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RADICAL ISLAM IN IRAQI KURDISTAN:

THE MOUSE THAT ROARED?

I. OVERVIEW

Tucked away in a handful of villages in a remote pocket of Iraqi Kurdistan, a small group of radical Islamist fighters has been accused of being the Kurdish offspring of the al-Qaeda network, and thus has become a fresh target in the international war on terrorism. To compensate for its limited reach and popularity, this group, called Ansar al-Islam (Partisans of Islam), has built on tenuous regional alliances to survive in the harsh mountainous environment above the town of Halabja in northwestern Iraq, just shy of the border with Iran. These alliances have enhanced its role as a minor spoiler in predominantly secular Kurdish politics in the Suleimaniyeh governorate.

Ansar al-Islam has been engaged there in a military stand-off with irregular forces of the regional government and has carried out sporadic attacks – with varying degrees of success – against secular Kurdish targets. In order to defeat this local rival through external intervention, the main parties that control the Kurdish enclave in northern Iraq have played up the threat it poses and its alleged links with terrorism.

Thanks to growing media exposure and the Bush administration's claim that Ansar al-Islam is beholden to both al-Qaeda and the Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein, this small band of Islamist fighters who say they seek to impose an Islamic state in the Kurdish areas of northern Iraq has become one of Washington's focal points as it makes the case for a war on the Iraqi regime. Administration officials have used Ansar al-Islam as Exhibit A in their claim that the regime in Baghdad not only is highly repressive and has, or seeks to acquire, weapons of mass destruction, but also is a major risk to share such weapons with terrorist groups for use against Western targets. This has catapulted the small extremist group to a significance that does not appear warranted by the known facts.

Despite intense media coverage in the past few months, little is certain about the group, whose fighters have remained secluded in a narrow wedge of the undulating hills that rise from the Halabja Plain up to the border. Villagers displaced by the group complain of harsh Taliban-like restrictions placed on the population and damage done to local shrines and institutions. Ansar adherents detained by the regional government claim that the group comprises a number of non-Kurdish fighters who arrived from Afghanistan following the U.S.-led war against the Taliban in the fall of 2001. They also describe camps where fighters are trained in basic infantry skills and suicide bombings for possible dispatch throughout the world.

In his presentation on Iraq at the U.N. Security Council on 5 February 2003,[1] U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell made two important claims regarding Ansar al-Islam: that a purported al-Qaeda operative, Abu Musab Zarqawi, established a "poison and explosive training centre camp" in the small area under Ansar's control and that the Iraqi regime has "an agent in the most senior levels of" Ansar. ICG is not in a position to evaluate these claims independently, which appear principally to be based on interrogations of detainees. If substantiated, of course, they would be extremely serious. Ansar's leader, Najmeddin Faraj Ahmad, known to his followers as Mullah Krekar, has vehemently denied any links with al-Qaeda and Baghdad. In the absence of further evidence, the only thing that is indisputable is that the group could not survive without the support of powerful factions in

[1] Text of Secretary of State Colin Powell's statement to the United Nations Security Council, 5 February 2003, at http://www.nytimes.com/2003/02/05/international/05raw-powell-text1.html.

neighbouring Iran, its sole lifeline to the outside world.

Ansar al-Islam is an offshoot of an Islamist movement that has a long history in Kurdish politics and whose main proponent, the Islamic Movement in Iraqi Kurdistan (IMIK), maintains its headquarters in Halabja, where it occupies the mayoralty. Although it is the third-largest political force in the Kurdish enclave, it failed to reach the 7 per cent threshold in the 1992 Kurdish elections necessary for participation in the regional parliament. It has thus been reduced to competing for influence in local elections and has remained largely confined to the Halabja area, where it could mutate but hardly proliferate. Its main rival is the staunchly secular Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), which controls the government in the eastern half of Iraqi Kurdistan.

Having lost a number of its fighters in clashes with Ansar al-Islam, it is not surprising that the PUK has sought to emphasise the group's putative terrorist connections, making detained Ansar followers available to foreign journalists and shepherding CIA agents and members of U.S. Special Forces up the mountain slopes to observe Ansar positions. But in the run-up to a possible war in Iraq, there is no hard evidence to suggest that Ansar al-Islam is more than a minor irritant in local Kurdish politics.

