

## Ansar al-Islam: Back in Iraq

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Months before the Iraq war of 2003, *The New Yorker*, *Christian Science Monitor*, and *The New York Times* published reports about Ansar al-Islam (“Partisans of Islam”), a brutal band of al-Qa‘ida guerrillas based in a Kurdish area of northern Iraq near the Iranian border. U.S. officials pointed to Ansar al-Islam as the “missing link” between al-Qa‘ida and Saddam Hussein. When Secretary of State Colin Powell made the U.S. case for war against Saddam at the United Nations on February 5, 2003, he cited Ansar al-Islam as a key reason for invasion. Powell drew links among the group, al-Qa‘ida, and Saddam, citing Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) documents declassified upon the request of the White House.<sup>1</sup>

As war approached, however, the Bush administration said less about Ansar al-Islam and al-Qa‘ida. Rather, the administration focused on Saddam’s attempts to develop weapons of mass destruction. After the war, it became a matter of common wisdom that Saddam had no links to al-Qa‘ida. Carl Levin, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, said that the case linking Saddam to al-Qa‘ida was never “bullet-proof.”<sup>2</sup> Former vice president Al Gore denied that such ties existed at all.<sup>3</sup>

But since the defeat and dispersal of Saddam’s regime, U.S. officials have begun to talk of Ansar al-Islam once more. In July 2003, U.S. joint chiefs of staff chairman General Richard Myers stated “that group is still active in Iraq.”<sup>4</sup> A week later, Myers revealed that some cadres from the group had been captured and were being interrogated.<sup>5</sup> The U.S. top administrator in Iraq, Paul Bremer III, reiterated Myers’s message in August, saying that there were “quite a number of these Ansar al-Islam professional killers on the loose in the country,” that they were staging attacks against U.S. servicemen, and that U.S. forces were trying to track them down.<sup>6</sup>

High-profile attacks against U.S. and international interests in Iraq in August also appeared to confirm suspicions that Ansar al-Islam was again operational. The attacks on the Jordanian embassy and the United Nations (U.N.) compound in Baghdad, followed later by a spate of suicide bombing attacks against foreign and U.S. targets, clearly fit the modus operandi of al-Qa‘ida. However, Ansar al-Islam never claimed responsibility for these attacks. Thus, analysts are now wondering, who exactly in Iraq represents Ansar al-Islam? Has the group rebounded? Is it connected with other elements in the Iraqi resistance,

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1 Colin Powell, remarks to the U.N. Security Council, Feb. 5, 2003, at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2003/17300.htm>; Stephen F. Hayes, “Saddam’s al-Qaeda Connection,” *The Weekly Standard*, Sept. 1-8, 2003.

2 Congressional Record, 108th Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> sess., “Iraq Intelligence,” July 15, 2003, at <http://levin.senate.gov/floor/071503fs1.htm>.

3 Al Gore, remarks at New York University, Aug. 7, 2003, at <http://www.moveon.org/gore-speech.html>.

4 Agence France-Presse, July 30, 2003.

5 *The New York Times*, Aug. 7, 2003.

6 Paul Bremer news conference, Aug. 2, 2003, quoted at <http://www.cnn.com/2003/US/08/08/nyt.gordon/>.

especially partisans of the old regime? If so, is it possible that it *did* have ties to the Saddam even before the war?

These questions require careful analysis as U.S. forces prepare for more battles ahead.

## **The Rise of Ansar**

The roots of Ansar al-Islam extend back to the mid-1990s. The group appears to be comprised of the various Islamist factions that splintered from the Islamic Movement of Kurdistan (IMK) in northern Iraq. As Iraq scholar Michael Rubin notes, they included groups called Hamas, Tawhid, and the Second Soran Unit, among others.<sup>7</sup>

On September 1, 2001, the Second Soran Unit and the Tawhid Islamic Front merged to form the Jund al-Islam. Jund al-Islam was soon renamed Ansar al-Islam. As the group grew, it bore the markings of other al-Qa'ida affiliates. Their cadres hailed from other Arab countries; some of them had experience in Afghanistan, and they based themselves in the part of Iraq under the weakest central authority: northern Iraq, also widely known as Iraqi Kurdistan.

