



The Pro-Iranian militias in Iraq – the current situation

November 6, 2022

Overview

- ▶ The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 undermined the internal order in the country and brought about, among other things, the establishment of **several pro-Iranian militias affiliated with the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps' Qods Force**. The militias were set up with the purpose of driving the US forces out of Iraq and establishing Iranian involvement in the country. Prominent among the militias are **Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq** ("League of the Righteous"), **Kata'ib Hezbollah** ("Hezbollah Battalions"), **Harakat al-Nujaba** ("the Movement of the Noble Ones"), and **Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada** ("The Master of Martyrs Brigade").¹
- ▶ The militias indeed operated in Iraq over the years against the US-led Global Coalition forces and contributed to the pullout of the forces from Iraq in late 2011. In 2014, they were integrated into the Popular Mobilization Forces (hereinafter: the **PMF**)², which was intended to fight against ISIS, and since then they have become an integral part of the military establishment in Iraq and also integrated into Iraqi politics. The militias continue working to strengthen the Iranian involvement in Iraq and sever Iraq's ties with the United States. They are also part of the Axis of Resistance³, where they also operate outside Iraq, especially in Syria, including the border area with Israel.

¹ For further details, see the ITIC's Information Bulletin from July 14, 2020, "Iran faces growing challenges in Iraq but is determined to further its vital interests."

² An umbrella organization supported by the Iraqi government, combining about 40 militias, the majority of which are pro-Iranian and are also supported by Iran. This umbrella organization also includes a few Sunni, Christian and Yazidi organizations. It was established in 2014 following a call by Ayatollah Ali Sistani, the leading Shiite religious authority in Iraq, who called for the establishment of a popular mobilization force against ISIS following the organization's takeover of large areas of Iraq. In 2018, the organization was recognized by the Iraqi government as an integral part of its security apparatus. In view of the reduced ISIS threat, there were calls in the Iraqi public to disarm the organization. The most prominent opponents were the pro-Iranian militias, who wish to continue to establish their power and act as proxies of Iran in Iraq.

³ An anti-American and anti-Israeli political-military alliance between Iran, the Assad regime in Syria, Iran's proxies (Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthi movement in Yemen, and pro-Iranian militias in Iraq and Syria), Hamas and the Islamic Jihad in Palestine (PIJ) in an attempt to gain legitimacy from the international community. The term originates in the Resistance movement which operated in World War II in France against the Vichy regime and carried out acts of sabotage and violence, at least some of which were considered legitimate.

- ▶ Following the assassination of Qassem Soleimani, the commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps' Qods Force, and Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis, the deputy chief of the PMF and commander of the pro-Iranian militia Kata'ib Hezbollah (Hezbollah Battalions)⁴, on January 3, 2020, in a targeted killing by the US, **there have been changes in the activity of the Iraqi pro-Iranian militias**. These changes included personal changes in the leadership, the establishment of new militias as façades of the existing ones in order to maintain a low profile while carrying out attacks, and the expansion of the militias' involvement in internal Iraqi as well as regional and global issues, such as the struggle against Israel and the United States as part of the Axis of Resistance and the Shiite Crescent⁵.
- ▶ The pro-Iranian militias often carry out attacks against the US forces in Iraq and Syria using rockets and drones **and have issued belligerent statements against the US and Israel. They maintain strong ties with the Lebanese Hezbollah and develop weapons with Iranian guidance, the most prominent of which are drones and rockets**. The presence of the militia fighters, especially in southeastern Syria, near the border with Israel, constitutes a threat to Israel. The weapons they possess, including drones and long-range missiles, may put Israel and the United States in danger even in more distant regions.
- ▶ The militias also pose a threat to Iraqi sovereignty and to Iraq's pluralistic regime and try to turn Iraq into a proxy of Iran.
- ▶ Recently, the militias began to attack Turkish targets in Iraq and threaten Saudi Arabia and the Emirates (due to their support for those fighting against the pro-Iranian Houthi movement), and it was even reported that they had sent military aid to assist Russia in its war against Ukraine, a fact that should alert decision-makers in Western Europe.
- ▶ The current study discusses the situation of the pro-Iranian militias' activity in Iraq and analyzes its possible consequences on the Middle East and other regions around the world.

⁴ In some places, Al-Muhandis appeared as the deputy chief of the PMF and in other places as the chief of the general staff of the PMF since he held both positions. In practice, he was the dominant figure in the PMF and the closest to Qassem Soleimani. At the same time, the PMF has a chairman named Faleh al-Fayad, but his role is representative and not military. See :

<https://twitter.com/hushamalhashimi/status/1230744753387388929>

⁵ A notion used to refer to the expansion of Iran's regional influence since the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, by pro-Iranian Shiite elements from Iran, through Iraq (about 60% of its inhabitants are Shiite), Syria (where members of the Alawite sect, who rule the country, make up about 10% of the population and are recognized through this axis as Shiites), and Lebanon (where Hezbollah, Iran's proxy in Lebanon, is a major power factor). The expansion of Iranian influence (from Iran to Lebanon) is in the shape of a crescent, therefore the notion used for that is the "Shiite Crescent," in addition to the fact that the crescent is an Islamic symbol.

This is the first in a series of documents intended to analyze the militias' activity and its consequences and risks.

