

# Kataib Hezbollah's Escalating Feud with the Iraqi Security Forces

by [Amir al-Kaabi \(/experts/amir-al-kaabi\)](#), [Michael Knights \(/experts/michael-knights\)](#)

May 19, 2023

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/ktayb-hzb-allh-tswd-alkhlaf-m-qwat-alamn-alraqyt\)](#)

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Amir al-Kaabi \(/experts/amir-al-kaabi\)](#)

Amir al-Kaabi is an Iraqi expert on Shia militant groups in Iraq and Syria.



[Michael Knights \(/experts/michael-knights\)](#)

Michael Knights is the Jill and Jay Bernstein Fellow of The Washington Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of Iraq, Iran, and the Persian Gulf states. He is a co-founder of the Militia Spotlight platform, which offers in-depth analysis of developments related to the Iranian-backed militias in Iraq and Syria.



Brief Analysis

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

or see Part 1: [How to Use Militia Spotlight \(/policy-analysis/how-use-militia-spotlight\)](#)

## The leading Iran-backed militia is increasingly picking territorial fights with military forces controlled by Baghdad.

Since the militia-led Coordination Framework appointed Mohammed Shia al-Sudani as their “[general manager \(/node/17805\)](#)” of the Iraqi government, the [Kataib Hezbollah \(/node/16641\)](#) (KH) terrorist movement and its Shia fighters inside the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) have become more assertive in their clashes with the country's regular security forces.

### March 14 Clash Between KH and CTS in Speicher

The initial incident of note took place in Camp Speicher, a strategic outpost on the Baghdad-Mosul road near Tikrit and a powerful sectarian totem ever since the Islamic State executed some 1,700 Air Force cadets there on June 12, 2014. Two months ago, a group of KH fighters led by Abu Jafar al-Daraji—a KH commander and head of the PMF security directorate in Salah al-Din—engaged in a firefight with the Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service (CTS) in Speicher.

Relations between the CTS and KH have never been comfortable, especially in Speicher and other remote bases where the U.S.-established CTS maintains outposts for its regional commando battalions engaged in anti-Islamic State operations. The March 14 Speicher clash occurred a day after a major PMF parade at the camp memorializing Tikrit's 2014 liberation—a controversial anniversary among different parts of the Iraqi security forces because the PMF withdrew from that liberation operation in protest of the CTS decision to use American airpower. Initial reports on the March clash suggested that KH had tried to access a CTS pay delivery, whereupon CTS personnel shot and killed two KH members. KH then burned a number of CTS vehicles and shot and injured two CTS soldiers.

### May 15 Showdown in Albu Aitha

Iran-backed militias have been a more visible presence on Baghdad's streets during Sudani's tenure as prime minister, with KH running checkpoints in the Palestine Street area that were not in place during Mustafa al-Kadhimi's term in 2020-2022. Relatedly, the Badr Organization's Abu Turab al-Tamimi recently assumed control over the Izdihar palace complex in west Baghdad on behalf of the PMF and its [Muhandis General Company \(/node/18017\)](#), taking over from the Iraqi Army and Federal Police.

On May 15, another shooting match broke out between KH members and rival security forces, this time in Baghdad's Albu Aitha suburb. The Federal Police used heavy machine-guns to defend themselves, and two officers were shot and wounded by KH. The incident was captured on video (Figure 1) and circulated on the internet, quickly generating social outrage. The Iraqi Security Media Cell (SMC) put out a cautious [statement](#)

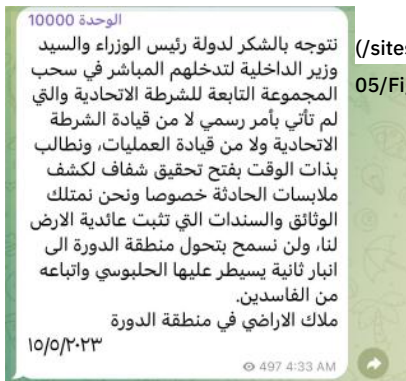


Figure 1: Federal Police injured by Kataib Hezbollah fighters in Albu Aitha, May 15, 2023.

(/sites/defa  
05/Figure%

[https://www.facebook.com/SecMedCell/posts/pfbid02H5G8xiv2f28ipq3aYcN1TTjrxQrAx5ojBN9sZ1zyvCftM2Sz8c7kOjWgnEtA8t8DI?locale=ar\\_AR](https://www.facebook.com/SecMedCell/posts/pfbid02H5G8xiv2f28ipq3aYcN1TTjrxQrAx5ojBN9sZ1zyvCftM2Sz8c7kOjWgnEtA8t8DI?locale=ar_AR) on May 16 claiming that the police were in the area regarding municipal orders about the removal of illegal buildings (see below). Yet the SMC held back from criticizing any PMF or Iran-backed militia factions.

