

Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq

AT A GLANCE

Overview
Organization
Strategy
Major Attacks
Interactions
Maps

HOW TO CITE

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SUMMARY

Formed: 2006

Disbanded: Group is active

First Attack: July-August 2006: Elements of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq fought alongside Hezbollah in the 2006 Lebanon-Israeli War (casualties unknown).¹

Last Attack: December 31, 2019: AAH participated in mass demonstrations near and attack on the U.S. embassy compound in central Baghdad (0 killed, unknown wounded).²

OVERVIEW

Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) is an Iranian-backed Shiite militant and political organization that split off from the Mahdi Army, another Shiite militia operating in Iraq. AAH was founded as a splinter group in 2006 under the leadership of Qais al-Khazali. The group is backed by Iran and promotes Iran's interests in Iraq. It primarily targeted U.S. troops prior to the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq in 2011, after which AAH rebranded itself as a political organization – while covertly continuing its militant campaign. Since the rise of the Islamic State (IS) in late 2013, the AAH has fought alongside the Iraqi government against IS. In 2018, its political wing became a member of the Fatah coalition in the Iraqi parliament, winning 15 seats in the following year's parliamentary elections.

NARRATIVE SUMMARY

Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH, "League of the Righteous" in Arabic) is an Iranian-backed Shiite militant organization. It is also sometimes called the Khazali Network. AAH was formed in January 2006 by Qais al-Khazali as a splinter group from a Shiite militia operating in Iraq known as the Mahdi Army. AAH is often referred to as one of the "Special Groups," a term used by the U.S. military to denote the Iranian-controlled Shiite militias operating in Iraq.³

Before founding AAH, Khazali commanded a brigade within nationalist Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army. The Mahdi Army was a Shiite militia established in 2003 in response to the U.S. invasion of Iraq. By 2004, Khazali and his followers within the Mahdi Army had begun to act independently of the group's leadership. Most notably, Khazali and his faction continued to fight U.S. troops in the summer of 2004 despite Sadr's order to the Mahdi Army to lay down its arms.⁴ While Khazali ultimately reconciled with Sadr, he split from the Mahdi Army with most of his brigade in early 2006. In establishing a new splinter group, Khazali sought greater autonomy and an opportunity to challenge Muqtada al-Sadr for authority among the Shiite armed groups.⁵

At the same time as their split from Muqtada al-Sadr and the Mahdi Army, Khazali and his armed group were recruited by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The IRGC had recently begun training a new coalition of militias in Iraq, and it invited Khazali to serve as the head of this "Special Groups Network," which became known as the Khazali Network.⁶ The militant group operating under the Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) name and with Khazali as its leader was first active in Iraq as early as July 2006, immediately after Khazali took over as head of the Iranian Special Groups Network. There is some uncertainty regarding the relationship between AAH and Khazali's Special Groups Network. Evidence suggests that AAH and the Khazali Network are two names for the same militant organization. However, it is possible that AAH was one of multiple affiliates comprising the Khazali Network.⁷ Given the overlapping leadership of AAH and the Khazali Network, this profile treats these two entities as different names for the same militant group.

Since its inception, AAH has relied heavily on Iranian funding, training, and logistical support. The group has become one of Iran's most influential and capable proxies in Iraq, carrying out Tehran's agenda and promoting its interests.⁸ Shortly after the group's creation, AAH elements fought alongside Hezbollah, another Iranian proxy militant organization, in the 2006 Israel-Lebanon War.⁹ AAH's fighters that participated in the war were extensively trained and funded by the IRGC.¹⁰ However, as of May 2021, there is evidence that AAH's relationship with the IRGC-QF is weakening. Observers believe this is due to the January 2020 killing of IRGC-QF commander Qasem Soleimani, whom observers identify as having been personally involved in forming the close relationship between AAH and Iran. Observers argue that Esmail Ghaani, Soleimani's successor as head of the IRGC-QF, is unable to exert the same degree of authority over the IRGC's Iraqi proxies as Soleimani had, leading to observed disagreements in strategy between the two throughout 2020.¹¹

At its inception in 2006, AAH's main targets were the U.S. coalition troops in Iraq. Between 2006 and 2011, the group claimed responsibility for over 6,000 attacks on U.S. forces.¹² Following one particularly deadly attack in March 2007 in which five Americans were killed in Karbala, U.S. forces captured Khazali and Hezbollah commander Ali Musa Daqduq. Akram al-Kabi, a close confidante of Khazali's and one of the AAH's top military commanders, temporarily assumed command of the organization until Khazali's release in early 2010.¹³

In 2008, Muqtada al-Sadr demanded that Kabi re-unite AAH with the Mahdi Army, but Kabi refused.¹⁴ After the Iraqi Army seized Basra from the Mahdi Army and other Shiite militia groups in 2008, the Mahdi Army negotiated peace with the government, while many of AAH's leaders fled to Iran. While in Iran, exiled AAH members received additional training and logistical support from the Iranian government and IRGC.¹⁵ AAH members who remained in Iraq continued to target coalition forces and the former Mahdi Army members.¹⁶

In December 2009, AAH orchestrated Khazali's release in exchange for the remains of one accomplice of Peter Moore, a British computer consultant whom AAH had taken hostage along with his four bodyguards in May 2007.¹⁷ Moore's four bodyguards were killed by AAH while in captivity.¹⁸ In February 2010, the group took another Western hostage, U.S. Department of Defense contractor Issa T. Salomi. Salomi was released in March 2010 in exchange for the release of four AAH fighters whom the Iraqi government had imprisoned.¹⁹

Shortly after the U.S. withdrawal in 2011, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki invited the group to enter the political process. AAH began to reorient itself toward formal politics and away from militancy in this new context.²⁰ The group sought to rebrand itself as an Iraqi nationalist political party. AAH shifted its goals from solely removing the U.S. military presence in Iraq to maintaining a Shiite-controlled Iraqi state, expanding Iranian influence in Iraq, eclipsing the Sadrist as the most influential Shiite group in Iraq, and providing social services to Iraq's Shiite population. AAH also expanded its operations and established a political office in Beirut, Lebanon, cementing its close ties to Hezbollah. Despite its new focus, the group did not renounce its former militancy and refused to surrender its weapon caches to the Iraqi government.²¹

In 2012, AAH attempted to garner support for its pro-Iranian political agenda by launching a massive poster campaign in which it distributed over 20,000 posters of Ayatollah Khamenei throughout Iraq.²² The group also conducted a series of assassinations of Sadrist leaders, hoping to weaken the group and take its place as the preeminent Shiite political faction in the country.²³ At Prime Minister Maliki's request, AAH formed a political wing, al-Sadiqoon ("the sincere ones" in English), ahead of the 2014 Iraqi parliamentary elections.²⁴ Al-Sadiqoon's leader, Adnan Fiham al-Dulaimi, is not known to be a member of AAH but has appeared in military fatigues in videos published through AAH-affiliated Al-Ahed TV and carries the title "sheikh," indicating a background in religious studies.²⁵

Al-Sadiqoon won a single seat in Iraq's 2014 parliamentary elections and allied itself with Maliki's Dawlat al-Qanoon ("State of Law" in English) coalition.²⁶ Hassan Salem Abbas Jabr held Sadiqoon's first and only parliamentary seat from 2014 to 2018, representing Baghdad province. The extent of Hassan Salem's connection to AAH proper is unclear. However, he notably appeared alongside several AAH leaders at a memorial service in 2019.²⁷

