

Iran's Axis of Resistance

In Review

October 21 - November 7, 2021

Iran's Iraqi Proxies Attempt to Assassinate the Iraqi Prime Minister

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Key Takeaway: Iran likely supported and facilitated a failed attempt by its Iraqi proxy militias to assassinate Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi to retain Iran's dominant influence in Iraq. Iran likely permitted the attack after Iraqi nationalist Shi'a cleric Moqtada al-Sadr began to pursue a new government without the participation of Iran's proxies in the aftermath of Iraq's October 10, 2021, elections. Iran and its proxies are most likely to deescalate if Sadr agrees to form a consensus government without Kadhimi as prime minister. However, Iran has demonstrably shifted its policy towards the current Iraqi government and may be willing to permit more violence to achieve its objectives: an Iranian-influenced government under a controllable prime minister who accepts Iran's dominant position. In a less likely but most dangerous scenario, Sadr could deploy his own militias to counter Iranian threats, risking a wider civil war in Iraq.

Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) and Kata'ib Hezbollah militants attempted to assassinate Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi. Iranian proxy militants launched two explosives-laden drones at the residence of Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi around 0230 local time on November 7.¹ The attack inside Baghdad's fortified Green Zone injured seven guards and may have slightly injured Kadhimi. Anonymous Iraqi security officials told *Reuters* that two of Iran's Iraqi proxy militias, Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH) and Asa'ib Ahl al-



Haq (AAH), coordinated to conduct the attack.² KH previously described Kadhimi's ascension to the premiership as "a declaration of war against the Iraqi people," assassinated his advisor, and drove armed convoys around his house to deter his attempts to crack down on Iraqi militias.³ The leader of AAH vowed to take revenge on Kadhimi after AAH and KH-linked protesters attempted to storm the Green Zone on November 5, leading to the death of at least one proxy protester.⁴

Tehran most likely supported and facilitated the assassination attempt. Anonymous regional officials claimed that Tehran had prior knowledge of the attack but did not directly order it.⁵ The participation of KH, Iran's most loyal and ideologically devoted proxy, indicates that Iran had prior warning and the opportunity to stop the attack but chose not to. Iran has long used KH as a threat to keep Kadhimi in line, even as it offered boons in

the form of political support for Kadhimi's premiership from other proxy groups.

Senior Iranian officials and their Iraqi allies quickly responded to the attempted assassination with notably consistent statements. This rapid and disciplined messaging would be highly unusual if the attack came as a surprise to Tehran. The Secretary of the Iranian Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani, blamed the "sedition" of "foreign think tanks" and implicitly suggested that the United States was responsible for the attack to foster instability in Iraq.⁶ Shamkhani is a prominent foreign policy adviser to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and has historically helped manage Iranian policy vis-à-vis Iraq. Other Iranian officials, including Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian, later used similar rhetoric to describe the attack.⁷ These officials attempted to blame the United States for Iraq's instability and deflect responsibility from the Iranian proxies. Iraqi proxy groups followed with similar rhetoric. Badr Organization leader Hadi al-Ameri blamed a "third party [...] trying to create sedition" for the attack while Kata'ib Imam Ali leader Shibl al-Zaidi blamed "a project of sedition."⁸ KH and AAH officials questioned whether the attack even occurred, blamed Kadhimi for "playing the victim," and claimed that proxies would not waste a drone on Kadhimi.⁹

Iran's Iraqi proxies set conditions for their post-attack narratives to frame it as a US-directed false flag attack ahead of time. Iran may have decided to greenlight the attack at least a week earlier; proxy militants launched three rockets at the headquarters of the Iraqi National Intelligence Service, which Kadhimi previously led, in a likely direct warning to Kadhimi on October 31.¹⁰ The November 7 assassination attempt came two days after AAH leader and US-designated terrorist Qais al-Khazali warned of a plot by "parties linked to intelligence agencies planning to bomb the Green Zone and to blame the Resistance factions."¹¹ The proxies eventually settled on a narrative of blaming the United States for a false flag attack to make Kadhimi more sympathetic. They implausibly blamed the US Embassy for not activating its counter-rocket, artillery, and mortar (C-RAM) system to interdict the drones.¹² C-RAMs are not built to counter low-flying drones and only cover a limited area; the US Embassy's C-RAM is too far from the prime minister's residence to provide protection.

