

Position Papers

A NEW ERA OF DIVISIONS AMONG IRAQ'S MILITANT FACTIONS

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In Iraq, fresh divisions are emerging among armed Shiite factions aligned with the Qom marjaya against the backdrop of regional events triggered by the Israeli assault on Gaza. These groups have engaged in attacks on US targets, ostensibly to pressure both Washington and Tel Aviv to cease the Gaza war. Meanwhile, internal conflicts persist within the Iraqi Shiite community, marked by an unresolved dispute between the two prominent Shiite political coalitions: the Coordination Framework and the Sadrist Movement. This discord oscillates in response to internal and external developments, influencing these alliances' positions on contentious issues.

The emergence of tensions in Iraq is a cause for concern for Iran, fearing that these may escalate into clashes that undermine its ability to use militias as a decisive lever that it totally controls. These tensions further complicate Iran's dilemmas in Iraq, particularly given the pivotal role of armed groups in its expansionist strategy. These groups serve as the backbone for implementing Iran's geopolitical schemes, especially in Iraq, and are a key tool for preserving its gains and advancing its expansionist agenda. The divisions among these groups raise questions about their nature — peripheral or central — and the severity of the discord. This development also prompts an inquiry into Iran's role in mitigating these divisions and the future of the conflict between armed groups and US forces in Iraq. Will tensions subside, escalate intermittently within the traditional rules of engagement, or persist with escalations surpassing traditional engagement rules?

The Issues That Fueled Divisions and Tensions Among the Iran-Aligned Militias in Iraq

The current divisions among armed groups loyal to the Qom marjaya in Iraq are not unprecedented. These can be traced back to the killing of Quds Force Commander Major General Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the highest-ranking affiliate of the IRGC in Iraq, in a US drone strike near Baghdad International Airport in early January 2020. These divisions were central and entrenched, primarily revolving around power struggles for leadership positions within the Popular Mobilization Forces following Muhandis' death. Additionally, these encompassed disputes over resource allocation, influence over designating Iraqi prime ministers, and the targeting of foreign forces in Iraq.

The key issues pertaining to the recent divisions among militias in Iraq are discussed below:

The Scale of the Military Engagement Against US Targets as Part of the Response to the Ongoing War in Gaza

The latest outbreak of differences among militias centers on the extent of military action against US targets in Iraq, ostensibly to pressure the United States and Israel to halt the conflict in Gaza. However, evidence suggests that the primary objective behind targeting US assets is the removal of US forces from Iraq. This issue has sharply divided the militias, mainly due to the stance of the Iraqi government led by Mohammed Shia' al-Sudani. The government, formed by the Coordination Framework, rejects targeting US forces. However, this coalition includes factions with armed militias loyal to Iran, some of which engage in attacks against US targets. This division puts significant pressure and is a cause for embarrassment for the Iraqi government and its relationship with the United States, exacerbating its existing crises and challenges.

The militias have split into two categories:

The first faction, led by figures such as Abu Hussein al-Hamidawi of Iraqi Kata'ib Hezbollah and Akram al-Kaabi of Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, strongly advocates for military action against US targets amid the Gaza conflict. They continue to endorse the targeting of US assets in the region.

On the other hand, the second faction, represented by leaders like Qais Khazali of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and Hadi Al-Amiri of the Badr Organization, opposes military involvement and the scale of such action. Their stance does not support the US military presence in Iraq but rather stems from considerations tied to the political alliances within the Coordination Framework, which forms the current Iraqi government. They are wary of the impact of escalating tensions on the government's future.

The rise in influence of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, particularly since the formation of the Sudani government, has sparked significant unease within Kata'ib Hezbollah as the group perceives Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq's increasing control and its future trajectory within Iran's armed proxies in Iraq and the broader Iraqi political landscape as a cause for con-

cern. Media reports suggest that Khazali wields considerable power within the government, leading some militia leaders and political allies within the Coordination Framework to liken him to a “train that could run over whatever gets in its way.” This characterization has led to criticism and resentment from Kata’ib Hezbollah members, who see themselves as a major militia wielding substantial influence over Iran’s agenda in Iraq and other spheres of Iranian expansionism and clout spillover.

Similarly, leaders within the Coordination Framework, including Nouri al-Maliki, the head of the National Wisdom Movement Ammar al-Hakim, and former Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, alongside militia leaders like Khazali, have endeavored to reshape the perception of their alliances on the international stage. Maliki, Hakim and Abadi held meetings with the US Ambassador to Iraq Alina Romanowski, while Khazali met with the Australian Ambassador to Iraq Paula Ganley. Consequently, they oppose escalating attacks against US targets beyond the current rules of engagement. They argue that such escalation could risk ongoing efforts to improve their alliances’ external image. They fear that surpassing the rules of engagement and persisting in attacks against US targets might facilitate Washington’s ability to garner international consensus against them and even the Iraqi government, potentially leading to sanctions against the government in the future.

