

The New Face of Iraq's Shiite Militias

OE Watch Commentary: The killing of Qassim Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis in a US drone strike last January led to a change in the way that Iranian-backed militias operate in Iraq, according to the two accompanying Arabic-language excerpts, the first from *al-Araby al-Jadid* and the second from *Independent Arabia*. According to the first passage, nine previously unknown militias have been formed and taken credit for attacks targeting US interests in Iraq since the assassination. Listed by name in the first accompanying passage, these hitherto unknown groups operate under the broader name of the “Islamic Resistance” (al-Muqawama al-Islamiyya). Per the article, most analysts and observers link them to the main Iranian-backed militias in Iraq’s Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) – Kata’ib Hezbollah, al-Nujaba, al-Khorasani, Sayyid al-Shuhada, al-Tafuf and others.



Raising flag of Iraq and Popular Mobilization Forces after defeating DAESH.

Source: Tasnim News Agency / Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Raising_flag_of_Iraq_and_Popular_Mobilization_Forces_after_defeating_DAESH.jpg CC BY (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>)

These new groups, both articles argue, should not be considered to be reflective of divisions among Iraq’s pro-Tehran militias, but rather as deliberate attempts to “reshuffle the deck,” confuse the Iraqi government and its security services, garner media attention, and “camouflage and divert suspicion and avoid punishment while also implementing what Iran requires of them, namely putting pressure on the Americans by targeting their interests wherever they are found in Iraq.” A commentator cited in the second article characterizes these new groups as “the spurs of traditional powers.” The new militias have been particularly effective in their messaging, releasing slick videos and drawing media attention by distributing their message via social media channels on Telegram (rather than Twitter, where they are quickly banned). The authors of both passages make it clear that observers believe this is only the beginning and there are “expectations that other militias will emerge” to further complicate the security situation in Iraq. **End OE Watch Commentary (Winter)**

“Since last January, nine new armed militias have been announced... All of them espouse ‘taking revenge’ for Soleimani and al-Muhandis and removing US forces from Iraq...”

Source: ولادة 9 مليشيات في العراق خلال 10 أشهر: محاولات لإشاعة الفوضى
“(Birth of 9 Iraqi Militias in Past 10 Months: Attempts to Sow Chaos),” *al-Araby al-Jadid*, 4 October 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/y6ybj9vr>

The killing of former Iranian Quds Fore commander Qasem Soleimani and the deputy head of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis in an American raid early this year near Baghdad International Airport was the beginning of a change in the way pro-Iranian militias operate in Iraq, as they worked to transform their behavior from intermittent strikes on the perimeter of the US embassy in central Baghdad’s Green Zone to intensifying their efforts toward weekly and almost daily strikes. In recent weeks, attacks using Katyusha rockets and IEDs actually occurred daily. In this context, new militias have emerged claiming these attacks as part of the so-called “Islamic Resistance,” embracing slogans of “revenge” against the coalition, specifically American forces.

Since last January, nine new armed militias have been announced. The first of them was the “Ashab al-Kahf” (Companions of the Cave), followed by the “Usbat al-Tha’irin” (League of Revolutionaries), and after them the “Saraya Thawra al-Ashrin al-Thaniya” (Second 1920 Revolution Company), “Quwat Dhu al-Fiqar” (Zulfikar Forces), “Saraya al-Muntaqim” (Avengers Company), “Awliya’ al-Dam” (Blood Brigades), “Tha’ir al-Muhandis” (al-Muhandis Revenge), “Qasim al-Jabarin” (He who Smites the Necks of the Cruel), and “al-Ghashiya” (The Overwhelming). All of them espouse “taking revenge” for Soleimani and al-Muhandis and removing US forces from Iraq. This comes amid expectations that other militias will emerge as part of the plan to reshuffle the deck and create confusion in the government of Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi and the American forces alike. All observers and those concerned with the affairs of armed groups assert that the birth of these new militias comes from the main factions that are currently part of the PMF, such as Kata’ib Hezbollah, al-Nujaba, al-Khorasani, Sayyid al-Shuhada and al-Tafuf, among others. These militias use Telegram as a platform for announcing their operations, after repeated closure of their accounts on Twitter. Sabreen News, al-Jadaha, Rubuallah and Wild al-Shuaib are considered their most prominent channels...



Continued: The New Face of Iraq's Shiite Militias

Source: هل الميليشيات الجديدة في العراق مناورة من الأطراف القديمة أم انقسامات؟
 “(Are Iraq’s New Militias a Maneuver by Existing Groups or Divisions?),” *Independent Arabia*, 7 October 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/y4xy24n6>

Observers believe they will not be the last and there are expectations that new militias will be formed in order to reshuffle the deck of cards and confuse both the al-Kadhimi government and the American forces...

While the phenomenon of announcing new militias and factions is often considered to reflect a state of division among traditional forces, Raad Hashem, a researcher on Iraqi affairs, has a different opinion. He explained to Independent Arabia that “this issue cannot be understood as a divisive dispute between traditional forces insofar as it is a division that serves their interests, by creating factions with different titles and names, to camouflage and divert suspicion and avoid punishment while also implementing what Iran requires of them, namely putting pressure on the Americans by targeting their interest wherever they are found in Iraq.” Hashem noted that these militias have mastered the game of politics in Iraq, as they are “an open participant in the political process and a hidden participant in the tug-of-war game under the cover of militias.” In the same context, Kazim al-Waeli, a former advisor to the International Coalition Against ISIS in Iraq and Syria, said that “these factions emerged from the Mahdi Army and consequently understand the same people and factions, but they seek to change their names to reshuffle the deck. This phenomenon cannot be classified as divisions, but rather as the spurs of traditional powers. There are forces and there are special forces, and it is possible to consider the new factions as special forces with different names.”

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