December 2012

Sam Wyer

MIDDLE EAST SECURITY REPORT 7

THE RESURGENCE OF ASA'IB AHL AL-HAQ

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Photo Credit: Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq protest in Kadhimiya, Baghdad, September 2012. Photo posted on Twitter by Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report examines the political, religious, and military resurgence of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) in Iraq since the withdrawal of U.S. Forces, identifying the group's key actors, their present disposition and strategy, and their regional expansion. AAH is an Iranian-backed Shi'a militant group that split from Moqtada al-Sadr's Jaish al-Mahdi (JAM) in 2006. Since that time, AAH has conducted thousands of lethal explosively formed penetrator (EFP) attacks against U.S. and Iraqi forces, targeted kidnappings of Westerners, rocket and mortar attacks on the U.S. Embassy, the murder of American soldiers, and the assassination of Iraqi officials.

AAH has close connections to Iran. The Lebanese Hezbollah operative Ali Mussa Daqduq, who was detained by coalition forces in 2007 and released from Iraqi custody in November 2012, provided organized training to AAH fighters. He reported to Youssef Hashim, the head of Lebanese Hezbollah Special Operations; the latter reported to Abdul Reza Shahlai (AKA Hajji Yussef), the director of Iranian Qods Force External Operations. Abdul Reza Shahlai was the mastermind behind the disrupted 2011 plot to assassinate the Saudi Ambassador to the United States in Washington, DC. All reported to Qassem Soleimani, the head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Qods-Force (IRGC-QF).

Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq is led by Qais al-Khazali, a student of Moqtada al-Sadr's father, Mohammed Sadeq al-Sadr. Qais was detained by coalition forces in March 2007 along with Daqduq, but he was released from custody in early 2010. Additionally, Mohammed al-Tabatabai, Akram al-Kaabi, Laith al-Khazali (the brother of Qais), and Hassan Salem remain part of AAH's core leadership. Kazim al-Abadi joined the organization after leaving the Sadrist Trend sometime prior to 2010.

AAH is resurgent. The group represents a significant threat to U.S. interests and any U.S. presence in Iraq, given its continued record of lethal activity, its Khomeinist ideology, and its current political ascension. Moreover, the group offers a vehicle for increased Iranian influence in political and religious affairs.

During the Iraq War, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq adamantly opposed U.S. occupation. Now that the bulk of the U.S. military has withdrawn, AAH's current objectives are assessed to be:

- To maintain a friendly Shi'a-controlled Iraqi state.
- To eclipse the Sadrist Trend as the principal champion of Shi'a religious activism.
- To promote the religious and political principles of the Iranian Revolution inside and beyond Iraq.
- To advance Iranian political and religious influence in Iraq.
- To expel the remaining U.S. military and diplomatic presence from the country.

After the withdrawal of U.S. forces in December 2011, AAH announced the intention to halt armed resistance and formally join the Iraqi political process. Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki facilitated this transition through outreach to Qais al-Khazali. AAH has adopted the Lebanese Hezbollah model to garner popular support. In 2012, AAH rebranded itself as a nationalist Islamic resistance organization, expanding its outreach among Iraq's minorities and establishing political offices throughout the country. It also assumed the role of a charitable organization. AAH has, consequently, grown rapidly as a political group.

Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and the Sadrists have competed for dominance as the champions of Shi'a religious activism in Iraq since 2006. This competition has escalated following AAH's move into politics, as demonstrated by a political assassination campaign in 2012. This campaign also indicates the current operational status of AAH's militia, which the group has maintained despite its turn towards politics. This militia is likely led by Hassan Salem, and it is capable of projecting influence by force within Iraq, and likely into Lebanon and Syria at Iran's behest.

AAH has accumulated a large political presence within Baghdad since 2010. It currently operates two political offices in the city, one in Kadhimiya and one in Rusafa. These offices oversee all AAH political activity in the capital as components of a larger Political Bureau. Additionally, AAH has held a number of public events that have been attended by AAH core leadership and representatives from the Iraqi government. Political activity in Baghdad has largely been used to promote AAH's new public image as a nationalist Islamic resistance organization.

Outside of Baghdad, AAH has established political offices in Basra, Najaf, Hillah, al-Khalis, and Tal Afar. Furthermore, the organization has dispatched political delegations to meet with tribal and minority leaders in provinces of Dhi Qar, Muthanna, and Maysan. The political expansion of AAH throughout Iraq demonstrates the organization's ability to penetrate areas with heavy Sadrist support. According to an interview with al-Mada Newspaper, however, AAH will not be participating in the 2013 provincial elections as an independent entity. This move, if true, is surprising given AAH's political expansion. It may either reflect that AAH is not organizationally prepared to compete or that the group seeks to exercise political influence by other means. Indirect participation may allow AAH to posture for the much more significant 2014 parliamentary elections.

AAH has also made concerted efforts to influence regional Shi'ite religious networks. The establishment of the "Seal of the Apostles" religious school network in Iraq has allowed AAH to coordinate and control the dissemination of AAH religious and political thought in Baghdad, Maysan, Basra, Dhi Qar, Najaf, and Samawah. AAH is again using religious networks for recruitment and propaganda purposes as a method of political activism. In this way, AAH subtly promotes Iranian regime interests while cultivating a nationalist public identity.

Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq also expanded its political activities into Lebanon. By early 2011, AAH established a political representation in Beirut, headed by Sheikh Ammar al-Delphi. He met with a number of senior members of Lebanese Hezbollah, Hamas, Shi'ite religious organizations, and the Lebanese government that year. The extension of AAH throughout Iraq and into Lebanon suggests that the organization receives substantial Iranian funding and support. AAH once again plays an integral role in Iran's regional proxy strategy, augmenting Lebanese Hezbollah in the struggle for Syria. Iranian-backed Shi'a militants, including elements that would become AAH, had previously participated directly in the 2006 war between Lebanon and Israel. Ali Mussa Daqduq was crucial in the solidification and training of AAH between 2005 and 2007.

The resurgence of AAH is an alarming development in Iraq because of the group's objectives and close ties to the IRGC-QF. Looking ahead to 2013, AAH will continue to marginalize Moqtada al-Sadr and usurp Sadrist support within Iraq. If successful, AAH will emerge as the principal Shi'a activist organization in Iraq. As such, it will enhance Iranian political and religious influence in Iraq and greatly augment Iran's regional proxy strategy. An enriched and militarily capable AAH militia may also threaten any U.S. presence in Iraq today, including its diplomatic presence. AAH is likely to become an increasingly capable and unrestrained proxy force that enhances other Iranian regional interests over time.

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By Sam Wyer

The withdrawal of U.S. troops on December 18, 2011 drastically altered the political and security environment in Iraq. The absence of American forces left some counter-occupation insurgent groups without a primary foreign enemy or plethora of military targets, causing them to rethink their goals and reshape their public image. It also accelerated political competition among Iraq's leaders. Sunni militant groups including al-Qaeda in Iraq have re-emerged in an environment free from the threat of U.S. Special Forces.

Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), also known as "the League of the Righteous," has also re-emerged. This Iranian-backed, Shi'a militant organization has claimed responsibility for over 6,000 attacks against U.S. and Coalition forces in Iraq since its creation in 2006.[1] AAH carried out spectacular and highly sophisticated operations during the peak of the Iraq War, including the October 10, 2006 mortar attack on American Forward Operating Base Falcon; the May 6, 2006 downing of a British Lynx helicopter in Basra, resulting in five British fatalities; the January 20, 2007 attack on the Karbala Provincial Headquarters, resulting in the capture and then murder of five American soldiers; and the May 29, 2007 attack on the Iraqi Finance Ministry, which ended in the kidnapping of five British contractors, four of whom were killed in captivity.[2]

Along with Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH) and the Promised Day Brigades (PDB), AAH is an Iraqi Shi'a militant group funded, armed, and trained by the Qods Force, the external Special Operations branch of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp. Qais al-Khazali reported to the Qods Force Deputy Commander, Abdul Reza Shahlai (AKA Hajji Yussef) through Qais' liaison Ali Mussa Daqduq.[3] During their peak, these Shi'a militant groups were Iran's primary proxy weapons against the United States' presence in Iraq, defined by their widespread use of explosively formed penetrators (EFPs), improvised rocketed-assisted mortars (IRAMs), and high-profile kidnappings and executions. They were characterized as a principal threat stream during the Iraq War, making their recent resurgence particularly alarming.

During the Iraq War, AAH violently opposed the U.S. occupation. AAH metamorphosed into a proactive political and religious organization immediately following the withdrawal of U.S. troops. Within a week of the U.S. withdrawal, AAH's leader and co-founder Qais al-Khazali announced the termination of armed resistance and the intention to join the political process in Iraq.[4] Since the announcement, AAH has expanded at an unprecedented and alarming rate. Today, AAH has expanded its influence through political, religious, and cultural resistance with support from Iran. Thus, while Iran has historically projected influence in Iraq by supporting a variety of proxy forces, the rapid expansion of AAH suggests that the Islamic Republic has consolidated its efforts behind this group.

Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq formed after a split within the Sadrist Movement between Qais al-Khazali, a student of Ayatollah Mohammed Sadeq al-Sadr, and his son, Moqtada al-Sadr. The group still maintains close religious allegiances to Mohammed Baqir al-Sadr and Mohammed Sadeq al-Sadr, two of the most influential modern Iraqi Shi'a clerics. In a departure from the Sadrists, however, AAH overtly displays its commitment to figures of the "tradition of the Iranian Revolution," including Ruhollah Khomeini, Ali Khamenei, Kazim al-Haeri, and Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi. They are likewise strong proponents of the Guardianship of the Jurists (*vilayet-e faqih)*, the dominant expression of political Islam in Iran.[5] Fundamentally, AAH is a Khomeinist organization that seeks to create a suitable environment for the return of Imam Mahdi through the imposition of

strict Shi'a Islamic governance.[6] In contrast, the Sadrist Trend does not openly display any allegiance to Iran.

AAH's current objectives may be best described in terms of political influence within Iraq. First, the group will promote a Shi'a-controlled Iraqi state. Second, AAH seeks to replace the Sadrist Trend as the principal champion of Shi'a religious activism, inheriting the legacy of Mohammed Sadeq al-Sadr. Third, as a proponent of *vilayat al-fiqh*, AAH will promote Iranian political and religious influence in Iraq and advance the Iranian Islamic Revolution. AAH also aims to facilitate Iranian lethal support to other regional allies and proxies; and to expel the remaining U.S. military and diplomatic presence from the country.

