

The Islamist Threat from Iraqi Kurdistan

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Articles & Testimony

On September 11, 2001, the world expressed shock as Al-Qa'ida terrorists hijacked four airliners, toppled the World Trade Center, and heavily damaged the Pentagon. This dramatic display of Al-Qa'ida's global reach has dominated international media attention, virtually to the exclusion of all other international news.

However, the United States was not the only country to be targeted by Islamist terrorists in September. Shortly after the tragic events of September 11, a militant Islamist group calling itself Jund al-Islam (The Army of Islam), erupted onto the scene in northern Iraq, establishing itself on the strategic Shinirwe Mountain overlooking the town of Halabja. In its inaugural address, the group declared its intention to "terrorize" enemies of Allah and "undertake jihad in this region."

Iraqi Kurdistan is naturally an attractive target for Al-Qa'ida, which has sought to develop havens in inaccessible or politically unstable areas. Prior to his relocation to Afghanistan, Osama bin Laden called Sudan home from 1991-1996. Reports also indicate that Al-Qa'ida-related groups maintained camps in Somalia. Simply put, Al-Qa'ida has a track record not only of establishing global reach, but also of seeking to diversify geographically its assets.

Like much of Afghanistan, northern Iraq is mountainous and inaccessible. The Kurdistan Workers' Party [PKK], which is waging a violent separatist campaign against Turkey, has often taken refuge in the region's mountains and caves to hide from both Turkish and Iraqi Kurdish militaries. Saudi money and Iranian arms flow into the region across porous borders. As a captured Jund al-Islam internal leaflet noted, "there are a number of reasons for initiating jihad within Kurdistan's borders. The geographic location, with its mountainous terrain, is suitable and has strategic value . . ."

Iraqi Kurdistan is also a tempting political target for Islamist destabilization because of its relatively secular and democratic administration. Indeed, the Islamist destabilization campaign in northern Iraq began in earnest on September 23, when members of Jund al-Islam massacred and mutilated the bodies of 43 Kurdish fighters belonging to the secular, pro-Western Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), which administers the province of Sulaymaniyah, as well as portions of the neighboring Irbil and Kirkuk provinces. Local Iraqis interpreted the attack as not only a direct challenge to the PUK, but also to the idea of a secular, moderately democratic entity in the Middle East.

An additional factor making Iraqi Kurdistan ripe for penetration by Al-Qa'ida is Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, who has not hesitated to work with Islamist groups in order to weaken domestic (and, perhaps, international) opponents.

A Brief History of Islamism in Iraqi Kurdistan

Islamism in northern Iraq is not new, though it has never had strong regional appeal. As PUK President Jalal Talabani observed in a May 2001 interview, "the cultural heritage of Iraq includes traditions that do not coincide with the program of the Islamist movements . . . [such as] a tradition of more equality between men and women than they accept."

Following the 1991 Kurdish uprising and the imposition of the 'safe-haven' in northern Iraq, numerous political parties participated in elections for a regional parliament. Masoud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party [KDP] won 46% of the vote and the PUK won 45%, while the Islamic Movement of Kurdistan (IMK) received just 6%. Nevertheless, the Islamic movement, which has undergone numerous schisms and transformations, remains locally significant along the Iranian border, especially in the town of Halabja (better known as the site of the 1988 Iraqi chemical weapons attack which killed an estimated 5,000 civilians).

In the aftermath of the 1994-1996 PUK-KDP civil war, the Kurdish parties divided the safe-haven into two distinct sectors. The KDP controlled the northern and western portions (including the entire length of the Turkish-Iraqi frontier) while the PUK controlled the south and east. The PUK, as part of its coalition agreement with the IMK, ceded to the Islamist group territory between Halabja, Tawella, and Panjwin near the Iranian border, inward several dozen kilometers to the town of Said Sadiq.

Driving from PUK-administered regions into IMK territory was like entering the Taliban's Afghanistan. White flags fluttered over checkpoints, as young men with Taliban-style beards, brandishing AK-47s, interrogated all but official cars. In 1999, an international aid organization's car was fired on after being waived through an Islamist checkpoint on the road to Tawella. The problem? A foreign woman did not have her head covered. On Fridays at noon, towns would be deserted as IMK militants enforced mosque attendance for locals.

