Backgrounder #38

Asaib Ahl al-Haq and the Khazali Special Groups Network

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Introduction

Multi-National Force-Iraq has identified various Shia extremist groups operating in Iraq, often using the label Special Groups or Secret Cells (first described in a press conference on July 2, 2007). MNF-I named Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH, or the League of the Righteous) as an active group on August 19, 2008 and released information that AAH is "affiliated" with Special Groups. This paper evaluates how the two groups are affiliated by testing four hypotheses about the relationship between the Special Groups network, led at one time by Qais Khazali, and Asaib Ahl al-Haq (League of the Righteous):

1) Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) is the same as the Khazali Special Groups Network (referred hereafter as Special Groups or SGs);
2) AAH was an affiliate of SGs in 2006 and its successor after Khazali's arrest in early 2007;
3) AAH was an affiliate of SGs in 2006 and remains so today; and
4) AAH is not related to SGs.

After a brief description of Special Groups and AAH, this paper will explore the evidence in support of each hypothesis. The first two hypotheses are most plausible given what is known about these two groups. Because the evidence is ample but indirect, the paper will list the assumptions or qualifications required for each of these hypotheses to be true. The third and fourth hypothesis can be ruled out given the amount of contradictory evidence, the clear connections between the leadership of the two groups, and the statements by MNF-I.

  This paper concludes that, based upon the body of evidence, the Khazali Special Groups Network and Asaib Ahl al-Haq are the same organization.

The Khazali Special Groups Network

The Khazali Special Groups network emerged in mid-2006 after the IRGC-QF, along with Lebanese Hezbollah, reorganized their efforts to train, arm, and fund Shi'a militias in Iraq. The aim of the restructuring was to organize these trained militia cells into a network resembling Lebanese Hezbollah.[1] Qais Khazali was chosen to lead the new organization in June 2006

Khazali had been a student of Mohammed Sadeq al-Sadr (Sadr II). After Sadeq al-Sadr's assassination in 1999 by the Baathist regime, Khazali and several other young clerics, who had also been close deputies and students of Sadr II, held the movement together underground.[2] Following the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the Sadrist Movement reemerged under the leadership of Muqtada al-Sadr, the son of Sadeq al-Sadr. Khazali, along with the other former students and deputies of Sadr II, were close associates of Muqtada al-Sadr and helped run the movement. After the second uprising in Najaf in August 2004, where Sadr's Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) fought with Coalition Forces, Khazali broke from Muqtada al-Sadr. During the battle, Khazali reportedly clashed with Sadr over strategy and issued his own orders to militia fighters without Muqtada's approval.[3] When the fighting ended in September 2004, he returned to Sadr City and continued to direct his group in attacks against Coalition Forces.[4] In October, Qais Khazali, along with Abd al-Hadi al-Darraji and two other senior Sadrist leaders were ignoring the ceasefire agreement and weapons buyback program that Muqtada al-Sadr brokered with the Iraqi government.[5] Khazali appeared to have control over a segment of those who formerly fought alongside Muqtada and JAM and to have attracted other senior leaders of the movement to him, and away from Muqtada.

Muqtada also reconciled with Qais Khazali and his cadre, who had split from him after the second Najaf uprising, and gave them a position of political honor within the movement. According to *Ansar al-Mahdi*, a Sadrist newspaper and purported mouthpiece of JAM, in early March 2005, Muqtada al-Sadr appointed Qais Khazali, Akram al-Kabi (another prominent JAM commander), and two others to supervise OMS offices.[6]

One can reasonably deduce from this information an association between Qais Khazali and Akram al-Kabi. It is known that Qais Khazali and Abd al-Hadi al-Darraji were working alongside one another in Sadr City in October 2005. One can therefore reason that there was a faction of former Sadrist leaders operating outside of Muqtada's control after the uprisings until March 2005. This faction's leadership included Qais Khazali, Abd al-Hadi al-Darraji, Akram al-Kabi, and one other individual unnamed in the public sources. This paper will refer to this group, and its followers who retained their arms and weapons, the "Khazali faction." In March 2005, the leaders merged back into the wider Sadr movement, presumably with their followers. For detailed information on the Khazali faction's relationship with the Sadrist Movement, see Iraq Report 12, "The Fragmentation of the Sadrist Movement."[7]

Although the Khazali faction reconciled with Muqtada al-Sadr in mid-2005, it is unclear how long the rapprochement lasted. By June 2006, when Qais was chosen to lead the reorganized Iranian-backed Special Groups network, the Khazali faction had again split from Muqtada al-Sadr's organization. Special

Groups received training by members of Lebanese Hezbollah in Iranian camps. Iraqi fighters would travel to Iran in groups of twenty to sixty.[8] They received four to six weeks of training in the camps in the use of mortars, rockets, sniper tactics, intelligence gathering, kidnapping operations, and explosively-formed penetrators (EFPs).[9] EFPs are especially lethal IEDs made with advanced explosives and curved copper plates that can easily pierce heavily armored vehicles. Armed, funded, and trained by the IRGC-QF and Lebanese Hezbollah, these cells became ever more lethal throughout 2006.