To accomplish these objectives, AAH has undertaken a multi-pronged strategy characteristic of Lebanese Hezbollah before it took a place in government. AAH has maintained an operational militia while expanding its political, social, and religious activities in an attempt to secure its influence and enhance its status in Iraq. The importance of this group has not diminished, and its resurgence may point to the expansion of Iranian influence in Iraq. At a minimum, AAH's resurgence suggests an attempt by the group to influence the future of Iraq through political and religious involvement. In the worst case, AAH represents a significant move by Iran to expand, penetrate, and transform Shi'a networks not only throughout Iraq, but the region as a whole. AAH seems to have become an integral part of Iran's multi-pronged proxy strategy to project influence in the region.

Furthermore, as Iran continues to increase its influence in Iraq, the expansion of AAH provides Iran with an ideal and historically loyal proxy that can be used to increase control over political and religious networks. Such networks will become more susceptible to Iranian manipulation as provincial and parliamentary elections approach and Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's ailing health and old age have many preparing for his death. AAH will likely be used to facilitate a rapid increase in Iranian influence in the aftermath of such events. While the extent of AAH's power in Iraq has yet to be seen, its recent expansion should be seen as an disquieting development in the progress of post-withdrawal Iraq.

AAH has rebranded itself from anti-Western armed resistance force to that of an Iraqi nationalist political organization. AAH's core identity is not nationalist, however, and its elevation to politics does not signify a departure from militancy. Despite pledges no longer to use weapons, AAH remains adamant about never surrendering them to the government of Iraq. In effect, the organization's move to politics is not a complete reversal, but rather the continuation of the same course by more subtle means. AAH intends to influence in Iraq's next provincial and parliamentary elections, scheduled for 2013 and 2014 respectively. Yet it may do so not through direct participation. On November 28, Adnan al-Dulaimi, the head of AAH's Political Bureau, announced in an interview with *al-Mada Newspaper* that AAH will not participate in the 2013 provincial elections as an independent political entity or as part of a joint list.[7] Given the recent expansion of AAH's political activities in Iraq, this decision is surprising.

If true, such a move could reveal that AAH does not feel organizationally prepared to compete. Alternatively, it may reflect a strategic decision by AAH, Nouri al-Maliki, or Iran to maintain political influence in Iraq outside of direct participation in the electoral system. In any case, AAH will likely attempt to exert leverage in the provincial elections. AAH can still project influence in certain provinces without exposing themselves to scrutiny by supporting specific candidates and political coalitions. Indirect participation may allow AAH to posture for the much more significant 2014 parliamentary elections.

Additionally, AAH has begun to penetrate Iraqi Shi'ite religious networks. Given the group's violent history in the insurgency, its radical, Khomeinist Shi'ite ideology, and direct connections to Iranian material support, AAH's resurgence demands further scrutiny, for it may affect the future of U.S. policy in Iraq and throughout the Levant.

This report highlights AAH's recent expansion in Iraq. It outlines AAH's current leadership and the impact these specific individuals have on the overall direction of the organization. It then documents the geographic expansion of AAH and the significance of its political and religious activities in Iraq and Lebanon. This report examines the factors accelerating AAH's resurgence. Specifically, it emphasizes AAH's ongoing conflict with the Sadrist Movement; its relationship with Maliki; and its role in Iran's proxy strategy both in Iraq and throughout the region. The report concludes with important political considerations regarding AAH's new role in Iraq, including the effects of the Syrian civil war and the future growth of the organization.

SECTION I: THE MOVE TO POLITICS

Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq's leadership reemerged in Iraq, appearing publicly in Najaf to formally announce their move to politics less than one week after the completion of the U.S. withdrawal.[8] On December 26, 2011 AAH's General Secretary Qais al-Khazali stated in a public press conference in Najaf that his organization planned to participate in the political process in Iraq.[9] Al-Khazali's public announcement launched a widespread media campaign that looked to reintroduce AAH to the Iraqi people as the organization responsible for the removal of U.S. forces in Iraq and the one that is able to repair Iraq. AAH has exploited its purported role in forcing the U.S. withdrawal in order to gain legitimacy and political support in a manner similar to both Lebanese Hezbollah and the Sadrist Trend.

The decision to join politics did not come by surprise; in fact, it involved a nearly three-year period of prisoner swaps, negotiations, and broken promises of reconciliation with the government of Iraq and the United States. Between 2007 and 2008, a large portion of AAH's core leadership was captured by U.S. and Coalition forces. Most prominently, a British-led raid on March 20, 2007 in Basra resulted in the arrests of AAH leader Qais al-Khazali, his brother Laith al-Khazali, and Lebanese Hezbollah member Ali Mussa Daqduq, who had been tasked by the Iranian Qods Force with overseeing the training of Iraqi Shi'a militant groups.[10]

Soon after the Basra raid, however, AAH staged one of their most successful and sophisticated attacks to date. On May 29, 2007, over 100 AAH militants raided the Ministry of Finance in Baghdad and kidnapped Peter Moore, a British computer consultant, and his four security guards. The high level of sophistication and coordination of the attack led many to assert that the Iranian Qods Force, a long time financier and trainer of AAH, helped plan and execute the attack.[11] The attack's success enabled AAH to leverage these prisoners over the next three years in order to secure the release of hundreds of its members and prominent leaders, including Laith al-Khazali and Abdul Hadi al-Daraji in June 2009 and Hassan Salem and Saleh al-Jizani in July 2009.[12]

Ultimately by the end of 2009, hundreds of AAH members had been freed in exchange for the bodies of the executed British hostages, a decision made easier by numerous statements from AAH pledging to renounce violence and put down their arms.[13] This also coincided with the transfer of Coalition detainees to the Iraqi legal system.[14] Combined with AAH's successful political negotiations, these conditions favored the release of prominent AAH members. At that time, General Ray Odierno stated, "we believe Asa'ib al-Haq has taken initial steps to reconcile with the government of Iraq."[15] Viewed in retrospect, these steps indicate a well-executed political ploy by AAH and were quickly overturned following Qais al-Khazali's release in January 2010.[16]

Qais al-Khazali regained control of his organization, and AAH quickly withdrew from the U.S.-facilitated reconciliation talks with Maliki after a U.S.-Iraqi Special Forces raid resulted in the arrest of two of its members.[17] In response, AAH kidnapped Iraqi-American military contractor Issa T. Salomi on January 23, 2010.[18] With its entire core leadership free, including Qais al-Khazali, Laith al-Khazali, Akram al-Kaabi, and Mohammed al-Tabatabai, AAH no longer had any incentive to continue with reconciliation talks or fulfill its promise to hand over its arms. At some point soon after Qais al-Khazali's release, AAH leadership reportedly moved to Iran where they continued to direct armed attacks against U.S.

forces, Sadrists, and Iraqi political figures.[19] In the end, AAH's pledge to end armed resistance was by no means upheld, and was instead used as political leverage to reconstruct their organization fully.

In late December 2011, AAH leadership relocated to Baghdad where it hosted a massive public demonstration in Baghdad's Tahrir Square on January 1, 2012 in celebration of the completed withdrawal of U.S. forces in Iraq. Titled the "Victory and Liberation Festival," this public celebration was the first indication of AAH's resurgence and foreshadowed the organization's growing presence in Baghdad.[20] At the same time, AAH leadership began giving numerous interviews to both Iraqi and Western press where they rebranded AAH as a "nationalist Islamic resistance group" that will "monitor the government, criticize it when it makes mistakes, represent the needs of the Iraqi people, and work to achieve their rightful demands."[21] While it previously relied on anti-American rhetoric, AAH's new nationalistic focus demonstrates a concerted effort to reframe and reshape its public image in the face of the U.S. withdrawal.

In all, AAH's entrance into politics ignited a rapid resurgence of the one of Iraq's deadliest militant groups under a different guise. This move is, however, part of a grander Iranian-guided strategy that looks to influence Iraqi affairs and manipulate Shi'a networks regionally. As will be seen in the following section, much of AAH's original leadership remains in full control of the organization, demonstrating that while the organization has redefined its public image, its fundamental principles remain unchanged.

CURRENT LEADERSHIP

According to a public interview with Akram al-Kaabi, a deputy leader of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, the organization began to form sometime after the August 2004 Battle of Najaf, during which Moqtada al-Sadr temporarily halted all Jaish al-Mahdi military operations after suffering heavy causalities.[22] In disagreement, Qais al-Khazali, Akram al-Kaabi, Abd al-Hadi al-Darraji, and Mohammed al-Tabatabai broke from JAM and the Sadrist Trend and formed the "Khazali Faction," also known as Ahl al-Kahf, or the "People of the Cave."[23] (See Index of AAH Figures for an list of prominent individuals). This faction was formalized under Iranian guidance and became known as Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq in 2006.[24] Following Qais al-Khazali's arrest in March 2007, Akram al-Kaabi took over leadership of AAH and was eventually joined by Laith al-Khazali, Qais' brother, after his release in June 2009.[25] During this time, Akram Al-Kaabi and Laith al-Khazali maintained AAH's armed resistance in Iraq and successfully negotiated the release of Qais al-Khazali in 2010, which immediately strengthened AAH and fully reunited AAH's old leadership.[26]

Board of Trustees

Currently, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq is led by a council-based "Board of Trustees" that is tasked with electing the General Secretary and overseeing all AAH activity.[27] Based on interviews, media reports, prominence in public events, and previous leadership roles, it can be deduced that the current Board of Trustees consists of at least five members: Qais al-Khazali, General Secretary; Mohammed al-Tabatabai, deputy and likely second-in-command; Kazim al-Abadi, deputy and likely third-in-command; Akram al-Kaabi; and Laith al-Khazali. Of these individuals, all except Kazim al-Abadi are known to have had prominent roles in AAH since the formation of the Khazali Faction in 2004.[28] Furthermore, all except Laith al-Khazali are known to be former students and aides of Mohammed Sadeq al-Sadr, the father of Moqtada al-Sadr, before his assassination in 1999.[29]

Since December 2011, Qais al-Khazali, Mohammed al-Tabatabai, and Kazim al-Abadi have made public appearances in Najaf, Baghdad, Diyala, Mosul, and Basra.[30] Despite western news reports stating AAH leadership is living in Iran, it is likely that these three individuals are currently living in Baghdad, based on the large volume of AAH activity and their reoccurring public appearances in the city, as outlined in the map on page 17.[31] Neither Akram al-Kaabi nor Laith al-Khazali appear to have made public statements or appearances in 2012.

In the past year, Kazim al-Abadi has risen in importance within AAH, and his prominence at most major AAH public events suggests that he is a leading member.[32] Furthermore, al-Abadi has been labeled as the *rais* or head of the organization by Iraqi media, and he has delivered at least one sermon an AAH mosque in al-Aamel, Baghdad.[33] While information on al-Abadi's past is largely unknown, it is assessed that he was a student of Mohammed Sadeq al-Sadr and classmates with Qais al-Khazali, Akram al-Kaabi, Mohammed al-Tabatabai, and Moqtada al-Sadr in the 1990s.

