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A PRELUDE TO THE CONCEPT OF HYBRID CONFLICT – IRAN'S ROLE IN THE WAR IN IRAQ (2003–2011)[1]

ABSTRACT: *The War in Iraq has been an important lesson to Western countries on the issue of counterinsurgency and counterterrorism. The emergence of the Islamic State group and other Sunni jihadist organizations has taken up much of the attention focused on this conflict. However, the lessons of the Iranian activities in Iraq got much less attention, despite the multi-layered and large efforts on the information, the political fronts as well as regarding the support for non-state armed groups. In the opinion of the author, these efforts merit closer attention in order to get a better overview on the issues related to hybrid warfare. This paper aims to show, based on the publicly available, declassified and open source information, the depths of efforts tied to Iranian actors, and the limits of these efforts. The paper will use the case study of Qais al-Khazali, who rose to become one of the important leaders of the so-called special groups, and of Asa`ib Ahl al-Haqq, a splinter group from Muqtada al-Sadr's Jaysh al-Mahdi.*

KEYWORDS: *Iran, Iraq, U.S., U.K., hybrid warfare, non-state armed groups, insurgency*

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INTRODUCTION

Hybrid warfare has received great attention lately, and the Iranian experience is unique in this regard. This paper aims to capture some of the known aspects of Iranian hybrid warfare efforts, including organizational, financial, training as well as political aspects based on secondary materials, and thanks to U.S. declassification efforts, some primary documents. Special attention will be given to the case of Qais al-Khazali, the leader of Asa`ib Ahl al-Haqq, one of the special groups, which operates in Iraq at the time of writing.

For the purposes of this chapter, the author will take a wider view of hybrid warfare, including non-military aspects of the Iranian efforts, giving historical context to these efforts, as well as information provided by U.S. Central Command about the interrogation of Khazali. The article will also give an overview of the Iranian response, and give an outlook on the role of the special groups, as well as the Iranian influence efforts in Iraq.

IRANIAN MOTIVATIONS, MILITARY POSTURE, AND PROXIES

The U.S. report on Iranian military power describes Iranian capabilities, as a "complex set" which combines conventional and unconventional elements. It lays great emphasis on deterrence, for which it built an Anti-Access Area Denial (A2AD) capacity (most notably a large missile force and naval capacities). The Iran-Iraq war also served as a reminder to create military forces that can be supported by domestic production. The Iranian leadership knows that its forces have a significant technological gap in comparison to the U.S., and recognizes the limited possibilities for building alliances in the current international system. Therefore, to compensate for these factors, the Iranian approach also lays heavy emphasis on psychological warfare and supports friendly non-state armed actors (or in simple term, proxies).[2]

It is important to keep in mind that this latter trend is nothing new. Since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Iran has had a long history of building up and supporting proxy forces. The most famous (or notorious) is of course is Lebanese Hizballah, which has maintained very close ties to Tehran. The early period was not easy, as Hizballah was created in a chaotic situation in the midst of the Lebanese civil war, where Iran and Syria had different visions for the organization, and in some aspects Tehran had limited influence on some parts of the organization. It is also worth remembering that the relations between Hizballah and Iran were not always straightforward, as the ending of the Iran-Iraq War, and the early days of Iranian president Hashemi Rafsanjani have shown. Also, Hizballah was not the only Shia group Tehran was supporting. Groups like Amal also got substantial Iranian support, and the rivalry between Hizballah and Amal also got violent, and Hizballah was able to defeat its main Shia rival.[3]

Although Hizballah is the most famous group, it is not the only one by far, and Iraq serves as a primary example that this approach was not unique, but fits a broader pattern. In the course of the Iran-Iraq War, Iranian leadership helped create the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI, nowadays Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, ISCI),[4] and its armed wing, the Badr Brigades (or nowadays Badr Organization).[5]

SCIRI was established in 1982, under the auspices of the Iranian government. Although it was meant to be an umbrella organization for Iraqi Shia political elements opposed to Saddam Hussein, due to the heavy Iranian involvement and its adoption of official Iranian doctrine, it became more like a political party. The Iranians made it possible for the SCIRI to establish the Badr Brigades from Iraqi POWs, and it engaged in active combat operations. After the end of the first Gulf War, SCIRI and Badr supported the Shia uprising in the South of Iraq.[6] Although SCIRI was the most visible Iraqi group Iran was supporting, it was not the only one; there were others, like parts of the Daawa party. There were ideological issues like the adoption of Iranian revolutionary ideology, which showed the depth

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2   Iran Military Power: Ensuring Regime Survival and Securing Regional Dominance. Defense Intelligence Agency, 2019, 22–23. https://www.dia.mil/Portals/110/Images/News/Military_Powers_Publications/Iran_Military_Power_LR.pdf

3   Norton, A. R. Hezbollah: A Short History. Princeton University, 2007, 43–44., 72–73.

4   Karouny, M. Iraq's SCIRI party to change platform: officials. Reuters, May 11, 2007. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-party-idUSYAT15330920070511

5   Knights, M. et al. Profile: Badr Organization. The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 2, 2021. https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-badr-organization

6   Tripp, C. A History of Iraq, Cambridge University Press, 2007, 237–238., 246.

of commitment: SCIRI adopted the "velayat-e faqih" acknowledging Iran's leading role, while Daawa was split about this issue and never fully backed the Iranians on such ideological issues.[7] (This model was formulated by Ayatollah Khomeini, who advocated that the clerical class was best suited to implement the ideals of Islam, so the most respected cleric needs to be engaged in ruling the faithful; this approach was criticized by other leading Shia clerics, including Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's mentor.[8])

The two historical examples from Lebanon and Iraq provide a brief overview of how difficult it is to create and maintain ties with non-state armed groups, while trying to maintain some degree of deniability and distance from their activities. Tehran's efforts to create proxy forces were internationally noted, as the U.S. designated Iran as a state sponsor of terrorism as early as January 1984.[9]

The 1990s saw an overall pause in the Iranian efforts in this field, but the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan in 2001 and the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 gave new emphasis and also new opportunities for Iran to utilize its knowledge about supporting non-state armed groups. Iraq, due to its geographical and historical closeness, remained a very important target for Iran, and having influence in the Shia territories as well as some influence in Baghdad seemed to be a paramount effort for Tehran. Therefore, Iran used its economic, political, and cultural leverage, as well as its military capabilities, as the next sections will show.

IRANIAN POLITICAL AND SOFT POWER INFLUENCE IN IRAQ

The soft power side of Iranian influence has a whole of government approach, including trade and economic ties as well as shaping the information environment in Iraq. Iran has incentivized exporting to Iraq to its own companies, but limits import from Iraq. The Iranians also opened banks in Iraq in the 2000s, to facilitate trade. This approach was not limited to the Southern Shia territories, but also was present in the Kurdish region and Baghdad. The Iranians also established foundations, which have founded socially important projects, like housing projects and health care institutions.[10]

It is however not always easy to gauge the extent of Iranian influence, as even in Iraq the concept of Iranian influence is defined in many different ways. Indeed, as the International Crisis Group's report pointed out, the term "Iranian" can mean a lot of different groups in Iraq. This includes:

– Iraqi Shias with ancestry in Iran,
– Fayli Kurds,
– Iraqis who speak Persian,

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[7]   Felter, J. and Fishman, B. Iranian Strategy in Iraq: Politics and "Other Means," Combating Terrorism Center at West Point Occasional Paper, 2008, 7. https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/Iranian-Strategy-in-Iraq.pdf

[8]   Nasr, Vali. The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future, Northon and Company, 2006, 125.