The most complex attack by the Khazali Special Groups network was conducted on January 20, 2007. Gunmen with "American-looking uniforms, vehicles and identification cards" successfully penetrated the Karbala Provincial Joint Coordination Center (PJCC) to attack a meeting of U.S. and Iraqi officials, who were planning the security measures for the upcoming Ashura pilgrimage.[10] During the attack, Special Groups fighters killed five U.S. Soldiers and wounded three more.[11] Intelligence gathered from the attack ultimately led to the capture of Qais Khazali, his brother Laith Khazali, and Lebanese Hezbollah member, Ali Musa Daqduq, in Basra on March 20, 2007.[12]

Akram al-Kabi led, in practical terms, Special Groups after Qais Khazali's arrest. Akram al-Kabi had once been the top JAM commander in Iraq, but Muqtada al-Sadr and the Sadrist leadership in Najaf relieved Kabi in May 2007.[13] The reasons for his relief are unknown, but at that time Muqtada and the Najaf leadership were purging the organization of individuals who responded to leaders other than Muqtada. The circumstantial evidence therefore suggests that Akram al-Kabi was relieved because he was already a member of an alternative command structure in May 2007. This alternative structure was most likely the Khazali networks, but possibly his own independent network. Akram al-Kabi is documented as the leader of Special Groups (once led by Qais Khazali) as of January 2008.[14]

Special Groups continued their operations in Iraq under Kabi's direction. After a period of retraining in late 2007, they increased their attacks with an indirect rocket and mortar fire campaign in early 2008.[15] They also frequently targeted U.S. and Iraqi troops with EFPs, small arms fire, and other types of attacks.

The United States Department of Treasury stated that these attacks were led by Akram al-Kabi, who was providing the weapons, funding, and command and control for his Special Groups network.[16] In February 2008, "al-Kabi sanctioned attacks targeting Coalition Forces to include indirect fire attacks against the International Zone."[17] In April and May 2008, as Coalition and Iraqi Forces conducted operations against JAM and Special Groups in Basra and Sadr City, Kabi continued to direct and fund Special Groups attacks.[18] In the wake of these attacks, thousands of Special Groups fighters fled to Iran to evade capture, retrain, and consolidate their networks in the summer of 2008.[19] In the late summer and fall of 2008, Special Groups fighters slowly began to return from Iran in order to conduct attacks ahead of provincial elections. However, their operations have been complicated by continued Coalition and Iraqi targeting of their networks.

Asaib Ahl al-Haq

The Shi'a insurgent group Asaib Ahl al-Haq began its operations as early as July 2006, one month after Iranian-backed Special Groups were reorganized under the leadership of Qais Khazali. Their first attacks claimed to be in support of Operation True Promise (Hezbollah's July 12, 2006 raid into Israel during which three Israeli soldiers were killed and two captured) and in retaliation for Israel's subsequent attacks into southern Lebanon.[20] AAH professes allegiance to the legacy of Mohammad Sadeq al-Sadr (Sadr II). In 2006, there were at least four major operational branches of the group: the Imam al-Ali Brigade, which was responsible for southern Iraq; the Imam al-Kazem (Kathem) Brigade, which was responsible for west Baghdad; the Imam al-Hadi Brigade, which was responsible for east Baghdad; and the Imam al-Askeri Brigade, which was responsible for Diyala and Kirkuk. From mid to late 2006, AAH conducted frequent attacks on Coalition Forces, using improvised explosive devices (IEDs), indirect rocket or mortar fire, or sniper fire. In the first half of 2007, there is no public evidence of AAH attacks. AAH reemerges in July 2007, although their video claims of attacks no longer reference the separate brigades of their organization, as they had in the past. This suggests that there was a reorganization of the network in the spring of 2007.