Al-Abadi was an important figurehead for the Sadrist Trend in Nasiriya, Najaf, and Baghdad in the late 1990s.[34] After Moqtada al-Sadr revived the organization in 2003, al-Abadi became one of the top spokesmen and directors of the Office of the Martyr al-Sadr (OMS) in Baghdad.[35] While the details of their fallout are unclear, at some point prior to 2011 al-Abadi split from Moqtada al-Sadr's movement to join AAH. In January 2011, Moqtada al-Sadr was asked in a publicly posted letter about the allegiances of Sheikh Kazim al-Abadi and Sheikh Abdul Razzaq al-Naddawi.[36] In his response, Moqtada confirmed the loyalty of al-Naddawi, but neglected to mention Kazim al-Abadi.

Militia

Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq maintains an operational militia, likely led by Hassan Salem, a known AAH militant who was released from U.S. custody in July 2009. He is identified as *al-qayadi al-jihadi*, or the jihadist leader, suggesting that the organization may direct its militia using a system similar to Lebanese Hezbollah's "Jihad Council."[37] Furthermore, AAH was known to have divided their militia into "battalions" during the Iraq War, each operating in a specific region in Iraq: Imam Askari Battalion in Samarra; Musa al-Kazim Battalion in Baghdad; Imam Ali Battalion in Najaf; and Abu Fadl Abbas Battalion in Maysan.[38] Media reports also indicate that Abu Mustapha al-Sheibani, the Qods-Force-backed arms smuggler and logistician who provided lethal weapons to AAH in 2006 and 2007, and Isma'il Hafiz al-Lami (AKA Abu Dura), a former Shi'a death-squad leader, had returned to Iraq from Iran in order to join the AAH militia in 2010.[39] Their whereabouts and role as of November 2012 are not attested.

Furthermore, in late December 2011 Qais al-Khazali met with Hashem Abu Alaa and Adnan al-Hamidawi, alleged leaders of Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH), the most elite and secretive of the Iranian-backed Shi'a militant groups, immediately following their release.[40] Despite the secrecy of current AAH militia organization, the involvement of high-profile AAH and KH leaders suggests that AAH may have restructured its armed wing and consolidated control as an umbrella organization for Shi'a militants in Iraq.[41] If such a restructuring has occurred, it may be used to harbor militants such as Sheibani, Abu Dura, and Ali Mussa Daqduq as AAH begins to solidify legitimacy as a lawful political organization.

Of particular concern is Ali Mussa Daqduq, who has been accused of training and abetting Qais al-Khazali and AAH and who played a major role in the January 20, 2007 attack in Karbala.[42] The Iraqi government released Daqduq in November 2012 after claiming that it no longer had any legal basis to hold him under house arrest.[43] The release of Daqduq heightens the relevance of AAH. The organization can be used to facilitate and protect Daqduq's travels between Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, and possibly Syria, allowing him to circulate among Qods-force backed groups, train their leadership and cadre, and teach specialized skills while serving as a liaison between AAH, the Qods Force, and Lebanese Hezbollah. AAH's past and current relationship with Lebanon is explored further in Section II.

Political Bureau

With its turn to politics, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq has created an expansive political network used to coordinate and oversee all AAH political activity in Iraq, including all charity, cultural, and religious services. The AAH Political Bureau, examined below, has established offices in Baghdad, al-Hillah, Najaf, al-Khalis, Tal Afar, and Basra. Adnan Faisal al-Dulaimi, the head of the bureau, has made numerous public statements on behalf of AAH and has been present at nearly every major televised

ASA'IB AHL AL-HAQ KEY FIGURES

BOARD OF TRUSTEES

Qais al-Khazali- Secretary General of AAH. Former student and aide of Sadeq al-Sadr. Arrested on March 20, 2007 but released in January 2010 in exchange for British captive Peter Moore. Likely residing in Baghdad.

Sayyid Mohammed al-Tabatabai-Deputy Leader of AAH (2nd in command). Former student and aide of Sadeq al-Sadr. Likely residing in Baghdad.

Kazim al-Abadi-Deputy Leader of AAH (3rd in command). Former student and aide of Sadeq al-Sadr. Likely residing in Baghdad.

Akram al-Kaabi-Deputy Leader of AAH. Controlled AAH during Qais al-Khazali's detainment between March 20, 2007 and January 2010. Location unknown on publication date.

Laith al-Khazali- Deputy Leader of AAH. Controlled AAH during Qais al-Khazali's detainment between March 20, 2007 and January 2010. Brother of Qais al-Khazali. Location unknown on publication date.

POLITICAL BUREAU

Adnan Faisal al-Dulaimi- Head of AAH political bureau. Lead AAH political official.

Muayad al-Khazraji- Spokesman for AAH political bureau. Former student of Sadeq al-Sadr and senior aide to Moqtada al-Sadr. Arrested by Coalition forces in 2003, released in 2004.

Ali Abu Saif al-Mohammedawi- Executive Director of Rusafa Representative Office.[45]

Jawad al-Talabawi- AAH militant released from U.S. custody March 2010. Brother of Mahdi al-Talabawi. Director of Rusafa Representative Office.[46]

Ahmed Mohsen al-Fareiji- Senior official of Rusafa Representative Office.[47]

Ammar al-Delphi- Head of AAH Representative Office in Beirut, Lebanon and Director of AAH Center for Studies in Beirut.

Salem al-Maliki- AAH liaison to the Iraqi government during prisoner negotiations 2008-2010.

RELIGIOUS

Sheikh Rhiyad al-Bahadli- Imam of Abdullah al-Radiya Mosque in al-Khalis, Diyala Province, Iraq.

Sheikh Hamid al-Quraishi- Imam of Abdullah al-Radiya Mosque in al-Khalis, Diyala Province, Iraq.

Ayatollah Afif Nablusi- Shi'a cleric based in Lebanon. Primary funder of the AAH Center for Studies in Beirut, Lebanon.[48]

Abu Jaafar- Head of Religion Department of Rusafa Representative Office.[49]

Hatem al-Kanani- Official of Religion Department of Rusafa Representative Office.[50]

CLERICAL, SPIRITUAL, IDEOLOGICAL LEADERS

Grand Ayatollah Mohammed Baqir al-Sadr- Iraqi cleric born in al-Kadhimiya. Father-in-law of Moqtada al-Sadr. Executed by Saddam Hussein in 1980.

Mohammed Sadeq al-Sadr- Iraqi cleric born in al-Kadhimiya. Father of Moqtada al-Sadr, leader of the Sadrist Trend. Assassinated by Saddam Hussein in Najaf in 1999.

Grand Ayatollah Kazim al-Haeri- An Iraqi cleric born in Karbala who currently resides in Qom, Iran. Former student of Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr and close associate to Sadeq al-Sadr.

Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Khamenei- Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Sayyid Ruhollah Khomeini- First Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran and leader of the 1979 Iranian Revolution.

Musa al-Sadr- Iranian-Lebanese Shi'a leader. Suspected to have been murder by Gaddafi regime in Libya.

Hassan Nasrallah- Secretary General of Lebanese Hezbollah.

MILITIA

Hassan Salem- AAH Jihadist Leader. Released by Coalition forces on July 29, 2009 with AAH militant Saleh al-Jizan.

Bashar al-Safi- AAH militia leader. Assassinated July 10, 2012 in Iskan, Baghdad by suspected Sadrist gunmen.

Isma'il Hafiz al-Lami (AKA Abu Dura)- Shi'a militant leader in Sadr City. Fled to Iran in 2007. Status on publication date unknown.

Ali Mussa Daqduq- Lebanese Hezbollah leader and AAH advisor and militia trainer. Captured in Basra in 2007 but released and transferred to Iraqi custody in December 2011. Cleared of all charged in May 2012. Released from custody in November 2012.

Abu Mustafa al-Sheibani- Iraqi-Iranian Shia militia leader who ran smuggling routes between Iraq and Iran. Possibly returned to Iraq in 2010 to join AAH militia. Status on publication date unknown.

Mahdi al-Talabawi- AAH militant released from U.S. custody March 2010. Brother of Jawad al-Talabawi. Status on publication date unknown.[51]

Saleh al-Jizani- AAH militant released from custody in July 2009. Status on publication date unknown.

Adnan Taj Shallal Sharhan- AAH militant leader in al-Karkh, Baghdad. Initially escaped from al-Taji prison in 2010, later recaptured in Baladruz District, Diyala Province in January 2011. Status on publication date unknown.

Hashem Abu Alaa- Senior official of Kata'ib Hezbollah. Released December 2011. Status on publication date unknown.[52]

Adnan al-Hamidawi- Senior official of Kata'ib Hezbollah. Released December 2011. Status on publication date unknown.[53]

AAH political event.[44] While AAH core leadership will attend most important political and religious functions, smaller events, media statements, and meetings are tasked to AAH Political Bureau officials such as Adnan al-Dulaimi, Ammar al-Delphi, and Muayad al-Khafaji. In all, the Political Bureau is AAH's most apparent development since the withdrawal of U.S. forces and has been used to reshape and promote AAH's new public image and nationalistic rhetoric.

Examination of AAH's current leadership and organizational structure shows that while AAH has created and expanded a political bureau, it has retained the same core leadership and control over a militia, and has maintained a dangerously anti-Western ideology. In September 2012, Qais al-Khazali made a public statement directly threatening U.S. interests in Iraq in response to an offensive anti-Muslim film.[54] AAH also held demonstrations in al-Khalis, Diyala, and Kadhimiya, Baghdad, calling for the removal of all U.S. diplomatic missions from Iraq.[55] Such threats reveal the dual nature of AAH. On one hand, AAH has reshaped their public image and increased their political, religious, and charitable services. On the other, AAH still has the capability to threaten U.S. interests in Iraq. Despite the formal withdrawal of American forces, the U.S. still maintains a large diplomatic mission as well as a small Special Forces contingent in the country.[56] Such personnel could be targeted by AAH.