[9]   State Sponsors of Terrorism, U.S. Department of State Bureau of Counterterrorism, undated. https://www.state.gov/state-sponsors-of-terrorism/

[10] Eisenstadt, M. et al. Iran's Influence in Iraq Countering Tehran's Whole-of-Government Approach. Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2011, 12. https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/3364

  – members of Iraqi groups who are tied to Iran (this can include major Kurdish parties, as they had close relations to Iran in their fight against the Saddam regime),
  – Iraqis who fought against Iraq with Iranian support during the Iran-Iraq War
  – Iraqis with Iranian sounding names.[11]

So, it is important to keep in mind that not all Iranian influence is government influence, and not everybody labelled Iranian is really Iranian in Iraq.

At governmental level, Iran initiated great efforts on energy issues, in order to become a major influence in Iraq. Due to the growing needs and grid issues, Iran also became a very important player on the Iraqi electricity market. Iran supplied electricity to the Shia majority provinces of Iraq. Iran also engaged in the trade of oil products. The territorial issues between the two countries, however, overshadowed some of this cooperation. Iran engaged oil trade with the Iraqi Kurds as well. Thanks to these efforts, Iran was able to exert economic influence (and pressure if needed) on the Southern, as well as the Northern parts of Iraq.[12] Iranian economic influence had political as well as economic reasons, because it offered Iran a very important approach to influence political processes in Iraq through these economic ties, offered a way to make it more difficult for the U.S. to attack Iran by exposing Iraq to the effects of such actions, as well as helping Iran circumvent some sanctions.

Thanks to the shared Shia background, pilgrims were another major cultural and economic source of influence on the Iraqis. According to some estimates, the number of pilgrims went into the millions in the 2000s. The Iranian government also provided support for infrastructure projects in the tourism sector of Iraq. Iranian offers of studying in religious seminars, making family visits easier, offering medical care etc. also motivated Iraqis to travel to Iran.[13]

In religious terms, it is not a one-way street of influence for Iran. Iraqi Shia leaders, most notably Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, was no supporter of the velayat-e faqih approach of the Iranians, and in the post-invasion period, he was able to expand his presence in Iran. Sistani however rarely involved himself in Iraqi politics, and he did not engage in anti-Iranian activities. Iranians tried to get a bigger say in the religious affairs of Najaf to secure more influence.[14]

From media perspective, Iran also tried to create a position of influence for itself. In March 2003, it helped to create Al-Alam television network, an Arabic language broadcaster. Among other media outlets, Iran relied on it to provide the Iranian views to the Iraqi population. The network was created by the Iranian state radio and TV service, and used satellite, terrestrial broadcasting as well as the Internet.[15] According to the BBC, Al-Alam service's terrestrial transmitter was built near the Iraqi border to maximize coverage in

[11]   Iran in Iraq: How Much Influence? International Crisis Group Middle East Report N°38 – 21 March 2005, 4–6. https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/38-iran-in-iraq-how-much-influence.pdf
[12]   Eisenstadt et al. 2011, 13.
[13]   Eisenstadt et al. 2011, 13–14.
[14]   Eisenstadt et al. 2011, 14–15.
[15]   Iran TV channel targets Iraq. BBC, April 3, 2003. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/2913593.stm

Iraq.[16] Also, organizations close to Iran had their own media networks in Iraq, which could enhance Iranian messages.[17]

Also, it has to be noted that Iranian and U.S. policy goals were not mutually exclusive on every occasion. The Iranian strategy built on the democratic transformation of Iraq, as roughly 60 % of the Iraqi population is Shia, and with a high degree of certainty, the Iranian calculation was that having a democratic process would enable Iranian influence through the old and the new political groups Iran was supporting in Iraq. Accordingly, Iran helped to assemble the United Iraqi Alliance bloc, which consisted of ISCI, Da'awa and Muqtada al-Sadr political faction, and which won the election in 2005.[18] It had its problems, as the first prime minister, Ibrahim al-Jaafari, a member of the Da'awa party, had to resign after differences with the Kurds and the Sunnis, with the latter accusing the government of supporting sectarian violence. Jaafari's ties to Iran and his close cooperation with Muqtada al-Sadr also was deemed problematic both inside and outside of Iraq.[19] But nevertheless, he oversaw the final stages of the drafting of the new constitution of Iraq.[20]

His successor, Nouri al-Maliki, had also been an exiled Shia politician from the Da'awa party,[21] but he proved to be more flexible, also against Iranian influence, by launching a military operation in 2008 against JAM in Basra.[22] Maliki was able to remain in the prime ministerial position until 2014, breaking away from the Iranian backed United Iraqi Alliance, creating his own State-of-Law coalition.[23] He remained in power until the political fallout of the loss of Mosul to the so-called Islamic State group.[24]

Maliki's nationalistic turn was not the only problem for Iranian influence in this time, as Iranian economic influence also created some anti-Iranian sentiment among Iraqis. This economic influence dampened Iraqi economic activity, and the Iranian water policy had a role in creating problems for Iraqi agriculture, both qualitative and quantitative, which were made more severe by droughts at the time.[25]

TRADITIONAL AND NEW ARMED GROUPS SUPPORTED BY IRAN

As already mentioned, Iran had supported numerous Iraqi Shia groups, including ISCI and the Badr Brigades. These groups played an important role, as many of their leaders were perceived to be loyal or at least friendly to Iran. Their role in the sectarian conflict was also

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[16] Usher, S. Iran's leaders harness media power. BBC, March 14, 2006. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4804328.stm

[17] Ryan, M. and al-Ansary, K. Feature – Iraq media booming, yet still in sectarian grip. Reliefweb, March 11, 2009. https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/feature-iraq-media-booming-yet-still-sectarian-grip

[18] Katzman, K. Iran's Activities and Influence in Iraq. CRS Report for Congress, June 4, 2009, 1. https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA501453.pdf

[19] Fact Sheet: Ibrahim al-Jaafari. Institute for the Study of War, May 12, 2010. https://www.understandingwar.org/reference/fact-sheet-ibrahim-al-jaafari

[20] Profile: Ibrahim al-Jaafari, al Jazeera, April 13, 2006. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2006/4/13/profile-ibrahim-al-jaafari

[21] Profile: Nouri Maliki, BBC, August 12, 2014. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-11733715

[22] Operation Knight's Charge (Saulat al-Fursan), Institute for the Study of War, undated. https://www.understandingwar.org/operation/operation-knights-charge-saulat-al-fursan

[23] Profile: Nouri Maliki, BBC, August 12, 2014. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-11733715

[24] Iraq crisis: Maliki quits as PM to end deadlock. BBC, August 15, 2014. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-28798033

[25] Eisenstadt et al. 2011, 12.

significant. The Badr Brigades, for example, with the support of Interior Minister Bayan Jabr, were absorbed into the Iraqi police force.[26] Thanks to this, the Badr Brigades were very active in the sectarian fighting, operating as death squads in the Sunni neighbourhoods of Baghdad.

