

Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

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INDONESIAN JEMAAH ISLAMIYA FOUNDER ABUBAKAR BAASYIR'S QUIET RELEASE FROM PRISON

Jacob Zenn

In 2019, the Indonesian government decided it would release Jemaah Islamiya founder Abubakar Baasyir from prison earlier than initially scheduled. He had been tried in 2011 and sentenced to 15 years in prison for setting up an "al-Qaeda in Aceh" training camp that Indonesia's counter-terrorism special operations unit, Densus-88, raided and dismantled ([Terrorism Monitor](#), April 7, 2011). Notwithstanding Baasyir's imprisonment, some camp members, including most notably Santoso, leader of the East Indonesian Mujahideen and known most popularly by the singular name, continued on the jihadist path. Santoso relocated to Poso, Sulawesi, conducted several terrorist attacks, and eventually pledged loyalty to Islamic State ([Jakarta Post](#), April 1, 2016). However, Santoso, the most wanted terrorist in the county at the time, was killed by Indonesian security shortly after the pledge in 2016 ([straitstimes.com](#), July 19, 2016).

Baasyir had also been imprisoned in 2004 ([Terrorism Monitor](#), November 4, 2004). Between his release after that imprisonment and 2011, he continued his jihadist leadership activities. In contrast, it does not appear that Baasyir is currently engaging in any new jihadist planning after his most recent release. Several reasons that may explain this. First, Baasyir is now 82-years old and in poor health, which may make it more difficult to continue leading jihadist activities. Second, Indonesia's terrorism infrastructure has largely been decimated by Densus-88, with attacks occurring only sporadically, and not nearly with the lethality resembling Baasyir's heyday in the years surrounding 9/11, when the infamous Bali bombings occurred in 2002 and 2005. Third, key Indonesian jihadists, including most recently Upik Lawan-ga and Zulkarnaen in late 2020, have been arrested, meaning the 'old guard' from Baasyir's heyday has given way to a new generation of less experienced jihadists ([Jakarta Post](#), December 15, 2020). Fourth, the new generation of Indonesian jihadists has become increasingly loyal to Islamic State, like Santoso had become, while Baasyir came of age during the Afghan jihad and had been influenced by al-Qaeda. This represents an-

other disconnect between Baasyir and prospective recruits at present.

Credit also must be given to the Indonesian government and especially Densus-88. Indonesia has become much more inhospitable to jihadism now compared to after 9/11. Madrassas where jihadists used to be recruited are no longer teaching the same ideologies and Indonesia has engaged in various de-radicalization and countering violent extremists to accompany Densus 88's work that have often been effective (benarnews.org, March 6, 2020). As a result, there is relatively little concern that Baasyir's release this time will lead to an increase in terrorism in Indonesia. However, a large number of Indonesians and foreigners who count their family members among the victims of Jemaah Islamiyah's attacks view Baasyir's early release from prison as unjust. Other Indonesians also note the human rights inconsistency where Baasyir can be released from prison early, but a woman is currently imprisoned for complaining about a mosque's loud call to prayer (Jakarta Post, January 22, 2019).

Jacob Zenn is the editor of Terrorism Monitor.

U.S. COUNTER-TERRORISM CAMPAIGN CONTINUES AGAINST AL-SHABAAB

Jacob Zenn

On January 30, the United States reportedly carried out a drone strike against al-Shabaab in a town controlled by the terrorist group in Somalia's Bakool province (Hal-gan Media, January 30). This was the first drone strike in Somalia under the Biden administration and indicates that drone strikes will continue despite the change of administrations in the United States. In addition, it shows that the Trump administration's relocation of all U.S. forces out of Somalia will not necessarily limit continued counter-terrorism operations in Somalia (wltx.com, January 18).

U.S. attention to counter-terrorism in Somalia is also unlikely to be altered by the Biden administration because al-Shabaab continues to show a high level of military capability in the country. One of the latest examples of al-Shabaab's sophistication was its use of a drone to film an attack on Manda Bay base in Kenya, which killed three Americans, on January 5, 2020 (voasomalia.com, December 19, 2021). Drones could also be used in attacks themselves, and the Manda Bay base attack is a reminder that even in Kenya, U.S. forces are not necessarily safe from al-Shabaab. Not only has al-Shabaab carried out several previous major attacks in the country, but, as the al-Shabaab video claim of the Manda Bay base attack demonstrated, the group also fields Swahili-speaking Kenyan fighters (Morad News, January 30; Quarterly Special Report, April 2015).