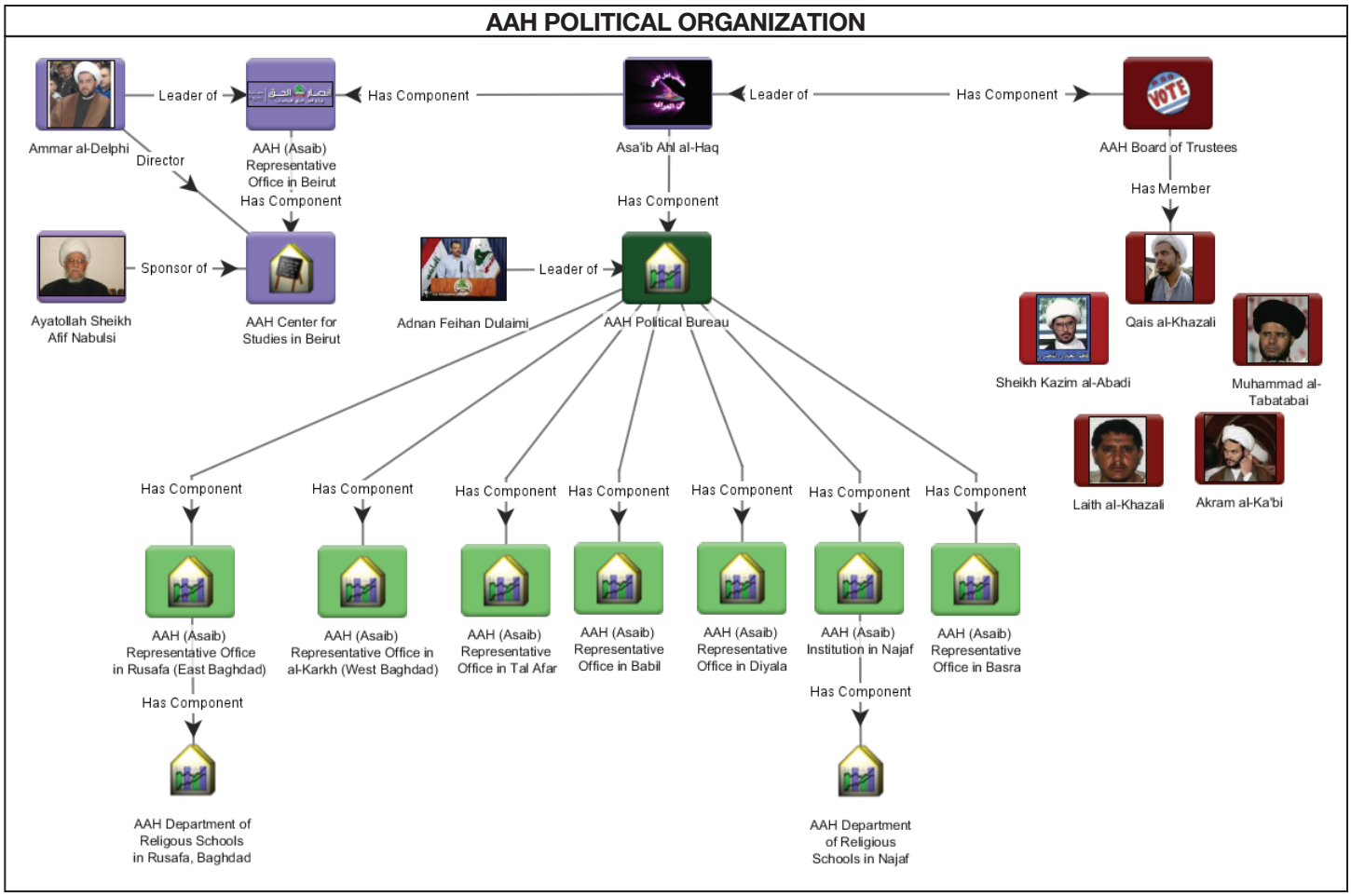
In sum, the continuation of AAH core leadership suggests the preservation of old networks throughout Iraq, Iran, and Lebanon. Such connections reveal a vehicle for the further expansion of Iranian influence. AAH's resurgence should not be seen as the radical transformation and reconciliation of a once extremely dangerous insurgent group. In reality, AAH has taken advantage of political opportunities and freedom of action that were not available before the withdrawal of U.S. forces. By refocusing on political participation and religious dissemination, AAH has found a successful method of retaining influence in Iraq.

SECTION II: AAH POLITICAL ACTIVITY

Qais al-Khazali's December 2011 statement in Najaf set off a campaign that has propelled Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq to political prominence in many cities throughout Iraq. In the last year, AAH has established a strong foothold in Baghdad, created political representations in numerous major Iraqi cities, sent delegations to many other provinces, and has even expanded into Beirut, Lebanon. Growth of the AAH Political Bureau demonstrates the organization's new strategy: by creating a widespread political network throughout Iraq and into Lebanon, AAH is able to provide services, political representation, religious guidance, and security to portions of Iraqi Shi'ites and minorities in a public and legal manner. Furthermore, AAH has undertaken an extensive propaganda campaign to co-opt the legacy of Mohammed Sadeq al-Sadr in an effort to hijack segments of Moqtada al-Sadr's constituency and spread Iranian influence throughout Iraqi politics and society. AAH's political activity in the last year points to the manifestation of a multi-pronged strategy of influence facilitated by the lack of U.S. forces and accelerated by Iranian support.

Baghdad

Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq's political presence in Baghdad has steadily spread since the January 1, 2012 event in Tahrir Square in Baghdad. Several months later, AAH hosted another large ceremony in Tahrir Square marking the opening of their first political office in Rusafa on April 26th. Similar to the January 1st event, this ceremony was well-publized and well-attended by leading AAH members and Iraqi media.[57] Among those in attendance were Qais al-Khazali, Kazim al-Abadi, Adnan Feihan Dulaimi, Jawad al-Talabawi, Mahdi al-Talabawi, and a representative to Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi, an Iraqi-Iranian cleric in Qom and member of the Iranian Guardian Council.[58] In a similar fashion, AAH opened a political office in al-Karkh on June 4, 2012, with a public ceremony in Kadhimiya that was attended by Qais al-Khazali, Bashar al-Safi, and Kamal al-Saidi, an Iraqi MP from Maliki's State of Law Coalition.[59] The opening ceremonies for these offices included numerous speeches by



AAH leadership, representatives, and other guests and concluded with a small military procession in which an AAH militant presents Qais al-Khazali with a captured American weapon. During the al-Karkh opening event, AAH militant Bashar al-Safi led the military presentation.[60] One month later, al-Safi was assassinated by suspected Sadrist gunmen in Iskan, Baghdad, an area that experienced intense Shi'a militant fighting between 2005 and 2007.[61]

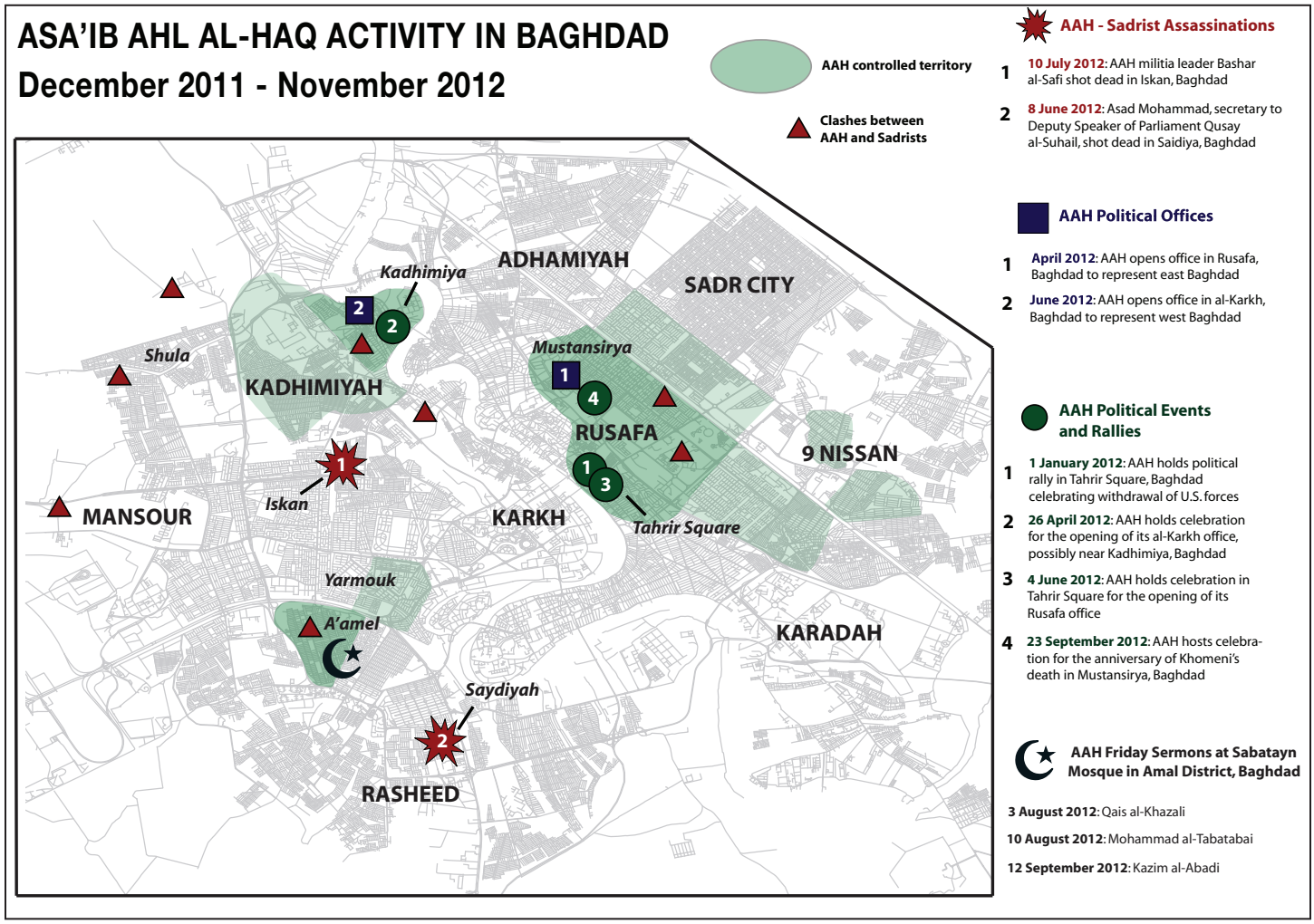
The AAH representative offices in Rusafa and al-Karkh control the eastern and western halves of the city, respectively, typical for many political parties in Baghdad. The locations of these offices and their associated public ceremonies help illustrate areas of AAH influence in Baghdad. The map of Baghdad on the following page shows the surmised geographic locations of AAH's political activities in Baghdad, which have been concentrated in Kadhimiya, Rasheed, and Mustansirya. On September 23, 2012, AAH hosted an event at a university in Mustansirya marking the anniversary of Ayatollah Khomeini's death.[62]

The locations of prominent AAH presence have significant underlying implications due to the sectarian cleansing Baghdad experienced during the Iraq War. AAH initially expanded its influence in Shi'a dominated areas along the banks of the Tigris. Kadhimiya, the location of AAH's al-Karkh office, contains the shrines of two Shi'a Imams, Musa al-Kadhim and Mohammed al-Taqi, and is considered one of the holiest sites in Shi'a Islam. Historically, Kadhimiya has been a crucial stronghold for the Sadrist Movement, where JAM helped provide security to the al-Kadhimiya Mosque and services to local residents.[63] The establishment of a strong AAH presence in the district suggests that the Sadrist Movement has been unsuccessful in stemming the expansion of one of their main rivals and may be losing ground.[64] AAH presence on the eastern banks of the Tigris runs north into Sadr City, which has sparked a number of firefights in the area in the last year.