Iraqi Kurdistan is an area of Iraq that until recently was protected in the northern “no-fly” zone by allied warplanes after the 1991 Kuwait war. The United States and Britain sought to defend the area from incursions by Saddam’s regime (which was responsible for the brutal murder of hundreds and expulsion of hundreds of thousands after the 1991 war) but left the area to be governed by the Kurds themselves. The Kurds were successful in creating a semiautonomous region under an interim government.

But northern Iraq lacked overarching central control. Opposing political factions—namely the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iraq (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)—held small hamlets of power, but they exercised no authority on the fringes of their zones. Those lawless fringes appeared to be the perfect spot to launch another jihad.

Ansar al-Islam announced its inception just days before the September 11 attacks on the United States. One month before, leaders of several Kurdish Islamist factions reportedly visited the al-Qa'ida leadership in Afghanistan<sup>8</sup> seeking to create a base for al-Qa'ida in northern Iraq.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps they knew that the base in Afghanistan would soon be targeted, following the impending terrorist attacks against U.S. targets.

There were other clear indications that al-Qa'ida was behind the group’s creation. The authors of a document found in Kabul vowed 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.”<sup>10</sup> The *Los Angeles Times*, based upon interviews with an Ansar prisoner, also corroborates this, noting that in October 2000, Kurdish Islamist leaders:

sent a guerrilla with the alias Mala Namo and two bodyguards into Iran and then on to bin Laden’s camps ... When teams began returning from the Afghan camps in 2001 ... they carried a message from bin Laden that Kurdish Islamic cells should unite. By that time, a number of al-Qaeda operatives had left Afghanistan and moved to northern Iraq ... militant leaders in Kurdistan

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7 Michael Rubin, “The Islamist Threat in Iraqi Kurdistan,” *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin*, Dec. 2001, at [http://www.meib.org/articles/0112\\_ir1.htm](http://www.meib.org/articles/0112_ir1.htm).

8 *The New York Times*, Jan. 13, 2002; author’s interview with Barham Salih, Washington, D.C., Jan. 10, 2002.

9 *Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 9, 2002.

10 *The Kurdistan Observer*, Jan. 14, 2002, at <http://home.cogeco.ca/~observer/14-1-03-memorandum-kurd-islam-qaeda.html>.

were replicating al-Qaeda type camps on military training, terrorism, and suicide bombers.<sup>11</sup>

According to several reports, Ansar al-Islam was started with \$300,000 to \$600,000 in al-Qa'ida seed money.<sup>12</sup> According to at least three journalistic sources, the group received money from a key cleric in the al-Qa'ida network, Abu Qatada, based in London.<sup>13</sup> In April 2003, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that Italian police had wiretapped conversations with an imam from Cremona, Italy, indicating that Syria was serving as a hub for recruits.<sup>14</sup> Some funds reportedly came from Saudi Arabia.<sup>15</sup>

While some thirty al-Qa'ida members reportedly joined Ansar al-Islam's Kurdish cadres in 2001,<sup>16</sup> the foreign fighter presence soon grew to between eighty and 120. The group's Arab members included Iraqi, Lebanese, Jordanian, Moroccan, Syrian, Palestinian, and Afghan fighters trained in a wide array of guerrilla tactics.<sup>17</sup> The fighters, armed with heavy machine guns, mortars, and anti-aircraft weaponry, sought to create a Taliban-like regime. They banned music, alcohol, pictures, and advertising in their stronghold. Girls were prevented from studying; men were forced to grow beards and pray five times daily.

Ansar al-Islam operated in fortified mountain positions along the Iran-Iraq border known as "Little Tora Bora" (after the Taliban stronghold in Afghanistan).<sup>18</sup> Colin Powell, in his February 5, 2003 statement to the U.N. Security Council, noted that the organization had established a "poison and explosive training center camp ... in northeastern Iraq."<sup>19</sup>

## Prewar Violence

Ansar al-Islam made headlines in September 2001 when it ambushed and killed forty-two PUK fighters. This alarmed the Kurds, who quickly established a conventional defensive front. It was soon understood that the Kurds were the target of a new jihadist war.