The militias' background and changes over the years

- ▶ The pro-Iranian militias in Iraq have a long history, beginning with the establishment of the **Badr Corps** (currently known as the **Badr Organization**) in 1982 (during the Iran-Iraq war), by Iraqi Shiites who opposed the Saddam Hussein regime and felt protected in Iran. Iran, for its part, well understood the inherent potential of using the Shia population in Iraq that opposed Saddam Hussein to export the Khomeinist revolution to Iraq, where the population is mostly Shiite, and to undermine the Iraqi government. It therefore used operatives of the Badr Organization, trained by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, to fight in the Iran-Iraq war, but on the Iranian side, against their own country and their own people.
- ▶ Since the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime, Iranian involvement in Iraq has tremendously increased. Additional pro-Iranian Shiite militias were established, mainly **Jaysh al-Mahdi** ("the Mahdi Army"), led by the Shiite leader Muqtada al-Sadr (who later became an opponent of Iranian involvement in Iraq). In 2006, operatives withdrew from Jaysh al-Mahdi, due to Al-Sadr's decision that year to stop fighting against the US forces in the country, and established, with the Iranian Revolutionary Guards' support, the militias of **Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq** ("League of the Righteous") and **Kata'ib Hezbollah** ("Hezbollah Battalions"), which was established in 2007. These militias continued fighting against the international coalition forces led by the United States in Iraq⁶. From the very beginning, they received Iranian aid that included funding, training, equipment, and weapons⁷.
- ▶ When the civil war in Syria broke out, on March 15, 2011, the Syrian regime needed Iran's assistance in suppressing its opponents, and the Iranian regime came to its rescue, deploying the Revolutionary Guards' Qods Force, Hezbollah fighters from Lebanon, and special Shiite

⁶ Many of these militia fighters, at least in the initial phase, were former operatives of Jaysh Al-Mahdi, the militia of Muqtada al-Sadr, which fought against the United States in 2003-2006. Since Al-Sadr stopped all activity against the US forces and in 2007 even declared a ceasefire in the fighting against them, those opposing this move established the pro-Iranian militias with the Iranian Revolutionary Guards' support.

⁷ For further details, see the ITIC's Information Bulletin from July 14, 2020, "Iran faces growing challenges in Iraq but is determined to further its vital interests."

units from Afghanistan (the Fatemiyoun Brigade) and Pakistan (Zainebiyoun Brigade), units mostly composed of the fighters of the pro-Iranian Iraqi militias (Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade, established in 2012, and Dhu al-Fiqar Brigade, established in 2013), and fighters of other pro-Iranian Iraqi militias, who participated in the fighting in Syria, such as Harakat al-Nujaba (“the Movement of the Noble Ones”), which was established in 2013. At least some of these fighters, among them the fighters of the pro-Iranian Iraqi militias, were integrated into the units of the Syrian army. These are thousands or tens of thousands of fighters, who have fought and are fighting in Syria. The new recruits to the ranks of the units fighting in Syria were told that their mission was to protect the holy places for Shiites in Syria, especially the Tomb of Al-Sayyida Zainab⁸ in the Damascus area. In practice, these units fought against the opponents of the regime in Syria in the various arenas throughout the country, where there are no Shiite holy sites, so they actually fought to stabilize the Assad regime at least to the same extent of protecting the holy places. Militia fighters in Syria are accused by Western sources as well as opposition elements in Syria of being involved in war crimes against Syrian civilians, especially the Abu Al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade, which is composed of Iraqi fighters⁹. They also take part in the demographic change in Syria, when operating to remove the Sunni population and take over neighborhoods and towns¹⁰.

► With ISIS taking over large areas of Iraq in June 2014, Ayatollah Ali Sistani, the senior Shiite cleric in Iraq, called for the establishment of a popular mobilization force (Al-Hashd al-Sha’abi)¹¹ to help the Iraqi army fight against ISIS. The pro-Iranian militias integrated into this force and became the dominant force. They also integrated into the Iraqi security establishment and benefited from funding and logistical assistance from the Iraqi government (especially from 2018, within the framework of the law regulating the PMF activities). This, alongside the financial, military and logistical assistance that they continued

⁸ Al-Sayyida Zainab (also referred to as Al-Set Zainab) was the beloved daughter of Imam Ali bin Taleb, the founder of Shiite Islam and the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad. The tomb serves as a pilgrimage center for Shiites from all over the world.

⁹ For further details, see the ITIC’s Information Bulletin from July 11, 2018, “Hezbollah and Iran-handled Shiite militias are integrated into the Syrian army in its campaign to take control of south Syria”

¹⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=unwOQEzI6ds>

¹¹ The PMF numbers over 60 organizations and their number is estimated at tens of thousands of fighters (60,000 as of 2015 and between 100,000 and 150,000 in 2018). A significant part of these organizations are pro-Iranian militias ideologically and logistically linked to Iran and especially to the Revolutionary Guards’ Qods Force, which is responsible for exporting the Islamic revolution according to Ayatollah Khomeini’s ideology outside the borders of Iran. Apart from the pro-Iranian militias, the PMF also includes Sunni and other tribal forces (including small groups of Christians and Turkmens). See: <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2021/nov/10/profiles-pro-iran-militias-iraq>

to receive from the Revolutionary Guards. Thus, in fact, a body was created in Iraq that assists the Iraqi army in fighting ISIS, but at the same time a central part of it is subordinate to the Revolutionary Guards' Qods Force and forms the basis for Iran's involvement in Iraq's internal affairs¹².