Meanwhile, in Somalia, al-Shabaab continues to strike Mogadishu. On January 31, for example, al-Shabaab fighters attacked Hotel Afrik, conducted a suicide car bombing targeting a retired army general and engaged in a firefight with Somali forces that led to nine deaths (arabnews.com, January 31; Shabelle Media Network, February 4). Al-Shabaab, therefore, predominates the rural areas outside Mogadishu and maintains an asymmetric warfare presence in Mogadishu itself (polgenow.com, August 2019).

The new Biden administration may seek to reorient U.S. foreign policy to East Asia in order to deal with China and will maintain a focus on preventing Islamic State's

resurgence in Syria and Iraq, but it will not be able to afford to ignore Africa. Al-Shabaab, among other al-Qaeda affiliates in Mali and Islamic State provinces in Mozambique and Nigeria, illustrate how Africa is becoming the primary area of operations for jihadist expansion.

Jacob Zenn is the editor of Terrorism Monitor.

Neo-Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh's Female Members Further Islamic State's Recruitment and Propaganda

Animesh Roul

The Neo-Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (Neo-JMB), which was responsible for the deadly July 2016 Holey Artisan Bakery terrorist attack in Dhaka claimed by Islamic State (IS), has effectively nurtured and nourished a strong network of female jihadists in the country ([ref-world.org](#), November 15, 2016). These women members have proven to be a largely unseen, but potent force behind the group's resilience. They have spearheaded recruitment and propaganda campaigns and even surprised security forces with a suicide bombing on December 26, 2016 in Ashkona area of the capital Dhaka ([The Independent](#), December 26, 2016).

Asma's and Shirina's Arrests

Women jihadists' roles were previously downplayed by Bangladeshi security agencies, mostly due to gender leniency. However, the arrest of Asmani Khatun (a.k.a. Asma) in February 2020 in Dhaka's Kamalapur area shed light on women's roles in neo-JMB ([Sangbad Pratidin](#), February 5, 2020). Asma's arrest exposed a well-organized pro-IS network spanning neighboring regions, including India, and led bare neo-JMB's robust social media outreach.

Following Asma's arrest, her deputy, Shirina Khatun, was apprehended from Dhaka's Gabtoli area in March 2020 ([Dhaka Tribune](#), March 20, 2020). Investigating agencies found that Asma and her associates, including Shirina, remained active behind the scenes and engaged in Neo-JMB recruitment campaigns using social media platforms, such as Facebook, Threema and WhatsApp. Bangladeshi Counter-Terrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC) officials learned Asma was secretly recruiting female members online using different pseudonyms like *Bandi Jibona* (Imprisoned Life) and *Nikhoj Alo* (Lost Light). She even succeeded in sending recruits to unidentified destinations for Islamic migration (*hijra*),

presumably to Syria (the authorities did not disclose where) and a few of the recruits were arrested by the authorities. The counter-terrorism police also unearthed a violent conspiracy targeting government establishments after Asma's arrest ([Daily Star](#), February 6, 2020).

Like Asma, Shirina had links with senior neo-JMB women in Bangladeshi custody, such as Rashida Akhter Humayra, the head of neo-JMB's so-called 'sister wing.' It was also evident from Shirina's interrogations how she managed social media accounts to connect with senior neo-JMB leaders and recruits. The communication history of Asma and Shirina showed several top leaders used to contact them, possibly using pseudonyms like "Abir Chowdhury," "Mehedi Hasan," "Abu Dujana," and "Islam al-Hind" (a presumably Indian-origin militant name) through Facebook ([Daily Star](#), March 24, 2020; [Prathom Alo](#), February 28, 2020). Another Neo-JMB female operative, Aayesha Jannat Mohona (a.k.a. Proggya Debnath), an Indian-origin Hindu convert to Islam, was arrested in Dhaka's Sadarghat area in mid-July last year. She was responsible for recruiting and training young girls from both Bangladesh and India for the Neo-JMB 'sister wing' ([Bangladesh News24](#), July 18, 2020).

