhandis sketched out in his executive orders 237 and 331 (as PMF deputy chairman) in 2019.¹⁴² The greatly expanded three-year national budget passed by the Sudani government in June 2023¹⁴³ included a near doubling of registered PMF fighters (from 122,000 to 238,000); the provision of long-term government benefits to these personnel; expansion of the PMF civil works and industrial base; and unprecedented intelligence-gathering arrangements that are excluded from civilian oversight.^{bp} The PMF, and particularly Abu Fadak's KH cadre in the PMF, have shown off increasingly sophisticated drone systems, including Iranian-provided Mohajer-6 unmanned combat aerial vehicles (as opposed simply to one-way loitering munitions).¹⁴⁴

The first year of the al-Sudani government also saw authorization of a 50-fold increase in the number of PMF officer trainees put through Ministry of Defense academies^{bq} and the graduation of PMF general officers (including U.S.-designated terrorists and human rights abusers)^{br} through Iraqi staff colleges.¹⁴⁵ Based on Militia Spotlight's multiple studies on these developments, the authors assess that PMF senior commanders are being groomed to command higher headquarters of the Iraqi military, including non-PMF army and federal police units, akin to the way officers in Iran's IRGC can control units of the regular Iranian army, navy, and air forces.¹⁴⁶ The use of Iraqi Ministry of Defense training and educational sites is likely a stop-gap measure until the PMF training directorate (intended by al-Muhandis to include six sub-directorates that included a PMF command and staff college and a

bj CMC board member Mahmoud al-Rubaie served as spokesman for the political office of the U.S.-designated terrorist group Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq before his appointment to the CMC board; and Mohammad al-Hamad, a figure close to al-Maliki, is now deputy head of the Iraqi Radio and Television Union, an offshoot of Iran's Islamic Radio and Television Union (IRTVU). See Michael Knights, Hamdi Malik, and Crispin Smith, “Profile: Communications and Media Commission,” Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, May 15, 2023, updated August 10, 2023.

bk In October 2020, the U.S. Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control designated Iran's Islamic Radio and Television Union (IRTVU) and other Iranian entities for obtaining American voter registration data in order to influence U.S. elections and incite unrest. On June 22, 2021, the U.S. Justice Department seized 33 website domains related to IRTVU. The shutdowns included a list of Iraqi websites connected to Iran-backed *muqawama* (resistance) groups and the Iraqi Radio and Television Union, an offshoot of IRTVU. See Hamdi Malik, “Understanding Iran's Vast Media Network in Arab Countries,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 2, 2021.

bl The CMC controls the .iq domain, giving it responsibility over the hosting of media outlets tied to designated terrorist organizations—for instance, al-Etejah Television, affiliated with Kataib Hezbollah, and Kaf, KH's official platform. See Ranw Hassan, “How Militia Digital Media Avoid Domain Seizure and Blocking,” Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 2, 2023.

bm Abu Fadak was known to both Soleimani and al-Muhandis throughout his career with KH and IRGC-QF. KH is discussed in detail in the author's (Knights') *CTC Sentinel* piece on KH: Michael Knights, “Back into the Shadows? The Future of Kata'ib Hezbollah and Iran's Other Proxies in Iraq,” *CTC Sentinel* 13:10 (2020).

bn Even as the broader *muqawama* was fighting for its political life, Abu Fadak was plodding along with his gradual strengthening of KH control within the PMF, marginalizing his main personal rival for leadership, Maytham al-Zaidi, the Sistani-supported head of the al-Abbas Combat Division (PMF brigade 26). Hamdi Malik, “Abu Fadak Tries to Split the Shrine Units,” Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, January 11, 2022.

bo The Abu Hussein wing of KH still seems to control the PMF Security Directorate under Abu Zainab al-Lami, who is linked to Abu Hussein's wing of KH. For background on these wings, see Knights, “Back into the Shadows?”

bp The PMF received a \$305 million capital investment for industrial development (via its new Muhandis General Company, which will be discussed below) and a \$1.2 million intelligence source payment fund not subject to parliamentary audit (the “Secret Expenses for PMF”), a privilege previously extended to just one organization, the Iraqi National Intelligence Service. Amir al-Kaabi and Michael Knights, “Extraordinary Popular Mobilization Force Expansion, by the Numbers,” Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 3, 2023.

bq From eight to 412, likely rising to 824 in 2024. See Amir al-Kaabi and Michael Knights, “Mainstreaming Hashd Commanders (Part 2): Fifty-Fold Increase in Officer Training,” Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 15, 2023.

br On February 11, 2023, the Iraqi Defense University for Higher Military Studies inducted U.S.-designated human rights abusers Laith al-Khazali (a member of the militia Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and brother to its likewise designated leader, Qais al-Khazali) and KH's likewise U.S.-designated Abu Zainab al-Lami. The intake also included Sami Massoudi, Iraq's deputy Hajj and Umrah commissioner and a former aide to Qassem Soleimani. See Michael Knights and Amir al-Kaabi, “Mainstreaming Hashd Commanders (Part 1): Advanced Education for Senior Militiamen,” Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 15, 2023.

junior officer academy) can be developed.¹⁴⁷ An investigative report by Iraq Oil Report quoted one officer cadet describing the 2023 officer training as “the fruit that Hajj Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and Qasem Soleimani ... put in so much effort to achieve.”¹⁴⁸ The overall objective of the *muqawama* is clearly to develop the PMF into a clone of the IRGC: a parallel military with greater political support than the conventional armed services, and (as the section below details) with its own economic conglomerates.

Part Five. Sharing the Spoils: Militia Control of a Top-Five Oil Exporter

Muqawama control of Iraq’s government—now without even a notional sharing of the spoils with Moqtada al-Sadr—puts the Iraqi militias into a league of their own as *the* economic powerhouse of Iran’s partner forces. Iran’s longest-serving proxy, Lebanese Hezbollah, and Iran’s newer Yemeni partner, the Houthi movement,¹⁴⁹ are economic minnows compared to the Iraqi state. The Shi’a Coordination Framework-led government’s first budget is the largest in Iraq’s history: \$152 billion in annual spending for three consecutive years, a roughly 50 percent increase from the last authorized Iraqi budget from 2021.¹⁵⁰ In contrast, a bankrupt Lebanon’s expected spending was under \$2 billion in 2022,¹⁵¹ and the country went \$72 billion further into debt due to massive financial losses since 2021.¹⁵² The Houthi enclave in Yemen also has a measly budget of around \$2 billion per year.¹⁵³

Controlling the PM’s Office and “Special Grades”

Muqawama control of the Iraqi prime minister’s office, *and* the parliament that sets budgets, *and* the judiciary that can be used to block spending, means that the Tehran-backed armed factions now have all the keys to the system and can accelerate their asset-stripping of the Iraqi state. In Iraq, control of ministries means control of jobs and contracts, and this control increasingly has less to do with openly appointing a minister^{bs} and more to do with what share of “special grades” (director-generals, deputy director-generals, and general managers) in the ministry goes to one’s faction.¹⁵⁴ No *muqawama* faction “owns” a whole ministry, top to bottom, and instead they spend an inordinate amount of time and energy competing over, blocking, negotiating, and eventually sharing economic opportunities generated through ministry spending.¹⁵⁵ The appointment of “special grades” is an issue where the Shi’a Coordination Framework and al-Sudani’s prime minister’s office argued for a while before—as with control of INIS—al-Sudani gave way and let the factions begin a feeding frenzy of controlling and replacing mid-level ministry officials,¹⁵⁶ ^{bt}

bs In one exception, AAH openly took the Minister of Higher Education position through its member Naim al-Aboudi, resulting in grave complications in U.S. government relations with the ministry. “The U.S. tells Iraq it won’t work with some Iraqi officials, Asa’ib Ahl Al-Haq responds.”

bt A blanket special grades review by the Sudani government, announced in November 2022, was an ingenious way to ensure all special grades would either have to align with a sponsoring faction or fail to pass the review. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees. See also Patricia Karam, “Sudani’s Premiership Is Failing in the Iraqi Fight Against Corruption,” Arab Center, July 12, 2023.

emplacing militia bodyguards to watch them,^{bu} and even engaging female officials in protective marriages to militiamen.^{bv}

The process of horse-trading for “special grades” is arranged at the Prime Minister’s Office, with the Shi’a Coordination Framework factions sending representatives to deal with the “neutral” broker, Abdal-Karim al-Sudani, another relative of Prime Minister al-Sudani and his security advisor and personal office manager.¹⁵⁷ To give an example, Abdal-Karim al-Sudani receives nominations and guidance regarding the hiring and firing of “special grades” allocated to U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organization AAH in government formation or subsequent deals, and these nominations are delivered by U.S.-designated human rights abuser Laith al-Khazali (a senior AAH member and brother to its likewise designated terrorist leader, Qais al-Khazali).^{bw}

Overall, the large 1,200-strong Prime Minister’s Office (a formal entity, hence capitalized) is seeded with political appointees from the Shi’a Coordination Framework, many of whom were still in place after three years of attempted house-cleaning by Kadhim. To give one high-profile example of a new appointee, al-Sudani’s head of communications is a young *muqawama* propagandist called Rabea Nader,¹⁵⁸ who is the former head of news and current affairs at AAH’s al-Ahd TV¹⁵⁹ and a former employee of KH’s al-Etejah TV.¹⁶⁰ Nader’s appointment received strong endorsement from *muqawama* platforms, particularly KH’s Hadaf Center for Strategic Studies,¹⁶¹ which referred to Nader as the “a son of the great mentor ... al-Shayeb [an epithet referring to al-Muhandis]”¹⁶² (Of note, Nader was one of four al-Sudani team members denied visas to the United States to attend the U.N. General Assembly in New York in October 2023).¹⁶³

Muqawama Milking of the Oil Industry

To gain a better understanding of how exactly the *muqawama* factions are monetizing state capture, one can look at Iraq’s Ministry of Oil (MoO), which is responsible for earning and collecting 85 percent of the government’s budget, and 42 percent of gross domestic product (GDP).¹⁶⁴ Though Nouri al-Maliki was assigned first-among-equal status in the MoO^{bx} within the *muqawama* carve-up of ministries, even the wily former premier

bu In the experience of Militia Spotlight’s team, which goes back 20 years in some cases of continual work on Iraq, Iran has frequently used the provision of bodyguards as a kind of protection racket—accept them into your household and be safe, but lose privacy and control—and it seems to have passed on this method to its partner militias. This is Militia Spotlight’s assessment based on all the available evidence and the authors’ analytic processes.

bv One high-ranking female minister became a second wife to an AAH militia leader for the purposes of protection. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

bw Both Qais and Laith al-Khazali belong to the U.S. designated foreign terrorist organization AAH, and each is also individually designated as sanctioned individuals. For Qais, see “Designation of Qays al-Khazali as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist,” U.S. Department of State, January 10, 2020. For Laith, see “Treasury Sanctions Iran-Backed Militia Leaders Who Killed Innocent Demonstrators in Iraq,” U.S. Department of the Treasury, December 6, 2019.

bx In Iraq, cabinet roles are split up in government formation through a kind of points system that is derived from how many seats in parliament each bloc has, with each ministry costing a certain number of points to control the minister. In the October 2022 government formation, al-Maliki seems to have got the Ministry of Oil. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2022-2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

has struggled to achieve pre-notification or veto power over ministry-related actions and personnel changes initiated by other Shi'a Coordination Framework players (i.e., AAH, Badr). As an MoO employee explained to one of the authors (Knights): "Iraqi technocrats would like to be independent and get on with their jobs but that requires a boss who protects them. It wasn't perfect under Kadhimi and the former minister [Ihsan Ismail], but it was much better and sometimes officials could appeal to them for protection. Now that's all gone. The boss cannot protect them, so they seek a patron, to make their own top cover. The lesson we have all learned under al-Sudani is that you need a militia protector—all the way from minister to director-generals, commission managers, and department heads."¹⁶⁵ Another 2023 interviewee from MoO noted: "They look at every [director-general] and put them on probation. If they have a militia, they leave them alone, but if they don't, they remove them."¹⁶⁶

This is not a new system but the scale is new, including a top-to-bottom review of all director-generals from October 2022 onward as a means of forcing technocrats to align with militias, most of all the dominant *muqawama* factions.¹⁶⁷ Many MoO officials who previously looked to, for instance, cleric Ammar al-Hakim's faction for political protection have now migrated toward more muscular militias such as Badr and, most frequently, AAH.¹⁶⁸ Thus, the head of Iraq's Petroleum Contracting and Licensing Directorate switched after October 2022 from Badr protection to AAH, sensing Qais al-Khazali's growing power.^{by} The most powerful individual in the MoO now is not the minister—a conflict-avoiding technocrat called Hayan Abdal-Ghani—but rather Bassim Khudair, an ambitious deputy minister whose power has been supercharged by support from Qais al-Khazali, Hadi al-Ameri, and the Iranian embassy in Baghdad.¹⁶⁹

In a recent show of power, a highly qualified MoO technocrat was removed from his position for being "too pro-Western" and for criticizing Chinese and Russian oil reservoir management practices.¹⁷⁰ Iran is now targeting Iraq as a major market for Iranian energy sector services and equipment, both of which are under-utilized in Iran due to U.S. sanctions, and directors are feeling increasing pressure to favor Iranian, Russian, and Chinese partnerships.^{bz} Foreign nations are learning that the way to win business in Iraq is to work with *muqawama* partners.^{ca}

Oil smuggling is a huge potential money-maker, and it is in the shared interest of all the Tehran-backed militias to ensure that malleable officials lead the State Oil Marketing Organization (SOMO) and the Basra Oil Company (BOC), which jointly oversee the export of around 3.4 million barrels per day of oil production, or three percent of global production).¹⁷¹ Under Kadhimi, efforts were made by enterprising SOMO and BOC officials, with cover

by The man did not change, but his allegiance did. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

bz The Iranian embassy in Baghdad is increasingly directly involved in guiding contract awards, in one case even subverting the result of a closed bid for oilfield services. Author (Knights) interview, Iraqi oil sector contacts, 2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

ca Different *muqawama* players seem to have different "territories" and serve as the point of entry for different vendor nations. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

from their minister and prime minister, to track and report illicit oil cargoes and ship-to-ship transfers moving in Basra and in Iraqi waters.¹⁷² This tracking and reporting is much less active now,^{cb} spurring fears^{cc} that illicit smuggling of Iraqi oil—often mixed with sanction-busting Iranian crude^{173 cd}—will increase to the endemic levels last seen in the mid-2000s.¹⁷⁴ Indeed, within the first year of al-Sudani's term, the *muqawama* factions fought a sharp bureaucratic war over control of the Oil Products Distribution Company, a lucrative portfolio due to its potential abuse as a means of making oil volumes disappear within Iraq.^{ce}

In particular, the *muqawama*'s growing post-October 2022 control of investment licenses (issued via provincial and ministry-level investment commissions^{cf}) also grants a new unchecked capacity to divert subsidized straight-run fuel oil and heavy fuel oil to investment projects that do not exist (say, an asphalt plant or a brick factory), whereupon militias can sell the oil locally or export it.¹⁷⁵ Oil traders are beginning to shun Iraqi exports of fuel oils because of worsening oversight of, and a post-October 2022 influx of militia-linked companies into, the Iraqi export system in Basra.¹⁷⁶ Concern is focused on the illegal smuggling of stolen or fraudulently obtained Straight-Run Fuel Oil and Heavy Fuel Oil exported by *muqawama*-linked traders, and the related risk of co-mingled Iranian oil being added to such flows and presented to international buyers as Iraqi oil, thus disguising the smuggling of U.S.-sanctioned Iranian oil.¹⁷⁷

Terrorist Threat Financing via Investment Licenses

With relevance far beyond the oil sector, investment licensing is a prize that the *muqawama* were briefly denied during the Kadhimi era.^{cg} This resulted in severe tensions between the Kadhimi team

cb In terms of officials at all levels of the ministry reporting in less detail, querying fewer cases, and thus detecting less oil smuggling in and through Iraqi waters. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi, international diplomatic, and oil sector contacts, 2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

cc There is rising interest in 2023 in ensuring, through investigations, the composition and origin of oil apparently exported by Iraq, a reaction to increased concern about co-mixing of Iranian liquids and stolen Iraqi liquids into apparently licit flows. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi, international diplomatic, and oil sector contacts, 2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

cd Key concern focuses on militia and Iranian-smuggled Heavy Fuel Oil and Straight-Run Fuel Oil that may have been fraudulently obtained from Iraqi fields or refineries, or pre-loaded on Iraqi tankers at Iranian ports.

ce Al-Maliki struggled to control the appointment of a new deputy minister in charge of potentially lucrative distribution rackets, falling prey to rival efforts by Qais al-Khazali and Hadi al-Ameri. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi, international diplomatic, and oil sector contacts, 2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

cf An early action of the al-Sudani government was to remove authorities from the National Investment Commission, which had successfully blocked some corruption activities under the Kadhimi government. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2022-2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

cg This was achieved by technocrats who, with some prime ministerial backing, were able to freeze the granting of new investment licenses that appeared fraudulent in design. To give a metric: 45 major investment licenses were granted in nine months under the *muqawama*-controlled Adel Abdal-Mahdi government in 14 months, versus five licenses granted by the Kadhimi team in 26 months. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2021-2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

and the *muqawama* players.¹⁷⁸ In one case, Badr's Hadi al-Ameri and Kata'ib Hezbollah's Abu Fadak¹⁷⁹ tried multiple times to gain a license for a two million donum (494,000 acre) dairy and chicken farm in Samawa.¹⁸⁰ To give a sense of why this project was fraudulent, it was a project 55 times larger than the largest dairy farm in Iraq, yet supported by almost no planning documents.¹⁸¹ This led the government to conclude that it was an effort to gain access to free land, duty-free exemption to import almost unlimited quantities of goods from Iran,¹⁸² and rubber-stamped visas to import low-cost foreign labor.¹⁸³ When the license was refused, the investment official in charge was told by a Badr intermediary "you'll leave [this job] on your back" (i.e., dead or injured).¹⁸⁴ Similar land grabs were attempted with regard to extremely valuable Baghdad Airport or west Baghdad land parcels;¹⁸⁵ with large blocks of units in the new city of Besmaya;¹⁸⁶ and in agricultural projects in the fertile middle Euphrates.¹⁸⁷ When the National Investment Council (NIC) head was offered to stay on under the Sudani government, they were told "you can stay, but your previous strategies will not work under this government. The [prime minister] cannot protect you."¹⁸⁸

The ultimate expression of the *muqawama*'s economic ambition is the repeated efforts that the militias have made to duplicate the model of IRGC's Khatam al-Anbiya conglomerate. (This was the most successful state-owned company in Iran since 1990, receiving over \$50 billion worth of contracts for the Revolutionary Guard since its formation in 1991 and sanctioned by the United States, the United Nations, and the European Union as a commercial extension of the IRGC.¹⁸⁹) In each of the last two elections in Iraq, the front-running candidates for prime minister were asked by IRGC-QF and the *muqawama* whether they would support the creation of an Iraqi equivalent of Khatam al-Anbiya, and in both 2018 and 2022, the premiership went to the candidates who said yes.¹⁹⁰ Though Adel Abdal-Mahdi was prevented from making good on this promise by strong warnings from the Trump administration

against forming the company, in November 2022 al-Sudani announced the formation of "the Muhandis General Company for Construction, Engineering, and Mechanical, Agricultural, and Industrial Contracting" (or the Muhandis General Company, MGC, hereafter).¹⁹¹

Named after the late U.S.-designated terrorist Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis,^{cm} the company is a unique commercial entity of a kind never before seen in Iraq. As shown in its articles of incorporation,¹⁹² the company is officially owned by the PMF. As its unwieldy full name implies, MGC can work in any sector. Uniquely for an Iraqi state company, MGC does not need cabinet or parliamentary approval to receive free land, state capital, or state-owned enterprises, or to undertake construction and demolition. In December 2022, the MGC received 1.2 million acres of government land along the Iraqi-Saudi border at no cost—an area half the size of Lebanon, and similar to prior mega-land grants pursued by *muqawama* actors such as Badr and KH.¹⁹³ Even before MGC was formed, a PMF force had preemptively seized and cordoned off the Muthanna land parcel.^{cn} The stretch of Muthanna province seized happens to be strategically located in an area where Iraqi militias have fired drones into Saudi Arabia and the UAE on multiple occasions since 2019.^{co}

