Kataib Imam Ali (Imam Ali Brigades)

**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, Shibli 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 Iraqi-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.

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