A wave of violence erupted in spring 2002, beginning with a politically motivated plot. Ansar al-Islam attempted to murder Barham Salih, a PUK leader. Five bodyguards and two attackers were killed in the ensuing gunfight.<sup>20</sup> Ansar al-Islam's tactics became bloodier, with the aim of inflicting as much damage as possible. In June, Ansar bombed a restaurant, injuring scores and killing a child.<sup>21</sup> In July, the group killed nine PUK fighters.<sup>22</sup> In a move reminiscent of the Taliban, the group destroyed Sufi shrines.<sup>23</sup> In December, Ansar launched a surprise attack after the PUK sent 1,500 soldiers home to celebrate the end of Ramadan.<sup>24</sup> According to Ansar's website, they killed 103 PUK members and wounded 117.<sup>25</sup> Gruesome pictures of the group's victims were posted on the Internet.<sup>26</sup>

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11 *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 5, 2003.

12 NewsMax.com, Mar. 18, 2002, at <http://www.newsmax.com/archives/articles/2002/3/18/74151.shtml>;

*The Christian Science Monitor*, Mar. 15, 2002.

13 *The Jerusalem Report*, Nov. 18, 2002; *The Christian Science Monitor*, Apr. 2, 2002; *Le Monde*, Nov. 13, 2002.

14 *Los Angeles Times*, Apr. 28, 2003.

15 Rubin, "The Islamist Threat in Iraqi Kurdistan."

16 Agence France-Presse, Dec. 4, 2002.

17 Author's interview with Barham Salih, Jan. 10, 2003; *The Christian Science Monitor*, Mar. 15, 2002.

18 Ibid.

19 Colin Powell, remarks to the U.N. Security Council, Feb. 5, 2003, at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2003/17300.htm>.

20 *The Christian Science Monitor*, Apr. 9, 2002.

21 *Iraqi Kurdistan Dispatch*, July 5, 2002, at <http://www.ikurd.info/news-05jul-p1.htm>.

22 *The Washington Post*, Sept. 5, 2002.

23 *Kurdistan Newsline*, July 23, 2002, at <http://www.puk.org/web/htm/news/knwsline/nws/kurdlead.html>.

24 *Ash-Sharq al-Awsat* (London), Dec. 6, 2002.

25 Associated Press, Dec. 15, 2002.

26 At <http://www.nawend.com/ansarislam.htm>. This site has since been shut down.

As Ansar al-Islam grew more violent, information began to surface about three worrisome aspects of Ansar al-Islam: (1) its interest in chemical weapons; (2) its possible links to Saddam's regime; and (3) its connections to Iran.

• *Chemical weapons.* By early 2003, more than thirty Ansar al-Islam militants (including fifteen to twenty Arab fighters) were incarcerated in the Kurdish "capital" of Sulaymaniyah.<sup>27</sup> *The International Herald Tribune* noted, "critical information about this network emerged from interrogations of captured cell members."<sup>28</sup> Based on this testimony and other intelligence, information was gleaned about Ansar al-Islam's nascent chemical facilities.

Specifically, it was reported that cyanide gas and the poison ricin were among the chemicals tested by Ansar al-Islam.<sup>29</sup> *The Washington Post* also reported that Ansar al-Islam smuggled VX nerve gas through Turkey in fall 2001.<sup>30</sup> PUK prime minister Barham Salih cited "clear evidence" of animal testing.<sup>31</sup> Other Kurdish leaders said they had "eyewitness accounts, prisoners confessions, and seized evidence" to support this.<sup>32</sup>

After Powell's U.N. speech on February 5, 2003, Ansar allowed a small group of reporters to visit their enclave to check for chemical weapons, "especially in the Khurmali and Sargat, areas where Ansar was believed to be developing ricin."<sup>33</sup> Neither Powell's claim nor the militants' denials could be verified.