► The pro-Iranian Iraqi militias were involved more than once in attacking the Sunni population in the country and took part in the killing of civilians during the civil protests against the Iraqi government at the end of 2019, in which people protested against Iran's involvement in the country. The violence used by the pro-Iranian militias greatly weakened their position in the Iraqi public not only among the Sunni and Kurdish population but also among the Shiite population. Public outrage was expressed during the riots in the execution of several operatives and commanders of the militias by the demonstrators on account of their attacks against civilians whose only desire was to protest against the conduct of the government and against Iran's involvement in the country. The results of the parliamentary elections in 2021 were further evidence of the poor status of the pro-Iranian militias among the public and their representatives to the parliament were defeated. However, following the withdrawal of the members of parliament from the movement of Muqtada al-Sadr (the Shiite leader who considers himself an Iraqi nationalist and opposes both Iranian and American involvement in Iraq's internal affairs) on June 12, 2022, and the replacement of some of them with members affiliated with the militias, the pro-Iranian militias strengthened their political status and they are also involved in the formation of the new government in Iraq. On October 13, 2022, Abdul Latif Rashid, the elected president of Iraq, tasked **Mohammad Shaya' al-Sudani** (who was the preferred candidate of Iran and its supporting militias for the prime minister of Iraq) to form the new government. Al-Sudani, who formed the new government on October 27, 2022, is pro-Iranian, a former member of Hizb al-Da'wa¹³, and close to Iraq's former Prime Minister, Nouri al-Maliki¹⁴.

¹² The Shiite militias in the PMF can be divided into three groups: those loyal to Iran who have pledged allegiance to Iranian leader Ali Khamenei; those subordinate to the Grand Shia Ayatollah, Ali Sistani; and one militia, Saraya al-Salam, subordinate to the leader of the Sadr movement, Muqtada al-Sadr, who is in disagreement with Iran. Al-Sadr now presents himself as an Iraqi nationalist although in the past, his militia, the Al-Mahdi Army, which he disbanded in August 2007, received aid from the Revolutionary Guards. See <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2021/nov/10/profiles-pro-iran-militias-iraq>

¹³ The Shiite opposition movement during the Saddam Hussein regime.

¹⁴ Al-Arabiya, Al-Hadath, July 26, 2022.



Map of the locations of the pro-Iranian militias in Iraq (updated to September 2022): Kata'ib Hezbollah (red); Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq (purple); Harakat al-Nujaba (green); Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada (orange) (Google Maps)¹⁵



Map of the locations of the pro-Iranian militias in Syria (updated to September 2022): Harakat al-Nujaba (red); Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade (blue); Dhu al-Fiqar Brigade (orange); the Golan Liberation Brigade (green)(Google Maps)¹⁶

Personal changes in the command of the Qods Force and the militias

- ▶ Immediately after the assassination (January 3, 2020) of Qassem Soleimani, the commander of the Revolutionary Guards' Qods Force, and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the PMF chief of the general staff and commander of Kata'ib Hezbollah (the dominant pro-Iranian militia in Iraq which is part of the PMF), their successors were appointed.
- ▶ Esmail Qaani, who served as Soleimani's deputy¹⁷, succeeded him as commander of the Qods Force (the organization that manages, commands, and guides the militias). Albeit a less prominent and charismatic figure than Soleimani was, Qaani continues to establish the

¹⁵ These are the locations that we have found. However, apparently there are much more.

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¹⁷ As to the meaning of the assassination and details about Qaani, see Raz Zimmt, "A Year after the Assassination of Soleimani: Iran Faces Many Challenges, But Determined to Cement its Regional Influence:" <https://www.terrorism-info.org.il>.

militias as an arm of Iran in Iraq and works for Iran’s continued regional expansion through them. He also seems to be promoting the involvement of the militias in Iraq’s internal politics. Since his appointment, Qaani has met several times with the leaders of the pro-Iranian militias in Iraq and in the last year was involved in reconciliation attempts between the representatives of the pro-Iranian militias and Muqtada al-Sadr “for the Shiite House”¹⁸, but without success (Fars, February 9, 2022; Al-Arabiya, January 18, 2022). At the same time, representatives from the militias frequently visit Iran.



Esmail Qaani, Qods Force Commander (Al-Kawthar, January 2, 2022)

- On July 27, 2021, Qaani made a secret visit to Baghdad due to Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa Kadhimi’s visit to the United States and his meeting with US President Joe Biden to discuss the future of the American military presence in Iraq. During the visit, Qaani met with officials in the Iraqi government and the Shiite militias and discussed with them the agreements reached at the Kadhimi-Biden meeting. Qaani’s previous visit to Iraq was apparently held in early April 2021, and it also focused on the strategic dialogue between Iraq and the United States and the ongoing attacks by the pro-Iranian Shiite militias against US forces in Iraq (Kurdish Shafaq News Agency, July 27, 2021).
- Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, as the PMF chief of the general staff (in Arabic: Rais Hayat al-Arkan lil-Hashd al-Shaabi) was succeeded on February 21, 2020, by **Abdul Aziz al-Muhammadawi**¹⁹, **AKA Abu Fadak**, who was among the founders of Kata’ib Hezbollah (“Hezbollah Battalions”) and held many posts in the organization (Asharq al-Awsat, February 22, 2020; BBC in Arabic, February 24, 2020)²⁰. Al-Mohammadawi has been a member of the leadership (Majlis al-Shura) of Kata’ib Hezbollah since 2003 and commanded many operations carried out by the militia.

¹⁸ In view of the split in Shiite society, the expression “for the Shiite house” has become popular in the discourse on the attempts to unite all Shiite elements in Iraq (the liberals, the Sadr faction, and the pro-Iranian faction).