Although the Sudani government has reacted to international alarm about the Muhandis General Company by trying to bury the story and slowing its growth,^{cp} the history of the *muqawama*'s economic efforts in Iraq suggests that it will keep trying to make an Iraqi Khatam al-Anbiya, which it views as the spoils of war owed to the PMF, much like the IRGC saw Khatam al-Anbiya as its reward for fighting the Iran-Iraq War.¹⁹⁴ The Muhandis General Company is itself not the first name used in Iraq since 2018 to pursue this dream: Once it was called the Motassim project, then the Al-Rashid,¹⁹⁵ and it may change names again, hoping to avoid notice with a lower-profile approach or by being split into multiple companies.¹⁹⁶ In the assessment of Militia Spotlight, a version of the Muhandis General Company is likely to recur because the idea has not been rejected by top Iraqi leaders. One al-Sudani government official quite candidly told one of the authors (Knights): "The idea is to keep them [the *muqawama*] busy so they do not attack anyone."¹⁹⁷

ch The largest such farm ever operated in Iraq was 36,000 donums in size.

ci For instance, the Badr/KH dairy and chicken farm project intended to import 500,000 tons of Iranian steel, duty-free, which is enough to build five Gerald R. Ford-class aircraft carriers, the largest warships in the world. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2021-2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

cj Without evidence of project financing or designs, Badr, AAH, and other Shi'a Coordination Framework parties all sought 1,000 donum parcels on land adjacent to Baghdad Airport, each one equivalent in size to the New York Financial District or the City of London. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2021-2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

ck Abu Fadak's business front, Haider al-Yaqubi, demanded for KH 5,000 housing "starter home" units intended for Iraqi married couples. Eventually, pressure results in a smaller number of units being allocated, many of which were then used by KH-related criminals as bordellos for foreign prostitutes brought into Iraq, using the employment visas associated with investment licenses. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2021-2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

cl These projects could be very competitive: AAH disrupted plans for a cultural heritage village in the Iraqi marshes of Diwaniyah in order to keep hold of rich fishing areas it had illegally seized. In Wasit, Badr leader Hadi al-Ameri and Kataib Al-Imam Ali (PMF brigade 40) leader Shibl al-Zaidi fought a bitter influence battle over developing a large dairy farm the area, while Shibl prevailing due to Lebanese Hezbollah support. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2021-2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

cm Though al-Muhandis means engineer in Arabic, the company is clearly named after Muhandis the man because the word engineering is repeated in its full name: the Muhandis General Company for Construction, Engineering, and Mechanical, Agricultural, and Industrial Contracting.

cn The Prosperity Palace, the prime west Baghdad real estate seized on behalf of the Muhandis General Company on April 24, 2023, is equivalent to a chunk of historic downtown Baghdad the size of 20 New York City blocks, the entire grounds of Buckingham Palace, or the U.S. Capitol.

co The May 2019 drone attacks on the Saudi east-west pipeline and the September 2019 drones on Abqaiq oil processing center were launched from Muthanna. This was also where the drone attacks were launched on Riyadh on January 23, 2021, and Abu Dhabi on February 2, 2022. Crispin Smith, Hamdi Malik, and Michael Knights, "Profile: Alwiyat al-Waad al-Haq," Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 1, 2021. See Isabel Coles and Dion Nissenbaum, "Saudi Pipeline Attacks Originated From Iraq," *Wall Street Journal*, June 28, 2019.

cp An al-Sudani government official told one author (Knights) that land would now be allocated to different entities in order to make it appear the project of a Khatam al-Anbiya-style, PMF-owned conglomerate was dead. Author (Knights) interview, Sudani government interviewee, 2023; exact date, name, and place withheld at request of the interviewee.

Part Six. Defined by Resistance: The Future of Anti-U.S. and Anti-Israel Operations

An influential model introduced by Chatham House in February 2021 suggested that Iraqi militias can be categorized as “parochial”¹⁹⁸ (militias focused primarily on political and economic activities such as Badr and AAH) or “vanguard”¹⁹⁹ (militias focused primarily on resistance activities, such as KH, Nujaba, and KSS). As Militia Spotlight noted as long ago as the October 2021 *CTC Sentinel* article, those distinctions are much less apparent when Tehran-backed militias are investigated in detail.²⁰⁰ Most of the so-called “vanguard” are highly active in the “parochial” business of state capture and asset-stripping, including all the different wings of KH.²⁰¹ Conversely, there are almost no purely “parochial” militias within the Shi’a Coordination Framework: As the authors noted in their October 2021 *CTC Sentinel* piece, AAH and even Badr sometimes act more as “drivers of rhetorical and kinetic escalation due to their domestic political and factional needs” as self-styled *muqawama* players.²⁰²

Since the return of anti-U.S. militancy in Iraq between 2017^{ca} and 2019,²⁰³ the “vanguard” forces in Iraq have been exceptionally compact, for operational security and because only a handful of small cells need to be ready at any moment to strike out at U.S. bases, Gulf States, or other shared enemies of the Iraqi *muqawama* and Iran.

In Militia Spotlight’s assessment, KH, AAH, Nujaba, and KSS all continue to undertake kinetic violence until the time of publication.²⁰⁴ Akram al-Kaabi may have been boosted as the most visible spokesman of the kinetic resistance factions since December 2021,²⁰⁵ but Militia Spotlight considers a substantive Kaabi leadership role to be very unlikely based on an accumulation of evidence that groups such as KH, AAH, or KSS would not place their kinetic attack cells under the control of an outsider and a rival, even if pressured to do so by IRGC-QF.²⁰⁶ It is much more likely that Kaabi, Nujaba, and Nujaba-linked media and brands (such as Ashab al-Kahf) are simply the most vocal and visible elements of the kinetic arm of the *muqawama*.²⁰⁷ Kaabi directly controls some very active kinetic cells, as does Laith al-Khazali and senior AAH fighters, and likewise Abu Hussein of KH and Abu Alaa al-Wala’i of KSS. None of these players are entirely “parochial.”²⁰⁸

The post-October 7 Gaza crisis provides some interesting new data on the issue of militant “vanguard” activities by all the *muqawama* factions, including Badr²⁰⁹ and AAH.²¹⁰ An early analytic ‘cut’ of the greatly intensified kinetic attacks undertaken against U.S. sites in Iraq and Syria during the 2023 Gaza crisis provides further evidence of orchestration and cohesiveness. From October 7-17, the *muqawama* postured and prepared, but did not strike U.S. bases until October 17-18, 2023,²¹¹ the tempestuous night of the Al-Ahli Hospital explosion in Gaza. Militia Spotlight’s daily monitoring of the anti-U.S. attacks thereafter has picked out the following trends in the kinetic behavior of the *muqawama* factions:

- **Badr:** The Gaza crisis has even seen the most genuinely parochial militia, Badr, openly call for attacks on U.S. bases and U.S. persons if the United States actively participates

in the conflict.²¹²

- **AAH:** Qais al-Khazali has been very cautious to appear as the least kinetically focused *muqawama* leader, but also one with enough apparent independence to impudently preempt major speeches by Iran’s Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei or by Lebanese Hezbollah’s Hassan Nasrallah.²¹³ AAH’s military wing under Laith al-Khazali tends to operate wherever it wishes, working across the agreed boundaries, albeit with greater reticence to openly claim kinetic attacks, especially against diplomatic targets in its traditional area of operations in Baghdad.^{ca} During the Gaza crisis in the fall of 2023, Qais al-Khazali and AAH have been openly mocked by other *muqawama* militants for not pulling their weight in anti-U.S. attacks.²¹⁴
- **Nujaba and KSS:** In contrast, Nujaba’s Akram al-Kaabi and KSS’ Abu Alaa al-Wala’i have shown great deference toward Iran and Hezbollah, and also with open commitment to kinetic operations: Indeed, both men made well-publicized visits to Lebanon after October 7, 2023, and Kaabi followed a Khamenei speech on November 1, 2023, with an open call to “liberate Iraq militarily” from the U.S. presence.²¹⁵ Nujaba probably undertook one of the two attacks on the first night of intensified Gaza-related anti-U.S. strikes—the October 18 drone attack on the U.S. site at Harir, Iraq.²¹⁶ KSS was added by the United States to the Specially Designated National list on November 17, 2023, because it “has planned and been involved in attacks against U.S. personnel in Iraq and Syria.”²¹⁷
- **KH:** The most interesting full-spectrum response has come from KH, which led its post-October 7 reaction with a rare public statement by KH Special Operations head Abu Hussein,²¹⁸ but which also saw their Hoquq parliamentary bloc call for legislative efforts to remove U.S. forces,²¹⁹ all while Abu Fadak placed the PMF on a wartime footing in case of an attack on Iraq by Israel, a stance that was then mirrored by the Sudani government and the non-PMF regular military.²²⁰ KH is perhaps the only *muqawama* actor to balance being a key kinetic actor—striking the first blow (at the U.S. site at Al-Asad)²²¹ of the Gaza-related attack series—with a role in political warfare and exploitation of the crisis for state capture purposes, by strengthening the PMF’s leadership of the security sector.²²²

Though the various *muqawama* factions have jockeyed and tried in small ways to outshine each other, the strong overall impression since the Gaza crisis began is one of strenuous exertion to maintain cohesion and unity.²²³ This is probably a deliberate effort, led by IRGC-QF.²²⁴ The post-October 17 strikes on U.S. bases in Iraq and Syria (numbering 117 at the time of writing on December 19) have mostly been claimed under a single new “purpose-made”

ca On October 19, 2023, an unknown actor is assessed to have fired a warning rocket (one of 15 in the cube of launch-tubes) at the U.S. annex in Baghdad airport on October 19, 2023, with no subsequent claim for the attack. See Knights, al-Kaabi, and Malik, “Tracking Anti-U.S. Strikes in Iraq and Syria During the Gaza Crisis.” AAH has historically been connected to many attacks in Baghdad, including U.S. diplomatic and airport sites. This assessment is the result of a synthesized intelligence process, drawing together weapons intelligence, historic attack patterns prior to October 18, 2023, militia ground-holding locations, social media intelligence, and claims.

cc The first post-2011 anti-U.S. ‘resistance’ attack was probably the October 1, 2017, roadside bombing that killed U.S. soldier Alexander Missildine. See Knights and Malik, “Ashab al-Kahf Claims Six-Year-Old Unsolved Murder of U.S. Soldier.”

online brand (i.e., a Telegram channel) that emerged on October 18 called the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, or IRI (Al-Muqawama al-Islamiyah fi al-Iraq), linked to an IRGC-QF-chaired Al-Aqsa Flood Coordination Room in Baghdad, and intended to demonstrate intra-*muqawama* solidarity.²²⁵ The first time that Nujaba is assessed to have used the IRI brand, it also (erroneously it seems) co-claimed using the Tashkil al-Waritheen brand²²⁶ (which was previously used for Nujaba-linked attacks on U.S. bases in Kuwait and Syria²²⁷). Mostly, however, the use of the generic IRI “press release” for attacks has been impressively uniform, with practically no competing claims and a close correlation between claimed and proven attacks.^{cs} In Militia Spotlight’s view, this is a strong indicator of both a “guiding hand” (i.e., IRGC-QF, which typically is involved in coordinated actions)²²⁸ and a high degree of intra-*muqawama* cohesion²²⁹—almost the opposite of the discord that was documented in the authors’ October 2021 *CTC Sentinel* article.^{ct}

The anti-U.S. strikes since October 18, 2023, suggest an unchanged geographic division of labor when it comes to threatening U.S. forces since the October 2021 *CTC Sentinel* piece, a trend that has been sustained under the time of writing. In the October 2021 study, Militia Spotlight described the system of military committees in detail,²³⁰ and based on the authors’ information collection, the system remains active and largely unchanged.²³¹ This means a leadership committee (now likely renamed the Al-Aqsa Flood Operations Room) chaired by Kata’ib Hezbollah, advised by an IRGC-QF “connection officer,” and attended by KH, Nujaba, KSS, AAH, and Badr.²³² In terms of geographic areas of responsibility, KH seems to strike the U.S. sites at Al-Asad and Tanf, south of the Euphrates,^{cu} while Nujaba and KSS cover the U.S. targets north of that river, within Iraq and Syria.^{cv} As in 2021, AAH may not be fully integrated into such deconfliction measures²³³ and may have

“The turnaround of *muqawama* fortunes in 2022 was not delivered via the barrel of a gun but rather by a series of cool-headed and coordinated moves by Qaani, Judge Faiq Zaydan, Hadi al-Ameri, Nouri al-Maliki, and Qais al-Khazali.”

been involved in strikes in October-December 2023 that occurred outside of the Islamic Resistance in Iraq claim mechanism.^{cw}

A final and possibly controversial observation regarding *muqawama* strikes on U.S. sites during the Gaza crisis (at least until the time of writing on December 19) has been an apparent “casualty-limiting” intent witnessed across most strikes, whereby the intent usually appears performative but is mostly not optimized to cause U.S. fatalities (and thus trigger significant U.S. retaliation).²³⁴ Casualty-maximizing tactics—such as the ‘swarming’ of drones to overwhelm base air defenses—have been rarely (or arguably not at all)^{cx} observed since October 17, 2023.^{cy} Targeting has often been focused on emptier parts of bases or indeed on evacuated sites.^{cz} Rockets have achieved uncommonly low numbers of hits within base complexes.^{da} There have also been unusual indications of the

cs Depending on counting rules, the ‘Islamic Resistance in Iraq’ has probably claimed between 66 percent and 84 percent of proven strikes against or near U.S. bases in Iraq and Syria between October 18 and November 15, 2023. In the first 58 strikes claimed by the ‘Islamic Resistance in Iraq,’ Militia Spotlight assesses 54 to have been genuine claims of an attack at the location mentioned, often with relatively accurate data on the weapons used. Indeed, KH even boasted of the manner in which its attack claims were confirmed one-for-one by U.S. government admissions. See Ameer al-Kaabi and Michael Knights, “Kataib Hezbollah Publicly Mocks Asaib Ahl al-Haq for Cowardice,” Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, November 30, 2023. This kind of coordinated, authoritative, unchallenged claim mechanism seems, in Militia Spotlight’s assessment, to be good evidence of an external guiding authority (i.e., IRGC-QF). The Washington Institute tracker lists these claims. See Knights, al-Kaabi, and Malik, “Tracking Anti-U.S. Strikes in Iraq and Syria During the Gaza Crisis.”

ct It may be that less cooperative actors, like Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq, still undertake outlier actions that may be less fully coordinated than KH, Nujaba, and KSS. This is Militia Spotlight’s assessment based on all the available evidence and the authors’ analytic processes.

cu KH seems to operate largely out of the Euphrates River Valley in Anbar and Syria, using western Iraq as needed. This assessment is the result of a synthesized intelligence process, drawing together weapons intelligence, historic attack patterns prior to October 18, 2023, militia ground-holding locations, social media intelligence, and claims.

cv Nujaba and KSS operate from the Euphrates Valley in Syria, from Sinjar in Iraq, and from northern Iraq, leading operations in Iraqi Kurdistan and the so-called Eastern Syria Security Area, north of the Euphrates. This assessment is the result of a synthesized intelligence process, drawing together weapons intelligence, historic attack patterns prior to October 18, 2023, militia ground-holding locations, social media intelligence, and claims.

cw Two attacks since October 19, 2023, were not claimed by the Islamic Resistance of Iraq, and both were in AAH’s historic operating area of Baghdad: the October 19 single-rocket attack on a U.S. site at Baghdad airport and the December 8 rocket-propelled grenade attack on the U.S. Embassy. In Militia Spotlight’s assessment, these events, both of which displayed cosmetic similarities to previous AAH attacks in Baghdad, deserve closer scrutiny by counterterrorism analysts. Knights, al-Kaabi, and Malik, “Tracking Anti-U.S. Strikes in Iraq and Syria During the Gaza Crisis.”

cx Due to the sensitivity of technical details regarding drone and anti-drone warfare, it is hard to find evidence of any significant drone swarm since October 17-18, 2023, in Iraq or Syria. Anecdotal reporting, often in veiled terms, suggests once or twice there have been small salvos of two to three drones arriving on target at the same time, but this is still very restrained enemy activity. This is Militia Spotlight’s assessment based on all the available evidence and the authors’ analytic processes.

cy There have been no drone salvos greater than three, and most have been single or double strikes. See Knights, al-Kaabi, and Malik, “Tracking Anti-U.S. Strikes in Iraq and Syria During the Gaza Crisis.”

cz In the authors’ view, drones have aided casualty-limiting measures, such as the selection of uninhabited aim-points. This assessment is the result of a synthesized intelligence process, drawing together weapons intelligence, historic attack patterns prior to October 18, 2023, militia ground-holding locations, social media intelligence, and claims.

da In the authors’ view, rocket salvos have often been aimed-off, with an improbably low number of rockets landing on bases (compared to typical 107mm and 122mm salvos). This assessment is the result of a synthesized intelligence process, drawing together weapons intelligence, historic attack patterns prior to October 18, 2023, militia ground-holding locations, social media intelligence, and claims.

repeated non-detonation of drone warheads.^{db} In Militia Spotlight's view, this is another strong indicator that the IRGC-QF have achieved enough control over tactical and technical choices that they once again have a more effective "safety catch" on the escalatory risks posed by Tehran-controlled militias in Iraq and Syria.²³⁵ This appears to have been especially common across attack cells.²³⁶ In the Nujaba or KSS areas, there is more of a question-mark, and it is notable that most U.S. retaliatory strikes have followed large rocket salvos on U.S. bases assessed to be within the Nujaba and KSS areas of operation, suggesting greater risk acceptance by these groups to undertake less predictable attacks using unguided weapons.^{dc}

Analytic Conclusions and Lessons

The Militia Spotlight team's prior October 2021 analysis in CTC Sentinel described a loss of cohesion within the *muqawama* and between its factions and the new IRGC-QF commander Esmail Qaani during his first year in the job. At the point of writing that article, the *muqawama* had almost hit rock bottom, which occurred when their electoral defeat became clear. This near-death experience for the so-called post-2003 "Shi`a project"^{dd} of Iran and the *muqawama* factions seems to have fostered realism and unified the various players against common enemies: Moqtada al-Sadr, the Barzani family leadership of the Kurdistan Region, Mohammed al-Halbousi's leadership of the Sunnis, and the former Kadhimi government officials. The turnaround of *muqawama* fortunes in 2022 was not delivered via the barrel of a gun but rather by a series of cool-headed and coordinated moves by Qaani, Judge Faiq Zaydan, Hadi al-Ameri, Nouri al-Maliki, and Qais al-Khazali.