• *Ties to Saddam.* Bush administration and PUK officials increasingly claimed that Ansar al-Islam was working directly with Saddam. Some reports indicated that Saddam's regime helped smuggle weapons to the group from Afghanistan.<sup>34</sup> Kurdish explosives experts also claimed that TNT seized from Ansar al-Islam was produced by Baghdad's military and that arms arrived from areas controlled by Saddam.<sup>35</sup> Another link was said to be a man named Abu Wa'il,<sup>36</sup> reportedly an al-Qa'ida operative on Saddam's payroll.<sup>37</sup>

It was also believed that Abu Musab az-Zarqawi, the al-Qa'ida operative who ordered the hit on Salih in spring 2002, had a relationship with Saddam. As war drew near, U.S. authorities announced that he had sought medical attention in Baghdad<sup>38</sup> where Saddam harbored what Powell called "Zarqawi and his subordinates"<sup>39</sup> for eight months. Intelligence revealed that he was also directly tied to Ansar; he reportedly ran a terrorist training camp in northern Iraq before the recent war.<sup>40</sup>

Zarqawi, by way of background, is thought to have coordinated the murder of USAID officer Laurence Foley in Amman, Jordan, in October 2002.<sup>41</sup> Former Federal Bureau of Investigation analyst Matthew Levitt notes that Zarqawi was the head of a 116-person global

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27 Author's interview with Barham Salih, Jan. 10, 2003.

28 *The New York Times*, Feb. 6, 2003.

29 *Al-Hayat* (London), Aug. 22, 2002; *Los Angeles Times*, Dec 9, 2002.

30 *The Washington Post*, Dec. 12, 2002.

31 Author's interview with Barham Salih, Jan. 10, 2003.

32 Author's interview with PUK representative, Washington, D.C., Mar. 2003.

33 Author's interview with PUK official, Washington, D.C., Apr. 1, 2003.

34 *The New Yorker*, Mar. 25, 2002.

35 *The Guardian*, Aug. 23, 2002.

36 "Ansar al-Islam," Iraq News Wire, no. 8, Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), Sept. 1, 2002, at <http://memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=countries&Area=iraq&ID=INW802>.

37 *The Christian Science Monitor*, Apr. 2, 2002; *Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 9, 2002.

38 *The International Herald Tribune*, Feb. 7, 2003.

39 Powell, remarks to the U.N. Security Council, Feb. 5, 2003, at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2003/17300.htm>.

40 *The Washington Times*, July 30, 2003.

41 Confirmed by source at the Pentagon.

al-Qa'ida network and that "authorities have linked Zarqawi to recent attacks in Morocco, Turkey, and other plots in Europe."<sup>42</sup>

• *Links to Iran.* It was also suspected that Iran played a significant role in supporting Ansar al-Islam. Indeed, Iran openly allowed the group to operate along its borders despite the group's alleged affiliation with the al-Qa'ida network. Kurds further allege that Iran provided logistical support by allowing for the flow of goods and weapons and providing a safe area beyond the front.<sup>43</sup>

There were other connections; the group's spiritual leader, Mullah Krekar, spent many years in Iran and was arrested in Amsterdam after a flight from Tehran. The Turkish *Milliyet* also notes that Ansar al-Islam checked cars leaving their stronghold going into Iran, indicating coordination with the Islamic republic.<sup>44</sup> Tehran, for its part, predictably denied all ties to the group.

## War Comes

By February, U.S. war preparations were nearly complete. Powell's U.N. speech made a plea to other governments to confront Saddam, and this was based in part on evidence concerning Ansar al-Islam.<sup>45</sup> In so doing, Powell also left no doubt that in addition to Saddam, Ansar would be a target in the imminent war.

Given this context, it might have made sense for the group to lower its profile. Instead it went on the offensive. Ansar al-Islam claimed responsibility for the February 8 assassination of Kurdish minister Shawkat Hajji Mushir, a founding member of the PUK. Ansar elements, posing as defectors, shot Mushir in the head. Four people were killed in the ensuing gunfight, including an eight-year-old girl; the Ansar gunmen escaped.<sup>46</sup> Later that month, a man thought to belong to Ansar al-Islam detonated a suicide bomb near a Kurdish checkpoint. The bomb, packed with metal shards, marked the first reported use of suicide bombings by the group.