Throughout the safe-haven, Saudi-financed mosques (identified as such with logos and attribution on their walls) preached extreme Salafiyah Islam. A new mosque in rebuilt Halabja dominates the local skyline, while a huge multi-story mosque visible for miles around is nearing completion in Irbil. The IMK is responsible for several new mosques in other towns and villages as well. While the PUK and KDP have not operated offices in each other's territory for five years, the IMK maintained offices (often resembling fortified compounds) throughout the safe haven.

The IMK has not been the sole representative of Islamists in Iraqi Kurdistan, though. The Kurdistan Islamic Union professes non-violence, and also supports the Islamic Kurdish League, which presents itself as a non-violent social service organization. While the Islamic Kurdish League generally maintains a positive local image, some senior politicians warn that the group could be the " Hamas of Kurdistan," meaning that the group is slowly expanding its influence among the poor and dispossessed, but could easily turn violent once it feels its base is large enough. Both the IMK and the Kurdistan Islamic Union maintain television stations.

The groups -- especially the Islamic Union -- have a wide appeal not for ideological or religious reasons, but rather as a protest vote. While the Iraqi Kurdish regional government held contested municipal elections last year, every November, there are closely-watched secondary school and university student elections organized by political party. Many of my students said they considered voting for the Islamists out of frustration at the dominance of their local party. Many who are not particularly religious respect the Islamists for transcending the PUK-KDP divide. In November 1999, the Islamists reportedly won close to 40% of the vote at Dahuk University, a sign which local residents said was a wake-up call to the KDP, indicating that it needed to become more responsive to the public. In November 2001, the Islamist parties managed to win just 11% of the vote in Sulaymaniyah, though many students complain that the PUK gerrymanders classes (concentrating Islamists in a single class so as to minimize their votes), and that the KDP threatens students and their families with retribution (denying jobs, graduate school admittance, etc.).

The Islamist Wake-up Call

In October 2000, heavy fighting erupted between the PUK and PKK guerillas in the Qandil range. PUK casualties -- announced each evening on local television -- mounted into the hundreds; in Darbandikhan, a large town in the Kirkuk governorate, locals set up a special pavilion to handle funerals. The PKK remains extremely unpopular in

Iraqi Kurdistan (though, ironically, the PKK satellite television, Med-TV, remains popular because of its slick production quality), but both the KDP and PUK have had to defend against PKK guerilla activity. While Syria once supported the group (until Turkey's 1998 mobilization convinced Damascus to end its sponsorship of the group), now Iran provides the PKK with logistical and material support. While entrenched in Qandil, the PKK re-supplied via Iran.

Throughout the autumn of 2000 and the winter of 2001, Iran used the PKK as a pawn against the PUK in order to split PUK resources and extend Islamist influence in northern Iraq. A senior PUK politician leaked to me at a January 5, 2001 meeting that, while the PUK was active in Qandil, the Iranians had facilitated the transfer of members of the militant Islamist and anti-Turkish Kaplanist movement to a base inside IMK-held territory near Halabja. At the same time, rumors swept Sulaymaniyah that the IMK was taking advantage of the situation in Qandil to demand extension of their territory by approximately 30 kilometers from Said Sadiq to Arbat, quite close to the PUK "capital" of Sulaymaniyah. The secular model of government established by the KDP and PUK in northern Iraq is a direct threat to Iran's governing philosophy of *vilayat-i faqih* (guardianship of the jurist). The PUK's developing relations with Turkey, especially after the January 2001, accession of Barham Salih as PUK Prime Minister, accentuate the challenge that the secular PUK by example poses to the Islamic Republic. In an October 2001 policy forum at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Salih stressed that secular Turkish democracy was the model not only for Iraqi Kurdistan, but also for the future of Iraq itself.

Discord in the Islamist Camp

Several competing factions of the IMK (later renamed the Islamic Unity Movement in 2000) are worthy of mention.

