

Kataib Imam Ali (Imam Ali Brigades)



Logo: AK-47 held aloft, similar to IRGC logo

Flag Text: Top line: “Islamic Iraqi Movement”; above rifle: “And those who strive for us – we will surely guide them to Our ways” (Quran 29:69); bottom: “Imam Ali Brigades”

FOUNDING

- 2014

KEY LEADERS

- Secretary General Shibl al-Zaydi
- Al Hajj Abu Ali al-Kurwi, 40th Brigade commander
- Hajj Kazim al-Ta'i, commander of the Abu Haydar Battalion

SIZE

- Estimated between 4,000 – 7,000 c. 2015

IDEOLOGICAL ALLEGIANCE

- Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei

POLITICAL WING

- Islamic Iraq Movement

WEAPONS

- Has publicized the use of U.S.-made HUMVEEs and M113-armored personnel carriers; has access to Iranian arms and Soviet-era vehicles, tanks, and light arms

ATROCITIES

- Burning a prisoner alive and carving him “like shawarma”; Beheading Islamic State prisoners – possibly after death

CURRENT DESIGNATIONS

- None

LEGAL STATUS IN IRAQ

- 40th Brigade of the Popular Mobilization Forces consists of Kataib Imam Ali fighters

AREAS OF OPERATION

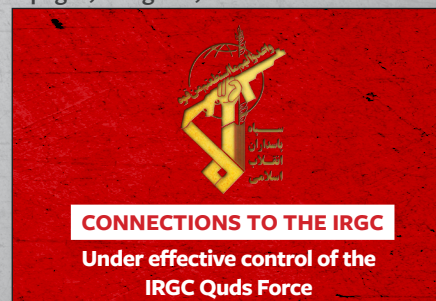
- Regions across Iraq and in Syria, including Palmyra and Aleppo

CONNECTIONS TO OTHER MILITIAS

- Zaydi was a commander in Moqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army prior to 2010
- Evidence of cooperation with Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba

SOCIAL MEDIA

- <http://kt-imam-ali.com/>, multiple Facebook pages, Telegram, YouTube



BACKGROUND AND ANALYSIS

Kataib Imam Ali is one of many Shiite militias that formed in response to the Islamic State's rapid expansion into Iraq in 2014. It takes its name from Ali, the first Shiite imam. The group's secretary general, Shibl al-Zaydi, has appeared in public with IRGC-Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani, indicating strong ties to Iran.¹ Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the PMF operations chief and leader of Kataib Hezbollah, has appeared frequently on film and in photographs with Kataib Imam Ali brigade leaders.² In them, Muhandis discusses battle plans and is seen wearing a Kataib Imam Ali arm patch, suggesting a formal role in the group.³ The group has deployed many fighters to Syria, where it runs a training camp and participated in the Iranian-led offensive to retake much of eastern Syria in 2017.⁴

The group is best known for the exploits of Abu Azrael, the “Iraqi Rambo,” a muscle-bound fighter with a penchant for wielding axes and swords.⁵ In a 2015 video, Abu Azrael watches as an Islamic State prisoner is burnt to death over a fire, then carves a slice of meat from his leg and compares it to “shawarma.”⁶ The group later sought to dissociate itself from this act.⁷ In 2018, Kataib Imam Ali joined the Iranian-backed Fatah al-Mubin (Manifest Victory) electoral coalition as the “Professionals for Construction Party – Al-Imam Ali Brigades.”⁸ That coalition is poised to shape the next Iraqi government, underscoring how the network of Iranian proxies in Iraq has expanded its influence in the midst of the campaign against the Islamic State.

1. Bill Roggio and Caleb Weiss, “Qods Force commander Soleimani reportedly spotted in Anbar Province,” *FDD's Long War Journal*, June 1, 2015. (<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/06/qods-force-commander-soleimani-reportedly-spotted-in-anbar-province.php>)
2. “الحاج شبل الزيدي و ابو مهدي المهندس و الحاج شبل الزيدي” (Kataib al Imam Ali Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and al-Haj Shibl al-Zaydi), *YouTube*, March 6, 2016. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WHW_Gc2I4WQ); Amir Toumaj, “Abu Azrael spotted during PMF's Mosul operation,” *FDD's Long War Journal*, November 4, 2016. (<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/11/abu-azrael-spotted-during-pmfs-mosul-operation.php>)
3. Phillip Smyth and Matthew Levitt, “Kataib al-Imam Ali: Portrait of an Iraqi Shiite Militant Group Fighting ISIS,” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, January 5, 2015. (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/kataib-al-imam-ali-portrait-of-an-iraqi-shiite-militant-group-fighting-isis>)
4. Caleb Weiss, “Iraqi Shia militias promote training camps in Syria,” *FDD's Long War Journal*, July 26, 2017. (<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/07/iraqi-shia-militias-promote-training-camps-in-syria.php>); Amir Toumaj and Caleb Weiss, “Iran tests the US in southeastern Syria,” *FDD's Long War Journal*, June 3, 2017. (<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/06/iran-tests-the-us-in-southeastern-syria.php>)
5. Nabih Bulos, “Iraq's Rambo is the scourge of Islamic State militants,” *The Los Angeles Times*, April 2, 2015. (<http://beta.latimes.com/world/great-reads/la-fg-cl-iraq-rambo-20150402-story.html>). Abu Azrael is a pseudonym. He claims his given name is Ayyub Faleh al-Rubaia.
6. Thomas Joscelyn, “Islamic State brutally executes 4 men in response to slaying by ‘Angel of Death,’” *FDD's Long War Journal*, August 31, 2015. (<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/08/islamic-state-brutally-executes-four-men-in-response-to-shiite-angel-of-death.php>)
7. “كتائب الإمام علي (ع) تتبرأ من تصرفات «أبو عزرائيل»” (Kataib al Imam Ali disowned the actions of ‘Abu Azrael’), *Al-Alam* (Iran), June 4, 2017. (<http://www.alalam.ir/news/1978207>)
8. Amir Toumaj and Romany Shaker, “Iranian-backed Iraqi militias form coalition ahead of parliamentary elections,” *FDD's Long War Journal*, January 25, 2018. (<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2018/01/iranian-backed-iraqi-militias-form-coalition-ahead-of-parliamentary-elections.php>)