After AAH's entrance into politics, the group remained partnered with Maliki and his political coalition. AAH quickly earned itself a reputation for being the military muscle behind Maliki's Shiite political bloc.²⁸ For instance, in 2013, the Maliki government allegedly used AAH fighters to police Anbar province instead of the formal Iraqi police.²⁹ In late 2013 and early 2014, reports surfaced of AAH fighters jailing or executing anti-Maliki Sunni Arab tribesmen in southern and central Iraq. Human Rights Watch reported that AAH fighters killed 109 Sunni men in the outskirts of Baghdad between March 2014 and July 2014.³⁰

During this period, the AAH was also active in Syria.³¹ AAH had three goals in Syria: to defend the Assad regime, weaken and turn back the advance of the Islamic State (IS), and secure Iranian strategic interests. In 2013, AAH worked in conjunction with Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH), another Iranian-backed Shiite militia group, to establish Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba. This served as a front organization to channel AAH and KH fighters into Syria.³² Iran continued to provide logistical and financial aid in support of AAH's operations during this time, sharing an estimated 1.5-2 million USD with the group each month.³³

In Iraq, AAH pivoted to targeting IS strongholds. AAH fought alongside other militia groups, Iraqi security forces, and U.S. troops as a member of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF, *Hashd as-Shaabi* in Arabic). Founded in 2014, the PMF is a state-sponsored umbrella group composed of approximately forty Iraqi militias, the largest number and most powerful of which are Shia.³⁴ Lacking a strong regular security force, the Iraqi government partnered with sectarian militias, some of which had existed for decades, to assist in liberating IS-held areas.³⁵ For AAH, the PMF apparatus was an important source of influence and recruitment. As a constituent group within the PMF, AAH gained many recruits amongst the Shia tribes of southern and central Iraq.³⁶

As a member of the PMF, AAH cooperated with U.S. forces to target IS. Despite the group's opposition to the United States during its occupation of Iraq, AAH shifted its anti-U.S. position. In 2015, an AAH spokesman released a statement that communicated the group's willingness to accept a U.S. military presence in Iraq to combat IS insofar as the U.S. presence operated under the supervision of the Iraqi government.³⁷ In March 2016, reports surfaced that AAH was in possession of several U.S. vehicles and military equipment, including at least two M113 armored personnel carriers.³⁸ However, on March 21, 2016, AAH released an anti-U.S. statement via its television channel, al-Ahad: "if the U.S. administration doesn't withdraw its forces immediately, we will deal with them as forces of occupation." The statement is believed to have been released in

response to an announcement made by the United States in the previous week that it had sent additional troops to Iraq to bolster coalition efforts against IS.³⁹

Beginning in 2017, AAH played integral roles in multiple PMF-led offensives against IS. AAH's most notable efforts were in offensives against the Islamic State near al-Qa'im and Kirkuk.⁴⁰ Photos of the al-Qa'im offensive show the AAH using expensive military equipment, including what appeared to be an Iranian T-72 tank.⁴¹ During the offensives, AAH also continued to engage in sectarian targeting and violence, reportedly raiding Sunni homes in Kirkuk.⁴²

AAH also participated in recapturing the town of Abu Kamal on the eastern border of Syria in November of 2017.⁴³ While this episode occurred as part of the counter-IS campaign in Syria, it illustrates how Iran has used its proxy forces to pursue strategic depth in the Middle East. Analysts describe Abu Kamal as a town of great strategic value. Its seizure enabled Iran to create a land route from Iran to Lebanon, allowing Iran to supply ordnance to Hezbollah directly.⁴⁴ After the operation, AAH leader Khazali traveled to the Israel-Lebanon border with a Hezbollah escort and emphasized his group's willingness "to stand united with the Lebanese people and the Palestinian cause in the face of the Israeli occupation."⁴⁵ This appearance shows that the links between the various Iran-backed militant groups, such as AAH and Hezbollah, are extensive and allow the easy movement of ordnance and troops between Iraq and Lebanon through an Iranian-supported network.

As the fight against IS in Iraq progressed, AAH also invested further in parliamentary politics.⁴⁶ In January 2018, AAH's political affiliate al-Sadiqoon joined a coalition called Fatah al-Mubin ("Manifest Victory" in Arabic). The Fatah coalition consisted primarily of the political wings of PMF units supported by Iran.⁴⁷ AAH and the Fatah coalition were successful during the 2018 parliamentary elections. Out of the 329 seats in parliament, Fatah won 47 seats, the second most seats allocated to a coalition behind Muqtada al-Sadr's Sairoon alliance (which won 54 seats). Of Fatah's 47 total seats, AAH's political wing al-Sadiqoon won 14.⁴⁸ Spokesmen for AAH indicated a clear desire to expel U.S. forces during the run-up to the election. This rhetorical campaign culminated in Fatah's instrumental role in orchestrating the passage of a January 2020 parliamentary resolution calling on the government to expel U.S. troops from Iraq.⁴⁹

In response to growing internal discontent in Iraq, AAH has sought to suppress demonstrations and intimidate protesters. Beginning in October 2019, anti-government protestors demonstrated in Baghdad and across Iraq's southern provinces. Their grievances centered on government corruption and failure to foster economic opportunity and provide public services.⁵⁰ As the movement progressed, protestors condemned Iran for enabling government corruption and interfering in Iraqi affairs through PMF.⁵¹ Iraqi security forces forcefully cracked down on protests with tear gas and live ammunition, and over 100 people died as a result of the violence in the first six days of demonstrations.⁵²

By January 2020, the death toll from the protests was over 600, with thousands of injuries and an unknown number of arrests and torture cases.⁵³ Iraqi Interior Ministry spokesman Saad Maan released a statement that Iraqi security forces did not fire on protestors and that all mass shooting deaths were the responsibility of militant groups.⁵⁴ PMF spokesman Ahmed Jassim al-Asadi denied any PMF presence.⁵⁵ However, since the beginning of mass protests in Iraq in October 2019, AAH has sought to suppress demonstrations and intimidate protesters as they believe the systemic change to Iraq's political system the protesters demand would diminish their influence within the country. Activists and observers, including the U.S. government, have accused AAH of using violent tactics to disperse and intimidate protesters in Baghdad, Nasiriyah, and other major cities. Observers accuse AAH of deploying snipers on top of roofs overlooking major protest sites.⁵⁶ AAH and other major militias have also been blamed for the disappearances and killings of prominent protest movement leaders and civil activists in Iraq.⁵⁷ AAH spokespeople and AAH leader Khazali have denied all accusations levied against the group.⁵⁸

In October 2020, AAH drew criticism for allegedly permitting the massacre of eight civilians in al-Farhatiyah, southern Salah ad-Din province. The governor of Salah ad-Din province criticized the group's alleged inaction, as the area was reportedly within the jurisdiction of the AAH-affiliated 42nd PMF brigade.⁵⁹ The governor argued it was impossible for the perpetrators "who numbered 20 people" to carry out the executions without arousing the awareness of security forces in the area. AAH officials later announced the group intended to comply with an investigation into the incident and punish any of its members found to be responsible; as of June 2021, there have not been any reports of the results of this investigation.⁶⁰ In May 2021, the U.S. Department of State released Iraq's section of the 2020 Report on International Religious Freedom. In the section, the State Department reported that the al-Farhatiyah massacre's victims were Sunni and that the incident appeared to be another episode in a series of retaliatory abuses committed by Shiite sectarian militants against Sunni civilians.⁶¹ The report also concluded that the AAH-affiliated 42nd PMF brigade was itself responsible for executing the massacre – a far more severe allegation than the claim made by the governor of Salah ad-Din province several months earlier.⁶² The report also alleged that AAH sought to intimidate Christian civilians into leaving their homes in the Christian-majority Bartella region of Ninewa province, and reported that AAH, alongside several other groups, has converted several Sunni mosques in Diyala province into PMF headquarters.⁶³