¹⁹ American officials referred to him as Ahmad al-Hamidawi.

²⁰ <https://aawsat.com/english>, <https://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast-51605106>

In the past, he served as the militia's Secretary-General and established its special units (Al-Hurra channel, February 23+26, 2020; ahlalrafidain.online, February 25, 2020).



Right: Qassem Soleimani embracing Al-Muhammadawi (Al-Nujaba Media, January 13, 2022); Left: Al-Muhammadawi and Qais al-Khazali, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq's Secretary-General (Al-Qirtas, January 14, 2022)

► According to a publication by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy from January 11, 2022, Abu Fadak tries to dismantle the militias subordinate to Ayatollah Sistani - the senior cleric in Iraq who opposes Iranian involvement in the country -to strengthen Iran's position in the country.

► In February 2020, **Ahmad Mohsen Faraj al-Hamidawi, AKA Abu Hussein**, was appointed to succeed Abu Ali al-Muhandis as Kata'ib Hezbollah's Secretary-General. His family members are also known to hold senior positions in the militia. In July 2021, the Shura Council appointed Muhammad Hasab al-Majidi as his successor, but Al-Hamidawi refused to step down and continues to serve as the militia's secretary-general (euro-times.com, March 4, 2022; washingtoninstitute.org, March 9, 2022).



Hamidawi's photo, as published on Twitter (@ahm_ks90 Twitter account, February 20, 2022)

► The US State Department designated Al-Muhammadawi (Abu Fadak) and Al-Hamidawi in the list of wanted persons involved in terrorism:

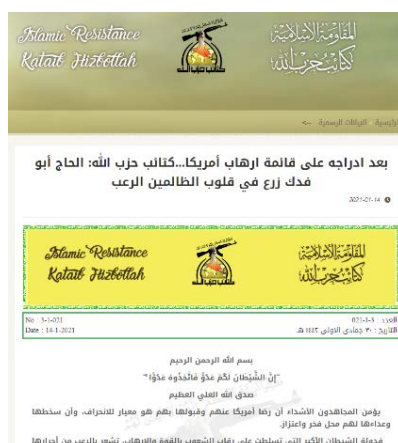
- ◆ On February 26, 2020, Al-Hamidawi was included in the list and designated as an international terrorist due to his involvement in carrying out terrorist attacks against

US forces and innocent Iraqi citizens (in 2009, Kata'ib Hezbollah was declared a terrorist organization) (Al-Hurra, February 26, 2020; US State Department website, February 26, 2020).



Kata'ib Hezbollah's Secretary-General Ahmad al-Hamidawi designated for involvement in terrorism (Al-Hurra, February 26, 2022; US Department of State website, February 26, 2022)

► On September 3, 2020, the US State Department imposed sanctions on Al-Muhammadawi and added his additional names, Abd al-Aziz Malluh Mirjirash, Abu Fadak, and Al-Khal. He was designated as an international terrorist who poses a significant risk to the security of the United States, its foreign policy, and its economy (US State Department website, January 19, 2021). In response, Kata'ib Hezbollah announced that the fact that the “Great Satan” (the United States) imposed sanctions on him indicates the defeat of the United States against the Axis of Resistance and its weakness and that the imposition of sanctions is a sign of respect for him after “Abu Fadak struck fear into the hearts of the enemies.” The organization called Abu Fadak “a symbol of jihad and resistance” (Kata'ib Hezbollah's website, January 14, 2020).

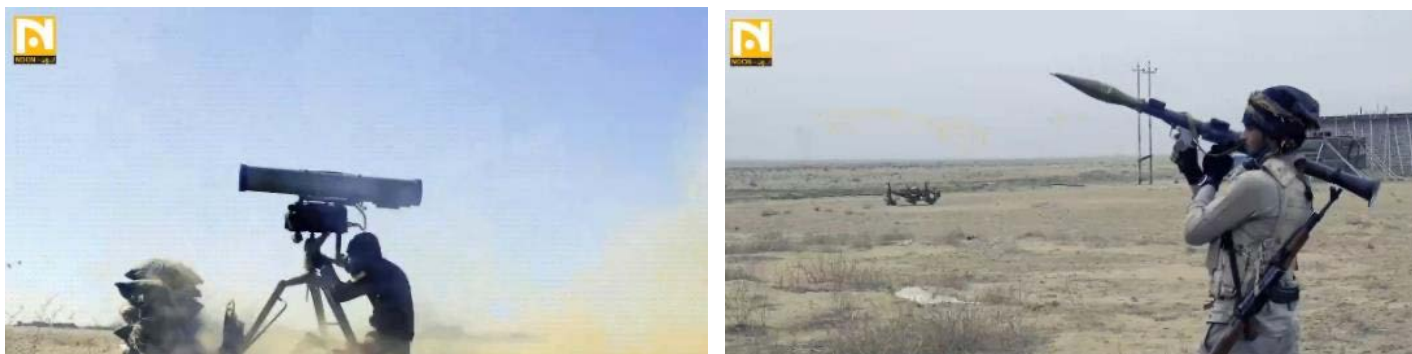


The text of the comment, according to which “Abu Fadak struck fear into the hearts of the enemies” (Kata'ib Hezbollah's website, January 14, 2022)

The militias' weapons

► The pro-Iranian militias are directed by Iran and it provides them with equipment and weapons, mainly American (which came to the Iraqi government as aid from the US) and Russian. In the first years after the US invasion of Iraq, most of the weapons of the pro-Iranian militias were received from Iran. It seems that upon the establishment of the PMF in 2014 and the significant expansion of the militia forces, the need to purchase additional weapons arose. Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis claimed in an interview in January 2017 that the PMF and the Iraqi army purchase weapons from Russia. According to him, in early January 2017, Faleh al-Fayad, chief of the PMF headquarters, visited Moscow to discuss the transfer of weapons from Russia to the PMF. He also noted that the militias receive weapons and equipment from Iran (Al-Mayadeen, January 3, 2017). It should be noted that in 2014-2018, the Iraqi government equipped the pro-Iranian militias (as part of the supply of weapons for the PMF) with American weapons that it received from the United States.