While al-Khazali is dynamic and remarkably confident, the experienced heads like Hadi al-Ameri have also proven their value within an IRGC-QF-orchestrated effort and should not be overlooked as key players within the *muqawama*. Al-Ameri may be older than al-Khazali by 20 years (al-Ameri is 69 versus al-Khazali's 49), but he has proven to be a wily old fox when it comes to the asset-stripping of the Iraqi state, drawing on a (literal) wealth of

db In the authors' view, there are some indications that warheads have experienced an improbably high number of non-detonations, suggesting deliberate casualty-limiting. This assessment is the result of a synthesized intelligence process, drawing together weapons intelligence, historic attack patterns prior to October 18, 2023, militia ground-holding locations, social media intelligence, and claims.

dc This is an interesting issue that requires further analysis. Basic correlation of U.S. retaliation and the preceding attacks on U.S. sites that are temporally connected to retaliation show that (from October 27 to December 11, 2023), five of six U.S. retaliatory strikes fell after what Militia Spotlight assesses to be Nujaba or KSS attacks. These cases (October 26 and 30, November 7 and 12, and December 3, 2023) were typically large unguided rocket salvos where the attacker appeared to have taken no effort to minimize or control the risk of U.S. casualties. Only in one of six U.S. retaliatory actions was KH the target, which followed apparent use of Al-Aqsa-1 heavy artillery rockets against the U.S. site at Al-Asad in November 20, 2023. Knights, al-Kaabi, and Malik, "Tracking Anti-U.S. Strikes in Iraq and Syria During the Gaza Crisis."

dd Using the phrase that many Shi`a officials privately use, to describe the idea that the Shi`a will use their demographic majoritarian status to collectively dominate the prime ministership and the government. This assessment is based on multiple decades-worth of the team's collective politics-watching across seven government formations since 2005.

track record in illicit business activities,^{de} most famously the so-called "Heist of the Century" in which Badr officials at Iraq's Tax Authority methodically found ways to successfully empty \$2.5 billion from the state's coffers, even as Kadhimi-era officials tried numerous ways to block their efforts.^{df} As a result, Badr still has a powerful war chest; significant paramilitary capabilities;^{dg} and good relations with Iran. Able to work with anyone—and go toe-to-toe with anyone^{dh}—Hadi al-Ameri has, for example, gained valuable director-general slots in the Ministry of Oil by allying with Qais al-Khazali and Mohammed Shia al-Sudani to outmaneuver al-Maliki in the first half of 2023.²³⁷

Kata'ib Hezbollah is also arguably in a much-improved position from its fractious state when the authors published their last *CTC Sentinel* article in October 2021. This is arguably because the role division within KH has become clearer after firm intervention from the office of Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei:^{di} there is a special operations wing under the strong family network of Abu Hussein, the KH Shura Council secretary general and head of KH-Iraq Special Operations.^{dj} Abu Hussein's wing of KH solidified after a period of post-Muhandis incoherence.^{dk} Abu Hussein's ally, PMF head of security Abu Zainab al-Lami, became a staff college graduate²³⁸ and a leading player in Baghdad real estate corruption.²³⁹ Another Abu Hussein trustee, Hossein Moanes Faraj al-Mohammadawi (also known as Abu Ali al-Askari), is now a prominent parliamentarian, able to live a relatively normal

de Hadi al-Ameri was Minister of Transport from 2010-2014, and his protégé in the minister's office, Sadiq al-Saadawi, is now the Minister of Transport under al-Sudani. The Badr network has significant experience in running ministries for their benefit, and milking control of ports, real estate, and projects. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2020-2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

df As noted earlier, *The Guardian* investigation identified Badr officials as the key players in the heist. See Foltayn.

dg Worthy of a separate study, Badr's drone and rocket systems, hidden away in bases such as Camp Ashraf in Diyala, are assessed by Militia Spotlight to be substantial. Of note, Israel struck Camp Ashraf in July 2019 as it tried to interdict the flow of precision weaponry and advanced conventional munitions to Syria and Lebanon via the "land bridge of Iraq." See Michael Knights and Alex Almeida, "Militias Are Threatening Public Safety in Iraq," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, August 14, 2019. Later, Mohajer-6 ground station units were shown at Ashraf in June 2021. See Farzin Nadimi and Michael Knights, "Militias Parade Under the PMF Banner (Part 1): Drone Systems," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, July 3, 2021.

dh To give an example, Hadi al-Ameri likens his key money-men and corrupt officials to his own son Mehdi, and warns other *muqawama* players to stay away from them or he will target their friends. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2020-2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

di Disciplining of KH leaders in late 2021 and Khamenei's letter, delivered in January 2022, appear to have been mechanisms used in this process. See Malik and Knights, "Militia Lionization of Esmail Qaani."

dj On October 10, 2023, Abu Hussein led the *muqawama* response, speaking as KH secretary general and on behalf of the KH special operations wing. His group probably fired the opening salvo as well, against Al-Asad on October 17-18, 2023. Amir al-Kaabi and Michael Knights, "Iran-Backed Militias Applaud Hamas, Threaten Americans," Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 13, 2023.

dk Abu Hussein survived a tough year in 2021 when his leadership was challenged, possibly with IRGC-QF encouragement. See Hamdi Malik, Michael Knights, and Crispin Smith, "Exposing Kataib Hezbollah's Royal Family? Insights from Recent Leaks," Militia Spotlight, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 9, 2022.

political life, out of the shadows, while still burnishing his resistance credentials using the online Abu Ali al-Askari persona.^{dl} Other KH Shura Council and mid-level officials have been given prestigious and financially rewarding security roles.²⁴⁰

The other main wing of KH—the more favored and predictable PMF wing led by Abu Fadak—seems to have ceased feuding with Abu Hussein's power base and instead focused on state capture and profiteering. Abu Fadak now has effective control of most of KH's intelligence and military assets,^{dm} and some of its international money-laundering networks.^{dn} Within Iraq, he has tried, with Hadi al-Ameri's active assistance, to push the development of numerous PMF-owned economic projects,^{do} most notably the Muhandis General Company, and has further extended his (Abu Fadak's) trustees into roles of strategic and economic value. Abu Fadak has thus presided over a period of stability, growth, and now professionalization of the PMF, and he now faces no challengers in this role.²⁴¹

Looking Ahead

In the opening year of the al-Sudani government, the “pie” of Iraq's economy and government jobs was big enough to accommodate all the *muqawama*'s looters, and a three-year package of back-to-back record-spending budgets is intended to keep the factions satisfied.²⁴² Completion *within* the *muqawama* seems muted at the moment: Badr and AAH are playing well, the wings of KH seem content with their role division and respective spoils, and the Nujaba and KSS cells are busy with anti-U.S. attacks. What could change this placid picture?

The December 2023 provincial elections are one potential divider. Demonstrating his trademark optimism, Qais al-Khazali is planning to compete the December 2023 provincial elections separately from Hadi's Badr and Falah al-Fayyadh in Diyala province, the birthplace and tribal base of both Ameri and al-Fayyadh.²⁴³ This suggests a clear test of relative strength is imminent.²⁴⁴ Both al-Ameri and al-Fayyadh are older generation leaders from the “outside resistance” to Saddam and the new-school of former Sadrists (like Qais and Laith al-Khazali, and Akram al-Kaabi) are gunning for them, as are younger IRGC-QF trustees such as Abu Alaa al-Wala'i, Abu Hussein, and Abu Zainab al-Lami.²⁴⁵ This generational divide may be a future faultline, and the older tribal-backed veterans may prove more durable than expected,

dl Hussien Moanes is nowadays spotted at Baghdad restaurants and adopting more regular patterns of activity. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

dm These include headquarters functions linked to Abu Fadak, such as KH Unit 101, an intelligence body; the three KH brigades of the PMF (45, 46, and 47); and various PMF directorates including missiles and drones. This is Militia Spotlight's assessment based on all the available evidence and the authors' analytic processes.

dn Abu Fadak seems to have control of some money exchange houses and dollar smuggling to Iran, working through Sheikh Adnan al-Mohammadawi (Adnan Yousif Jassim, Abu Ammar), a former Shura Council member who runs KH-Iraq's economic authority. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2022-2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

do Abu Fadak has ambitions to build a military industrial base with Iranian assistance. This is likely to involve the Iraqi Military Industrial Commission, and various engineering, imaging and technology departments at Iraqi universities. Author (Knights) interviews, multiple Iraqi contacts, 2022-2023; exact dates, names, and places withheld at request of the interviewees.

especially as they have a long track record with Iranian leaders. A change of Supreme Leader in Iran, when Khamenei passes, could tip the balance to the new generation.^{246 dp}

For counterterrorism analysts, the effective loss of the Iraqi state to Tehran-backed terrorist groups and militias to an unprecedented degree is pregnant with implications, especially in the fields of counter-terrorism threat financing. In general, the intelligence resources dedicated to counter-threat financing in Iraq should be greatly boosted because of the order-of-magnitude increase in the funds that might increasingly be available to the Axis of Resistance due to the Iran-led bloc's inheritance of uncontested control of a three-year program of \$456 billion of approved government spending.^{dq}

Any major Iraqi company working in a key industry (such as oil exports) who has received significant contracts since October 2022 should be thoroughly investigated, especially if they previously had no track record in the sector where they have been awarded work by the al-Sudani government. Oil smuggling originating in, or passing through, Basra's offshore areas requires very close monitoring by the United States, because (as noted earlier) the Iraqi government is no longer effectively keeping watch. The Iraqi Oil Tankers Company, the General Company for Ports in Iraq, and all companies involved in refining, oil transportation, vessel management, and ship-to-ship transfers in Iraqi waters.

Another necessary focus area is the project to build a Khatam al-Anbiya-type conglomerate, perhaps in component pieces initially and with efforts made to better hide its existence. Major company formation (especially when the PMF is involved), investment licenses, and land grants should all be closely watched by the U.S. Treasury, anti-corruption and anti-terrorist watchdogs, and citizen journalists. In particular, great attention should be paid to the development of PMF-owned or militia-owned complexes near Iraq's borders—facing Saudi Arabia, in western Anbar, or elsewhere probably functioning as large free-trade zones or logistical transshipment sites but ideal for dual-use as advanced conventional munitions storage and launch locations.^{dr}

Engagement of Iraqi government organs should be much more carefully vetted due to extraordinary and accelerating penetration of these agencies by U.S.-designated terrorist organizations, U.S.-designated human rights abusers, and U.S.-designated corrupt actors. The most important is the need to pay more attention to the judiciary. Analysts should focus much more effort on Faiq Zaydan and other senior and mid-level judges, working on a smart assumption that al-Muhandis probably did not plant just one seed in the judiciary (Zaydan) but many. U.S. security assistance to

dp The publication Amwaj made interesting points that al-Ameri and al-Fayyadh only survived attempts to exclude them because of mediation from the Office of the Supreme Leader, who favored inclusivity of these older leaders. “The secret Arab visitors in Iran and the ‘liberation’ of Jerusalem,” Amwaj, November 7, 2023.

dq Calculated by multiplying the three-year package of approved \$152 billion annual budgets.

dr The Imam Ali base in Albu Kamal in Deir ez-Zor, Syria, is a good model for this kind of complex that may be replicated in Iraq. A notional equivalent of the Imam Ali base in Iraq would be expansive, with multiple bermed-off or fenced sub-compounds, possibly also with a rail link and truck-yards. Numerous storage containers would be present, some fully or partially buried. For discussion of Imam Ali base, see Tal Beeri, “The Imam Ali base in AlBukamal – A Central Military Anchor in the Iranian Corridor to Syria and Lebanon,” Alma Research and Education Center, March 23, 2023.

Iraqi security forces must also be reassessed in light of the new and significant *muqawama* penetration of agencies such as INIS, CTC, and Baghdad International Airport.

From a great power competition perspective, Iraq falling under the control of anti-U.S. forces should be an issue of great significant and growing interest. The most vocally anti-U.S. resistance leader in Iraq, Akram Kaabi, is now a welcomed visitor in Moscow since 2022,²⁴⁷ and the relationship between the Iraqi *muqawama* and Russia rapidly bloomed after the *muqawama* wholeheartedly supported the invasion of Ukraine.²⁴⁸ The Russian embassy in Baghdad has continually deepened these ties, particularly since the Gaza crisis began, providing opportunities to exploit Iraqi anger to weaken U.S. “soft power” in Iraqi society.²⁴⁹ The Iraqi *muqawama*’s role in supporting anti-U.S. operations in Syria is an obvious initial point of collaboration, and at least one effective anti-U.S. attack in Syria (at the Rmeilan Landing Zone in March 2023) has contained hints of Russian support for a lethal “offset action” to pay the United

States back for its provision of lethal support to Ukraine.^{ds}

More focused on economic fruits, China has also created deep inroads with the *muqawama* factions, receiving their support for China’s Belt and Road Initiative sub-projects in Iraq,²⁵⁰ for Chinese oil-for-infrastructure loans,²⁵¹ and for preferential—often corrupt—Chinese access to energy contracts.^{dt}

As Iran and its Axis of Resistance tighten their ties to Russia and China, an Iraq dominated by the *muqawama* is in danger of being drawn into this loose anti-Western coalition in the future. **CTC**

ds In the post-strike press conference, Pentagon reporters had correctly ascertained from sources that the strike occurred when base anti-drone defenses were offline for maintenance. See “Pentagon Press Secretary Brig. Gen. Pat Ryder Holds an On-Camera Press Briefing,” U.S. Department of Defense, March 24, 2023.

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The Path to October 7: How Iran Built Up and Managed a Palestinian ‘Axis of Resistance’

By Phillip Smyth

Since October 7, in the wake of the “al-Aqsa Flood” terrorist attacks by Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), and other Palestinian factions from across the ideological spectrum, Iran’s aid to and strategic management of these groups has taken on a new level of relevance. The methods Iran has used to cultivate and maintain influence and control over disparate Palestinian groups follows the same pragmatic carrot-and-stick formula it has used across the Middle East with other proxies, with incentives that include financial aid, weapons, and training. The use of sticks was particularly important in Tehran’s restoration of influence over Hamas and PIJ after the Syrian civil war drove a wedge between Palestinian groups and Iran. The withholding of funds and a divide-and-rule approach helped Tehran get these groups back in line. More generally, Iran has worked to create and leverage splinter groups, particularly from the Palestinian Authority’s dominant Fatah Movement, to grow its influence in Gaza and the West Bank. Tehran has also strived to build influence among leftist Palestinian groups to create a broad coalition of partners. And it uses umbrella groups and joint operations rooms to try to bolster the unity and coherence of its Palestinian network.

On the morning of October 7, 2023, rocket barrages from the Gaza Strip consisting of around 2,000¹-5,000^a rockets began to hit targets in southern Israel. Armed motorized paragliders and gunmen in trucks, on motorbikes, and technicals streamed through holes blown through Israel’s once-vaunted border fence and began firing on a mixture of civilian and military targets.² Seaborn divers and small boats attacked other targets on Israel’s coast.³ Around 1,200 Israelis were killed and around 3,500 wounded; over 240 were taken hostage.⁴ There were many reports

a Hamas claimed it launched 5,000 rockets. See “Why the Palestinian group Hamas launched an attack on Israel? All to know,” Al Jazeera, October 7, 2023.

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of rape, beheadings, and torture.⁵

Most of the fighters who crossed into Israel were members of Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), but they were joined by gunmen from numerous smaller Palestinian factions. The scope, brutality, and audacity of the attacks, along with the weapons systems used, revealed a level of planning, destructiveness, and capability that surprised many analysts both in and out of government.⁶

One common thread linking the attackers were their extensive financial, military, and political connections to the Islamic Republic of Iran. As this article will outline, these associations were the product of extensive cultivation and management of a Palestinian “Axis of Resistance” by Tehran over many years.

Along with spreading the Islamic Revolution, one of the main goals of the late Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini was the destruction of Israel.⁷ In fact, once Iran’s Shah was deposed, it was Khomeini who then invited Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) Chairman Yasir Arafat to Iran, where he was allowed to take over office space in the former Israeli embassy.⁸ Arafat himself told a crowd of Iranians that with Khomeini in power and the Islamic Revolution established, “the road to Palestine now leads through Iran.”⁹ Since that time, Tehran has never abandoned the goal of Israel’s destruction.¹⁰

Iran currently lacks the conventional military capability for a heads-on confrontation with Israel. Proxy forces have allowed Iran to maintain some level of plausible deniability, while asymmetrically supplying Tehran with a means to effectively strike Israel or apply pressure to it. Furthermore, Iran’s creation of proxy forces has facilitated the spread of Iranian Islamist ideology.

As yet, no ‘smoking gun’ has emerged of direct Iranian involvement in or greenlighting of the October 7 attacks.¹¹ This may reflect the opacity of many proxy-related activities by Iran and Tehran’s deliberate pursuit of plausible deniability. Alternatively, it may reflect the fact that while Iran cocked the gun, it was its Palestinian proxies that pulled the trigger. While praising those who carried out the October 7 attack, Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei has repeatedly denied Iran played any direct role.¹² Likewise on November 3, 2023, Hezbollah Secretary General, Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah, claimed the attack was “100 percent Palestinian” and that those who carried it out “kept it hidden ... from everyone.”¹³

In his November 3 speech, Nasrallah also stated that Iran has “always been openly adopting and supporting resistance factions in Lebanon, Palestine, and in the region. However, they [Iran] do not exercise any form of control over these factions or their leadership.”¹⁴ This claim should not be taken at face value. As this article will outline, Iran has made many efforts over the years to maintain influence and control over what it calls the “Axis of Resistance,” and while it has not always succeeded in getting groups to do its bidding, it has always maintained significant sway over its network.

From around the time of the Syrian civil war, Iran has worked hard to cultivate new and old Palestinian proxies. As it did with Iraqi Shi`a militias in confronting U.S. forces in Iraq in the years after 2003,¹⁵ Iran has used Lebanese Hezbollah as a key go-between in creating and maintaining relationships with Palestinian groups. Given the large Palestinian refugee population in Lebanon, geographic proximity to the conflict zone, and Hezbollah's loyalty and reputation as a leader within the "Islamic Resistance" against Israel, Iran has been able to rely on Hezbollah as a strong agent of influence. Further proxy-building efforts by Tehran among Palestinian groups have involved heavy financial incentivization,¹⁶ supplying weapons,¹⁷ assistance with propaganda,¹⁸ and the formation of unified umbrella groups to foment greater cooperation between Iran's proxies.¹⁹

Yet, Iran has not only utilized carrots in its dealings with its Palestinian allies; it has also made clear that those benefits can be taken away as quickly as they were introduced if these groups do not toe the line. Among the sticks Iran has brandished is the crafting of splinter groups to apply pressure against organizations that are or have become unaligned with Tehran.

In order to set the stage for analyzing Iran's relationships with its Palestinian proxies, this article first examines Tehran's attempt to create loyalist splinter groups in Iraq out of insufficiently dependable Shi`a groups such as Moqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army to advance its interests. Next, the article outlines how after the Syrian civil war created a wedge between Tehran and Palestinian groups, Iran used carrots and sticks to restore influence over Hamas and PIJ. The third part of the article outlines how Iran has leveraged splinters, particularly from the Palestinian Authority's dominant Fatah Movement. These groups formed a potent addition to Hamas and PIJ's power in Gaza and allowed for a broader cross section of influence within Palestinian ranks. Tehran viewed Fatah as an entity to both neutralize and utilize. Fighters that had split from Fatah formed one element of the larger Hamas-led attack on October 7.

Iran did not just focus on Fatah. As outlined in the fourth part of the article, it has also engaged leftist Palestinian groups. These partnerships and efforts at proxy building have demonstrated Tehran's desire to act to build a coalition of a wide cross-section of Palestinian armed groups.

The fifth part of the article outlines how Iran has followed-up on its new relationships with Islamist and leftist groups by reworking them into umbrella structures and joint operations rooms to boost the unity and coherence of its network. The final section then offers some conclusions. In the appendix, the author has included a table with details on the main Palestinian armed Islamist groups, the Fatah splinters, and Palestinian leftist armed groups.

Part One: Iran's Use of Splinters in Iraq

Recruiting and utilizing splinters from other larger more dominant groups, often from groups that oppose Iran, has been a key Iranian strategy when it comes to the cultivation of proxy groups and networks.²⁰ For Iran, this formula has worked particularly well over the years with Iraqi Shi`a militias. Iran's formulaic approach, proven with these Shi`a militias, was then replicated for use with Palestinian factions.

Iran's attempts to splinter more dominant and/or oppositional groups in Iraq is instructive with what it has attempted to do in the Palestinian context and particularly with Fatah. During the Iraq War (2003-2011) when radical Shi`a cleric Muqtada al-Sadr was

leading his Mahdi Army (Jaysh al-Mahdi), numerous splits within the group began to develop due to his leadership and strategy. Al-Sadr had a mixed relationship with Iran, sometimes aligning with it²¹ and at other times opposing Tehran.²² In 2006, a group known as Asa`ib Ahl al-Haqq (League of the Righteous) split from al-Sadr's ranks and soon received Iranian aid.²³ Asa`ib Ahl al-Haqq's then and current leader, Qais al-Khazali, was a founding member of Muqtada al-Sadr's powerful Office of the Martyr Sadr and a close aide to al-Sadr.²⁴ But he became fed up with al-Sadr's management style and began working to build his own network.²⁵ In so doing, he took advantage of his contacts with Iran's IRGC-QF and numerous leading clerics that he had established during his prior visits to Iran with al-Sadr.²⁶ This was exploited by Iran, which offered cash, training, and weapons.²⁷ Asa`ib Ahl al-Haqq has since grown into a major player within Iraqi politics and within the Iraqi government funded and recognized al-Hashd al-Sha`abi (the Popular Mobilization Forces) militia umbrella group.²⁸

Other proxy networks were also carved out of al-Sadr's ranks by Iran. When al-Sadr opposed sending additional Shi`a fighters to the Syrian War, some Sadrist leaders and their networks disagreed with his decision.²⁹ Tehran exploited that division by facilitating the transfer of Shi`a militiamen belonging to these networks to Syria and supplying the know-how to build separate groups.³⁰ From 2013-2016, the Iranians fostered the growth of groups such as Kata`ib al-Imam Ali (the Imam Ali Battalions), led by Shibl Zaydi, a former Mahdi Army commander.³¹ An additional Sadrist splinter was Jaysh al-Muwamalat, led by another former commander of Jaysh al-Mahdi's successor group, Saraya al-Salam.³² All of these efforts have provided Iran with a growing influence in Iraq and larger forces to draw on to serve Iranian interests. In addition, the pressure and threats of pressure Iran exerted on al-Sadr often forced him into more conciliatory positions vis-à-vis Iran because of concern over the loyalty of his own ranks.³³

In 2012, when internal leadership issues arose within the Iraqi Shi`a militia group Kata`ib Hezbollah, instead of discarding a wide network of experienced personnel, Iran allowed the splinter group Kata`ib Sayyid al-Shuhada to form the following year.³⁴

A similar issue related to control and influence arose within Asa`ib Ahl al-Haqq, when one of its former leaders, Akram Ka`abi, split off and was allowed to form Harakat Hizballah al-Nujaba.³⁵

The creation of these new groups from established organizations not only created groups more loyal to Tehran but also created pressure points on the original groups to stay in line.³⁶ This was especially the case with Harakat Hizballah al-Nujaba's relationship with Asa`ib Ahl al-Haqq when reports emerged that the latter was not always obeying instructions from Tehran.³⁷ From 2020-2021, when Asa`ib Ahl al-Haqq reportedly engaged in using front groups to launch rocket and UAV attacks against U.S. targets that had not been sanctioned by Iran, Harakat Hizballah al-Nujaba was brought forward to claim leadership of all front groups used to attack U.S. facilities and forces as well as domestic adversaries in Iraq.³⁸ The

b It is important to note that following AAH's use of reportedly unapproved front groups to attack U.S. interests, Harakat Hizballah al-Nujaba leader Akram Kaabi was publicly utilized as a means to demonstrate overall Iranian control. In December 2021, Kaabi posed in front of flags belonging to a multitude of the established front groups and behaved as a spokesman for them, signifying he—and by extension, Iran—was in control of all elements. See al-Muqawama al-Islamiyyah Harakat al-Nujaba, Telegram, December 9, 2021.

effort was likely a move to reestablish Iran's control and maintain a façade of unified Iranian control.