On February 20, the U.S. Department of Treasury named Ansar al-Islam a Specially Designated Terrorist Group (SDTG).<sup>47</sup> The designation effectively constituted a hunting license for U.S. forces. As the war neared, Ansar al-Islam braced itself for a combined U.S.-Kurdish assault. One Kurdish official noted that "nervousness" set into the group, which retreated to higher mountain peaks and dug into caves.<sup>48</sup>

On March 23, with the war fully underway, PUK fighters attacked Ansar al-Islam's stronghold, with backing from U.S. Special Forces, unmanned aerial vehicles, and aircraft strikes. Cruise missiles destroyed much of the enclave. Deserters left behind artillery, machine guns, mortars, and Katyusha rockets. On March 25, Ansar fighters made a desperate attack on PUK forces near Halabja but were repelled. Dozens of their forces were wounded or killed.<sup>49</sup> Within eight days, the entire Ansar enclave was decimated. At least 259

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42 Matthew Levitt, "Placing Iraq and Zarqawi in the Terror Web," Policywatch. no. 710, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Feb. 13, 2003, at <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/watch/policywatch/policywatch2003/710.htm>; author's interview, Dec. 10, 2003.

43 *The Washington Post*, Sept. 5, 2002.

44 *Milliyet* (Ankara), Jan. 7, 2003.

45 Powell, remarks to the U.N. Security Council, Feb. 5, 2003, at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2003/17300.htm>.

46 *The New York Times*, Feb. 10, 2003.

47 Treasury Department statement regarding the designation of Ansar al-Islam, Feb. 20, 2003, at <http://www.treas.gov/press/releases/js48.htm>.

48 Author's interview with PUK official, Washington, D.C., May 2003.

49 "USWAR/Ansar al-Islam Attacks PUK Positions," Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA), Mar. 26, 2003, at <http://www.irna.com/en/head/030326094847.ehe.shtml> (site no longer available).

Ansar al-Islam fighters were killed in the fighting. According to the group's leader, some twenty-eight planes and 108 rockets destroyed the compound.<sup>50</sup>

During the fighting, PUK forces also took eight fighters into custody, including Jordanians, Syrians, Tunisians, and one Palestinian who stated that he came to Iraq to "kill Americans." Interestingly, many captured Arab fighters held passports with Iraqi visas, signaling that Iraq likely approved their presence.<sup>51</sup>

After rummaging through the debris, coalition officials found a multitude of intelligence leads, including a list of suspected militants living in the United States, the phone number of a Kuwaiti cleric, and a letter from Yemen's minister of religion. Evidence also reportedly showed that specific meetings took place between Ansar and al-Qa'ida activists.<sup>52</sup> German media reported that a three-volume manual was found listing chemical and biological experiments, including the use of ricin and cyanide.<sup>53</sup>

After U.S. forces began their March 23 assault on Ansar positions, wounded fighters hobbled across the border, seeking Iran's assistance. However, an official from the Kurdish Socialist Democratic Party noted that "they went inside one kilometer, but the Iranians made them go back."<sup>54</sup> On March 30, dozens more fighters escaped to Iran. However, Kurdish factions reported that on that occasion, Tehran detained them as prisoners.<sup>55</sup>

Hamid-Reza Asefi, a spokesman for Iran's foreign ministry, insisted that "there is no link between this group and Iran."<sup>56</sup> But, in subsequent months, Washington and Tehran were reportedly negotiating the transfer of several Ansar militants who were still in Iran. Among those sought by the United States were Abu Wa'il and a man named Ayub Afghani, an explosives expert trained in Afghanistan.<sup>57</sup>