A new player on the scene was Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army (Jaysh al-Mahdi, JAM), which became prominent in 2004 in its fight against the Coalition forces. It operated in the Shia majority territories including the holy cities of Karbala and Najaf, and also had active operations in Baghdad's Sadr City. Its 2004 operations ended in a defeat, as the majority of the JAM fighters was inexperienced, and organizationally JAM had many limitations. It suffered heavy losses, and had to agree to a ceasefire with the U.S., which was mediated by Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. During the sectarian fighting, JAM was a major force in Baghdad, and it maintained its hostile attitude towards the Coalition forces as well. It also fought Shia rivals, like the Badr Brigades in 2007. A year later Prime Minister Maliki launched an Iraqi-led operation against JAM in Basrah, which led to a flurry of political activities, with Iran getting involved as a mediator to end the fighting.[27] (Iran provided an important safe haven for those Sadrists who did not feel safe in Iraq. Sadr's personal journeys to Iran were however not that well received, as his father had strong differences with the Iranians, and this was well known to his followers.[28] During his interrogation, Khazali also speculated that Sadr and his followers were interested in keeping good relations to Iran, because the Coalition Forces could force them into more or less permanent exile, and Iran would be their best choice.[29])

On the structure of JAM, Khazali reported that it has five "brigades," although one such unit had between 50 and 100 members. These brigades were considered special groups. When planning an attack, some special groups sought religious advice on the admissibility of an attack, although these approaches were made usually to people in close contact with the insurgency and not classical religious scholars. Some special groups did not even seek such advice. Also, a legislative committee of JAM existed, which could provide similar guidance, if requested. Religiously, JAM based its approach on the doctrine of defensive jihad as they understood it, so theoretically proportionality, defence of the innocent etc. was part of the ethos of JAM. Of course, Iraqis seen as collaborators with the Coalition Forces were not perceived as innocent civilians and were considered to be legitimate targets. Civilian state workers were theoretically not to be attacked.[30]

From April 2006, so-called golden companies were established inside JAM. These were considered to be new elite units of the group, receiving better religious and military training as well as more sophisticated weapons. The growth of these units, according to Khazali, was not as rapid as the leadership wanted it to be, as there were logistical problems, it was difficult to find committed members fit for the units. Military training depended on a large part on the location of a golden battalion. For example, training a group in the use of weapons was more difficult in Baghdad. However, the concept of golden companies was

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[26] Katzman 2009, 1.
[27] Al-Mahdi, J. Institute for the Study of War, undated. https://www.understandingwar.org/jaysh-al-mahdi
[28] Tactical Interrogation Report Enclosure TAB-A, 30–31.
[29] Tactical Interrogation Report (TIR) 34, 224.
[30] TIR 31, 207–208.

born out of internal rivalry, and originally a senior JAM commander intended to rival the capabilities of the special groups with the golden companies.[31]

The Shia majority populations were largely secured by British forces in Iraq. They had difficulty in keeping the militant Shia groups at bay. One of the best-known examples of failure of mentoring Iraqi security forces on part of the British forces, was the capture of two British special operations forces personnel by the Iraqi Police, who were suspected of working for the Sadrists. The incident happened in 2005, when the British special operations forces operators, using a civilian vehicle, were challenged by the Iraqi Police, and after a brief chase and firefight, were captured by them. Already in the early reports, it became clear that the captured men were on an intelligence-collecting mission. These reports also pointed out that tensions were already high, because British forces killed a senior JAM leader in the previous days.[32] More than a year later, British forces undertook a major operation, reportedly involving over 1,000 British and Iraqi troops, to storm the headquarters of the Serious Crimes Unit of the Basra Police. In the course of the operation, the British freed 127 prisoners, many of whom were said to have been tortured and some threatened to be killed. The building of the Serious Crimes Unit was demolished by the British Army as part of the operation. The British stated that this police unit was infiltrated by Shia militia and operated as a death squad. The attack on the unit had official Iraqi central government approval, but at the local level, the reception was very negative, with the city council cutting its cooperation with the British.[33]

During his interrogation Khazali said that the security in Basra was lax, and this enabled them to use mortar attacks against the British successfully. He believed that using mortars was a very effective tool and brought success for the special groups in Amarrah. Because of the decentralized nature of the special groups, no central policy was made in this regard, and other Shia groups, such as Badr Brigades, al-Fadila, Thar Allah group etc., also used the same methods against the British.[34]

In all, it was very difficult for the British to effectively contain the Shia armed groups, and the British timetable for withdrawing U.K. forces from Iraq made operational decisions for British commanders difficult.

THE ROLE OF THE SPECIAL GROUPS (K1)

The special groups are Iranian-backed militant Shia Iraqi organizations, which operated in secret under the umbrella of JAM, and later independently. The special groups were the main means to attack Coalition Forces, as they operated in secret and directed their military action only against Coalition Forces.[35] The strategic purpose was to hasten the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq, as well as having leverage over other Shia parties, and the Iraqi political process overall.[36] This included engaging in sectarian violence, conducting oper-

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[31] TIR 31, 209–210.

[32] British troops arrested in Basra. BBC, September 19, 2005. news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/4260894. stm

[33] UK troops storm Iraqi police HQ. BBC, December 25, 2006. news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/6208535.stm

[34] TIR 35, 230–231.

[35] Enclosure TAB-A documents for release 18–32, 65.

[36] Knights, M. The Evolution of Iran's Special Groups in Iraq. CTC Sentinel, November 2010. Vol. 3, Issue 11–12, 12. https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/CTCSentinel-Vol3Iss11-127.pdf

ations against Iraqi government personnel (including kidnappings), and embezzling funds from the Iraqi government,[37] with a sense of deniability. According to Kimberly Kagan's research, the planning for establishing special groups began as early as 2002, and also enlisted the training support of Lebanese Hizballah, utilizing camps inside Iran. She also indicates that Lebanese Hizballah served as an organizational model for the special groups.[38]

The activities of the special groups were not in focus as much as the Sunni insurgency. However, there have been examples of early reporting, which indicated that the U.S. commanders were perceiving the threat of these groups and wanted to make the domestic audiences aware of them. Some of the early reporting indicated that the Iranians were already planning to support new Iraqi groups as early as 2002, when the possibility of the U.S. invasion became abundantly clear.[39]

The special groups have media organizations that are selected by regional commanders. The names of these media groups do not reflect the militant organizations they are working with. With time, multiple groups formed under the umbrella of JAM, so Sadr changed their designation to special battalions.[40] They used a variety of names when they claimed an attack. Khazali's group for example, used the names of six Shia imams and one other religious figure, in combination with the Arabic words battalion or company. Other groups, organizationally unrelated, might use similar or the same names when claiming attacks.[41]

The special groups were divided into three regions, with minimal communications amongst them for ensuring security. In case of emergencies, mobile phones were used (either for initiating calls or sending text messages).[42]

The Legislative Committee is responsible for ensuring that the special groups and JAM respect rules that are made by the Shaara. Sadr took close interest in such decisions, and insisted sometimes that he personally approves decisions regarding JAM. With regard to the special groups, Sadr did not want to be associated with them, so he did not interfere in the decisions concerning them in order not to alienate the Americans any further. According to Khazali, this did not stop him of claiming credit for the establishment and successes of the special groups in private.[43] Kataib Hizb Allah, Asaib Ahl al-Haq and the Promised Day Brigades were the best-known special groups in the 2000s.