II. ORIGINS

As in other parts of the Middle East, Islamic fundamentalism has a long history among the Kurds, arising from nineteenth century Kurdish nationalism and recurring in episodic spikes. The immediate origins of the resurgence in the 1980s and 1990s lie in the ideology of Hassan al-Banna in Egypt, which spawned numerous radical Sunnite Islamic movements throughout the Middle East.[2] Like their Arab brethren, the Kurdish Islamists found inspiration in the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, despite the abiding differences that divide Shi'ite and Sunnite Islam.

The largest grouping of Kurdish Islamists is the Islamic Movement of Iraqi Kurdistan, which has undergone a number of permutations and name-changes since it emerged in the late 1980s from the ferment of the Iran-Iraq war. Squeezed between two undesirable regimes, Iraqi Kurds were operating in a security vacuum in the north of the country and trying to figure out how they could advance their own political (religious and nationalistic) agenda. Initially encouraged by Saddam's Ba'athist regime in Baghdad, the Islamists soon turned against it, posing a direct challenge to the socialist secularism and Arab nationalism on which the regime was based.

Under the leadership of Mullah Osman Abd-al-Aziz, Islamists deriving from the Muslim Brotherhood and other groupings and fortified by returning veterans from the Afghan war against the Soviet Union found strong support in certain corners of Iraqi Kurdistan. The Howraman area that for centuries has been a centre of religious activity and home to both Sunnite Islam and various Sufi sects was especially hospitable. The Howraman region hugs the border with Iran south of Suleimaniyeh; its district centre is the sizeable town of Halabja. The region is largely self-contained, separated from the rest of Kurdistan by towering mountains to the south and east, and the large Sirwan reservoir, also known as Darbandikhan Lake, to the north and west. Only one paved road connects Halabja with Suleimaniyeh.

In spring 1987 Islamist leaders in Halabja launched political activities, including the organisation of mass demonstrations against the regime's village destruction campaign. These led to military reprisals in May 1987, including the razing of one of the town's neighbourhoods, that forced the activists into the mountains, where they founded the IMIK and declared "jihad" on Baghdad.[3] The next year, despite its Sunnite foundation, the IMIK followed the example of the secular Kurdish parties and joined Iranian forces as they entered Iraqi territory in the so-called Val-Fajr 10 operation, a military foray that in turn triggered the massive Iraqi chemical attack on Halabja on 16 March 1988 after Saddam's forces were routed from the area.[4] The Kurds' defeat in the counter-insurgency campaign (Anfal) that spring led

[2] See Sami Shourush, "Islamist Fundamentalist Movements Among the Kurds", in Faleh Abdul-Jabar, ed., *Ayatollahs, Sufis and Ideologues: State, Religion and Social Movements in Iraq* (London, 2002), p. 177. According to Shourush, "in particular circumstances of the nineteenth century, the Kurdish liberation movement acquired an Islamic veneer".

[3] The Islamists were not the only Kurds active in the demonstrations. All Kurdish parties participated. Most were operating underground at the time.

[4] The destruction of the Kani Ashkan neighbourhood in May 1987 and the gassing of Halabja and surrounding areas in March 1988 are described in Human Rights Watch, *Iraq's Crime of Genocide: The Anfal Campaign Against the Kurds* (New Haven and London, 1995).

to the scattering of their fighters until the 1991 Gulf War revived their political fortunes.

When Baghdad was unable to contain the local situation and unilaterally withdrew from most of Iraqi Kurdistan in October 1991, the Kurdish parties, the Islamists among them, returned in force and set up a de facto Kurdish statelet in northern Iraq. The Islamists benefited from the new security vacuum, the modicum of democratic government created by the Kurdistan Front – a coalition of the main Kurdish parties, including the IMIK – and the return of Kurdish Islamist fighters from the war against the Soviets in Afghanistan to extend their influence in the enclave.[5]

Nevertheless, playing by the rules in the 1992 parliamentary and leadership elections, the IMIK gathered only 49,108 votes (out of roughly one million), or about 5 per cent, insufficient for parliamentary representation.[6] Disaffected with the political process, it contented itself with consolidating its presence in areas where it enjoyed popular support. There it set up its own consultative *shura* (council) and system of law enforcement, and began providing health, education and social services to its members.[7] The Halabja area was the main, though by no means only, such area, and the IMIK was the largest, but by no means only, Islamist group to engage in such activities in the enclave.