While AAH's everyday combat activities against IS in Iraq have decreased in frequency and scope since 2017, the group has been militarily active across the country in recent years. Since 2017, the group has operated primarily in Salah ad-Din, Kirkuk, Diyala, and Ninewa provinces.⁶⁴ As of October 2020, PMF brigades known to be under AAH or its affiliates' control include the 41st, 42nd, and 43rd PMF brigades.⁶⁵

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

A. LEADERSHIP

Qais al-Khazali (2006-present): Khazali is the founder of AAH. As of May 2021, he is still leading the group. He was a pupil of the prominent Shiite cleric Mohammad Sadiq al-Sadr and served as a military commander in the Mahdi Army, a militant group led by Sadr's son Muqtada al-Sadr. Khazali broke with the Mahdi Army in 2006 to establish AAH. British forces captured Qais al-Khazali and his brother Laith and senior Hezbollah operative Ali Mussa Daqduq in Basra in March 2007.⁶⁶ He was held prisoner until January 2010, when he was released in exchange for the remains of one of contractor Peter Moore's bodyguards, whom the group had taken hostage in May 2007.⁶⁷ Akram al-Kabi led AAH during Khazali's detention.⁶⁸ Khazali is AAH's most visible figure, regularly delivering statements on its behalf regarding its political and military outlook. Khazali was designated by the U.S. Department of Treasury for human rights abuses in December 2019 and by the U.S. Department of State as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist in January 2020.⁶⁹

Akram al-Kabi (2006 to present): Kabi has been one of the key leaders of AAH since its inception in 2006, before which he was one of the foremost military commanders in the Mahdi Army. Kabi assumed leadership of AAH after Khazali's capture in March 2007, relinquishing the position after Qais al-Khazali's release in January 2010. Since 2013, he has served as the leader of Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, a front organization established by AAH and Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH) that has coordinated Iraqi militants to fight on behalf of the Assad regime in the Syrian civil war.⁷⁰

Laith al-Khazali (2006-present): Laith al-Khazali is Qais al-Khazali's brother. He has been a member of AAH's core leadership since its inception in 2006.⁷¹ British forces in Basra captured Laith al-Khazali in March 2007 along with his brother Qais and senior Hezbollah operative Ali Mussa Daqduq.⁷² He was released in June 2009 as part of a "reconciliation effort" between the Iraqi government and AAH.⁷³ Laith al-Khazali was designated by the U.S. Department of Treasury for human rights abuses in December 2019 and by the U.S. Department of State as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist in January 2020.⁷⁴

Mohammed al-Tabatabai (unknown-present): Tabatabai is among AAH's core leaders. He became a trusted friend of Qais al-Khazali while studying under Mohammed Sadiq al-Sadr in the 1990s.⁷⁵

Ali Mussa Daqduq (unknown-present): While not officially a member of AAH, Daqduq is a senior Hezbollah operative who is in charge of coordinating AAH and Hezbollah operations and has often served as a liaison between AAH and the Iranian government. He is also a senior advisor to Qais al-Khazali and was captured by British forces along with Qais and Laith al-Khazali in Basra in March 2007.⁷⁶ He was released on November 16, 2012 by the Iraqi government.⁷⁷ The U.S. Department of the Treasury designated Daqduq in November 2012 for his association with Hezbollah and the group's activities.⁷⁸

Hassan Salem (unknown-unknown): Salem was believed to be the head of AAH's militia branch in 2012 when the group carried out a series of political assassinations.⁷⁹ Salem has also served as a member of the Iraqi Parliament and the leader of the al-Sadiqoon party, AAH's main political wing, within parliament.⁸⁰ Salem began his term in parliament after al-Sadiqoon won one seat in the 2014 parliamentary elections. Salem was re-elected in 2018 as a candidate for the Fatah Coalition, a political umbrella of which al-Sadiqoon was a member.⁸¹ As of March 2021, Salem continues to serve in parliament.

Qasem Soleimani (2006-2020): Major General Qasem Soleimani was the commander of the Quds Force, the division within the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in charge of extra-national militant activities and clandestine operations. Although not a member of AAH, Soleimani was responsible for establishing and funding the group. He is believed to have wielded considerable authority among AAH's leadership. For instance, Soleimani personally supervised and directed AAH's activities from their founding, and he even acted to mediate internal conflict among the group's leadership.⁸² Soleimani was killed in a U.S. drone strike near Baghdad International Airport on January 3, 2020.⁸³ Since Soleimani's death, ties between AAH and the IRGC-QF have reportedly weakened.

B. NAME CHANGES

Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq ("League of the Righteous" in Arabic) is also known as the Khazali Network or the Khazali Special Groups Network.⁸⁴ The group was also briefly known as Ashab al-Kahf ("Companions of the Cave" in Arabic) around the time of its initial breakaway from the Mahdi Army.⁸⁵

C. SIZE ESTIMATES

- 2007: 3,000 (Associated Press/Fox News)⁸⁶
- February 9, 2014: 1,000 – 5,000 (The Washington Post)⁸⁷
- March 15, 2015: 10,000 (Voice of America)⁸⁸
- August 2019: 10,000 (Combating Terrorism Center, USMA West Point)⁸⁹
- October 2020: 15,000 (U.S. Department of Justice, citing Iran Wire)⁹⁰

D. RESOURCES

AAH is an Iranian proxy group operating in Iraq and receives extensive funding from the Iranian government – particularly from the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' Quds Force (IRGC-QF). In 2014, Iraqi intelligence officials estimated that AAH received between 1.5-2 million USD per month from the IRGC.⁹¹ Much of this money was channeled to AAH through IRGC-QF commander Major General Qasem Soleimani. After Soleimani's death in 2020, funds to AAH were directed by Brigadier General Esmail Ghaani, Soleimani's successor. The Quds Force has also helped to train and equip AAH soldiers. New recruits to AAH were often sent to either Iran or Hezbollah training camps in Lebanon for a two-week training course before being deployed in the field.⁹²

Iran has also paid the families of killed AAH fighters up to \$5,000 and covered the fallen fighter's burial cost.⁹³

Like many of its militia counterparts, AAH controls several checkpoints within Iraq from which they gain revenue by levying illegal taxes for passage through the checkpoint. Most notably, AAH reportedly controls the al-Abayji checkpoint on the highway between Baghdad and southern Salah ad-Din province (netting roughly \$30,000 daily for the group) and the al-Ghalibiya checkpoint east of Baghdad (earning \$10-20,000 daily).⁹⁴ The group also controls several ordnance factories in Nahrawan, Bismayah, and Jurf al-Nasr.⁹⁵

Additionally, unconfirmed reports have alleged that AAH has received funding from former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and that some AAH fighters have been recruited into a special paramilitary force led by Maliki himself. Maliki, too, receives significant aid and support from Iran.⁹⁶

As a member of the PMF, AAH has access to the Defense Ministry's budgetary allocation to PMF units. The 2021 Iraqi federal budget allocated roughly \$3.14 billion for the PMF – nearly 50% more than the previous budget of 2019.⁹⁷ However, it is unclear exactly how much of this total AAH receives.