While the investigation into the Neo-JMB women's wing is still ongoing, police have yet to establish if women militants like Shirina or Asma have working relations among other militant formations in Bangladesh or India. Nevertheless, it was apparent to investigating agencies that these women succeeded in indoctrinating several women (Muslims and Hindus) into subscribing to IS' jihadist ideology such that some recruits left their homes, married fellow jihadists and made *hijra* to join IS' Bangladeshi wing, if not traveling further abroad to Syria. Proggya Debnath's case was also an example of the 'jihadist bride' phenomenon ([Daily Star](#), July 20, 2020). She was enticed into the world of radical Islam and militancy after marrying Amir Hossain Saddam, a Bangladeshi national living in Oman. After moving to Bangladesh from India, she started teaching at various private madrasas and continued to recruit for neo-JMB using various online accounts to recruit and provide religious training to women. She further distributed money among female recruits after collecting it from neo-JMB sources ([Dhaka Tribune](#), July 17, 2020; [BDNews24](#), July 22, 2020).

Women in Neo-JMB: Now and Then

Neo-JMB, which is more appropriately 'IS-Bangladesh' because it pledged allegiance to IS, is a violent JMB faction. However, Bangladeshi authorities deny any IS presence on their soil, and instead named the group 'Neo-JMB' after the deadly Holey Artisan Bakery attack in July 2016 ([Daily Star](#), March 28, 2017). That attack left 29 people dead, including 17 foreigners, five Bangladeshi citizens, two police officers, and five militants ([Daily Star](#), July 3, 2016).

A 2019 study conducted by CTTC estimated around 63 percent of female militant suspects in Bangladesh were linked to Neo-JMB. CTTC derived this figure by analyzing profiles of 85 female militant suspects arrested since 2017 ([Daily Star](#), April 19, 2019). The trend of women participation in support or combat roles is not new in the country. However, after the Holey Artisan Bakery attack, their engagement in jihadist activities became an increasing concern for security agencies.

Neo-JMB, like other extremist groups in the country, such as Hizbut Tahirir and al-Qaeda-linked Ansar al-Islam, have used women operatives as a support system in their violent campaigns ([Terrorism Monitor](#), November 17, 2018). However, unlike other Islamist militant groups in Bangladesh, Neo-JMB has the advantage of a grassroots network of radicalized women and their family members. Initially engaged in *dawa* (proselytization) activities and inspiring family members and relatives for jihad, later their role shifted to rigorous religious teaching and recruitment of new cadres using social media ([BDnews24.com](#), May 11, 2017; [Daily Star](#), November 14, 2018).

In February 2009, Bangladesh's counter-terrorism police confronted, perhaps for the first time, three women militants affiliated to the original JMB group during a raid. At the time, these three members, who were all relatives of JMB militants, identified as Noor Jahan, Marzia and Mina, and displayed the unique characteristics of highly-trained operatives to the astonishment of police officers. These women shocked the police by destroying evidence, including papers, documents, and SIM cards in mobile phones swiftly during a police raid at their safe-house in Ghortoil in Gazipur ([Daily STAR](#), February 21, 2009). The same year, on May 14, police also confronted

a violent situation in Mirpur, Dhaka when a JMB explosives expert, Boma Mizan's wife Sharmin Haque Lata, detonated a bomb to save her husband from being arrested ([Zee News](#), May 15, 2009).

Although they noticed the shifting trend of women partaking in armed violence, investigating agencies somehow overlooked women's potential role in the country's future terrorist violence. A significant shift in perception took place when Neo-JMB's female operatives were found to be capable of armed violence, including a bombing and suicide mission. In September 2016, Bangladeshi police stumbled upon a Neo-JMB suicide squad and arrested four women militants in Baraitali locality of Sirajganj ([Dhaka Tribune](#), September 5, 2016). Several months later, Bangladesh witnessed its first female suicide bomber. On December 24, 2016, Shakira, the wife of Neo-JMB militant Rashedur Sumon, detonated her suicide vest in Dhaka's Ashkona locality while attempting to attack police during a search and sweep operation. Several women operatives were arrested resulting from that operation and other raids across Bangladesh ([BDNews 24](#), December 27, 2016).