Part Two: How Iran Used Carrots and Sticks to Restore Influence Over Hamas and PIJ

Hamas and PIJ form the two largest and most important Palestinian proxies for Iran.³⁹ The two groups pioneered the use of suicide bombings by Palestinian organizations in the 1990s-2000s,^{40 c} with the former taking over Gaza in 2007. Both groups have built themselves into strong military and terrorist actors over a period of decades. With its closer ideological links and long relationship with Iran, PIJ has been Iran's main proxy for much of its activities among the Palestinians.⁴¹ However, Hamas as the much stronger group was hard for Iran to ignore, and it actively cultivated the organization.⁴² For example, Hamas leader Khaled Meshal was hosted by Lebanese Hezbollah in January 2010 and met Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah.⁴³ That same month, Israel reportedly killed a Hamas leader involved in smuggling Iranian rockets to the group in Gaza.⁴⁴ By 2010, a year before the outbreak of the war in Syria produced tensions between Tehran and Hamas that were eventually surmounted, estimates of Iranian funding to Hamas exceeded \$20-\$30 million a year.⁴⁵

With such cash injections, it appeared that Iran had secured influence for years to come. Yet, in 2013, the war in Syria presented Iran with new challenges for its relationship with various Palestinian proxies. Tehran deployed Shi'a militias with a history of sectarian animosity toward Sunnis to prop up the Assad regime. These forces were cast as "defenders of the [Shi'a] shrines" and the "Shi'a resistance."⁴⁶ Any foe of Iran or Hezbollah in Syria was branded "takfiri,"⁴⁷ a term used to describe ultra-hardline Islamist extremists.^d But in reality, the forces they were fighting on the ground were at times Syrian Muslim Brotherhood affiliates from similar ideological streams as Hamas.⁴⁸ From 2013-2015, there were claims of current and former Hamas members joining and training Syrian rebel groups.⁴⁹ In 2015, one leader from Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyyah, a Syrian Sunni Islamist group, claimed he had received videos from Gaza to assist in tunnel repairs in Syria.⁵⁰

Palestinian camp-turned-neighborhoods, particularly Yarmouk, south of Damascus, were hotbeds of rebel and Sunni extremist activity and directly abutted Shi'a zones.⁵¹ This created discomfort for Sunni Palestinian groups such as Hamas and PIJ in their relations with Tehran. Advances made by Syrian rebel groups⁵² and growing sectarianism within the Palestinian territories added to the tensions.⁵³ Furthermore, the wholesale destruction occurring in Palestinian areas within Syria⁵⁴ resulted in many former proxies of Iran cooling their enthusiasm for Tehran or outright opposing it. With Tehran waging a sectarian war against fellow Sunnis in

"From 2012-2013, Tehran froze most of its funding to Hamas due to the group's support for Sunni Islamist rebel groups in Syria and its open disapproval of Iran's intervention in the conflict."

Syria,^e for Hamas, the 13-month long presidency of the Muslim Brotherhood's Muhammad Morsi in Egypt from June 2012 to July 2013 opened up the possibility of replacing the patronage of Tehran with that of Cairo.⁵⁵

From 2012-2013, Tehran froze most of its funding to Hamas due to the group's support for Sunni Islamist rebel groups in Syria and its open disapproval of Iran's intervention in the conflict.⁵⁶ In June 2013, the deputy minister of foreign affairs for Hamas in Gaza told Reuters, "Things are not easy ... and we are trying to overcome the problem."⁵⁷ For its part, Hamas began courting Turkey and Qatar to fill the financial hole left by the Islamic Republic.⁵⁸ Yet, the financial issues were taking their toll on the group. By 2014, Hamas sent signals to Tehran that it was seeking some form of rapprochement.⁵⁹

Palestinian Islamic Jihad, for its part, maintained a more neutral position on the war in Syria, but like other Iranian-backed factions, it mostly escaped being penalized by Tehran for this decision.⁶⁰ However, in 2015, when the group did not give messaging support to the Iranian-backed Ansar Allah (also referred to as the Houthis) in Yemen, the group reportedly lost for a period of time its Iranian funding.⁶¹ "Iran wants all the factions it considers its allies and gives money to support all the political and military positions that [Iran] executes in the region," said one unnamed PIJ official in January 2016. "The [Palestinian] Islamic Jihad movement did not support the Iranian military and political positions, so relations became tense and it got bad."⁶²

Just like it had in Iraq to rein in group such as Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, Iran encouraged a group to splinter off PIJ, using this as a form of stick to put pressure on it. Peeled from the ranks of the PIJ in 2014,⁶³ Harakat Sabireen was small by comparison to Hamas and its PIJ parent group. According to a March 2019 report by Al-Monitor, Iran had, "shifted much of its financial support instead to Sabireen."⁶⁴ However, Harakat Sabireen made up for its small size by its speedy assembly, increased funding by Tehran, flashy marketing, and its resilience even when Hamas made attempts

c The Bus 405 suicide attack (albeit, not a bombing) is considered "the first Palestinian suicide attack, despite the fact that ... [the perpetrator] survived." It was launched by Palestinian Islamic Jihad in September 1989. From 2000-2005, Both Hamas and PIJ were also responsible for 65.5 percent of suicide bombings by Palestinian groups. See Efraim Benmelech and Claude Berrebi, "Attack Assignments in Terror Organizations and The Productivity of Suicide Bombers," Working Paper 12910, National Bureau of Economic Research, 2007, pp. 5-7.

d This is term is used, often pejoratively, to describe ultra-hardline Islamist extremists who regard those who do not follow their approach as guilty of apostasy and deserving of death.

e The sectarian nature of the war in Syria and increased Iranian Shi'a proselytizing in Gaza became major issues for Hamas. In 2011, Hamas was attempting to maintain links with Tehran and more quietly deal with Iranian proselytizing. See "Shiite Militancy Makes Inroads in Sunni Gaza," Jamestown Foundation, Terrorism Monitor 8:24 (2011). In January 2012, Hamas attacked Gaza's small community of Shi'a Muslims. See Avi Issacharoff, "Hamas Brutally Assaults Shi'ite Worshipers in Gaza," Haaretz, January 17, 2012. In June 2013, a salafi mob, in part inspired by Muslim Brotherhood-encouraged anti-Shi'a sectarianism, led to the lynching of Shaykh Hassan Shehata and three other Egyptian Shi'a. See "Egypt: Lynching of Shia Follows Months of Hate Speech," Human Rights Watch, June 27, 2013. In turn, Shehata's death was used as a recruitment tool by Iranian Shi'a militias for Syria. See Phillip Smyth, "Liwa'a 'Ammar Ibn Yasir: A New Shia Militia Operating in Aleppo, Syria," Hizballah Cavalcade, Jihadology, July 20, 2013.



Gunmen from Saraya al-Quds, the armed wing of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, are pictured on April 8, 2022, during an anti-Israel protest in the city of Khan Yunis in the southern Gaza Strip. (Yousef Masoud/SOPA Images/Sipa USA)(Sipa via AP Images)

to shutter the group.⁶⁵ The group, numbering only around 300, also had leadership elements in Iran.⁶⁶ Sabireen even adopted Lebanese Hezbollah-style iconography to further make clear its true loyalties.⁶⁷ Harakat Sabireen also actively disobeyed Hamas' strictures when it launched rockets into Israel.⁶⁸

By 2019, due in part to Iran's withholding of funds and splinter group strategy, Hamas and PIJ had fully returned to the Iranian fold. Iran subsequently allowed Harakat Sabireen to fade and Hamas moved in to begin fully dismantling the group the same year.⁶⁹ For Tehran, following Sabireen was likely a minor sacrifice to rebuild links and more direct control over the larger and far more influential and powerful PIJ and Hamas. Carrots then further helped to surmount the tensions caused by the Syrian civil war. In 2023, Iranian funding for Hamas was reported to be around \$100 million a year.⁷⁰ This tripling of funding compared to 2010 only underlines Iran's drive to keep Hamas' rule of Gaza afloat.

Part Three: Iran's Efforts to Splinter Fatah

In the Palestinian arena, Tehran applied the same concepts when

dealing with Fatah, the most dominant member of the PLO and within the Palestinian Authority (PA). This does not mean that Iran has not tried to build close relations with the PLO and Fatah directly⁶—it has. But Tehran's fundamental differences with the PLO and by extension the Palestinian Authority's role and relationship with Israel has regularly set the two at loggerheads, making such attempts difficult.⁷¹ Thus, Iran has focused significant efforts toward exploiting internal divisions within the PLO/Fatah/PA and encouraging disgruntled members to splinter off and, ideally, ally more closely with Iran.

Following the 2007 Hamas-Fatah War, Hamas stripped the Palestinian Authority and particularly Fatah's leadership of their control and power in the Gaza Strip. Prior to that bout of violence, some Fatah members had had their own tensions with the Palestinian Authority under Mahmoud Abbas. These figures would later lead factions that often identified as Fatah, but often did not follow Abbas's leadership.⁷² Others separated themselves from Fatah, or operated in an opaque sphere where Iranian aid could still flow to them while they maintained their links with Fatah and the Palestinian Authority.⁷³

Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades Splinters

One part of Fatah that Iran has tried to create splinter groups from is the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade (Kata'ib Shuhada al-Aqsa), an Islamist military formation formed in 2000 by members of Fatah.

^f Harakat Sabireen incorporated a mix of Sunni and primarily Iranian Shi'a Islamist ideology into its structure. Harakat Sabireen founder Hisham Salem is a Shi'a religious shaykh and was originally a commander within the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. His early networks that eventually grew into Harakat Sabireen included extensive support from Iranian-linked Shi'a charities and his Harakat Sabireen membership has included former PIJ members who converted to Shi'a Islam. Avi Issacharoff, "Hamas, beholden to Iran, lets Shiite group operate in Gaza," *Times of Israel*, May 12, 2015; author conversations, Iranian-backed Iraqi Shi'a militia commander, August-September 2019; Hassan Abbas, "Al-Sabireen: an Iran-Backed Palestinian Movement in the Style of Hezbollah," March 14, 2018; Salah Qashta, "'al-Sabireen' ...al-halif al-falastini al-awal li-airan 'ala qa'ima al-irhab al-amrikani," *Irfaa Sawtak*, February 2, 2018.

^g One example is Iran's shipment of tons of arms to Yasir Arafat-controlled elements of the PLO via the *Karine A* cargo ship in 2002. Robert Satloff, "The Peace Process at Sea: The *Karine-A* Affair and the War on Terrorism," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, May 1, 2002.

Ostensibly, the group is still to this day a Fatah-controlled entity.⁷⁴ Working to suck in splinters from the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade made sense for Tehran. Support for Palestinian Islamist groups, namely PIJ and Hamas, has long been a hallmark of Iranian policy. Ali Khamenei, the current Supreme Leader, has noted that “the foundations of this resistance rest on Palestinian *jihād groups* [emphasis by the author] and all faithful and steadfast Palestinians living inside and outside Palestine.”⁷⁵

Following the destruction of the Palestinian Authority and by extension Fatah’s influence in Gaza, factions within the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade gravitated toward commanders who more often promoted violence than their “political” Fatah counterparts and who favored partnerships with Hamas or PIJ.⁷⁶

Jaysh al-Asifa and Other Splinters

In 2012, one faction of al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, Jaysh al-Asifa (The Storm Army) was announced by the Palestinian Authority to no longer have no connections to it or Fatah.⁷⁷ Jaysh al-Asifa had initially been known as the Martyr Imad Mughniyeh Groups,⁷⁸ a Lebanese Hezbollah commander responsible for the deadly bombings of the U.S. embassy and Marine Corps barracks in Beirut in 1983, along with other hijackings, kidnappings, and murders throughout the 1980s.⁷⁹ However, Jaysh al-Asifa still promoted itself as an entity associated with Fatah.⁸⁰ Its leader, Salem Thabit (Abu al-Abd), told Raya Media Network in April 2014 that he wanted to unify Fatah military factions.⁸¹ Thabit worked to coordinate and organize the joint Hamas-al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade March 2004 double suicide bombing of the port of Ashdod.⁸² He also promoted strong relations with Hamas.⁸³ The group did little to hide its links to Lebanese Hezbollah, telling the pro-Hezbollah daily Al-Akhbar in 2014 that “the relationship [between the Jaysh al-Asifa and Lebanese Hezbollah] had a major role in transferring experiences of the resistance from Lebanon to Gaza.”⁸⁴ In 2015, Thabit spoke of further moves to “unify arms [of his faction and Hamas] against the enemy [Israel].”⁸⁵ By 2020, operating primarily in Gaza, the group had undertaken joint operations with the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP).⁸⁶

By 2013, other elements of al-Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigade were thanking Lebanese Hezbollah and Iran for supplies of “weapons and equipment,” adding that the “main supporters for the Palestinian resistance” were Bashar al-Assad’s Syria, Hezbollah, and Iran.⁸⁷ In 2015, Gazan sections of the al-Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigade openly asked Iran for money on television.⁸⁸ One subgroup of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade—the Martyr Nidal Amoudi Brigade (Liwa al-Shahid Nidal al-Amoudi)—demonstrated its links to Iran by featuring Iranian weaponry, particularly with the Iranian-made AM-50 .50 caliber anti-material rifle.⁸⁹

Additionally, al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade’s Gaza factions actively and increasingly participated in operations with Hamas, PIJ, and other Iranian-backed organizations. In the West Bank, the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades as a whole was increasingly seen as a stalking horse for Iran. In 2023, an unnamed Palestinian Authority security source told *The Jerusalem Post* that the group was being paid by Iran via PIJ.⁹⁰

By October 7, factions that emerged from the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, including Jaysh al-Asifa and Liwa al-Shahid Nidal al-Amoudi, ceased posting regular updates on platforms such as Telegram. In fact, Liwa al-Shahid Nidal al-Amoudi stopped posting on October 5.⁹¹ Instead, pages generically belonging to the al-Aqsa

Martyrs Brigade placed these groups back under the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade moniker and claimed responsibility for attacks launched by them on October 7. These included the videotaped kidnapping of an Israeli citizen,⁹² small arms attacks on Israeli civilian structures,⁹³ the capture and destruction of Israeli civilian and military vehicles,⁹⁴ and one member of the group stomping on a dead body (presumably an Israeli).⁹⁵

Harakat al-Mujahideen

While many elements of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades maintained their outwardly Fatah-affiliated branding, other elements within Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades grew into separate organizations with their own branding and structure. A case in point is the Harakat al-Mujahideen (Holy Warrior Movement), a Palestinian fighting group that participated in the October 7 attacks. The group released a video of “leadership inspecting [the group’s] forces” inside an Israeli village⁹⁶ and of beheaded Israeli troops at the Fajah military base near Gaza in an October 8 video release.⁹⁷

Harakat al-Mujahideen’s founder, Umar Atiya Abu Shari’ah, was also one of the founders of the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade in Gaza.⁹⁸ Beginning in 2000, during the so-called Second or al-Aqsa Intifada, the precursor networks based along the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade’s began to coalesce under Shari’ah’s leadership.⁹⁹ While elements of the Harakat al-Mujahideen have been established in the West Bank, its main powerbase has been in Gaza.¹⁰⁰ In 2021, Asa’ad Abu Shari’ah, the group’s secretary general, stated there was “requirement for national unity” that would “bring together all of the leaders of [the Palestinian armed] factions.”¹⁰¹ After thanking God for the group’s development, he thanked “the Islamic Republic of Iran and Lebanese Hizballah as the main supporters of the Palestinian resistance,”¹⁰² demonstrating the group’s pro-Tehran orientation.

Other Fatah Splinters

The Popular Resistance Committees

Harakat al-Mujahideen were not the only splinter from Fatah to grow into a new organization. Another group that grew out of Fatah was the Popular Resistance Committees (PRC). The group claimed it worked with Hamas and other Palestinian groups in carrying out the October 7 attack “killing or capturing a large number of Zionist soldiers and settlers.”¹⁰³ On the day of the attack, the group also posted images of captured Israeli equipment, IDs and credit cards belonging to an Israeli soldier.¹⁰⁴

The PRC’s leader, Jamal Abu Samhadana, earlier in his militant career had gained a reputation for being a popular Fatah military leader in the Rafah area of Gaza. But despite his deep familial and personal links with Fatah, he claimed to be deeply influenced by PIJ founder Fathi Al-Shaqaqi.¹⁰⁵ According to the Hezbollah-linked al-Mayadeen news outlet, by 1995, Samhadana was secretly working with PIJ and Hamas’ early armed formations.¹⁰⁶ From 2000-2004, working closely with Hamas, Samhadana founded and developed the Popular Resistance Committees (PRC). Samhadana claimed to be inspired by the success of Lebanese Hezbollah in southern Lebanon and the resulting Israeli pullout from the area in May

h While the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade subunit could not be identified, the kidnapper’s headband included, “Liwa” or brigade. This may point to a link to Liwa al-Shahid Nidhal al-Amoudi.

2000.¹⁰⁷ The group adopted new tactics with small arms, rockets, and improvised explosive devices.¹⁰⁸ In 2005, the PRC went so far as to gun down Yasir Arafat's cousin Musa Arafat, a Gaza-based advisor to Mahmoud Abbas, and kidnapped his son.¹⁰⁹ One Fatah representative told AFP the attack was "a very powerful blow to the [Palestinian] Authority."¹¹⁰

It has been claimed that the PRC introduced RPG-7 type grenade launchers into the Gaza Strip.¹¹¹ In 2006, the former head of Israel's Shin Bet said Samhadana was a "criminal and a hired killer by the Hamas."¹¹² The PRC also worked with other Palestinian factions (particularly Hamas), resulting in the PRC, Hamas, and Jaysh al-Islam (the Army of Islam) orchestrating the June 2006 capture of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit.¹¹³ The operation would later result in Lebanese Hezbollah launching its own kidnapping operation that would trigger the 2006 Hezbollah-Israel War.¹¹⁴

By 2021, the PRC openly lauded its direct links to Iran, commemorating the late IRGC-QF commander Qassem Soleimani's aid to the group in what would become known as the May 2021 Battle of the Sword of Jerusalem (Sayf al-Quds). The PRC's military spokesman noted, "there was outside support [for the group and during the fighting], most notably the support of Hajj Qasim Suleimani."¹¹⁵ Lebanese Hezbollah's Al-Manar news outlet noted the spokesman emphasized "the Palestinian resistance relies on the Islamic Republic and Lebanese Hizballah ... They are the largest and only supporters over the past decade for Gaza and the resistance."¹¹⁶

Harakat al-Ahrar al-Falastinia

Another Fatah splinter group is Harakat al-Ahrar al-Falastinia (the Palestinian Freedom Movement), which was founded in Gaza in 2007 by Khaled Abu Hilal, a former Fatah leader. The group, which is also known as Fatah al-Yasir (Yasir Arafat's Fatah), began as a more Islamist-focused oppositional element to Fatah¹¹⁷ with Hilal building close links to Hamas and PIJ.¹¹⁸ In a 2007 interview with *The New York Times*, he claimed that what he had created was "pure Fatah, Fatah before Oslo," a reference to the 1993 Oslo Accords. He also railed against Fatah's corruption and said he was pushing for stronger links with Hamas.¹¹⁹ By the time Hilal founded Harakat al-Ahrar al-Falastinia, he had already built up significant support among Gazan members of al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade who had issues with Fatah leadership at the time. In 2006, some 800 of the group's members had pledged their allegiance to Hilal and voiced their approval for Hamas.¹²⁰

In 2011, Hilal voiced his support for Iran and pushed for further cooperation with the Islamic Republic due to its support for the "right of Palestinian resistance."¹²¹ In 2016, when Iran promised \$30,000 for Palestinians whose homes were destroyed and \$7,000 to the family of every "martyr," the Palestinian Authority voiced its disapproval of these funds, considering them "interference."¹²² Hilal responded to the PA by stating that accepting the Iranian money was as "a duty for the [Palestinian] nation and not interference."¹²³

Harakat al-Ahrar al-Falastinia's military section, Kata'ib al-Ansar (the Brigade of the Supporters), also stepped up their activities with combined operations with Hamas and PIJ, in addition to their own attacks against Israeli targets.¹²⁴ In May 2021, Khaled Abu Hilal resigned as secretary general of the Palestinian Freedom Movement and joined Hamas.¹²⁵ It is not clear if Harakat al-Ahrar al-Falastinia played a role in the October 7 attack. Its last post on its website was on October 3, 2023.¹²⁶ The group did

"Iran's recruitment of Fatah's assets demonstrates that the elements of the Palestinian Authority are duplicitous, not in control of their own forces, or a mixture of both."

celebrate the October 7 attacks, however. It also claimed the deaths of movement leaders as a result of Israeli airstrikes on October 9¹²⁷ and another "martyr" following an Israeli strike on Khan Younis in Gaza on October 12.¹²⁸

Iran's recruitment of Fatah's assets demonstrates that the elements of the Palestinian Authority are duplicitous, not in control of their own forces, or a mixture of both. This recruitment owed much to particular commanders' need for a benefactor for their groups. Iran and its proxies also provided many of these factions with media assistance. The geographic isolation of Gaza, separated from other Palestinians in the West Bank, along with Hamas' and PIJ's dominance in Gaza served as a further exploitable elements for Tehran.¹ Iran's cultivation of splinters from Fatah and its provision of funding and weapons to these groups not only strengthened PIJ's and Hamas' positions in Gaza and the West Bank, but also provided the Iranians with more armed proxies for its shadow war against Israel and supplied Tehran's Palestinian allies with a further domestic pressure point against Fatah. As has been outlined, many of the Iranian-sponsored splinter sections of Fatah participated in the October 7 attacks, with elements of the al-Aqsa Martyr's Brigade claiming it had launched rockets and sent fighters into Israel, possibly taking Israeli hostages.¹²⁹ Their participation served as a force multiplier for Hamas and PIJ.