Differences Over Whether to Continue/Stop Military Operations Against US Targets

The discord between the two factions has not abated; instead, it has extended to include the faction advocating for military action against US targets. On February 1, 2024, the Iraqi Hezbollah Brigades announced a temporary halt in their attacks on US targets. This decision was not a strategic shift but rather a tactical move aimed at mitigating the intensity and scope of potential US military responses. This announcement followed accusations by the US administration, blaming Iran and its Iraqi militias for involvement in military assaults against US forces at Tower 22 in northeastern Jordan, near the Syrian border, on January 28, 2024. Under Iranian pressure, the militias were urged to adhere to the conventional rules of engagement and refrain from targeting US forces to prevent a forceful US retaliation. Such retaliation could have had grave implications for the militias’

future, particularly in light of the killing of three US soldiers at Tower 22.

However, it appears that Harakat al-Nujaba did not align with Kata'ib Hezbollah's stance to halt attacks on US and Israeli targets. Secretary-General of Harakat Nujaba [Akram al-Kaabi](#) previously announced, "[The Iraqi Islamic Resistance](#) decided to liberate Iraq militarily. It's an irrevocable decision. The next attacks will be more devastating: no stopping, no appeasement, no retreat." In the same vein, on March 3, 2024, the so-called Islamic Resistance in Iraq, comprising armed groups loyal to Iran in Iraq, launched assaults on Kiryat Shmona Airport in Israel, a strategic ally of the United States, using unmanned aerial vehicles.

The inter-militia disputes, particularly between Kata'ib Hezbollah and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, can be traced back to November 26, 2023, when Abu Hussein al-Hamidawi, in a [statement](#), listed the groups responsible for bombing US bases in Iraq, omitting Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq. The statement included Harakat Nujaba, the Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada and Ansarallah, urging other factions to join Kata'ib Hezbollah to end the US presence in Iraq, but without mentioning Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq. This omission sparked resentment and criticism from Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and it expressed security concerns regarding the future of the militias.

Regarding the statement, Jawad al-Talibawi, the spokesman for Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, criticized Kata'ib Hezbollah's move, asserting that it disregarded the [established principles](#) of resistance, endangering it and exposing it to potential threats while ignoring prevailing security conditions. Many observers speculated that Kata'ib Hezbollah's statement might have aimed to undermine Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq's role in confronting US forces, potentially embarrassing it in front of the Iraqi public. They suggest that the statement aimed to diminish Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq's popularity and thwart its prospects in future elections, thus curbing its influence over the Iraqi political landscape.

The Impact of the Shift in the US Policy of Deterrence on the Tensions Among the Armed Militias

The US deterrence policy against militia attacks on US targets in Iraq and Syria is undergoing a significant evolution in its approach, tools, intensity and outcomes. This shift is prompted by the militias'

recent violations of the established rules of engagement, coinciding with the conflict escalation in the Palestinian arena, which resulted in the deaths of three US soldiers at Tower 22. US retaliatory strikes have expanded beyond targeting militia military assets to include command and control centers, key leadership figures, missile launch sites, intelligence facilities and weapons depots. This policy aims to disrupt militia command structures and limit their ability to launch further attacks against US interests. Approximately 85 targets across seven sites in Iraq and Syria have been hit by US airstrikes, carried out predominantly by long-range B-1 bombers deploying over 125 precision-guided missiles. The strikes have inflicted significant casualties and losses, with militia leaders and fighters killed. According to Rami Abdulrahman, director of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 23 militia fighters were killed in US airstrikes in Syria. In Iraq, government spokesman Bassem Al-Awadi reported 16 fatalities, 36 injuries and several missing individuals, with strikes also targeting the security headquarters of the Popular Mobilization Forces.

In the preceding phase, the US response primarily consisted of airstrikes targeting militia arms caches and ammunition stores, with occasional strikes against fighters. Sanctions were imposed on certain militias and their leaders, with a greater emphasis on diplomatic efforts to halt attacks on US interests. The Syrian theater received more attention than Iraq, reflecting the strategic agreement between Washington and Baghdad.

In the recent escalation of military action against armed militias in Iraq and Syria, the Biden administration is pursuing a shift from warning strikes to precise retaliatory measures. These strikes are intended to send a strong deterrent message to Iran and its proxies while avoiding direct conflict. The goal is to weaken the militias and dissuade them from targeting US interests in the future. Amid regional tensions heightened by the war in Gaza, there is a concerted effort to prevent a larger-scale war, which all parties recognize would have disastrous consequences.

The Iranian Position on the Divisions Among the Militias Toward the Strikes on US Targets

Following the shift in the US deterrence policy toward militias in Iraq and Syria, Iran's stance on militia engagement against US targets

appears to have evolved. There is a growing inclination within Iran to support groups advocating adherence to traditional rules of engagement, possibly to avoid escalating tensions into a full-scale war with the United States, which would have significant repercussions for Iran's regional ambitions. Media reports indicate a visit by Quds Force Commander Ismail Qaani to Iraq on January 29, 2024. During this visit, he reportedly met with leaders of armed groups at Baghdad International Airport, shortly after Washington assigned blame to Iran and its militias for the killing of US soldiers at Tower 22. This visit is seen as an attempt to pressure militia leaders to curb or moderate attacks against US targets, particularly in the face of heightened US threats and pressure on Iran and the militias.