AAH also reportedly has access to military equipment made by the United States. In March 2016, reports surfaced on international media outlets that AAH and Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH), another Iranian-funded Iraqi Shiite militia, were seen transporting and operating U.S.-made vehicles and other military equipment in Samarra, where the two militias were engaged against IS. It remains unclear how the vehicles and equipment came into AAH and KH possession. Some observers have speculated that U.S.-made small arms and military vehicles are frequently stolen from Iraqi government stockpiles and sold on the black market to the militias and private buyers.⁹⁸

E. GEOGRAPHIC LOCATIONS

Disclaimer: This is a partial list of where the militant organization has bases and where it operates. This does not include information on where the group conducts major attacks or has external influences.

AAH operates primarily within Iraq and is headquartered in Baghdad, where it has two political offices. It also maintains offices in al-Khalis, Basra, Tal Afar, Hillah, and Najaf and has contacts with tribal leaders in Dhi-Qar, Muthanna, and Maysan provinces.⁹⁹ After Khazali was released from custody in 2010, he and other AAH leaders relocated to Iran to manage AAH operations. After the U.S. withdrawal in 2011, the majority of AAH's leadership returned to Baghdad.¹⁰⁰ In 2013, reports surfaced that the Maliki government was using AAH fighters in lieu of the Iraqi police force in Anbar province and as riot police in Baghdad.¹⁰¹ Between 2014 and 2017, AAH participated in anti-IS operations as part of the Popular Mobilization Forces. It participated in operations across northern, western, and central Iraq.¹⁰²

AAH started to expand its operations to areas outside of Iraq in 2011. Though elements of AAH had fought alongside Hezbollah in the 2006 Israel-Lebanon War, the group's initial area of operations was predominantly limited to Iraq. In 2011, however, the group established a political presence in Lebanon and sent representatives to meet with Hezbollah, Hamas, and Lebanese government officials.¹⁰³ Following orders from Iran, AAH also began to send fighters to Syria to fight alongside Hezbollah and Assad government forces.¹⁰⁴ In 2013, AAH joined with Kata'ib Hezbollah to form a front group, Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, to provide military support to the Assad regime in Syria.¹⁰⁵

Within Iraq, the group has operated primarily in Baghdad, Salah ad-Din, Kirkuk, Diyala, and Ninewa provinces since 2017.¹⁰⁶ Observers in 2019 estimated that AAH had become the most powerful political and economic actor in the region of Iraq between the cities of Samarra and Baghdad. Moreover, the U.S. government estimated in October 2020 that AAH wields *de facto* control of the northern Baghdad belts – the exurbs and rural areas surrounding the northern edges of Baghdad.¹⁰⁷ The group maintains training sites in Basra, Karbala, Jurf al-Nasr, and Jalula, as well as ordnance factories in Nahrawan, Bismayah, and Jurf al-Nasr.¹⁰⁸ AAH also controls two checkpoints – one northwest of Baghdad and one east of Baghdad – from which they extract revenue by levying illegal taxes on passing vehicles.¹⁰⁹ The group also made significant inroads among the Shia Turkmen of southern Kirkuk and Sulaymaniyah provinces – a territory traditionally dominated by the Badr Organization.¹¹⁰

STRATEGY

A. IDEOLOGY AND GOALS

AAH is a Shiite organization that promotes the ideals of the Iranian Revolution, most notably the doctrine of *Wilayat al-Faqih* (“guardianship of the jurists” in Arabic). *Wilayat al-Faqih* entails the complete implementation of political Shiism under a faqih, or Islamic jurist, who is entrusted with temporal political authority over God's people. Ruhollah Khomeini developed the doctrine in the 1970s and established Iran's post-revolutionary theocratic government. As head of this government, Khomeini took up the position of Grand Ayatollah in line with the doctrine of *Wilayat al-Faqih*.¹¹¹

AAH is often called a Khomeinist organization and follows Iran's current Grand Ayatollah, Ayatollah Khamenei, as their *marja'* – an eminent Shiite cleric to whom followers look for political and spiritual guidance. In line with its allegiance to Iran and the principles of the Iranian Revolution, AAH seeks to institute a Shia Islamic government in Iraq by establishing the shariah as the country's sole legal system and entrusting governance to a qualified jurist. As a result, AAH shares considerable ideological overlap with Hezbollah in Lebanon and other Khomeinist groups in Iraq.¹¹² In addition to looking to Iran for spiritual guidance, AAH also retains a close spiritual

allegiance to Mohammed Sadiq al-Sadr, one of Iraq's most famous and revered Shiite clerics.¹¹³

During the U.S. occupation of Iraq, AAH's main goal was the expulsion of U.S. troops from Iraq and thus directed the majority of its attacks against U.S. forces in the region.¹¹⁴ However, since the U.S. withdrawal in 2011, AAH has sought to rebrand itself as an Iraqi nationalist political organization rather than an explicitly anti-Western group. Despite its attempts to portray itself as nationalist, AAH promotes Iranian interests in Iraq and pursues closer links between the two states.¹¹⁵ Ultimately, the group aims to establish a Shia-controlled state and implement the *shariah* throughout Iraq. Concurrently, the group also sought to support the Assad regime in Syria and prevent the anti-Shia Islamic State (IS) advance in both Syria and Iraq.¹¹⁶

As of late 2020, there is evidence of a disagreement in strategy between AAH and Iran. In response to IRGC commander Esmail Ghaani's request in November 2020 that the *muqawama* ("resistance factions," a nickname used to distinguish Iran-aligned militias) refrain from attacking the U.S. in Iraq, AAH leader Qais al-Khazali asserted, "the Americans occupy our country [Iraq], not yours [Iran]."¹¹⁷ Khazali clarified the group's relationship with Iran, stating that although "there is a convergence of interests between the *muqawama* and Tehran," this convergence does not "change the fact that the Iraqi resistance has 100% patriotic motives."¹¹⁸

Recently, AAH has begun to expand its nationalistic outlook from a purely anti-U.S. and anti-Israel point of view. Since the beginning of Turkey's military operations targeting Kurdish militias in northern Iraq in June 2020, AAH and other *muqawama* groups have denounced Turkey and called for retaliation. In June 2020, AAH leader Qais al-Khazali condemned the Turkish military operation and demanded the federal and Kurdish regional governments redevelop their policies to confront Turkey's "dangerous violation of Iraqi sovereignty."¹¹⁹ Several months thereafter, in November 2020, Khazali said that Turkey's military presence in northern Iraq "would be more dangerous, bigger, and more extreme than the American threat," warranting a strong military and diplomatic response from the Iran-aligned "resistance factions" and the federal and regional governments.¹²⁰

B. POLITICAL ACTIVITIES

Following the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq in December 2011, AAH declared its intention to join the Iraqi political process and transition away from militancy, which Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki helped facilitate.¹²¹ By 2012, AAH began rebranding itself as a nationalist Shiite political party.¹²² The group established political offices in Baghdad, al-Khalis, Basra, Tal Afar, Hillah, and Najaf. AAH also sent political delegations to meet with tribal leaders in Dhi-Qar, Muthanna, and Maysan provinces, and it began providing charitable services to Shiite communities across the country.