Part Four: Iran's Outreach to Leftist Palestinian Groups

Due to the political threat Communism posed to the power of Iran's Islamic Revolution, and its atheism, there is little doubt regarding Ayatollah Khomeini's hatred of Marxism. From 1982-1983, Khomeini sought to arrest and execute communist opponents in Iran's leftist Tudeh Party.¹³⁰ In his 1989 letter to Soviet premier Mikhail Gorbachev, the Supreme Leader noted, "it is clear to everyone that Communism should henceforth be sought in world museums of political history."¹³¹

However, the Islamic Republic has acted far more pragmatically vis-à-vis leftist Palestinian groups, pulling them from history's dustbin and reestablishing them as viable proxies. The collapse of the Soviet Union combined with the onset of the 1993 Oslo Accords marked a dire time for Palestinian leftist organizations. Left without their communist benefactors, suffering from a sense of ideological failure and decades of combat and intra-political losses due to factional infighting, and held back by an aging leadership apparatus, many of these groups faced the stark choice of (re) joining Arafat's PLO and later the Palestinian Authority, attempting

i It is important to note that in 2015, Jaysh al-Asifa's head noted that it was "not easy for the fighters of Fatah to carry weapons in the Gaza Strip after the Hamas movement took over." See Amar Abu Shebaab, "Qa'id jaysh al-'asifa li 'raya': tawhid miqatli fatah lays 'asira w al-'alaqa mah al-qassam taybeh," *Raya*, April 20, 2014.

to maintain some level of militancy with an extremely diminished capability to execute any attacks, or merely fading into obscurity. Iran's attempts to acquire the loyalty of leftist groups stemmed from these weaknesses.

Regardless of the clear baseline ideological differences, there are commonalities between the Palestinian leftist groups and Iran's *modus operandi*. Many of the numerous Palestinian "Popular Front"-style Marxist factions that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s were no shrinking violets when it came to violent actions and terrorist attacks. One of the earliest and most powerful organizations of the period, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) were pioneers when it came to hijacking civilian airliners and supplied fighters that countered numerous U.S. allies and moderate Arab states.¹³²

The tactics and strategy of many Palestinian leftist groups were often in line with the notion that violence was the only way to achieve a Palestinian state.¹³³ This meshed well with the violent 'Islamic Resistance' ideology Iran pushed for its Shi'a Islamist proxies such as Lebanese Hezbollah.¹³⁴ As more violent behaviors became commonplace to the Palestinian arena, there were more hardline groups from which Iran could recruit. Moreover, politically speaking, many leftist groups either vehemently opposed the 1993 Oslo Accords or maintained ambiguous stances on them. Iran and its proxies stood in opposition to the process, creating alignment on the issue. Speaking to *Egypt Today* in 2017, Abu Ahmed Fouad, the Damascus-based deputy director of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), stated, "The [Popular] Front [for the Liberation of Palestine] is a triangle of strength opposing the political approach represented by the powerful leadership of the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Palestinian Authority."¹³⁵ The PFLP was seen by Iran as a means to influence Palestinian affairs and as a potential counter to Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hamas.¹³⁶ The PFLP and its military section, Kata'ib al-Shahid Abu Ali Mustafa (The Martyr Abu Ali Mustafa Brigades), which advanced into Israel during the October 7 attacks¹³⁷ was and is the strongest Palestinian leftist group courted by Iran.¹³⁸ However, it is also important to understand the nuance of Iranian proxy-building among smaller and more overlooked leftist organizations, many of which emerged from the PFLP. This article focuses significant attention on them.

The PFLP-GC: Iran's First Leftist Proxy

In more recent years, the late IRGC-QF commander Qassem Soleimani has been given credit by Palestinian leftist groups for the Iranian embrace of ideologically diffuse Palestinian factions. In a 2021 interview with Hezbollah's official *Al-Ahed* magazine, PFLP deputy director Abu Ahmed Fouad stated that "the martyr Soleimani totally removed issues of bias when he stated, 'We will put aside any ideological differences and share one goal, resistance to

remove the cancerous entity [Israel]."¹³⁹ Soleimani was building on Iranian attempts to make progress with Palestinian leftist groups.

Iran's first attempt to pull a Palestinian leftist group under its wing concerned the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC). Formed in 1968 by Ahmed Jibril after a split with the PFLP, the group became well known for its numerous advanced terrorist attacks.¹⁴⁰ Jibril ruled the PFLP-GC with an iron fist until his death in 2021; splinters from his group were often killed in retribution for disloyalty.¹⁴¹ At the time, the PFLP-GC favored violent action and looked down on more intellectually focused endeavors, such as writing papers on leftist theory, that were swirling around many leftist Palestinian groups.¹⁴² This led the organization to pull off some audacious terrorist and guerrilla attacks in the 1970s and 1980s. In 1987, one of these attacks involved the use of two motorized hang gliders and resulted in the deaths of six Israeli soldiers. It likely served as a form of inspiration for the use of motorized hang gliders and paragliders by Hamas on October 7, 2023. In fact, on October 10, the pro-Hezbollah al-Mayadeen published an article commemorating the PFLP-GC attack.¹⁴³ The use of these recreational vehicles as weapons was also adopted by elite units of the IRGC, which, for example, displayed their use in 2019.¹⁴⁴

The PFLP-GC maintained close links to Syrian leader Hafez al-Assad and later his son Bashar al-Assad, and acted as a proxy for Syria throughout the 1970s and 1980s, particularly during intra-Palestinian fighting.¹⁴⁵ Adam Dolnik has noted that "the group's relationship with Syria was a key factor why Jibril never achieved the level of prominence that one might expect based on his military excellence and a touch for spectacular attacks."¹⁴⁶ The group's violence against fellow Palestinian groups and willingness to bend to accommodate to the will of Syria led some Palestinian critics to brand Ahmed Jibril and the PFLP-GC as having embraced "revolutionary nihilism."¹⁴⁷

Beginning in the 1990s, through Lebanese Hezbollah, Iran increased its contacts with the PFLP-GC. According to Gary Gambill, "a few hundred PFLP-GC guerrillas were permitted to operate against Israel in conjunction with Hezbollah throughout the 1990s."¹⁴⁸ Gambill has noted that the group lacked functional command and control structures in Lebanon and was reliant on performing operations with Lebanese Hezbollah.¹⁴⁹ Starting in 2000, the PFLP-GC began to attempt arms smuggling operations to Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Gaza.¹⁵⁰

In the 1990s and 2000s, several factors gave Iran opportunities to gain more influence among Palestinian leftist groups. One was Syria's deepening links with Iran during the 1990s and 2000s. A second factor was Damascus' dominance over the PFLP-GC and other "Popular Front" groups. A third factor was the ability of Damascus to grant Palestinian leftist groups staging areas in Syria and in the then Syrian-occupied Lebanon. Fourthly, groups such as the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), PFLP, and PFLP-GC all have their headquarters in Damascus. Writing in 1997, Harold Cubert, a chronicler of the PFLP, noted that "with its headquarters located in Damascus, and its very existence currently dependent upon Syria's goodwill, the PFLP is in no position to carry out its strategy against Israel and the West, unless its host allows it."¹⁵¹ As Iranian influence in Syria has grown since 2013 due to propping up the Assad regime, the DFLP, PFLP, and PFLP-GC have undoubtedly had to increasingly answer to and work with Tehran.¹⁵²

In the case of the PFLP-GC, their powerbase was limited to a

j It should be noted that the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), a violent splinter from the PFLP, was considered more moderate than its other "Popular Front" cohorts. In the 1970s, when most groups adopted the "Rejectionist" approach to achieve the full destruction of the State of Israel, the DFLP posited that a unilateral declaration of a Palestinian state on any amount of "liberated land" (through armed conflict or negotiations) was a preferable option. For the DFLP, this territory could serve as a springboard for the future "liberation of Palestine." See Muhammad Y. Muslih, "Moderates and Rejectionists within the Palestine Liberation Organization," *Middle East Journal* 30:2 (1976), pp. 127-128.

“As Iranian influence in Syria has grown since 2013 due to propping up the Assad regime, the DFLP, PFLP, and PFLP-GC have undoubtedly had to increasingly answer to and work with Tehran.”

series of Palestinian camps primarily in Syria and to a lesser extent in Lebanon. In Lebanon, the heavy influence of Hezbollah allowed for further Iranian influence over the group. In Syria, the PFLP-GC has continued to act as a loyal servant of the Assad regime, acting as a proxy for both Assad and Iran against Syrian Sunni jihadi, rebel, and oppositional Palestinian groups.¹⁵³ During the Syrian War, the PFLP-GC's loyalty to Assad was deep and its violent acts against fellow Palestinians became so numerous that sections of the PFLP-GC based outside Syria and Lebanon actively opposed Jibril and his group. A former member of the group's Gaza politburo told *Al-Monitor* that the PFLP-GC had performed a “deplorable and completely unacceptable act” when the organization shelled the Palestinian neighborhood of Yarmouk south of Damascus in 2012.¹⁵⁴ Nevertheless, the PFLP-GC maintained its pro-Assad positions. And despite its unpopularity in Palestinian circles, Iran maintained its links to the group. Iran even utilized a nucleus of members from the PFLP-GC to create another pro-Assad militia group in Syria, *Liwa al-Quds*.¹⁵⁵

Named after Ahmed Jibril's son, Muhammad Jihad Jibril, who was killed in a 2002 car bombing, *Kata'ib Shahid Jihad Jibril* (The Martyr Jihad Jibril Brigades) became a new militant wing for the PFLP-GC in the West Bank and Gaza.¹⁵⁶ *Kata'ib Shahid Jihad Jibril* subsequently claimed small arms attacks, including a 2004 shooting attack against Israelis near Hebron¹⁵⁷ and one in 2005 against Israeli troops in Nabulus.¹⁵⁸ Yet, these attacks were minor and representative of a group with little reach.

Kata'ib Shahid Jihad Jibril remained obscure, but by 2018 and particularly in Gaza, it was showing off new capabilities. Despite the PFLP-GC's actions against other Palestinians in Syria and limited influence in Palestinian areas outside Lebanon and Syria, it appeared the group had not only gained new young members, but also more advanced weaponry. In November 2018, its members were photographed with a MANPADS.¹⁵⁹ During the October 7 “al-Aqsa Flood” attacks, in which it claimed it participated, *Kata'ib Shahid Jihad Jibril* claimed the loss of two members.¹⁶⁰ Given its overt links to Bashar al-Assad's Syria, without some form of Iranian backing and Hamas and PIJ allowing it to grow, it is highly doubtful the group could have been able to produce these results organically, particularly in Gaza.^k

The PFLP-GC was an obvious group for Tehran to utilize in

Gaza. The Assad regime already had a high degree of control over the group, facilitating Iranian influence.¹⁶¹ In Lebanon, the PFLP-GC had to get acquiescence from Lebanese Hezbollah in order to pull off any military attacks against Israel.¹⁶² The group's diehard membership, history of supporting and working with Lebanese Hezbollah, and hardcore militarism made it an attractive partner to Iran.

The DFLP: Tehran's Other Popular Front

Originally founded as the Popular Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine in 1969, the DFLP resulted from a split from its fellow leftist group the PFLP. Led by Jordanian-Palestinian Christian Nayef Hawatmeh, the small group earned an early reputation for a strong communist intellectual base.¹⁶³ According to Jillian Becker, the DFLP had “especially close ties with the Soviet Union.”¹⁶⁴ The DFLP often acted as a go-between for radical leftist groups and the Fatah-dominated PLO. The group carried out a number of deadly attacks, including the 1974 Ma'alot Massacre in which over 20 school children were killed.¹⁶⁵ However, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, negotiations between the PLO and Israel, and eventually with Yasir Arafat's signing of the 1993 Oslo Accords, the DFLP ran into hard times.

Due to increasing PLO negotiations with Israel and then the Oslo Accords, an internal split led by Yasir Abd Rabo (Abu Bashar) took more of the DFLP's followers away from Hawatmeh's camp.¹⁶⁶ In 1993, the DFLP rejected the Oslo Accords and wavered in its support for PLO chairman Yasir Arafat.¹⁶⁷ By the late 1990s, the DFLP was floundering. It continued some violent attacks through the 2000s, but they were piecemeal, hardly comparable to successful terrorist attacks launched by Palestinian rivals, and unrepresentative of the group's capabilities during its height in the 1970s.¹⁶⁸

However, by the 2010s, the group was in increasing contact with Iran and its proxies. In 2011, the DFLP's 11th congress was held in Beirut and included a speech by Lebanese Hezbollah parliamentarian Nawaf al-Musawi.¹⁶⁹ During al-Musawi's speech, it was reported that he “stressed the need for the Palestinian factions to overcome their political differences, so that they could be [better] able to confront the Israeli aggression.”¹⁷⁰ Meetings, events, and other forms of coordination with Lebanese Hezbollah persisted. In 2013, Lebanese Hezbollah utilized the DFLP to assist in distributing food to Palestinian refugees displaced from fighting in Syria. This particular initiative backfired. Given many of the refugees had just seen their neighborhoods destroyed by pro-Assad forces, they burned the food in protest against the gesture from Lebanese Hezbollah.¹⁷¹

In 2012, the DFLP attempted to maintain a position similar to that of PIJ regarding the fighting in Syria. In conjunction with Fatah and the small *Jabhat al-Nidal al-Sha'abi al-Falastini* [Palestinian Popular Struggle Front], the DFLP pushed for neutrality for Palestinians living in Syria.¹⁷² While there were no reports of the DFLP taking part in fighting on either side of the Syrian War, the group did maintain a relatively pro-Assad stance. In 2021, Nayef Hawatmeh even offered his congratulations to Bashar al-Assad when he was re-elected to his position as president.¹⁷³ Meetings between the DFLP and Lebanese Hezbollah also continued well into 2023, with a DFLP delegation congratulating Lebanese Hezbollah in July of that year for its “July victory,” a reference to the 2006 Hezbollah-Israel War, saying it was part of the “path to

k The PFLP-GC had already suffered splits inside the Palestinian Territories due to issues some members had with its actions during the Syrian Civil War. In fact, in Syria, the PFLP-GC suffered a split that resulted in some fighters forming the short-lived Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-Free Command. See “27 2 Damascus Ugarit dimashq, i'alan tashkil al-jebha al-sha'abia al-tahrir falastin al-qa'ida al-hurr al-mishaqa 'an jebha ahmed Jibril,” *Ugarit News*, YouTube, February 27, 2013.

Palestinian victory and liberation.¹⁷⁴

The most dynamic portion of DFLP-Iranian cooperation took place in the Gaza Strip. Established in 2000, the DFLP's armed section known as Kata'ib al-Muqawama al-Wataniyah – Quwat al-Shahid Umar al-Qasim (The National Resistance Brigades – Martyr Umar al-Qasim Forces), or KMW, has offered one of the clearest examples of Iranian influence within the DFLP. Initially formed around cellular structures in the West Bank and Gaza,¹⁷⁵ with Iranian assistance, the KMW was reformed into a more cohesive armed structure and slightly rebranded with a more modern facade.¹⁷⁶

By 2019, the DFLP's KMW was sporting new capabilities in Gaza. In one parade, the group demonstrated it had access to MANPADS, possibly of Iranian origin.¹ In 2021, the DFLP posted photos of the group's fighters using the Iranian-made AM-50 .50 caliber anti-material rifle.¹⁷⁷ KMW also likely received assistance from Iran related to its media profile, launching a Telegram channel in 2019 for more advanced media propaganda. Signs of Iranian influence could even be spotted in the type of music used in propaganda videos.^{178 m} From 2019-2022, the group claimed more armed activity, particularly via the use of mortars and rocket munitions.¹⁷⁹ These activities would also include other Iranian proxies. In May 2022, the group claimed a joint operation that included the PIJ and al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade in Gaza.¹⁸⁰

Moreover, the DFLP publicized its role of maintaining loyalty to the Iranians. The January 3, 2020, death of IRGC-QF commander Qassem Soleimani was memorialized on their social media. The group posited that Soleimani's death would “only increase our determination to follow the same path of [that] martyr commander.”¹⁸¹ Around two weeks later, the DFLP posted material that sent slightly more subtle signs of loyalty to Tehran. During a January 2020 ceremony to honor a freed Palestinian prisoner, Alaa Abu Jazar, the event was replete with DFLP members posing with weapons in front of “martyrdom” posters devoted to members of Harakat Sabireen.¹⁸²

It was the military rather than political wings of Palestinian leftist groups such as DFLP that received makeovers and increased support. From access to newer small arms to heavier weapons and new alliances with more powerful groups in Gaza, the DFLP's KMW displayed them with gusto. Nevertheless, the DFLP's political wing, particularly via social media, did not receive the same attention from Iran, appearing to still use old messaging techniques and lacking the flashy imagery, uniforms, and attention allotted to KMW.

Part Five: Tehran's Strategy of Crafting Unity and Coherence Through Umbrella Groups and Joint Operations Rooms

Umbrella groups and joint operations rooms have been a regular feature within the Palestinian arena for decades and were regularly crafted by various Palestinian actors.ⁿ In fact, the PLO itself operated as an umbrella group. Some had shorter lifespans than others. In more recent times, umbrella groups containing outfits part of Iran's Palestinian proxy network in Gaza, point to some level of Iranian influence and direction. Iran has regularly demonstrated a desire to craft umbrellas for its proxies to organize ideologically and religiously different groups it exerts various levels of control over.

Not all umbrella type groupings and organizations crafted by Tehran are equal, but the end effect of them tends to be demonstration of Iranian management, control, and better armed organization for the groups included within them. The patronage supplied by Iran and its more loyal proxies have stood as a symbol to other groups that it would not only be in their interest to fight under Iranian direction, but that this would offer a better prospect of political and military success.

