

WITH THE FALL of the Taliban, and the consequent disruption of al-Qaeda's base in Afghanistan, fears have arisen that terrorists have dispersed to other remote and lawless parts of the world, quickly forming new outposts there and/or blending with sympathetic local radical militant groups who can provide manpower and succour. By their nature, such groups can be hard to pin down and combat; they might be enmeshed in complex local political dynamics and, to add to the confusion over their ultimate intentions, apparently be used as tactical proxies by an otherwise improbably eclectic host of groups and states.

One such militant group is Ansar al-Islam (Followers of Islam), which operates in Iraqi Kurdistan. On 20 August, unnamed US officials were quoted in the press as saying that Ansar 'might be experimenting with [the toxin] ricin'. The officials went on to say that the Bush administration had considered a military strike against Ansar, but had decided that the target area was too small to justify one. With the US seemingly preparing for war with Iraq, it is certain that Ansar – an organisation variously claimed by Western and Kurdish officials to be backed not only by al-Qaeda, but also Iran and Saddam Hussein – will attract greater attention.

The rise of Ansar

In March 1988, many of those who survived Iraq's use of chemical weapons against the Kurdish town of Halabja and the surrounding region fled to Iran. They only returned in significant numbers after 1991, when, following a post-Gulf War rebellion encouraged by the West, the creation of an Allied-imposed no-fly zone led to the founding of the Kurdish 'safe haven' in northern Iraq. This area is now administered by Kurdish political-military parties: the western part is run by the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP); and the eastern part by the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Both of these traditional competitors are secular organisations, but they were soon challenged by religious groups that began to wield considerable influence and field guerrillas in Halabja after 1991, perhaps thanks to Iranian influence. Most notable was the group now known as the Islamic Movement of Kurdistan (IMK).

In June 2001, disputes over Islamic doctrine, doubtless fed by personal animus among leading figures, led to the IMK's fragmentation. Hardliners who admired Osama bin Laden, and who are thought to have had considerable contacts with al-Qaeda, formed Jund al-Islam (Soldiers of Islam). This group included Iraqi and foreign Arabs amongst its followers. Jund then joined other former

IMK members led by one Mullah Krekar and created Ansar, whose foundation was announced on 1 September 2001. Komola was another small group to emerge from the IMK split.

Today, Ansar controls a relatively small area of about 100km sq, centred on the village of Biyarah hard on the Iranian frontier and about 20 km north-east of Halabja. According to Iraqi Kurdish *peshmarga* (guerrilla) commanders, it has up to 700 men under arms, of whom 70–80 are Iraqi Arabs, Saudis, Jordanians, Sudanese and other foreign Muslims. Some of its Kurdish members and many of its foreign fighters apparently saw action in Afghanistan, taking refuge with Ansar following the collapse of the Taliban regime.

According to the PUK, whose claims have to be treated with some caution, one of the main leaders of Ansar is Abdullah Shafei, also known as Winya Rassool. He is in his mid-to-late 40s and in 1993–2000 was with al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. Another is Abu Wae'l, who similarly is said to have spent time with al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. PUK officials claim he is also an Iraqi intelligence agent. The PUK contend that a third leader, Mullah

Al-Qaeda in Northern Iraq?

