

Saddam's Ambassador to al Qaeda

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Articles & Testimony

A recently intercepted message from Iraq-based terrorist Abu Musab al Zarqawi asking the al Qaeda leadership for reinforcements reignited the debate over al Qaeda ties with Saddam Hussein's fallen Baath regime.

William Safire of the New York Times called the message a "smoking gun," while the University of Michigan's Juan Cole says that Safire "offers not even one document to prove" the Saddam-al Qaeda nexus. What you are about to read bears directly on that debate. It is based on a recent interview with Abdul Rahman al-Shamari, who served in Saddam's secret police, the Mukhabarat, from 1997 to 2002, and is currently sitting in a Kurdish prison. Al-Shamari says that he worked for a man who was Saddam's envoy to al Qaeda.

Before recounting details from my January 29 interview, some caution is necessary. Al-Shamari's account was compelling and filled with specific information that would either make him a skilled and detailed liar or a man with information that the U.S. public needs to hear. My Iraqi escort informed me that al-Shamari has been in prison since March 2002, that U.S. officials have visited him several times, and that his story has remained consistent. There was little language barrier; my Arabic skills allowed me to understand much of what al-Shamari said, even before translation. Finally, subsequent conversations with U.S. government officials in Washington and Baghdad, as well as several articles written well before this one, indicate that al-Shamari's claims have been echoed by other sources throughout Iraq.

When I walked into the tiny interrogation room, it was midmorning. I had just finished interviews with two other prisoners--both members of Ansar al Islam, the al Qaeda affiliate responsible for attacks against Kurdish and Western targets in northern Iraq. The group had been active in a small enclave near Halabja in the Kurdistan region from about September 2001 until the U.S. assault on Iraq last spring, when its Arab and Kurdish fighters fled over the Iranian border, only to return after the war. U.S. officials now suspect Ansar in some of the bloodier attacks against U.S. interests throughout Iraq.

My first question to al-Shamari was whether he was involved in the operations of Ansar al Islam. My translator asked him the question in Arabic, and al-Shamari nodded: "Yes." Al-Shamari, who appears to be in his late twenties, said that his division of the Mukhabarat provided weapons to Ansar, "mostly mortar rounds." This statement echoed an independent Kurdish report from July 2002 alleging that ordnance seized from Ansar al Islam was produced by Saddam's military and a Guardian article several weeks later alleging that truckloads of arms were shipped to Ansar from areas controlled by Saddam.

In addition to weapons, al-Shamari said, the Mukhabarat also helped finance Ansar al Islam. "On one occasion we

gave them ten million Swiss dinars [\$700,000]," al-Shamari said, referring to the pre-1990 Iraqi currency. On other occasions, the Mukhabarat provided more than that. The assistance, he added, was furnished "every month or two months."

I then picked up a picture of a man known as Abu Wael that I had acquired from Kurdish intelligence. In the course of my research, several sources had claimed that Abu Wael was on Saddam's payroll and was also an al Qaeda operative, but few had any facts to back up their claim. For example, one Arabic daily, al-Sharq al-Awsat, stated flatly before the Iraq war, "all information indicates [that Abu Wael] was the link between al Qaeda and the Iraqi regime" but neglected to provide any such information. Agence France-Presse after the war cited a Kurdish security chief's description of Abu Wael as a "key link to Saddam's former Baath regime" and an "intelligence agent for the ousted president originally from Baghdad." Again, nothing was provided to substantiate this claim.

In my own analysis of this group, I could do little but weakly assert that Wael was "reportedly an al Qaeda operative on Saddam's payroll." The best reporting on Wael came from a March 2002 New Yorker article by Jeffrey Goldberg, who had visited a Kurdish prison in northern Iraq and interviewed Ansar prisoners. He spoke with one Iraqi intelligence officer named Qassem Hussein Muhammed, whom Kurdish intelligence captured while he was on his way to the Ansar enclave. Muhammed told Goldberg that Abu Wael was "the actual decision-maker" for Ansar al Islam and "an employee of the Mukhabarat."

"Do you know this man?" I asked al-Shamari. His eyes widened and he smiled. He told me that he knew the man in the picture, but that his graying beard was now completely white. He said that the man was Abu Wael, whose full name is Colonel Saadan Mahmoud Abdul Latif al-Aani. The prisoner told me that he had worked for Abu Wael, who was the leader of a special intelligence directorate in the Mukhabarat. That directorate provided assistance to Ansar al Islam at the behest of Saddam Hussein, whom Abu Wael had met "four or five times." Al-Shamari added that "Abu Wael's wife is Izzat al-Douri's cousin," making him a part of Saddam's inner circle. Al-Douri, of course, was the deputy chairman of Saddam's Revolutionary Command Council, a high-ranking official in Iraq's armed forces, and Saddam's righthand man. Originally number six on the most wanted list, he is still believed to be at large in Iraq, and is suspected of coordinating aspects of insurgency against American troops, primarily in the Sunni triangle.

Why, I asked, would Saddam task one of his intelligence agents to work with the Kurds, an ethnic group that was an avowed enemy of the Baath regime, and had clashed with Iraqi forces on several occasions? Al-Shamari said that Saddam wanted to create chaos in the pro-American Kurdish region. In other words, he used Ansar al Islam as a tool against the Kurds. As an intelligence official for the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (one of the two major parties in northern Iraq) explained to me, "Most of the Kurdish fighters in Ansar al Islam didn't know the link to Saddam." They believed they were fighting a local jihad. Only the high-level lieutenants were aware that Abu Wael was involved.