► At the same time, the militias developed an independent production capacity of weapons with the support of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. Qais al-Khazali, Secretary-General of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq, stated in an interview with the BBC in Persian (January 2022) that his organization is capable of manufacturing weapons for the militia if they are not supplied by Iran, especially drones. Alaa al-Nashu', an expert on strategic affairs, said in January 2022 that the militias receive weapons from Iran and assistance from Iranian advisers to manufacture weapons. He added that the militias are storing drones in factories in the Al-Waziriya region of Baghdad and the Al-Jarf al-Sakhr region south of Baghdad. In July 2020, the Badr militia also revealed that it manufactures medium-range and long-range rockets on its own (Al-Ayn, April 30, 2021). This is part of Iran's strategy in recent years regarding its proxies, according to which each proxy becomes more independent and less dependent on supplies from Iran.



Right: Harakat al-Nujaba fighter holding an RPG launcher, apparently made by Iran (Harakat al-Nujaba's Twitter account, June 24, 2022). Left: Russian Kornet anti-tank system handled by a Harakat al-Nujaba fighter (Harakat al-Nujaba's Twitter account, June 24, 2022)



Right: Harakat al-Nujaba fighter shooting an American M-16 rifle (Harakat al-Nujaba's Twitter account, June 24, 2022). Left: Yasser-type Iranian drone with Harakat al-Nujaba logo on its wings (@al_moshashae Twitter account, June 11, 2015)

Emergence of new militias for low-profile activity

► Shortly before the assassination of Soleimani and Al-Muhandis, and especially after their assassination, names of new pro-Iranian Iraqi militias began to appear on social media. Some of these militias even claimed responsibility for firing rockets and activating IEDs against American targets in Iraq. It is estimated that existing militias use these names as a façade allowing them to carry out low-profile activity against US Army targets in Iraq and other targets.

► These militias include the following: **Ashab al-Kahf** (“Companions of the Cave”); **Usbat al-Taerin** (“the Avengers Group”); **Saraya Thawrat al-Ishrin** (“the 1920 Revolt Battalions”); **Ta’r al-Muhandis** (“Revenge of Al-Muhandis,” i.e., Abu Ali al-Muhandis); **Jund Soleimani** (military group called after Qassem Soleimani); **Liwa Muntaqimun** (“the Avengers Brigade”); **Saraya al-Muntaqim** (“the Avenger Battalions”); **Saraya Ta’r al-Shuhada** (“Revenge of the Martyrs Battalions”); **Qassem al-Jabarin**; **Fasil al-Muqawama al-Dawliyya** (“the International Resistance Faction”); **Saraya Awliyat al-Damm** (“Companies of the Guardians of Blood”); **Kata’ib al-Sabiqun** (“the Early Comers Battalions”); **Awwalu al-Azm** (“the First Determined

Ones”); **Liwa Khaybar** (Khaybar Brigade, named after the place in the Arabian Peninsula where the Jews were expelled and some of them were murdered by Muslim forces in early Islam); **Quwwat Dhu al-Fiqar** (“Dhu al-Fiqar Forces,” named after the sword of Ali bin Abu Taleb, the prominent Shia figure); **Abu Fadl al-Abbas** (named after Abbas, the hero of the Karbala Battle in 680 AD, the most important battle of the Shia); **Al-Shaheed Karim Dara’am** (faction by the name of Karim Dara’am); **Qabdat al-Huda wa-Ahl al-Ma’ruf** (“the Group of the Righteous Path and the People of the Good Deeds”); **Firqat al-Ghashiya** (“the Al-Ghashiya Group,” named after Chapter 88 in the Quran, which deals with heaven and hell); **Ahbab Allah** (“Those Loved by Allah”); and **Alwiyat al-Wa’ad al-Haqq** (“True Pledge Brigades”)²¹.



Logos and names of 16 of the “new” militias (Tatawwurat al-Alam al-Islami, December 31, 2021)

Threats and attacks against US targets in Iraq and Syria

► Even after the pullout of US forces from Iraq in late 2011, the pro-Iranian Iraqi militias continued to fight the remaining American presence in the country and strive for a complete severance of the political ties between Iraq and the United States. Towards the end of 2021, they even set an ultimatum that if the American forces do not leave the country, as was decided in the Iraqi parliament, they will harm them.