For their part, *muqawama* (resistance) platforms initially reported that a person named Omar al-Issawi had led the clash against the security forces. By giving this Sunni name, the platforms were essentially trying to distance their Shia militia patrons from the incident. Afterward, a few KH-affiliated platforms disseminated a statement in the name of local landowners (“the owners of Dora Lands”) thanking “the prime minister and interior minister for their direct intervention in pulling out a group that belonged to the Federal Police which came without an official order from Federal Police Command or the [Baghdad] Operations Command.” The statement continued: “We demand a transparent investigation to reveal the details of the incident, especially since we have all the documents that prove that this land belongs to us and that we won’t allow [them] to turn Dora area into another Anbar controlled by [Speaker of Parliament Mohammed al-] Halbousi and his corrupt followers” (Figure 2).



(/sites/default/files/2023-  
under the bridge linking Dora district and east Baghdad. These farms (mainly in the Albu Aitha  
05/Figure%2001.jpg)

The so-called "Dora Lands" are the former properties of Saddam Hussein’s family, mostly located under the bridge linking Dora district and east Baghdad. These farms (mainly in the Albu Aitha outskirts of Dora) were seized by Iraqi Shia militias after 2003. Parcels of this valuable land were then illegally sold to private citizens in the area, who began to build illegal structures there. Albu Aitha is also notorious as the site of numerous assassination cells and prisons run by Iran-backed militias such as KH and Saraya al-Ashura (the PMF's 8th Brigade), including the individuals who killed researcher Hisham al-Hashimi on July 6, 2020. Albu Aitha has been used as a base for KH rocket cells as well. On June 26, 2020, the group was famously raided by the CTS in Albu Aitha after evidence linked the site to a rocket attack on the U.S. embassy, leading to the arrest of the rocket cell leader and twelve other KH fighters.

### Conclusion

Under the Coordination Framework’s “*muqawama* government,” Iraqi militias are becoming more territorial and appear increasingly confident that they can take on the CTS, Army, and Federal Police with few consequences. KH is a particularly interesting case worth watching: the group has been less prominent in anti-American attacks since its last overt strike, an August 2022 operation against the U.S. base in al-Tanf, Syria. Within Iraq, KH is busy consolidating control over valuable territory and working as a key force within the expanding PMF and the aforementioned Muhandis General Company. The extent to which some or all KH factions are “domesticating” in the same manner as Asaib Ahl al-Haq (i.e., focusing more on domestic power grabs and economic empire-building) is an open question, and a worthy one for policymakers. ❖

## PART OF A SERIES

### Militia Spotlight (/policy-analysis/series/militia-spotlight)

#### How to Use Militia Spotlight

(/policy-analysis/how-use-militia-spotlight)



## Kataib Hezbollah and the Gaza Crisis (Part 2): Israel's Incursion, Khamenei-Nasrallah Speeches, and Blinken's Visit

(/policy-analysis/kataib-hezbollah-and-gaza-crisis-part-2-israels-incursion-khamenei-nasrallah)



## Kataib Hezbollah and the Gaza Crisis (Part 1): Special Ops in the Lead

(/policy-analysis/kataib-hezbollah-and-gaza-crisis-part-1-special-ops-lead)

## RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

## Iranian Escalation in Iraq and Syria: Implications and U.S. Options

November 15, 2023, starting at 12:00 noon EST (1700 GMT)

♦  
Michael Knights,  
Devorah Margolin,  
Andrew J. Tabler,  
Wladimir van Wilgenburg

(/policy-analysis/iranian-escalation-iraq-and-syria-implications-and-us-options)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

## Developing a Practical Model to Solve the Iraq-KRG Oil Crisis

Nov 9, 2023

♦  
Yerevan Saeed

(/policy-analysis/developing-practical-model-solve-iraq-krg-oil-crisis)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

## The Hamas-Israel War: One Month On

Nov 9, 2023

◆  
Zohar Palti,  
Hanin Ghaddar,  
Ghaith al-Omari,  
Dennis Ross

(/policy-analysis/hamas-israel-war-one-month)

## TOPICS

Military & Security (/policy-analysis/military-security)

Terrorism (/policy-analysis/terrorism)

## REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Iraq (/policy-analysis/iraq)