The IMIK's attempt to establish a parallel administration to that of the main Kurdish parties – the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) – led to friction and, eventually, armed clashes between the PUK and IMIK in December 1993. These were soon overshadowed, though, by the more serious armed conflict that broke out the following year between the PUK and KDP, in which the IMIK at times joined with the KDP.[8] Mediation by various outside actors, including the United States, Iran, and Iraqi Arab opposition groups, proved fruitless until the late 1990s, when the U.S. arranged a cease-fire between the KDP and PUK, and a cold peace came to northern Iraq.

A tactical move by the KDP toward Turkey prompted a successful Iranian bid to bring the PUK and IMIK together in May 1997 under what is known as the Tehran agreement. The reconciliation, as well as its refusal to impose Islamic *Shari'a* law in the areas it controlled, led to severe internal tensions, however, and the IMIK began to splinter. Veterans of the Afghan war set up at least two new parties, both far more radical than the IMIK: Kurdish Hamas under Omar Baziani and Tawhid under Abu Bakr Howleri.[9]

These parties adhered to Salafism, a brand of Sunnite Islam that was relatively new to Iraqi Kurdistan. It had arrived from Saudi Arabia both via Kurds' exposure to Saudi fighters in Afghanistan and through Saudi financial backing of charitable activities in northern Iraq after the area was opened up in the early 1990s. Most Kurds, by contrast, are Shafi'ite Sunnis, a branch that adheres to a less conservative interpretation of Islam. Both under secular rule from Baghdad and through their allegiance to the equally secular PUK and KDP, the vast majority of Kurds in the past decades have displayed few outer signs of deep religious devotion.

After the death of Mullah Osman Abd-al-Aziz in 1999, his brother, Mullah Ali Abd-al-Aziz, assumed control of the IMIK and joined the PUK's half of the Kurdistan Regional Government, taking charge of the Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs, as well as the Ministry of Justice.[10] The IMIK competed in local elections in the spring of 2001 and netted around 20 per cent of the vote in both the KDP- and PUK-controlled regions, and more than 50 per cent in the Halabja area.[11]

In May 2001, the IMIK spawned a further offshoot, the Islamic Group of Kurdistan (Komaleh Islami) under Mullah Ali Bapir, a devout adherent of Salafism with a pragmatic streak.[12] In early

[5] There are no reliable data on the number of Kurds who joined the *mujahedin* in their fight against the Soviets in Afghanistan. Anecdotal information suggests at least scores.

[6] "Results of Parliamentary Election in Iraqi Kurdistan Help [sic] May 1992", available at http://www.kurdistan-parliament.org/election.htm.

[7] Amnesty International, *Iraq: Human Rights Abuses in Iraqi Kurdistan since 1991* (London, 1995), p. 20. The IMIK made no apparent attempt to impose *Shari'a* law in these areas.

[8] See, Amnesty International, op. cit., pp. 98-130.

[9] There were geographic and political as well as ideological dimensions to this split. Baziani and Howleri hail from Erbil (Howleir), a region that has been under the exclusive control of the KDP since 1996.

[10] The IMIK's Minister of Justice resigned in February 2002 and was replaced by an independent.

[11] Inga Rogg, "Die Kurden im Bann der Islamisten", *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 2 December 2002.

[12] Ali Bapir has declared that his group "does not consider it an illegitimate act to cooperate with any side that takes heed of the interest of the people and the homeland, provided that it is not against Islamic law". RFE/RL. Iraq Report, vol. 5,

September, Hamas and Tawhid unified under the leadership of Abdullah al-Shaf'i and named itself Soldiers of Islam (Jund al-Islam) and declared "jihad" against secular Kurdish parties. After the 11 September attacks in the United States a few days later, there was pressure on Islamists to distance themselves from terrorism.[13] A few months later, after military setbacks at the hands of the PUK, Najmeddin Faraj Ahmad, known as Mullah Krekar, assumed control over Jund al-Islam, which was renamed Ansar al-Islam (Partisans of Islam).[14]

III. ACTIVITIES

When still a member of the IMIK, Mullah Krekar declared in May 2001 that the Kurdish Islamists' objective was "to bring down the Iraqi regime and replace it with an Islamic regime".[15] His aim was not limited to Baghdad; as leader of Ansar al-Islam he has also sought to replace the Kurdistan Regional Government with one modelled on the Taliban.[16] The Islamists' conduct in northern Iraq has been consistent with this objective, as well as with the practices of radical Islamists in other countries over the past decade. Members of Hamas and Tawhid are said to have attacked and vandalised bookshops, beauty salons, clubs and tourist areas in the main Kurdish towns, and to have thrown acid at women they accused of wearing immodest dress. Tawhid is also accused of having assassinated a prominent Assyrian (Christian) politician close to the KDP, Franso Hariri, the governor of in Erbil, the seat of the KDP's half of the Kurdistan Regional Government, in February 2001.[17]