► The pro-Iranian Iraqi militias frequently attack US targets in Iraq and Syria. The following are some examples:

- ◆ On June 9, 2022, it was reported that an explosive drone landed on a road near the American consulate in the city of Erbil during the night. The Kurdish security forces accused the militia of Kata’ib Hezbollah (“Hezbollah Battalions”) of launching the aircraft and said that it was launched from the Kirkuk area. Pro-Iranian media sources

²¹ <https://arabic.iswnews.com/>; <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/84368>.

reported that it was an assassination operation against Mossad personnel (RUDAW, June 9, 2022; i24NEWS, June 9, 2022).²²

- ◆ On July 7, 2021, a drone reportedly caused damage near the Erbil airport. A militia by the name of Saraya Awliyat al-Damm (“Companies of the Guardians of Blood”), one of the names used to maintain low-profile militia activity in Iraq, claimed responsibility for the incident. The United States blamed the pro-Iranian militias.
- ◆ On August 15, 2022, three drones attacked the headquarters of US-affiliated forces in the Al-Tanf crossing area, between Syria and Jordan, an area controlled by the US forces. One of the drones was shot down, one was destroyed, and another landed in the area but caused no casualties. No party has claimed responsibility for the incident, but apparently one of the pro-Iranian militias is behind it (Al-Arabiya, August 16, 2022).

Threats against Israel

► At the same time with the gradual stabilization of the Syrian government and the weakening of ISIS in Syria and Iraq, **the pro-Iranian militias in Iraq, apparently led by Iran, began to openly declare their involvement in the conflict with Israel.** On March 8, 2017, Akram al-Kaabi, the secretary-general of the pro-Iranian Iraqi militia Harakat al-Nujaba (“the Movement of the Nobles Ones”), announced the establishment of the **Golan Liberation Brigade**. According to his statement, his fighters in Syria are ready to “liberate” the Golan Heights along with the Syrian army when the campaign against ISIS ends. On November 24, 2017, Al-Kaabi clarified in an interview from Tehran that his militia had established the Golan Liberation Brigade to “fight against the takfiri organizations [i.e., the jihadist organizations, first and foremost ISIS] handled by the Zionist entity [i.e., Israel].” The attempt to present ISIS as an arm of Israel is intended to increase the hostility against it. He added that, if requested, this brigade would help the Syrian army “liberate the Golan” (Uni News Agency, March 10, 2022).

²² <https://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/090620221>



Akram al-Kaabi, secretary-general of the militia of Harakat al-Nujaba, declaring the establishment of the Golan Liberation Brigade (Uni News Agency, March 10, 2022)

- ▶ In August 2020, a Syrian opposition source, citing local military sources, reported that as part of its efforts to expand its influence in the region, Iran began **establishing a new military force in the Quneitra Governorate near the border with Israel**. According to the report, Iran is working through Hezbollah and with the support of Branch 220 of the Syrian Political Security Directorate to establish the new force under the command of former fighters in the Syrian army and the militia of **Fawj al-Julan** (The Golan Fawj – the Golan Regiment), which operates as part of the Syrian regime and consists mainly of Druze residents (Enab Baladi, August 12, 2020). It is not unlikely that this force will cooperate (or is already cooperating) with fighters of pro-Iranian militias, especially with the Golan Liberation Brigade.
- ▶ Engineer Nasr al-Shammari, the spokesman for the militia of Harakat al-Nujaba, stated in an interview on June 11, 2021, that the Golan Liberation Brigade is fully prepared to participate in the operation to “liberate” the Golan at the request of the Syrian government and that the brigade fighters have undergone appropriate training and have been equipped with weapons suitable for striking deep in Israel and not only in the Golan region. According to him, the brigade was established by Harakat al-Nujaba to participate along with the “Brothers in Syria” in the campaign to “liberate” the Golan, which is becoming closer every day (Al-Ahed, June 11, 2022).
- ▶ In the last two years, the Axis of Resistance, comprised also of the pro-Iranian militias in Iraq, presented the “Deterrence Equation [of Israel]” (Mu’adalat al-Rad’). This equation, which was presented publicly for the first time in a speech delivered by Hassan Nasrallah, the Secretary-General of Hezbollah, on May 25, 2020, was intended to deter Israel and threaten its existence through a simultaneous attack from several fronts, and by implication, the

activation of all fronts of the Axis of Resistance²³. As part of the adoption of this equation, Kata'ib Hezbollah (“Hezbollah Battalions”) announced in June 2021 that it was part of the Deterrence Equation against Israel. In an interview conducted by Al-Mayadeen channel, which is close to the Lebanese Hezbollah, with Muhammad Muhyi, the spokesman for the militia, he stated that it is the first Iraqi militia that openly declares this and that it will not necessarily be the only one to participate in a possible large-scale conflict with Israel. He added that the militia can use precision missiles and drones to overcome the geographical distance from Israel (Al-Mayadeen, June 17, 2022). Harakat al-Nujaba also announced, in June 2021, that they are part of the Deterrence Equation.



Kata'ib Hezbollah spokesman Muhammad Muhyi saying that the militia is part of the Deterrence Equation against Israel (Al-Mayadeen, June 17, 2022)

- ▶ The subject of the Deterrence Equation came up again in an interview conducted by Al-Mayadeen channel on July 25, 2022, with Hassan Nasrallah on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the establishment of Hezbollah. Nasrallah repeated several times his threats to hit the Karish reservoir, as part of his threats against Israel during the negotiations to draw the maritime border between Israel and Lebanon, claiming that if there is a conflict with Israel, other elements in the region such as the pro-Iranian militias will also join him (Al-Mayadeen, July 25, 2022).²⁴
- ▶ Nasr al-Shammari, Deputy Secretary-General of the militia of Harakat al-Nujaba and the militia's official spokesman, said in October 2019 that the militia has personal relationships with senior officials in the Palestinian “resistance” organizations and that they hold meetings with them. He also said that out of their legitimate and national duty and as part of the ideological principles of the militia fighters, they will stand up against Israel (“the usurping

²³ The idea was raised in a speech by Hassan Nasrallah on May 25, 2020, in which he announced a new equation, according to which any damage caused by Israel to Jerusalem will lead to a regional war (“Al-Quds-Ma’araka Iqlimiyya”): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SLYVQ1W-FgE>

²⁴ An agreement was finally signed between Israel and Lebanon on October 27, 2022.

entity”) with all the means at their disposal, alongside the “resistance movements” that confront Israel and especially Hezbollah (The Levant News website, October 25, 2019). There is also evidence of Harakat al-Nujaba’s involvement in aid activities for Palestinian families in the Gaza Strip²⁵.

