

Explaining Apparent Muqawama De-Escalation Since January 28

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Brief Analysis

Part of a series: [Militia Spotlight \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/militia-spotlight\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/militia-spotlight)

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Since three Americans were killed, the self-styled "resistance" has been almost inactive except for a spate of fake, foiled, and disavowed attacks, pointing to an order from Iran to calm things down.

On January 28, 2024, Iran-backed militias struck five U.S. targets in Iraq, Syria, and Jordan—including the deadly drone attack that killed three Americans and injured many more at Tower 22. Since then, against the backdrop of a sudden increase in U.S. determination to retaliate, the Iran-backed groups have almost entirely halted genuine attacks, moving remaining attacks to Syria at a lower tempo and seemingly claiming only fake attacks inside Iraq.

Immediate Aftermath of January 28—KH Seems to Stop, Nujaba Wants to Fake Continued Attacks

Even before Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps–Qods Force (IRGC-QF) commander Esmail Qaani turned up in Baghdad on January 30, [Kataib Hezbollah \(Profile Kataib Hezbollah\)](#) and [Sabereen News \(/node/16673\)](#)—two firmly Iran-controlled entities—were turning down the heat in the U.S.-militia conflict. [As reported by Militia Spotlight, \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/tracking-anti-us-strikes-iraq-and-syria-during-gaza-crisis\)](#) attack claim activity immediately became very strange, showing signs of confusion and dissent over whether attacks should continue:

- On January 28–29, the Islamic Resistance in Iraq War Media claimed a drone attack on the coalition annex at Erbil

airport for which no visible or audible evidence existed. Based on prior patterns, this attack was in the Nujaba (/node/18558) area of operations. An attack claim on Israel included less detail than usual.

- On January 29, Nujaba appears to have undertaken two more “attacks,” both of which resulted in very strange results. On the Iraq-Syria border, a cross-border shoot of 122 mm rockets (assessed to be by Nujaba) was apparently foiled when the rocket crew abandoned the vehicle upon being disturbed by Iraqi forces, and on January 30, an unusual KAS-04 drone operation crashed soon after takeoff in the Kirkuk area without penetrating Kurdistan airspace. Both of these instances are somewhat unusual, and the net result was that someone—probably Nujaba—demonstrated apparent ongoing intent to attack without actually completing any attacks.
- On January 31, Nujaba (not the Islamic Resistance in Iraq War Media) claimed another drone attack —on Harir, an air base in Kurdistan that formerly housed U.S. soldiers, for which no evidence existed and which was disavowed by Sabereen News, resulting in a Nujaba–Kataib Hezbollah row and the temporary closing down of Sabereen. The Islamic Resistance in Iraq War Media posted and then took down a February 1 Israel attack claim, which is (again) very odd behavior.

Nujaba Takeover of Islamic Resistance in Iraq War Media and Anti-U.S. Strikes

- Then the Islamic Resistance in Iraq War Media account changed hands on February 2, in our assessment now continuing under Nujaba—not KH—control.
- Since the U.S. airstrikes within KH’s western Iraq and Syria areas of operation, we assess that only Nujaba has struck U.S. bases and only those within Syria and only from Syrian launch points (e.g., unusually striking Rmeilan Landing Zone by drone from the Syrian Euphrates River Valley, not the typical 122 mm rockets from the Iraq-Syria border area). Though U.S.-partnered Syrian Democratic Forces personnel were killed in one such attack, these Syrians (as opposed to the collocated U.S. troops) appear to have been specifically targeted, suggesting a deliberate choice to use accuracy in a manner that might easily have been used to kill Americans but was not.

A Theory of *Muqawama* Behavior Since January 28

In the aftermath of the U.S. killing of two senior KH members in Baghdad on February 7, and a surprisingly muted initial reaction from KH, it is worth advancing the following theory as a kind of rebuttable proposition:

1. To prevent Iran from being struck, and to prevent KH elements spread throughout the Popular Mobilization Forces from being kinetically targeted or sanctioned, did the IRGC-QF send a strong signal of de-escalation to the U.S., reversing course after a number of weeks of pushing the envelope with increasingly risky actions in January?
2. With urging from Qaani, KH has behaved since January 28 in a disciplined and self-sacrificing manner, publicly accepting blame and the shame of ceasing attacks on the U.S., then soaking up both materiel damage on February 3 and leadership casualties on February 7.
3. Nujaba has sought throughout to retain the freedom to attack U.S. forces and has been given this freedom, as long as it is undertaken at a low tempo, in relatively nonprovocative ways and entirely inside Syria. After some days of wrangling over this dispensation, Nujaba has been given the lead on anti-U.S. operations in Syria and control of the Islamic Resistance in Iraq War Media account.

If this theory is mostly correct, KH will shrug off even the February 7 strike as an unavoidable cost of its killing of the Americans and a worthwhile way to display its dedication and discipline to the IRGC-QF. Nujaba will mount less dangerous, less provocative strikes in Syria only. If the theory has no merit or has been invalidated by the February 7 strike, there may be escalation against U.S. sites in Iraq and/or Syria, by KH and/or Nujaba. ❖

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