Brief Analysis

or see Part 1: How to Use Militia Spotlight: Profiles (policy-analysis/how-use-militia-spotlight-profiles)

Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada is a splinter of Kataib Hezbollah that works directly with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and has a transnational focus on the shared regional agenda of the Iran-backed axis of resistance.

Name: Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada (KSS) (The Masters of the Martyrs Brigade).

Type of movement: Tier 2 fasail (armed group). Kinetic military operations (largely transnational in focus).

History and objectives:

- Listed by the United States as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist in July 2008, Sheibani was sidelined within KH in 2010-2013 and focused his efforts on operations in the Syrian civil war as part of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) chain of command. KSS members in Syria have been paid by the IRGC. The group claims to have suffered 88 killed in that conflict.
- In 2014, the leadership of KSS passed to Abu Alaa al-Walai.
- KSS became part of the Iraqi security forces when they formed the 14th Brigade within the Population Mobilization Forces (PMF).
- KSS threatened Saudi Arabia in October 2014, stating that “anything of Saudi origin,” whether human or material, was a legitimate future target, and warning that the group would “strike and destroy” the kingdom. Secretary-general Walai subsequently stated in July 2018 that he would send KSS militants to fight government forces in Yemen, proclaiming that he was “a soldier standing at the signal of Sayyed Abdul-Malik al-Houthi.”
- KSS claims to have been struck twice in Syria by U.S. aircraft: once in August 2017 at al-Tanf (claiming to have suffered 36 killed and 75
wounded) and once in March 2021 at Abu Kamal, suffering no casualties. The United States denied the first incident but admitted to the second as retaliation for the group’s alleged involvement (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/erbil-rocket-cell-insights-haidar-hamza-al-bayatis-confession) in the February 16, 2021, rocket attack on Erbil airport.

- Between November 19 and November 25, 2021, KSS claimed that 49,000 volunteers were enrolled in its new recruitment campaign (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/kss-fake-recruitment-drive) to prepare for a major battle with the U.S. troops in Iraq. Abu Ala al-Walai said on November 19 in a tweet: “as the hour of determination and the big battle approaches... Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada announces a recruitment plan for volunteers to join our ranks”. He called on “the Iraqi people and the muqawama factions to raise the level of readiness in preparation for the decisive and historic confrontation with the American occupation on 12/31/2021 after 12:00 [midnight]”.

**Chain of command:**

- **Iran.** Clear and convincing evidence that KSS sometimes responds to commands from, and is partly financed by, the IRGC. The preponderance of the evidence shows that the IRGC-Qods Force (IRGC-QF) and Lebanese Hezbollah have provided KSS with financial assistance, military assistance, and intelligence sharing, as well as help in selecting, supporting, and supervising its leadership. Following the January 2020 killing of IRGC-QF commander Qasem Soleimani, KSS visitors were given high-profile treatment in Tehran, suggesting they had attained a higher status than all other groups except Kataib Hezbollah and Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba.

- **“Vanguard” Iraqi militia network.** Chatham House describes “vanguard” networks as having strong central control, a weak connection to society, and primary focus on the transnational axis of resistance and IRGC-QF agenda.

- **Partly financed by the Iraqi state.** KSS operates the state-funded 14th Brigade of the PMF. Chain of command nominally runs through the Popular Mobilization Commission of the Prime Minister’s Office and up to the prime minister. In practice, KSS PMF units frequently disobey the Iraqi government chain of command while legally remaining organs of the Iraqi state.

**Affiliate relationships:**

- Strong and supportive relations with Lebanese Hezbollah and other axis of resistance transnational fighters.
- Sibling rivalry with Kataib Hezbollah, from which former KH member Abu Mustafa al-Sheibani defected to form KSS.
- Rivalry with Badr and other resistance factions, especially concerning profile and recruitment, giving way to coordination when such factions are all threatened.
- Strengthening editorial role within Sabereen News (node/16673) since November 2021.

**Subordinate elements:**

- The 14th Brigade of the PMF, an Iraqi state organ. This formation is under the administrative and operational control of KSS leaders.
- Multiple covert action roadside bombing, rocket, and assassination cells that may have overlapping membership with the KSS PMF brigade.
- KSS runs iNEWS TV, a media network that employs a less religiously conservative style than other muqawama television channels. Abu Alaa and KSS have their own (separate) dedicated Telegram channels.
- KSS political representative and spokesman Falih Khazali, who has been a member of parliament in Iraq for two terms (2014-2018 and 2018-present).
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