Hamas

Originating in Garmian (such as the towns of Kifri, Kalar, Darbandikhan, and Chamchamal), the fanatical members of Hamas uphold a Salafiya interpretation of Islam in which the Quran and the hadith are interpreted literally. They clashed violently with the PUK in 1993 and 1994, after which they settled in and around the town of Khurmali. The movement split from the IMK in 1997, following the Islamic Movement's agreement to participate in the PUK government (Hamas maintains that any cooperation with secular parties is contrary to Islam). The group is led by Umar Abdul Karim Abdul Aziz (Umar Barzani). Umar trained and fought in Afghanistan, along with Makuwan Qazi Ramazan (Makuwan Muryasi) and Arsalan Ahmad Marif. In July 2001, Hamas united with Tawhid under the new name, Tawhid Islamic Front.

Tawhid

Tawhid, led by Mullah Abdul Ghani Bazazi, was formed out of the mosques in Irbil, though the KDP banned it. Because the IMK leadership did not support Tawhid against the KDP, in 2000 a shadowy group formed within Tawhid named the Tawhid Islamic Group. This group initiated a terror campaign of throwing acid at unveiled women. When the KDP cracked down on the group, many relocated to Halabja, and have also operated a base in Hajji Umran. The relationship between Tawhid and Hamas developed in part out of a mutual dislike of Mullah Abdul Aziz' Islamic Unity Movement (the successor to the IMK). Two members of Tawhid -- Mullah Abu Bakr Hawleri and 'Abu Qatada' -- reportedly traveled to Afghanistan to cement relations with bin Ladin. On August 8, Abu Qatada gave a dinner reception in which he regaled his guests with stories about bin Ladin. In July 2001, Tawhid sent several other members to Afghanistan for training in Al-Qa'ida camps. These include: Muhammad Salih Umar, Swara Karim, Wahid Muhammad Mahmud, Usma Ahmad Bazani, and Hamin Salim Bani Shari. Following the merger with Hamas, Mullah Abu Bakr Hawleri became leader with the Hamas' Umar Bazani as his deputy.

The Tawhid precipitated the latest clash between the secular Kurdish parties and the Islamists when, on February 19, 2001, gunmen in Irbil assassinated Fransu Hariri, the KDP majority leader in the Kurdistan Regional

Government's parliament and the government's highest-ranking Christian. KDP officials traced the license plate of the get-away car to PUK territory, who traced the vehicle to Halabja. PUK security forces arrested one suspect who provided the names of five others. The Tawhid reportedly targeted the KDP in revenge for an incident in the summer of 2000 when KDP peshmurga near Hajji Umran opened fire on Tawhid militants infiltrating into Iraq from Iran (The KDP claimed they thought the infiltrators were PKK). Twenty Tawhid fighters died. However, many locals in Irbil suspect that Hariri's religion was a factor in his assassination. The IMK in late March 2001 refused to transfer custody of the suspects to the KDP, at which point both the PUK and KDP closed down IMK offices. However, these offices reopened during the second week in April. Members of the (non-violent) Islamic Union in Irbil claimed that the KDP arrested "more than 2,000" Islamists (and joked that the price of razors had skyrocketed as many sought to shave their beards), though the real total is likely significantly lower.

The Second Soran Unit

This group, with between 350-400 men under arms, was the largest single military unit within the IMK (and its successor, the Islamic Unity Movement). Approximately 50-60 Arabs also fight with the group, many of whom trained in Afghanistan. The Second Soran Unit is extremely well-armed, with Daushkas (surface-to-surface rockets), 106mm artillery, and many other heavy weapons. They remain based in the vicinity of Biyara, near the Iranian border at Tawella. The leader of the unit is Asad Muhammad Hasan (Aso Hawleri), a member of the IMK since 1991, and a member of its central council since 1997. While ideologically and violently opposed to the PUK (and KDP), the unit also frequently clashed with the IMK leadership. In 1998, the Second Soran Unit created a political front group called the Central Islamic Faction led by Aso Hawleri, several Arabs, and a Turkoman named Abu Khubayi Barachak (now imprisoned by the KDP on terrorism charges). After the split in the IMK and Islamic Unity Movement, the Second Soran Unit initially became independent, but eventually joined the Tawhid Islamic Front.

