

Profile: Kataib al-Imam Ali

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Feb 27, 2024

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Brief Analysis

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

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A unique militia that is closer to Lebanese Hezbollah than other Iran-backed Iraqi groups, yet widely resented for prioritizing commercial success over kinetic operations.

Name: Kataib al-Imam Ali (al-Imam Ali Battalions, or KIA).

Type of movement: Armed group (*fasai*) and political/social organization.

Primarily focuses on social and economic operations but has facilitated kinetic military operations against U.S. forces in Iraq as well. Has also undertaken domestic counter-political/social moderate operations and threatened to carry out counter-Israel operations abroad. Has targeted human rights and freedom of expression among Iraqis.

History and objectives:

- KIA was established in June 2014 as the military branch of the party Harakat al-

Iraq al-Islamiyah (Islamic Movement of Iraq). The group first mobilized when Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani issued a fatwa calling for volunteers to join the security services, though it sent volunteers into the Popular Mobilization Forces instead, forming the 40th PMF Brigade.



Kataib al-Imam Ali logo

- In the war against the Islamic State (IS), KIA deployed forces in Iraq (beginning in 2014) and Syria (2015), the latter presented as a defensive measure to protect the Sayyeda Zainab shrine, Syria's most important Shia shrine. KIA fought in battles in Tikrit, west of Mosul, and al-Qaim. In the process, it developed a PMF "superstar" named Ayoub Falih Hasan al-Rubayie (aka Abu Azrael), who gained a very large social media profile for his battlefield antics.
- KIA maintained a strong post-2015 presence at Camp Speicher, a large, unused military base west of Tikrit where 1,700 Shia cadets were massacred by IS in June 2014. The group also seized a large military site in Suwayrah, Wasit, where KIA leader Shibl al-Zaydi developed a strong political base. On paper, it maintains a force of around 8,000 fighters, mainly deployed in Iraq with about 1,000 still active in Syria. Its actual number of fighters on the ground is likely smaller, even if it still controls that many salary allocations.
- In the PMF's deadly October 2019 crackdown on protesters, KIA rounded up civilians and put them in private jails operated by the militia. Abu Azrael was **badly wounded** (<https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2019/oct/31/iraq-protesters-target-iran-influence-violent-demo/>) by protesters in Baghdad.
- On the eve of the January 2020 attacks on the U.S. embassy in Baghdad, Zaydi held a meeting at his farm in al-Zafraniya that included top militia figures such as Hadi al-Ameri, leader of the **Badr Organization** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-badr-organization>); Akram Kaabi, leader of **Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-harakat-hezbollah-al-nujaba>) (HaN); Qais al-Khazali, leader of **Asaib Ahl al-Haq** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-asaib-ahl-al-haq-0>) (AAH), Abu Ala al-Walai, leader of **Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-kataib-sayyid-al-shuhada>) (KSS); and Ahmad Mohsen Faraj al-Hamidawi, secretary-general of **Kataib Hezbollah** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-kataib-hezbollah>) (KH).
- In 2020-21, KIA went quiet, focusing on building commercial networks and behind-the-scenes political activity. Shibl acted as a convener of competing *muqawama* (resistance) groups and a message carrier for Lebanese Hezbollah and Iranian security officials.
- In December 2023, Abu Azrael announced on social media that he had resigned from KIA and its PMG brigade. The message was later deleted from his X/Twitter account but still exists on his Telegram account. His X account still introduces him as "deputy commander for the 40th PMF Brigade."
- On January 5, 2024, during a ceremony in Basra commemorating the deaths of Qasem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, KIA fighters led by Mohammadawi **clashed** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/badr-and-asaib-crack-whip-kataib-al-imam-ali-basra>) with the PMF Central Security Directorate, the Badr Organization, and AAH.



Figure 1: Abu Azrael (L) and Qasem Soleimani (R) in Syria in 2015.