QAIS AL-KHAZALI AND ASA'IB AHL AL-HAQ (AAH)

The U.S. provided redacted versions of Khazali interrogation, which is a useful source on his person. According to this data, Khazali was born in 1974, his highest state schooling was middle school, and attended the Shia al-Hawsa Religious Training Institute in Najaf. He paid for getting out of the Iraqi Army in 1997, so the U.S. side did not consider him to have any special military training. He was a close associate of Muhammad al-Sadr, the father of Muqtada al-Sadr. In the aftermath of the U.S. attack on Iraq, Khazali helped form

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[37]   Kagan 2009, 173.

[38]   Kagan 2009, 159., 165–167.

[39]   Ware, M. Inside Iran's Secret War for Iraq. Time Magazine, 15 August 2005. http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/printout/0,8816,1093747,00.html

[40]   Enclosure TAB-A documents for release 18–32, 49–50.

[41]   TIR 31, 207.

[42]   Enclosure TAB-A, 43.

[43]   TIR 41, 261–262.

the Office of Martyr Sadr (OMS), which became the political organization of Muqtada al-Sadr.[44] He knew Muqtada al-Sadr from their time at a religious school in 1995. During this time and also later, they developed a close relationship, as both stayed in Iraq after the killing of the elder Sadr. His offices were overtaken by his successor, Ayatollah Ha'ari, but Muqtada al-Sadr was named his official representative and the offices of the elder Sadr took up social roles on Shia majority territories. During the 2003 war, Muqtada al-Sadr took over the offices, which served as a base for power.[45] Contemporary sources identify Khazali in the early days of the Iraq War as a spokesman for Muqtada al-Sadr, who was also receiving Western journalists.[46] Also, according to his testimony given during his interrogation, he had an important role in the legislative committee of OMS, which made him partially responsible for the special groups, which functioned parallel to JAM.[47]

A turning point for him and his relations with Muqtada al-Sadr was the 2004 battle in Najaf and its aftermath. During his interrogation, Khazali blamed Abbas al-Kufi, who according to him was in charge of the military operations, for not knowing anything about military operations and mismanaging the situation, and blamed Sadr as well for making mistakes. However, he also said that Sadr did not break down, as it was reported by some sources.[48] Later on Sadr blamed Khazali for a friendly preacher's open criticism of Sadr, and Khazali was also working on weakening the position of Sadr inside the organization, as he was trying to win over senior leadership for his own causes.[49] He distanced himself from Sadr and began forming his own group, although remained under the wider umbrella of the Sadrist movement for some time. The support for starting independent operations in the U.S. assessment came from the Iranians, the Quds Force. This meant funnelling funds and providing special training for the members of the AAH. According to U.S. analysis, this was an effort to create a more reliable partner, because doubts emerged about the long-term political viability of Sadr for the Iranians. The Iranians continued to support JAM but were increasingly looking for opportunities to support other Shia groups opposed to Sadr.[50]

After his break with OMS, he was able to build up his own forces from breakaway Jaysh al-Mahdi groups, concentrating in Baghdad and the Southern Shia majority city of Basra and operating in many provinces, like al-Hilla, al-Diwaniyah, Najaf and Karbala.[51] Although he was not affiliated with Sadr anymore, due to his earlier position he still had some tasks that were related to the special groups. During his interrogation he said, he gave some religious guidance on the permissibility of attacks and Sharia issues, based on his personal relationship with special group leaders. He also mediated when issues arose between JAM and special group leaders. Using his Iranian contacts, he tried to ensure that the members

44   Tactical Interrogation Report of Qayis al-Khazali, US CENTCOM, 20 March 2007, 18–19. https://www.aei. org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/TIR-1.pdf?x91208

45   Enclosure TAB-A, 24–25.

46   Cockburn, P. Muqtada al-Sadr and the Fall of Iraq, Faber and Faber, 2008, 2.

47   TIR 33, 217.

48   TIR 42, 267–268.

49   Enclosure TAB-A Documents for release 18–32, 57.

50   Rayburn, J. D. et al. (eds.) The U.S. Army in the Iraq War: Volume 2 Surge And Withdrawal 2007–2011, Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press, 2019, 70. https://publications.armywarcollege. edu/pubs/3668.pdf

51   TIR 2, 51–52.

of the special groups received their pay from Iran, as his successor was not prepared for this role. On an occasional basis, he continued his contacts with special group leaders.[52]

The best-known operation of AAH from this period was the attack against the Karbala Provincial Joint Coordination Centre in January 2007. The kidnappers wore U.S. style uniforms, were able to access unopposed the compound where the Americans worked. According to contemporary press reports, a large number of attackers using uniforms and equipment similar to those of U.S. forces and utilizing falsified credentials, passed three checkpoints and gained access to the Centre.[53] The attackers concentrated on U.S. troops, used non-lethal as well as lethal weapons against U.S. troops, and left by the vehicles in which they had arrived.[54] The attackers were able to abduct four U.S. military personnel, who were later killed by the captors while on the run from U.S. forces. It was quickly deemed one of the most sophisticated attacks up until that point in the Iraq War. In all, five U.S. troops were killed.[55]

Due to the sophistication of the attack, it was speculated early on that Iran was involved in the planning and execution of the attack. During his later interrogation, Khazali stated, the objective of the attack was to capture U.S. hostages in order to get people released who were in U.S. captivity at the time.[56]

U.S.-LED COUNTER IRANIAN INFLUENCE OPERATIONS AND THE CAPTURE OF THE KHAZALI BROTHERS

Khazali was captured on 20th March 2007. He provided a false name to his interrogators, and only after the interrogation team managed to convince him that they knew exactly who he was, was he willing to confirm his identity and started to cooperate to a limited extent.[57]

This was an outcome of a U.S.-led effort to target key Iranian and Iraqi personnel who were engaged in the organization of the special groups and several mainstream militant groups. The Coalition Forces captured 20 Iranians in Iraq between December 2006 and October 2007.[58] Just to list a few cases:
- Mohsen Chizari was captured, who according to the U.S., was the third-ranking official in the Quds Force on 29th December 2006,[59]
- Coalition Forces detained five Iranians in Erbil on 11th January 2007,[60]
- Hakim al-Zamili, deputy health minister and special group member, was captured on 19th November 2006.[61]

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[52] TIR 33, 218–219.
[53] Karbala attackers posed as U.S. military officials. CNN, January 23, 2007. https://edition.cnn.com/2007/WORLD/meast/01/22/iraq.karbala/index.html
[54] Report: Gunmen In U.S. Uniforms Killed GIs. CBS News, January 22, 2007. https://www.cbsnews.com/news/report-gunmen-in-us-uniforms-killed-gis/
[55] Soldiers killed in Karbala were first abducted. CBS News, January 26, 2007. https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna16826151
[56] TIR 6, 68–69.
[57] Tactical Interrogation Report of Qayis al-Khazali, US CENTCOM, 20 March 2007, 19. https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/TIR-1.pdf?x91208
[58] Katzman 2009, 5.
[59] Kagan 2009, 172.
[60] Kagan 2009, 172.
[61] Kagan 2009, 174.

The Coalition Forces also captured members of the Lebanese Hizballah.