Before discussing Iran's use of umbrellas in the Palestinian context, it is useful to discuss Tehran's previous use of this strategy in other locations. In 1997, Lebanese Hezbollah created the Lebanese Resistance Brigades (Saraya al-Muqawama al-Lubnaniya), a non-sectarian militia auxiliary to Lebanese Hezbollah's main Shi`a-staffed forces. Its purpose also extended to becoming a middleman between Lebanese Hezbollah and by extension Iran, and other anti-Israel armed groups in Lebanon. According to Chris Zambelis, the group would “forge operational ties with non-Islamist militias that subscribe to a host of different ideologies but nevertheless act under the rubric of resistance. This includes militants that promulgate secular, nationalist, socialist, and leftist ideologies.”¹⁸³

While the Lebanese Resistance Brigades was not necessarily an umbrella group itself, it allowed Hezbollah to craft informalized umbrella structures with groups that held their own ideologies and levels of autonomy. As a partial result of these networking advances, in May 2008, when Lebanese Hezbollah's telecom network was threatened with closure by Lebanese authorities, primarily from parties opposed to Hezbollah, Hezbollah not only mobilized sectarian allies such as Harakat Amal, but also secular groups such as the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP). These groups then stormed into Beirut.¹⁸⁴ In 2013, units from the SSNP coordinated with and fought alongside Lebanese Hezbollah and Iraqi Shi`a militias in Syria. The relationship deepened to such a degree that the secular SSNP adopted the sectarian rhetoric of Lebanese Hezbollah.¹⁸⁵

In Iraq, the Popular Mobilization Forces (al-Hashd al-Sha'abi) serves as another example for Iranian umbrella network construction. According to one former al-Hashd al-Sha'abi commander, Iran's thinking was that tensions between different groups could be controlled, defused, and utilized by Iran with the “correct loyal men” leading the organization.¹⁸⁶ Since the 2014 formation of al-Hashd al-Sha'abi in Iraq, it has been

l The MANPADS in the photo appears to be an SA-7 Strela-type system. If Iranian, it is likely a Misagh-type MANPADS. KMW's official Telegram channel, Telegram, December 13, 2019.

m The background instrumental music is a song called “Ya Wa'ad Allah” by Lebanese Hezbollah band Firqat al-Fajr and was released after the 2006 Hezbollah-Israel War. Different versions (including instrumental styles) have been used by various Iranian supported groups. See “Ya Wa3d Allah ... New Version YA-Lubnan.com,” Daily Motion, 2008. In Bahrain, the song was used by Iranian-backed Bahraini militants and another version was made for Iraq's Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq. See Phillip Smyth, “Singing Hizballah's Tune In Manama: Why Are Bahrain's Militants Using the Music of Iran's Proxies?” Hizballah Cavalcade, Jihadology, May 5, 2014.

n One example is the 2021 “Joint Operations Room.” See Adnan Abu Amar, “Ghurfa al-'amliat al-mushtarkat lilmuqawama fi gaza nuwat li 'jaysh al-tahrir,” Al Jazeera, May 28, 2021.

overwhelmingly dominated by Iranian-backed Shi'a militia groups and commanders.¹⁸⁷ Yet, Hashd al-Sha'abi also included members that were loyal to factions that clashed with Iranian interests and ideology.¹⁸⁸ o

As already noted, extremely loyal groups to Iran, such as the Badr Organization, make up the largest contingent of al-Hashd al-Sha'abi's forces. Many commanders of al-Hashd al-Sha'abi arose from the ranks of another loyal Iranian proxy group, Kata'ib Hezbollah.¹⁸⁹ Over time, some Hashd al-Sha'abi groups were dropped by the Iranians over issues ranging from loyalty, potential unacceptable levels of criminality, or because they had openly opposed Iran.¹⁹⁰ The Hashd al-Sha'abi promoted pro-Iranian messaging and heavily promoted factions more loyal to Iran.¹⁹¹ This demonstrated Iran's influence over various Shi'a militias and its ability to build a core of effective partners within different factions.

Turning to the Palestinian context, in the hopes of crafting various Fatah-splinter, leftist, and Islamist groups into a more loyal, militarily cohesive, and politically responsive network, it was in Iran's interest to form new umbrellas for its ideologically heterodox web of Palestinian proxies. One early example includes the Ten Resistance Organization, created in 1991 at the Iranian-run World Conference in Support of the Islamic Revolution in Palestine.¹⁹² Hamas and leftist Palestinian groups created the umbrella group as a protest against negotiations between Israel and the PLO.¹⁹³

In September 2023, Hamas and PIJ also started a joint operations room in Beirut. According to the official Iranian Islamic Republic News Agency, Iran's foreign minister praised the group and "underlined the need for unity among all the Palestinian groups."¹⁹⁴

Another joint operations room, which was functional by 2021, primarily included Lebanese Hezbollah and Hamas.¹⁹⁵ This joint operations room utilized Lebanese Hezbollah as a coordinator between Iran, other Iranian proxies in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, and the Palestinian groups.¹⁹⁶ Ibrahim al-Amin, a writer with the pro-Hezbollah Al-Akhbar, told Hezbollah's Al-Manar that in 2021 Beirut-based joint operations room included Palestinian factions other than Hamas, utilized Hezbollah to smuggle Hamas field operatives in Gaza to Beirut, and that IRGC-QF commander Ismail Qaani made two visits to the group's offices during the two weeks of fighting between Palestinian forces in Gaza and the West Bank in May of that year.¹⁹⁷

Iran's main Palestinian umbrella project grew wings in Gaza and the West Bank has been the Joint Operation Room for the Palestinian Factions of Resistance (al-Ghurfa al-Mushtrakat li-Fasa'il al-Muqawama al-Falastinia, or JOR). Initially, the JOR began as a partnership between Hamas and PIJ in 2006.¹⁹⁸ Ten other armed organizations including Islamist Fatah splinters and leftist groups were added to the umbrella JOR grouping between

January 2017 and July 2018.^p In November 2018, Yahya al-Sinwar, Hamas' Gaza lead and prominent military commander, referred to the JOR as a body that would form the "nucleus of the army of liberation."¹⁹⁹ By December 2018, the PFLP, particularly through its Abu Ali al-Mustafa Brigades, also began deferring to the JOR for how it would execute armed decision-making.²⁰⁰ The JOR reared its head in a more militant fashion with rocket attacks against Israeli targets in November 2018²⁰¹ and a round of rocket attacks from Gaza in 2019.²⁰² New marketing material, including iconography, propaganda, and promotional material, was also displayed by the JOR starting in 2020.²⁰³

All of the groups involved with the JOR had high levels of Iranian backing and were ostensibly marketed as a more unified force. "With the strength of God, we fight together and [will] win together," a December 2020 communique by JOR read.²⁰⁴ In December 2020, JOR announced a new series of armed exercises "to enhance cooperation and joint actions ... [to] permanently and continuously raise their combat readiness."²⁰⁵ JOR posted highly polished propaganda surrounding the exercises that included launching rockets, simulating taking an IDF hostage from a tank, raiding small structures, deploying what was likely an Iranian-made Misagh MANPADS, and using an Iranian-made AM 50.²⁰⁶ In other videos from the drill, combat divers simulated raiding coastal targets and JOR fighters interdicted mock Israeli seaborne forces.²⁰⁷ All of these tactics were later utilized in the October 7 attacks. Citing Hamas, the analyst Joe Truzman noted the training operation was "the first of its kind and is an effort to ready Palestinian militant groups against a potential military conflict against Israel."²⁰⁸ Much of the propaganda and statements produced for the JOR followed models that utilized filming, graphics, and even text used by Iran that had also been used for other regional Iranian proxies.²⁰⁹ q

Following the May 2023 clashes involving the JOR and Israel, IRGC-QF commander Ismail Qaani singled out the JOR with special greetings to the umbrella group, adding that their operations "proved once again that by relying on almighty God, firm determination, and wise management, [these forces were] capable of breaking the enemy's power."²¹⁰ In a form mirroring earlier unveilings of newly minted Iranian proxies,^r Iranian and other proxy/proxy-supporting publications granted the JOR regular coverage and high praise.²¹¹ Yet, by September 2023, a month before the so-called Al-Aqsa Flood operations, the JOR

o A number of these groups later broke off. Muqtada al-Sadr's Saraya al-Salam began operating with the Iraqi Ministry of Defense, and many factions loyal to Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani formed their own network in 2020. See Suadad al-Salhy, "Iran and Najaf struggle for control over Hashd al-Shaabi after Muhandis's killing," Middle East Eye, February 16, 2020.

p Hamas' Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades; PIJ's al-Quds Brigades; the PFLP's Martyr Abu Ali al-Mustafa Brigades; the DFPLP's KMW; the PFLP-GC's Martyr Jihad Jibril Brigades; the Palestinian Freedom Movement's Brigade of the Supporters; the Popular Resistance Committee's Nasir Salah al-Din Brigades; the Palestine Mujahideen Movement's Mujahideen Brigade; Fatah-splinter/Al-Aqsa Martyr's Brigade's Groups of the Martyr Ayman Jawda; The Martyr Nidal Amoudi Brigade; Martyr Abd al-Qader al-Husayni Brigades; and Storm Army.

q Similar markers can be seen with videos produced for the Iranian-backed Iraqi front group Saraya Thawrat al-Ashreen al-Thania. See Saraya Thawrat al-Ashreen al-Thania official Telegram Channel, Telegram, July 5, 2020. JOR statements also match a model used by the Iranian-backed Bahraini group Saraya al-Mukhtar: JOR official Telegram channel, Telegram, May 10, 2021, and Saraya al-Mukhtar Official Telegram Channel, Telegram, February 20, 2017. At times, even the same fonts were utilized in these posts.

r When Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and Kata'ib Hezbollah's first videos of attacks on U.S. forces were released from 2005-2007, Lebanese Hezbollah's Al-Manar was often the first to run them or run them as exclusives. Author observation. See also "Iraqi shia resistance:asaeb ahlu alhaq," archive.org, April 11, 2008.

seemed to cease activity. No posts emerged from its Telegram, and coverage withered. It is possible this was for reasons of operational security or for other reasons relating to the impending October 7 attack. Almost all the constituent groups of the JOR assisted in the attacks from Gaza into Israel in October and did so in a mutually supportive manner.^s It remains to be seen whether the JOR will be revived in the coming months.

Conclusion

It is possible that Iran was surprised by the catastrophic success of the October 7 attacks. Tehran may not have expected the attacks to have dealt as deadly a blow to Israel as they did. However, there is little doubt that Iran's financial aid, structuring of its proxies into more cohesive armed factions and then into umbrella organizations, and assistance through the supply of weapons increased the deadliness and extremism of its Palestinian proxies. It is also quite clear that without Iranian assistance and nurturing, these groups would not have been in a position to strike Israel, as they did on October 7 with as much success as they showed.

Armed capabilities supplied by Iran, such as a variety of UAV designs, rockets, demolition charges, and other munitions, were smuggled into Gaza and used to deadly effect in the October 7 attack in which Israeli vehicles, buildings, civilian houses, and observation posts were all targeted.²¹² Iranian assistance allowed its Palestinian proxies to amass the firepower, messaging know-how, and much of the hi-tech equipment necessary to carry out and propagandize the attack. Financial aid provided by Iran did more than keep Hamas operating as a governing body in Gaza; it was also directly piped into Hamas' terror and military apparatus.²¹³

Training provided to Hamas fighters and the other proxies also honed their abilities to execute the October 7 attacks. As PFLP-GC secretary general Talal Naji told Iran's al-Alam in August 2021, "Sometimes the training took place in the Islamic Republic of Iran, sometimes in Syria, and sometimes in Lebanon with the brothers in Hezbollah who are waging jihad." While it is currently unknown how Hamas or fighters from other groups traveled to Iran, Lebanon, and Syria, it can be assumed to be via the wide network of Gaza's smuggling tunnels,²¹⁴ by sea,⁴ or from flights Gazans could take originating outside of Israel.²¹⁵

Naji also stressed that "as you know, we are an axis, an axis of resistance. [IRGC-QF commander Qassem Soleimani] used to supervise himself," adding that Iranian-supplied weapons, such as the Russian-made laser-guided Kornet anti-tank missile, strengthened their capabilities.²¹⁶^u

Iran allows for a level of autonomy among its proxies, but as

this article has outlined, Tehran has moved to punish insufficiently obedient groups, allowing them to wither on the vine, or has engineered splinters to weaken them or pressure them into line.

Hamas' takeover of Gaza served as the means for Iran to absorb splintered factions of Fatah into its orbit. Even if those factions could not be fully controlled, creating a reliance on Iran's weapons, money, and other forms of political support facilitated their reformation into Iran's umbrella. By cultivating ties with militant factions with differences with Abbas' Fatah, Iran was able to recruit manpower to its "Axis of Resistance" and create a pressure point within Fatah. Furthermore, the continued presence of Fatah splinter fighters in Gaza has given Iran leverage to ensure the obedience of Hamas and PIJ. Small and less popular groups such as the PFLP, PFLP-GC, and DFLP were cultivated by Iran as part of a larger umbrella of Tehran-aligned groups, but likely simultaneously served other roles, including countering the Palestinian Authority and if necessary to put pressure on Hamas and PIJ.

As the Israeli offensive continues in Gaza, it is possible some armed Palestinian groups may be forced to shift their center of gravity to Lebanon. This would expose them to even deeper Iranian influence. On December 4, 2023, Hamas' Lebanon section released a statement calling for the creation and recruitment for the Vanguard of the al-Aqsa Flood (Taliyah Tufan al-Aqsa), a group focused on "resisting [Israeli] occupation."²¹⁷ Given any armed activities by Hamas in Lebanon would have to be coordinated with Lebanese Hezbollah, these activities would also be subject to a degree of control by the Iranian decision makers that exert influence over Hezbollah. As previously seen with the PFLP, DFLP, and PFLP-GC, groups dependent on using Lebanon or Syria as staging areas have only become more beholden to their masters in Damascus or Tehran.

Even if Hamas and PIJ are militarily defeated in Gaza in the months ahead, Iran would still have many options to work with in both Gaza and the West Bank. As Eurasia Group's Ian Bremmer stated in an October 31 piece, "The war is radicalizing far more Palestinians than Hamas propaganda ever could."²¹⁸ Iran will likely attempt to rebuild its network in Gaza from newly radicalized Palestinians, including among leftist actors, Islamists, and smaller factions they can more strongly control.

In this scenario, it should be expected that Iran will also continue to splinter off groups from Fatah/the Palestinian Authority. On November 5, a mysterious group claiming to represent members within the Palestinian Authority-affiliated security services emerged. Called the Sons of Abu Jandal, the group demanded that Mahmoud Abbas and the PA security forces engage in violence against Israel or revolt against Abbas.²¹⁹ While no link to Iran has yet been established and the group has since gone quiet, it is these types of splinters that have been exploited by Tehran in the past.

In the months ahead, it is likely that Iran will continue to use the carrots (e.g., funding) and sticks (e.g., fostering splinter groups) in order to maintain and deepen control over its Palestinian "Axis of Resistance." As Israel's military campaign in Gaza puts these groups under increasing pressure, Iran's leverage will only grow. Given Iran has aimed to provide support to a wide range of new and well-established groups, particularly those with more violent dispositions, the radicalizing effect of the war on Palestinians provides fertile terrain for Tehran. **CTC**

s While it is unclear whether Harakat al-Ahrar al-Falastinia participated and which specific Gaza-based factions of al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade were involved, all of the other elements of the JOR have claimed roles in the October 7, 2023, attack. (See Figure 1.)

t In one 2013 case, smugglers brought in a dismantled Hyundai Sonata from Egypt into Gaza. "Hamas polices seas as tunnel smuggling suffers," Reuters, November 11, 2013.

u The missiles were also used on the first day of the current Gaza war. See Seth J. Frantzman, "Overwhelmed: The IDF's first hours fighting the terror waves on Oct 7," *Jerusalem Post*, October 16, 2023. Hamas has since claimed the use of the weapon against Israeli soldiers. See Iran Observer, "Hamas released a footage of the Kornet missile hitting the Israeli APC . . .," X, October 28, 2023.

Appendix: Iran-Backed Palestinian Organizations



Color Key

Green: Main Islamist organizations (2)

Gray: Leftist groups (3)

Yellow: Islamist Fatah splinters (7)

Light Green: PIJ splinter/Shi'a Islamist (1)

Main/Political Group	Military Section/Sub-Organization	Details	Ideological/Political Background	JOR Affiliate	Oct. 7 Participant
 Hamas	 The Martyr Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades (Kata'ib al-Shahid Izz al-Din al-Qassam)	In the 1990s and early 2000s, Hamas was active in planning and orchestrating suicide bombings. Hamas is the largest faction in Gaza and currently leads the area's governing apparatus. The group promotes Muslim Brotherhood style Islamism.	Mainstream Islamist	✓	✓
 Palestinian Islamic Jihad (Harakat al-Jihad al-Islamiyyah fi Falastine or PIJ)	 The Quds Brigade (Saraya al-Quds)	With close links to Khomeinist ideology, PIJ has primarily focused on violent activities in the Palestinian territories and Israel. In the 1990s-2000s, the group carried out dozens of suicide bombings. PIJ is the second largest faction in Gaza after Hamas, in terms of size and weapons supplies.	Mainstream Islamist	✓	✓
 Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (or PFLP)	 The Martyr Abu Ali Mustafa Brigades (Kata'ib al-Shahid Abu Ali Mustafa)	The leftist PFLP group pioneered airline hijacking attacks in the 1970s. Despite occasionally working with the Palestinian Authority, the Marxist group has often rejected peace negotiations with Israel and has continued its militancy.	Leftist	✓	✓
 Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine - General Command (or PFLP GC)	 The Martyr Ahmed Jibril Brigades (Kata'ib al-Shahid Ahmed Jibril)	Primarily based in Syria and Lebanon, the leftist PFLP-GC's heyday was in the 1970s-80s. It often engaged in fratricidal conflicts with other Palestinian groups in that period. It is a close ally and proxy of the Assad regime in Damascus with a more limited presence in the Palestinian territories.	Leftist	✓	✓
 Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (or DFPLP)	 The National Resistance Brigades - Forces of the Martyr Umar al-Qasim (Kata'ib al-Muqawama al-Watania - Quwwat al-Shahid Umar al-Qasim)	Splitting from the PFLP, the DFPLP is a smaller Marxist group with a presence in Gaza and the West Bank. The DFPLP has had a mixed relationship with the Palestinian Authority and has often worked against it.	Leftist	✓	✓
 The Popular Resistance Committees (Lijan al-Muqawama al-Sha'abiyah or PRC)	 The Nasir Salah al-Din Brigades (Alawia al-Nasir Salah al-din)	Formed out of a splinter from the Gaza-based sections of the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade. The PRC has been involved in major operations including the 2005 assassination of Palestinian Authority advisor Musa Arafat and the 2006 kidnapping of Gilad Shalit.	Islamist Fatah Splinter	✓	✓
 Palestinian Freedom Movement (Harakat al-Ahrar al-Falastinia)	 Brigade of the Supporters (Kata'ib al-Ansar)	A splinter from the Fatah Movement, the Palestinian Freedom Movement is primarily based in Gaza and was formed out of pro-Hamas Islamist militant elements of Fatah and the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade linked to Khaled Abu Hilal.	Islamist Fatah Splinter	✓	Unclear
 al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade (Kata'ib Shuhada al-Aqsa)	 Storm Forces/Army (Quwwat Jaysh al-Asifa)	An element that emerged into the public in the 2010s from the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade in Gaza. Despite claiming to be representative of Fatah, the Storm Forces were officially cast as splinters by the Fatah Movement.	Islamist Fatah Splinter	✓	Unclear/Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade Did Participate
 al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade (Kata'ib Shuhada al-Aqsa)	 Martyr Abd al-Qader al-Husayni Brigades (Kata'ib al-Shahid Abd al-Qader al-Husayni)	One of the factions of the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade with ties to Iran. The group operates in the West Bank, but its primary area of operations has been in Gaza.	Islamist Fatah Splinter	✓	Unclear/Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade Did Participate
 al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade (Kata'ib Shuhada al-Aqsa)	 The Martyr Nidal Amoudi Brigades (Kata'ib/Liwa al-Shahid Nidhal al-Amoudi)	With a presence in the West Bank and Gaza, this section of the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade trumpets its links to Fatah, despite the 2007 PA Presidential Decree to disarm all militia groups. In 2021, the group called on the Palestinian Authority security services to target Israeli forces.	Islamist Fatah Splinter	✓	Unclear/Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade Did Participate
 al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade (Kata'ib Shuhada al-Aqsa)	 Groups of the Martyr Ayman Jawda (Majmat al-Shahid Ayman Jawda)	An element of the Gaza-based al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades. In 2005, the group vowed to continue suicide bombings in Israel. It has maintained close links to Hamas and PIJ.	Islamist Fatah Splinter	✓	Unclear/Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade Did Participate
 Holy Warrior Movement (Harakat al-Mujahideen)	 The Holy Warrior Brigades (Kata'ib al-Mujahideen)	Officially founded in 2006 from splinter elements from Fatah and the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade. The group filmed its members with the beheaded bodies of Israeli soldiers on October 7, 2023.	Islamist Fatah Splinter	✓	✓
 The Movement of the Patient (Harakat Sabireen)		Splintered from PIJ in 2014-2015, the Gaza-based Shi'a Islamist group caused ire for Hamas and PIJ. It received increased funding from Iran, just as PIJ and Hamas lost their Iranian funding. The Movement launched small rocket attacks against Israeli targets and was generally repressed by Hamas.	PIJ Splinter/Shi'a Islamist		

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The Future of Terrorist Use of Improvised Explosive Devices: Getting in Front of an Evolving Threat

By Austin C. Doctor and Sam Hunter

Because of their outsized impact—as well as the wide availability of device components—violent extremists in the United States consider improvised explosive devices a valuable part of their arsenal. They are easy to make, difficult to combat, and cause significant harm and disruption. Yet this threat is not static. Violent extremists continue to innovate, drawing on emerging technologies and creative problem solving. The onus of initiative requires that the counterterrorism mission community looks over the horizon to identify emerging threats. In support of this need, the authors offer a forward-leaning taxonomy of emerging threats related to terrorist use of IEDs in the United States and outline its key implications for policy, practice, and applied study.