Conclusion

In Bangladesh, the problem of female radicalization and extremism ultimately owes its origin to the Islamic fundamentalist politics espoused by groups like Jamaat-e-Islami (JeI) and the student wing Islami Chhatra Shibir (ICS). Both ICS and its all-women branch, Islami Chhatri Sangstha, remain at the core of increasing campus extremism ([BDNews24](#), June 19, 2014; [Daily Janakantha](#), October 20, 2017). Islamic Chhatri Sangstha was accused of motivating female students to take part in jihad and was involved in anti-democratic and anti-secular activities in furtherance of JeI's core philosophy of establishing an Islamic state in Bangladesh ([Daily Star](#), September 22, 2016). Bangladeshi police observed that Neo-JMB prefers Islami Chhatri Sangstha and Tablighi Jamaat (TJ)—two fundamentalist Islamist organizations—for female recruits. Neo-JMB also recruits immediate family members, such as husbands, brothers, or sisters ([Daily Star](#), August 20, 2016).

Women from different socio-economic strata have thus become Islamist militants in Bangladesh and broken the traditional tag of jihadist 'sisters and wives' in recent

years. Several Neo-JMB women members are presently in jail for furthering jihadism and conspiring to establish IS' caliphate. While investigating agencies are attempting to fathom the extent of women's participation in Neo-JMB's Islamist activities, unseen and often unsung members like Asma and Shirina remain a lifeline for the grassroots consolidation of jihadism in Bangladesh.

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Baluch Nationalist-Separatist Militant Alliance Threatens Pakistani Security Forces

Farhan Zahid

Pakistan's restive Baluchistan province has experienced a fresh wave of nationalist-separatist terrorist attacks since 2019, with new targets indicating shifting trends. Baluch nationalist-separatist militant groups have not only ramped up their attacks, but also have changed strategy and formed a new alliance. The implications of this are a steep incline in attacks against the Pakistani security forces.

Background of the Baluch Insurgency

Unlike Islamist insurgencies in Pakistan, which escalated after the Global War on Terrorism commenced in 2001, Baluch nationalist-separatist violence in Baluchistan is much older. The current insurgency, which can be considered the fifth iteration since Pakistan's independence in 1947, started after the death of Nawab Akbar Bugti, who was the head of the Bugti tribe, during a 2006 military operation ([Dawn](#), August 27, 2006). However, even before this incident, sporadic attacks against security forces were taking place in Kohlu and Dera Bugti districts since 2004. One major terrorist attack, for example, targeted then-President General Pervez Musharraf, who was making a speech in December 2005 in Kohlu ([Dawn](#), December 15, 2005).

The killing of Nawab Akbar Bugti sparked a new wave of violence in Baluchistan, which is still ongoing and has caused security forces, including the Pakistani military, paramilitary forces (Frontier Corps and Baluchistan Levies Force), and police, to become involved in combating various militant groups across the province, including local, regional and global groups. The latter, globally operating organizations, include Islamic State Khorasan Province and al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent. The Baluch nationalist-separatist insurgency is also important because Baluchistan is Pakistan's largest province. It is almost the size of Germany and comprises 42 percent of Pakistani territory and is the most sparsely populated province in Pakistan. The vast province also

has a coastal belt of almost 650 kilometers and borders Iran and Afghanistan.

Baluch nationalist-separatist militant groups mostly operate in southern and central Baluchistan. However, they have managed to perpetrate attacks all over the province. In 2019, for example, there were 84 such attacks, and in 2020 the number of attacks still increased, despite the severe COVID-19 outbreak in the province ([Dawn](#), January 8, 2020).

Shifting Tactics in Baluch Militancy

At least six major Baluch nationalist-separatist militant groups are currently operating in Baluchistan: Baluchistan Liberation Army (BLA), Baluchistan Republican Army (BRA), Baluchistan Liberation Front (BLF), United Baluch Army (UBA), Lashkar-e-Baluchistan (LeB) and Baluch Students Organization (BSO). The most potent among these are the BLA and BRA, which operate in central and southern Baluchistan districts, including Bolan, Sibi, Kharan, Khuzdar, Turbat, Awaran, Lasbella, Mastung, and Kalat. The other four groups operate in those same districts and some other districts, such as Naseerabad and Jaffarabad near Sindh province's border.