The Islamic Unity Movement

In August 2000, Mullah Abdul Aziz's IMK merged with another group led by Mullah Sidiq, and was renamed the Islamic Unity Movement. Personal differences within the Islamic Unity Movement led Mullah 'Ali Bapir to withdraw his followers and create an independent movement named the Islamic League (not to be confused with the Islamic Kurdish League). On October 22, 2000, two days before my visit to the town, a full-fledged gun battle erupted in Halabja between rival Islamist factions. Additionally, factional rivalries continued to exist within the Islamic Unity Movement. Iranian militants and Salafi centers in the Persian Gulf, as well as devotees of Al-Qa'ida were able to exploit the divisions to increase their own influence within the movements.

The Rise of Jund al-Islam

On September 1, 2001, the Second Soran Unit and the Tawhid Islamic Front merged to form Jund al-Islam. According to a report in Al-Sharq al-Awsat, three Afghan-trained Arabs witnessed the agreement: Abu Abdul Rahman, who serves as bin Ladin's representative for the supervision of unity and media in Kurdistan; Abu Wa'il, an expert and instructor in sabotage; and Abu Darda'a, an instructor in terrorism and assassination.

Upon the signing, the three transferred to Jund al-Islam a \$300,000 grant supplied by bin Laden. In total, the report claimed that 60 of the approximately 400 fighters in Jund al-Islam received training in Afghanistan. Throughout the fighting, Jund al-Islam commanders reportedly communicated via satellite phone with Islamic militants based in Jordan. Saddam Hussein's government may also be involved -- a group of Sunni Arabs operating with the Jund al-Islam hail from Mosul, a large city under Saddam's control.

Intelligence sources on the ground in northern Iraq indicated that the infiltrators initially had three to four Katyusha rockets, a number of 106mm shells, anti-tank and anti-aircraft guns, sniper-rifles, rocket-propelled grenades, BKC machine guns, and mortars. Some reports counted up to 400 "Afghan Arab" mercenaries, though later reports spoke

of perhaps 600 fighters, divided into six battalions: Nasr, Fat'h, Badr, Quds, Fida'iyun, and Salahuddin. Thirty-four Jund al-Islam members were Iraqi Kurds who received training in Afghan camps. The Jund al-Islam itself reportedly declared that its fighters have trained for "four years in many types of explosives, and possessed all kinds of heavy weapons."

Several Turkish officials dismissed PUK claims that the Jund al-Islam was linked to Al-Qa'ida and accused the Iraqi Kurds of trying to latch onto anti-bin Laden fever to extract U.S. military support. However, before the eruption of fighting brought the Iraqi Kurds into the limelight (at least in US policy circles), political independent residents had e-mailed reports about "men in black" infiltrating into the region, speaking Arabic and languages other than Kurdish.

The Organization of the Jund al-Islam

The leader of Jund al-Islam is Abdullah al-Shafi'i (Mullah Wuria Hawleri). While some reports identify Shafi'i as an ethnic Arab from Iran, he is apparently an Iraqi Kurd from the village of Gwer near Irbil. Shafi'i fled to Afghanistan in 1993, but has since returned to Iraqi Kurdistan at least three times. He is also reported to have fought in Chechnya. Aso Hawleri, formerly the head of the Second Soran Unit, serves as Shafi'i's deputy.

Important governing agencies in the Jund al-Islam include the Shari'a Board, comprised of a court, a committee to investigate legal questions and issue decrees, a committee for the promotion of virtue and the prevention of vice, and a committee to supervise the imposition of Islamic law; the Mujahidin Military Leadership Council, which supervises military matters; the Media Council, which supervises the group's media outreach -- including a Jund al-Islam radio station which began operating from Darga Shekhan -- and issues circulars; and a public relations department, which handles the group's foreign relations and grass roots organization.

The Jund al-Islami is based in Biyara, a few kilometers from the Iranian border. After its establishment, the group also seized the border town of Tawella, as well as the villages of Mila Chinara, Khak Kelan, Kharpan, Zardalhala, Hanadi, Dargashikhan, Balkha, Mishla, and Palyanaw. The group issued a Taliban-like proclamation for areas under its control, containing the following imperatives:

- A state of holy war against "the blasphemers and the secularists"
- The implementation of God's will
- The prohibition of any contact with secular parties
- The establishment of an Islamic administration conforming to the "Islamic Sunni religion."
- The merger of all Islamic parties under the Jund's control
- That no rule except "the Judgments of Islam" be accepted.

