



Kataeb Hezbollah: Profile of a Shiite-Iraqi militia handled by the Qods Force to promote Iranian interests in Iraq (Full Version)

July 9, 2020

Overview

Kataeb Hezbollah (“Hezbollah Brigades”) is a radical Shiite militia of a clearly anti-American nature with a Khomeinist ideology. It was established by the Qods Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) in 2007 in southern Iraq with the objective of fighting against the US army and ousting it from Iraq. It is the most prominent among the Shiite militias handled by Iran, **prioritized in military and financial support from the IRGC’s Qods Force.**¹ Kataeb Hezbollah played a key role in fighting against the United States army in Iraq from its establishment until 2011. After the US army left Iraq, **the Qods Force found other objectives for Kataeb Hezbollah and continues to handle it to promote Iran’s strategic goals in Iraq and Syria.** In the ITIC’s assessment, Kataeb Hezbollah is currently handled by the Qods Force first and foremost **to promote the objective of removing the US army from Iraq unilaterally while disrupting the strategic dialogue between Iraq and the US.**



Right: Operatives of Kataeb Hezbollah carrying a photo of Ayatollah Khomeini, expressing their loyalty to Iran and the Khomeinist ideology of the Rule of the Jurisprudent (Kataeb Hezbollah website). Left: Operatives of Kataeb Hezbollah carrying the photo of Ayatollah Khomeini in a military parade on “World Jerusalem Day” (Iraqi News Agency, November 13, 2018)

¹ Two other Shiite militias prioritized in the allocation of Iranian resources are **Asaib Ahl al-Haq** and the **Nujaba Movement**. See the ITIC’s Information Bulletin from January 13, 2020, “Asaib Ahl al-Haq, profile of an Iraqi Shiite militia handled by the Iranian Qods Force.” See also the ITIC’s Information Bulletin from December 31, 2017, “The Movement of the Noble Ones (Harakat al-Nujaba)”

► **Iraq was and has remained a very important arena in Iran’s regional policy and a major pillar in its concept of national security². At the center of Iran’s strategic goals in Iraq are compromising US political influence and putting an end to its military presence and political influence in Iraq; strengthening the Iranian influence on the Iraqi government and transforming Iraq into a state with Iranian orientation; increasing Iranian influence among the Shiite sect in Iraq while reducing the role of the United States and the International Coalition in the campaign against ISIS; additional goals are weakening ISIS by combined action of the Shiite militias and the Iraqi security forces; weakening the national Iraqi Shi’a, which is reluctant to accept Iranian dictates; securing the overland supply route between Iran and Syria, which passes through Iraq (“the overland corridor”); and using the Shiite militias to strengthen the “Axis of Resistance” led by Iran, including by using Iraqi Shiite militias to support the Assad regime.**

► **Kataeb Hezbollah and the other Shiite militias are perceived by the Iranians as proxies used to promote the above strategic goals while refraining from direct involvement or provoking measures which may implicate Iran and the Shiite militias in a direct confrontation with the United States. Handling Kataeb Hezbollah and other Shiite militias creates inherent tension between Iran and its militias on the one hand, and other elements in the Iraqi government and the Shiite sect in Iraq striving to preserve Iraq’s independence and sovereignty, on the other.**



Emblem of Kataeb Hezbollah: Above the hand holding a rifle, which rises from a map of Iraq, there appears a Quranic verse, “Fight the leaders of disbelief, for indeed, there are no oaths [sacred] to them” (Surat At-Tawbah, 9, Verse 12, Sahih International translation). The emblem draws its inspiration from the emblems of the Qods Force and the Lebanese Hezbollah (see below).

² See the ITIC's Information Bulletin from July 14, 2020, “Iran faces growing Challenges in Iraq but is determined to further its vital Interests,” by Dr. Raz Zimmt.

► **Kataeb Hezbollah was established by Jamal Ja'far Mohammad Ali Ibrahimi, AKA Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, a Shiite Iraqi with an extensive history of terrorist activity** (he was involved in a series of terrorist attacks in Kuwait, which were carried out by the Lebanese Hezbollah as part of an Iranian terrorist campaign). **Following his terrorist activity in Kuwait, he fled to Iran, where he stayed for 20 years, and then came back to Iraq after the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime.** During the Iraq War, he established Kataeb Hezbollah **with the handling and support of the Qods Force.** Kataeb Hezbollah's "specialty" was planting deadly roadside charges along the roads used by the American forces and firing rockets causing the US army many casualties which precipitated its departure from Iraq (2011). **Kataeb Hezbollah was perceived by the Americans as the most dangerous anti-American and pro-Iranian among the Shiite militias operating in Iraq.**

► Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis continued to serve as Kataeb Hezbollah's commander even after the US forces left Iraq on 2011. **In June 2014, he was appointed deputy commander of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), an umbrella framework of dozens of Shiite militias,** some operating **under Iranian sponsorship,** others independent or loyal to **Ayatollah Ali Sistani,** the supreme religious authority of the Shiites in Iraq (even though formally, the PMF is subordinate to the Iraqi government). The background for the establishment of the PMF was ISIS's takeover of Mosul and its threat to Baghdad at that time. This led to a religious ruling issued by Ayatollah Ali Sistani, calling on the Iraqi residents to embark on jihad against ISIS. Thus, **he actually granted internal Iraqi legitimacy to the establishment of the PMF and the existence of the armed Shiite militias. Until he was killed, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis was the dominant figure in the PMF,** while the formal commander, Falih al-Fayyad, served as a figurehead.

► **On January 2, 2020, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis met his death in a targeted killing by a US aircraft. His friend (and handler) Qods Force Commander Qassem Soleimani was killed along with him.** Al-Muhandis was replaced as commander of Kataeb Hezbollah by **Ahmad al-Mohammadawi (Abu Fadak),** one of the founders of Kataeb Hezbollah who had held a series of military and political positions in the organization. On February 26, 2020, **he was included in the US terror list and was designated as an international terrorist operative due to his involvement in terrorist attacks against American forces and innocent Iraqi civilians** (previously, in 2009, Kataeb Hezbollah was designated as a terrorist organization). It appears that so far, Al-Mohammadawi has not been formally appointed as

deputy commander of the PMF due to internal conflicts between the pro-Iranian militias and the followers of Ayatollah Sistani.



Kataeb Hezbollah Commander Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis (left) and Qassem Soleimani (right). The two were very close until they met their death in a targeted killing by the US (Al-Arabiya TV, December 30, 2019).

- ▶ Main characteristics of Kataeb Hezbollah:
 - ◆ The military wing of Kataeb Hezbollah includes **three brigade frameworks numbering about 9,000-10,000 fighters**. Most of the fighters are deployed in Iraq or operate against ISIS as part of the PMF. Some of them are deployed in Syria (mainly in the Albukamal area).
 - ◆ The funding for the activity of Kataeb Hezbollah's military wing comes in part from the Iraqi government, through the PMF. Another part of the funding **comes directly from Iran and is estimated at several millions of US dollars per month**.
 - ◆ Kataeb Hezbollah has **an extensive network of civilian foundations**, according to the model implemented by Iran in the Lebanese Hezbollah (albeit on a smaller scale). This network includes **media infrastructure, religious foundations, women's foundations, a student wing, and a youth movement**.
 - ◆ Kataeb Hezbollah has maintained **close relations with the Lebanese Hezbollah ever since Kataeb Hezbollah's establishment (2007)**. The relations between the two organizations find expression, inter alia, in the assistance provided by operatives of the Lebanese Hezbollah for **training operatives of Kataeb Hezbollah** (and other Iranian-sponsored Shiite militias).
 - ◆ Kataeb Hezbollah **adopted the Iranian ideology of the rule of the jurisprudent** and nurtures the personality cult of Ayatollah Khomeini and the current

Iranian leader Khamenei. At the same time, they also **use Iraqi-Shiite trappings in order to rebut allegations that they are an Iranian branch serving Iran's interests.**

An examination of Kataeb Hezbollah's patterns of activity in the last decade indicates that the organization **has been employed by Iran as the main tool to promote Iran's strategic goals in Iraq.** Thus, for instance, Kataeb Hezbollah played a major role in **the brutal suppression of the Shiite protest** against the Iraqi government in late 2019; it was the main force **in a violent demonstration in front of the US Embassy in Baghdad**, during which the Embassy compound was damaged (December 31, 2019). In addition, **it participated in the fighting in Syria** supporting the Syrian regime, and joined forces in the **fighting against ISIS** in western and northern Iraq (as part of **the PMF, the umbrella framework of the Shiite militias**). Kataeb Hezbollah constitutes a major force of the Shiite militias **securing the border area between Iraq and Syria** in the Al-Qaim-Albukamal region, **considered strategically important for the Iranians.**



Right: Kataeb Hezbollah's flag waving above the US Embassy wall (Baghdad al-Youm, December 31, 2019). Left: US Embassy wall set on fire (YouTube, December 31, 2019)

► After the killing of Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis, Kataeb Hezbollah (and other Shiite militias handled by Iran) **launched a threat campaign against the United States, which was accompanied by sporadic rocket fire at American bases and facilities without formally claiming responsibility.** The campaign was intended to prevent Iraqi-American talks on the manner of departure of the US army from Iraq, and **bring about a unilateral departure of the US army from Iraq without an American-Iraqi agreement.** Kataeb Hezbollah was the main Shiite militia **launching rockets at bases of US and International Coalition soldiers and facilities (including the Taji base north of Baghdad,**

Baghdad’s international airport, and the “Green Zone” in central Baghdad³). The rocket fire forced the Americans to evacuate several bases **and divert part of their attention and efforts to cope with Iran and the Shiite militias at the expense of fighting against ISIS.**

► In the second half of June 2020, **there were several shooting incidents targeting American/Western sites in the Baghdad region and the Taji base.** In the ITIC's assessment, Kataeb Hezbollah was the main Shiite militia **behind the rocket fire, acting on orders from Iran, with the purpose of disrupting the strategic dialogue** between the US and Iraq, which is to determine the future of American presence in Iraq. These firing incidents with no casualties took place without **any claim of responsibility on the part of Kataeb Hezbollah or any other Shiite militia** in order not to trigger fierce American responses against either Iran or the Shiite militias in Iraq.

► Following those incidents of rocket fire, on June 25, 2020, a force of the Iraqi government counterterrorism unit raided the Kataeb Hezbollah headquarters in southern Baghdad. Fourteen Kataeb Hezbollah operatives were reportedly detained, to be released four days later. **The raid was intended to convey a threatening message to Kataeb Hezbollah, with the purpose of making them stop firing rockets at the American bases or facilities.** Kataeb Hezbollah responded with threats against Iraqi Prime Minister Mostafa al-Kazimi and a statement that **their armed activity in Iraq “is totally legitimate.”** However, **the power struggle between Iraqi sovereignty and Kataeb Hezbollah and the other Shiite militias working to promote the Iranian interests is far from over.**

The structure of the study

► The study includes the following sections:

◆ **Overview**

◆ **Historical background:** the period of Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis

◆ **Kataeb Hezbollah’s ideology**

◆ **Profile of the Kataeb Hezbollah organization:**

- The military infrastructure
- Kataeb Hezbollah’s leadership
- Funding the organization
- The political support in the internal Iraqi arena

³ The “Green Zone” is a heavily secured area in central Baghdad where the American and international presence is located, including the US Embassy.