Al-Shamari also told me that the links between Saddam's regime and the al Qaeda network went beyond Ansar al Islam. He explained in considerable detail that Saddam actually ordered Abu Wael to organize foreign fighters from outside Iraq to join Ansar. Al-Shamari estimated that some 150 foreign fighters were imported from al Qaeda clusters in Jordan, Turkey, Syria, Yemen, Egypt, and Lebanon to fight with Ansar al Islam's Kurdish fighters.

I asked him who came from Lebanon. "I don't know the name of the group," he replied. "But the man we worked with was named Abu Aisha." Al-Shamari was likely referring to Bassam Kanj, alias Abu Aisha, who was a little-known militant of the Dinniyeh group, a faction of the Lebanese al Qaeda affiliate Asbat al Ansar. Kanj was killed in a January 2000 battle with Lebanese forces.

Al-Shamari said that there was also contact with the Egyptian "Gamaat al-Jihad," which is now seen as the core of al Qaeda's leadership, as well as with the Algerian Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), which bin Laden helped create in 1998 as an alternative to Algeria's Armed Islamic Group (GIA). Al-Shamari talked of Abu Wael's

links with Turkey's "Jamaa al-Khilafa"--likely the group also known as the "Union of Islamic Communities" (UIC) or the "Organization of Caliphate State." This terror group, established in 1983 by Cemalettin Kaplan, reportedly met with bin Laden in Afghanistan in 1997, and later sent cadres there to train. Three years before 9/11, UIC plotted to crash a plane into Ankara's Ataturk Mausoleum on a day when hundreds of Turkish officials were present.

Al-Shamari stated that Abu Wael sometimes traveled to meet with these groups. All of them, he added, visited Wael in Iraq and were provided Iraqi visas. This corroborates an interview I had with a senior PUK official in April 2003, who stated that many of the Arab fighters captured or killed during the war held passports with Iraqi visas.

Al-Shamari said that importing foreign fighters to train in Iraq was part of his job in the Mukhabarat. The fighters trained in Salman Pak, a facility located some 20 miles southeast of Baghdad. He said that he had personal knowledge of 500 fighters that came through Salman Pak dating back to the late 1990s; they trained in "urban combat, explosives, and car bombs." This account agrees with a White House Background Paper on Iraq dated September 12, 2002, which cited the "highly secret terrorist training facility in Iraq known as Salman Pak, where both Iraqis and non-Iraqi Arabs receive training on hijacking planes and trains, planting explosives in cities, sabotage, and assassinations."

Abu Wael also sent money to the aforementioned al Qaeda affiliates, and to other groups that "worked against the United States." Abu Wael dispensed most of the funds himself, al-Shamari said, but there was also some cooperation with Abu Musab al Zarqawi.

Zarqawi, as the prisoner explained, was al Qaeda's link to Iraq in the same way that Abu Wael was the Iraqi link to al Qaeda. Indeed, Zarqawi (who received medical attention in Baghdad in 2002 for wounds that he suffered from U.S. forces in Afghanistan) and Abu Wael helped Ansar al Islam prepare for the U.S. assault on its small enclave last year. According to al-Shamari, Ansar was given the plan from the top Iraqi leadership: "If the U.S. was to hit [the Ansar base], the fighters were directed to go to Ramadi, Tikrit, Mosul . . . Faluja and other places." This statement agreed with a prior prisoner interview I had with the attempted murderer of Barham Salih, prime minister of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. This second prisoner told me that "Ansar had plans to go south if the U.S. would attack."

Al-Shamari said the new group was to be named Jund ash-Sham, and would deal mainly in explosives. He believed that Zarqawi and Abu Wael were responsible for some of the attacks against U.S. soldiers in central Iraq. "Their directives were to hit America and American interests," he said.

Al-Shamari claimed to have had prior information about al Qaeda attacks in the past. "I knew about the attack on the American in Jordan," he said, referring to the November 2002 assassination of USAID official Lawrence Foley. "Zarqawi," he said, "ordered that man to be killed."

These are some of the highlights from my interview, which lasted about 45 minutes.

I heard one other salient Abu Wael anecdote in an earlier interview during my eight-day trip to Iraq. That interview was with the former tenth-in-command for Ansar al Islam, a man known simply as Qods. In June 2003, just before he was arrested and put in the jail where I met him, Qods said that he saw Abu Wael. After the war, Abu Wael dispatched him from an Ansar safe house in Ravansar, Iran, to deliver a message to his son in Baghdad. The message: Ansar al Islam leaders needed help getting back into Iraq. It was only then, he said, when he met Abu Wael's son, that he learned of the link between the Baathists and al Qaeda.

Qods told me that he was angry with the leaders of Ansar for hiding its ties to Saddam. "Ansar had lots of secret ties between the Baath and Arab leaders," he said.

The challenge now is to document the claims of these witnesses about the secret ties between Saddam, al Qaeda, and Abu Wael. A number of U.S. officials have indicated to me that there are other Iraqis who have similar stories to tell.

Perhaps they can corroborate Abdul Rahman al-Shamari's account. Meanwhile, the U.S. deck of cards representing Iraq's 55 most wanted appears to be one card short. Colonel Saadan Mahmoud Abdul Latif al-Aani, aka Abu Wael, should be number 56.

Jonathan Schanzer is a terrorism analyst for the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and author of the forthcoming book *Al-Qaeda's Armies: Middle East Affiliates and the Next Generation of Terror*. ❖

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