In order to underscore their point, the Jund al-Islam immediately undertook a campaign to shock and destabilize. Just as the Taliban had destroyed the pre-Islamic Buddha statues in Bamian, the Jund al-Islam destroyed two Kaka'i shrines (the Kaka'i are a local sect heavily influenced by pre-Islamic practices). Jund al-Islam supporters also assassinated a high-ranking Kurdish official and a moderate Muslim scholar. Local security sources claimed to have uncovered plots to carry out several other assassinations and conduct a wave of bombings, beginning in Sulaymaniyah and spreading across Iraqi Kurdistan.

After the massacre of its troops, the PUK forcefully responded. PUK prime minister Barham Salih declared in a September interview with MEIB that "Iraqi Kurdistan cannot be used as a terrorist haven." On October 3, the PUK asked the Kurdistan Islamic Group led by Ali Bapir to evacuate Ahmadawa and Khurmali so that the PUK could have a freer hand to more directly counter Jund al-Islam. (Ali Bapir separated his faction from Mulla Ali Abdulaziz in June

2001 after internal quarrelling. Nine other faction leaders also split from Mullah 'Ali, but remained independent until September 13, when they rejoined under the banner of Ali Bapir). As the PUK entered Halabja, the Jund al-Islam shelled them from the heights of Shinerwe mountain. The PUK surrounded the Jund al-Islam positions and unleashed a heavy artillery barrage. Killed in the fighting on October 8 were Abu Abdul Rahman (an Arab from Syria and the personal emissary of bin Laden) and Abu Yassir, an Arab from Baghdad.

The conflict continued into October, following several attempts at negotiation to co-opt the Jund al-Islam into Ali Bapir's Kurdistan Islamic Group. On October 23, Jund al-Islam militants took the town of Khormal, 15 kilometers from Halabja, and expelled all PUK supporters from their homes. The following week, the militants established checkpoints along main road in order to collect taxes and customs fees from transiting vehicles. In early November, the PUK launched a renewed attack on Jund al-Islam positions, reclaiming some territory and causing heavy casualties on both sides. However, PUK peshmurga remained unable to uproot the Islamists. Negotiations resumed. On December 10, the KDP daily Hawlati reported that Mulla Krekar and Abdulrahman Abdulrahman, leaders of the IMK, would merge with Jund al-Islam to form a new Islamist movement, named "Supporters of Islam in Kurdistan." As with the previous conflicts in northern Iraq with the PKK, neither the PUK nor the KDP are capable of defeating an enemy receiving significant external material and logistical support. As with the PKK, it appears that the PUK will be forced to negotiate an unpleasant truce for the time being.

Implications of the Jund al-Islam's rise

The evidence appears overwhelming that armed Islamist groups sought to establish a safe-haven within mountainous northern Iraq. Private or public money from Saudi Arabia, as well as from Al-Qa'ida, financed the new group. Clearly, bin Ladin and his deputies saw a base in Iraqi Kurdistan as a useful operating point to harm both United States security interests as well as to destabilize Turkey.

Just as troubling is the role of Iran in facilitating the rise of the Jund al-Islam. The only international border into PUK and IMK-administered territory is that of Iran. Following the October 4 battle for Tawella, Shawkat Hajji Mushir, a local PUK commander, commented that "if the PUK gets any closer [to the border], PUK bullets and rockets would hit Iranian positions." While smuggling does take place across the border, Iranian guard posts and small forts are visible throughout and road crossings are few. Moreover, the Toyota land cruisers used by Jund al-Islam could not have been smuggled into the area without the tacit approval of the Iranian government and security apparatus. The apparent re-supply of Jund al-Islam through Iranian territory is further evidence of Tehran's complicity.

While Iran is currently engaged in a public relations campaign to break her international isolation and woo Western investment, it is unlikely to shed its reputation as a state sponsor of terrorism until it ends its involvement with Jund al-Islami. ❖

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