◆ **The civilian infrastructure:**

- Overview
- Religious system
- Women's institutions
- Dissemination of studies and articles
- Student wing
- Scouts movement

◆ **Media infrastructure:**

- Overview
- Al-Ittijah Channel
- Website
- Social media
- Combat Information Unit
- Other media platforms not directly subordinate to Kataeb Hezbollah

◆ **Collaboration with the Lebanese Hezbollah**

- Support of the Lebanese Hezbollah
- Resemblance between the emblems

◆ **Milestones in Kataeb Hezbollah's activity in the last decade**

- Fighting in northern Syria against the rebel organizations
- Fighting against ISIS as part of the PMF
- Securing the Iraqi-Syrian border region
- Suppressing Shiite protest against the Iraqi government
- Violent demonstration in front of the US Embassy
- Threat campaign against the US and the Iraqi government
- Rocket fire at American bases and facilities
- Exerting pressure on the US during the strategic dialogue

◆ **Preemptive operation of the Iraqi government**

- Overview
- Kataeb Hezbollah's response
- Iranian response

Historical background: the Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis era

▶ **Jamal Ja'far Muhammad Ali Ibrahim** AKA **Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis**, 57, was an Iraqi Shiite **married to an Iranian woman**. In the distant past (the 1970s and 1980s), he was a member of the **Shiite Al-Dawa party**, which operated against the Saddam Hussein regime. He was forced to flee Iraq to Kuwait and from there he moved to Iran. **He stayed in Iran for about 20 years and returned to Iraq after the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime.**

▶ In the 1980s, **Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis was involved in terrorist attacks against the US and French embassies in Kuwait** (December 1983). The attacks on the embassies were carried out with car bombs, killing five people. The attacks **were carried out by the Lebanese Hezbollah, as part of an Iranian wave of attacks carried out in the first half of the 1980s in order to advance a number of Iran's political-strategic goals**. Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis **fled to Iran and was sentenced to death in absentia in Kuwait** for his involvement in these terrorist attacks. In 1985, he was also charged with **attempting to assassinate the Emir of Kuwait, Sheikh Jaber al-Ahmed al-Sabah, and with attempting to hijack a Kuwaiti airplane**⁴.

▶ After the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime in April 2003, Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis returned to Iraq **and became a senior operative in the Badr Forces**, the military wing of the **Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI)**, established by pro-Iranian Shiite leader **Mohammad Baqir al-Hakim**⁵. In 2006-2007, he served as an MP on behalf of the

⁴ In an interview with an Iranian TV channel, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis admitted that he had carried out "jihadi activity" in Kuwait in the 1980s, together with Mustafa Badreddine of the Lebanese Hezbollah. He was sentenced to death in Kuwait for this activity but managed to flee to Tehran (YouTube, Rawdah News Channel, April 23, 2017).

⁵ **The Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq**: a body established in Iran in the early 1980s by Ayatollah **Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim** to fight the regime of Saddam Hussein. Up to the time of the American invasion, this body had an active militia fighting against the regime of Saddam Hussein. This militia, **the Badr Organization, was trained, guided and funded by the Qods Force of the Revolutionary Guards**. After 2003, the militia was disbanded and its members joined the Iraqi army and police. A number of people who served

Al-Dawa Party. US officials accused him of being **an agent of the Qods Force in Iraq, which supports the pro-Iranian (Shi'ite) militias. In April 2007, Al-Muhandis established Kataeb Hezbollah**, comprising several armed Shiite militias **handled and supported by the Qods Force, in the southern Iraqi city of Al-Amara** Kataeb Hezbollah began waging **guerrilla warfare against the US and its allies**. Following the withdrawal of the US forces from Iraq (2011), **Kataeb Hezbollah announced that it would not lay down its arms** in the face of so-called threats posed to Iraq by the United States and several countries in the region.

► June 2014 saw the **establishment of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF)**, an umbrella framework comprising the Shiite militias that fought against the United States. **Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, a close associate of the Iranians, was appointed PMF deputy commander and actually became the dominant figure in the organization. In this capacity, he was also in charge of managing the PMF's funds, and this gave him a position of power over the other Shiite militias.** On the other hand, Falih al-Fayyad, the PMF commander, was and remains a figurehead.

► **On the night of January 2, 2020, US aircraft attacked two vehicles in Baghdad, carrying senior officials of the Qods Force and the PMF. Qassem Soleimani, commander of the Qods Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, was killed in the attack. Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, PMF deputy commander and commander of Kataeb Hezbollah, was killed along with him.** According to an announcement issued by the US Department of Defense, Soleimani's elimination was intended to deter Iran following attacks that it was behind. The announcement mentioned an attack on a military base near Kirkuk (December 27, 2019) in which a US citizen was killed, and the violent riots at the US Embassy in Baghdad (December 31, 2019). In the ITIC's assessment, **Kataeb Hezbollah played a key role** in both of these attacks.



in the Badr Organization became operatives and fought against the US forces in Iraq, including Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and Abu Mustafa al-Sheibani.

Right: Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, deputy commander of the pro-Iranian Shiite militias in Iraq, who were eliminated in a targeted killing in early January 2020 (Fars, January 4, 2020). Left: Kataeb Hezbollah operatives mourning the deaths of Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis (Al-Arabiya, March 6, 2020).



The vehicle in which Qassem Soleimani was traveling, after the US attack (Tasnim News Agency, January 3, 2020)

Profile of Kataeb Hezbollah

Military infrastructure

▶ At the time of the withdrawal of the US forces from Iraq (2011), Kataeb Hezbollah numbered about 400 operatives. In the nine years that have passed since then, their number **has increased significantly and is currently estimated at about 10,000 fighters**. About 7,500 fighters operate in the Iraqi arena, while about 2,500 fighters have been dispatched to carry out missions in Syria⁶, **mainly in the area of Albukamal**, in the ITIC's assessment. The significant increase in the organization's size was apparently made possible **due to the funding provided by the Iraqi government since 2014 to the militias included in the PMF**. This is in addition to the support provided directly to the Iranian-sponsored Shiite militias by the Qods Force, including the supply of weapons.

▶ Kataeb Hezbollah **is headed by a Supreme Council (Majlis al-Shura)**, to which the military and civilian wings are subordinate. **The military wing apparently comprises three brigades that are part of the PMF: the 45th Brigade, the 56th Brigade, and the 57th Brigade**. Each of these brigades comprises **about 2,500 fighters**. (**Note:** Kataeb Hezbollah is similar in size to the Nujaba Movement, another important Iranian-sponsored Shiite militia

⁶Al-Istiqlal, March 14, 2020; Michael Knights's article in CTC Sentinel: **"Iran's Expanding Militia Army in Iraq: The New Special Groups** (Combating Terrorism Center at West Point" (August 2019, vol.12, issue 7).

which also has about 9,000-10,000 fighters organized in three brigades). Kataeb Hezbollah also has **intelligence and security network**. In addition to the military wing, Kataeb Hezbollah has an **extensive civil and media infrastructure** (see below).

Kataeb Hezbollah's ideology

Kataeb Hezbollah has adopted the Khomeinist ideology of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, at the core of which is the concept of the **Rule of the Jurisprudent** (*Velayat-e Faqih*). This means that **Kataeb Hezbollah perceives Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei as the source of authority** (rather than Ayatollah Ali Sistani, the supreme religious authority among Shiites in Iraq). They also share **the personality cult of Ayatollah Khomeini and his successor Ali Khamenei**. In addition, Kataeb Hezbollah has adopted prominent trappings of the Iranian worldview, centered on **intense hostility to the United States and Israel**.

The personality cult of Khomeini and Khamenei



Right: Kataeb Hezbollah Scouts holding a sign with a picture of Iranian leader Ali Khamenei above the inscription, "Palestine will be liberated." Left: Sign showing Ayatollah Khomeini, the father of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, above the inscription, "(World) Jerusalem Day, day of the confrontation by nations against the forces of arrogance (i.e., the US and the West)" (Iraqi blog "Sumerian Priest," September 30, 2014). Left: Conference of the Kataeb Hezbollah Women's Foundation. Above are pictures of Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and Ayatollah Khomeini (website of the Kataeb Hezbollah Women's Movement, February 26, 2019).

Additional Iranian trappings



Right: Kataeb Hezbollah Scouts mourning the killing of Qassem Soleimani, Commander of the Qods Force of the Revolutionary Guards, and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, PMF Deputy Commander (January 3, 2020) (From a Facebook group affiliated with Kataeb Hezbollah’s scout movement, January 6, 2020). Left: Hezbollah operatives setting fire to a poster showing the American flag and US President Donald Trump, alongside shoe prints, during a demonstration by the operatives in front of the United States Embassy in Baghdad (NAS, June 28, 2019).



Kataeb Hezbollah Commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis (left) and Qassem Soleimani (right). The two were very close until they met their deaths in a US targeted killing (Al-Arabiya Channel, December 30, 2019).

At the same time, Kataeb Hezbollah adopted **local Iraqi-Shiite trappings**. These were intended, first and foremost, **to legitimize their activity in Iraq** and to repudiate allegations by the Iraqi public that Kataeb Hezbollah is an Iranian branch that serves the interests of a foreign country.

► To this end, **Kataeb Hezbollah has turned two senior Iraqi Shiite clerics** into role models. Their leading role model is **Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, a Shiite Iraqi Ayatollah who supported Khomeini’s Islamic Revolution and attempted “to export” it to Iraq** (he was therefore executed by the Saddam Hussein regime in the 1980s). Another role model is **Mohammad Mohammad Sadeq al-Sadr**, an Ayatollah who opposed Saddam Hussein’s regime, who was executed by Saddam Hussein in the 1990s because he supported the Shiite uprising in southern Iraq. The role models do not include **Ayatollah Ali Sistani**, the supreme religious authority among the Shiites in Iraq and even beyond (even though Kataeb Hezbollah makes use of the Iraqi internal legitimacy granted by Sistani to the establishment of the PMF).



Right: Kataeb Hezbollah Scouts carrying its flags on World Jerusalem Day. They are holding a sign showing and quoting Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr: “Whoever makes peace with Israel has excluded himself from Islam” (Scout Movement website, July 14, 2015). Left: Encouraging members of the Kataeb Hezbollah Women’s Foundation to study the Quran. A picture of Mohammad Mohammad Sadeq al-Sadr appears in the background (Al-Zainabiyat Foundation website, June 27, 2018).

► In order to reinforce its “Iraqi” identity, **Kataeb Hezbollah presents itself as patriots fighting against ISIS on behalf of Iraq and striving to liberate Iraq from the “American occupation.”** All this is in order to obscure the fact that the organization is handled by the Qods Force in order to advance Iranian interests in Iraq, based on the Iranian ideology, policy and considerations (in **Lebanon, Hezbollah also presents itself as “Lebanon’s defender” against Israel in order to gain intra-Lebanese legitimacy for the possession of weapons** and refute accusations that it is a pawn of Iran). In addition, Kataeb Hezbollah uses legendary “classic” Shiite elements. Kataeb Hezbollah operatives sometimes carry **pictures of Imam Hussein**, the symbol of the Shiite sacrifice, who was killed in the battle of Karbala in southern Iraq (680 AD).



Right: Kataeb Hezbollah operatives waving their flags and Iraqi flags, in order to present themselves as Iraqi patriots (Al-Ain, February 28, 2020). Left: Kataeb Hezbollah fighter holding a flag bearing the picture of Imam Hussein, symbol of the Shiite sacrifice (Kataeb Hezbollah website, July 8, 2020).