Asaib Ahl al-Haq continued their attacks on Coalition Forces from mid-2007 until May 2008. During the Sadr City offensive, AAH conducted attacks in Baghdad, primarily in the areas in and around Sadr City. Multi-National Force-Iraq stated that JAM and Special Groups militias were also operating in these areas at the time, and the latter was providing assistance to the former.[21] MNF-I continued to call these militants members of Special Groups, rogue JAM, and criminals, rather than AAH.

The lull in AAH activity from May to July 2008 corresponded with the departure of thousands of Iraqi militants to Iran to avoid capture in the wake of their losses in the spring offensives. While in Iran, fighters consolidated their networks and were retrained in new tactics.[22]

AAH continued to attack Coalition Forces in the summer and fall of 2008 with EFPs; they also engaged in kidnapping, intimidation, and sectarian violence.[23] Coalition Forces conduct raids against the AAH network, particularly targeting weapons smugglers and financiers. In the first half of October, U.S. troops seized more than $400,000 dollars from AAH financiers—an amount indicating that the network has funding on par with that of Special Groups.[24] The raids also suggested that AAH was rebuilding their networks that had been disrupted in the spring offensives. In the town of Qasirin in Diyala province, Coalition Forces captured a suspected AAH weapons and finance facilitator who "was attempting to restart "Asaib al Haq" in the Qasarin area in Diyala Province."[25]

Akram al-Kabi published a message for the members of Asaib Ahl al-Haq urging them to continue their armed resistance against Coalition Forces on September 11, 2008.[26] Kabi also appealed to the legacy of Mohammed Sadeq al-Sadr as the father of their movement.[27] This message establishes that Akram al-Kabi was the leader of AAH in September 2008. He had been leader of Special Groups as of January 2008 at the latest, and perhaps as early as spring 2007. It is possible that he was the leader of the two different groups that operated in succession to one another; however, the problem with this

explanation is that AAH functioned concurrently with Special Groups from July 2007 onward, rather than succeeding SGs as an organization.

When Muqtada al-Sadr appealed to the members of AAH to rejoin his movement on November 14, 2008, he was rebuffed in a letter from AAH leaders who refused to join the group and demanding Sadr apologize for his charges against them.[28] They declared AAH as the true heir to the Sadr II movement because their leaders were close aides of Sadeq al-Sadr who were integral in carrying on his legacy after his death.[29] They urged Sadr to unite with them and return to armed resistance.[30]

Hypothesis 1: Asaib Ahl al-Haq is the Khazali Special Groups Network

The group known as Asaib Ahl al-Haq is what is widely known as the Khazali Special Groups network in this hypothesis.

- Supporting evidence
    - They share leadership:
        - Akram Kabi, a member of the Khazali faction became the leader of Special Groups no later than January 2008. Circumstantial evidence suggests that he was a leader of Special Groups before May 2007.
        - He addressed a letter to the members AAH on September 11, 2008 that urged them to continue their operations against Coalition Forces.[31] Kabi is therefore also a leader of AAH.
        - Kabi and Khazali, along with two others, were close associates prior to the formation of the Khazali Special Groups network.
        - The leaders of AAH and SGs were the closest deputies and students of Sadeq al-Sadr.
    - The two groups were formed at nearly the same time.
    - There is a close correspondence between the timelines of the two organizations.
    - Their operations, tactics, and aims also align closely.
        - Periods when Special Groups are inactive coincide with periods when AAH is inactive.
        - Areas where SGs are active are areas where AAH is active.
        - SGs and AAH have access to similar weapons.

- Assumptions/Qualifications required [If AAH is SGs, then:]
    - The Khazali network was organized into at least four brigades: Imam al-Ali, Imam al-Hadi, Imam al-Kazem, and Imam al-Askeri. After Khazali's arrest, the structure of AAH was reorganized under Akram al-Kabi.
    - AAH was the Khazali faction of the Sadrist Trend until it split from the movement.
    - AAH was assisting JAM during the Sadr City offensive in April 2008.

Hypothesis 2: Asaib Ahl al-Haq was an affiliate of the Khazali Special Groups Network in 2006 and was its successor following the arrest of Khazali in early 2007.

- Supporting evidence
    - The two groups were formed at nearly the same time.
    - Their operations, tactics, and aims align closely.
    - Akram al-Kabi assumed control of Special Groups after Khazali's arrest.
- Assumptions/Qualifications required (if AAH is the successor to SGs, then)
    - A faction of the Khazali Special Groups network existed in 2007 other than AAH. After Khazali's arrest, the other faction either joined the reorganized AAH or they split from the organization.
    - Kabi was the leader of AAH prior to Khazali's arrest in March 2007.
    - AAH leadership is distinct from the leadership of the Khazali Special Groups network.
    - The members of AAH and the Khazali Special Groups network were distinct prior to March 2007.