It is still thought that Iran hosts several al-Qa'ida militants in its territory. In fact, some senior American officials believe that the orders to carry out the May 12, 2003 bombings in Riyadh came from Sayf al-'Adil, an al-Qa'ida operations chief based in Iran at the time of the bombing.<sup>58</sup> U.S. officials and Arab press reports have since indicated that al-Qa'ida spokesman Sulayman Abu Ghayth, Osama bin Laden's son Sa'd, and Zarqawi are among a number of al-Qa'ida operatives in Iran. Iranian president Muhammad Khatami, however, refused to allow U.S. investigators to question suspects detained there.<sup>59</sup>

## **Ansar Rebounds**

Following the fall of Baghdad in early April 2003, some 140,000 U.S. forces occupied Iraq. Since then, relative calm has prevailed in the south under British control and in the north, still held by the Kurds. But U.S. forces in Iraq's center have become embroiled in a guerrilla war with unspecified numbers of irregular fighters who have inflicted a rising number of casualties.

For the first two months, Bush administration officials appeared certain that Saddam loyalists were the culprits behind sniper attacks and mine explosions that killed several soldiers per week. By July, however, after U.S. forces surrounded and killed Saddam's sons Uday and Qusay, officials began invoking the name Ansar al-Islam.

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50 Associated Press, Aug. 12, 2003.

51 Author's interview with PUK official, May 2003.

52 Associated Press, Mar. 31, 2003.

53 Agence France-Presse, Apr. 9, 2003.

54 *The Washington Post*, Mar. 25, 2003.

55 Author's interview with PUK official, May 2003.

56 Agence France-Presse, Mar. 25, 2003.

57 United Press International, May 9, 2003.

58 *An-Nahar* (Beirut), May 21, 2003.

59 Agence France-Presse, Aug. 13, 2003

The resurgence of Ansar al-Islam was no surprise. After all, some 300-350 members fled the Ansar compound ahead of the Iraq war, meaning that the group was bound to survive.<sup>60</sup> And as one prisoner during the war stated, “I don’t think the fight with Ansar will be over when America finishes its bombing.”<sup>61</sup>

As if on cue, in late April, clashes took place between a band of Ansar militants and local Kurdish security forces 45 kilometers east of Sulaymaniya.<sup>62</sup> The following month, just after the war’s end, a Kurdish spokesman stated that the group was trying to “regroup in the mountainous Iraqi-Iranian border region,” and that “a number of Ansar members are trying to join another Islamic group” in the region.<sup>63</sup>

Soon after that, Kurdish officials cited an unconfirmed report that several thousand al-Qa’ida fighters could attempt to resuscitate Ansar’s activities. Further, one Kurdish spokesman lamented that “if the strikes had occurred one year [before], 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.”<sup>64</sup> The official also noted that if the group had developed ricin or other chemical weapons, it likely moved them before the attacks. Thus, Ansar al-Islam could still carry out a chemical attack.

Finally, Kurdish officials also expressed fears that sleeper cells were waiting to be activated in the Kurdish enclave and that they could employ tactics such as suicide bombing. Evidence of this came in two wartime operations: the March 22 suicide bombing, carried out by a Saudi, killing an Australian cameraman at a checkpoint near Halabja,<sup>65</sup> and the thwarted suicide car-bombing on March 27 when security personnel shot an assailant before he reached the Zamaki checkpoint.<sup>66</sup>

Ansar’s website, during the war and after, featured a “Letter from the Emir of Ansar al-Islam, Abu ‘Abdullah ash-Shafi‘ to the Muslims of Kurdistan and Iraq and the World.” The missive threatened 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.”<sup>67</sup>

Kurdish fears appeared to be vindicated in June when Ansar al-Islam announced that it had opened its doors to volunteers to fight the United States in Iraq. In a statement sent to *Ash-Sharq al-Awsat* newspaper, ‘Abdullah ash-Shafi‘, the group’s local leader, boasted (falsely) that his group had already destroyed ten U.S. tanks.<sup>68</sup>