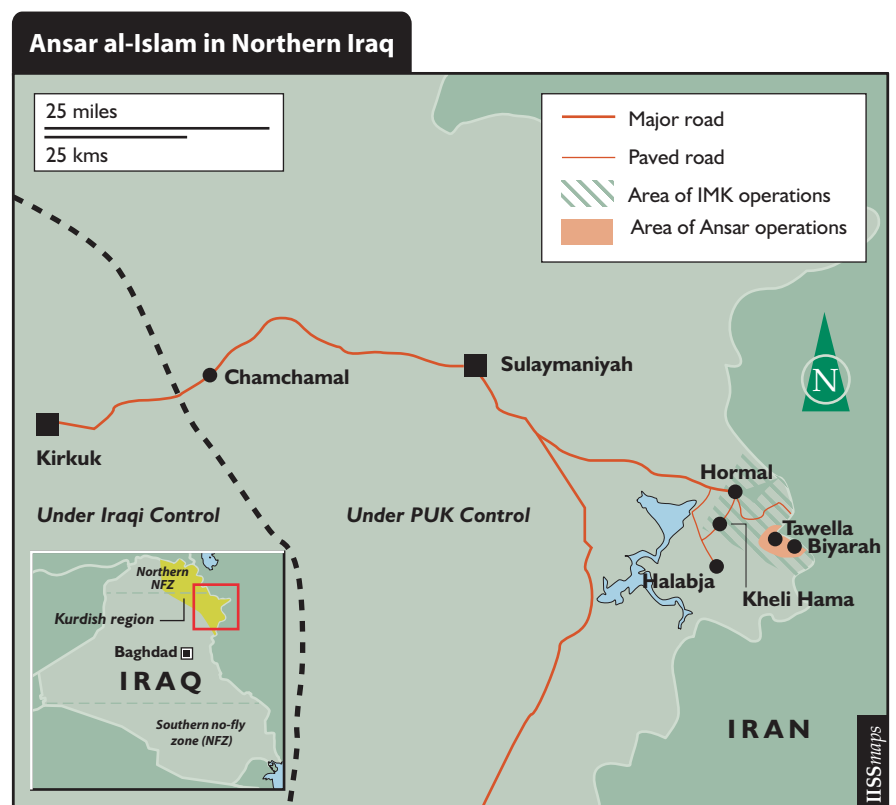
The elusive Ansar al-Islam

Krekar, has family in Norway, a Norwegian travel document, has not been seen in the region for some two months and may be in Norway. They allege that he has used Norway as a base from which to gather funds for Ansar. In Friday sermons he has supposedly often praised bin Laden and claimed to be his student. However, in August, Mullah Krekar claimed, in an interview with the Middle East broadcaster al-Jazeera, that Ansar had no links to al-Qaeda.

While Ansar is centred on Biyarah, a larger surrounding area is controlled by Komola and the IMK. The IMK continues to be a legal party in PUK-controlled Kurdistan and its leader, Mullah Ali, holds court in Halabja. Its links to Ansar are deeply ambiguous, but one of Mullah Ali's sons, Tahseen, is a leading light in Ansar and is believed to be the key interlocutor with the task of sourcing weapons from Iran.

Objectives and capabilities

Ansar's original aims were apparently twofold – local and international. Firstly, they wanted to create a Taliban-style Islamic Emirate of Kurdistan, which



Al-Qaeda in Northern Iraq? page 2

according to Ansar would eventually be part of an Islamic world of emirates (Afghanistan being the first). Unlike the IMK and Komola, Ansar has imposed unpopular Taliban-like Islamic restrictions on the people of Biyarah. Secondly, Ansar's area of control was to provide a new base, strategically located between Afghanistan and Israel, that could provide a discreet haven for international militants. After the Taliban's ouster, speculation that Ansar is offering al-Qaeda a safe haven has therefore assumed greater importance.

The al-Qaeda connection is lent some substance by the testimony of Ansar prisoners held by the PUK. While this testimony was gathered first-hand in interviews for *Strategic Comments*, it must necessarily be treated with caution. One prisoner alleges that al-Qaeda activists, working clandestinely with the rank-and-file of the IMK, had invested considerable energy in the formation of Ansar. The prisoner contended that in 2001, three delegations from what was to become Ansar went for training with al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, where tuition covered techniques relating to explosives, poisons, street fighting and kidnapping.

Meanwhile, the PUK claim that Ansar is also armed and supplied by Iran. *Peshmerga* commanders say that Iranian officers conduct artillery spotting for Ansar from the mountains in Iran behind Ansar positions. They also contend that Iran recently supplied Ansar with three truck-mounted *Katyusha* multi-barrel rocket launchers and that in early summer the Iranian Army briefly transported soldiers to Tawella, near Biyarah. The PUK interpreted this as an Iranian warning to them, possibly indicating greater involvement should the PUK move against Ansar. Wounded Ansar fighters are also said to be evacuated to Iranian hospitals. To claims of Iranian involvement are added allegations of Iraqi complicity. One prisoner was alleged by his PUK guards to be an agent of the Iraqi intelligence services – although he denied this. The PUK believe that Saddam has been supporting Ansar financially. They say that their intelligence organisation has identified Iraqi agents infiltrating the area, noting the subsequent payment of Ansar personnel.

A tactical proxy?