Kataeb Hezbollah's leadership

Ahmad al-Mohammadawi, Kataeb Hezbollah's secretary general

► After Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis was killed, **Ahmad al-Mohammadawi**, AKA **Abu Fadak**, was appointed as **Kataeb Hezbollah's secretary general**. Al-Mohammadawi joined Kataeb Hezbollah in 2007, when the militia was established. He underwent military training in the IRGC camps in Iran. He was member of Kataeb Hezbollah's leadership (Majlis al-Shura) and carried out various positions as a field commander. He commanded many operations of Kataeb Hezbollah and established their Special Units.

► Following his appointment as commander of Kataeb Hezbollah, **Al-Mohammadawi visited in Iran**. During his stay in Iran, he visited the tomb of Qassem Soleimani, former Qods Force commander, in the city of Kerman (Mashreq News, February 24, 2020).



Ahmad al-Mohammadawi at Qassem Soleimani's tomb (Mashreq News, February 24, 2020)

► On February 26, 2020, Al-Mohammadawi's name was added to the US Department of State's Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) list⁷ (White House website, February 26, 2020). It seems that so far, Al-Mohammadawi has still not been formally appointed to the successor of Al-Muhandis as the PMF commander due to conflicts between pro-Iranian militias and militias supporting Ayatollah Ali Sistani, the supreme Shiite cleric in Iraq⁸. This apparently weakens him among Kataeb Hezbollah and in Iraqi internal politics, in comparison to his predecessor, Al-Muhandis.



Right: Ahmad Al-Mohammadawi (Abu Fadak) (@kablaenaser Twitter account, April 16, 2020).

Left: Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis kissing Abu Fadak (Serateshgh website, February 22, 2020)



⁷ On the SDGT list he is called Hamidawi, possibly a misspelling of Al-Mohammadawi.

⁸ See article in the Lebanese daily newspaper Al-Akhbar (which is affiliated with the Lebanese Hezbollah) entitled, "No consensus on the choice of Abu Fadak as a successor: The struggle over the PMF leadership flares up once again" (February 24, 2020). According to another article, four PMF militias close to Ali Sistani published a joint statement objecting to the appointment of Al-Mohammadawi as the successor of Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis (Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, February 23, 2020).

Ahmad al-Hamidawi's name on the SDGT list (US Department of State website, February 26, 2020). The name Al-Hamidawi may be a misspelling of Al-Mohammadawi.

Other senior figures

- ▶ **Hussein Mu'anes (Abu Mahdi al-Askari), Kataeb Hezbollah's military spokesman.** Member of Kataeb Hezbollah's Shura Council (Majlis al-Shura). He was held by the American forces in Iraq in 2008-2011. In the Iraqi media, he is also described as **the person in charge of security in Kataeb Hezbollah.**



Abu Mahdi al-Askari
(Kalkamesh Press, March 4, 2020)

- ▶ **Mohammad Muhyi, Kataeb Hezbollah's spokesman.** Member of Kataeb Hezbollah's Political Bureau (Al-Mayadeen, January 12, 2020).



Kataeb Hezbollah Spokesman Mohammad Muhyi
(Al-Mayadeen, January 12, 2020)

Financing Kataeb Hezbollah

- ▶ It appears that until the establishment of the PMF, Kataeb Hezbollah **relied almost exclusively on Iranian aid**, which included financing the militia's activities, supplying weapons, and training. In November 2014, the families of Americans killed and wounded while serving in Iraq sued **five European banks**. According to the lawsuit, the European bankers cooperated with Iranian banks to circumvent the sanctions imposed by the US on

Iran. According to the statement of claim, **the banks are responsible for shootings and IED attacks carried out by the Qods Force and Iraqi Shiite militias in Iraq, including those carried out by Kataeb Hezbollah** (Reuters, November 10, 2014).

▶ **Since 2014, the Iraqi government has been financing a significant portion of the expenses of handling the Shiite militias, including Kataeb Hezbollah, through the PMF Financial Directorate and thus the extent of the Iranian aid has dropped.** Moreover, according to media reports, **commercial businesses** in Baghdad and southern Iraq, and **criminal activity** such as smuggling and abductions, are a **secondary source of income** for Kataeb Hezbollah (supplementing the Iranian aid through legitimate economic investments and criminal activity is also characteristic of the Lebanese Hezbollah). It appears that **the presence of Kataeb Hezbollah at the border crossings**, mainly the Al-Qaim-Albukamal crossing between Iraq and Syria, **is also a source of income** (for example, collecting money from vehicles crossing the border, smuggling between Iraq and Syria, and collaborating with smuggling networks).

▶ According to a Reuters report, which relies on informed sources, including three commanders in the leading Shiite militias, until the United States renewed its sanctions on Iran, **Iran had transferred \$12-15 million a month to its sponsored militias in Iraq⁹.** However, according to the report, **the Iranian aid has decreased sharply in recent months.** This was due to the US sanctions, the drop in oil prices, and the COVID-19 pandemic, all of which have reduced the financial aid and made transferring it difficult (the closure of the border crossings due to the COVID-19 pandemic has also disrupted the transfer of funds and military equipment through the border crossings).

▶ According to one of the commanders of the leading militias, the Iranian aid for each of the four leading Shiite militias has dropped from **\$4.5-5 million a month to 2-3 million.** It can therefore be assumed that Kataeb Hezbollah, which is prominent among the four leading Shiite militias, **is currently receiving Iranian aid amounting to several million dollars a month** (several tens of millions of dollars a year). According to the Reuters report, the

⁹ **This aid is much less than the Iranian aid provided to the Lebanese Hezbollah, which enjoys priority when it comes to Iranian aid.** The aid to the Lebanese Hezbollah is estimated at **several hundred million dollars a year**, plus large quantities of **weapons and additional military assistance.** For more information, see the ITIC's Information Bulletin from July 10, 2016: "Nasrallah's Speech: Hezbollah's Budget Is Entirely Funded by Iran, Including Weapons and Operatives' Salaries – Analysis of Significance and Implications."

reduction in aid **affected the ongoing operations** of the militias and the purchase of weapons, forcing them to find alternatives by promoting their business interests. However, the funds that continue to arrive are allocated to military operations carried out as part of the **campaign against Iran’s opponents, including rocket fire against American targets** (Reuters, July 2, 2020, article entitled: “**Coronavirus and sanctions hit Iran’s support of proxies in Iraq**”).

Political support in the domestic Iraqi arena

► Kataeb Hezbollah does not have its own independent political wing. **The organization receives support from the Fatah Alliance**, most of whose members are key pro-Iran operatives in Iraq. It is headed by **Hadi al-Ameri**, one of the most prominent pro-Iran operatives in Iraq.

► The Fatah Alliance was formed in advance of the Iraqi parliamentary elections in May 2018. Its members are operatives in the PMF, and especially in the prominent pro-Iran militias operating as part of the PMF, such as the Badr Militia, Asaib Ahl al-Haq, and the Sayyid al-Shuhada Brigades¹⁰. The Fatah Alliance may also include Kataeb Hezbollah members, but they do not appear under the organization’s name. **In total, the Fatah coalition has 47 members in the Iraqi parliament** (out of 329 Iraqi MPs), meaning **they constitute a minority in parliament** (Counter Extremism Project, July 2, 2020).

Civilian infrastructure

Overview

Kataeb Hezbollah operates a network of civilian foundations among the Shiite sect in Iraq, **according to the model implemented by Iran in the Lebanese Hezbollah** (in Iraq, this model was implemented on a smaller scale and at a lower cost). The purpose of the civilian foundations is **to increase the influence of Kataeb Hezbollah among the Shiites, to inculcate Iranian ideology**, and besmirch the opponents of Kataeb Hezbollah and Iran, mainly the United States. In the ITIC’s assessment, most of the expenses of the civilian foundations are funded by Iran (just as it funds most of the expenses of Hezbollah’s civilian infrastructure in Lebanon).

¹⁰ Phillip Smyth, **Iranian Militias in Iraq’s Parliament: Political Outcomes and U.S. Response**, The Washington Institute, 11 June 2018.

► Kataeb Hezbollah operates **five systems of civilian foundations** among the Shiites in Iraq:

- ◆ **Religious system:** the Mosques and Hussainiyas¹¹ Authority
- ◆ **Women's foundations:** Al-Zainabiyat¹² Council
- ◆ **Student wing:** The Al-Nakhb academic institution
- ◆ **Research and propaganda system:** Al-Hadaf Research Center
- ◆ **Scout movement:** Imam Hussein¹³ Scouts Association



Emblems of the four civilian foundations operated by Kataeb Hezbollah (from right to left): The religious system, the research/propaganda system, the women's foundations, and the student wing (Kataeb Hezbollah website, June 18, 2020)

Religious system

► **The Mosques and Hussainiyas Authority** is an institution which was intended to spread Islamic awareness in the Shiite religious institutions in Iraq through meetings, conferences, symposiums and other activities. This is used to increase the influence of Kataeb Hezbollah, inculcate Iranian ideology, increase support for Iran, and find volunteers and operatives for Kataeb Hezbollah. The Mosques and Hussainiyas Authority has a Facebook account. However, it has been inactive since March 2020.

¹¹ **Hussainiya:** a Shiite religious community center of sorts, where educational, cultural and social activities take place.

¹² Named after **Zainab**, the daughter of Ali, a role model in Shiite Islam.

¹³ **Imam Hussein bin Ali**, killed in the Battle of Karbala in 680, becoming a symbol of heroism and sacrifice in Shiite Islam.



Activists of the Mosques and Hussainiyas Authority in one of the mosques
 (@haea.almasajed Twitter account, March 5, 2020)

Women's foundations

► The purpose of the **Al-Zainabiyat Foundation** is to broaden support of women and their families for Kataeb Hezbollah and its Khomeinist ideology. The women who are members of this foundation take part in demonstrations and other events organized by Kataeb Hezbollah. The foundation has a website: <http://www.zainabiat.org>. It features articles on the status of women in Islam, health, commemoration of shaheeds, importance of studying Islam in its conservative Shiite version, and documentation of conferences of the Al-Zainabiyat Foundation.



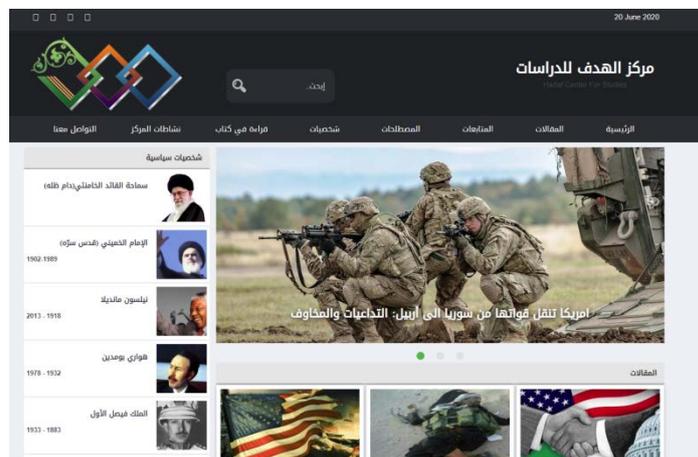
Right: Homepage of the Al-Zainabiyat Foundation website: the main article is about an event for the family of jihad fighter, shaheed Ahmad al-Muhanna, a PMF photographer killed while covering the riots in Baghdad in December 2019 (Al-Zainabiyat Foundation website, June 23, 2020). Left: Item intended to encourage women to study the Quran; the photo of Mohammad Mohammad Sadeq al-Sadr, a senior Shiite cleric in Iraq who was executed by Saddam Hussein in the 1990s, appears in the background (website of the Al-Zainabiyat founder, June 27, 2018)



Right: Activity of the Al-Zainabiyat Foundation. Women dressed in traditional clothes carry the Kataeb Hezbollah flag (Iraqi blog Sumerian Priest, September 30, 2014). Left: Conference of the Women’s Foundation; pictures of Iranian leader Ali Khamenei and Islamic Revolution leader Ayatollah Khomeini are hung above (website of the Al-Zainabiyat founder, February 26, 2019)

Research and propaganda system

► The **Al-Hadaf Research Center** is intended to promote Iranian-Khomeinist ideology in Iraq and increase hostility towards the United States by the dissemination of articles and studies. The center has a website: <http://hadafcenter.com/>, whose content is clearly pro-Iranian and anti-American. The Al-Hadaf Center includes sections of research, translation, distribution, and public relations. The center also has a library.



