

# Perpetrators of Stephen Troell's Killing in Baghdad Remain Unknown

by [Mohanad Faris \(/experts/mohanad-faris\)](/experts/mohanad-faris)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Mohanad Faris is an Iraqi journalist. He is a contributor to Fikra Forum.



Brief Analysis

**The circumstances surrounding Troell's death in November clearly indicate that the murder is tied to political infighting and the ongoing issue of armed militias in Iraq.**

On November 7, 2022, U.S. citizen Stephen Troell was killed in Baghdad's central Karrada district when unknown militants opened fire on his car. The brutality and lack of a clear reason for targeting Troell has raised a number of questions about the motives and timing of the killing.

While certain organizations have [attempted \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/militias-demonize-usaid-after-us-citizen-gunned-down-baghdad\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/militias-demonize-usaid-after-us-citizen-gunned-down-baghdad) to link Troell with U.S. government aid organizations and clandestine services, he had in fact been working as an English teacher at the Global English Institute of Baghdad, part of the Houston-based non-profit Millennium Relief and Development Services. This organization has worked in various developing countries, including Iraq, since 2004. Troell was part of its educational field team, and had been living in Iraq since 2018 with no ties to military or intelligence circles.

## Political Conflict and Troell's Killing

Troell's killing came twelve days after the Iraqi Council of Representatives approved Coordination Framework candidate Mohammad Shia al-Sudani's new government. The timing suggests that there may have been a link between the incident and ongoing conflicts among Coordination Framework forces over their allotted twelve cabinet posts in the 21-member cabinet, as well as other security and administrative positions.

Although the government has now been formed, several administrative and security posts remain vacant, including the head of intelligence services. According to media reports, the struggle over this post is primarily between Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and the Hoquq Movement, the political wing of Kataib Hezbollah. The Iraqi intelligence services are crucial to armed groups because of their extensive database of information, which helps to expand these groups' influence at the local and regional level and to shape their political networks in the region.

As such, some political blocs linked with the Coordination Framework felt that the cabinet's power-sharing mechanism had not worked in their favor. These blocs control well-known armed groups operating in the security sphere, and it is widely believed that these factions intended to use Troell's killing to signal their opposition to the current government. They were aware that re-engaging in militant operations would exert significant pressure by embarrassing the new government on the international stage.

What lends weight to this view is the fact that the use of violence by armed factions to exert political pressure is far from a new tactic. These groups likewise employed this strategy under Mustafa al-Kadhimi's government, both when they carried out drone strikes on Kadhimi's home and through numerous attacks on foreign diplomatic targets in order to highlight the weakness of the

Iraqi state and cause embarrassment for the government.

Nevertheless, the entities suspected in the killing of the U.S. citizen have tried to evade responsibility for the incident. Moreover, the lack of any declared suspects more than a month after the killing has demonstrated the weakness of the intelligence services regarding their inability to maintain security or to uncover militant operations that could undermine the security of the state, tarnish its reputation, or force regime change.

While accusations have been leveled against both Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and Kataib Hezbollah given the ongoing conflict between the two, the leadership of both groups has been quick to deny any connection with the incident. Namely, the security representative for Kataib Hezbollah, **Abu Ali al-Askari** (<https://twitter.com/abualialaskry1/status/1590410077780946944/photo/1>), issued a statement indicating that this incident was part of an effort to undermine the current government, and that the group responsible was clearly a mercenary gang with no conscience, which regularly carried out kidnappings and killings. He called on the government to identify the perpetrators and bring them to justice. Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq leader **Saad al-Saadi**

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likewise stated that the U.S. accusations of his group's involvement in the attack were unfounded, and that neither Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq nor any other resistance faction had any connection to the killing of the Troell.

Concurrently, **Ashab al-Kahf** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-ashab-al-kahf>)—a militant Shia group often used as a cover for various politically risky militant operations, or in operations for which Iran wishes to avoid being held responsible—issued a statement in the media claiming responsibility for the incident. Ashab al-Kahf has been active in Iraq since 2019 and has claimed responsibility for many militia attacks on foreign convoys. It also claimed responsibility for an attack targeting the U.S. embassy on November 17, 2020, as well as a rocket attack on a Turkish base in northern Iraq on February 15, 2021. It is worth noting that Ashab al-Kahf are not an independent armed group but rather function as a wing for multiple factions that are closely aligned with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard.