It appears that Iranian decision-makers have recognized the adverse outcomes stemming from the militias' actions against US targets, which risk escalating into a broader regional conflict that Iran seeks to avoid. The recent visit of Qaani to Baghdad suggests Iran's reluctance to see a wider conflict unfold in the Middle East, given the potential repercussions on its political system and regional ambitions. The decrease in militia attacks against US targets in Iraq following the shift in US tactics also indicates that Iran holds considerable influence over the situation in Iraq. Tehran seems to have the ability to dictate the level of escalation or de-escalation and even to determine the extent of involvement, underscoring its control over Iraqi militias. The swift response of Kata'ib Hezbollah to Iran's request to halt attacks against US targets is the best case in point.

Iran is acutely aware that any rifts among its militias in Iraq pose a significant threat to its geopolitical ambitions in the Middle East — for two critical considerations:

Firstly, these divisions occur within the ranks of the most prominent militias that pledge allegiance to the Qom authority, serving as key players in Iran's expansionist agenda in Iraq. Secondly, these tensions are unfolding within Iraq, a pivotal arena for Iranian expansionism due to its historical, geographical, political and economic significance. Iraq stands as a central component of Iran's strategy, serving as a linchpin for extending its influence across the region and implementing strategic corridors linking Tehran to the Mediterranean Sea.

Iran perceives that the perpetuation of divisions among its militias in Iraq would entail the loss of its paramount leverage in the country. Moreover, these divisions risk its grip on the most potent instrument for exerting control over the Iraqi landscape, thereby undermining its influence in a key sphere of Iranian expansionism. Furthermore, such divisions would impede the advancement of expansionist agendas across the Arab region, particularly given that the majority of these militias pledge allegiance to the Qom marjaya, operate under the direct auspices of the Quds Force and execute its directives. These militias are strategically positioned in key areas such as in oil-rich regions, and at vital international thoroughfares, and border crossings that link Iraq with neighboring Iranian territories, and in predominantly Shiite regions in southern Iraq.

The Future of Tensions Between the Militias and US Forces in Iraq

The future trajectory of the divisions among Iraqi armed groups hinges on several potential scenarios, all contingent upon the escalation dynamics between these groups and the United States within the Iraqi theater. These prospective scenarios encompass:

De-escalation

Three key indicators support this scenario. Firstly, Iran's expressed apprehension regarding the potential for militias to escalate attacks against US targets, thereby risking an open conflict with the United States. This concern was underscored by the visit of Qaani to Iraq, where he engaged with officials from various armed factions, indicating Iran's efforts to temper tensions. Secondly, the Iraqi government's stance against targeting US and international coalition forces, emphasizing their presence at the government's invitation and vowing to hold perpetrators accountable. The government's steadfast refusal to endorse attacks against US forces may serve as a crucial factor in maintaining stability. Lastly, internal discord among militias regarding the continuation of hostilities could potentially lead to a cessation of escalation against US targets, at least temporarily. This internal disagreement may prompt some factions to reconsider their approach, contributing to a reduction in tensions — though temporarily.

In the scenario of sustained de-escalation, the rifts between Iraqi militias would likely subside, paving the way for mutual understandings aimed at averting actions that could undermine their collective strength. Iran, eager to maintain the pivotal roles of these militias in advancing its objectives in Iraq, would exert greater efforts to prevent any discord among them.

Resuming Large-Scale Strikes While Surpassing the Traditional Rules of Engagement

If the conflict in the Gaza Strip continues raging, placing pressure on Hamas, a key player in the “Axis of Resistance,” or if the Biden administration opts for broader offensives against these militias — possibly in response to their support for Hamas amid its confrontation with Israel — then those militias opposing calm (de-escalation) would find ample rationale to resume targeting US interests.

In this scenario, the US reaction is anticipated to be harsh, particularly if lethal attacks target US troops, reminiscent of the recent incident in Jordan where three US soldiers were killed at the end of January. With profound disparities among Iraqi militias regarding the escalation against US assets, any breach of their customary rules of engagement would likely deepen the schisms among them.

Sporadic, Intermittent Strikes (Most Likely Scenario)

This scenario would see the militias becoming adamant about not returning to a state of calm, having learned from the forceful US retaliation following the killing of US soldiers at Tower 22. These militias might opt for sporadic strikes and periodic attacks on US targets, within or beyond Iraqi territories.

Given the sporadic nature of these assaults, the United States could be compelled to adhere to the conventional rules of engagement, responding in a restrained manner without escalating the situation. While this scenario may not exacerbate the existing divisions among the militias, it is likely to dampen their intensity. With limited attacks and correspondingly restrained US responses, the overall conflict may see a decrease in severity.



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