

# Ansar al-Islam:

## Postmortem or Prelude to More Attacks?

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### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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### Brief Analysis

**A**nsar al-Islam, an al-Qaeda affiliate in northern Iraq, was rocked by U.S. missile and air strikes over the weekend, concluding an eight-day campaign against the organization. The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) stated that, with help from more than 100 U.S. Special Forces operatives, they have "completely overrun" Ansar's stronghold. The PUK reportedly killed twenty-four Ansar fighters on Monday alone. Yet, the group may not have been defeated completely. Although its enclave was literally flattened, Ansar al-Islam is threatening new attacks, and will likely live to fight another day.

### Prelude to War

During his February 5, 2003, address to the United Nations, Secretary of State Colin Powell noted that Ansar attacked Kurdish targets, developed chemical weapons, had ties to Saddam Husayn, and had connections to al-Qaeda through the operative Abu Mussab al-Zarqawi. Among other things, Zarqawi is wanted in the October 2002 assassination of U.S. Agency for International Development officer Laurence Foley. On February 20, 2003, the U.S. government announced that Ansar had been named a Specially Designated Global Terrorist group.

As reports emerged that the group would be targeted during the invasion of Iraq, Ansar prepared for a combined U.S.-Kurdish assault. One Kurdish official noted, "Nervousness had set in to the group. They immediately began relocating their forces, retreating to the more mountainous areas of Hawar-barza, and digging themselves into the caves and higher mountain peaks." Some of the group's members made public appearances, challenging Powell's allegations. Some even opened their stronghold to reporters, "especially in the Khormal and Sargat areas where Ansar was believed to be developing Ricin."

The group continued to attack the Kurds, however. In February, Ansar militants killed a popular Kurdish leader and two of his bodyguards, while injuring a nine-year-old with a gunshot to the head. Later that month, the group launched a rocket-propelled grenade attack on PUK positions and a suicide bombing at a Kurdish militia checkpoint that killed four people. On March 1, the group attacked a Kurdish stronghold in Khormal.

### The War and Ansar's Demise

On March 23, PUK fighters launched an attack on Ansar's stronghold, backed by U.S. unmanned aerial vehicles and aircraft strikes. Throughout the subsequent week, cruise missiles destroyed much of the enclave; deserters left

behind artillery, machine guns, mortars, and katyusha rockets. On March 25, Ansar launched a desperation attack on PUK forces near Halabja, but were repelled. Dozens of their operatives were wounded or killed. By March 30, the entire Ansar enclave had been decimated.

At least 259 Ansar fighters were killed during the eight days of fighting, and many of the group's arms caches were destroyed. The PUK currently has eight fighters in custody, including Jordanians, Syrians, Tunisians, and one Palestinian who stated that he came to northern Iraq to "kill Americans." Notably, many of the captured Arab fighters held passports with Iraqi visas.

### Iran's Role

According to the New Yorker, Kurdish officials in northern Iraq reported months before the war that "several men associated with al-Qaeda" had been smuggled from Iran "into an Ansar al-Islam stronghold." Tehran is also thought to have provided a safe haven to Ansar, in addition to logistical support and weaponry.

When Ansar fighters wounded in the March 23 U.S. attack hobbled across the border for Iranian assistance, "they went inside one kilometer, but the Iranians made them go back," according to a Kurdish Socialist Democratic Party official. Yet, when the Ansar stronghold was destroyed on March 30, hundreds more fighters were said to have escaped over the mountains into Iran. Although the PUK reported that Tehran has detained the militants and promised to turn them over, this has yet to occur.

Hamid-Reza Asefi, a spokesman for Iran's foreign ministry, insists that "there is no link between this group and Iran." Past links are hard to deny, but Tehran continues to distance itself from Ansar. By cooperating with the Iraqi Kurdish authorities over Ansar detainees, Tehran may hope to cash in these and other favors with the United States at the end of the war.

### Capabilities Unchanged

Ansar will almost certainly fight on. Many Ansar militants reportedly escaped the enclave between Powell's February 5 speech and the start of the U.S. campaign. One Kurdish spokesman lamented, "If the strikes had occurred one year ago, we would have completely destroyed Ansar. They were half expecting the strikes, which gave them plenty of time to disperse, or for their leaders to relocate." One prisoner stated, "I don't think the fight with Ansar will be over when America finishes its bombing."

Some Iraqi Kurdish officials said they have seen indications that sleeper cells are waiting to be activated in the Iraqi Kurdish region. Others believe that the surviving militants may employ new tactics, including suicide bombing. As evidence, they attribute two recent attacks to Ansar: the March 22 suicide bombing that killed Australian ABC cameraman Paul Moran at the Girdi Go checkpoint near Halabja, carried out by a Saudi Arabian national; and the thwarted suicide car-bombing on March 27, when security personnel shot the assailant before he reached the Zamaki checkpoint. Moreover, one PUK official noted that if the group had developed Ricin or other chemical weapons, it likely moved them before the coalition attacks.

The group's propaganda arm remains operational as well. As the Search for International Terrorist Entities (SITE) Institute has reported, Ansar's website (run from a server in New Jersey and updated as recently as March 25) features images of murdered Kurdish fighters taken from al-Jazeera footage and includes a recent "Letter from the Emir of Ansar al-Islam, Abu Abdullah ash-Shafi, to the Muslims of Kurdistan and Iraq and the World" threatening that "300 jihad martyrs renewed their pledge to Allah, the strong and the sublime, in order to be suicide bombers in the victory of Allah's religion."

### Implications

U.S. intelligence and Kurdish authorities are now sifting through a treasure trove of data left behind in Ansar's

bunkers and are testing for what they believe to be evidence of chemical and biological weapons. Information gleaned from seized computer hard drives and documents (some containing addresses and phone numbers) could help prevent future terror attacks. Moreover, if these materials offer further evidence that Ansar has ties to Saddam or al-Qaeda, they could serve as a boost to U.S. war efforts.

More broadly, the routing of the Ansar enclave has several ramifications. First, severely weakening an al-Qaeda affiliate is a significant achievement. Second, the dismantling of Ansar's conventional military capabilities will enhance the safety of U.S. forces in northern Iraq. Third, the operations against Ansar have kept the Kurds tied up and away from sensitive areas such as Kirkuk, a city that they are anxious to liberate from what they see as occupation by Saddam's regime.

Policymakers should encourage future U.S. cooperation with the Kurdish authorities against Ansar or other terrorist groups in the region. Indeed, the postwar rebuilding process should include teaching law enforcement and counterterror techniques to Iraqi Kurds. Continued successes in this area will demonstrate that Iraqis are winning back their security, and that they are doing so with U.S. assistance.

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