Conclusion

Given the evidence and the assumptions required for either hypothesis to be true, one can deduce that Asaib Ahl al-Haq is the same as the Khazali Special Groups network. The second hypothesis is plausible, but it assumes that the leadership and membership of the two groups is distinct. There is no strong evidence to support this assumption. Rather, the close relationship between Kabi and Khazali suggests the opposite—that the leadership shared close ties and objectives. It also assumes the existence of other factions associated with the Khazali Special Groups networks. There is no evidence of any such groups. Finally, the second hypothesis offers no explanation for the convergence between AAH and SG activities both before and after Qais Khazali's arrest.

The first hypothesis is therefore the most likely. The close relationship between Qais Khazali and Akram Kabi prior to the formation of Special Groups in 2006 suggests that they would form one organization, rather than two. Both Khazali and Kabi were students of Mohammed Sadeq al-Sadr and sought to carry on armed resistance against Coalition Forces, despite Muqtada al-Sadr's calls to stand down. After Khazali's arrest in March 2007, it is likely that a successor would come from within the organization, rather than outside. Akram al-Kabi's assumption of the leadership of Special Groups suggests that he was already a member of the group. His leadership of both Asaib Ahl al-Haq and Special Groups in 2008 is the strongest evidence that the organizations are actually the same. Finally, the timelines of the two groups overlap significantly. Asaib Ahl al-Haq and the Khazali Special Groups network were both formed in the summer of 2006. They show similar disruptions in their activities—in the wake of Qais Khazali's arrest in March 2007 and in the wake of the spring 2008 offensives.

Timeline of AAH and SG activity:

May 2006	Daqduq, Youssef, and Soleimani meet in Tehran to discuss reorganization of Special Groups network.[32]
June 2006	Khazali named head of the reorganized Special Groups.[33]
July 17, 2006	Imam al-Ali brigade of AAH claims responsibility for attacks on Coalition Forces in Karbala and Hillah.[34]
July 20, 2006	Imam al-Ali, Imam al-Hadi, Imam al-Askeri, and Imam al-Kazem Brigades of AAH claim responsibility for attacks in Saydiyah, Rustamiyah, Shaab, Nasiriyah, Diwaniyah, al-Kofl, Sab al-Boor, and Daqdooq.[35]
July 23, 2006	Imam al-Hadi and Imam al-Ali Brigades of AAH claim responsibility for attacks in Rustamiyah and Nasiriyah.[36]
August 1, 2006	Imam al-Ali brigade claims responsibility for attacks in Amara, Hillah, and Karbala.[37]
August 8, 2006	Imam al-Askeri and Imam al-Ali brigades of AAH claim responsibility for attacks in Kirkuk (August 1) and Hashemiyah (July 28), respectively.[38]
August 21, 2006	Imam al-Ali brigade claims responsibility for attacks in Hillah and Hashemiyah.[39]
September 26, 2006	Imam al-Hadi Brigade of AAH claims responsibility for attacks on September 12 and 14 in Ur, Baghdad.[40]
November 1, 2006	Imam al-Hadi Brigade of AAH claims responsibility for attacks in al-Noab Dobat. Imam al-Askari Brigade claims responsibility for attacks in al-Duz, Kirkuk.[41]
December 19, 2006	Imam al-Hadi Brigade of AAH claims responsibility for attack in east Baghdad on December 16, 2006.[42]
January 20, 2007	Khazali Special Groups conduct complex attack on the Karbala Provincial Joint Coordination Center.[43]
March 20, 2007	Qais Khazali, Laith Khazali, and Ali Mussa Daqduq arrested in Basra.[44]