In the summer of 2012, AAH expanded its activity into southwest Baghdad, areas on the sectarian

fault line.[65] According to Iraqi media reports, AAH militants stormed the Sunni Sabatayn Mosque in al-Aamel district in August 2012 and barred all Sunni Muslims from entering.[66] Almost immediately following the seizure of the mosque, Qais al-Khazali, Mohammed al-Tabatabai, and Kazim al-Abadi all gave Friday sermons calling for national unity and preaching about the need for cultural resistance against western infiltration.[67] The takeover of the Sabatayn Mosque is an alarming development in the progression of AAH activity in Baghdad and demonstrates the organization's willingness once again to use intimidation and violence to achieve political goals.[68] Moreover, the takeover of the Sabatayn Mosque suggests a heightened sense of security for AAH in Baghdad and is reminiscent of the sectarian tension in Baghdad during the Iraq War.

In sum, AAH has rapidly created a strong foothold in Baghdad. The creation of political offices and the presence of AAH core leadership at public political events and sermons demonstrate the organization's current sense of security. Such activities were not feasible in Baghdad prior to the withdrawal of U.S. and Coalition forces. The new public image of AAH has come in response to growing public support, funding, and internal security, all of which hints at support for the organization from Iran and potentially elements within the Iraqi government. Furthermore, recent Iraqi media reports accuse Maliki of providing a security details to all senior leaders of the organization in an effort to increase AAH's freedom of movement between Sadr City, Hurriya, and 9 Nissan, as well as to augment its rivalry with the Sadrist Movement.[69] According to these reports, the security details contain bodyguards from the Iraqi Ministry of the Interior and government-plated SUVs.[70] While such reports are unconfirmed, AAH leadership has nevertheless been able to travel and appear in public with increasing levels of comfort.



Outside Baghdad

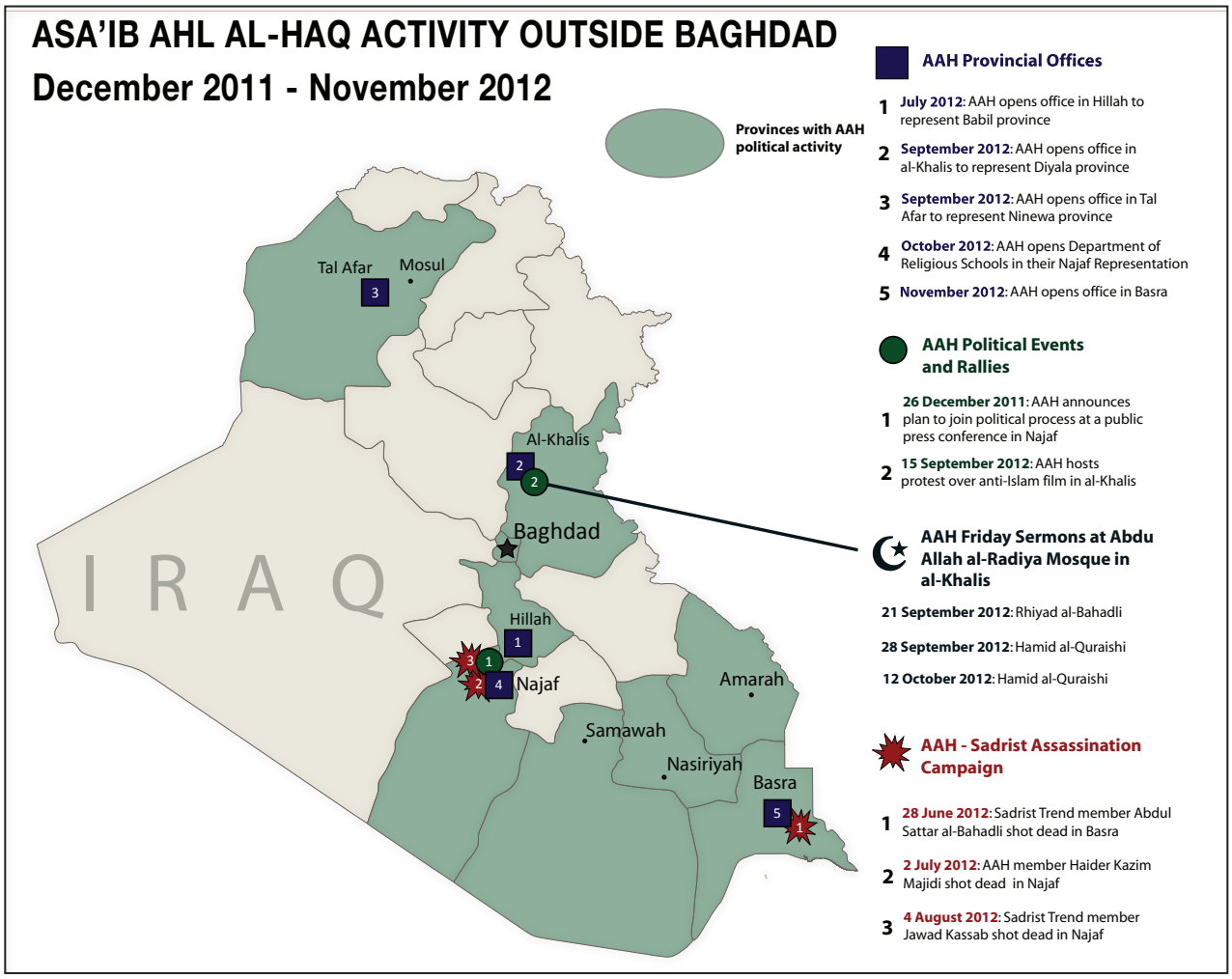
Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq expanded their political activities to Iraqi cities outside of the capital after the establishment of the representative office in al-Karkh in June 2012. In July, an office opened in al-Hillah representing Babil Province.[71] In September, offices opened in al-Khalis and Tal Afar representing Diyala and Ninawa Provinces, respectively.[72] Then in November, AAH opened an office in Basra.[73] Additionally, AAH has sent delegations to the city of Mosul and the provinces of Dhi Qar, Muthanna, and Maysan.[74] The stated goal of these activities is to "be in touch with all parties and ethnic groups in the province."[75] As a way of promoting its nationalistic identity, AAH has repeatedly called for a national assembly to unite Iraq. AAH's new focus on nationalism may be an attempt to appeal to Iraqi nationalists who oppose foreign influence. Thus, by establishing relationships with various ethnic and social groups, AAH has begun to successfully create a localized but nationally connected network throughout Iraq. Furthermore, the locations of AAH offices in Iraq mirror the areas where the Sadrist Trend dominated the 2009 provincial elections, in which they won 43 of 440 seats in the 2009 provincial elections with heavy concentrations in Najaf, Maysan, Dhi Qar, and Baghdad.[76]

Most recently, Qais al-Khazali traveled to Basra in November 2012 in order to open a new AAH political office in the city. Similar to the Baghdad events, the opening ceremony was attended by local pro-Maliki politicians including Abdul Salam Zine al-Abidine, the representative to the governor of Basra for religious affairs, and Mahmoud al-Maksusi, a member of the State of Law Coalition and head of the Economic Commission of the Basra Provincial Council.[77] In his speech, Qais al-Khazali praised the 2006 downing of the British Lynx helicopter as a sign of the city's historic commitment to resistance. While continuing his sharp criticism of the current government, Qais, for the first time, called for the formation of joint electoral lists, likely in preparation for the upcoming provincial elections.[78] Furthermore, the presence of State of Law officials and the opening of an office in Basra may foreshadow a political alliance between AAH and Maliki's State of Law Coalition, which dominated in Basra in the last provincial elections in 2009, winning 20 out of 35 seats.[79] AAH's relationship with Maliki is discussed further in Section IV.

AAH presence outside of Baghdad has been focused in Shi'a-dominated areas around Baghdad and in the south, with the exception of AAH's office in the predominantly Sunni city of Tal Afar in northern Iraq. Tal Afar is only 37 miles from the Syrian border, however, which may shed light on AAH's true reason for establishing an office that far north. Over the past year, reports have surfaced about the presence of Iraqi Shi'a militants in Syria. In June 2012, Moqtada al-Sadr publically denied reports claiming Jaish al-Mahdi fighters were operating in Syria but insisted that "splinter" groups could be involved, a likely reference to AAH.[80] Since that statement, numerous media reports have indicated that Iraqi Shi'a fighters are traveling to Syria via Iran or Najaf to aid Bashar al-Assad.[81] While AAH has neither confirmed nor denied the presence of its members in Syria, its strong Iranian backing makes involvement plausible. As Syria's closest ally, Iran has taken lead in mobilizing support for the Syrian government through shipping arms, giving financial support, and mobilizing Shi'a militants by facilitating travel and recruitment.[82]

AAH is likely operating to some degree in Syria. Whether to protect the shrine of Sayyida Zeinab, the daughter of Ali ibn Abi Talib, in Damascus or under direct orders from Iran, the presence of Iraq's once largest and deadliest Shi'a militant group in Syria would not be a surprise and would allow them to interact directly with operators from the Lebanese Hezbollah.[83] Furthermore, in November 2012 AAH announced its desire to expand further into Ninawa, which may point to an increased effort to create an operational area near the Syrian border in order to commandeer well-established smuggling routes through Jabal Sinjar and al-Yarubiyah.[84]

Thus far, AAH political activity outside of Baghdad has focused on promoting and expanding the reach of its social services to Shi'a communities and various minorities in Iraq. Yet AAH has met publicly with a number of Sunni leaders,



including Mahdi Sumaidaie, a leader of the Iraqi Salafist group the Sunni Endowment for Islamic Affairs, who was ultimately assassinated by an IED attack in Yarmouk, Baghdad in August 2012.[85] By reaching out to various ethnic and religious groups within Iraq, AAH is likely attempting to bolster its nationalist image. AAH's rhetoric has focused on building a "better society" and repairing the failed Iraqi political system by uniting all ethnic and religious groups.[86]

Throughout the past year, AAH leadership has been involved in a number of meetings with tribal and minority leaders in Iraq. In April, Qais al-Khazali held a joint press conference in Baghdad with Sattar Jabbar, the leader of the Sabean Mandaeans, a minority group that has faced extreme persecution in Iraq since the fall of Saddam.[87] The following month, AAH sent a delegation to Maysan Province to meet with the Mandaeans in order to "build bridges of love between the two religions," renounce sectarian conflict, and pledge to amend the Iraqi political system.[88] Assuming they are providing the Mandaeans, who are guaranteed one seat in the Baghdad provincial election, with some level of services and security, AAH may be attempting to gain leverage over individual seats in next year's provincial elections. In any case, such meetings demonstrate AAH's current move to shift its public image from a hardline militant organization to a service provider, similar to what Hezbollah did in Lebanon. Furthermore, the networks formed through these activities will likely be used for political coordination in Iraq's upcoming elections.