The U.S., as part of the Iranian nuclear issue, worked out U.N. Security Council Resolution 1747, which contained a provision for stopping Iranian arms export.[62] The U.S. also designated the IRGC Quds Force as a terrorist organization, as part of Executive Order 13224.[63]

According to the memoirs of General Stanley McChrystal, there was an unofficial list of Shia militants the Coalition Forces were not allowed to attack, in order not to raise political sensitivities with the Iraqi government. Qais al-Khazali was on this unofficial list. His younger brother, Laith was, however, considered to be a target. According to the recollections of McChrystal, the capture mission was designed to catch Laith al-Khazali.[64] Emma Sky, an advisor to General Raymond Odierno, confirmed in her memoirs the existence of such a list of non-targetable Shia leaders. According to her information, Qais knew Maliki personally, and Maliki was convinced that Qais was not sympathetic of Iran.[65]

The raid against Khazali was the outcome of a long intelligence gathering operation, during which British and U.S. forces tried to map the Iranian networks working in Iraq. After receiving information of a meeting, British special operations forces initiated a raid and captured Khazali, along with his brother and a third person on 20th March 2007. Important documentary evidence was also secured during the raid. According to the research of BBC journalist Mark Urban this contained information about the Karbala raid, linking it directly to AAH and also information on Iranian payments going to AAH. The third person, who was detained along with the Khazalis turned out to be Ali Mussa Daqduq, who was identified by the U.S. as a long-time Hizballah operative. Daqduq later also cooperated to some extent with his interrogators, and gave up some information regarding his role.[66] (Later, the U.S. government sanctioned Ali Mussa Daqduq al-Musawi, a member of Lebanese Hizballah, for his part of the planning of the Karbala attack.[67])

General David Petraeus used the capture of the Khazali brothers to generate a more favourable political climate to fight special groups. According to McChrystal, he presented one of the captured documents found at the site, where the brothers had been detained. A presented document had an openly hostile tone towards the Iraqi government, which helped convince Maliki that shielding the special groups will be a political liability for him in the longer term. The two Khazali brothers remained in U.S. custody for years to come.[68] This facilitated a long interrogation process, the redacted versions of these protocols have been cleared for the public in 2018, and the American Enterprise Institute published these

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[62] Resolution 1747 (2007) Adopted by the Security Council at its 5647th meeting on 24 March 2007, United Nations Security Council, 2007. https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N07/281/40/PDF/N072 8140.pdf?OpenElement

[63] Katzman 2009, 5.

[64] McChrystal, S. My Share of the Task: A Memoir, Portfolio/Penguin, 2013, 256.

[65] Sky, Emma. The Unraveling: High Hopes and Missed Opportunities in Iraq, Penguin, 2015, 183.

[66] Urban, Mark. Task Force Black: The Explosive True Story of the SAS and the Secret War in Iraq, Abacus, 2011, 224–226.

[67] Treasury Designates Hizballah Commander Responsible for American Deaths in Iraq, Department of the Treasury, November 19, 2012. https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/tg1775

[68] McChrystal, Stanley. My Share of the Task: A Memoir, Portfolio/Penguin, 2013, 257–258.

documents.[69] During these interrogations, Qais al-Khazali gave very interesting insight into how the special groups developed and what role Iran played in this process.

Khazali revealed a lot of useful information during his interrogation. In the early days, he was responsible for finance in the OMS, and headed construction efforts for the organization as well as the daily organizational issues. Thanks to his position and his close relationship with Muqtada al-Sadr in the early days, he had a very good overview of the development of the OMS. Among other information, he described to his interrogators that while he and Sadr were in Iraq, in the early days of the war, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps made a concentrated effort to enlist their support. He described meetings with people who he believed were members of the Qods Force of the IRGC. Later, due to his religious background and his closeness to Sadr, he became responsible for the special groups in the Shaara, and was making principal decisions, thus he was above the military commanders of the special groups.[70]

Regarding his Iranian connection, Khazali told his interrogators that after the fall of the Saddam regime, he visited Tehran for a funeral, where Iranian government representatives approached him, and made an agreement with him for financial support of the group. He made further trips to Iran, where he met with the two officials repeatedly. These Iranian officials also visited Iraq, the city of al-Najaf, where they wanted to approach Muqtada al-Sadr personally, but were rejected. According to Khazali, these were officials of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps' al Quds Force, although officially they were working on cultural matters.[71] He was part of a delegation that visited Tehran in June 2003, meeting with the highest level of Iranian leadership. During this trip, a more formal relationship was worked out, thanks to which Iran could send money more directly to the OMS. Sadr wanted to be at the centre of this relationship, and was aware of the importance of the money received from Iran. At this point, the Sadr-Khazali relationship was in a strong phase, so Khazali was tasked with going to Tehran to work out details on later dates.[72] According to his statements during the interrogation, he visited Iran on five or six occasions, met with his contact person to discuss the support Iran was willing to provide for the OMS.[73]

He told his interrogator that personally he thought that having direct dealings with Iran was unavoidable and for the benefit of Iraq. He insisted that he did not sell out to the Iranians, whom he disliked. At the same time, he also insisted that the majority of the Sadrist leadership shared his opinion about the relations to the Iranians, indeed there were some among them who hated the Iranians.[74] According to Khazali, Iran was using the Iraqis to wear down the Americans, and thus creating strategic opportunities for itself to continue the Iranian nuclear program and other activities.[75]

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[69]   The Qayis al-Khazali Papers, American Enterprise Institute, undated. https://www.aei.org/the-qayis-al-khazali-papers/

[70]   TIR 43, 273.

[71]   TIR 1, 19–20.

[72]   TIR 4, 63–64.

[73]   TIR 16, 126.

[74]   TIR 41, 259.

[75]   TIR 42, 269.

IRANIAN FINANCIAL SUPPORT
AND WEAPONS SUPPLIES TO SPECIAL GROUPS

During another session, Khazali also stated that he met with General Suleimani and General Hajji Yusef from the IRGC Quds Force, who offered financial support directly, which was neither accepted nor declined at that time. The Sadrist leadership later accepted the Iranian offer of a monthly USD 750,000-1 million support with the caveat that Iran will not have any direct influence over the operations the JAM will be executing, which Iran accepted at this point.[76] Hajji Yusef later travelled personally to Najaf around the end of 2003 or the beginning of 2004, in order to set up the specifics of financial support. The specifics sometimes varied but usually the promised money was sent monthly. It occurred that due to specific reasons larger amounts were sent, USD 2 or 3 million.[77] The money was received by a liaison person in JAM, who transferred it to the group's treasurer, who in turn sent it to regional commanders for salaries and to finance logistical needs.[78]

JAM and special groups operations were financed from the funds received from the IRGC, with half of the money transferred to the special groups, the other half remaining under the control of the Sadrists. The payments had to be made in person, which made travel necessary for members of the group. The payments were given to them in US Dollars.[79] The money was transferred using traditional methods, like hawalas. Four major areas were financed with Iranian money: the special groups, regular JAM, social services, and support of the families of killed JAM members.[80]

Weapons were an important matter, and Iran was well situated in this regard. Khazali pointed out that the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security and the IRGC's Quds Force were the main players when it came to working with Iraqis on issues like operations in Iraq or weapons smuggling.[81] Iran has its own large conventional weapons production capacity, and thanks to the long border with Iraq, it had almost endless possibilities to smuggle weapons to Iraq. According to Khazali, there were trusted smugglers, who did much of the work. But Iran also sold weapons to independent smugglers, who worked with their own contacts. Khazali also stated that Iranians had further ways to smuggle weapons into Iraq, if necessary.[82] Iran preferred to use smugglers using non-Iranian territory, as this provided a degree of deniability for them.[83] Of course, Iran was not the only source of weapons, as there were still unsecured stockpiles of the former Iraqi Army, some weapons were delivered through Syria and Saudi Arabia, and the black market was also a very important source.[84]