The PUK, which has controlled the eastern part of the Kurdish enclave since the 1996 break-up of the Kurdistan Regional Government, has been in the frontline of the military effort to confront radical Islam in the Kurdish mountains. Its accommodation with the IMIK gave it access to the Halabja area, but the wider Howraman region has been off-limits to its fighters. Both the Islamic Group of Kurdistan and Ansar al-Islam have taken up positions there, the former in and around the town of Khurmal just east of the main road leading from Halabja to Suleimaniyeh, and the latter in the small towns of Biyara and Tawela and surrounding villages further up the mountains toward the border.

The PUK has fought a number of battles with Ansar or its immediate predecessor, the Jund al-Islam, reportedly losing 42 fighters in an ambush in September 2001 and another 53 in December 2002. Mortar exchanges occur intermittently.[18] In general the PUK is the far superior military force, able to field some 10,000 fighters in the area under its control,[19] but it has contained Ansar al-Islam, not defeated it. The Islamic Group and the IMIK have acted as buffers; at times IMIK representatives have mediated between the PUK and Ansar.[20] These talks

N°3 (January 25, 2002), quoting the Suleimaniyeh weekly newspaper *Komal* on January 10. In August 1998 the IMIK had merged with a group headed by Osman Abd-al-Aziz's brother, Sadiq Abd-al-Aziz, Haraket al-Nahda, changing its name to the Islamic Unity Movement in Iraqi Kurdistan (IUMIK). When Ali Bapir left the IUMIK in May 2001, he took many of the Haraket al-Nahda activists with him, and in September the IUMIK, now under Osman's other brother, Ali, reverted to its old name, the Islamic Movement of Iraqi Kurdistan.

[13] According to the *Economist*, "within hours" of the 11 September attacks, the PUK accused the IMIK and Jund al-Islam of receiving training and money from both al-Qaeda and Iraqi intelligence agents with the aim of creating a haven for Osama bin Laden. "Bandwagon", *Economist*, 27 September 2001.

[14] Inga Rogg, "Die Kurden im Bann der Islamisten", *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 2 December 2002. Mullah Krekar is a former IMIK commander and a veteran of the Afghan war against the Soviets who obtained asylum in Norway in 1991 and was able to move about freely as a consequence.

[15] Quoted by Harem Jaff, "Islamic Terrorist Groups, many names, but one obvious aim", KurdishMedia.com, 6 October 2001.

[16] This according to an unaffiliated Kurdish observer, Asos Hardi, editor of the independent news weekly, *Hawlati*, in an interview with the ICG, Suleimaniyeh, August 2002.

[17] Presentation by Barham Salih, the prime minister of the PUK's half of the Kurdistan Regional Government in Suleimaniyeh, at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Washington, D.C., 11 October 2001. The assassination was apparently in retaliation for Tawhid's expulsion from Erbil by the KDP, which could no longer tolerate the group's violent practices. ICG telephone interview with an expert on the Kurds, London, 4 February 2003.

[18] A PUK intelligence officer told *The New York Times* that "for the amount of mortars Ansar shells us with each month, they would need six or seven trucks to carry it", and that these must have come from or via Iran, given the location of Ansar's bases on the border. C.J. Chivers, "Kurds Face a Second Enemy: Islamic Fighters on Iraq Flank", *The New York Times*, 13 January 2003.

[19] ICG interview with a PUK official in northern Iraq, August 2002. The KDP may have as many as 15,000 fighters. See also, the International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2002-2003* (London, 2002), p. 97.

[20] ICG interview with IMIK representative Muhammad Ra'ouf Ahmad, Suleimaniyeh, August 2002. Although some PUK officials interviewed by ICG expressed extreme scepticism over the IMIK's offers of mediation, claiming the

yielded no results, and the PUK has become convinced that, in the words of one official, "there is no other way of solving this problem than by fighting" the radical Islamists.[21] When ICG visited the area in May 2002, Ansar positions were visible on hilltops east of Halabja, hard up against the Iranian border, its fighters facing off with PUK forces entrenched in the plain and the mountains around it.