AAH's entry into formal politics drew the ire of the Sadrists – a political movement consisting mainly of Shiite Islamist, Iraqi nationalists that follow Muqtada al-Sadr, an influential Shiite cleric in Iraq. Before AAH announced its intention to enter formal

politics, the Sadrists were the primary allies of Maliki's Dawlat al-Qanoon ("State of Law" in English) coalition in Parliament and had had a history of tensions with AAH; to this end, Muqtada al-Sadr stated in 2010 that he would not allow AAH to participate in politics because of the group's history of "murdering Iraqi civilians."¹²³ AAH's entry into formal politics appeared to tip the balance of power in Parliament away from the Sadrists by creating a new potential ally for Maliki/Dawlat al-Qanoon.¹²⁴ In addition to the Sadrists' parliamentary rivalry with AAH, the two groups' histories and competing Shiite Islamist ideologies made cooperation unlikely, if not impossible. AAH was formed in 2006 by defectors from Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army who sought strategic autonomy and closer political and military ties to Iran – whose influence in Iraq and ideology the Sadrists opposed.¹²⁵ Tensions resulting from the groups' ideological differences were compounded by irreconcilable political goals, as both groups wished to become the preeminent social and political organization among Iraqi Shia.¹²⁶ In the 2014 Iraqi parliamentary elections, AAH's political party, al-Sadiqoon, won one seat in Parliament and allied with Maliki's Dawlat al-Qanoon coalition.¹²⁷

In preparation for the 2018 parliamentary elections, Sadiqoon stepped up its public presence. The group proved adept at campaigning. It utilized a lively and polished social media presence and provided various public services – such as building schools and sponsoring soccer games.¹²⁸ AAH also offered humanitarian aid following earthquakes in northern Sulaymaniyah province in November 2017, though residents ultimately refused to accept AAH's aid, citing its reported history of human rights abuses.¹²⁹ Alongside this aid to the community, there were also incidents of violence on the campaign trail. In one notable incident, AAH personnel opened fire on students at the University of al-Qadisiyah after they threw their shoes at AAH leader Qais al-Khazali.¹³⁰

In January 2018, al-Sadiqoon joined a coalition called Fatah al-Mubin ("Manifest Victory" in Arabic) comprised primarily of Iraqi militias supported by Iran, such as KH, AAH, the Badr Organization, and Kata'ib Imam Ali.¹³¹ Hadi al-Ameri, the leader of the Badr Organization, led the Fatah Coalition from its founding until his resignation in June 2020.¹³² During his tenure as head of the Badr Organization and the Fatah Coalition, Ameri maintained extensive ties to Iran and the Quds Force.¹³³ It appears as though Fatah is the political wing of Iran's broader effort to gain more influence in Iraq, given the inclinations of many of its leaders and constituent parties towards Tehran and its religious authorities: the bloc's leader, Hadi al-Amiri, stated Fatah "is the same project of Imam Khomeini," referring to Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the founder of Iran's theocratic government.¹³⁴

AAH and the Fatah coalition were quite successful in Iraq's May 2018 parliamentary elections. Out of the 329 seats in the Iraqi parliament, Fatah won 47 seats, the second most of any coalition behind Muqtada al-Sadr's Sairoon alliance (which won 54 seats). AAH's Sadiqoon won 15 of Fatah's 47 total seats.¹³⁵ With the largest share of seats in parliament, Sadr's Sairoon alliance began to assemble a governing coalition.¹³⁶ However, Fatah later claimed a majority of its own after striking an alliance with Maliki's Dawlat al-Qanoon coalition and defecting members of Prime Minister Abadi's coalition.¹³⁷ After a period of parliamentary gridlock, Fatah eventually backed the formation of prime

minister-designate Adel ‘Abd al-Mahdi’s government with Sairoon at the head of the governing coalition in parliament.¹³⁸

Since entering parliament, AAH and Fatah have used their considerable political clout to advance their own interests and align Iraq’s politics closer to Iran. For example, in the lead-up to the 2018 elections, spokesmen for AAH made their interest in expelling U.S. forces clear.¹³⁹ Months later, in January 2020, AAH-aligned lawmakers within Fatah played a substantial role in orchestrating the passage of a parliamentary resolution calling on the government to expel U.S. troops from Iraq following the death of IRGC-Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani.¹⁴⁰

Fatah and AAH played an important role during the formation of the new Iraqi government in early 2020. Fatah initially opposed Mustafa al-Kadhimi’s nomination to the Iraqi premiership. However, after receiving the bloc’s choice candidate for the position of Labour & Social Affairs Minister, Fatah voted for Kadhimi’s government.¹⁴¹

Alongside its broader efforts to expand its influence within Iraq’s formal politics, AAH has recently begun to show a significant capacity to organize street protests to promote its views and defend its interests. The most notable instance of AAH-sponsored protest activity came on December 31, 2019. The group played a role in organizing and executing the militia-led demonstrations near the U.S. embassy compound in central Baghdad. AAH leader Qais al-Khazali was photographed attending the demonstration, alongside then-KH leader Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and Badr Organization leader Hadi al-Amiri.¹⁴² The demonstrations escalated into an attack on the U.S. embassy by protestors.¹⁴³

AAH has also expanded its political influence into Lebanon, where it established a political office and sent delegations to meet with Hamas, Hezbollah, and Lebanese government officials in 2011.¹⁴⁴ However, as of May 2021, there is no evidence indicating whether AAH continues to operate this office in Lebanon.

C. TARGETS AND TACTICS

During the U.S. occupation of Iraq, AAH primarily targeted U.S. troops and their Iraqi allies. The group claimed responsibility for over 6,000 attacks on U.S. soldiers between 2006 and 2011. AAH was known for its use of explosively formed penetrators (EFPs) and improvised rocketed-assisted mortars (IRAMs) against U.S. troops and its high-profile kidnappings and executions of western nationals and Iraqi citizens working for western corporations.

The Islamic State’s (IS) rise to prominence in 2013-14 created a common enemy for AAH and the United States. As a member of the Popular Mobilization Forces, AAH engaged in limited cooperation with U.S. troops. However, the group maintained a level of animosity toward the United States. For example, in 2016, AAH released a statement threatening to attack U.S. personnel in Iraq.¹⁴⁵

Following the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq in 2011, AAH reoriented itself toward formal political participation in Iraqi politics. Though the group claimed a commitment to non-violence, it refused to surrender its weapons to the Iraqi government. In 2012, AAH used these weapons to assassinate several Sadrist candidates participating in the 2013 elections.¹⁴⁶

After AAH's entrance into politics, the group remained partnered with Prime Minister Maliki and his political coalition. AAH quickly earned itself a reputation for being the military muscle behind Maliki's Shiite political bloc.¹⁴⁷ AAH was accused of standing in for the police force in Anbar province on Prime Minister Maliki's orders. The group also reportedly conducted purges of anti-Maliki Sunni tribesmen in Iraq's southern provinces to ensure a Shiite demographic majority in those provinces.¹⁴⁸ A report published by Human Rights Watch in July 2014 corroborated these claims and accused AAH of killing 109 Sunni tribesmen between March and July 2014 in the towns surrounding Baghdad.¹⁴⁹

In 2017, AAH's political wing, al-Sadiqoon, joined the Fatah Coalition.¹⁵⁰ AAH's political capital grew with Fatah's success in the 2018 elections, in which it gained 15 seats in Parliament.¹⁵¹ For more information about AAH's political activities, see the "Political Activities" section of this profile.