Iran and its proxies intended the attack to accomplish three primary objectives:

- 1. To force the formation of a consensus government that includes Iranian proxy representatives despite their electoral losses.** The primary target of this attack was not Kadhimi, but nationalist Shi'a cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, the leader of the bloc that won the most seats in Iraq's October 10 elections. Sadr is attempting to form a coalition government that excludes Iran's political proxies to cement his own influence in Iraq.¹³ His premier of choice is a second-term Mustafa al-Kadhimi. Iran's proxies used this attack to signal to Sadr that they will destroy Iraq's political system if he does not allow them to participate in it.
- 2. To remove Kadhimi from contention as the next prime minister.** Iran's proxies oppose Kadhimi due to his attempts to limit proxy corruption, hold proxy militias accountable for terrorist attacks and assassinations, and protect the results of Iraq's October elections, in addition to his efforts to preserve the US military presence in Iraq. Kadhimi has repeatedly tried to crack down on proxy activity to a greater extent than all other Iraqi prime ministers. His failure to hold them accountable is beside the point; his unwillingness to be cowed by proxy threats makes him too dangerous (or perhaps simply too inconvenient) to remain in power. Iran's proxies likely calculated that this attack would accomplish this objective regardless of Kadhimi's survival. If he died or was severely injured, he would be out of the running. But even if he survived, they may have assessed that he is likely to resign to avert greater violence.
- 3. To demonstrate and reinforce Iran's primacy in Iraq.** The attack represents a significant shift in Tehran's Iraq policy since Iran helped put Kadhimi into office in May 2020. A nationalist Sadr-led government without Iranian proxy participation would be unacceptable to an Iranian regime committed since 2003 to never allow a hostile government to emerge in Baghdad again. Permitting the attack on Kadhimi demonstrates to Iraqis and other regional powers that Iran will retain its veto power over major domestic or foreign policy issues in Iraq.

Iran's Iraqi proxies are most likely to deescalate if Sadr agrees to form a consensus government without Kadhimi as prime minister. Initial reports of negotiations to hold specific militia members accountable for the assassination attempt in exchange for prosecuting the members of the Iraqi Security Forces who killed Iranian proxy members in the recent protests may provide a short-term de-escalation. Such actions by the Iraqi government are unlikely to change the calculus of Kadhimi, Sadr, Iran, or its proxies, however.¹⁴ The notoriously capricious Sadr is under tremendous pressure from Shi'a politicians, the Shi'a religious establishment in Najaf, Iran, and Iranian proxies to include Iran's proxies in the political process. Iran's proxies targeted Sadr's house with an explosives-laden drone in December 2019, the last time a Sadrist-plurality Iraqi parliament attempted to choose a new premier. Sadr eventually fell in line and formed a consensus coalition government to elevate Kadhimi with Iranian approval.¹⁵ Any individual who Iran perceives as a threat to Iranian influence in Iraq, including Kadhimi and Sadr himself, could be a target for additional proxy violence. Sadr is most likely to fold again, forcing Kadhimi to step aside. Kadhimi does have a narrow path forward if he or Sadr broker a deal with Iran's proxies for a Kadhimi-led consensus government. Such a deal would require another change in Iran's new policy towards Iraqi government formation. In a less likely but most dangerous scenario, Sadr could decide to stand his ground and deploy his own Saraya al-Salam militia to counter Iranian proxy threats, potentially triggering an intra-Shi'a civil war in Iraq.

Iran's Axis of Resistance Activity

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- 1. Iran's Iraqi proxies unveiled a new capability to threaten US planes, helicopters, and drones in Iraq.** Members of the Iran-backed 52nd Brigade of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces likely placed, then discovered and dismantled, an unfired 358 missile they claimed was aimed at their base in Tuz Khurmatu, Salah ad-Din Province, Iraq on October 21.¹⁶ The 358 is an Iranian-made cruise missile designed to avoid US defenses that Iran's partners, the

Yemeni al-Houthis, have used to target US and Saudi drones in Yemen. Iranian proxies could also use the anti-aircraft missile to down US military helicopters and tiltrotors.¹⁷ The reveal of this missile follows months of Iranian proxy threats to shoot down foreign aircraft in Iraqi airspace.¹⁸ Proxy militants located the missile 90 km from where US forces are present at Erbil International Airport, likely to demonstrate their capability to threaten US air assets and to limit the freedom of movement of US-led Coalition aircraft. US aerial assets assist the Iraqi Security Forces with intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance on ISIS militants in and around Salah ad-Din.

The reveal of this missile in the Iraqi theater is one of a series of Iranian proxy escalations in October 2021 intended to limit the US-led Coalition's freedom of movement in Iraq and Syria and to incentivize an eventual US withdrawal. Iran will likely order its proxies to continue attacks on US assets, possibly including drones or helicopters, in Syria and may resume attacks on US assets in Iraq as the December 31, 2021, deadline for the complete withdrawal of US combat forces from Iraq nears. Iran's proxies have never successfully downed a US asset with a 358, and questions remain regarding its range and efficacy. However, the presence of additional proxy anti-air capabilities could complicate future US reconnaissance missions and evacuations, if needed, in Iraqi or Syrian airspace.