According to U.S. sources, large quantities of weapons manufactured in Iran were found by Coalition Forces, including rockets, sniper rifles, and mortar systems. The best example of the Iranian support was the production of explosively formed penetrators (EFP), which

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[76] TIR 9, 85.
[77] TIR 16, 126.
[78] TIR 17, 33.
[79] TIR 21, 151.
[80] Enclosure TAB-A, 21–22.
[81] TIR 47, 300.
[82] TIR 47, 300.
[83] TIR 43, 275.
[84] TIR 35, 231.

needed copper disks and high precision machinery to be manufactured.[85] According to U.S. sources, this included 107 mm artillery rockets, 81 mm mortar shells, and other weapons.[86] The most interesting weapons, which could be linked directly to Iran, were Iranian copies of the Austrian Steyr HS 50 sniper rifles. The system was sold to Iran for law enforcement purposes, but the Iranians reportedly used it to support Iranian-supported non-state armed groups.[87]

Through different liaison channels, the regional commanders could order weapons from Iran, free of charge, through quite a few middle men. This procedure circumvented the OMS. The procedure had its flaws, as the weapons arriving were rarely the ones the regional commanders ordered, what arrived was an Iranian decision.[88] The speed of deliveries was very much affected by the way they were smuggled in, so it was difficult to create larger stockpiles. Also, each group was in charge of its own efforts to store weapons, and they were usually hidden in homes, or some other private property.[89] The most lethal weapon against the Coalition Forces was the Explosively Formed Penetrator, or EFP. The distribution of EFPs was limited to groups that – from the Iranian point of view – were reliable and trained in using them. The devices were brought in through traditional smuggling routes primarily in Maysan Province, but some arrived through Basra Province. The devices were hidden among commercial goods and were delivered to the groups they were designated for. According to Khazali, the same IRGC officers were in charge of this process, who were also responsible for moving Iraqi Shia trainees across the border.[90] Later, a group was created under the command of Khazali, to distribute the weapons among the special groups, as they saw fit.[91] Iran had deep interests in Basra and was especially willing to support groups that operated in the city. Also, a factor was its geographic location and its economic importance, as well as its urban nature, which made it easier to create a difficult environment for Coalition Forces.[92]

IRANIAN TRAINING FOR IRAQI SHIA GROUPS

Khazali did confirm that Iran was providing training for Shia armed groups. Due to their security consciousness, the contacts were based on personal relations, and this made even for Iraqi Shia groups very difficult to know what other Iraqi groups were doing with the Iranians. Usually groups designated for Iranian training remained small, 10-20 trainees at one time and even those had to travel separately to Iran for their training. He identified three camps for the interrogators, and noted that members of different groups could be present at the same time for training in these camps.[93] Training in Iran for special group recruits

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[85] Kagan 2009, 160, 179.
[86] Kagan 2009, 179.
[87] Gao, C. Ready, Aim: Why Iran Loves the Steyr HS 50 Sniper Rifle. The National Interest, July 17, 2020. https://nationalinterest.org/blog/reboot/ready-aim-why-iran-loves-steyr-hs-50-sniper-rifle-164910 and Kraske, M. A Smoking Gun from the Alps. Spiegel, 14 February 2007. https://www.spiegel.de/international/austrian-weapons-in-iraq-a-smoking-gun-from-the-alps-a-466284.html
[88] TIR 17, 133.
[89] TIR 19, 143.
[90] TIR 18, 137.
[91] TIR 43, 274–275.
[92] TIR 42, 268.
[93] TIR 10, 91–92.

included light and crew-served infantry weapons systems and using IEDs. For raw recruits, this basic training lasted for one month. Based on their abilities, Iranians provided options for some to train on specific systems. Advanced training was also provided, such as using mortars and IEDs, which made these courses and the attendees very important for the special groups.[94]

Khazali reported that the Iranians had some important limitations on the technical skills they were providing to the trainees. For example, the Iranians did not provide any training on how to manufacture remote controllers for IEDs. This was a problem for the members of the Shia militant groups, as in urban environments wire controlled IEDs were not practical.[95]

A major part of this training was the use of Explosively Formed Penetrators (EFP), which were one of the most effective weapons the insurgents had against the Coalition Forces. Khazali also stated that the source of EFP manufacturing was Iran, and the devices were smuggled into Iraq. The provided training however, had its limits. For example, it did not include MANPADS training, as it was expensive and the Iranians were concerned that such training could be eventually used against them.[96]

Also, Iran did not provide any MANPADS, Shia groups had only a few such systems, captured from the stockpiles of the Saddam era Iraqi army.[97] In addition, Khazali reported that specific programs for trainers' skills were not on the agenda, the people trained in different skills were teaching their comrades as best they could.[98]

He mentioned that other special groups outside of JAM started receiving training from Iran around 2004. In the early period, the Iranians sought Iraqi Shia militants to come to Iran for training, but later the trend was reversed, and the Iraqis actively sought opportunities to go to Iran for training. This all was facilitated through trusted personal relations between the Iraqis and the IRGC.[99] Khazali also mentioned that Lebanese Hizballah too was involved in the training of some Iraqis.[100] He stated that no Iranian advisors were directly with JAM, although he suspected that some were supporting the Badr Brigades and the Group of Abu Mustafa al-Shaybani.[101] He also pointed out that the Iranians never tried to dictate the special groups the targets to attack, they provided only general guidance.[102]

DYNAMICS OF KEEPING IRANIAN RELATIONS WITH IRAQI MILITANT GROUPS

Khazali also pointed out to his interrogators that relations between the Sadrists and the Iranians were not without problems. He stated that as early as under the elder Sadr, the Iranian approach to government was criticized and that these problems were of a theoretical nature and not based on personal sympathies.[103] Khazali emphasized that the Sadrist movement

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[94] Enclosure TAB-A, 41.
[95] Enclosure TAB-A, 23.
[96] TIR 11, 98.
[97] Enclosure TAB-A documents for release 18–32, 62.
[98] TIR 11, 98.
[99] TIR 16, 126–127.
[100] TIR 19, 142.
[101] TIR 32, 213.
[102] Enclosure TAB-A, 22.
[103] TIR 32, 214.

was not pro-Iranian, but the Badr Brigades were the staunchest pro-Iranian Shia militant group. There had been issues between the two groups, which in some cases led to violence, and Iran had to mediate between the Badrists and the Sadrists.[104] In his opinion, Iran could only influence Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim, the leader of the Badr Brigades and Muqtada al-Sadr not to fight each other, but Iran did not have the influence to control Sadr. The Iranians had much closer relations with the Badr Brigades. Similarly, the Sadrists and the Daawa Party had a difficult relationship.[105]

During his interrogation, Khazali mentioned that the dynamic changes in the Shia militant landscape usually had two reasons: financial and ideological. Financial reasons often meant that militant groups split for a while because of unsanctioned activities, such as kidnapping and theft. According to Khazali, Iran did not financially incentivize for such splits, as it was keen to keep up its good relation with Sadr. Sadr himself did use Iranian money in order to support some breakaway groups. The money coming from Iran was allocated by the Sadrist leadership for different tasks, roughly half of it was used for building and maintaining the military capacity of JAM.[106] Another important organizational aspect in Khazali's view was that in Shia groups, often it was not military competence that was the most important factor when choosing a leader, but his popularity with others in the group.[107]

Khazali also provided some details on meetings after the second battle of Najaf, where the reorganization of the Shia militant groups was discussed and a plan was agreed on to that end. Also, he corroborated information that an Iranian, presumably an advisor, was taking part in combat on the side of the Shia militant groups.[108] At this meeting, the major decision was that special groups were needed, but they had to distance themselves from the official JAM and Muqtada al-Sadr. Khazali had a role in approving special groups operations at later dates.[109]

He also provided information on his role in the emergence of JAM. Around 2005 he was responsible for all aspects of JAM, but was removed from these duties later that year.