In October 2019, anti-government protestors demonstrated in Baghdad and across Iraq's southern provinces. Their grievances centered on government corruption and failure to foster economic opportunity and provide public services.¹⁵² As the movement progressed, protestors condemned Iran for enabling government corruption and interfering in Iraqi affairs through PMF.¹⁵³

Iraqi security forces and PMF forces both aggressively cracked down on the protests. AAH has worked alongside regular security forces to suppress demonstrations and intimidate protesters. AAH has been accused of using violent tactics to disperse and intimidate protesters in Baghdad, Nasiriyah, and other major cities, including deploying snipers on rooftops overlooking major protest sites.¹⁵⁴ AAH and other militias have also been accused of carrying out the kidnappings and killings of prominent protest movement leaders and civil activists in Iraq.¹⁵⁵ AAH also reportedly clashed with other armed groups that sought to protect protesters from abuse. For example, AAH militants clashed at first with protesters and later with members of Muqtada al-Sadr's Saraya al-Salam that had sided with protesters in the southeastern city of Amarah.¹⁵⁶ By February 2021, the death toll from the protests was over 600, with thousands of injuries and an unknown number of arrests and torture cases.¹⁵⁷ AAH and its leader Qais al-Khazali have denied all accusations levied against the group.¹⁵⁸

AAH has also returned to targeting the U.S. diplomatic and military presence in Iraq, even after it entered into the formal Iraqi political system. Observers believe that AAH has continued its militant activities by using so-called "shadow groups." These groups – many of which were formed by the militias shortly after the deaths of Qasem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis in early 2020 – reportedly claim public responsibility for attacks in the more established militias' stead to create plausible deniability, allowing the

militias to continue militant activities subtly.¹⁵⁹ Other major militant groups in Iraq, such as Kata'ib Hezbollah and the Badr Organization, use these shadow groups for the same purpose. AAH likely used this tactic when, on November 17, 2020, rockets fell near the U.S. embassy compound in central Baghdad in violation of the unilaterally-imposed "truce" between major Shiite militant groups and the United States.¹⁶⁰ Sabereen News, a news service observers believe to be linked to AAH, almost immediately reported via Telegram that a group named Ashab al-Kahf ("Companions of the Cave," in Arabic) had claimed responsibility for the attack.¹⁶¹ Ashab al-Kahf has previously stated that it is not affiliated with any existing militia groups.¹⁶² However, analysts have generally concluded that AAH is likely using Ashab al-Kahf as a front to publicly appear compliant with the truce while continuing its militant campaign.¹⁶³

AAH Media Strategy and Tactics

Besides its military campaign, AAH has also developed a considerable media presence through the group's creation or sponsorship of proprietary media outlets. The outlet "Sabereen News" is thought to be an important component of the group's media strategy and maintains Telegram, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube accounts under that name. With a subscriber base of 80,000 on Telegram – the network's primary medium – Sabereen serves as a major outlet for the militias' public relations efforts. Sabereen publishes content primarily from AAH and KH, including claims of responsibility for major attacks. Analysts believe that Sabereen is closely connected to AAH for three reasons: 1) Sabereen has often professed devotion to AAH leader Qais al-Khazali, stating that it "has answered the call" from him; 2) it has taken AAH's side during rhetorical spats between AAH and other militias; 3) most glaringly, Sabereen has called for the release of imprisoned AAH personnel with the statement "we are Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq."¹⁶⁴

MAJOR ATTACKS

Disclaimer: These are some selected major attacks in the militant organization's history. It is not a comprehensive listing but captures some of the most famous attacks or turning points during the campaign.

July-August 2006: Elements of AAH fought alongside Hezbollah in the 2006 Lebanon-Israeli War (unknown killed, unknown wounded).¹⁶⁵

October 10, 2006: AAH used mortars to attack U.S. Forward Operating Base Falcon outside of Baghdad (unknown killed, unknown wounded).¹⁶⁶

May 6, 2006: AAH shot down a British Lynx helicopter in Basra (5 killed, unknown wounded).¹⁶⁷

January 20, 2007: AAH militants attacked and captured the Karbala provincial government headquarters, killing five U.S. soldiers in the process. The Khazali brothers and Ali Musa Daqduq, who had helped plan and lead the attack, were captured by U.S. forces shortly after the attack (5 killed, unknown wounded).¹⁶⁸

May 29, 2007: AAH forces attacked the Iraqi Finance Ministry, capturing a British contractor named Peter Moore and his four bodyguards. AAH released Moore in December 2009 in exchange for the release of Qais al-Khazali by the Iraqi government. However, by the time that Moore was released, AAH had killed his four bodyguards (4 killed, unknown wounded).¹⁶⁹

February 2010: AAH captured U.S. Department of Defense contractor Issa T. Salomi. Salomi was released in March 2010 in return for the release of four AAH fighters who were held by the Iraqi government (0 killed, 0 wounded).¹⁷⁰

November 2011: AAH claimed responsibility for a roadside bomb. The only death from the bomb, a U.S. soldier, was the last U.S. soldier to die before the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq later that month (1 killed, unknown wounded).¹⁷¹

August 10, 2012: AAH forces captured a Sunni Mosque in the Al-Amin al-Thaniyah district of Baghdad and converted it to a Shiite mosque (unknown killed, unknown wounded).¹⁷²

September 2012: AAH led the operation to recapture the city of Amerli, Iraq from the Islamic State (unknown killed, unknown wounded).¹⁷³

March-April 2014: According to a Human Rights Watch report, AAH killed 109 Sunni men in the villages surrounding Baghdad between March and April 2014 (at least 109 killed, unknown wounded).¹⁷⁴

October 2017: AAH participated in the offensive on the city of Kirkuk, Iraq. It is suspected that Iran played a significant role in recapturing this territory from the Islamic State (unknown killed, unknown wounded).¹⁷⁵

November 2017: AAH participated in the offensive on the city Al-Qa'im, located near the Iraq-Syria border. The group was spotted using what appears to be an Iranian T-72 tank (unknown killed, unknown wounded).¹⁷⁶

November 2017: AAH participated in the offensive to recapture the city of Abu Kamal, located near the Iraq-Syria border. This town was strategically significant and enabled Iran to set up a supply route from Iran to Lebanon that would allow Iran to provide aid to Hezbollah (unknown killed, unknown wounded).¹⁷⁷

December 31, 2019: AAH organized and participated in mass demonstrations near and attack on the U.S. embassy compound in central Baghdad.¹⁷⁸ AAH leader Qais al-Khazali appeared among demonstrators at the embassy compound that day (0 killed, unknown wounded).¹⁷⁹

INTERACTIONS

A. DESIGNATED/LISTED

- The U.S. Department of State designed AAH as a Foreign Terrorist Organization: January 2020 to present¹⁸⁰
- The U.S. Department of the Treasury designated AAH leader Qais al-Khazali and his brother for human rights abuses: December 2019 to present¹⁸¹
- The U.S. Department of State designated AAH leader Qais al-Khazali and his brother Laith al-Kahzali as Specially Designated Global Terrorists: January 2020 to present¹⁸²
- The U.S. Department of State designated Akram al-Kabi, who led AAH while Khazali was in government custody and, as of May 2021, leads Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist: March 2019 to present¹⁸³

B. COMMUNITY RELATIONS

Before it entered the Iraqi political process in 2011, AAH did not have a significant relationship with the broader Iraqi Shiite community. Since then, the group has built widespread support among Iraqi Shia, becoming what observers describe as a “parochial” group – one with substantial social relations and a defined political power base.¹⁸⁴ AAH and its political party, al-Sadiqoon, have established political offices across Iraq, run candidates in parliamentary elections, and formed significant relationships with tribal leaders.¹⁸⁵ AAH has also begun providing social services to the Shiite tribes in southern Iraq. The group established a network of religious schools across the region and sponsored public entertainment events such as soccer games.¹⁸⁶ AAH also offered humanitarian aid following earthquakes in northern Sulaymaniyah province in November 2017, though residents ultimately refused to accept AAH’s aid, citing its reported history of human rights abuses.¹⁸⁷ In November 2018, AAH provided aid to those affected by flash floods in central Iraq.¹⁸⁸

