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COMMENTARY

THE ENEMY OF MY ENEMY: THE ODD LINK BETWEEN ANSAR AL-ISLAM, IRAQ AND IRAN

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In his first media briefing following the start of the war in Iraq, US General Tommy Franks was questioned about the activities of the shadowy terrorist organization, Ansar al-Islam. He was noncommittal in his response. However, with the killing of an Australian journalist and his Kurdish escort a few days into the war, and the subsequent US bombing of Ansar positions near Iraq's northwestern border with Iran, it is of some import to describe this organization and its role in Iraq.

Ansar appeared just before the September 11 attack on the US. A small group of extremist Kurdish Islamic rebels from the splintered Islamic Movement of Kurdistan (IMK) merged to form a Taliban-like faction. They follow an extremist form of Sunni Islam that is similar to the religious dictates of Wahabism - an arch-conservative movement found in Saudi Arabia and blamed by Western officials for encouraging acts of terrorism against US interests. Essentially, they conform to a religious doctrine that teaches its adherents that they must follow the teachings of the Koran literally.

In July of 2001, splinter groups from the IMK— al-Tawhid (the Islamic Unification Movement-IUM) and Hamas— joined to form the Islamic Unity Front (IUF). They were joined in August by the Soran Forces, the most important military splinter group of the IMK. The IUF was dissolved in early September, 2001. A new group was formed; it was initially called Jund al-Islam (Soldiers of Islam).

Their leader is the enigmatic Mullah Krekar, whose real name is either Najm al-Din Faraj Ahmad, Najmuddin Faraj Ahmad or possibly even Fateh Najm Eddine Farraj. He is of Kurdish extraction, and once proclaimed to a Kurdish newspaper that "Democracy is based on four principles which are not permissible in Islam. As far as Islam is concerned, democracy from beginning to end is heresy." The same kind of extreme view was held by the Taliban.

This conviction is not surprising, since Mullah Krekar has been associated with Afghanistan since the war against the

Soviet Union in the 1980s. He is known to have studied Islamic law in Pakistan under the Palestinian scholar Abdullah Azzam - the same man who is considered to be the mentor of Osama bin Laden.

Mullah Krekar joined Ansar shortly after September 11. He replaced Abu Abdullah Shafae, who was trained by al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. Shafae became Ansar's deputy leader. Another important leader was Abu Abdul Rahman, who had supposed ties to al-Qaeda, however he was killed in fighting in October, 2001.

According to the Norwegian government, Mullah Krekar had been living in Oslo since claiming asylum in 1991. While returning to Oslo from Iran in September of 2002 he was briefly detained in Amsterdam by Dutch authorities. A month prior to this, Norway had revoked his refugee status. He is now back in Norway, where he acts as the spokesperson for Ansar. His presence has clearly had a "positive" influence on the fortunes of Ansar.

In the wake of September 11 Jund al-Islam took hold of a swath of territory in north-eastern Iraq, along the Iranian border. Sometime in December, 2001 (after being defeated by the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan- PUK) they dissolved and then re-formed under the name of Ansar al-Islam fi Kurdistan which, roughly translated, means Supporters or Partisans of Islam in Kurdistan. They have also been referred to as the Islam Partisan Movement and are on the US State Department's list of terrorist organizations. Presently Ansar is based near the villages of Biyara and Tawela, which are northeast of the town of Halabjah in the Hawraman region of Sulaymaniyah Province. So far their primary foe has been the PUK, who are the defacto ruling power in the region.

There had been a brief cease-fire between the two groups, but in July of 2002 Ansar resumed its attacks against the PUK. To date the worst attack occurred in 2001 when Ansar conducted a surprise attack on a PUK held village resulting in the massacre of 42 PUK guerrillas. The PUK has also claimed that Ansar has been involved in kidnappings, terrorist bombing attacks and other regional "atrocities".

Ansar al-Islam has become infamous as Colin Powell's al-Qaeda link to Iraq. At best, these links are tenuous. However, if Ansar can gain more territory and cause more problems for the PUK, there is a possibility that the latter - one of the key US allies in northern Iraq - could become destabilized. This in turn could lead to Ansar-controlled territory growing into a Taliban like mini-state, especially given the support it has from Iran and Iraq.