When a car bomb rocked the Jordanian embassy in Iraq on August 7, 2003, and killed seventeen people, Ansar al-Islam was among the first suspected culprits. According to Lt. Gen. Norton Schwartz, no specific information about Ansar’s involvement was available, but he still noted that Ansar had “infrastructure in Iraq, and some of that remains, and our effort is focused on eliminating that.”<sup>69</sup> An *Al-Hayat* article on the same day iterated Schwartz’s concerns, stating that Islamic militants from Pakistan had infiltrated northern Iraq with the help of bin Laden, and “it was suspected that the Ansar al-Islam group was in connection with the Islamists in Falluja, Tikrit, Bayali, and Baghdad” where attacks against U.S. forces were taking place.<sup>70</sup> Washington expressed fears that the number of fighters might have been

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60 *The New York Times*, Aug. 13, 2003.

61 *The Boston Globe*, Mar. 19, 2003.

62 *Ash-Sharq al-Awsat*, Apr. 22, 2003.

63 Author’s interview with Kurdish spokesman, Washington, D.C., May 20, 2003.

64 Author’s interview with PUK official, Apr. 1, 2003.

65 Kurdish Media, Mar. 25, 2003, at <http://www.kurdmedia.com/news.asp?id=3635>.

66 Author’s interview with PUK official, Apr. 1, 2003.

67 At <http://www.nawend.com/ansarislam.htm> (site no longer available).

68 *Ash-Sharq al-Awsat*, June 13, 2003.

69 Associated Press, Aug. 8, 2003.

70 *Al-Hayat*, Aug. 7, 2003.

in the hundreds.<sup>71</sup> Administration officials also expressed concerns that safe houses and other logistical operations in Iraq were being run by Ansar al-Islam.<sup>72</sup>

Meanwhile, the PUK reported in August that its forces had captured several Ansar militants among some fifty people caught infiltrating northern Iraq by way of Iran.<sup>73</sup> Among them were five Iraqis, a Palestinian, and a Tunisian.<sup>74</sup> Information gleaned from subsequent interrogations has not yet been made public by Kurdish officials.

Following the Jordanian embassy attack, there was fear that Ansar was still planning something bigger. Indeed, Bremer stated, “Intelligence suggests that Ansar al-Islam is planning large-scale terrorist attacks [in Iraq] ... I think we have to be pretty alert to the fact that we may see more of this.”<sup>75</sup>

On August 13, a number of gunmen attacked U.S. troops in downtown Baghdad and then sped from the scene. Before they left, however, they dropped cards stating “Death to the Collaborators of America—al-Qa‘ida.” This may have been in reference to the Jordanian embassy bombing, or even to the forthcoming bombing at the U.N. compound in Baghdad on August 19, when a suicide bomber drove a cement mixer full of explosives that set off a blast killing seventeen and wounding more than 100 people. While two previously unknown groups claimed responsibility for the attack, *The New York Times* noted that “the immediate focus of attention was Ansar al-Islam, a militant Islamic group that American officials believe has been plotting attacks against Western targets in Baghdad.”<sup>76</sup>

### **Ansar’s Network**

These operations, in the heart of Baghdad, raised the specter of cooperation between regime remnants and Ansar al-Islam. According to officials interviewed by *The Weekly Standard*, Ansar cadres were thought to be “joining with remnants of Saddam’s regime to attack American and nongovernmental organizations working in Iraq.”<sup>77</sup> There was much speculation that the Iraqi resistance was being coordinated by ‘Izzat Ibrahim ad-Duri, a Saddam confidant and one of the most wanted Baathists. He was fingered by two captured members of Ansar al-Islam as an instigator of the recent campaign of violence against Americans in Iraq.<sup>78</sup> (However, subsequent reports indicated that ad-Duri was struggling for his life in a battle with leukemia and was probably incapable of coordinating attacks against Americans.)<sup>79</sup>

Meanwhile, a concurrent *Newsweek* report indicated that “Ansar fighters are joining forces with Baathists and members of al-Qaeda.”<sup>80</sup> That report also indicated that Ansar’s structure was morphing such that each “fighting force is said to be reorganized into small units of ten to fifteen members, each headed by an ‘emir’.”<sup>81</sup> According to this report, Ansar, through its use of cells and contract fighters, had become a microcosm of the larger al-Qa‘ida network, which implements a similar structure worldwide.