On April 15, 2013, two improvised explosive devices (IEDs) were placed roughly 200 yards apart on Boylston Street in Boston, Massachusetts, and detonated near the final stretch of the Boston Marathon.¹ The joint explosions killed three people—eight-year-old Martin Richard, 23-year-old Lu Lingzi, and 29-year-old Krystle Campbell—and injured more than 250 others.²

Investigators concluded that the attackers were motivated by extremist beliefs, though “not connected to any known terrorist groups.”³ The perpetrators responsible for the attack, 26-year-old Tamerlan Tsarnaev and 19-year-old Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, had learned how to construct the explosive devices from a popular article published in *Inspire* magazine, an English-language online publication produced by al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula.⁴ The improvised devices used in the attack were two six-quart pressure cookers packed with low explosives, ball bearings, nails, and other metal used as shrapnel.⁵ The explosions most likely came from up to 20 pounds of powder from fireworks and/or similar pyrotechnic materials.⁶ The attackers detonated each bomb remotely by sending a signal to a receiver on each device, which used power from battery packs to light Christmas tree bulbs that had the glass covers removed.⁷ These sparked and ignited the IEDs’ contained explosives.⁸ According to one report, the devices may have cost as little as \$100 to build.⁹

Improvised explosive devices are easy to make, difficult to combat, and cause significant harm and disruption. Militant IED attacks have caused countless civilian and troop casualties in conflict zones abroad. Likewise, they are responsible for considerable death, destruction, and panic within the United States. Major ongoing conflicts, such as the war in Ukraine and the recent surge of hostilities in Israel and Gaza, can serve as highly publicized testbeds for novel means of IED development and employment.

Because of their outsized impact—as well as the wide availability of device components—violent extremists continue to consider IEDs a valuable part of their arsenal.

Yet, the expected persistence of a threat should not be mistaken for rote repetition. The terrorist IED threat is not static. Violent extremists continue to innovate, drawing on emerging technologies and creative problem solving. In response, law enforcement, military, and intelligence practitioners devise new preventative and interdiction methods. Terrorists respond by finding novel ways to conduct successful attacks. The cycle repeats itself. As a result, despite billions of dollars invested in the counter-IED mission over the past 20 years, yesterday’s solutions are at risk of being poorly suited to tomorrow’s threats.

The onus of initiative requires that practitioners and applied researchers look over the horizon to identify emerging threats. In support of this need, the authors offer a forward-leaning taxonomy of emerging threats related to terrorist use of IEDs in the United States and consider its implications. The article proceeds as follows. First, the authors provide a framework with which to conceptualize and classify IEDs and IED-related incidents. Next, they briefly

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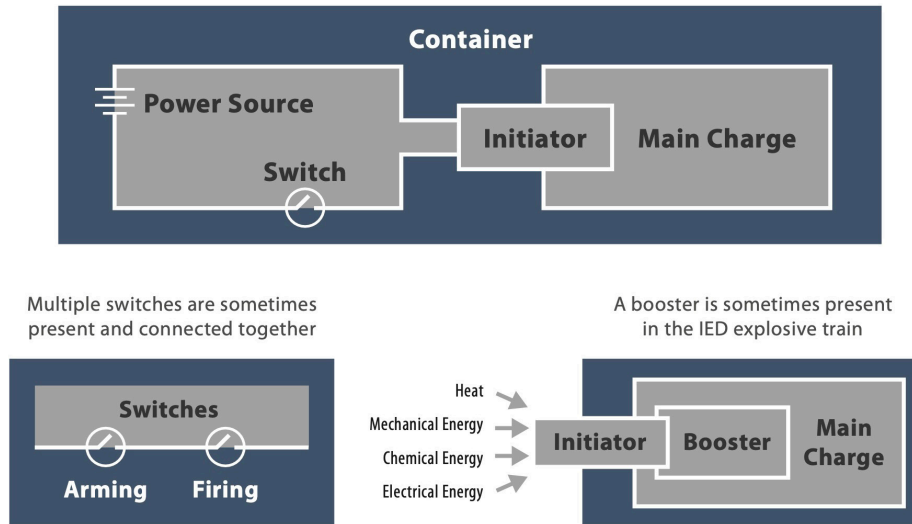


Figure 1: The five components common to modern improvised explosive devices (Source: “Improvised Explosives Device Lexicon,” United Nations Mine Action Service, July 1, 2016)

analyze recent global trends in terrorist use of explosives. Third, they identify key emerging threats related to the threat actors, methods, and targets connected to IED-related incidents in the United States. Finally, the article concludes with a discussion on the implications that these emerging threats may hold for the counter-IED mission community, supporting research efforts, and U.S. national and homeland security.

A Rapid-Fire IED Taxonomy

Although IEDs are not new, the term “improvised explosive device” only emerged as recently as the 1970s. It has since been tethered to a wide array of definitions and taxonomies. These occasionally differ regarding the nature of device components, the source of a device’s “improvised” nature, and the intended use by whomever is conducting an attack. The lack of consistency is driven partially by the fact that practitioners and academics both heavily contributed to this debate with limited communication across disciplines and with distinct purposes behind them.

Most academic definitions contain a broader selection of inclusionary characteristics, encapsulating the development process, ingredient types, desired effect from usage, and types of adversaries that may or may not use this method of attack. Prioritizing inclusivity and practicality as guiding principles, Paul Gill and his colleagues synthesize nearly 30 different definitions to offer the following conceptualization:

An explosive device is considered an IED when any or all of the following — explosive ingredient, initiation, triggering or detonation mechanism, delivery system — is modified in any respect from its original expressed or intended function. An IED’s components may incorporate any or all of military grade munitions, commercial explosives or homemade explosives. The components and device design may vary in sophistication from simple to complex and IEDs can be used by a variety of both state and non-state actors. Non-state actors can include (but not be limited to) terrorists, insurgents, drug traffickers, criminals and nuisance pranksters.¹⁰

Practitioners face a similar issue. IED taxonomies can vary considerably across different elements of the counter-IED mission

community (e.g., military Explosive Ordnance Disposal technicians, intelligence community analysts, local bomb squad units, and federal law enforcement officers). The lack of a standardized and universally adopted framework—the systematic description of key device components—can inhibit the data collection, information sharing, and synchronized implementation needed to mitigate current and future IED-related threats.

While IEDs are inherently bespoke, most modern devices feature five basic component types: (1) a switch, (2) an initiator, (3) a main charge, (4) a power source, and (5) a container. Figure 1, taken from the United Nations Mine Action Service, summarizes this IED technical categorization framework.¹¹

Some IEDs also make use of enhancements, which terrorists add to a device to increase its physical or psychological effects. Common enhancements include shrapnel (e.g., nails, screws, or ball bearings) and fuel (e.g., propane or other gas). Terrorists could create “dirty bombs” by adding chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear (CBRN) agents.¹² In 2014, the Islamic State successfully enhanced an unknown number of IEDs delivered via aerial and land vehicles, as well as roadside victim operated IEDs, with chlorine and mustard gas.¹³ Reportedly, the Islamic State had access to university laboratories in Mosul and chemical experts to conduct these attacks.¹⁴

A clear, concise conceptualization and taxonomy of IEDs are necessary to identify and characterize emerging threats in this space. Looking ahead, one can expect to see terrorists innovate around IEDs in two general ways: first, in the component composition of the device itself, and second, in the methods by which they plan and conduct IED-based attacks. In the next section, before elaborating on emerging trends in the United States along these dimensions, the authors summarize recent trends in IED-related terrorist activity.

Recent Global and Domestic Trends in Terrorists’ Use of IEDs

The IED threat is, regrettably, alive and well. A recent report by Action on Armed Violence (AOAV) identified a total of 640 incidents worldwide involving IEDs across 33 countries and

territories from January to June 2023.^a These attacks were responsible for a recorded 1,456 civilian casualties, including 450 deaths. Notably, after years of steady decline in IED-based violence, the rates reported for this year thus far portend a possible increase in IED use for the first time since 2018.

It is unsurprising that improvised explosives continue to be one of the most common tools and methods used by terrorists and militant organizations abroad. As tactical instruments, IEDs are capable of wielding outsized, even strategic, effects. The widespread use of IEDs by local insurgent forces in Afghanistan and Iraq against U.S. forces, for example, often compelled deployed troops to restrict themselves to armored vehicles, avoid key travel routes, and advance at a snail's pace through sensitive areas.¹⁵ And with justified cause. By some estimates, at least half of American troop fatalities in Iraq as well as in Afghanistan were caused by IEDs.^{16b} IEDs can quickly level an asymmetric playing field.

Groups and individuals associated with the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida continue to drive much of IED-related activity around the world, accelerated by both organizations' ongoing regional expansion. Notably, al-Qa`ida affiliate al-Shabaab has long relied on IEDs as a critical tool against both civilian and military targets in Somalia.¹⁷ Now an operational trademark of the group, combatants often integrate vehicle borne IEDs (VBIEDs) and/or person borne IEDs (PBIEDs) in multi-stage, complex ground assaults.¹⁸ Al-Shabaab operatives were reportedly responsible for the recent surge of IED-based attacks around key border areas in Kenya, such as Garissa and Lamu counties.¹⁹ Observers have noted a similar, concerning trend by violent extremist forces in the Sahel and West Africa.²⁰

Other global regions are also experiencing sustained or increased IED activity. Militant actors in Afghanistan and Pakistan continue to perpetrate IED attacks at a high tempo. In a June 2023 report, the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan's Human Rights Service reported that 3,774 civilians were seriously injured or killed by conflict actors between August 2021 and May 2023.²¹ Roughly 75 percent of those recorded casualties are attributed to militant use of IEDs in crowded public spaces, including houses of worship, schools, and markets.²² In the immediate aftermath of the Taliban takeover in August 2021, IED attacks by the Islamic State's affiliate in Afghanistan, Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISK), increased significantly, including an uptick in observed suicide PBIEDs attacks.²³ Drawing on an original dataset of extremists charged in U.S. courts for their roles in planning or perpetrating attack plots tied to the Afghanistan-Pakistan region, Andrew Mines found that IEDs have been the most frequent method of attack between 1985 and 2023.²⁴

The IED threat is hardly limited to foreign wars or political

“Groups and individuals associated with the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida continue to drive much of IED-related activity around the world.”

unrest abroad. This issue hits home for many Americans. Of course, there are the devastating and well-documented domestic terrorism incidents, such as the 2013 Boston bombing and the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing. Looking back further into American history, explosives-based attacks emerge as a regular feature of domestic extremist activity: Consider the Weather Underground bombings in the 1970s, the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing of 1963, and the 1920 anarchist bombing of the J.P. Morgan Building on Wall Street, for example.²⁵ Audrey Cronin records a staggering 216 unique bombing incidents between 1867 and 1934 in the United States as political dissidents of various kinds made regular use of newly developed and widely accessible dynamite.²⁶ In short, ideologically motivated actors in America have long used explosives to coerce outgroups or challenge the political status quo. And the threat remains. For example, one day before the January 6 insurrection, a still unidentified individual left two pipe bombs outside the Republican National Committee and Democratic National Committee headquarters on Capitol Hill. The devices did not detonate.²⁷ Even more recently, amid concern that there could be a resurgence in jihadi terrorism in the West because of the war in Gaza, in October 2023 a Jordanian man living in Texas was arrested after allegedly posting online about his support for killing Jews and viewing “specific and detailed content posted by radical organizations on the internet including lessons on how to construct bombs or explosive devices.”²⁸

While there have been relatively few successful terrorist bombings overall, U.S. intelligence and law enforcement efforts have successfully thwarted several local IEDs plots and attacks. In August 2023, for example, authorities arrested a 17-year-old resident of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, alleging “he was preparing to build bombs and select targets after being in touch with an al-Qa`ida affiliate in Syria.”²⁹ The suspect's phone messages and internet history revealed instructions for how to make improvised explosive devices. Additional surveillance found that the teen had purchased materials to make the bombs in the weeks prior to his arrest, including chemicals, wiring, and devices that could be used as detonators.³⁰ In addition, U.S. Customs and Border Protection provided records revealing 14 international shipments of military tactical gear to the teen's home address.³¹ The case is ongoing.

In January 2011, Kevin Harpham, a white supremacist affiliated with the National Alliance, admitted to placing an IED along the route of a Martin Luther King parade in Spokane, Washington.³² The device, a shaped charge, was designed to scatter shrapnel covered with rat poison to keep victims' wounds from coagulating.³³ The IED was discovered less than an hour before the parade started and was subsequently disarmed.³⁴ In February 2020, Demetrius Nathaniel Pitts, a U.S. citizen who had pledged his allegiance to al-Qa`ida, was sentenced for plotting to bomb a July 4th parade in downtown Cleveland in 2018.³⁵ Pitts planned to use both remote-control cars filled with explosives and loaded with metal shrapnel

a Regarding the AOVAV report methodology: Because attribution is not always possible, it is possible that some of the recorded incidents may not reflect activity by armed non-state actors. However, militants are recorded as the most common perpetrators of IED attacks, specifically the Islamic State, al-Shabaab, and the Baloch Liberation Army. See Chiara Torelli, “Explosive Violence Monitor 2022,” Action on Armed Violence, 2023; Iain Overton, “Report on IED Incidents for January-June 2023,” Action on Armed Violence, July 13, 2023.

b An estimated 16,500 IEDs were “detonated or discovered being used against U.S. forces in Afghanistan in 2011” alone. “Counter-Improvised Explosive Devices: Multiple DOD Organizations are Developing Numerous Initiatives,” GAO-12-861R, U.S. Government Accountability Office, August 1, 2012.

and a larger vehicle packed with explosives to “cause maximum damage.”³⁶ The attack was stopped by an FBI employee acting in an undercover capacity.³⁷

In a more recent example, in February 2022, Christopher Cook, Jonathan Frost, and Jackson Sawall pleaded guilty to conspiring to conduct a domestic terror attack—one that presumably, if not foiled, would have involved the use of explosives.³⁸ The men had met on Iron March, a neo-Nazi online forum, and joined forces. Federal prosecutors argued that the group’s intended target for a large-scale attack was the U.S. power grid “to stoke division in furtherance of white supremacist ideology.”³⁹ As part of the conspiracy, each member of the group was reportedly assigned a substation in a different region of the United States.⁴⁰ Their group used an encrypted messaging app to share information with one another about gathering firearms and explosives for use in the attack. And, in an August 2020 search of the defendants’ homes, the FBI found precursor chemicals “which could be used to create an explosive device.”⁴¹ Cook and Frost were sentenced in April 2023.⁴²

It is worth mentioning that the future IED threat in the United States may also stem from conspiracy-based ideologies, some of which may have links to violent extremist beliefs but do not necessarily on their own constitute domestic terrorism. On Christmas Day 2020, a vehicle borne IED exploded in downtown Nashville, Tennessee. The bombing occurred outside of an unmarked communication building and, according to one report, caused extensive communications and power outages, flooding, and a fire within the building.⁴³ Federal law enforcement determined that the action was not related to terrorism, but the investigation team notes that the perpetrator, Anthony Quinn Warner, maintained “long-held individualized beliefs adopted from several eccentric conspiracy theories.”⁴⁴

In summary, despite the relatively slow cadence of successful domestic bombings of late, the authors warn against laxity—the IED threat is not going anywhere. A declassified U.S. military report on improvised methods utilized by Viet Cong forces describes the complexity of observed IED-based attacks as being “only limited by the ingenuity of the man who constructs them.”⁴⁵ More than 50 years later, this is no less true. The near-endless combinations of IED design (i.e., technical categorization) and application (i.e., tactical characterization) continue to present a significant challenge to the counter-IED mission community.

When terrorists and violent extremists innovate, they gain an advantage, even if temporarily, in circumventing existing detection and interdiction methods. Therefore, anticipating the timeline and locus of innovation is essential to maintain a proactive posture in countering terrorist use of explosives. In the next section, the authors describe how the terrorist IED threat is evolving and outline a five-part framework for classifying related emerging threats.

Emerging Threats in Terrorist Use of IEDs in the United States

The authors anticipate a number of emerging threats related to the methods and targets of IED-based plots and attacks in the United States.⁴⁶ Anticipating how terrorists might attack in the future—and why—is central to the design of efforts to protect the security of both individual targets and the nation as a whole. Some of the emerging threats discussed here represent incremental evolutions, indicating areas for targeted adjustment within the existing counter-IED infrastructure.⁴⁷ Others point to potential structural

shifts in the terrorism milieu, requiring deeper thought and potential responsive action around how the interagency counter-IED mission community organizes its future efforts.

The authors identify five overlapping categories that they expect to act as underlying currents propelling the future explosives threat: the threat actor landscape, technical categorization, tactical characterization, malign use of emerging technologies, and the target surface. Each emerging threats category features key indicators or propellants, which will be discussed. Combined, these categories speak to critical questions: *Who* is likely to use IEDs, *how* are they likely to develop and employ IEDs, and *where* will IED attacks be targeted? Importantly, this set of related analytic categories transcends the boundaries exclusive to a single critical mission area—such as prevention, detection, or render safe—and creates an opportunity for cross-cutting insights.

1. The Threat Actor Landscape in the United States

The terrorism milieu in the United States is increasingly fragmented. It is a problem of addition, not substitution. Jihadi terrorism still presents a significant threat to the United States and its partners, especially through homegrown violent extremism (HVE). The simultaneous rising activity of various domestic violent extremists—such as racially and ethnically motivated violent extremists (RMVE) and anti-government/anti-authority violent extremists (AGAAVE)—in the United States has led to a structural shift in the threat actor space. It is ideologically diverse and geographically diffuse. While some foreign terrorist organizations likely maintain a capability and intent of striking the U.S. homeland, the greatest likelihood of an attack in the United States comes from within.^c

Domestic violent extremists and homegrown violent extremists showcase significant range in their ideological agendas, espoused grievances, and general relationship to the status quo. But as a tactical tool, the IED is more ecumenical and will have a catholic appeal across tomorrow’s threat actor ecosystem. Instructions for the construction of IEDs and the call for their use are featured strongly in salafi-jihadi publications, such as Inspire; white supremacist RMVE channels, such as Terrorgram; and anarchist violent extremists’ canon texts, such as The Anarchist Cookbook.⁴⁸ As such, the general use of IEDs or specific TTPs reflected in observed plots and attacks may not necessarily vary meaningfully across this fragmented actor landscape.

However, the fragmentation of the threat actor landscape in the United States—compounded by the simultaneous presence of organized violent extremist groups, decentralized cells, and seemingly “lone actors”—may shape where and why one expects to see explosives used in domestic terrorist attacks.⁴⁹ Some may focus on accelerating “mayhem,” i.e., overthrowing or destabilizing the prevailing political and social order.⁵⁰ Others clearly remain intent on generating mass casualties. For extremists intent on using explosives, their respective ideologies may shape their target

c According to a recent U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) report on domestic terrorism, over the past decade, RMVE actors have been responsible for a 357 percent increase in domestic terrorism-related cases, accounting for many of the most violent incidents from 2010 to 2021. See “The Rising Threat of Domestic Terrorism in the U.S. and Federal Efforts to Combat It,” U.S. GAO, March 2, 2023, as well as Don Rassler, *The Compound Era of U.S. Counterterrorism* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center; Tampa: Joint Special Operations University, August 2023).