Homepage of the Al-Hadaf Research Center: The main article is entitled “America transfers its forces from Syria to Erbil: Consequences and concerns.” On the left, under the heading “Political figures,” pictures of Iranian Leader Ali Khamenei and Leader of the Islamic Revolution in Iran Ayatollah Khomeini (website of the Al-Hadaf Research Center, June 20, 2020)

Student wing

► The **Al-Nakhb** (i.e., the chosen, elite) **Foundation in Academia** operates among students at Iraqi universities with the purpose of increasing Iranian influence and that of

Kataeb Hezbollah among them and encouraging them to oppose the influence of Western culture. The foundation helps students in various ways. Inter alia, it provides them with financial support, trains them, and sends students outside Iraq. It has a website which features articles portraying the West negatively, commemorating Kataeb Hezbollah shaheeds, and praising the Islamic Revolution in Iran. In addition, the foundation has a Twitter account, Facebook page, and YouTube channel.



Homepage of the Al-Nakhb Foundation in Academia. The main article includes praise for the important changes brought by the Islamic Revolution in Iran (website of the Al-Nakhb Foundation in Academia, June 23, 2020)



Right: Support tent of student members of Kataeb Hezbollah (Iraqi blog “Sumerian Priest,” September 30, 2014). Left: Bus with a Kataeb Hezbollah flag carrying members of the Shiite sect to Shiite holy sites (website of the Al-Nakhb Foundation in Academia, June 23, 2020)



Event commemorating a Kataeb Hezbollah shaheed
(website of the Al-Nakhb Foundation in Academia, June 23, 2020)

The Scout Movement

► **Kataeb Hezbollah’s Scout Movement**¹⁴ was founded in 2011. Its purposes are to operate among the younger generation, inculcate Khomeinist ideology in it, and nurture new generations of Kataeb Hezbollah operatives. It has a website. Kataeb Hezbollah’s scout movement has signed an agreement with Lebanese Hezbollah’s Imam al-Mahdi Scouts, according to which members of Kataeb Hezbollah’s scout movement will be sent to Lebanon and to scout camps in Iran.



Right: Emblem of the scout movement, featuring the Iraqi flag and the word “Obey” on the background of the colors of the Kataeb Hezbollah emblem (website of the scout movement, June 25, 2020). Left: Emblem of the Lebanese Hezbollah’s Imam al-Mahdi Scouts. The Lebanese cedar appears in the center, with the word “Obey.”



Right: Activists of Kataeb Hezbollah’s scout movement holding signs of shaheeds of the militia. In the center, a graduate of the scout movement who joined Kataeb Hezbollah and was killed in Syria defending the Shiite holy site of Al-Sayyida Zaynab Shrine in the Damascus area (“Sumerian Priest” Iraqi blog, September 30, 2014). Left: Boys of the scout movement holding signs with pictures of Iranian leaders. On the right, a sign with a picture of Iranian leader Ali Khamenei. The text reads, “Palestine will be liberated.” On the left, a sign with a picture of the father of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini. The text reads, “[World] Jerusalem Day [founded by Khomeini in support of the Palestinians] - a day of conformation by nations against the forces of arrogance [i.e., the West]” (Iraqi blog “Sumerian Priest”, September 30, 2014).

¹⁴ Jam’iyat Kashafat al-Imam Hussein.



Right: Activists of the scout movement carrying flags of Kataeb Hezbollah (Iraqi blog “Sumerian Priest”, September 30, 2014). Left: Boys of the scout movement carrying flags of Kataeb Hezbollah and a sign with a photo of Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr¹⁵. The text on the sign, a quote by Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, reads, “Whoever makes peace with Israel has excluded himself from Islam” (website of the scout movement, July 14, 2015)



Operatives of the scout movement mourning the killing of Qassem Soleimani, commander of the IRGC’s Qods Force, and Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis, PMF deputy commander (from a Facebook group affiliated with Kataeb Hezbollah’s scout movement, January 6, 2020)

Media infrastructure

Overview

Similarly to all Iranian-sponsored organizations, **Kataeb Hezbollah operates its own propaganda machine**, although it is not as developed and extensive as the one of the Lebanese Hezbollah. Kataeb Hezbollah’s propaganda network includes an **Iraqi satellite news channel (Aletejah TV)**, a **website, activity on social media** (Twitter and Telegram), and an entity called **Combat Information Unit**, whose operatives document Kataeb Hezbollah’s fighting. In addition, Kataeb Hezbollah disposes of two websites employed by the Axis of Resistance: **The Resistance Media Network** and **the Central Combat Information**. In the ITIC’s assessment, **Iran is behind both of them** (possibly through the PMF). **The**

¹⁵ Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr attempted to promote the Khomeinist Islamic Revolution in Iraq in the 1980s and was executed by Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

Lebanese Al-Mayadeen TV Channel, which is affiliated with Hezbollah, is used also as a platform to disseminate Kataeb Hezbollah’s messages, including threats to the United States.

Aletejah TV (in Arabic, “the direction”)

► This is an Iraqi satellite news channel which apparently belongs to Kataeb Hezbollah. The channel has **a website and an active channel on YouTube**. It can be assumed that the channel operates under Iranian sponsorship. The content of the reports is consistent with Kataeb Hezbollah’s positions. However, the channel maintains a relatively “moderate” façade, in the ITIC’s assessment, in order to increase its viewership among the Iraqi population which does not necessarily support Kataeb Hezbollah.



Kataeb Hezbollah’s Spokesman Mohammad Muhyi threatens the United States (Aletejah TV, January 12, 2020)

Website

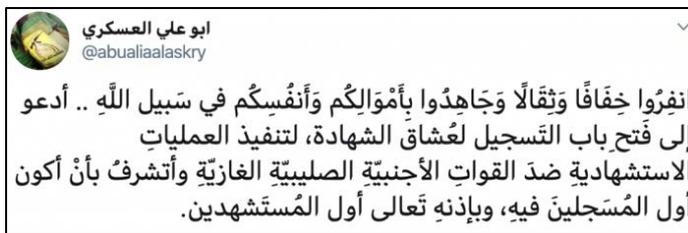
► **Kataeb Hezbollah operates a website** which includes announcements of the organization, information on Kataeb Hezbollah’s actions, commemoration of shaheeds, and news items on pro-Iranian Kataeb Hezbollah activity. This is a low-quality website, which is not updated often.



Homepage of Kataeb Hezbollah’s website. The militia emblem appears in the center (Kataeb Hezbollah’s website, June 16, 2020)

Social media

- ▶ Kataeb Hezbollah's ongoing activity on social media is relatively meager. The military spokesman of Kataeb Hezbollah, Abu Mahdi al-Askari, **manages active accounts on Twitter and Telegram** although Kataeb Hezbollah is designated in the US as a terrorist organization. It appears that Kataeb Hezbollah and its operatives were blocked by Facebook.
- ▶ **Activity on Twitter:** Kataeb Hezbollah's military spokesman, Abu Mahdi al-Askari, is active on Twitter (the account address is @abualalaskary).



Right: Post from Abu Mahdi al-Askari's previous account on Twitter (Twitter account of Abu Mahdi al-Askari, January 3, 2020). The account was blocked by Twitter until it was reopened.

Left: Abu Mahdi al-Askari's current Twitter account (@abualalaskary Twitter account, June 7, 2020)

- ▶ **Activity on Telegram:** Kataeb Hezbollah has several Telegram accounts. The organization's military spokesman Abu Mahdi al-Askari has an active Telegram account (the address is t.me/abualaskary).



Post in English from Abu Mahdi al-Askari's Telegram account (Telegram account t.me/abualaskary, April 7, 2020)

- ▶ Apart from that, there are several groups on Telegram bearing the name of Kataeb Hezbollah. However, items published by these groups are scarce and out of date.



Various groups active under the name of Kataeb Hezbollah on Telegram
(Telegram, June 18, 2020)

Combat Information Unit

► Kataeb Hezbollah has a **Combat Information Unit**, whose operatives document the fighting against ISIS. This unit published videos of the fighting against ISIS in 2015 until 2017. Since 2017, the Combat Information Unit apparently does not publish videos on the Internet. It may produce videos for internal use only.



From a video of Kataeb Hezbollah's Combat Information Unit documenting the fighting against ISIS in the Salah al-Din governorate (YouTube, February 28, 2015)

Other media platforms not directly subordinate to Kataeb Hezbollah

The Resistance Media Network

► The Resistance Media Network is an entity which operates a website and produces videos. Kataeb Hezbollah makes use of the website for propaganda purposes.



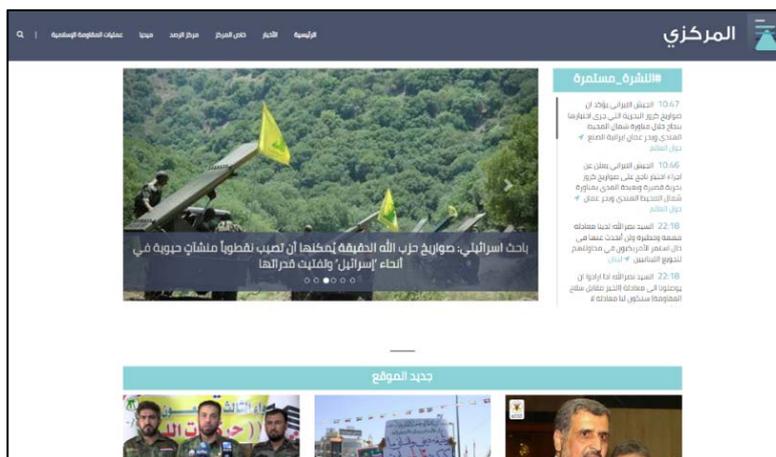
**Emblem of the Resistance Media Network
(Resistance Media Network website, September 25, 2017)**



Homepage of the Resistance Media Network, which is devoted mainly to information on the PMF and also contains few Iraqi army reports (Resistance Media Network website, June 18, 2020)

Central Combat Information website

► The website of the Central Combat Information is a media platform employed by the Axis of Resistance. In the ITIC's assessment, **Iran is behind the operation** of this platform. The website address is <https://central-media.org/>. It posts items on Iran's proxies in the Middle East, mainly the Lebanese Hezbollah, Hamas, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), and militias which are part of the PMF, including Kataeb Hezbollah.