Involvement and threat against the Iraqi regime

► The importance of the pro-Iranian militias in the fight against ISIS has decreased in recent years since the activities of the security forces in Iraq (the army, the counterterrorism unit subordinate to the Prime Minister, and the security apparatus subordinate to the Ministry of the Interior) have decreased and they do not need their assistance. Following this, there were calls in Iraq to disarm the militias (especially in mid- 2017), and senior members of the Shia community in Iraq, led by Ali Sistani, the most senior Ayatollah in Iraq, and Muqtada al-Sadr, called for ending their activities as a military force operating alongside the legitimate government. Despite the calls, under pressure from Iran and the militias themselves, they were not disbanded and in 2018 the salaries of the PMF fighters were adjusted to those of the Iraqi army. This situation left the militias as a significant force operating in Iraq as an arm of the Iranian regime, operating alongside the Iraqi army, and actually posing a threat to the Iraqi army and Iraq’s sovereignty in the event of a conflict between the Iraqi government and the Iranian regime.

► Mustafa Kadhimi, the Prime Minister of Iraq at the time, strove to weaken Iranian involvement in Iraq in order to maintain an independent decision and preserve Iraqi sovereignty. He therefore worked to restrain the pro-Iranian militias in Iraq, which created a conflict between him and the militias. This conflict peaked in the raid carried out by the Iraqi counterterrorism unit on June 25, 2020, against a compound of the militia of Kata’ib Hezbollah, which was responsible for firing rockets at the American Embassy compound in Baghdad and at American forces stationed in Iraqi military bases. In the raid on the militia compound in southern Baghdad, 14 operatives were arrested and launchers and rockets apparently intended for further attacks were seized. The attack provoked strong reactions from the militias loyal to Iran, which included a personal attack against the Prime Minister, who was accused of collaborating with the United States. A few days later, the operatives were released.

²⁵ For further details, see the ITIC's Information Bulletin from May 25, 2020, “The Nujaba Movement, an Iraqi Shiite militia handled by Iran, also operates in the Gaza Strip.”

► On November 6, 2021, the pro-Iranian militias attempted to assassinate Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa Kadhimi using a booby-trapped aircraft launched at his residence. It was a new peak in Iranian involvement in Iraq that also raised tensions between the countries. Following this, Qods Force Commander Esmail Qaani rushed to Baghdad to try to reduce the tension between the countries and the public anger in Iraq over Iran's involvement in the country. It is not yet known which of the militias was behind the assassination attempt, but shortly before it was carried out, Qais al-Khazali, who is the head of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq, threatened the Iraqi Prime Minister. He protested the violent dispersal of the demonstrations against the election results and claimed that the military forces fired live ammunition at the demonstrators. He pointed the blame at the Iraqi Prime Minister and made it clear that he is the one who will bear the consequences and pay the price. After the event, Al-Khazali denied his organization's involvement in the assassination attempt and accused the United States of trying to incriminate the organization, suggesting that Israel and the United States were responsible for the assassination attempt (Al-Jazeera, November 9, 2021).

► Upon the American pullout from Iraq, at the end of 2011, senior members of the militias began to consolidate their power in the political system in Iraq. In early 2017, a total of 14 Kata'ib Hezbollah representatives were integrated into the Iraqi parliament (out of 329 seats), but they had little influence on the government's decisions. The infiltration of the pro-Iranian militias into Iraqi politics began to expand in the Iraqi parliamentary elections in 2018. Prominent pro-Iranian militias (Kata'ib Hezbollah, Badr Organization, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq, and Imam Ali Brigades) founded the Al-Fatah Coalition and won 48 seats in the parliament.

► In the parliamentary elections on October 10, 2021, the power of the Al-Fatah Coalition decreased and it won 17 out of the 329 seats. The winner of the elections was Muqtada al-Sadr with 73 seats. He called for unity around Iraqi nationalism while suppressing Iranian and American involvement in the country. The Al-Huquq ("Rights") Party, which is a new party established before the 2021 elections by Kata'ib Hezbollah ("Hezbollah Battalions") won one seat.

► After the withdrawal of the Sadr stream representatives from the parliament on June 12, 2022, the power of the representatives of the pro-Iranian militias (Al-Fatah Coalition) increased to 48 seats, and all the pro-Iranian elements in the parliament include about 130 seats (including other Shia groups in the parliament – of Nuri al-Maliki, Dawlat al-Qanun, and of Amar al-Hakim, the Al-Hikma bloc).