Lebanon

For the first time, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq has established an overt branch outside of Iraq. Since its incorporation sometime between 2010 and

early 2011, the AAH Representative Office in Beirut has been the organization's hub for regional political activity. Headed by Sheikh Ammar al-Delphi, the office has both attended and hosted a number of political events and high-level meetings in Beirut. Since March 2011, al-Delphi has been involved with at least 15 meetings or political events in Beirut.[89] Al-Delphi has met with a number of high-level officials from Hezbollah and Hamas as well as members of both the Lebanese and Iranian Governments (see Timeline of Ammar al-Delphi Meetings and Events). Al-Delphi also attended AAH's January 1, 2012 event in Baghdad.[90] His presence indicates the connection between AAH-Beirut and AAH core leadership.

TIMELINE OF AMMAR AL-DELPHI MEETINGS AND EVENTS[91]

- **March 7, 2011**- Meeting with Mohammed Yazbek (Hezbollah Shura Council member)
- **April 30, 2011**- Meeting with Sheikh Adul Amir Kaplan (VP of Lebanese Supreme Islamic Shiite Council)
- **May 17, 2011**- Meeting with Ghanzafar Roknabadi (Iranian Ambassador to Lebanon)
- **May 18, 2011**- Meeting with Emile Lahoud (former Lebanese President)
- **May 23, 2011**- Meeting with Mustafa Dirani (Hezbollah member)
- **May 24, 2011**- Meeting with Salim al-Hoss (former Lebanese Prime Minister)
- **June 1, 2011**- Attended celebration for anniversary of Khomeini's death at Iranian Embassy in Beirut. Also attended by Emile Lahoud (Lebanese MP), Ghazanfar Roknabadi (Iranian Ambassador), Hassan Nasrallah (Secretary General of Hezbollah), Naim Qassem (Hezbollah), Sheikh Kaplan (VP of Lebanese Supreme Islamic Shiite Council)
- **June 24, 2011**- Attended 11th Annual Festival on Reform in Lebanon. Also attended by Hassan al-Shalabi (head of Islamic University in Lebanon) and Sheikh Kaplan (VP of Lebanese Supreme Islamic Shiite Council)
- **July 21, 2011**- Attended conference on harmony and cooperation in Lebanon. Also attended by Sheikh Kaplan (VP of Lebanese Supreme Islamic Shiite Council) and Sheikh Hassan Awad (Head of Islamic Jaafari Court in Lebanon)
- **July 28, 2011**- Meeting with delegation from the Islamic Action Front in Bahrain (Rashid al-Rashid, political advisor; Jafar al-Alawi)
- **August 22, 2011**- Meeting with Mohammed Rais Zadeh (Iranian Cultural Adviser in Beirut)
- **October 30, 2011**- Hosted seminar on Iraqi Resistance in Beirut. Attended by Adnan Feihan Dulaimi (Head of AAH-Iraq Political Bureau), Ali Baraka (Hamas representative in Beirut), Ibrahim al-Moussawi (Hezbollah media relations official), Jamal Wakim (author), and Mustafa Hamdan (former head of Lebanese Presidential Republican Guard under Emile Lahoud)
- **December 23, 2011**- Meeting with Ali Baraka (Hamas representative in Beirut)
- **January 1, 2012**- Attended AAH celebration ceremony in Tahrir Square, Baghdad. Also attended by AAH leaders Mohammed al-Tabatabai, Qais al-Khazali, and Kazim al-Abaidi
- **January 18, 2012**- Meeting with Marwan Fares (Lebanese MP, Syrian Social Nationalist Party)

Although the exact purpose of AAH's office in Beirut is unclear, AAH's presence in Lebanon suggests that it maintains influence among Islamic resistance organizations outside of Iraq. The prevalence and high-profile nature of al-Delphi's meetings reveal a well-established network between Islamic resistance groups, the Lebanese government, and the AAH organization in Iraq. The political structure of AAH in Beirut is similar to the political offices operating in Iraq. In April 2011, AAH opened the Center for Studies in Beirut as a subsidy of its Representative Office.[92]

The academic center has since been used to host the October 30 2011 seminar on Iraqi Resistance that was attended by representatives from AAH in Iraq, Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Lebanese Government.[93] The seminar, which was located at the Hazmieh Rotana Hotel, just outside Hezbollah's security quarters in southern Beirut, highlighted the success of Islamic resistance movements during the Iraq War.[94] Interestingly, Ayatollah Afif Nablusi, who has become one of the most prominent clerics in Lebanon since the death of Grand Ayatollah Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah in July 2010, funds the Center for Studies in Beirut.[95] Nabulsi has historically been closely aligned with Hezbollah and Iranian leadership.[96] Nabulsi's support of AAH in Beirut suggests a likely Iranian strategy to integrate regional Shi'ite networks.

The presence of AAH into Lebanon is not surprising. Since the beginning of the Iraq War in 2003, Iran has utilized Lebanese Hezbollah to facilitate the formation, training, and expansion of Shi'a militias in Iraq.[97] Iraqi Shi'a militias also fought on behalf of Hezbollah in the Hezbollah-Lebanon War in July 2006.[98] Between 2005 and 2007, Ali Mussa Daqduq, the Hezbollah trainer released from Iraqi custody in November 2012, played a major role in Iran's special operations network in Iraq. Reports indicate that Iraqi Shi'a militants travelled to both Iran and southern Lebanon to receive training during the Iraq War.[99] On orders from the Qods Force, Daqduq travelled to Iraq on numerous occasions in 2006 in order to oversee the formation and training of AAH and to act as Qais al-Khazali's liaison to IRGC-QF officials including Abdul Reza Shahlai. Daqduq also attended meetings in Tehran in May 2006 with Shahlai and Yussef Hashim, the head of the Lebanese Hezbollah's Special Operations in Iraq.[100]

The network created between the Qods Force, Lebanese Hezbollah, and AAH enabled Iran to maintain a direct line between its proxy groups and facilitate operational coordination. The devastating result of this coordination was demonstrated in the AAH-led 2007 attack against U.S. forces in Karbala. According to U.S. Department of the Treasury designations, both Shahlai and Daqduq played a direct role in planning the attack.[101] The attack's success and high-level of sophistication highlight the result of AAH's Iranian-facilitated training by Lebanese Hezbollah operatives in Iraq. Furthermore, Abdul Reza Shahlai remains committed to targeting U.S. interests globally. In 2011, Shahlai was tied to an assassination plot against the Saudi Ambassador to the U.S. in Washington D.C.[102] Although the attack was uncovered by U.S. federal agents it nonetheless further highlights the expansive scope of Iranian proxy networks and their danger to the United States. While under a different guise, AAH's current establishment in Lebanon has rekindled these past connections and will ultimately strengthen AAH's ties to the Lebanese Hezbollah and expand its operations in Iran's global proxy network.

SECTION III: AAH RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY

Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq operates a network of religious schools in Iraq, called the "Seal of the Apostles," similar to the Hezbollah model.[103] Such networks have been established to varying degrees in the provinces of Baghdad, Maysan, Basra, Dhi Qar, Najaf, and Muthanna and seem to be directly connected to AAH's political offices in Baghdad, Najaf, and Beirut.[104] Most recently, on October 23,2012, Qais al-Khazali traveled to Najaf to announce the establishment of the AAH Department of Religious Schools as part of the AAH institution in the city and is likely used to coordinate and control religious and cultural dissemination in Najaf.[105] Religious activism has become a key component of recruitment and propaganda for AAH, just as it has been for the

Sadrist Movement and Lebanese Hezbollah.[106] By creating a rival network of religious schools, AAH has further infiltrated into major areas of Sadrist influence.

AAH also uses religious sermons to disseminate their political and social goals. In particular, AAH uses two primary mosques: the Sabatayn Mosque in al-Aamel, Baghdad and the Abdullah al-Radiya Mosque in al-Khalis, Diyala. AAH leadership and religious leaders have given six Friday sermons from August to November 2012, three at each of the mosques, as outlined in the maps of Baghdad and the surrounding areas. The content of the sermons focuses on the need for both cultural and political change in Iraq. In particular, the sermons blame the Iraqi political system for provoking sectarianism. Typically, Friday sermons help facilitate the dissemination of shared information in different locations.[107] The control of mosque networks allows the spread of "similar messages in different mosques, generating common knowledge and coordination across geographically-dispersed Shi'ite congregations on national-level issues."[108] Thus, success by AAH in establishing such networks would greatly enhance their ability to coordinate and function as a cohesive national organization. An institutionalized method of information dissemination would help AAH organize voting strategies across provinces for the 2013 provincial elections.

AAH claimed credit for a massive poster campaign in August 2012 in which the organization distributed over 20,000 posters displaying AAH's logo, a photograph of Ali Khameini, and a photograph of Sadeq al-Sadr.[109] The posters were used in street demonstrations and on buildings and billboards. The posters have remained up in cities across Iraq as disapproving citizens have refused to remove them in fear of retaliation from AAH.[110] Furthermore, AAH's overt alignment with Iran is highlighted by the organization's public critique of Ali al-Sistani and association with ideological figures such as Hassan Nasrallah. Statements by AAH leadership emphasize that the organization does not follow the "silent marja," in reference to the political quietism of Ali al-Sistani.[111] AAH's religious alignment accentuates the organization's already deep-rooted connection with Iran and highlights the attempt by Iran to use proxy forces to establish influence in national, regional, and global Shi'ite networks.