(/sites/default/files/2024-02/Abu%20Azrael%20and%20QS.png)

Chain of command:

- **Shibl Mohsen Obaid al-Zaydi:** The KIA secretary-general rose to prominence during the formation of Jaish al-Mahdi in 2004. A member of the Iran-backed “special groups,” he was detained by the U.S. military in Iraq and later released in 2010. He is one of the most commercially active and wealthy (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/honored-not-contained-future-iraqs-popular-mobilization-forces>) militia and PMF leaders, with extensive operations in oil smuggling, telecommunications, trade, agriculture, real estate, and the Qi Card electronic payment system. On November 14, 2018, the U.S. Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control designated (<https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm546>) Zaydi for acting on behalf of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force (IRGC-QF), highlighting his role (https://diyaruna.com/ar/articles/cnmi_di/features/2018/11/14/feature-03) as a financial liaison who facilitates transactions and coordinates between the IRGC and armed factions in Iraq. The designation detailed his involvement in oil smuggling operations from Iran to Syria, funding Lebanese Hezbollah’s operations in Syria, and mobilizing Iraqi fighters to Syria under Soleimani's direction.



Figure 2: Muhammad al-Bawi (L) and Shibl al-Zaydi (R).

- **Al-Haji Muhammad Adnan al-Bawi:** Bawi was the assistant secretary-general of KIA and led its operations in Syria. In July 2019, Muqtada al-Sadr accused Bawi of exploiting his name in corrupt activities for personal benefit. After being arrested in May 2021 by the Supreme Anti-Corruption Committee on charges of land fraud, Bawi was subsequently released in February 2023, with bail set at 100 million dinars. In July 2023, a criminal court in al-Karkh scheduled a trial for him on allegations of kidnapping a citizen in Baghdad's al-Adl neighborhood. Eventually, Laith al-Khazali, an important AAH commander, influenced the judiciary to drop charges against Bawi. He then began working with Khazali to raise funds for AAH through illicit economic activities. In December 2023, Bawi

was photographed with Khazali; the two men were presenting a bouquet of flowers congratulating Abu Zainab al-Lami, commander of the PMF Central Security Directorate (Figure 3).

- **IRGC-QF:** Qasem Soleimani played a pivotal role in the development of KIA, significantly influencing its organizational structure and operations. He maintained a close relationship with Zaydi and contributed to the group's strategy and growth. The IRGC-QF appears to have put (<https://ctc.usma.edu/irans-expanding-militia-army-iraq-new-special-groups>) special effort into cultivating Zaydi while ensuring that Muhandis provided KIA with a large number of paid billets within the PMF payroll system, expanding the unit to a size on par with Muhandis’s own KH. Zaydi has been used on a number of occasions (e.g., in 2021-22) to convince other Iraqi *fasail* of the need to respect truces with U.S. forces, sometimes at the behest of the IRGC-QF.
- **Lebanese Hezbollah:** Zaydi maintains a deep association with Lebanese nationals Mohammed al-Kawtharani and Adnan Hussein Kawtharani, who serve as Hezbollah's key representatives in Iraq. Moreover, Zaydi played a crucial role in transferring substantial financial resources to Lebanon, supporting Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian civil war. He has maintained significant operational relationships with Hezbollah officials and their economic ventures in Iraq.



Figure 3: Muhammad al-Bawi (L), Abu Zainab al-Lami (M), Laith al-Khazali (R).

Affiliate relationships:

Iran-backed terrorist groups in Iraq increasingly view Shibl al-Zaydi as a sellout due to his shift toward economic and political activities. Nevertheless, he has strong historic ties to the *fasail* and was involved in mounting attacks on U.S. forces in Iraq, Syria, and Jordan.