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71 Agence France-Presse, Aug. 14, 2003.

72 *The New York Times*, Aug. 13, 2003.

73 Reuters, Aug. 12, 2003.

74 *The New York Times*, Aug. 13, 2003.

75 *Ibid.*, Aug. 10, 2003.

76 *Ibid.*, Aug. 20, 2003.

77 *The Weekly Standard*, Sept. 1-8, 2003.

78 Associated Press, Oct. 30, 2003.

79 *The Washington Times*, Oct. 31, 2003.

80 *Newsweek*, Oct. 13, 2003.

81 *Ibid.*

Ansar al-Islam's Iranian connection also gave rise to speculation. In August, suspected Ansar militants and/or al-Qa'ida cadres continued to stream across the Iranian border. While Kurdish officials arrested some fifty militants in August 2003,<sup>82</sup> it is not known how many have made it across without incident.

Among the infiltrators, some came with fake passports while others had identification from Tunisia and even European countries. Once the infiltrators made it out of Iran, Saddam loyalists were thought to help smuggle them into central Iraq to fight U.S. forces.<sup>83</sup> In this way, it appears that the mullahs ensured continued fighting in Iraq.<sup>84</sup> Iran was also under increased scrutiny for its continued harboring of more senior al-Qa'ida operatives. Some of these operatives were expelled to their host countries. The whereabouts of others are unknown.<sup>85</sup>

Ansar al-Islam is not only back in Iraq; the group also appears to have gone global—at least, to some extent. *Ash-Sharq al-Awsat* reported in April that two Tunisians were arrested in Italy for ties to Ansar al-Islam.<sup>86</sup> In August, several suspected Ansar cadres were found with five Italian passports.<sup>87</sup> Italy appears to be a central jumping-off point for Ansar; wiretaps by Italian police confirm this to be true.<sup>88</sup> More recently, Italian intelligence revealed the existence of an extensive al-Qa'ida support network in northern Italy. The network, established in spring 2002 and based out of Milan, Varese, and Cremona, has reportedly provided funds and recruits to Ansar al-Islam and al-Qa'ida.<sup>89</sup>

But many questions remain about the extent of Ansar al-Islam's network. Lebanese, Jordanian, Moroccan, Syrian, Palestinian, and Afghan fighters have all fought among the ranks of Ansar. That could mean there is or was a recruiting infrastructure in each country to bring them to northern Iraq. Further, if the group did receive funds from Abu Qatada in London, then Ansar al-Islam also has at least some infrastructure there. If Syria is a staging ground for Ansar fighters, as the Italian wiretaps revealed, then Ansar is one more terrorist organization operating with a wink and a nod from Damascus. And finally, if some funding for the group came from Saudi Arabia, as Michael Rubin suggests, then one can assume that the Wahhabi infrastructure is supporting this group.<sup>90</sup>

Unfortunately, there are no definitive answers to these questions. Ansar al-Islam is a new terrorist group; information about it is still emerging. But one thing is clear: Ansar al-Islam is one of the most dangerous affiliates in al-Qa'ida's orbit, with the potential to strike at vital U.S. interests in Iraq. And given its broader links, the group could develop an even wider reach—like al-Qa'ida itself.

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82 *Ash-Sharq al-Awsat*, Aug. 18, 2003.

83 Agence France-Presse, Aug. 17, 2003.

84 *Ash-Sharq al-Awsat*, Aug. 18, 2003.

85 *Middle East Newline*, Aug. 21, 2003.

86 *Ash-Sharq al-Awsat*, Apr. 3, 2003.

87 *The New York Times*, Aug. 13, 2003.

88 *Los Angeles Times*, Apr. 28, 2003.

89 "Ansar Al-Islam's European Base," American Foreign Policy Council, Oct. 31, 2003, citing *Corriere della Serra* (Milan), Oct. 27, 2003.

90 Rubin, "The Islamist Threat in Iraqi Kurdistan."