The unmatched, expansive political and social influence of Ali al-Sistani has remained a roadblock to Ali Khamenei and his attempts to expand the Iranian Islamic Revolution. Sistani is a strong opponent of Iranian clerical rule, and has deliberately removed himself from Iraqi and Iranian politics, contrary to the principles of velayat-e faqih.[112] The leadership and hierarchical structure of AAH, however, aligns closely with Iranian authority and appears to accept the group's role as subordinates to Iran's clerical rule.[113] Sistani's religious principles and political quietism have prevented Iran from gaining control over Najaf and its clerical elite, which still overshadows the Iranian clerical establishment in Qom. The Iranians have a possible successor to Sistani in Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi.[114] Shahroudi studied under Ayatollah Khoei and Ayatollah Rouhollah Khomeini and headed Iran's judiciary from 1999 to 2009. Iran is leveraging Shahroudi to build influence in the clerical politics of Najaf. The Iranian regime likely does not seek to replace Sistani, but rather to ensure the establishment of weaker, localized *mojtaheds* in Iraq. As a result, this could fragment the Iraqi Shi'ite religious network and force Najaf to become politically and economically subordinate to Qom and Iranian clerical authority.[115]

AAH may facilitate the increase in Iranian influence in Iraq after Sistani's death. As noted earlier, a representative of Shahroudi has attended at least one major AAH event in Baghdad. Furthermore, AAH's pro-Iran propaganda campaign, its criticism of Sistani, and its overt religious alignment with Iranian clerical rule suggests high levels of Iranian funding and political guidance. As Iranian analyst Mahdi Khalaji states,

By injecting money into charities and civil or religious institutions and by financially supporting the religious establishment in Najaf and other Shi'ite areas, Khamenei will expand the Shi'ite network in Iraq and take advantage of the absence of a great marja to create an overwhelming Shiite network that is not only Iraqi but also connected to

a large global network controlled by Khamenei.[116]

Iran has done just that by supporting AAH. The creation of AAH religious, political, and charity networks in Iraq and Lebanon will assist Khamenei to dominate the political and religious vacuum that will likely form after Sistani's death. Furthermore, by attempting to co-opt the legacy of Sadeq al-Sadr and portray itself as the rightful successor of his movement, AAH is trying to hijack his already well-established religious networks and use the legacy of his movement to attract support. Such a maneuver has inevitably caused direct confrontation with the Sadrist Trend, which claims the same legacy.

SECTION IV: THE SADRIST TREND, MALIKI, AND IRAN

A key component of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq's resurgence has been its evolving relationships with prominent actors in Iraqi politics. Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki wants to use AAH as a counterweight to Moqtada al-Sadr, although he does not want the organization to be uncontrollable and ultimately threaten his hold on power. For Iran, AAH's success not only weakens Moqtada al-Sadr, but it also facilitates the spread of Iranian influence through Iraqi political, religious, and cultural networks. Both, however, want to use AAH as leverage over others while maintaining some level of control over the organization.

AAH's main political adversary, the Sadrist Trend, wants it to fail. In June, Qais al-Khazali publicly rejected Sadr's call for a no-confidence vote against Maliki one day before Kamal al-Saidi, a leading member of Maliki's State of Law coalition attended the opening ceremony for AAH's al-Karkh office in Baghdad.[117] While Maliki has not announced any type of political alliance with AAH, it is possible that Maliki facilitated AAH's entrance into politics.[118] Moreover, in its current state, AAH requires both Maliki and Iran to ensure political maneuverability and consistent financial and religious support.

The Sadrist Trend

A fierce competition has continued between AAH and the Sadrists for support, territory, and legitimacy since the organizations split. Violent confrontations between the two groups have increased following the release of Qais al-Khazali in 2010. AAH and Sadrists began fighting one another in Najaf, Basra, and Baghdad, ignoring al-Sadr's offers for reconciliation. A firefight erupted between the two groups in December 2010 after the Sadrist Trend refused to allow AAH to bury two of its members in the Wadi al-Salam cemetery in Najaf.[119] This violence prompted Moqtada al-Sadr to speak out directly against AAH and accuse them of attempting to overthrow his power and discredit his name.[120] In a public statement, Moqtada al-Sadr stressed that he would not allow AAH to participate in politics because of the group's history of murdering Iraqi civilians.[121]

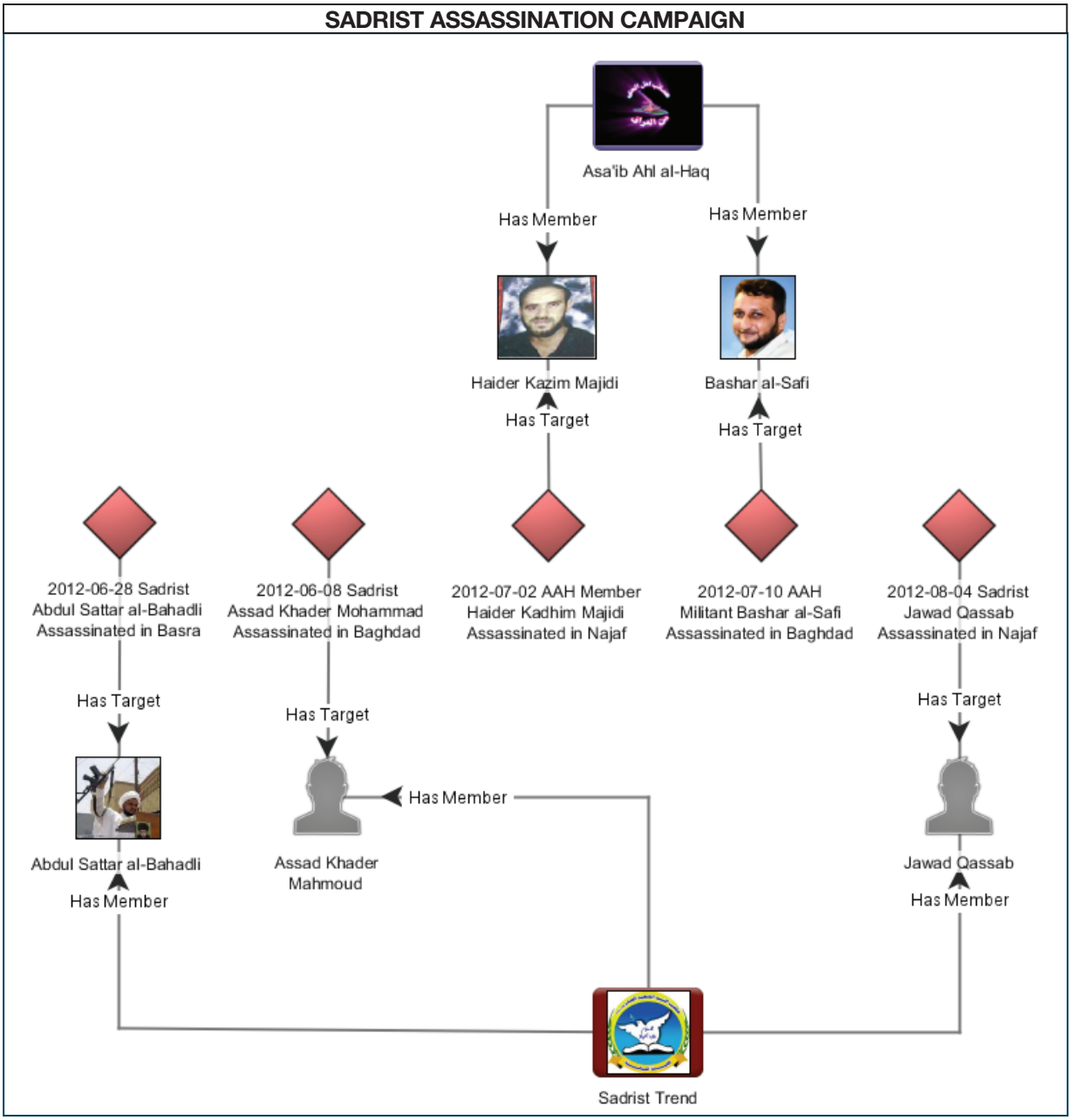
Moqtada al-Sadr's return to Iraq in January 2011 exacerbated rising tensions. Upon his return, al-Sadr continued to speak out against AAH and other splinter militants, including Abu Dura who had recently returned to Iraq to join AAH.[122] By the end of the month, however, Moqtada al-Sadr had returned to Iran due to an increase in death threats from AAH.[123] AAH continued to separate itself from the Sadrist Trend throughout 2011. In February 2011 AAH denied Hadi al-Darraji, a former leader of the organization, affiliation within its ranks because of his support of the Sadrists.[124] In August of that year, al-Darraji announced his return to the Sadrist Trend.[125] At the same time, clashes between the two Shi'a groups continued as AAH attempted to gain control of Shi'a territory in Baghdad while continuing attacks against the U.S. In response to the increased levels of violence, U.S. and Iraqi forces heightened law enforcement efforts against Shi'a militants, which resulted in the arrests of dozens of suspected AAH members in Baghdad and Diyala Provinces.[126]

AAH began joining Maliki's push for national reconciliation at that time. After receiving political support from Maliki in 2011, AAH pledged to disarm and formally join the political process in Iraq.[127] As expected, this move, facilitated by Maliki, was not well received by the Sadrists. On January 1, 2012, Moqtada al-Sadr accused AAH members of being "killers without a religion" who are only interested in gaining power.[128] He called on the organization to change its name and highlighted

its dangerous "dual leadership," in reference to the group's direct Iranian support and guidance.[129] This rhetoric is not surprising because AAH is a direct threat to Moqtada al-Sadr's support base, which has historically been difficult to control.

Iran has also had a difficult time controlling Moqtada al-Sadr. Thus, the looseness of the Sadrist Movement has provided Iran with an easy opportunity to fund splinter groups such as AAH. By co-opting the legacy of Sadeq al-Sadr's movement, AAH has begun to hijack segments of the Sadrist constituency and spread Iranian influence within the Iraqi political system. As an alternative to Moqtada al-Sadr, Qais al-Khazali has proven to be a much more reliable proxy for Iran. Furthermore, it appears evident that the Sadrist Trend remains internally fractured: The departure of Kazim al-Abadi for AAH reveals that internal divisions within Moqtada's organization remain and that AAH is successfully taking advantage of them.

AAH and the Sadrist Trend are on a political collision course for Iraq's upcoming elections as violent confrontations and political competition continue to scar their relationship. Qais al-Khazali will likely not support the Sadrist Trend's efforts in



the 2013 provincial elections, as both Maliki and Iran seem to be utilizing AAH as a counterbalance to Moqtada al-Sadr—a figure who is not openly hostile to Iran but also not entirely predictable. Despite Qais al-Khazali's claim that AAH has no interest in being part of the ruling coalition, it remains to be seen how AAH will maneuver itself politically in the upcoming provincial and parliamentary elections, especially regarding its relationship with Maliki.[130] Moqtada al-Sadr's actions against Maliki during the spring of 2012 may be connected to the prime minister's courting of AAH into the political process.[131]

Furthermore, AAH's relationship with the Sadrist Trend has been plagued by a steady campaign of tit-for-tat assassinations, most evident in the high-profile murder of Sadrist parliamentarian Saleh al-Ugaili in 2008.[132] In a noticeable increase, there have been at least five assassinations blamed or accredited to AAH and the Sadrists against the other in 2012. The locations of these assassinations—Baghdad, Najaf, and Basra—are areas with previously heavy Sadrist support and suggest an attempt by AAH to assert power and challenge the Sadrists for territory. Thus with a backdrop of political competition over the same support, this growing assassination campaign reveals the seemingly irreconcilable relationship between AAH and the Sadrist Trend.