In theory, Iran, al-Qaeda and Saddam's Iraq should not have shared concerns. However, in Iraqi Kurdistan it would appear that all three derive some strategic benefit from Ansar's activities. Al-Qaeda wanted a Kurdish base even before the fall of the Taliban, and it seems likely that the region has indeed provided a sanctuary

for at least some men in flight from Afghanistan. Saddam, meanwhile, has a clear interest in supporting groups who can destabilise the Kurdish autonomous region, which has been identified as a possible federal unit in a post-Saddam Iraq. Until recently, the PUK and the Iranians had good relations, since both had a mutual enemy in Saddam. However, the Iranians are now nervous that a secular, democratic and federated Iraqi Kurdistan, which might emerge following the fall of Saddam in the face of a US attack, would provide an unwelcome inspiration to Iran's own 8m Kurds.

Conflict with the KDP/PUK

Ansar has launched terrorist attacks against both the PUK and KDP. On 23 September 2001, Ansar personnel murdered 42 PUK guerrillas captured during fighting at the village of Kheli Hama. In response, the PUK launched an offensive, and by 25 September had succeeded in expelling Ansar from Halabja. By the beginning of November they were confined to the mountains.

In addition to the incident at Kheli Hama, Ansar's acknowledged terrorist actions have included: the assassination, on 18 February 2001, of Franso Hariri, a key ally of KDP leader Massoud Barzani and Kurdistan's most prominent Christian politician; the attempted assassination, on 2 April 2002, of the PUK prime minister Barham Salih; and the July 2002 desecration of tombs belonging to the Naqshbandi Sufi order.

Over the summer of 2002, the PUK has made preparations for an offensive against Ansar. Trench systems and fortifications have been built in the valley beyond Hormal, and in the mountains which skirt around the area under Ansar's control. Another 2,000 men reinforced a regular 1,000-strong *peshmerga* contingent in July and August – these regularly trade artillery fire with Ansar.

The PUK's attitude is that it can live with the IMK, and with reports speaking of divisions within Ansar over the Naqshbandi tomb desecrations, PUK officials had hoped that a wedge might be driven between Ansar and the IMK and Komola. In a bid to achieve this, the PUK has been talking to the IMK over the past few months, sometimes with the involvement of Iranian clerics and officials. The PUK believes that Ansar will not be hard to defeat on its own, as long as it does not receive active Iranian support. Still, should the PUK launch offensive operations aimed at crushing Ansar, it is quite possible that IMK and Komola fighters will feel compelled in the name of Islamic solidarity to fight alongside Ansar.

Together, the IMK, Komola and Ansar are believed to control some 2,000 fighters.

Ansar's future

It is clear is that the attention presently focusing on Ansar can only hinder its operations, notwithstanding alleged support from Iran, Iraq and al-Qaeda. At present, Ansar is holed up in mountains abutting the Iranian border, besieged by the PUK, who want to eliminate them before any American-led attack on Saddam begins. The PUK does not want to be faced with a distracting, two-front war when an American attack commences. It is confident that Saddam's forces will collapse under the US assault, giving the PUK the unique opportunity to capture the oil-rich city of Kirkuk. This is one of the PUK's main strategic objectives in any coming conflict.

The PUK is readying its troops and, with the rapprochement between the PUK and the KDP announced in early September, it has become more plausible that the former would take up the offer of help from a KDP still smarting from Ansar's assassination of Hariri. Although there has yet been no direct military involvement by Western forces, the report of Iranian personnel movements near Tawella was followed by visits to the area by US and UK military intelligence personnel (although whether this was a direct response to the Iranian troop movements is not clear). The PUK subsequently asked the US to launch air strikes against Ansar. Although the US decided not to take action on that occasion, they undoubtedly possess the capacity to act should they deem it necessary. If US military action is launched, it is unlikely that Ansar would be able to relocate and find another refuge within the Kurdish area. In the face of a PUK offensive, the only way out for Ansar would be through Iran. This outcome has the potential to lead to further instability, particularly if Iran continues to see Ansar as an 'Islamic bulwark', with the potential to act as a strategically useful cross-border insurgency unit.

Ansar's modest numbers and as yet limited military resources make it, first and foremost, a force in the local politics of northern Iraq and bordering areas. However, its rapid emergence from comparative obscurity highlights the apparent ease with which radical armed groups comprising an international membership can coalesce. Tracking, evaluating and prioritising the threats posed by such elusive groups will provide international intelligence and law-enforcement agencies with a persisting and onerous task. ●