KIA's ties to other organizations include:

- **Kataib Jund al-Imam (the 6th PMF Brigade):** Due to the close political alliance between Zaydi and Kataib Jund al-Imam leader Adnan al-Asadi, the two units have a history of cooperation.
- **Badr Organization:** The Badr Organization (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-badr-organization>) and KIA are closely affiliated (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/kataib-al-imam-ali-portrait-iraqi-shiite-militant-group-fighting-isis>) and operate as partners, sharing strategic objectives and resources. This partnership is evident in the seamless

transition of individuals such as Adnan al-Shahmani from Badr to leadership roles in new militias such as Tayyar al-Risali, which KIA backed extensively. KIA's public commemoration of a fallen Badr commander in 2015, Abu Zahra al-Ghafari, also highlights their deep ties. In August 2019, Muhandis [initiated \(/node/1357\)](#) a restructuring of his alma mater, the Badr Organization, by reallocating his new favored factions, KH and KIA, into traditional Badr strongholds such as Kirkuk, Tuz Khormatu, Tal Afar, and Diyala.

- **Other PMF brigades in Iraq:** Ali Kerwei, a KIA member and deputy leader of the PMF's Nineveh Operations Command, worked closely with smaller PMF units such as Saraya Ansar al-Aqida (28th PMF Brigade), Kataib Ansar al-Hujja (29th PMF Brigade), and Quwat al-Shahid al-Sadr (25th PMF Brigade). In Sinjar and Tal Afar, KH and KIA advisors work with Liwa al-Hussein (53rd PMF Brigade) and Fawj Lalish (36th PMF Brigade), which are each staffed by local Yazidis and Shia Turkmens.
- **Other PMF brigades in Syria:** KH and KIA [maintain personnel \(https://ctc.westpoint.edu/irans-expanding-militia-army-iraq-new-special-groups/\)](https://ctc.westpoint.edu/irans-expanding-militia-army-iraq-new-special-groups/) in Abu Kamal along with Harakat al-Abdal (39th PMF Brigade).
- **Syria's National Defense Forces (NDF):** In 2015-17, KIA fought alongside the Syrian army's Tiger Forces, the Assad regime's NDF irregular forces, and Liwa al-Sahara in several areas: Palmyra, Aleppo, rural Damascus, and the Badia border region adjacent to Iraq.
- **Yemen's Houthi movement:** In November 2018, in a video shared on Iraqi social media, a commander [showcased \(https://www.mei.edu/publications/iraqs-imam-ali-brigade-militiamen-vow-fight-yemen-next\)](https://www.mei.edu/publications/iraqs-imam-ali-brigade-militiamen-vow-fight-yemen-next) rows of KIA personnel performing combat drills and declaring their readiness to support the Houthis (aka Ansar Allah) with the phrase "*Ila al-Yaman inshallah*" (to Yemen, God willing).

Subordinate relationships:

- KIA [maintains \(https://ctc.westpoint.edu/irans-expanding-militia-army-iraq-new-special-groups/\)](https://ctc.westpoint.edu/irans-expanding-militia-army-iraq-new-special-groups/) local offices in numerous Iraqi provinces for fundraising and recruitment. In Baghdad, its economic offices are concentrated in the Karradah and Jadriyah districts.
- Kataib Rouh Allah Issa ibn Miriam (The Brigade of the Spirit of God Jesus Son of Mary): In late December 2014, KIA initiated a training program for Christians, predominantly from the Syriac Christian and Assyrian Christian communities.
- KIA's social media presence is tiny except for its YouTube channel, which has 51.4K subscribers. It also runs an official Telegram account with more than 12k followers. (Note: all numbers for followers/subscribers in this profile were retrieved in February 2024.) Instead, its main social media presence has been built up via certain "superstar" commanders, who have numerous fan pages on Facebook and TikTok. For instance, Shibl al-Zaydi manages an official X/Twitter account with approximately 56.2K followers and frequently engages there. Abu Azrael is no longer with KIA but boasted a diverse digital presence during his long association with the group: an X/Twitter feed with 113.1K followers (inactive since 2020), a Facebook page with 15K followers (inactive since September 2023), and a highly active YouTube channel with 801K subscribers. His dual TikTok accounts, with 210.1K and 468.8K followers, respectively, are now his main communication channels. Notably, fan pages dedicated to him surpass those of Zaydi across these platforms, perhaps accounting for his falling out with the KIA leader.



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