Homepage of the Central Combat Information. Main article about Hezbollah; article on the PMF, and another one on Ramadan Salah, the PIJ secretary general who recently died (Central Combat Information website, June 18, 2020)

Collaboration with the Lebanese Hezbollah

Support of the Lebanese Hezbollah

Ever since its establishment in 2007, **Kataeb Hezbollah in Iraq has maintained close ties with the Lebanese Hezbollah**. These ties were made possible due to the close relations of these two organizations with the Qods Force and **Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis's close relations with Hezbollah's senior figures**. These close relations were reflected in military support provided by the Lebanese Hezbollah, mainly the training of Kataeb Hezbollah operatives by instructors of the Lebanese Hezbollah. The close ties between the two organizations persisted even after the Americans left Iraq (2001) **and have continued until today**.

► Speaking in an interview with the Hezbollah-affiliated Al-Mayadeen TV Channel (January 3, 2017), former Kataeb Hezbollah Commander Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis said that he had been in contact with Hezbollah for many years. He added that **he maintained relations with Imad Mughniyeh and Mustafa Badreddine from the early 1980s**. At that time, Imad Mughniyeh was Hezbollah's chief operative. **Mustafa Badreddine** was detained in Kuwait following the attacks against the US and French embassies and against Kuwaiti targets. A total of 17 Hezbollah operatives and supporters were detained along with him. Hezbollah made an effort to have him and the others detained in Kuwait released through hijacking airplanes for bargaining purposes, including a TWA plane (1985) and Kuwaiti planes (1984, 1988).

► Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis said in the interview to Al-Mayadeen that **Imad Mughniyeh and Mustafa Badreddine had had a very important role in training the Iraqi “jihad fighters”** (Note: He referred to the operatives of the Dawa party, who fled to Iran because of Saddam Hussein’s persecution). **He himself was one of those Iraqis.** They both had a **primary role in establishing and training the first networks of “the Iraqi resistance fighters” against the US.** They trained and equipped the Iraqis who fought against the American presence in Iraq.

► It appears that the bulk of the support by the Lebanese Hezbollah **is now transferred to the Shiite militias through the PMF.** Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis said at the time that Hezbollah operatives were supporting the PMF in training and planning (Al-Mayadeen, January 3, 2017). In addition, **operatives of Kataeb Hezbollah and other Iraqi Shiite militias** cooperated with Hezbollah in the fighting in northern Syria and in securing the Albukamal border crossing, on Iranian instructions.



Photo of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah (center) alongside photos of three Hezbollah operatives and an Iranian killed in battle in Syria. The picture was taken at a PMF training facility. The emblem of the PMF’s training unit appears underneath the photos.

Resemblance between the emblems

The close connection between Kataeb Hezbollah and the Lebanese Hezbollah, and the close connection between the Iranian Qods Force and the Shiite militias handled by it in Iraq, **are expressed in a great similarity in the graphics of the emblems of Kataeb Hezbollah, Asaib Ahl al-Haq, and the Nujaba Movement.** The three emblems of the prominent proxy organizations of Iran **are very similar to those of the Qods Force and the Lebanese Hezbollah.** The emblems feature a hand waving a rifle, and above it (in one of the cases, beneath it) Quranic verses on a holy war for the sake of Allah against the infidels. The

emblems of Kataeb Hezbollah and Asaib Ahl al-Haq feature a map of Iraq. The emblems of Kataeb Hezbollah, the Lebanese Hezbollah and the Qods Force also feature a map of the world in order to grant their activity worldwide religious legitimacy.

Emblems of the main three Iranian proxy militias

Kataeb Hezbollah



Nujaba Movement



Right: Emblem of Kataeb Hezbollah; Above the hand holding a rifle, which rises from a map of Iraq, appears a Quranic verse reading, “Fight the leaders of disbelief, for indeed, there are no oaths [sacred] to them” (Surat At-Tawbah, 9, Verse 12, Sahih International translation). Left: Emblem of the Nujaba Movement. The name “Hezbollah” appears in the center. Above the hand holding a rifle, there is a Quranic verse: “...and fight a holy war [against the infidels] for the sake of Allah, as He deserves. [For] He [is the one] who chose you” (Quran, Surah 22, verse 78).

Asaib Ahl al-Haq



Emblem of the militia of Asaib Ahl al-Haq: underneath the rifle appears a Quranic verse: “Indeed, they were youths who believed in their Lord (i.e., Allah)” (Surah 18, Verse 13, Sahih International translation). The verse was intended to present the members as operating out of devotion to their religion, as the Quran attributes it to a group of youths who won the guidance of Allah because they adhered to Allah’s path.

Emblems of Qods Force and the Lebanese Hezbollah

Qods Force



Hezbollah



Right: Qods Force emblem. Above the rifle, there is a Quranic verse: “And prepare against them whatever you are able of power and steeds of war” (Surah 8, Al-Anfal, Verse 60, Sahih International translation). The meaning of the verse is a call to prepare a military force in advance of waging war against the enemy. Left: Hezbollah’s emblem. Above the rifle, there is a Quranic verse: “And whoever is an ally of Allah and His Messenger and those who have believed – indeed, the party of Allah – they will be the predominant” (Surah 5, Verse 56, Sahih International translation).

Milestones in Kataeb Hezbollah’s activity over the past decade

The fighting in northern Syria against the rebel organizations

Since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war (2011), **the Qods Force under Qassem Soleimani has led the Iranian effort aimed at preventing the collapse of the regime and the fall of Damascus and strategic outposts in northern Syria into the hands of the rebel organizations.** This has been accomplished by sending Iranian advisers and fighters to Syria and **by sending operatives from the organizations supported by Iran to the battle zones** (Shiite militias from Iraq, the Lebanese Hezbollah, and Shiite fighters from Afghanistan and Pakistan). As part of the Iranian effort to support the Assad regime, **thousands of Iraqi Shiite militia operatives have been sent to Syria, including more than 1,000 Kataeb Hezbollah operatives,** who took part in the fighting in northern Syria under the command of Qassem

Soleimani¹⁶. Currently, their main area of operation is the **Syrian-Iraqi border area, mainly the Albukamal-Al-Qaim region.**

► Kataeb Hezbollah was one of the first Shiite militias to send forces to Syria to support the Assad regime in the fight against the jihadi organizations and other rebel groups (including the Al-Nusra Front at the time). **The fighting took place in the Aleppo region in 2015-2017**, as part of a Syrian army campaign designed to relieve the pressure on vital outposts of the Syrian regime in the north of the country. **To this end, a joint Syrian-Iranian operations room was set up in the region to command the attacking forces.**

► In advance of the attack, the Iranians sent several thousand reinforcements, consisting of a **force from the Revolutionary Guards and Shiite militias from Afghanistan and Iraq, including Kataeb Hezbollah.** On October 11, 2015, **Qassem Soleimani went to northeastern Syria** to take part in commanding the offensive by the Syrian army and the forces that support it (Al-Akhbar, October 13, 2015). It appears that Soleimani directly commanded Kataeb Hezbollah and the other Iranian-sponsored militias. In late 2016, Kataeb Hezbollah played a vital role in securing the city of Aleppo, and the organization even maintained an office in parts of the city that were controlled by the Syrian regime.



**Qassem Soleimani briefing fighters, probably in the area of Latakia, Syria
(Facebook, October 13, 2015)**

¹⁶ **Kata'ib Hezbollah**, Stanford University, a program of the Center for International Security and Cooperation (CISAC), May 2019 (hereinafter: Kata'ib Hezbollah, Stanford University).



Joint Syrian-Iranian operations room established in Aleppo in advance of the Syrian army assault. At the top left there is a poster showing Khomeini and Khamenei. An Iranian reporter who reported on the activity of the operations room is visible on the right (Fars News Agency, October 22, 2015).

- ▶ **Several thousand operatives of Kataeb Hezbollah, the Nujaba Movement and other Shiite militias from Iraq apparently played an active role in the fighting in the Aleppo area.** It is unclear whether Kataeb Hezbollah operatives remained in the area of Aleppo after the city fell to the Syrian regime (December 2016). Kataeb Hezbollah apparently redeployed their forces in northern Syria and **shifted their center of operation to the eastern part of the country**, mainly the Syrian-Iraqi border region, **where Iran wishes to maintain its strategic interests (see below).**

Fighting against ISIS as part of the PMF

The PMF (Al-Ḥashd al-Sha’abi in Arabic) is an umbrella framework of dozens of Shiite militias numbering about 120,000-140,000 operatives. Some of these militias are affiliated with Iran and some are affiliated with prominent figures in the Shiite community in Iraq, mainly Ayatollah Ali Sistani, the supreme religious authority among the Shiites in Iraq. **PMF operatives have played (and continue to play) an important role in the fighting against ISIS, alongside the Iraqi security forces.** Despite the impressive number of these militia operatives, their combat fitness and discipline are inferior to those of the Iraqi army, although they have considerable political influence among the Shiite community. Moreover, it seems that the killing of Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, and the reduction of Iranian financial aid, **have compromised the operational capability of the Iranian-sponsored Shiite militias, including Kataeb Hezbollah.**

- ▶ **The PMF was established in June 2014**, the month in which ISIS took control of the city of Mosul and reached the pinnacle of its achievements. The establishment of the PMF

was aimed at streamlining the campaign against ISIS at a time when it posed a tangible threat to Baghdad and the Iraqi regime. The establishment of the PMF was made possible by a *fatwa* issued by **Ayatollah Ali Sistani, the supreme Shiite scholar in Iraq**¹⁷. Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the commander of Kataeb Hezbollah, was appointed the commander of the PMF since its establishment. It appears that after his death in the targeted killing by the United States, **his successor has not yet been appointed, apparently due to disputes between the Iranian-sponsored militias and the supporters of Ali Sistani** (Iraqi media reports on the appointment of Ahmad al-Mohammadawi as the new commander of Kataeb Hezbollah have not been verified).

► The PMF was originally subordinate to the Iraqi Interior Ministry. However, **on December 19, 2016, Fouad Ma'sum, the Iraqi president at the time, signed a law that was approved by the Iraqi parliament**. Under this law, **the PMF would be part of Iraq's armed forces and would be subordinate to the commander of the Iraqi armed forces and not to any political party. The Prime Minister of Iraq is also considered the supreme commander of the armed forces, and is therefore the supreme authority of the armed forces**. In early 2018, former Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi issued a directive **making the salaries of those serving in the PMF equal to the salaries of those serving in Iraq's other security forces, in order to reinforce his authority over it**. In practice, however, **Kataeb Hezbollah and other Shiite militias are handled by the Qods Force**, and their subordination to the Iraqi government is limited to their being used for routine security missions, mainly against ISIS.

