

# Ansar al-Islam: Iraq's al-Qaeda Connection

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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## Brief Analysis

**A**nsar al-Islam, an al-Qaeda affiliate active in Iraqi Kurdistan since September 2001, is a prototype of America's enemies in the "war on terror." The group serves as a testament to the global spread of al-Qaeda affiliates, achieved through exploitation of weak central authorities and a utilitarian willingness to work with seemingly differing ideologies for a common cause. Lengthy reports on Ansar have appeared in the New York Times, Washington Post, and Los Angeles Times, and Kurdish leaders have given Washington a plethora of intelligence on the group. Nevertheless, Ansar has yet to appear on official U.S. terrorism lists. Meanwhile, political complexities would make military action against the group difficult, at best. Hence, this small force of 650 fighters is a textbook example of the ongoing challenges posed by the war on terror.

## Northern Iraq's al-Qaeda

In August 2001, leaders of several Kurdish Islamist factions reportedly visited the al-Qaeda leadership in Afghanistan with the goal of creating an alternate base for the organization in northern Iraq. Their intentions were echoed in a document found in an al-Qaeda guest house in Afghanistan vowing to "expel those Jews and Christians from Kurdistan and join the way of Jihad, [and] rule every piece of land . . . with the Islamic Shari'a rule." Soon thereafter, Ansar al-Islam was created using \$300,000 to \$600,000 in al-Qaeda seed money, in addition to funds from Saudi Arabia.

Today, Ansar operates in fortified mountain positions along the Iran-Iraq border known as "Little Tora Bora" (after the Taliban stronghold in Afghanistan). There, the group's Kurdish, Iraqi, Lebanese, Jordanian, Moroccan, Syrian, Palestinian, and Afghan members train in a wide array of guerrilla tactics. Approximately 30 al-Qaeda members reportedly joined Ansar upon the group's inception in 2001; that number is now as high as 120. Armed with heavy machine guns, mortars, and anti-aircraft weaponry, the group fulfills al-Qaeda lieutenant Ayman al-Zawahiri's vision of a global jihad. Ansar's goal is to disrupt civil society and create a Taliban-like regime in northern Iraq. To that end, it has already banned music, alcohol, photographs, and advertising in its stronghold. Girls are prevented from studying; men must grow beards and pray five times daily.

## Activities since 2001

Ansar first made headlines in September 2001 when it ambushed and killed forty-two Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) fighters. In February 2002, the group assassinated Franso Hariri, a Kurdish Christian politician. That spring,

Ansar attempted to murder Barham Salih, a PUK leader; five bodyguards and two attackers were killed in the ensuing gunfight. In June, the group bombed a Kurdish restaurant, injuring scores and killing a child. In July, the group killed nine PUK fighters, and destroyed several Sufi shrines -- a move reminiscent of the Taliban. In September, Dutch authorities arrested the group's leader, Najmuddin Faraj (a.k.a. Mullah Krekar), for suspected ties to al-Qaeda. In December, Ansar launched a surprise attack after the PUK sent 1,500 soldiers home to celebrate the end of Ramadan. According to the group's website, they killed 103 PUK fighters and wounded 117.

That same month, Jordan's prime minister announced that al-Qaeda operative Fazel Inzal al-Khalayleh (a.k.a. Abu Mussab al-Zarqawi) had sought refuge with Ansar. Khalayleh had ordered the spring 2002 attack on Salih as well as the October 2002 murder of U.S. Agency for International Development officer Laurence Foley in Amman. Khalayleh's deputy, Nur ad-Din ash-Shami (a.k.a. Abu Abdullah), was killed in a battle with Kurdish fighters less than two weeks ago.

Currently, more than thirty Ansar militants (about twenty of whom are Arab) are incarcerated in Sulaymaniyah. Their testimony has provided clues about the group's ties to Saddam Husayn, al-Qaeda, Iran, and weapons of mass destruction.

#### Chemical Weapons

Some Bush administration and PUK officials claim that Ansar has established chemical weapons facilities in Iraqi Kurdistan. Reports allege that Baghdad helped to smuggle these weapons from Afghanistan and that Ansar has tested substances such as cyanide gas and the poison Ricin. Salih has cited "clear evidence" that such tests have been performed on animals. Moreover, the Washington Post reported that the group smuggled VX nerve gas through Turkey in fall 2001.

#### Links to Saddam

Bush administration and PUK officials have also speculated that Ansar may be working with Saddam through a man named Abu Wa'il, reportedly an al-Qaeda operative on Saddam's payroll. Kurdish explosives experts also claim that TNT seized from Ansar was produced by the Iraqi military, and that arms are sent to the group from areas controlled by Saddam. Iraqi officials deny all such ties, yet Saddam clearly profits from Ansar's activities, which keep Kurdish opposition forces tied up on the border and away from Saddam. Indeed, support for Ansar is not unlike the money Saddam gives to families of Palestinian suicide bombers; turning up the heat in Kurdistan and the Palestinian territories takes heat off Saddam as a crisis looms.

Currently, Kurdish and international sources are accumulating evidence they say could soon present a clearer picture of Saddam's cooperation with al-Qaeda.

#### Links to Iran

Iran supports Ansar by allowing it to operate along its borders. Iran may also provide logistical support by permitting the flow of goods and weapons and providing a safe area beyond the front. The Turkish daily Milliyet has noted that Ansar militants check cars leaving their stronghold en route to Iran, indicating coordination with the Islamic republic. Moreover, the recently apprehended Mullah Krekar spent many years in Iran and was arrested in Amsterdam after a flight from Tehran.

Iran has several possible reasons for supporting Ansar. For one, having a democratic proto-state on its borders threatens the very nature of the Islamic republic. Thus, continued guerrilla activity benefits Tehran, as does any movement designed to spread Islamism in Kurdistan. Furthermore, by supporting Ansar and other Islamist groups in Iraq, Tehran may attempt to gain influence among the various factions that could contribute to a new Iraqi government if Saddam's regime is overthrown.

## Implications

More than one year after Ansar announced its formation, the State Department has yet to designate it a Foreign Terrorist Organization, nor has the Treasury Department listed it as a Special Designated Global Terrorist. It would be interesting to know why. Other questions remain: Can Washington pressure Iran to cease cooperation with Ansar? Can it persuade Norway, where Mullah Krekar lived for several years, to examine his financial accounts? Can it verify ties between al-Qaeda and Saddam based on interviews with captured Ansar militants?

If such links are established, military force should be considered. Reports from the front indicate that Ansar could not withstand an aerial assault. Yet, Washington may be reticent to attack during this period of UN inspections for fear of international rebuke, particularly from Turkey. Ankara, already ambivalent about an Iraq war, may be sensitive to any measures that would potentially strengthen the Kurds. Still, Ansar al-Islam poses a threat to any future U.S. ground deployment. Moreover, dismantling the group would potentially weaken both Saddam and al-Qaeda -- two primary targets in the war on terror.

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