March-May 2007	Muqtada al Sadr relieves Akram al-Kabi as the overall commander of Jaysh al-Mahdi. He has presumably become head of Special Groups, but this cannot be documented until January 2008.[45]
June 18, 2007	AAH claims attacks in Baghdad (rocketed IZ), Nasiriya, Kut, al-Khayra, and al-Basra in response to the bombing of the minarets on the Samarra mosque, which AAH blamed on the US.[46] Videos no longer reference separate brigades of AAH.
July 16, 2007	AAH claims responsibility for attacks in Baghdad (IDF on IZ) on July 10, 2007. Footage also shows attacks on a Stryker, British Challenger, and an American Humvee.[47]
Late 2007	Hezbollah's Al-Manar airs AAH video of operations against American in late 2007. Video aired on February 25, 2008.[48]
January-March 2008	Special Groups, led by Akram Kabi, conduct IDF campaign in Baghdad.[49]
March 1-15, 2008	Videos containing footage of attacks by AAH on CF in Baghdad and elsewhere recorded from al-Manar and are posted to web. Unclear when these attacks occurred.[50]
March 16-31, 2008	20 videos containing footage of attacks by AAH on CF in Baghdad recorded from al-Manar and posted to web. Unclear when these attacks occur.[51]
March 25, 2008	Basra offensive begins. Fighting erupts in Baghdad as well.[52]
April 2008	Sadr City clearing operations. CF face fierce resistance from JAM/SGs.[53]
April 24, 2008	AAH posts video claiming responsibility for attacks in al-Obeidi, Sadr City, and Jameela. Unclear when the attacks occurred.[54]
May 10, 2008	AAH claims attack on US vehicle in Bayaa in a video posted on December 4, 2008. The video time stamp differs from the screen caption, which says the attack was on October 5, 2008. The video time stamp is more likely to be correct.[55]
May 16-31, 2008	One video showing single attack by AAH posted during this period—firing 122mm shells at British base in Basra. Another posting on May 29 shows a compilation of 18 clips in a special edition video. Clips show attacks in Baghdad, Basra, Dhi Qar, Diyala, Najaf, and Wasit.[56]
May-July 2008	Operations against JAM and Special Groups have disrupted their networks. Several thousand have gone to Iran to avoid capture, regroup, and retrain.[57]

August 19, 2008	"A Special Groups suspect turned into an informer Tuesday morning during operations in Qasarin, about 30 km north of Baghdad in Diyala Province. Coalition Forces were in pursuit of a suspected Special Groups criminal, affiliated with the "Asaib al Haq" criminal ring. "Asaib al Haq," is the name of the Shi'ite group which broke away from Muqtada al Sadr's militia. According to information provided by suspects already in custody, the suspect was attempting to restart "Asaib al Haq" in the Qasarin area in Diyala Province. In addition, the wanted man is suspected of being the weapons and finance facilitator for "Asaib al Haq" in that area."[58]
August 31, 2008	"Coalition Forces detained five suspected criminals Sunday morning in the Adhamiya district of Baghdad, including an alleged leader within the Special Groups-affiliated criminal ring. Several suspects already in custody identified the targeted individual as a logistician and financial manager for "Asaib al Haq," a Shi'ite group which broke away from Muqtada al Sadr's militia. In this position, he is believed to provide funds and materials, including vehicles, for criminal operations. He is assessed to have knowledge of illegal smuggling activities that support "Asaib al Haq" finances."[59]
September 1, 2008	Two suspected AAH members captured in ar-Rumaythah, Muthanna Province.[60]
September 19, 2008	Akram al-Kabi posts message to AAH members. Message dated September 11, 2008.[61]
September 24, 2008	Coalition Forces capture a suspected senior weapons smuggler for AAH in Amarah.[62]
October 2, 2008	Coalition Forces capture a suspected senior weapons smuggler for AAH and one other member in Amarah.[63]
October 18, 2008 *(Approximate Date)*	Coalition Forces continue to degrade the Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq criminal network's ability to operate by seizing more than $205,000 U.S. dollars during a recent operation in Al Majarr al Kabir. Raid targeted high-level AAH financier, but he was not home at the time of the operation. During their search, Coalition Forces discovered more than $205,000 U.S. Dollars, 126,000 Iranian Rial, and 8.5 million Iraqi Dinar. They also discovered several passports, Iranian visas, various IDs, and other items linking the suspect to the Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq criminal network.[64]
October 1-18, 2008	Coalition Forces have seized more than $400,000 U.S. dollars in funds from the Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq criminal network.[65]
November 2, 2008	Coalition Forces capture six alleged AAH members in Nasiriyah.[66]

November 14, 2008	Sadr asks members of AAH to join his new brigade and leave the leaders of AAH.[67]
November 23, 2008	Coalition Forces capture three alleged AAH members in Adhamiyah District and five suspected AAH members in New Baghdad District.[68]
November 23-24, 2008	AAH responds to Sadr's request refusing to join the group and demanding Sadr apologize for his charges against its leaders.[69]
December 15, 2008	Coalition Forces capture of suspected key AAH network leader and three associates early Monday in Abd al-Husayn al-Musawi, just north of New Bagdad.[70]

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