Khazali also described, what led to his schism with Sadr. According to him, he was perceived in the movement as having become too influential. Due to his position, he had close contacts with some of the Iraqi political elites, and he also had close ties with the Iranians on the financial side. Inside the organization some accused him of trying to usurp power from the leadership. According to Khazali, a feud broke out in which another close associate of Sadr had to step in and mediate, which was successful in the short term, and Khazali returned to manage the finance of OMS for a short time. It was a political initiative by the Iraqi government, in which Khazali was mediating that brought tensions to the forefront. The objective was to condemn and end sectarian violence, and a preliminary deal was reached, in which Khazali was the negotiator from Sadr. However, OMS leadership demanded the agreement and did not allow Khazali to sign it as its representative. In the second half of 2006, the influence issue came up again; as a result, Khazali broke with

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[104] Enclosure TAB-A, 22.
[105] Enclosure TAB-A documents for release 18–32, 65., 68.
[106] TIR 7, 75.
[107] TIR 15, 121–122.
[108] TIR 4, 64–65.
[109] TIR 6, 70.

Sadr, and became a political actor on his own.[110] He described Sadr as someone who wanted to keep every important decision under his own control, and selected people for important jobs who were respectable but not really qualified for the position he selected them for.[111]

Another issue in the break up was the problematic command and control system of JAM. Khazali was tasked with sorting out "good" and "bad" commanders. He told his interrogators that he tried to convince Sadr which of his commanders he should keep, but Sadr was increasingly in a state of paranoia, and he was unsuccessful, with "bad" commanders (meaning commanders, who did their own missions without central approval) remaining in JAM.[112] He later elaborated that in JAM everyone was loyal to Sadr, but at lower levels the competition was fierce, both among the commanders themselves and for the attention of Sadr. There were also fights over values among JAM leadership. This occurred despite the fact that due to organizational deficiencies JAM leadership was unable to distinguish between groups that were successful, and groups that were less successful, and the leadership feared that this would create a negative environment within JAM.[113] Also, Sadr did not trust his JAM leaders very much, at later stages he regularly changed the head of the force every few months.[114] According to Khazali, Sadr did not value military professionalism, as he perceived that such individual commanders could get popular within the movement and thus would become dangerous to his position.[115] Demotions were sometimes applied to punish brigade commanders, but this usually was in response to personal feuds and not linked to the effectiveness of a commander. It was rare that a brigade commander got dismissed, as it would affect morale in his unit. According to Khazali, the most frequent cause for changes in the brigade command was that individual commanders gave up their position.[116]

During the interrogation, he also mentioned that Iran never tried to force or otherwise motivate JAM to cooperate in military terms with other Iran-backed groups, like the Badr Brigades. In his view, this was due to the deep differences between the leaders.[117] The Iranians tried to exert pressure on Sadr to take part in the political process in Iraq, which Sadr saw as legitimizing the U.S. presence in Iraq, and was opposed to it accordingly. However, Sadr later relented and according to Iranian wishes, he participated in the political process.[118]

After the election in 2005, the OMS had ministerial positions, and thus had access to financial resources of the Iraqi state. The Sadrist leadership used these positions to benefit contractors who were loyal to Sadr, and according to Khazali, some money was paid back to Sadr.[119] According to Khazali, the Sadrist movement was able to build a large network of companies which were in contact with other businesses as well as government institutions.[120] These companies were often linked to one influential family, and were bidding for

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[110] Tactical Interrogation Report of Qayis al-Khazali, US CENTCOM, 20 March 2007, 20–22. https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/TIR-1.pdf?x91208
[111] TIR 41, 60–261.
[112] TIR 3, 56.
[113] TIR 15, 121.
[114] TIR 28, 34.
[115] TIR 42, 268.
[116] TIR 41, 263.
[117] TIR 15, 122.
[118] TIR 23, 157.
[119] TIR 8, 80.
[120] TIR 21, 152.

government and Coalition reconstruction projects, because these were deemed the most profitable possibilities. In order to create the best chances, companies vying for a contract were often controlled by the economic arm of the Sadrist movement, so no matter who won, the Sadrist side benefited from the contract. According to Khazali, the successful companies had to pay 20 percent of their profits to Sadr.[121]

IRANIAN REACTIONS TO KHAZALI'S CAPTURE

It is not clear when the Iranians became aware of the capture of the Khazali brothers. However, the Iranians were quick to intensify their activities quite visibly against the British presence in Iraq.

The UK was deeply involved in the naval aspects of the Iraq War and its aftermath, and in 2007, the UK was leading the multinational naval forces entrusted with monitoring Iraqi territorial waters. This force operated under UN Security Council's resolution 1723, and under the invitation of the Iraqi government of the time. The British contingent was part of Combined Task Force 158, and its rules of engagements were laid down by CTF 158.[122] The mission of the Royal Navy was to support maritime security, commerce, deter terrorist operations and help secure Iraqi oil platforms in the Arabian Gulf.[123]

On 23rd March 2007, a routine Royal Navy patrol from HMS Cornwall boarded a ship in Iraqi territorial waters, which was suspected of smuggling goods into Iraq. The 15-strong patrol was captured by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps Navy, who stated later that the British sailors and marines had been in Iranian territorial waters and had entered illegally.[124]

The British foreign office summoned the Iranian ambassador to protest against the arrest of their personnel, and a short time later the Iranians summoned the British ambassador, accusing the British Navy personnel of intruding into Iranian territorial waters.[125] The British presented GPS data, which they said was evidence that the British contingent operated in Iraqi territorial waters, which the Iranian embassy in London disputed, claiming the British had been in Iranian territorial waters. Tony Blair, the British Prime Minister personally commented on the incident, suggesting that pressure on Iran needs to be applied to secure the freedom of the British military personnel. Later the British Foreign Secretary told Parliament that Britain was suspending bilateral cooperation with Iran in every way. The British pointed out that the original statement of the Iranians also put the position of the captured British personnel inside Iraqi waters.[126]

The diplomatic row between the UK and Iran deepened after the captured personnel were paraded on Iranian TV and the leading seaman's statement was used to underpin

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[121] TIR 23, 157.

[122] Fulton, R. et al. Inquiry into the Apprehension of 15 RN/RM Personnel form HMS Cornwall by Iranians on 23 March 07 – Operation Deacon, Ministry of Defence, 16 May 2007, 4. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/482260/20151120-Report_Redacted-FINAL_Redacted.pdf

[123] Fulton et al. 2007, 1.