The BLA also has a suicide attack squad known as the Majeed Brigade, whose best known *fedayeen* (suicide) attacks targeted a five-star hotel recently built in Gwadar in May 2019 and another at the Pakistan Stock Exchange in June 2020 ([BBC Asia](#), May 12, 2019; [News International](#), June 30, 2020). The intensity of attacks by groups other than BLA and BRA have always been low and mostly involved perpetrating roadside IED blasts, assassinations of defectors and informers, bombings of railroad tracks and cell-phone towers, and attacks on security forces. These groups were also hampered by infighting and turf wars.

A shift in strategy, however, has become evident since the formation of a new group: Baluch Raji Ajohi Sangar (BRAS), meaning "Alliance for Baluch National Freedom" ([Terrorism Monitor](#), September 20, 2019). It is the first ever alliance between the four main Baluch nationalist-separatist militant groups in decades of the Baluch nationalist-separatist insurgency. BRAS comprises BRA, BLA, BLF, UBLF and is the brainchild of Dr. Allah Nazar Baluch, who was BLF's supreme leader and now is BRAS'

leader. He made the effort to combine forces of Baluch nationalist-separatists on November 10, 2018.

The slain leader of BLA's Majeed Brigade, Aslam Baluch (a.k.a. Achu), also announced the formation of the alliance, albeit not publicly. [1] The primary reason for the alliance is for the sharing and pooling of resources, including, weapons, equipment, personnel, intelligence, safe havens, and other materials in order to conduct attacks against Pakistani and Chinese China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) projects. Previously, the Baluch nationalist-separatist insurgents were not able to coordinate because of their different areas of operations, but after joining together they are expected to perform more effectively.

BRAS' Targeting of Security Forces

BRAS has been involved in several major attacks targeting the security forces, especially the Frontier Corps, a paramilitary organization. In one attack, BRAS targeted and killed 14 Coast Guard and naval personnel traveling back to Ormara Naval base near Gwadar district in southern Baluchistan in April 2019 ([Nation](#), April 19, 2019). Before that, BRAS claimed responsibility for killing nine security forces personnel in an IED attack in February 2019 in Turbat district ([Outlook](#), February 18, 2019). In yet another attack in the same area, BRAS claimed to have killed seven military personnel in October 2020 ([Dawn](#), October 16, 2020). BRAS further claimed that it was launching an operation that would be focused on only targeting security forces in Baluchistan in March 2020 ([News Intervention](#), March 2020).

Even in separate attacks not involving BRAS, Baluch nationalist-separatist organizations, such as UBA, appeared to be specifically focusing on the Pakistani military and Frontier Corps. This is a shift from their earlier tactics. They did not, in contrast, expend efforts on destroying railroad tracks or cell-phone towers that would negatively impact the lives of the masses.

Meanwhile, the increase in intensity of militancy in Baluchistan has garnered regional attention. The Pakistani government has, for example, repeatedly blamed archrival India for backing and bankrolling the Baluch nationalist-separatists perpetrating attacks in Baluchistan. Specifically, Pakistan alleges India seeks to sabo-

tage Sino-Pakistani business interests, especially because Baluchistan's Gwadar port is central to China's supposed Indo-Pacific 'string of pearls' strategy – referring to a series of Chinese bases and outposts along India's maritime periphery. New Delhi has repeatedly denied Islamabad's allegations ([dw.com](#), November 11, 2016). The BLA had also previously attacked China's embassy in Karachi in November 2018 and injured Chinese engineers in a roadside attack in Baluchistan three months before then ([Dawn](#), June 30, 2020).

Conclusion

The insurgency in Baluchistan appears to be growing compared even to the tempo witnessed in 2019 and 2020, and the insurgents are conducting attacks across the province. This means Pakistani security officers and policymakers must adopt new policy measures in order to reverse their momentum. However, this does not seem probable, and violence can be expected to increase.