► **From the Iranian perspective, the PMF makes it easier to control the Shiite militias handled by the Qods Force** when it comes to carrying out ongoing security missions (fighting against ISIS, securing territory retaken from ISIS, and securing the Iraqi-Syrian border). This is because unlike Hezbollah in Lebanon, in the Iraqi arena Iran has to cope with the challenge of handling a large number of Shiite militias. Moreover, the inclusion of militias supported by Iran in the PMF enables the **receipt of funding from the Iraqi government for**

¹⁷ **Ayatollah Ali Sistani** is the supreme religious authority among the Shiites in Iraq and is based in Najaf. He issued a *fatwa* calling for a jihad against ISIS by the residents of Iraq. This religious ruling is perceived and presented as the basis for **intra-Iraqi legitimacy for the establishment of the PMF**. In a speech delivered by **Qassem Soleimani** (July 10, 2017), he mentioned the liberation of Mosul. He especially praised the Islamic scholar Ali Sistani for his contribution to the victory over ISIS, noting that he saved Iraq and the Iraqi people in many cases (Iranian news agencies Khabar and Tasnim, July 10, 2017).

their ongoing security activity, thereby reducing the expenses involved in Iran’s handling of the militias. However, when it comes to politically sensitive “special missions,” **such as putting pressure on the United States and the Lebanese government, it appears that the Shiite militias, including Kataeb Hezbollah, are handled by the Qods Force directly, and not via the PMF.**



Right: PMF emblem: the name “Popular Mobilization” appears in the center, and is surrounded by the caption “Allahu Akbar” (“Allah is the Greatest”) against a background in the colors of the Iraqi flag. Above is the caption “The Republic of Iraq” (PMF website, July 10, 2017). Left: The photo shows (from left to right) Qods Force Commander Qassem Soleimani; Badr Organization Commander Hadi al-Ameri; and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, who was the commander of Kataeb Hezbollah (Al-Sharq Al-Awsat, April 4, 2017).

► **During the fighting against ISIS, Kataeb Hezbollah took part in the fighting in two main arenas, where the PMF forces operated alongside the Iraqi security forces. Kataeb Hezbollah participated in the takeover of the city of Fallujah (May 2016). After the takeover of Fallujah, Kataeb Hezbollah operatives harassed the local (Sunni) population, executing and torturing dozens of people. In addition, Kataeb Hezbollah participated in the campaign to take over Mosul, along with other Shiite militias (late 2016 and early 2017). At the end of the fighting, A Kataeb Hezbollah force entered Mosul and set up an office in the east of the city¹⁸.**

► **Another arena where Kataeb Hezbollah fought was the city of Tal Afar, located about 55 km west of Mosul, on one of the roads leading to Syria. The attack was carried out with the aid of Iranian advisers (AP, October 29, 2016). During the attack, they successfully took over an airport near the city and the areas dominating the airport, with Iraqi air support. Subsequently, Kataeb Hezbollah, along with other Shiite militias supported by Iran, carried out ongoing security activity along the Iraqi-Syrian border (positions, checkpoints, and patrols), mainly in the areas of Albukamal (Syria) and Al-Qaim (Iraq).**

¹⁸ Kata'ib Hezbollah, Stanford University.



Kataeb Hezbollah fighting against ISIS in the Salah al-Din Province (Kataeb Hezbollah's Combat Information Unit, February 28, 2015)

Today, Kataeb Hezbollah continues to carry out counterterrorism activity against ISIS alongside the Iraqi security forces, as part of the PMF. It is also involved in holding territories from which ISIS operatives had been ousted, and holding the vital area of Al-Qaim-Albukamal. On the other hand, Kataeb Hezbollah and the other Shiite militias are a preferred target for ISIS's ongoing guerrilla activity, which has increased in recent months.

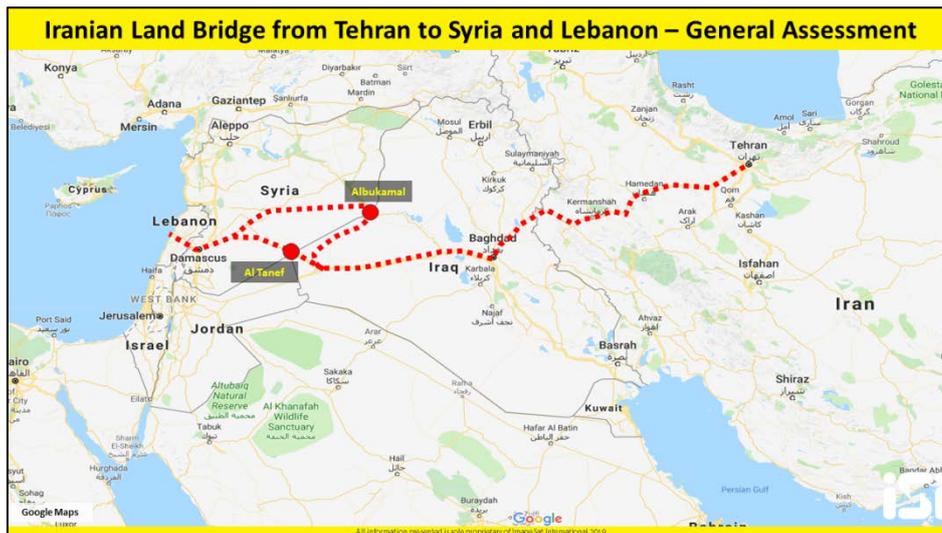
Securing the Iraqi-Syrian border area

Kataeb Hezbollah is deployed in the Iraqi-Syrian border area along with other Shiite militias handled by the Qods Force. **They are deployed there to establish the pro-Iranian forces' control near the border crossing between Syria and Iraq.** This is partly in order to secure the logistical overland route between Iraq and Syria (the overland corridor), **which is a vital Iranian interest**¹⁹. Former Qods Force Commander Qassem Soleimani used to visit this area

¹⁹ See the ITIC's Information Bulletin from July 19, 2018: "Increasing Iranian control of the Albukamal border crossing area – part of Iran's strategy of establishing an overland supply route connecting Iran with Iraq, Syria and Lebanon." See also the ITIC's Information Bulletin from July 25, 2019: "Syria is preparing to open the new, upgraded Albukamal Border Crossing with Iraq, with Iranian support. The crossing is expected to serve as an Iranian land bridge through Iraq to Syria and from there to Lebanon."

from time to time and meet with the Shiite militias sponsored by Iran. His successor Esmail Ghaani continues to do so. In late June 2020, he visited the AlbuKamal area and met with members of the Shiite militias (mirnews.ir, June 27, 2020).

► The Shiite-Iraqi militias supported by Iran, including Kataeb Hezbollah, **played an important role in taking over the Syrian city of AlbuKamal from ISIS (September 2017)**, which was **an important step towards the collapse of the Islamic State as an entity with control over territory**. The importance of the Shiite militias in securing the Iraqi-Syrian border area (the Al-Qaim-AlbuKamal area) increased after the takeover of AlbuKamal, because the Syrian army was forced to move some of its forces to other, higher priority combat zones. Today, the Iranian-sponsored Shiite militias, including Kataeb Hezbollah, operate in the border area and **are a major power there**²⁰. Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kazemi reportedly declared that **armed groups and militias control the country's border crossings**. Therefore, according to him, it is impossible to benefit from the revenues of the crossings, which deprives Iraq of an important source of income (Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, June 25, 2020).



The “land bridge” that runs from Iran to Syria and from there to Lebanon via the AlbuKamal border crossing (map: ISI). From Iran’s perspective, the use of the shorter route that passes through the Al-Tanf crossing is currently impractical due to the presence of US troops and their sponsored rebel organizations.

²⁰ The Arab website Al-Araby Al-Jadeed reported that **the Iraqi government has no real control over the Al-Qaim crossing**. The crossing is controlled by “armed and political elements” who are acting as a “state within a state.” It was also reported that armed Kataeb Hezbollah operatives had recently (July 2) attacked local customs officials while trucks were passing from Iraq to Syria. This led to the closure of the crossing and the shutdown of its activities (Al-Araby Al-Jadeed website, July 3, 2020).



Right: Motorized column of the PMF which arrived near the Iraqi-Syrian border in late May 2017 (Twitter account of the PMF's Combat Information Unit, May 30, 2017)

► Iraqi Shiite militias deployed in the Iraqi-Syrian border area, **including Kataeb Hezbollah, have occasionally been the target of American attacks** in response to rocket fire against the US forces in Iraq (in the ITIC's assessment, primarily by Kataeb Hezbollah). For example:



December 29, 2019:

- US aircraft attacked **three targets in the Iraqi city of Al-Qaim and two targets in the Syrian city of Albukamal**. The airstrike was carried out **in response to the launch of about 30 rockets at a joint US and Iraqi army base in the city of Kirkuk, in northern Iraq, on December 27, 2019**. As a result of the rocket fire, an American citizen (who operated as a contractor) was killed, and four Americans and two members of the Iraqi security forces were wounded (US Department of State website, February 26, 2020).
- **According to Kataeb Hezbollah Spokesman Ja'far al-Husseini, 24 operatives were killed in the airstrike and more than 50 were wounded** (Al-Manar, December 30, 2019). **Most of the casualties were Kataeb Hezbollah operatives** (Reuters; Al-Mayadeen, December 29, 2019). According to reports, **one of the targets attacked was Kataeb Hezbollah's main headquarters in the city of Al-Qaim** (Sky News Twitter account, December 29, 2019). Kataeb Hezbollah and its leader Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis announced that **the US would pay dearly for the airstrike** (RT Arabic; Baghdadtoday, December 29, 2019).
- **On the same day**, three senior US government officials held a briefing on the **airstrikes against Kataeb Hezbollah in Iraq and Syria**. One of the speakers stressed that the actions taken by the US were aimed at **protecting its forces and US citizens in Iraq, as well as deterring Iran**. Another senior official stressed that **all the forces supported by Iran, including Kataeb Hezbollah,**

must leave Syria. He made it clear that these forces **pose a threat to the interests of the United States and its partners in the region** (US Department of State website, December 30, 2019).



Photo from the press briefing on the attack on targets in Al-Qaim in Iraq and Al-Bukamal in Syria by the US army. The briefing was attended by three senior government officials: Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley (right); US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo (middle); and US Secretary of Defense Mark Esper (left) (website of the US Embassy and Consulate in Iraq, December 29, 2019).

◆ **June 18, 2018:** (US?) aircraft carried out an airstrike against the PMF headquarters south of Al-Bukamal. The headquarters that was attacked apparently controlled the Iraqi Shiite militias operating near the border and the movement of vehicles on the dirt roads that bypass the Al-Bukamal crossing. **The headquarters was completely destroyed.** A total of 52 fighters were killed in the attack, **including 30 operatives of Iraqi Shiite militias, mainly Kataeb Hezbollah operatives.** In view of the heavy losses sustained by the militias, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, commander of Kataeb Hezbollah and deputy commander of the PMF, visited the site.



**The headquarters of the Shiite militias before and after the airstrike on June 18, 2018
(ImageSat International [ISI])**



Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, deputy commander of the PMF, visiting the headquarters that was destroyed south of Albukamal (Zamanalwsl.net.news, June 29, 2018)

Suppression of the Shiite protest against the Iraqi government

► In the last three months of 2019, there were **widespread protests in Iraq against government corruption, rising unemployment, and the Iraqi government's failure to provide its citizens with proper basic services**. The protests were concentrated in the capital Baghdad and the Shiite south. Hundreds of Iraqi civilians were killed and thousands more have been wounded in the government's efforts to suppress the protests. **These protests took on a distinctly anti-Iranian character and the Iranians had a clear interest in assisting the Iraqi government in suppressing the protests.**



Right: Iraqi demonstrators in front of the Iranian consulate in Karbala (ISNA, November 4, 2019). Left: Burning an Iranian flag during the demonstrations (YouTube, October 28, 2019)

► During the protests, **Kataeb Hezbollah served as a key tool in Iran's brutal suppression of the demonstrators (mostly Shiites), including by firing live ammunition**. In October 2019, Kataeb Hezbollah operatives were involved in **sniping attacks** against peaceful demonstrators in Baghdad, in which over 100 people were killed and about 6,000

were wounded (US Department of State website, February 26, 2020). Kataeb Hezbollah operatives were accused by the demonstrators of murdering civilians and as a result the operatives were beaten and even executed by the demonstrators. **Kataeb Hezbollah headquarters in Najaf, Basra and apparently also elsewhere were set on fire in response to the murder of the demonstrators** (Kitabat, January 19, 2020).