AAH appears to have a tenuous relationship with members of the Sunni community in Iraq. Amnesty International has accused AAH of mistreating Sunnis in areas that the group liberated from the Islamic State. For example, AAH allegedly raided Sunni homes in Kirkuk without cause.¹⁸⁹ Moreover, from July 2018 to the present, AAH has reportedly intimidated and extorted Sunni tribal groups. Throughout the group’s campaigns against U.S. and Iraqi military installations, AAH targeted Sunni tribes in the areas along the Tigris between the cities of Samarra and Baghdad.¹⁹⁰

In October 2020, AAH drew criticism for allegedly permitting the massacre of eight civilians in al-Farhatiyah, southern Salah ad-Din province. The governor of Salah ad-Din province criticized the group’s alleged inaction, as the area was reportedly within the jurisdiction of the AAH-affiliated 42nd PMF brigade.¹⁹¹ The governor argued it was impossible for the perpetrators “who numbered 20 people” to carry out the executions without arousing the awareness of security forces in the area. AAH officials later announced the group intended to comply with an investigation into the incident and punish any of its members found to be responsible; as of June 2021, there have not been any reports of the results of this investigation.¹⁹² In May 2021, the U.S. Department of

State released Iraq's section of the 2020 Report on International Religious Freedom. In the section, the State Department reported that the al-Farhatiyah massacre's victims were Sunni and that the incident appeared to be another episode in a series of retaliatory abuses committed by Shiite sectarian militants against Sunni civilians.¹⁹³ The report also concluded that the AAH-affiliated 42nd PMF brigade was itself responsible for executing the massacre – a far more severe allegation than the claim made by the governor of Salah ad-Din province several months earlier.¹⁹⁴ The report also alleged that AAH sought to intimidate Christian civilians into leaving their homes in the Christian-majority Bartella area of Ninewa province and encouraging Shia to move to the area in their stead, and reported the group has converted several Sunni mosques in Diyala province into PMF headquarters.¹⁹⁵

Since the beginning of mass protests across southern Iraq and Baghdad in October 2019, AAH has come under considerable scrutiny from the Iraqi public. Protesters accuse the PMF and the major constituents therein – AAH included – of participating in the state's crackdown on demonstrations. As of February 2021, violence carried out by Iraqi security forces and PMF militants has killed over 600 protesters.¹⁹⁶

C. RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER GROUPS

AAH is one of the Iranian-backed Special Groups, the U.S. military's name for the Iranian-sponsored Shiite militias fighting in Iraq. The Iran-aligned militias operating in Iraq are also referred to as *muqawama* groups, or "resistance factions" in Arabic. Since it was formed, AAH has always had good relations with other Iranian-sponsored Shiite militias, both Iraqi and foreign. AAH often appears alongside several other *muqawama* groups to mark important holidays and participate in politically-oriented rallies in support of the *muqawama*'s goals. AAH notably appeared alongside Kata'ib Hezbollah and the Badr Organization in a 2016 demonstration in Baghdad to mark International Quds Day – a holiday created by Iran to express it and its affiliates' opposition to Israel and support for the Palestinian cause.¹⁹⁷

In particular, AAH has often cooperated with Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH), the largest of the *muqawama* groups after AAH. In 2013, the two groups co-founded Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, a front group based primarily in Syria. AAH and KH have used this front to channel militants to support the Assad regime and Hezbollah in their fight against the Islamic State and Islamist-aligned elements of the Syrian opposition.¹⁹⁸ For its close relationship to AAH, Hezbollah, and the Iranian government, the U.S. State Department designated Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist in March 2019.¹⁹⁹

AAH has also maintained close relations with Lebanese Hezbollah. Hezbollah operatives were responsible for training many of AAH's initial recruits. Senior Hezbollah operative Ali Mussa Daqduq has often served as a liaison between the Iranian government and AAH. Members of AAH have fought alongside Hezbollah in the 2006 Lebanon-Israel War and the Syrian civil war in 2011.²⁰⁰ During a visit to the Israeli-Lebanon border, Khazali emphasized AAH's "full readiness to stand united with the Lebanese people and

the Palestinian cause in the face of the Israeli occupation.”²⁰¹ An AAH spokesperson later clarified that Khazali’s statement was meant to threaten Israeli and express “solidarity with the Lebanese people if the Israeli entity attacks them.”²⁰²

AAH has had a tense relationship with the Sadrist movement and the Mahdi Army, the Sadrists’ armed affiliate, since splitting from the Mahdi Army in 2006. The Sadrist movement is a loosely-organized political movement of Shiite Islamist, Iraqi nationalists vehemently opposed to foreign intervention in Iraq. The Sadrists are followers of Muqtada al-Sadr, a Shiite cleric, political leader, and son of Grand Ayatollah Mohammed Sadeq al-Sadr. Mohammed Sadeq al-Sadr, as one of Iraq’s preeminent Shiite clerics, became involved in politics by organizing and providing services to poor Shia across Iraq; this organizing formed the basis of the Sadrist movement which remains one of Iraq’s most powerful political movements to this day.²⁰³ Muqtada al-Sadr succeeded his father Mohammed as the leader of the Sadrist movement after the latter’s assassination in 1999.²⁰⁴ In response to the American invasion of Iraq, Muqtada founded the Mahdi Army in 2003; AAH’s current leader, Qais al-Khazali, was a member of the Mahdi Army and a pupil of Mohammed Sadeq al-Sadr before splitting from the group in 2004 and forming AAH two years later.²⁰⁵ Seeking reconciliation, Sadr called for AAH to rejoin the Mahdi Army after British forces in Iraq arrested the Khazali brothers in 2007; AAH refused.²⁰⁶

Though AAH and the Sadrists both maintain close religious ties to the legacies of Mohammed Baqir al-Sadr and Mohammed Sadeq al-Sadr, the groups differ ideologically. AAH is a Khomeinist group that expresses overt allegiance to figures of the “tradition of the Iranian Revolution” and espouses the ideology of *Wilayat al-Faqih* (“Guardianship of the Jurist,” in English; the Islamic Republic of Iran’s state ideology).²⁰⁷ Since its founding, AAH ultimately sought to displace the Sadrists as the preeminent Shiite social and political organization in Iraq while advancing Iran’s influence within Iraq – both of which the Sadrists opposed.²⁰⁸ To this end, countless violent clashes of varying degrees of severity between the Sadrists and AAH militants took place across Iraq – particularly in and around Baghdad, the Sadrists’ main base of power – between the Khazali faction’s departure from the Mahdi Army in 2004 and the Mahdi Army’s eventual disbandment in 2008.²⁰⁹

Relations did not improve between AAH and the Sadrists when AAH entered the Iraqi political process in 2011. Before AAH announced its intention to enter formal politics, the Sadrists were the primary allies of Maliki’s Dawlat al-Qanoon (“State of Law” in English) coalition in Parliament and had had a history of tensions with AAH; to this end, Muqtada al-Sadr stated in 2010 that he would not allow AAH to participate in politics because of the group’s history of “murdering Iraqi civilians.”²¹⁰