[124] UK sailors captured at gunpoint, BBC News, 23 March 2007. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/6484279.stm

[125] Cobbold, Richard. Analysis: Iranian Seizure of Royal Navy Sailors, RUSI, 26 March 2007. https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/analysis-iranian-seizure-royal-navy-sailors

[126] UK reveals Iran dispute evidence, BBC, 28 March 2007. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/6501555.stm

the Iranian narrative about the incident. The footage of the alleged confession was also aired around the Middle East by the Iranian al-Alam satellite TV channel. The Iranians also released a letter, allegedly written by the lead seaman to her parents.[127] According to media reports, Syrian and Qatari mediation helped end the escalating diplomatic tensions. Iranian President Ahmedinejad personally made the statement about the release, stating humanitarian considerations.[128] The British Royal Navy personnel was finally released on April 4, 2007.[129]

As there was constant monitoring and the British mission was an overt routine mission, it is unlikely that the British sailors entered Iranian territorial waters by mistake. In 2004, there was already a similar incident, when eight sailors and marines were captured and detained for four days.[130] The British post-incident inquiry did not establish a single cause or factor for the incident, neither did it find anyone on the British side culpable (bad communications, inadequate training etc. were cited as reasons). The available British report speculated whether it was a strategic response to Coalition activity or an opportunistic manoeuvre of an IRGCN commander.[131] It also has to be noted that the commander of HMS Cornwall was later removed from his position, and the British Ministry of Defence neither confirmed nor denied that this was an outcome of this incident.[132]

Although available British official statements do not point it out, the timing strongly suggests that the Iranian capture operation was probably at least partially a reaction to the capture of Khazali.

A few months after the capture of Khazali and some of his associates, on 29th May 2007, Peter Moore, a British citizen and four of his British bodyguards were kidnapped. Moore worked as an IT expert for the Iraqi government and was kidnapped during his work at an Iraqi government facility. Another reason for his kidnapping, according to the Guardian, was that he was installing software that would have revealed the embezzlement of foreign aid money.[133]

His capture started an enduring effort to free him. His bodyguards were executed allegedly because the British government did not meet the demands of the kidnappers,[134] and their bodies were traded for the release of Iraqi prisoners. The investigation of the Guardian alleged that Moore was taken to Iran during his captivity, and kept in a facility run by the IRGC's Quds force.[135] This was however not confirmed by the U.K. or the U.S., although

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[127] Borger, J. and Wintour, P. Fury as Iran shows footage of captured sailors on television. The Guardian, 29 March 2007. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/mar/29/politics.iran2

[128] Iran To Free 15 Captured Brits. CBS News, 4 April 2007. https://www.cbsnews.com/news/iran-to-free-15-captured-brits/

[129] Fulton et al. 2007, 1.

[130] Cobbold, R. Analysis: Iranian Seizure of Royal Navy Sailors, RUSI, 26 March 2007. https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/analysis-iranian-seizure-royal-navy-sailors

[131] Fulton et al. 2007, 2–3.

[132] Walker, P. and agencies: HMS Cornwall commander removed after Iran hostage debacle. The Guardian, 28 July 2008. https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2008/jul/28/military.iran

[133] Mahmood, M. et al. Revealed: hand of Iran behind Britons' Baghdad kidnapping. The Guardian, 30 December 2009. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/dec/30/iran-britons-baghdad-kidnapping

[134] Alan McMenemy's body recovered five years after Iraq kidnap. BBC, 21 January 2012. https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-16660750 and Timeline: British hostages in Iraq. BBC, 20 January 2012. https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-13846598

[135] Mahmood, M. et al. Revealed: hand of Iran behind Britons' Baghdad kidnapping, The Guardian, 30 December 2009. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/dec/30/iran-britons-baghdad-kidnapping

General Petraeus said, he suspected that Moore was kept in Iran.[136] It was assumed at the time that Khazali's group wanted to exert pressure on the British government in this way to release the Khazali brothers. After Khazali was transferred to Iraqi custody in 2010, Peter Moore was freed. Khazali's brother was released a few months prior.[137]

In June 2009, the U.S. military, in accordance with the security agreement between the U.S. and Iraq, could only operate against special groups with Iraqi approval, and the detainees that the U.S. captured were transferred to Iraq. Due to the elections, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki stopped the operations against special groups, and started to release some detainees.[138] Khazali was also set free by the Iraqi authorities and was able to continue his political career. The official explanation was that he was not accused of any crime under Iraqi law (attack on Coalition Forces was not sanctioned by Iraqi law).[139] It probably can be attributed to these political ambitions that AAH apologized to Peter Moore for kidnapping him.[140]

CONCLUSION

Looking at the publicly available information on Iran's role in Iraq in the last 20 years, we can safely say that the sustainment of hybrid warfare capabilities is not an easy undertaking, as this article has shown. Although the article has a much narrower focus, it still shows important factors from the early days of the Iranian efforts.

The cases of OMS-JAM and AAH show that creating or supporting non-state armed actors is also a very intensive challenge, as political and operational interests can go in different directions. The internal group dynamics are also very important as SCIRI and the Badr Brigades have split up,[141] and now act as political rivals, while Sadr's movement has also taken political turns, which were difficult to predict. Some of the special groups in turn have become more mainstream, like AAH, and began to organize in a political fashion as well, using the democratic process and violence to further their aims.[142] Also, Iran not only invested in Shia groups, the U.S. accused them of supporting militant Sunnis as well, providing EFPs for such groups as well, which shows that a state actor does not have to stick to like-minded groups in order to further its aims at least in the short term.[143]

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[136] 'No evidence' hostage held in Iran, al Jazeera, 1 January 2010. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2010/1/1/no-evidence-hostage-held-in-iran

[137] Chulov, M. Qais al-Khazali: from kidnapper and prisoner to potential leader. The Guardian, December 31, 2009. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/dec/31/iran-hostages-qais-al-khazali

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The moves of the Iraqi government, such as Operation Charge of the Knights in 2008, which Maliki launched against the Sadrists in Basra, was also an important political twist. This caused a rift between Maliki and Sadr, with Sadr withdrawing his political support. Iran made the most of it, creating a ceasefire between the warring sides.[144]

Looking at the wider spectrum of events, the popular October revolution in Iraq in 2019 has also shown some limits, and at times the counterproductive nature of Iranian influence, with many of the Iraqi Shia demonstrators condemning Iranian influence.[145] Indeed, the Iranian consulate in Basra was torched in the forming days of the movement, which shows that this dissatisfaction was not merely philosophical.[146]

Of course, Iranian influence was significantly widened by the actions against the so-called Islamic State group, as the special groups became parts of the Popular Mobilization Forces, which was created after the successful IS offensive in 2014, creating an official structure for the Iran-supported groups.[147] In the last few years, there were signs that the coordination between Iran and the special groups has become strained on some issues.[148]

However, at the same time, it has also been true that Iranian involvement in the special groups had negative effects on its reputation in Iraq, as it has reinforced fears about the intentions of Iran. The infighting between some Iran-backed groups also casts a long shadow.[149]

The case examined in this article also shows that having extensive, close links to non-state armed groups, as much as they have an operational interest, can be very effective in supporting the creation and build-up of other non-state armed groups, although this avenue of research is still somewhat in the dark due to the lack of publicly available information. It also shows the importance of individual leaders, such as Khazali, who still plays an important role in the composition of the special groups. The records of his interrogation provide a unique insight into the organizational challenges of non-state armed groups and their further study is warranted.

The better and deeper understanding of Iran's role and operational approaches to non-state armed groups will no doubt further our knowledge about the issue of hybrid warfare.

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