Right: Kataeb Hezbollah headquarters in Najaf on fire (Kitabat, January 19, 2020). Left: Kataeb Hezbollah headquarters in Basra on fire (Al-Mordad, September 7, 2018)



Kataeb Hezbollah operatives being led by masked demonstrators. It is reasonable to assume that he was later beaten or even executed, having been accused by the demonstrators of shooting at them (YouTube, December 7, 2019). The photo is of low quality in the original.

Violent demonstration in front of the US Embassy in Baghdad

► In response to the US airstrike on Kataeb Hezbollah in the area of the Iraqi-Syrian border crossing (December 29, 2019), **Kataeb Hezbollah** (in the ITIC's assessment, led or inspired by the Qods Force) **organized a mass demonstration in front of the US Embassy in Baghdad** (December 31, 2019). Hundreds of people took part in the demonstration, including civilians and operatives of prominent Shiite militias handled by the Qods Force. The demonstrators broke into the embassy compound, set fire to parts of the outer wall, destroyed security posts, and threw stones. They also took control of the outdoor part of the embassy, **flying Kataeb Hezbollah flags on the compound walls**. However, they failed to

break through the main doors of the embassy building (Al-Mayadeen; Al-Jazeera; Sky News, December 31, 2019).

► **Kataeb Hezbollah played a major role in the violent demonstration at the US Embassy compound.** Apart from them, **operatives of the Nujaba Movement** and **Asaib Ahl Al-Haq** operating as part of the PMF also participated in the break-in (Reuters; Al-Sumaria; Al-Jazeera; Russia Al-Youm; Baghdad Al-Youm, December 31, 2019). The graffiti left at the scene reads, among other things: **“Qods Force Commander, [Qassem] Soleimani is our leader”**; **“Death to the Jews”**; **“No and no to America”** (@HeshmatAlavi Twitter account, December 31, 2019). **Kataeb Hezbollah Spokesman Mohammad Muhyi** noted that the slogans written on the embassy fences **expressed the opinion of the Iraqis** (Al-Mayadeen, December 31, 2019).



Right: The demonstration in front of the US Embassy (@HeshmatAlavi Twitter account, December 31, 2019). Left: Kataeb Hezbollah flags, PMF flags and Iraqi flags during the demonstration in front of the embassy (YouTube, December 31, 2019)



Kataeb Hezbollah flag flying on the US Embassy wall (Right: @HeshmatAlavi Twitter account, December 31, 2019. Left: Baghdad Al-Youm, December 31, 2019)



Kataeb Hezbollah operatives against a backdrop of a poster bearing the Kataeb Hezbollah emblem and graffiti photographed on the embassy fence. The inscription reads, “[Qassem] Soleimani is our leader.” The inscription above it reads “No and No to America” (@HeshmatAlavi Twitter account, December 31, 2019)

► **Kataeb Hezbollah Spokesman Mohammad Muhyi gave an interview legitimizing the attack on the embassy.** According to him, the US embassy in Iraq does not carry out political activity but constitutes a **state within a state**. He added that **through the embassy, the United States manages its assistance to terrorists and its intervention in Iraqi and regional matters**. He demanded that the United States reduce its embassy (to the size of the Iraqi embassy in the United States) and added that **they would not allow the embassy to continue operating in the near future** (interview with Hezbollah-affiliated Al-Mayadeen TV, December 31, 2019).

Threat campaign against the United States and the Iraqi government

Following the killing of Soleimani and Al-Muhandis, Kataeb Hezbollah launched a threat campaign against the United States and the Iraqi government, which was intended, inter alia, to sabotage the dialogue between Iraq and the United States (the “strategic dialogue”) and expedite the unilateral withdrawal of US forces from Iraq, not as part of the agreement. This campaign has been going ever since, concurrently with the pressure exerted on the Americans on the ground.

Threats against the US

► Here are some examples:

- ◆ **Kataeb Hezbollah Spokesman Mohammad Muhyi** described the American forces in Iraq as an **“occupying and invading force.”** Therefore, Mohammad Muhyi

added, the right of Kataeb Hezbollah, as the “resistance” force representing the Iraqi people, to expel (once again) US forces from Iraq (as they caused their withdrawal in 2011) (interview with Al-Mayadeen on the day of the violent demonstration against the US Embassy in Iraq, December 31, 2020).

◆ **Kataeb Hezbollah Military Spokesman Ja’far al-Husseini** stated that Kataeb Hezbollah would respond to the American attack against Soleimani and Al-Muhandis: **“Militia operatives are ready at any moment for the decision of the organization’s commanders to attack bases where there are American troops throughout Iraq”** (Al-Mayadeen Channel, January 2, 2020).



Military spokesman Ja’far al-Husseini: Kataeb Hezbollah awaiting decision to attack American bases (Al-Mayadeen Channel, January 2, 2020)

◆ **Kataeb Hezbollah called on the Iraqi people to join a protest that will lead to the removal of the American forces from Iraq** (Kataeb Hezbollah website, January 22-24, 2020).



Protest demonstration organized by Kataeb Hezbollah operatives to expel the American forces from the country (Kataeb Hezbollah website, January 24, 2020)

◆ **Kataeb Hezbollah Spokesman Mohammad Muhyi** stated that a **confrontation with the United States in Iraq is inevitable, since it apparently does**

not intend to leave Iraq. He said time was running out for this confrontation (Al-Mayadeen, January 12, 2020).



Kataeb Hezbollah Spokesman Mohammad Muhyi: A confrontation with the United States is inevitable (Al-Mayadeen, January 12, 2020)

◆ **Kataeb Hezbollah Military Spokesman Ja'far al-Husseini** announced that meetings had been held between Kataeb Hezbollah and their allies in Iran **to examine alternatives to expelling the Americans from Iraq**. When asked if the “resistance” organizations could attack US bases in Iraq, he replied: **“This is a certain thing, we have no alternative.”** According to him, the US forces in Iraq were now under siege. They cannot roam the streets of Baghdad and move between bases, but can only move between them by air (Al-Mayadeen Channel, February 18, 2020).

◆ **Kataeb Hezbollah Spokesman Mohammad Muhyi stated that the “huge crime” of killing Soleimani and Al-Muhandis by the United States could not go unpunished.** He threatened that the United States would bear “the consequences of this crime” and called it “the biggest terrorist state in the world” (Iraqi satellite channel Aletejah TV, affiliated with Kataeb Hezbollah, April 23, 2020).

◆ **In a press release issued on Jerusalem Day**, an annual support event for the Palestinians initiated by Iran, Kataeb Hezbollah stated that **the US military presence in Iraq was illegitimate**. According to the press release, **they will continue to fight for the expulsion of the American forces (“the evil ones”) from Iraq and the region** as part of the Axis of Resistance (Kataeb Hezbollah website, May 22, 2020).

Threats against the Iraqi government

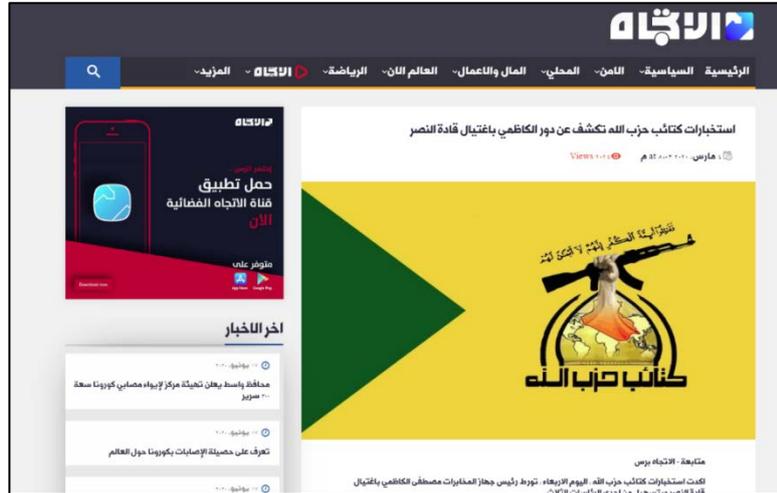
▶ Along with threats against the United States, Kataeb Hezbollah conducted a **threat campaign against senior Iraqi government officials**, aimed at undermining talks between

the US and Iraq and leading to a unilateral withdrawal of the American forces from Iraq without an agreement. Thus, for example:

- ◆ **Kataeb Hezbollah Military Spokesman Hussein Mu'anes (Abu Mahdi al-Askari)** threatened senior Iraqi figures who maintain contact with US officials (including Mustafa al-Kazemi, the Iraqi prime minister, former Intelligence chief). He gave them an extension until March 15, 2020 to sever their ties with the Americans, otherwise they would be eliminated (Al-Arabiya, March 6, 2020). As a result, Twitter blocked his accounts on March 3, 2020²¹.
- ◆ In late 2018, **Iraqi Speaker of Parliament Mohammed al-Halbousi** received a letter with the logo of Kataeb Hezbollah. The letter states that his ties with the Americans are not to the liking of Kataeb Hezbollah (YouTube, May 29, 2019).
- ◆ **Kataeb Hezbollah Military Spokesman Ja'far al-Husseini** announced that his organization had set a **one-week schedule** during which the Iraqi Parliament would be allowed to pass a resolution on the removal of the American forces from Iraq. Any MP who refuses to vote will be put on public trial and considered an accomplice in the killing of Iraqi civilians (Hezbollah-affiliated Al-Mayadeen TV, January 2, 2020).
- ◆ **Iraqi President Barham Saleh** has received threats of deportation from Baghdad if he meets with US President Trump (Russia Al-Youm, January 21, 2020).
- ◆ **Current Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kazemi** has been accused by Kataeb Hezbollah of involvement in the killing of Soleimani and Al-Muhandis while serving as chief of Iraqi Intelligence. His involvement consisted of providing the United States with intelligence (The Arab Weekly, May 13, 2020). Unlike most Shiite militias, Kataeb Hezbollah explicitly opposed Al-Kazemi's appointment as prime minister (despite the public expression of Iranian support for his candidacy).
- ◆ According to **Kataeb Hezbollah Military Spokesman Hussein Mu'anes (Abu Mahdi al-Askari)**, his organization was surprised to discover that **the team appointed to conduct the "strategic dialogue" with Iraq was affiliated with most of the US collaborators in Iraq**. He demanded that three of the candidates for conducting negotiations be replaced, due to their affiliation with the United States. He also

²¹According to an informed Iraqi source, in the wake of Abu Mahdi al-Askari's threats, Iraqi Intelligence carried out a wave of arrests of senior Kataeb Hezbollah officials.

demanded that a candidate from the PMF be added to the negotiating team (Abu Mahdi al-Askari's Twitter account, June 7, 2020).