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Notes

[1] Author's discussions with a senior security studies expert based in Islamabad, January 14, 2020

Iran's Resistance Axis Rattled by Divisions: Asaib Ahl al-Haq's Leader Rejects the Ceasefire in Iraq

Jacob Lees Weiss

On December 20, 2020, 21 Katyusha rockets struck the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad, breaking an Iranian-sponsored ceasefire in Iraq for a second time ([U.S. Central Command](#), December 23, 2020). The Iraqi security forces later arrested a member of the Iraqi political and militant organization Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), Hussam al-Azirjawi, after finding conclusive evidence of his involvement in the attack ([al-Hurra](#), December 26, 2020). Following al-Azirjawi's arrest, multiple widely-shared clips on social media appeared to show a large mobilization of armed AAH militants in East Baghdad. A further clip showing masked AAH gunmen threatening to attack Iraqi security forces on command from AAH leader, Qais al-Khazali ([al-Arabiya](#), December 25 2020). These arrests and video clips reveal that AAH has begun to show increasing signs of dissent from the party line set by Iran and its most loyal proxy in Iraq, Kata'ib Hezbollah. [1]

AAH's Signs of Division with Kata'ib Hezbollah and Iran

The Katyusha rocket attack on the U.S. embassy is the latest example of the apparent growing discord between the al-Khazali-led AAH on one side, and Iran and Kata'ib Hezbollah on the other. Previously, in October 2020, an Iranian-sponsored ceasefire announced by Kata'ib Hezbollah, but allegedly covering all Iranian-linked factions, proposed a conditional halt to operations targeting U.S. assets ([Rudaw](#), October 11 2020). A month later, a smaller militia, Ashab al-Kahf – seemingly unaffiliated to AAH or Kata'ib Hezbollah – launched eight rockets at the U.S. Embassy on November 17, 2020, in the first major ceasefire violation ([Mehr News](#), November 18 2020).

Following the attack, AAH's al-Khazali unilaterally announced that the ceasefire had ended ([al-Mayadeen](#), November 19, 2020). Kata'ib Hezbollah, in contrast,

condemned the ceasefire violation, which it described as resulting from either the idiocy and ignorance of a drunkard, or agency on behalf of former U.S. President Donald Trump. This implied, they alleged, that it was a false flag attack planned to distract from Trump's recent election loss ([al-Quds](#), November 18, 2020).

Furthermore, on November 24, Iran sent the commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps–Quds Force (IRGC-QF), Esmael Ghaani, who succeeded the late Qasem Soleimani, to Iraq to urge compliance with the ceasefire ([Middle East Monitor](#), November 24 2020). Al-Khazali publicly denounced Ghaani's visit, claiming that resistance to the U.S. occupation is an Iraqi nationalist project without need for Iranian interference ([al-Akhbariya](#), November 19 2020). While AAH never accepted responsibility for any subsequent attacks targeting U.S. assets, al-Khazali made clear his support for other smaller, and allegedly distinct, resistance groups who did target American assets, like Ashab al-Kahf ([al-Khazali](#), December 26). [2]

Iran's Hand in AAH's Formation

Since the 1980s Iran has attempted to recruit from the Iraqi Shia population to form militant and political organizations to safeguard its interests in Iraq. The oldest of these groups is the Badr Corps (now Badr Organization). It was formed as the IRGC-controlled military wing of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), which is a political organization formed by Iran consisting of exiled Shia refugees and activists. Badr Corps members, such as Hadi al-Ameri and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, went on to have significant influence in post-Saddam Hussein Iraq. [3]

Likewise, the IRGC established AAH in 2006 by recruiting al-Khazali, who at that time commanded a Jaysh al-Mahdi military brigade. Jaysh al-Mahdi was a militia formed by influential Iraqi Shia populist cleric Muqtada al-Sadr in 2003 to fight the U.S. occupation. Al-Khazali had initially been a loyal member of Jaysh al-Mahdi, or Mahdi Army, including even studying Islamic jurisprudence under the tutelage of Sadr's father, Grand Ayatollah Mohammad al-Sadr, in Najaf in the 1990s ([Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq](#), January 2020). However, by 2004 al-Khazali had begun to grow frustrated with Sadr's leadership ([Levant Networks](#), January 9). Iran exploited this rift by offering

extensive IRGC funding and training to al-Khazali to form AAH with the aim to add AAH to its list of proxies in Iraq. At the same time, Iran sought to weaken al-Sadr, who had always been reluctant to hand over his significant support base and influence to Iran.