- ▶ Muqtada al-Sadr announced his retirement from political life in late August 2022 against the background of the announcement of the candidacy of Mohammad Shaya' al-Sudani for prime minister. Following his retirement, riots broke out in Iraq and dozens of Iraqi citizens were killed on August 29, 2022, in a prolonged exchange of fire between the rival Shia factions in the secure government district of Baghdad ("the Green Zone").
- ▶ The members of parliament affiliated with the pro-Iranian militias promoted a law passed by parliament on May 26, 2022, that prohibits normalization with Israel and contacts with Israelis and called for the then Prime Minister, Mustafa Kadhimi, to be put on trial for treason if he dares to attend the conference in Saudi Arabia on July 16, 2022, which dealt with a regional defense alliance against Iran. Kadhimi ignored the warning and went and even emphasized in his speech the need to preserve the values of democracy.
- ▶ The pro-Iranian Shiite militias have recently launched several rockets and drones against Turkish targets in Iraq. This is because of the frequent attacks carried out by Turkey recently in the Iraqi Kurdistan region and because it establishes bases and positions in the region on the claim that it is fighting the Kurdish terrorist organization PKK (Al-Jazeera, July 22, 2022). This is how the militias present themselves as patriots working to protect the borders of the Iraqi state and as responding to the needs of the Kurdish population in the country. An example of this is drones firing on July 21, 2022, at a Turkish artillery base north of Duhok. The drones belonged to the pro-Shia militia Ashab al-Kahf ("Companions of the Cave", a fictitious name used by Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada, or according to another version, a façade for Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq), in response to a Turkish artillery attack on July 20, 2022, in Zakho, in the north of the Kurdistan's governorate of Duhok, in which nine Iraqi citizens, including women and children, were killed. In addition, the militias organized a protest demonstration in front of the Turkish consulate in Baghdad and called for its closure (www.washingtoninstitute.org, July 22, 2022; Al-Sumaria, July 22, 2022). At the same time, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq called on the Iraqi parliament to take measures against Turkey in response to the shooting (Al-Sumaria, July 22, 2022). Turkey, for its part, issued a statement saying that it was not responsible for the artillery fire (Al-Jazeera, July 22, 2022).



Flags of the Iraqi militias Kata'ib Hezbollah, Harakat al-Nujaba, and Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada in a demonstration in front of the Turkish consulate in Baghdad (Al-Jazeera, July 22, 2022)

► On July 26, 2022, two rockets were fired at the Turkish consulate in Baghdad, apparently by the pro-Iranian militias (Al-Sumaria, July 26, 2022). In another incident on that same day, an explosive drone was launched at a Turkish base in northern Iraq. An Iraqi Shiite organization called Saraya Ababil (another fictitious name used for pro-Iranian militias) that announced its establishment on the same day claimed responsibility for the attack and published a video documenting the launch of the aircraft (Al-Mayadeen, July 27, 2022).



Right: Operatives of Saraya Ababil beside the aircraft a moment before launching it (Al-Mayadeen, July 27, 2022). Left: The aircraft being launched (Al-Mayadeen, July 27, 2022)

► Another fictitious organization behind which there are Iraqi pro-Iranian militias (apparently Kata'ib Hezbollah) is Alwiyat al-Wa'ad al-Haqq ("True Pledge Brigades"), which on October 2, 2022, issued threats that it would attack companies operating in Saudi Arabia, in light of Saudi Arabia's support for the Yemeni government which is fighting the pro-Iranian organization Ansar Allah (also known as the Houthi movement). Additional threats were directed by the organization at the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia's strategic partner in the war in Yemen, and it even claimed responsibility on February 2, 2022, for an attack carried out by drones against vital facilities in Abu Dhabi, in the Emirates, as a signal from Iran to the United Arab Emirates not to intervene in the war in Yemen.

The militias' involvement in the war in Ukraine

► It has recently been reported that the pro-Iranian Iraqi militias are delivering weapons to the Russian forces fighting in Ukraine. The weapons are delivered through Iran (timesofisrael.com, April 12, 2022). It should be noted that this is the first evidence of its kind for the involvement of pro-Iranian militias in a global issue, something that should cause concern in the West, mainly in the European countries.

Conclusion

► The pro-Iranian militias have become major power centers in society and politics in Iraq and are currently posing a challenge to the authority of the central government in Iraq and the entire region. Although their legitimacy in the Iraqi public has decreased following the significant decrease in ISIS activity in the country, their political power has actually strengthened recently in view of Muqtada al-Sadr's retirement from political life. The militias put the sovereignty of Iraq and its regime under greater risk and threaten to establish Iran's involvement in the country and even make Iraq its proxy.

► The integration of the pro-Iranian militias into the Axis of Resistance and the Shiite Crescent poses a potential threat to Israel and the United States, especially in light of their ability to self-manufacture rockets and drones independently of Iran, in light of their presence in the Syrian-Israeli border area, and in light of threats by the Axis of Resistance to take part in a regional war against Israel. The involvement of the militias in global issues, especially the war in Ukraine, also poses a threat to Western countries.

► In recent years, the pro-Iranian militias have faced quite a few constraints and challenges, which oblige them to find different ways to continue influencing the political arena in Iraq without losing public legitimacy. At the top of the challenges and constraints are the internal struggles within the Shia community, the growing opposition from other power centers in the Shia community (including Ayatollah Ali Sistani and Muqtada al-Sadr) to the militias' activity, the demand to disarm them, and the widespread public criticism directed at them. Therefore, it is not unlikely that they will have difficulty realizing their goals. In addition, Iran's degree of control over the militias may have decreased in the last two years, both because of the power struggles between the pro-Iranian militias and the other power elements in the "Shiite House" and due to Qaani's difficulty (compared to Soleimani) in directly controlling the militias.