- 2. Iran's Iraqi proxies blamed the United Nations Assistance Mission (UNAMI) for an ISIS attack to set conditions for further threats and possible violence against UN assets.** ISIS militants killed 11 people and injured 15 in an attack on al-Hawasha, Diyala Province, on October 26.¹⁹ Some Iraqi outlets blamed the Iranian proxy-infiltrated Popular Mobilization Forces for focusing on anti-election protests in Baghdad instead of securing Diyala from ISIS attacks. Iran's proxies blamed the "UN militias" and UNAMI chief Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert in English and Arabic posts for controlling the media narrative and for directing the ISIS attacks.²⁰ The Iranian proxy response to the October ISIS attack mirrors their January 2021 reaction to an

ISIS attack in Baghdad in which they repeatedly blamed Saudi Arabia and culminated with a proxy attack on the Saudi royal palace in Riyadh.²¹ Iran's proxies may escalate their threats to include kinetic attacks against Plasschaert or other UNAMI personnel and facilities, using the ISIS attack and their claims that UNAMI stole Iraq's elections to justify their actions. Iran's proxies last attacked a UN World Food Program convoy that they claimed was ferrying US intelligence personnel in August 2020.²²

- Iranian proxy militants fired three rockets likely targeting the Iraqi National Intelligence Service (INIS) headquarters in Baghdad on October 31 to threaten the Iraqi prime minister.** All three rockets landed within one kilometer of the INIS headquarters at

approximately 04:30 local time and caused no casualties. The timing, targeting, and relative inaccuracy of the attack indicates that proxy militants intended the attack to be harassing, not lethal.²³ Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi reportedly visited the INIS, which he led prior to his premiership, on October 30.²⁴ Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) had located and dismantled another Katyusha rocket launchpad in Baghdad's al-Shu'ala neighborhood on October 30 that may have also targeted the INIS.²⁵ Domestically, the attackers likely intended to signal to Kadhimi that he, his intelligence service, and his US backers are not welcome in Iraq's next government. Proxy channels falsely claimed that the October 31 attack was targeting the US Embassy, which was outside the range of the rockets' reported launch site.²⁶ Proxy media likely intended that claim to threaten the United States and possibly to



signal a resumption of attacks in Iraq generally. Proxy militants later fired two explosives-laden drones at Kadhimi's house in an attempted assassination on November 7.

- 4. Most members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) threatened to sever diplomatic and economic ties with Lebanon to limit Lebanese Hezbollah's (LH) influence over the Lebanese government.** Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) recalled their ambassadors from Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia and the UAE expelled Lebanon's ambassadors on October 27.²⁷ LH-aligned Lebanese Information Minister George Kordahi criticized the Saudi-led coalition's involvement in the Yemeni civil war as "futile" and said it was time for the war to end in an interview recorded before he joined the government but aired on October 26.²⁸ Saudi Arabia also banned Lebanese imports and terminated the Saudi-owned MBC media conglomerate's presence in Lebanon on October 29.²⁹ Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan al-Saud called for Kordahi's removal as a precondition for reconciliation.³⁰

Saudi Arabia has sought to reduce Iranian influence in Lebanon since 2017 and banned Lebanese agricultural exports to limit Hezbollahi drug smuggling earlier in 2021.³¹ Saudi Arabia and other GCC states are exploiting Kordahi's comments as a pretext to further limit their involvement in Lebanon to force the Lebanese government to rhetorically distance itself from LH and Iran. The GCC members may intensify existing economic and diplomatic penalties against Lebanon, possibly generating a new wave of economic protests pressuring Mikati and his cabinet to resign. LH forces could respond with counterprotests in the event of Kordahi's removal or other anti-LH actions.

These actions could exacerbate Lebanon's already tense political scene.³² The GCC countries' attempts to economically and diplomatically isolate Lebanon may inadvertently create a vacuum for LH and Iranian influence to fill. In the most dangerous scenario, additional blows to Lebanon's already-failed economy could push the country toward a failed state or resumed civil war.

- 5. Likely Iranian proxy militants targeted a Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) base near Bashiqa, Ninewa Province, Iraq with multiple rockets, likely to counter threatening Turkish activity in other regions.** Unidentified militants launched between two and eight 122mm Grad rockets targeting the Zlikan camp from a truck positioned outside Mosul on November 7.³³ Two rockets impacted within the camp.³⁴ Likely Iranian proxy militants also targeted the Zlikan base on April 14, August 12, and September 24, 2021, with similar munitions. The April 14 attack killed one TSK soldier. Iraqi security forces interdicted another attempted attack on September 15.³⁵ Proxy media channels aggressively condemned the Turkish presence in Iraq in the leadup to each attack.³⁶ Increasingly frequent Iranian proxy attacks on Turkish military assets in northern Iraq throughout 2021 suggest Iran is directing its Iraqi proxies to intensify anti-TSK operations as part of a broader escalation against Turkey in the region. Iran may be using Iraq as a pressure valve to demonstrate its frustration with Turkey by proxy without directly escalating against its neighbor. Iran likely seeks to oppose Turkey's influence and presence in Iraq while also retaliating for Turkey's threatening activities in Azerbaijan, along the Iranian border, in northern Syria or elsewhere in the region.

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