Website of Kataeb Hezbollah's Aletejah TV: Report accusing Iraqi Intelligence Chief Mustafa al-Kazemi (the current Iraqi Prime Minister) of involvement in the assassination of Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis (Aletejah TV website, March 4, 2020)

Rocket fire at American bases/facilities

Over the past year, Kataeb Hezbollah and other Iranian-sponsored Shiite militias **occasionally fired rockets at American bases/facilities**. In the ITIC's assessment, **the rockets were fired on the order of the Qods Force, which took care not to claim direct responsibility for it in order not to incriminate Iran or the Iran-backed Shiite militias** (which may provoke American reactions against the militias or against Iran). **The frequency of the incidents has increased recently in view of the "strategic dialogue" currently underway between the United States and Iraq** on the subject of the future of the US military presence in Iraq. The Americans, on their part, reportedly conveyed a message to the Iranians and the Iraqi government that any attack that harms American citizens in Iraq, carried out by Iranian-backed militias, would be perceived as an Iranian attack and would provoke a US military response against Iranian interests in Iraq²².

▶ According to a report by the US Department of State, **on December 27, 2019, Kataeb Hezbollah fired about 30 rockets at a joint US and Iraqi army base in Kirkuk, northern**

²² Michael Knight, CTC Sentinel, who heard this from American and Iraqi government officials.

Iraq. As a result, an American citizen (who operated as a contractor) was killed. Four Americans and two members of the Iraqi security forces were wounded (US Department of State website, February 26, 2020). Subsequently, the US army announced **that it had paused its military activity against ISIS, subject to ongoing re-examination. According to the announcement, rockets were fired over the past two months by Kataeb Hezbollah operatives**, causing the deaths of an American and members of the Iraqi security forces. According to the announcement, at this time the **US army is fully committed to protecting the Iraqi bases that host Coalition troops** and this comes at the expense of supporting operations conducted by the Iraqi partners of the US against ISIS (Operation Inherent Resolve website, January 5, 2020).

► **In March 2020, Grad rockets were fired several times at Al-Taji Base north of Baghdad and at the Green Zone in Baghdad. As usual, no organization claimed responsibility for the rocket fire.** In one of the attacks (March 11, 2020), **two American soldiers and a British soldier were killed.** The rocket fire was attributed to Kataeb Hezbollah, although it did not claim responsibility. On March 14, 2020, another attack was carried out, with no casualties. **The United States responded with airstrikes on Kataeb Hezbollah targets**, based on the assessment or knowledge that the PMF militias, apparently Kataeb Hezbollah, were behind the rocket fire following threats to drive the US forces out of Iraq (US Department of Defense, March 14, 2020; Al-Jazeera, March 14, 2020).



**Rocket fire at Al-Taji Base, north of Baghdad
(YouTube, March 10, 2020)**

Pressure exerted on the United States during the “strategic dialogue”

On June 11, 2020, the first meeting was held as part of the “strategic dialogue” between Iraq and the United States, during which the future of the US military presence in Iraq

will be determined. The “strategic dialogue” was and still is accompanied by **firing rockets at American targets in the Baghdad region. In the ITIC’s assessment, the rockets were fired mainly by Kataeb Hezbollah,** and possibly also by other Shiite militias handled by Iran. **The rocket fire was intended to send a threatening message to supporters of the American orientation in Iraq, thus affecting the outcome of the “strategic dialogue”²³.**

Two days after the beginning of the “strategic dialogue,” Kataeb Hezbollah issued an announcement stating that the United States had a criminal record of breaching agreements and should not be relied upon. The announcement called for the implementation of the Iraqi Parliament’s decision to oust the foreign forces from the country, adding that the “resistance” would fulfill its familiar role (implicitly, would exert pressure on the US army) (Kataeb Hezbollah website, June 13, 2020).

▶ Following are some of the rocket attacks:

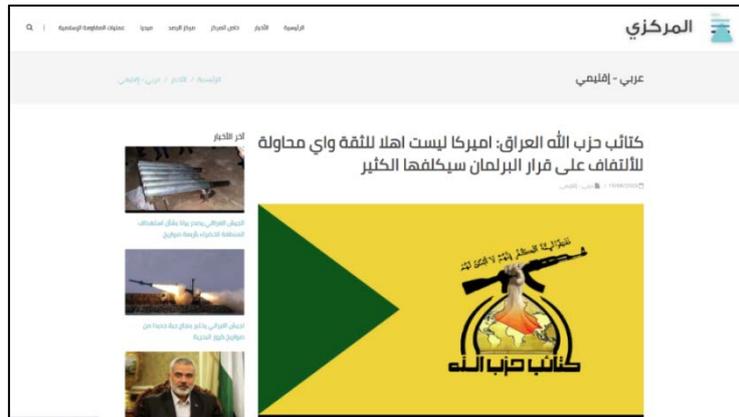
◆ **On June 16, 2020, three rockets were fired at the area of Baghdad International Airport.** There were no casualties. The Iraqi security forces located the rocket launchers and found more rockets (RT in Arabic; Al-Sumaria; Al-Arabiya; Sputnik, June 16, 2020). A fictitious organization calling itself the Band of Insurgents claimed responsibility for firing at US troops at the airport (Omar al-Janabi’s Twitter account). **About a week before that (June 10), the first round of the “strategic dialogue” began in Baghdad.**

◆ **On June 13, 2020, two rockets landed at Al-Taji Base, where US soldiers were stationed²⁴.** There were no casualties (Iraqi News Agency, June 14, 2020). Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kazemi reportedly set up a team made up of intelligence and counter-terrorism personnel aimed at locating those involved in the rocket fire. He noted that, in his opinion, **the group that attacked Al-Taji Base was affiliated with Kataeb Hezbollah or the Nujaba Movement, which had made threats both before**

²³ According to Col. Myles Caggins, the official military Spokesman for Operation Inherent Resolve, the International Coalition’s troops currently number fewer than 10,000.

²⁴ After the killing of Qassem Soleimani, the Iraqi Parliament passed a resolution that all foreign forces would withdraw from Iraq immediately. In light of this resolution, the US army reduced its forces and concentrated them at Al-Taji Base north of Baghdad and Ein al-Assad Base in the Al-Anbar Governorate in western Iraq. Al-Taji Base has become a target of choice for sporadic rocket fire designed to exert pressure on the US.

and after the first session of the “strategic dialogue” between Iraq and the US (Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, June 14, 2020).



An article stating that Kataeb Hezbollah refuses to see the United States as a party to negotiations with Iraq, due to a lack of trust in it (website of Kataeb Hezbollah’s Central Combat Information Unit, June 13, 2020)

- ◆ **On June 18, 2020, four rockets landed in the Green Zone in Baghdad.** According to Al-Arabiya TV (June 18), the rockets were aimed at the US Embassy. A fictitious organization calling itself the Band of Insurgents claimed responsibility for the rocket fire (Omar al-Janabi’s Twitter account).
- ◆ **On June 22, 2020, the Iraqi army reported that a rocket had landed in the area of Baghdad International Airport.** The rocket was fired from a village west of Baghdad. There were no casualties and no damage was caused (Reuters, June 22, 2020).
- ◆ **On July 4, 2020, a rocket was fired at the Green Zone with the aim of hitting the US Embassy in Baghdad.** The rocket landed near the embassy. A fictitious organization calling itself the Band of Insurgents claimed responsibility for the rocket fire. According to Iraqi and Arab media reports, a Patriot missile system installed at the embassy intercepted the rocket (Al-Sumaria; Al-Arabiya, July 4, 2020). **In addition, Iraqi security forces thwarted attempted rocket fire at Al-Taji Base.** This was the first incident of rocket fire since the Iraqi government’s preventive action against Kataeb Hezbollah (see below).

The Iraqi government's preventive action

Overview

▶ On June 25, 2020, a force of the counter-terrorism unit raided the **Kataeb Hezbollah headquarters in south Baghdad. About 14 Hezbollah operatives were detained in the raid, including three commanders** (according to reports, one of the commanders was Iranian, but this has not been verified). Weapons and military equipment were seized, including rockets, launching pads, GPS devices, a remote-controlled detonator, and a weapon equipped with a silencer (Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, 27 June 2020). **On June 29, 2020, the detainees were released after talks with high-ranking Iraqi government officials.**



Kataeb Hezbollah operatives released from detention
(Al-Hadath, June 29, 2020)

▶ The immediate excuse for the raid was the **ongoing rocket fire by Kataeb Hezbollah in an attempt to disrupt the “strategic dialogue.”** According to a senior Iraqi official, the raid was carried out about two weeks **after talks aimed at halting rocket fire by Iran-backed militias**, for fear the US would respond “surprisingly” if any US citizens were killed in Iraq (Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, June 27, 2020). **In the ITIC’s assessment, the Iraqi government had information indicating that Kataeb Hezbollah was the main organization behind the rocket fire.**

Kataeb Hezbollah’s response

▶ The initial response of **Kataeb Hezbollah Military Spokesman Abu Mahdi al-Askari was a fierce and threatening personal attack on Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kazemi:** “This filthy man, known as Al-Kazemi, wanted to change the rules of the game and conceal

his involvement in the crime of the murder of the two martyrs [Soleimani and Al-Muhandis], and to give his American masters another guarantee that he is their collaborator. In light of this, the fervent believers in the PMF have no choice but to [...] ... rescue their comrades from the paws of the treacherous Al-Kazemi” (Abu Mahdi al-Askari’s Twitter account, June 26, 2020).

▶ Subsequently, **Kataeb Hezbollah Spokesman Ja’far al-Husseini stated that the end of the “American occupation” was something that could not be compromised, and that Kataeb Hezbollah would not allow any dissenting voice to be heard.** He added that the United States had persuaded Al-Kazemi and other political parties in Iraq to confront the PMF and Kataeb Hezbollah. He claimed that the detention of Kataeb Hezbollah operatives was against Iraqi law and that **Kataeb Hezbollah’s weapons were “completely legal and could not be subject to any compromise”** (an argument similar to that made by the Lebanese Hezbollah) (Al-Mayadeen TV, June 30, 2020).

Iran’s response

▶ **Iran contented itself with a weak official response to the raid on Kataeb Hezbollah’s headquarters. Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesman Abbas Mousavi** stated at his weekly press conference that the events taking place in Iraq **were related to Iraq alone and that Iran did not intend to intervene in Iraq’s internal affairs** or to express an opinion on issues unrelated to Iran. He added that the PMF was a popular group that was established under the guidance of senior clerics and turned into a military force. He noted that Iran was confident that the Iraqi government would conduct its internal affairs in the best possible way in order to restore stability and security to the country as soon as possible (Tasnim News Agency, June 29, 2020). The official Iranian response reflected **Iran’s desire to refrain from a direct confrontation with Iraqi Prime Minister Al-Kazemi.** It is clear that Iran prefers to act to preserve its political, military and economic influence in Iraq **without being drawn into a public confrontation with Al-Kazemi.** This is in recognition of the constraints that it faces in the Iraqi arena **and in the belief that currently there is no immediate and significant threat to Iran’s vital interests in Iraq.**

▶ **In general, the Iranian media also refrains from direct criticism of the Iraqi Prime Minister.** According to a commentary article on the Mehr News Agency website (June 27), the operation against the Shiite militia was intended to assess the ability to dismantle the “resistance” and remove it from the Iraqi political and security arena. The fierce response to

this operation on the part of the remaining Shiite militias has proved that they enjoy widespread popular support in Iraq. According to the article, **disbanding the militias is one of the Americans' main objectives in the "strategic dialogue" between the United States and Iraq**, even though the Shiite militias are cooperating with the security forces in the fight against terrorism. In any case, the article states, the perpetrators of the operation could not achieve the result they were striving for, because Shiite militias are not only an integral part of the armed forces but also enjoy the support of senior clerics.