However, and perhaps due to the precedent of infighting showcased by the splintering of AAH from the Mahdi Army, the IRGC created a smaller, more secure militia that it could trust to act completely under its command. Thus, under the guidance of IRGC General Qasem Soleimani and long-term Badr member Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the IRGC created Kata'ib Hezbollah. [4] The stature of Kata'ib Hezbollah group's two principal patrons, Soleimani and al-Muhandis, allowed it to exercise an influence that went beyond its relatively small size. Both Soleimani and al-Muhandis also had significant control over the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), which is the Iraqi state security umbrella organization encompassing the majority of the country's militias. [5]

Iran's Loosening Grip over AAH

AAH's rejection of the ceasefire was so surprising because it not only was a clear rejection of Iranian orders, but also because of the severity that its rebellion posed to Iranian interests. Both rocket attacks on the U.S. Embassy, which were either directly linked (December 20) or implicitly condoned (November 17) by AAH, were designed to overwhelm the embassy's C-RAM defense system. Iran had made it clear to its proxies that the scale of U.S. retaliation and the escalation in conflict that could ensue in the case of loss of U.S. life, particularly during the tail end of Trump's presidency, was not worth the risk ([Middle East Eye](#), November 24 2020).

There are two other intertwining factors behind the loosening of Iran's grip on AAH, however: the January 2020 U.S. assassination of Soleimani and al-Muhandis, and the rise of what some prominent Iraq analysts have come to describe as 'shadow militias.' [6] Iran's diverse portfolio of Iraqi militia and political groups may have had a distinct advantage compared to its strategy in Lebanon. In Lebanon, Iran's reliance on one dominant group, Hezbollah, has meant that Iranian influence has been contingent on Hezbollah's ability to outlast periods of domestic crisis. However, the Iraq strategy's diversity requires strong coordination among the many Iranian-

aligned militias to ensure obedience and cohesion within a single overall overarching party line. While the stature and respect commanded by Soleimani and al-Muhandis meant that this coordination was achievable, their replacements, Esmael Ghaani and Abu Fadak, have not been able to exert that same influence.

The assassinations also validated a shift that Soleimani had lobbied for since 2019 involving the establishment of numerous apparently distinct splinter militias to carry out attacks in place of the more established resistance groups such as Kata'ib Hezbollah and AAH. [7] The tactic of using these 'shadow militias' became prevalent throughout 2020, with dozens of groups such as Ashab al-Kahf and Sarayat Qassem al-Jabbarin seemingly emerging out of nowhere to claim responsibility for attacks targeting U.S. assets. [8] The confusion surrounding the use of these groups allowed Kata'ib Hezbollah and AAH to distance themselves from those attacks and hence complicate U.S. retaliation.

While the proliferation of these new groups created plausible deniability for the more established militias like Kata'ib Hezbollah and AAH, it came at the cost of further loosening Iran's hegemony over the Iraqi resistance to the U.S. military presence. This move downgraded the public role of its main proxy Kata'ib Hezbollah from being at the centre of the Iraqi resistance activities in 2019, to simply praising the 'shadow militias' on its social media channels in 2020. Secondly, it allowed groups to use the 'shadow militias' without Iranian direction and still maintain plausible deniability with Iran itself.

Al-Khazali's Gambit with AAH

The loosening of Iran's control over the 'resistance axis' in Iraq has allowed al-Khazali to rethink his relationship with Iran. Al-Khazali is a pragmatic operator seeking to preserve his power and influence over maintaining ideological dogma. This pragmatism is evidenced throughout his career. At the start of his career, he turned his back on the Sadr clergy, under whom he had studied for nearly a decade, to embrace Iran's Khomeinist *Wilayat al-Faqih* (guardianship by Islamist jurisprudence) ideology – Tehran's governing ideology. [9] Later, he accepted some of AAH's current sources of funding, which rely on taxation of criminal activities (prostitution) and business-

es (liquor stores and nightclubs) that are unacceptable to any form of Shiism.

Al-Khazali has confirmed that in the event of a permanent U.S. withdrawal from Iraq, there will no longer be any justification for the existence of armed resistance groups ([al-Akhbariya](#), November 19 2020). With the gradual U.S. withdrawal edging ever closer, al-Khazali is gearing up to secure the status of AAH. When the U.S. withdrew from Iraq for the first time in 2011, AAH decided to consolidate political and societal control by transforming itself into a political group. [10] However, at the time of the initial U.S. withdrawal, AAH needed Iranian leverage with the Iraqi government to allow AAH to function as a political party with the necessary funds to set up political offices under the AAH brand. However, in 2021, AAH no longer needs Iranian support because the organization's position in Iraq is already established, with its political wing currently holding 15 seats in parliament, many government posts under its control, and even its own dedicated television channel.