New York City police officers clear the scene after a report of a possible suspicious package was called in at the Time Warner Center on October 25, 2018, in New York. (Craig Ruttle/AP Photo)

selection.⁵¹ For example, drawing on federal court documents from 2016 to 2022, one report finds evidence that salafi-jihadi and white supremacist attack planners have largely targeted different U.S. critical infrastructure sectors, with “the former focusing on the commercial facilities, government facilities, and emergency services sectors, and the latter predominantly focusing on the energy sector.”⁵² This suggests distinct underlying logics—corresponding with different ideological foundations and related objectives—behind the use of IEDs by violent extremists in the United States.

As a result, rather than one target profile in IED attacks, there will likely be multiple. Different types of targets (e.g., public crowded spaces, the power grid, etc.) will likely carry unique symbolic or practical value for different sorts of U.S.-based violent extremists.⁵³ Of particular concern is the rising number of threats, plots, and attacks against U.S. public officials and elected representatives. This trend has been mostly driven by anti-government anti-authority violent extremists, though not exclusively.⁵⁴ Many such incidents in the future may involve IEDs, an instrument firmly rooted in the history of political assassinations. In August 2023, for example, James Clark pleaded guilty to sending a bomb threat to an election official in the Arizona Secretary of State’s office. Clarke warned the official that she needed to “resign by Tuesday February 16th by 9 am or the explosive device impacted in her personal space will be detonated.”⁵⁵ According to federal investigators, the would-be attacker had conducted online searches that included the full name of the election official, instruction on how to kill, the official’s residential address, as well as details on the Boston Marathon bombing.⁵⁶ This presents a fundamentally different challenge than protecting the homeland from another 9/11 type attack. It points to the risk of normalization of political violence and an erosion of

civic norms – all propelled by the increasingly diverse set of violent extremists present in the United States.⁵⁷

2. IED Technical Categorization

Terrorists have ample opportunity to innovate in the design and manufacture of IEDs through its various components. A focus on patterns of IED technical categorization (i.e., a systematic construct of an IED’s components; see Figure 1) can provide useful leverage over emerging trends in terrorist use of explosives. The communication and diffusion of novel inventions, which may originate from terrorist bombmaking camps, basement labs, or benign hobbyist communities, reduce barriers of entry for would-be attackers and increase challenges for interdiction.

When developing an IED, most terrorists in the United States have relied on commercial explosives such as propellants (e.g., black and smokeless powders) and pyrotechnics (e.g., flash powders) as main charges or use readily available precursors chemicals such as peroxides and fuel-oxidizer mixtures (e.g., ammonium nitrate-fuel oil) to manufacture homemade explosives (HMEs).⁵⁸ The use of military explosives (e.g., Semtex) is exceptionally rare in U.S. bombing incidents. In general, the set of common IED main charges has been relatively unchanged over the past 15 years and is

unlikely to shift significantly in the coming years.^d However, current limitations in detecting inorganic species and complex mixtures, such as homemade fuel-oxidizer explosives, across a range of environmental conditions, continues to present challenges and represents part of the still evolving threat.

Another emerging threat stemming from IED technical categorization is presented by a different key device component: the switch. Significant advances in electronics over the past few decades have enabled terrorists to make creative changes to device switches. These advancements matter; how a device is commanded or activated is a critical part of an attack plan that determines where the responsible terrorist(s) may be at the time of the bombing. It affects the set of viable prevention, detection, and defeat options available to the counter-IED mission community. Electronic triggers have evolved from the use of Casio watches to radio transmitters and from garage door openers to mobile phones. Timing chips sell for a few dollars, and small computing chips sell for well under \$100, making such materials inexpensive to acquire. These advancements open the field for command, time, and victim-operated switches, standing to increase the operational range and fidelity of terrorist IED attacks. In particular, the authors observe the emerging potential opportunity for devices controlled or activated via WiFi as well as the potential for increased use of sensor-based switches to facilitate more sophisticated or targeted attacks.

Lastly, it is worth noting that terrorists constantly imagine and adopt new containers both for the confinement of the main charge but also for the purpose of concealment. Metal pipes and pressure cookers are among the most common containers used in U.S. attacks, but creativity abounds. Recent incidents, for example, have seen terrorists in the United States or abroad use handheld radios, printers, synthetic rocks, aluminum drink cans, and other non-descript items as containers.⁵⁹ The sheer scope of possible containers creates Herculean challenges to forecasting—and therefore mitigating—potential trends in their adoption.

3. IED Tactical Characterization

Terrorists continue to show great creativity in the tactical characterization of IED-based attacks (i.e., the way in which an IED incident is planned and conducted). This can be assessed across multiple phases of the terrorist attack sequence, including operational preparation and device employment.

A major contributor to—if not a key enabler of—the evolving IED threat is the sharing and dissemination of malign tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) through online platforms and communication channels, such as YouTube, Facebook, WhatsApp, and microblogs.⁶⁰ For would-be attackers with minimal prior experience or knowledge, the dissemination of best practices and novel solutions lowers barriers of entry to building a functional

IED. It is not only the wide dissemination of articles like “How to Build a Bomb in the Kitchen of Your Mom.”⁶¹ It is also dissemination of TTPs at scale through online micro-engagements enabled by increased user technological savvy and an ever-widening range of platform options. This risk was specifically reinforced in the 2023 Europol Terrorism Situation and Trend Report, which assessed that “terrorists and violent extremists remain apt in evading restrictive measures and monitoring related to explosive precursors in the EU. For instance, a pro-IS group released a document on a cloud-based instant messaging platform, suggesting the use of alternative precursors for HMEs.”⁶² Further compounding this threat, the advents of the metaverse and Web3 offer further opportunities through obscured website launch, file-hosting services, and discrete communication for evasion of present content moderation and monitoring efforts.⁶³ This, paired with the exploitation of readily available off-the-shelf technologies, means that violent extremists are able to both develop and employ IEDs with a relatively small investment and higher degree of reliability.⁶⁴

Employment—the means by which IEDs are delivered to a target—is a major component of an IED attack tactical design. One of the highest tempo evolutions in the IED threat area is found in the potential for delivery of explosives via unmanned systems (UxS).⁶⁵ This threat is still evolving.⁶⁶ Unmanned vehicles can range from a toy-radio-controlled boat or car to a quadcopter aerial drone to an autonomous ground- or surface-based vehicle. Thus far, the greatest attention has been given to unmanned aerial systems. In November 2012, Rezwan Ferdaus was sentenced for plotting an attack in support of al-Qa`ida on the Pentagon and the U.S. Capitol using a model aircraft filled with C-4 plastic explosives.⁶⁷ As reported by FBI investigators involved in the case, the would-be attacker was the mastermind behind the operational plan: “Mr. Ferdaus’ sentence reflects that he alone conceived the plot, was responsible for his illegal acts, and acted purposefully.”⁶⁸ To be sure, this plot was dependent on the supply of explosive materials by an FBI undercover employee, suggestive of some control over this threat incident.⁶⁹ However, the highly publicized spike in the use of armed unmanned aerial vehicles in Syria and Iraq by the Islamic State, and possibly the ongoing central role of small UAS in the Ukrainian resistance, may inspire a greater frequency of similar attempts by terrorists in the United States.⁷⁰ In February 2022, FBI Director Christopher Wray reported to the U.S. Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee that the FBI was “investigating, even as we speak, several instances within the U.S. of attempts to weaponize drones with homemade IEDs. That is the future that is here now.”⁷¹

In January 2023, a graduate student in the United Kingdom was arrested for building a drone to deliver a bomb on behalf of the Islamic State.⁷² The student had filled out an Islamic State application form. During the arrest, authorities seized several devices. A 3D printer was also found at the property.⁷³ The case is ongoing, but it indicates that the tactics developed and honed in conflict zones abroad may be adopted by like-minded persons living in otherwise peaceful environments. Compounded by the concurrent advancement of other emerging technologies, terrorist use of unmanned systems is an evolving threat that will continue to present a host of novel challenges to current security infrastructure and protocols.⁷⁴

d In 1998, the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) National Research Council issued its *Containing the Threat from Illegal Bombings* report. In 2018, NAS published *Reducing the Threat of IED Attacks by Restricting Access to Chemical Explosive Precursors*. Comparison of these reports and additional data published by the U.S. Bomb Data Center confirms that the set of precursor materials assessed most likely to present a threat remained relatively unchanged over that 20-year period. Explosive materials follow a similar trend: The use of pyrotechnics and fireworks continue to lead explosive instances in the United States by a sizable margin.

“Earlier this year, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security identified rising threats to critical infrastructure as a leading national risk.”

4. Malign Use of Emerging Technologies

Serving as a force multiplying function to a number of the threats identified above, the malign use of emerging technologies provides feasible means of novel IED design and employment. Of notable concern is that such emerging technologies are rarely military systems, but rather commercial off-the-shelf. As these become more affordable, more reliable, and widely available, the threat they present will only become greater.⁷⁵

Although hardly exhaustive, the authors offer a handful of emerging technologies that carry notable implications for the future IED threat. The growing knowledge and use of microcontrollers (e.g., Arduino Uno) and single-board computers (e.g., Raspberry Pi) present a worrying new means of device construction, with disquieting implications for their application.⁷⁶ They provide a low-cost, easy way for novices and experts alike to construct IEDs that interact with motors and sensors that may measure light, temperature, pressure, and other environmental variables.⁷⁷ Adding to this threat, the lawful online activities carried out by communities of hobbyists and in “maker spaces” around these technologies is a growing avenue through which individuals and groups with malign intent may become sufficiently knowledgeable and skilled in their use with relatively little cost or time.

Relatedly, the sustained advancements in infrastructure surrounding the Internet of Things (IoT), including high-speed internet and 5G/6G telecommunication networks, open a new threat vector related to IED-based attacks.^e Extending the logic of a radio-controlled device, a WiFi-connected IED could be controlled through an extensive array of methods, and from a much wider geographic range. As a recent report on IED threats put it: “We are at a stage ... where the ‘internet of things’ offers an endless choice of switches.”⁷⁸ If addition, a device’s integration into the IoT may also support the employment of an IED device through the operation of an autonomous vehicle or unmanned system (UxS).

In another vein, the past year has seen a surge of public use of generative artificial intelligence (AI) through the release of ChatGPT, DALL-E, and other programs built around machine learning-based models. Opportunities for malign use abound. In the realm of IEDs, generative AI may provide new avenues for the development of explosives, the identification of attack targets, operational planning, training, and other key tasks. To be sure, it is

unlikely that generative AI will wash out a dependency on individual expertise, but it will help to level the playing field, reducing the time required for any given individual to develop viable homemade explosives and improvised devices.

Finally, rapid and significant advancements in additive manufacturing (AM) (i.e., the process of creating a three-dimensional object by building up a series of successive layers of material(s) over time) are a key part of the evolving IED threat landscape. Recent efforts, for example, have demonstrated the possibility of using 3-D printing to create elements of energetic materials applicable to high explosives, propellants, and pyrotechnics.⁷⁹ These could presumably be used in device boosters or main charges and, in some cases, help aspiring attackers to circumvent current prevention barriers. Logistically, AM may reduce time sensitivities, provide opportunities for rapid prototyping, and circumvent supply-chain constraints—all in an operationally secure environment. These functions reduce common barriers to developing IEDs. Additive manufacturing also opens a new avenue for crafting IED containers and other key device components in a way that is both low cost and discrete.

5. Expanding Target Surface

The target surface for IED attacks is complex and varied, but the authors observe several trends regarding the targets that may appeal to threat actors in tomorrow’s political environment. This is important as threat assessments, intervention efforts, and preventative security measures will likely differ for different target types, albeit with some overlap. Among these include U.S. critical infrastructure, crowded spaces, and public officials.

Critical infrastructure sites such as power grid substations, transportation systems, and crowded spaces are among the most frequently targeted soft targets for threat actors. Earlier this year, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security identified rising threats to critical infrastructure as a leading national risk. For example, violent extremists are likely to maintain the growing operational focus on the U.S. power grid; neo-Nazi extremists Brandon Russell and Sarah Beth Clendaniel conspired to conduct a series of “sniper attacks” on Maryland electrical substations earlier this year.⁸⁰ In addition to transportation and energy, other national critical infrastructure sectors are also generally seen as attractive targets for extremist attacks, including communications, food and agriculture, and healthcare and public health. These incidents tend to garner mass attention and cause significant harm and disruption, aligning with the doctrine of multiple elements of today’s violent extremist ecosystem. Extremists may use a wide range of TTPs for such attacks, including the use of IEDs.

As expressed in a recent government threat advisory bulletin, the terrorism threat may originate from a wide range of ideologically motivated individuals or groups and could focus on a multitude of soft targets: mass transit areas, arenas, shopping malls, open-area gatherings, houses of worship, and others.⁸¹ Crowded public spaces, including large public venues, present one of the greatest challenges for detection and protection owing to their numerous entrance and egress points, open spaces, and lack of security by design. For terrorists looking to maximize casualties, unrestricted public areas are ‘low-hanging fruit.’

Public officials are also an increasingly frequent target of violent extremist activity. A long-standing tool of assassination, explosives were used in the earliest phases of modern terrorism

e As defined by the U.S. Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, the Internet of Things (IoT) refers to “any object or device that sends and receives data automatically through the Internet. This rapidly expanding set of ‘things’ includes tags (also known as labels or chips that automatically track objects), sensors, and devices that interact with people and share information machine to machine.” See “Securing the Internet of Things (IoT),” Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, February 1, 2021. See also Zakria Qadir, Khoo N. Le, Nasir Saeed, and Hafiz Suliman Munawar, “Towards 6G Internet of Things: Recent advances, use cases, and open challenges,” *ICT Express* 9:3 (2023).

by violent extremist groups such as Narodnaya Volya.⁸² A growing number of plots are targeting U.S. elected officials and federal law enforcement.⁸³ Notably, these threats may come from across the violent ideological spectrum.⁸⁴ In May 2023, Jessica Higginbotham, a former security subcontractor working at the Athens-Clarke County Democratic Party campaign office, pleaded guilty to threatening to bomb their local headquarters while the U.S. Senators from Georgia were in town for campaign events. In August 2018, Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro survived an assassination attempt involving explosive drones.⁸⁵ Based on the open-source information available, it appears that an attack involved two drone-borne IEDs while Maduro was giving a speech in Caracas, celebrating the 81st anniversary of the National Guard.⁸⁶ Given widespread access to commercial-off-the-shelf systems and the rising rate of threats and plots against U.S. public officials, the authors anticipate that similar attempts may be made by ideologically-motivated actors in the United States in the future.

Looking Ahead

IEDs are easy to make, difficult to combat, and cause disproportionate harm and disruption. In 2015, terrorism and insurgency expert David Kilcullen remarked “I sometimes hear people express the hope that the IED threat will diminish as Western forces pull out of Afghanistan. Unfortunately, nothing could be further from the truth—the IED has now entered the standard repertoire of irregular forces in urban areas across the planet, and there are no signs this threat is shrinking; on the contrary, it seems to be growing.”⁸⁷

Over the past decade, there has been a relative increase in violent extremist activity across the United States. Yet, successful bombings have been relatively few. Given the steady cadence of attempted IED attacks, however, motive or intent does not seem to be waning. The authors, therefore, warn against a false sense of security. The fact that intelligence and law enforcement practitioners have thwarted so many of the recent attack plots in the United States may indicate a future risk that terrorists will be oriented toward developing novel means of IED development and employment.^f This would pose new challenges to those responsible for combating terrorist use of explosives.

The U.S. domestic counter-IED mission community is currently organized around five critical mission areas: deterrence, prevention, detection, protection, and response.⁸⁸ These are suitable categories for action, but less useful as analytic concepts. Far too many emerging threats bleed across the missions’ boundaries. Thus, to support proactive assessment and mitigation, the authors have presented a five-part framework for identifying and assessing emerging threats related to the development of IEDs and their employment. They argue that there is value in dissecting key features of this evolving threat, including attention to the threat actor landscape, IED technical categorization, IED tactical characterization, malign use of emerging technologies, and the target surface.

Looking ahead, and thinking about next steps, the authors offer

f For example, some reports suggest that the Islamic State may have responded to new counter-drone measures by designing their systems “in such a way as to reduce their radar signature” including wrapping their drones in tape to avoid detection. See Arthur Holland Michel, “Counter Drone Systems,” Center for the Study of the Drone, December 2019; Austin C. Doctor, “The Militant Drone Threat is No Longer New. Why Does It Still Feel Novel?” Modern War Institute, West Point, February 2, 2022.

three guiding principles for practitioners and academic researchers as they work to proactively identify actionable, sustainable, and durable solutions to the evolving IED threat.

1. Inhibit terrorist access to IED materials. This means reducing malign actors’ acquisition and use of precursor chemicals and known bomb-making materials. This work is already well underway as a critical mission area,^g but the authors’ analysis suggests the need for additional considerations. Based on the set of emerging technologies identified here, for example, law enforcement and first responders should include small UxS, microcontrollers and single board computers, 3-D printing systems, and such components on lists of potential plot-warning indicators. A focus on this goal will also require monitoring the avenues by which terrorists disseminate TTPs, best practices, and general knowledge on the development of HMEs and the construction of IEDs. As discussed, much of this is occurring online. Microblogs and Web3, social media platforms, encrypted message applications, and the emerging metaverse will all be viable points of access for lethal ‘know how.’

2. Disrupt IED facilitation networks and IED plots. In some cases, efforts to restrict terrorist access to precursor and bomb-making materials will be unsuccessful. The next objective should be intercepting potential attackers and disrupting their facilitation networks. This demands a clear understanding of targets at risk, probable locations for sourcing and IED development, tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs), and the actors likely to be behind an attack. In addition to maintaining robust intelligence and law enforcement capabilities, this requires deep knowledge on both established and emerging trends. Given the changing nature of the threat actor landscape and an expanding target surface, the authors see notable value in an updated analysis of the individual- and environment-level precedents of IED adoption and tactical design. More generally, analytic initiatives should be oriented on future, anticipated challenges. Future-focused methodologies such as horizon scanning, predictive scenario-simulation analysis, and/or risk assessment evaluations may be especially useful toward bridging the gap between previous and anticipated manifestations of the IED threat and developing forward-leaning solutions focused on future plots.

3. Enhance interagency and inter-sector coordination. From 2006 to at least 2015, a large part of the counter-IED effort—and connected federal research and development funding—was driven by military needs based on U.S. activity in Afghanistan, Iraq, and other theaters. The Joint IED Defeat Organization (JIEDDO) was a gravitational center of this effort, boasting more than \$18 billion

g For example, the U.S. Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency Office for Bombing Prevention manages the Bomb-Making Materials Awareness Program. See “Counter-IED Resource Guide,” CISA Office for Bombing Prevention, March 2017. For an example of a similar program in the European Union, see “Regulation EU 98/2013 on the marketing and use of explosives precursors,” European Union Migration and Home Affairs, May 24, 2017. The U.K. Home Office requires that “Members of the public who want to import, acquire, possess or use these chemicals must hold an Explosives Precursors and Poisons (EPP) licence issued by the Home Office and an associated photographic identity document.” See “Guidance: Supplying explosives precursors and poisons,” United Kingdom Home Office, August 15, 2023.

in funding over much of that period.^h But these are leaner times. As defense priorities shift from counterterrorism to great power competition and as violent extremist activity increases domestically, “much of the U.S. prevention and counterterrorism workforce will be expected to do more with less as they hold the line.”⁸⁹ Under these circumstances, effective action to counter emerging and evolving IED threats will require clearly identified roles and responsibilities and formal mechanisms of information sharing, coordination, and collaboration across the interagency mission community.

^h The JIEDDO mission has been re-organized but continues. “In March 2015, after considering a range of options, the Deputy Secretary of Defense designated JIEDDO a combat support agency focused on counter-terrorism, counter-insurgency, and other related operational areas, including counter-IED. In April 2015, JIEDDO’s name was changed to JIDA to reflect this expanded mission. In February 2016 DOD renamed JIDA to JIDO and placed it under the authority of the Director, DTRA, effective October 1, 2016.” For more, see “Warfighter Support: DOD Needs Strategic Outcome-Related Goals and Visibility over Its Counter-IED Efforts,” U.S. GAO, GAO-12-280, February 22, 2012.

Moreover, robust partnerships between government practitioners, industry leaders, and academic experts will be constructive toward developing and implementing actionable and evidence-based mitigating strategies.

While this article largely focuses on the potential implications of this evolving threat for U.S. national and homeland security, much of the discussion presented here will also pertain to other countries including across Western Europe, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand as well as certain hostile environments in the Middle East, Central and South Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa.

The desired end state is the safeguarding of local communities, the protection of critical infrastructure, and the minimization of harm in cases of successful IED attacks. Combating future terrorist use of IEDs in the United States and elsewhere necessitates a frank assessment of where the IED threat is heading, where existing security measures are sufficient, and where the current counter-IED architecture may require a remodel to match the changing times. **CTC**

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