AAH's relationship with the Sadrist Trend has been defined by both growing violent conflict and political confrontation. The open hostility between AAH and the Sadrists draws attention to the weakened state of Moqtada al-Sadr and the evolving influence of AAH and their Iranian directors. AAH has already begun to take over control of Sadrist strongholds in Baghdad and elsewhere. Politically, such actions could result in the loss of seats by the Sadrist Trend to AAH-supported entities in the upcoming elections.

Maliki

Maliki's decision to allow Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq into the political process demonstrates a continuation of his political pragmatism in regards to forming political alliances, as well as a continued partiality towards Qais al-Khazali. Maliki is using AAH as political leverage over Moqtada al-Sadr. Maliki has successfully drawn in the Sadrists when needed, as seen in his success in forming a ruling government in 2010, and has pushed them away when their power grew too large, as demonstrated in the launch of Operation Knights' Charge in 2008.[133] Maliki may be attempting to replace Sadrist support with that of AAH. Maliki could also be using AAH to help increase his support from "disaffected Shias," who have complained about the prime minister's feeble attempts at providing security, improving basic service provision, creating jobs, and helping the poor, and have thus tended to support the Sadrist Trend.[134]

The two groups are far from partners, based on Maliki's recent dearth of statements on the group and AAH's continuous criticism of the Iraqi government. Nevertheless, AAH's public rejection of the no-confidence vote, the presence of State of Law officials at AAH events, and rumors of state-provided security details, perhaps for protection against the Sadrists, suggest the existence of a working relationship and the possibility of a future political alliance. If, however, AAH proves to be detrimental to Maliki's power, or if it fails to sufficiently counter the support of the Sadrists, Maliki will likely revoke his backing of AAH. While Maliki has already demonstrated an increased association with Iran, a tight knit relationship with a direct Iranian proxy group could prove to be detrimental to his support base and damage his support from Iraqi nationalists who oppose an increase in any foreign influence. Ultimately, Maliki must evaluate whether the benefits gained from AAH's charitable, political, and religious services outweigh the potential damage of the group's overt alignment with Iran.

It is unclear whether the decision to allow AAH into the political process will benefit or hurt Maliki. While unlikely to fully dismantle Moqtada al-Sadr's support base, AAH is, nonetheless, poised to influence in the upcoming elections.[135] Maliki's Dawa Party would be strengthened greatly by AAH support in its political competition with the Sadrists, and such an alliance would not be unprecedented. Maliki debated an alliance with AAH prior to the 2009 elections, which briefly

planned to run under Salem al-Maliki's Covenant Party. In the end, such plans never materialized.[136] The evolving relationship between AAH and Maliki will manifest itself in the political alliances and coalitions made ahead of the elections.

Iran

Iran focused its financial support on the three major Shi'a militant groups in Iraq while American troops were present: Kata'ib Hezbollah, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, and the Promised Day Brigades.[137] Each group functioned with varying levels of autonomy to Iran. Kata'ib Hezbollah fell nearly completely under Qods Force control. Moqtada al-Sadr's Promised Day Brigades, an elite version of the Jaish al-Mahdi, retain greater autonomy in Iraq. Moqtada al-Sadr has continually attempted to create some level of independence between his organizations and Iran, which prompted Iran to facilitate the creation of alternatives to the Jaish al-Mahdi in the first place.[138] For Iran, facilitating the resurgence of AAH creates an opportunity to advance a loyal proxy organization that can be used to increase the regime's influence in Iraqi politics, religious networks, and society. The spread of AAH's Political Bureau allows the group to penetrate the political process, while the funding of AAH religious schools throughout Iraq enables the promotion of specific Iranian clerics and ideologies, and prepares them for dominance in Iraqi Shi'ite religious networks following the death of Ali al-Sistani. Furthermore, maintenance of an operational militia provides Iran with the failsafe ability to project influence by force, intimidation, or coercion through AAH.

While historically used solely as a military proxy organization, AAH has evolved to embody Iran's grander proxy strategy in Iraq. As seen with Hezbollah in Lebanon, Iran successfully uses what has been called a "whole-of-government approach" as a means to project power outside its borders.[139] Hezbollah's successful creation of a state within a state in Lebanon has allowed Iran effectively to finance and influence various instruments of power in Lebanon simultaneously.[140] Iran does not want a strong, independent Iraq.[141] Thus, with U.S. forces gone and American influence in Iraq dwindling, Iran has restructured its proxy strategy. The adoption of an expanded role for AAH allows Iran to influence political officials, religious dissemination, and orchestrate high-profile attacks.

The Iranian regime is not cultivating AAH as a replacement to Lebanese Hezbollah, Iran's quintessential proxy force in the region, but rather as a supplement to it. As part of Iran's larger strategy, Hezbollah has historically played a crucial role in the training of new proxies, as seen with Ali Mussa Daqduq's training of AAH in 2006 and 2007. The training provided by Hezbollah to AAH was crucial for the success of AAH's militant operations within Iraq against the United States and the Iraqi Government. AAH will likely be used to augment Hezbollah's regional activities from a different geographic area. Thus, as AAH continues to establish itself in Lebanon, its relationship with Hezbollah will continue to grow and AAH will become an increasingly important part of Iran's global proxy network.

Unlike Hezbollah, however, AAH cannot currently be used as a stand-alone deployable force due to its relatively small size and lack of heavy weapons. Whether this is an ultimate Iranian objective for AAH remains to be seen. Nevertheless, AAH is likely to increase its coordination with Hezbollah and enhance Iran's base of support for militant activity in the Levant. The regime may cultivate AAH to supplement or replace Syria as Iran's primary avenue of support for Hezbollah.

Iran has always desired a weaker and more malleable premier than Maliki.[142] Yet by supporting the prime minister for now, Iran has given itself leverage in Iraq politics and ensured that Iraq will remain "Shi'a-dominated, weak, and fractured" and unable legitimately to threaten Iranian interests.[143] If Maliki pushes away from Iran, he will likely face reprisals, including ultimately the undermining of his power. Maliki currently works more closely with the Iranian regime than he did in 2011, while maintaining a significant degree of independence and autonomy.[144]

The resurgence of AAH demonstrates the evolution of Iranian proxy strategy in Iraq. No longer is

AAH just a militant proxy group. Instead, the organization has expanded to facilitate the spread of Iranian influence in Iraqi provincial politics and Shi'ite religious networks. While Iran is in no way using AAH as its sole source of influence, the organization has become a seemingly key component to Iran's greater strategy that transcends the borders of Iraq.

CONCLUSION

Since the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq on December 18, 2011, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq has reemerged in Iraq. Organizationally, the group has successfully reunited and solidified under its old leadership. Structurally, AAH has reached new potential as an Islamic nationalist opposition group. Under the leadership of Qais al-Khazali, support from Iran, and facilitation by Maliki, AAH has reframed its image as a political and religious organization. The growth of AAH's charitable and religious services demonstrates an Iranian-orchestrated multi-tiered strategy of influence. Undeniable links to Iranian funding and religious allegiances to Iranian clerical rule have characterized AAH since its creation. While the organization's public façade has changed, its underlying motivations, principles, and sources of support have not.

Although the extent of AAH success in Iraqi electoral politics has yet to be seen, the organization will in no doubt have an impact on the ever-changing political and security environments of Iraq. As the conflict in Syria continues to worsen and Iran continues to step up its material assistance to Assad, the revitalization of AAH becomes a threat to American national security interests in the region. AAH has the capability to respond militarily in Iraq to a Western military intervention in Syria or Iran. AAH is capable of kidnapping, high-profile assassinations, and targeted EFP, rocket, and mortar attacks as of November 2012. AAH has threatened to mobilize its forces to target Western business interests, contractors, and diplomatic personnel within Iraq, including the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad and the U.S. Consulate in Basra. AAH leaders have threatened such targets in the last year and remain able to orchestrate a sophisticated attack if desired.

AAH will become an increasingly crucial element of what has thus far been a multi-pronged strategy at influencing Iraqi politics, society, and religious affairs. Thus, the political maneuvering that will take place prior to the 2013 provincial elections may help reveal the direction of AAH's future. If AAH openly supports the State of Law Coalition, the provincial elections will help determine whether or not AAH has the potential to replace the Sadrist Trend's support base and remove the need for Maliki to negotiate with Moqtada al-Sadr at all. Whether or not this is feasible has yet to be seen. If AAH is able to win over a significant amount of Moqtada al-Sadr's constituency, however, AAH may be able to solidify Maliki's hold on power and provide him a third term as prime minister in 2014.

AAH has not entirely avoided internal dissent. In March 2012, AAH member Jafar al-Bindawi announced his split from the organization to form a splinter group called the "Asa'ib Organization of Iraq," claiming a closer alignment with Moqtada al-Sadr.[145] Then in April 2012, unconfirmed reports claimed that AAH assassinated two brothers after they dissented from the organization due to its connections with Iran.[146] The report indicated that AAH offered the father of the murdered men 100 million Iraqi dinars in compensation.[147] Examples such as these reveal the existence of possible fractures within AAH, which may be exacerbated as the organization enters the electoral fold.

While internal conflict is a vulnerability, AAH's cohesion relative to that of the Sadrist Trend appears strong. The organization's acknowledged subordination, at least in religious terms, to Iran and its retention of the group's original leaders helps solidify the organization's unity. Whether AAH will continue to expand at a rapid pace or is contained by other political actors, the resurgence of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq highlights a restructured and reinvigorated projection of Iranian influence that may impact not only Iraq, but also the region as a whole.

U.S. opportunities to limit the expansion of AAH are limited. The United States remains without major avenues of influence over the organization. Supporting the Sadrist Trend is untenable, and the

recent fracturing of the secular-Sunni Iraqiyya bloc leaves the U.S. without a viable opposition partner in Iraq.[148] The United States may exert leverage over Maliki through the continued provision of foreign military sales. Yet it must also prepare for the possibility of AAH ascension through the Iraqi political system and anticipate threats to U.S. interests in Iraq, namely the enduring U.S. military and diplomatic presence.

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