Al-Khazali is once again turning the focus of AAH inwards, but this time with greater autonomy from Iran. Rather, al-Khazali plans to further the status of AAH by positioning the group as the leader of the conservative Shia bloc. To do this, he will need to stave off competition from other Iranian-established groups, such as the Badr Organization and Kata'ib Hezbollah, and also groups outside of Iran's fold, such as Muqtada al-Sadr's Sadrist movement.

To compete with Kata'ib Hezbollah, the October 2020 ceasefire presented al-Khazali with a fantastic opportunity. By rejecting the ceasefire and defending the right for the 'shadow militias' to continue launching attacks, Kata'ib Hezbollah's position came to be seen as isolated and weak. In comparison, AAH's support for the continued attacks, despite Iranian attempts to reel them in, allowed the group to position itself as a heroic defender of Iraqi sovereignty.

AAH's shift toward a more nationalistic outlook will be vital ahead of the upcoming October 2021 general elections. AAH will have to compete with the Sadrist movement for the same working-class Shia electoral base. The Sadrist movement has always been more successful in this respect, largely due to Sadr's greater nationalistic

credibility. Whereas Sadr hails from important Iraqi Shia heritage, al-Khazali's switch of religious allegiance to the Iranian clergy, which came as a condition for Iranian funding and support, has always been a point of contention for many Iraqi Shia.

Conclusion

It is too early to assess whether al-Khazali will maintain AAH's splintering from the Iranian fold. Ultimately, al-Khazali is motivated by expanding the status and power of his group. Currently, he believes that amid the oncoming Iraqi general elections, diverging from the direct sphere of Iranian influence serves this goal. However, this approach will only remain viable contingent on the continued withdrawal of the U.S. military presence and the inability of domestic political movements to effectively challenge the place of sectarian groups such as the AAH in Iraq. As long as this remains the case, cracks in unity between the myriad Iraqi militia and political groups that Iran established will continue to grow as internal power struggles for territory, ideology or political power increase.

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Notes

[1] AAH would later deny being behind the attack, claiming that Azirjawi had been arrested on an unrelated criminal charge. The group also stated that the social media clips were fabricated and the armed militants were unknown to them (AA, December 26, 2020).

[2] Following on from his interpretation of the Shia concept of Defensive Jihad, al-Khazali claims that it is a divine right to oppose the U.S. military occupation. Regarding the targeting of diplomatic missions, al-Khazali has claimed that although he may not personally agree with the targeting of U.S. diplomatic missions at this specific time, he understands the motivations of other unnamed militia groups—perhaps in reference to Ashab al-Kahf— who consider the U.S. embassy to not be a true

diplomatic mission but a base for the CIA (al-Akhbariya, November 19 2020)

[3] See Afshon Ostovar, *Vanguard Of The Imam*, pg. 111, (Oxford University Press, April 2016)

[4] See Michael Knights, "Back into the Shadows? The Future of Kata'ib Hezbollah and Iran's Other Proxies in Iraq," (Combating Terrorism Center, October 2020)

[5] See Michael Knights, "Iran's Expanding Militia Army in Iraq: The New Special Groups," (Combating Terrorism Center, August 2019)

[6] See Tom Webster, "The Shadow Militias of the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Units," (International Affairs House, January 2021)

[7] Knights 2020.

[8] Such attacks are frequently posted on the Telegram channel 'Sabereen News' and either take the form of rocket attacks targeting the U.S. embassy in Baghdad, the Camp Victory U.S. military base attached to Baghdad International Airport or improvised explosive device attacks targeting U.S. logistic convoys across Iraq. With regards to the latter, Sarayat Qassem al-Jabbarin has increased the frequency of attacks to a roughly weekly basis- the most recent attack occurring in al-Diwaniya on January 30.

[9] According to mainstream Twelver Shia Islam, following the occultation of the twelfth imam, the clergy should act as the religious authority over society. The Wilayat al-Fiqh ideology, established by Ruhollah Khomeini, differs in not only that the remit is expanded to include both religious and political authority, but also that it should be in the hands of just one Islamic jurist- currently, Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.

[10] See Sam Wyer, "The Resurgence of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq" (Institute for the Study of War, December 2012).