AAH’s entry into formal politics – a process which Prime Minister Maliki eagerly facilitated – appeared to tip the balance of power in Parliament away from the Sadrists by creating a new, potentially stronger ally for Maliki/Dawlat al-Qanoon.²¹¹ The two groups’ competition for preeminence among Iraqi Shia continued into the political sphere alongside their military competition. This competition eventually led AAH to launch an assassination campaign against Sadrist political leaders in 2012. Through these

assassinations, AAH aimed to weaken the Sadrist's standing prior to the 2013 regional elections. Although both groups fought alongside one another against the Islamic State, relations improved very little during this period. For instance, in 2014, Sadr wrote off AAH as little more than a Maliki-sponsored militia and accused it of carrying out purges of anti-Maliki Sunni tribesmen in southern Iraq. AAH responded by attacking Sadrists in the Shia-majority neighborhoods surrounding Baghdad.²¹² Tensions between the two groups continued throughout Iraq's mass protests in 2019. Sadr lent rhetorical and physical support to protesters, while AAH has helped security forces repress the demonstrations. Notably, on October 26, 2019, AAH militants clashed at first with protesters and later with members of Muqtada al-Sadr's Saraya al-Salam – a revival of the Sadrists' Mahdi Army that was founded in 2014 – that had sided with protesters in the southeastern city of Amarah.²¹³

Recently, the relationship between AAH and the Sadrists has shown signs of improvement. In December 2020, Muqtada al-Sadr announced that he and his Sairoon political alliance intend to campaign in Iraq's 2021 parliamentary elections with a call to "restore the Shiite home" via the establishment of "moral governance" in Iraq.²¹⁴ A spokesman for and leader of AAH's political wing, al-Sadiqoon, later welcomed Sadr's statement. The spokesman said that the group considered Sadr's message "very important" because it promoted an "inclusive national interest" that transcended Iraq's sectarian divisions in the name of good governance.²¹⁵ The spokesman added that "the strength and unity of the [Shiite bloc] reflects positively on the strength and unity of Iraq," hinting that AAH may pursue closer relations with the Sadrists ahead of Iraq's 2021 parliamentary elections.²¹⁶ However, this possible rapprochement did not pan out, as the Fatah coalition, of which AAH's al-Sadiqoon is a member, sought to form a post-hoc coalition with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, another major Kurdish party.²¹⁷

Following the Islamic State (IS) offensive into northern Iraq in 2014, AAH served as part of the Iraqi government's fight against the group. As one of the most powerful pro-government militias in Iraq, AAH was deployed to some of the most highly-contested areas in Iraq in the battle against IS. For instance, the group led the Shiite militias in the battle for Amerli in 2013-2014 and Samarra in 2015-2016.²¹⁸ In retaliation, IS carried out a suicide attack at a soccer match sponsored by AAH in a town south of Baghdad in March 2016.²¹⁹

Although AAH operates independently from Iraq's formal security apparatus, the group conducted its role in anti-IS operations in Iraq under the structure of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF, *Hashd as-Shaabi* in Arabic). Founded in 2014, the PMF is a state-sponsored umbrella group composed of approximately forty Iraqi militias, the largest number and most powerful of which are Shia.²²⁰ Lacking a strong regular security force, the Iraqi government relied on its partnership with these volunteer PMF militias, some of which had existed for decades, to liberate IS-held areas.²²¹ The Iraqi government organized the PMF in response to Ayatollah Sistani's 2014 non-sectarian *fatwa* that called for Iraqis to form "popular" militias to resist IS' offensive into Iraq.²²² Constituent groups within the PMF remain partially integrated into the Iraqi armed forces but retain varying degrees of independent command. Some groups, including AAH, also maintain

strong relationships with Iran and the IRGC.²²³ The largest groups in the PMF, in decreasing order of size, are Kata'ib Hezbollah (30,000),²²⁴ the Badr Organization (10,000-15,000),²²⁵ and AAH (15,000).²²⁶

The PMF is an important source of influence and recruitment for AAH, and it has helped AAH make significant inroads among the Iraqi Shia.²²⁷ Due to their instrumental role in the fight against the Islamic State (IS), many Iraqis view the militias as vital to the state's security apparatus.²²⁸ Public opinion polls conducted in the aftermath of IS's defeat in November 2017 suggest the Iraqi public strongly views militias within the PMF structure as positive contributors to local security – with 91% of Shia respondents and 64.5% of Sunni respondents indicating a positive view of the PMF.²²⁹ Constituent units of the PMF also receive financial and military support from both Iraq and Iran.²³⁰ As part of the PMF, AAH played an instrumental role in the campaign against IS in Iraq. AAH and other PMF militias have also come under significant criticism on human rights grounds for alleged attacks against Sunni civilians and being a source of Iranian influence in Iraq.²³¹

There have reportedly been tensions between AAH and the Jaysh al-Rijal al-Tariq al-Naqshabandia (JRTN), a Sufi militant group led by former Ba'ath Party leaders operating in Iraq. AAH claimed that its militants assassinated Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri, Saddam Hussein's former second in command and the leader of the JRTN, on April 17, 2015. AAH's hostility towards JRTN stems from the latter's alignment with jihadist groups, including the Islamic State (IS), against the Iraqi government and Coalition forces. JRTN participated in IS's initial offensive into Iraq in June 2014 and reportedly received weapons, equipment, and funding from IS as part of a rapprochement agreement struck in September 2014.²³² AAH's initial claims later proved false when, in October 2020, a spokesman for the Ba'ath party reported Douri had died earlier that month.²³³

D. STATE SPONSORS/EXTERNAL INFLUENCES

AAH has maintained close ties with Iran since the group was founded in 2006. AAH is often referred to as one of Iran's proxy organizations in Iraq and receives significant financial aid and training resources from Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps – Quds Force (IRGC-QF). Iran also influences the group's goals and activities. Although AAH leader Qais al-Khazali controls the group's day-to-day operations, commanders of the IRGC-QF have wielded significant influence over AAH's military and political activities in the past.²³⁴

After IRGC-QF commander Qasem Soleimani's death in January 2020, Iranian-aligned elements of the PMF – AAH included – appeared to shift their military strategies to decrease their operational and strategic reliance upon the IRGC. Observers attribute this development to the apparent inability of the new IRGC-QF commander, Esmail Ghaani, to exert the same degree of personal authority over its Iraqi proxies as his predecessor.²³⁵ Should Tehran's authority over the militias loosen, observers believe that the militias will operate with a greater degree of autonomy that could jeopardize their future relationship with Iran.²³⁶

Comments made by AAH leader Qais al-Khazali in the months following Soleimani's death suggest that AAH has embraced this shift in strategy. In November 2020, Ghaani made a highly publicized visit to Baghdad. He called for peace and requested that Iran's Iraqi proxies refrain from attacking U.S. military and diplomatic installations in Iraq.²³⁷ The following week, Khazali pushed back against Ghaani's request. Khazali stated that, in his and AAH's view, "the truce with the Americans has ended [as] its conditions [are] not being met."²³⁸ Khazali's response also asserted, "the Americans occupy our country [Iraq], not yours [Iran]," stating that although "there is a convergence of interests between the *muqawama* ["resistance factions," a nickname used to distinguish Iran-aligned militias] and Tehran," this convergence does not "change the fact that the Iraqi resistance has 100% patriotic motives."²³⁹ In December 2020, Khazali continued his public disagreement with the IRGC. He released a statement in which he made clear his and AAH's support for the smaller, allegedly distinct "shadow groups" operating in Iraq that have continued to target U.S. assets against Ghaani's wishes.²⁴⁰

MAPS

- Iraq
- Syria

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