According to the British Broadcasting Corporation, a top captured Iraqi intelligence officer, Abu Iman al-Baghdadi, has indicated that one of the senior Ansar leaders, Abu Wail, is an Iraqi intelligence officer. If this is true then Saddam and his security services have some influence on Ansar. Al-Baghdadi's claims are reinforced when one considers the radio chatter between Ansar forces and Iraqi army units heard by the Kurdish military. Furthermore, the leader of the PUK, Barhim Salih, claims that a group affiliated with Ansar is operating from Mosul, a city under Iraqi control at the time of writing.

Until the recent round of US air strikes on its mountain redoubts, it has been reasonable to assume is that Ansar was a small paramilitary band composed of some 700 or possibly 800 fighters (some sources have indicated numbers as low as 500-600 fighters). Most are Iraqi Kurds, many of whom fought in Afghanistan against the Soviets. However, there are individuals within its ranks who are both Taliban and al-Qaeda members who escaped from Afghanistan after the US invasion, but their numbers represent less than 10 percent of Ansar's strength. This and Ansar's leadership are the tenuous Iraq-al-Qaeda link that the US has been trying to establish. Ansar's also include Iraqis, Jordanians, Moroccans, Palestinians, and Afghans, all of whom have been trained and/or fought in Afghanistan. There do not seem to be any Saudis (who are a major part of al-Qaeda) present in Ansar's ranks..

The presence of non-Kurdish members of Ansar was substantiated by Human Rights Watch, which noted that "a number of them [villagers], including former detainees, said that there were foreigners among Ansar al-Islam forces, that on occasion they were interrogated by non-Iraqis speaking various Arabic dialects, and that they had heard other languages spoken that they did not recognize."

Reports from the region indicate that Ansar has set up a Taliban-style enclave composed of several villages with an approximate population of 4,000. Apparently, they have burned down girls' schools and beaten and killed women for not wearing the burqa. Human Rights Watch has reported that Ansar has tortured people and targeted individuals who are perceived as not following their interpretation of the Koran.

Since the US proclamations that Ansar is linked to al-Qaeda, Mullah Krekar has threatened, in a recent interview with the newspaper Al-Hayat, to show evidence that he had contacts with the American government prior to September 11. He stated, "I have in my possession irrefutable evidence against the Americans and I am prepared to supply it ... if [the United States] tries to implicate me in an affair linked to terrorism." He went on to tell Al-Hayat that, "[He] had a meeting with a CIA representative and someone from the American army in the town of Sulaymaniya [in Iraqi Kurdistan] at the end of

2000. They asked us [Ansar] to collaborate with them ... but [we] refused to do so."

What is clear about the existence of Ansar al-Islam, is that in one form or another it has links with both the Iraqi and Iranian governments. The very fact that Ansar forces have occasionally retreated into Iran, that they are getting weapons through Iran, and that Mullah Krekar was arrested in Europe on the way back from Iran, means the Iranian government has to be aware of the presence of the organization. In actuality, the government of Iran has to be offering some direct and indirect support given the specific locations from which Ansar operates. It is also in the interest of the Iranian government to have a group like Ansar opposing the PUK, thus destabilizing Kurdish opposition and possibly forestalling the creation of a Kurdish state—something Tehran vehemently opposes.

As to the Iraqi link, the logic is similar. It is in Saddam's interest to have a force directly opposing Kurdish independence. Also, given the tenuous al-Qaeda links, Ansar offers Baghdad a proxy force to thwart America's regional ambitions.

There is also a nexus of interests here, in that Ansar, Tehran and Baghdad all have one general goal in common—opposition to the US. The old adage, "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" comes to mind. This creates a serious problem for US intentions in Iraq as Ansar represents a pre-cursor movement that could easily evolve into another al-Qaeda. The idea is not that far-fetched, since the organization has the lineage, it has outside support, and its members are clearly fanatics.

Given that the attack on Iraq has now occurred, the US and its allies must take a harder look at this seemingly insignificant group, as Ansar may prove to be yet another terrorist thorn in the side of the US. Its neutralization through air strikes and ground action must be a priority lest it become a complicating factor in a post-Saddam Iraq and a terrorist threat to Americans everywhere.

In early April, US Special Forces assaults on the Ansar enclave have apparently broken their grip, with the remnants being driven across the border into Iran. What is unclear as of 2 April, 2003 is how degraded Ansar actually is. Given that the general attack on Iraq has now occurred, the US and its allies must take a harder look at this seemingly insignificant group, as Ansar may prove to be yet another terrorist thorn in the side of the US. Worse, if not nipped in the bud, it may become in a post-Saddam Iraq a strong counter-weight to US regional objectives.

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