The statement indicated that the killing had been carried out in reprisal for the killings of Quds Force Commander Qasem Soleimani and the former deputy chairman of the Popular Mobilization Forces, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, both killed in a 2020 U.S. airstrike near the Baghdad International Airport. However, Ashab al-Kahf later issued a statement on Telegram on November 13 denying the **authenticity** (<https://t.me/Alkhuf/675>) of the previous statement and claiming that the group had never issued such a statement, although they did not deny responsibility for the attack.

Others have suggested that the Sadrist Movement could have perpetrated the attack, since it is openly hostile to the current government and therefore would want to cause the latter embarrassment. However, such a scenario seems unlikely since the Sadrist movement generally refrains from getting caught up in matters beyond its own political ambitions. Earlier rhetoric likewise seems to suggest that the Sadrists are hoping to be seen as moving away from militia tactics. On October, 20, Salih Mohammed al-Iraqi, who is close to the Sadrists' leader, tweeted that no new militant groups could be established and that it was prohibited to carry out operations that could disturb public security.

### **Stalled Governmental Investigations**

Following the assassination of Troell, the Iraqi Prime Minister ordered the Minister of Interior, Abdul Amir al-Shammari, to form a committee to investigate the incident. However, more than a month after the incident and despite the widespread use of surveillance cameras in the security fortified Karrada area, the committee is yet to release any significant details regarding the circumstances of the crime. Moreover, the nature of the committee's duties, its members, and its investigation plan are still

confidential.

The governmental investigative committee did issue statements indicating that the perpetrators of the operation were driving two black cars (<https://www.alarabiya.net/arab-and-world/iraq/2022/11/07/%25D9%2585%25D9%2582%25D8%25AA%25D9%2584-%25D8%25A3%25D9%2585%25D9%258A%25D8%25B1%25D9%2583%25D9%258A-%25D9%258A%25D8%25B9%25D9%2585%25D9%2584-%25D9%2581%25D9%258A-%25D9%2585%25D9%2586%25D8%25B8%25D9%2585%25D8%25A9-%25D8%25A7%25D8%25BA%25D8%25A7%25D8%25AB%25D9%258A%25D8%25A9-%25D8%25A8%25D8%25B1%25D8%25B5%25D8%25A7%25D8%25B5-%25D9%2585%25D8%25B3%25D9%2584%25D8%25AD%25D9%258A%25D9%2586-%25D9%2581%25D9%258A-%25D8%25A8%25D8%25BA%25D8%25AF%25D8%25A7%25D8%25AF>) without license plates. However, it remains unclear how these cars got through security barriers. The way in which the incident occurred demonstrates that the perpetrators were aware of Troell's movements and had planned the attack in advance. This incident was therefore an organized attack carried out by a group with experience in this kind of operation.

It seems difficult for whichever group in question to have perpetrated the killing without coordinating with security agencies to help them reach their target, since Troell's killing occurred in a district that has high security and public and private security cameras lining the streets. The security forces have yet to disclose whether any relevant camera footage had been found. Many sources indicated that these agencies knew which entity was responsible for the attack, but did not want to reveal this information due to fear of further domestic unrest. This supports the claim that a political entity within the current government has links to the incident.

Either way, the committee to determine the perpetrators of Troell's killing is increasingly resembling the committees put together to investigate similar previous incidents, such as the formation of a committee to investigate the killing of more than 500 protestors during the popular protests that swept the country in 2019. A similar committee was likewise formed to investigate the assassination of civil activist Ehab al-Wazni, who was killed in the Karbala Governorate on May 9, 2021. Despite the passing of more than a year since its formation, the committee has not released any information regarding the incident.

Such unsatisfactory results raise doubts about the effectiveness of these official committees, which have failed to produce real new information about these killings and may in fact be subject to the influence of the perpetrators of the crime. Alternatively, these may just be nominal, formal committees, formed to absorb popular and international fury towards those violations.

What is clear is that Stephen Troell has become one of the latest of many victims killed due to Iraq's current security unrest. Although the identity and motives of the perpetrators are unlikely to be revealed, Troell's killing has further emphasized that a turbulent future lies ahead if the struggle between political parties' armed factions over posts in the new Iraqi government continues. ♦

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