The arrival of Ansar al-Islam in the villages of Howraman precipitated a haemorrhage of their small population.[22] After denouncing secular Kurdish society and politics as "blasphemous", the organisation sought to apply *Shari'a* law. Harsh restrictions reminiscent of Taliban rule in Afghanistan were applied: no public forms of entertainment such as music and dancing, no alcohol or television, no images of women on public display, a strict dress code (a head scarf or full-length dress for women, a beard for men), and adherence to prayer times – all at pain of physical punishment, including death. Beauty salons were ransacked and girls' schools burned down.[23] Those who objected were harassed or expelled, and many other villagers left for Halabja and Suleimaniyeh to escape either the oppressive situation or the intermittent fighting between Ansar and the PUK.[24]

Particularly affected is the population of a small cluster of three villages dominated by the Kaka'i, a small syncretic sect, also known as the Ahl al-Haq, that has its spiritual centre in the village of Hawar, a pilgrimage site close to the border.[25] They are considered heretics by the Islamists of Ansar, who are Sunnite Muslims hewing to a conservative Wahhabi interpretation of their faith. The Kaka'i, by contrast, are a Sufi order known for its heterodoxy and tolerance of religious diversity. From the 450 households that are said to have been in these villages, only a few old people remain.[26] In July 2002, Ansar al-Islam supporters desecrated a number of tombs of Naqshbandi (Sufi) order sheikhs in the area, triggering a welter of condemnations from across the Kurdish spectrum, including the other Islamist groups.[27] The Naqshbandi population has similarly suffered under Ansar's Salafist yoke, though many villagers were reportedly displaced simply because

IMIK, Komeleh Islami and Ansar al-Islam are all made of the same cloth and cannot be trusted, both the IMIK and Komeleh Islami have engaged in forceful verbal exchanges with Ansar that have laid bare deep ideological and political differences. For example, the IMIK and Komeleh Islami have accused Ansar al-Islam of violating the fundamental principles of Islam; Ansar, in turn, has charged its former comrades with being "close to atheism" and driven by mercenary motives. "Ansar al-Islam Accuses Main Islamist Parties of Being Close to Atheism", Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Iraq Report, vol. 5, N°30, 20 September 2002. The Komeleh Islami, while refusing to join the PUK in the Kurdistan Regional Government, has been funded by it, believing as it does that whatever its ideological leanings and political affiliations, it is owed a share of the pie that has fed the Kurds under the U.N.'s "oil-for-food" program since 1996. Meanwhile, the IMIK has kept a representation in Biyara, the small town where Ansar al-Islam has its headquarters. In fact, IMIK leader Ali Abd-al-Aziz's son Tahsin is also based in Biyara, though his precise affiliation is uncertain. Another son, Irfan, is the IMIK's Media and Public Relations representative in Tawela, another Ansar stronghold. ICG telephone interview with an expert on the Kurds, London, 4 February 2003. See also, C.J. Chivers, "Kurds Puzzled by Report of Terror Camp", *The New York Times*, 6 February 2003.

[21] ICG interview with Qader Aziz, head of the Toilers' Party, a political group closely aligned with the PUK, Suleimaniyeh, August 2002.

[22] Kurdish sources indicate the population in the area controlled by Ansar al-Islam stood at 4,000. Given that all the towns and villages in the area were destroyed by the Iraqi regime during the Iran-Iraq war and only slowly began to be rebuilt in the 1990s, few of the original population has been living in the area in the past few years.

[23] Catherine Taylor, "Taliban-style group grows in Iraq", *Christian Science Monitor*, 15 March 2002; C.J. Chivers, "Kurds Face a Second Enemy: Islamic Fighters on Iraq Flank," *The New York Times*, 13 January 2003; and Human Rights Watch, "Ansar al-Islam in Iraqi Kurdistan", Human Rights News, 6 February 2003, available at:http://www.hrw.org/backgrounder/mena/ansarbk020503.htm.

[24] In the area of Kheyli Hama village, for example, which lies in a no-man's land between PUK and Ansar forces, all 140 reported families have left. ICG telephone interview with Hania Mufti of Human Rights Watch, 4 February 2002.

[25] ICG interview with a displaced resident of Hawar in Suleimaniyeh, May 2002. Despite being a religiously and linguistically distinct group (they speak their own language, Macho), the Kaka'i generally consider themselves to be Kurds. For a history of the Kaka'i presence in Iraqi Kurdistan, see Michiel Leezenberg, "Between Assimilation and Deportation: The Shabak and the Kakais in Northern Iraq", in K. Kehl-Bodrogi, ed., *Syncretistic Religious Communities in the Near East* (Leiden, 1997), pp. 155-74. See also, Sami Shourush, "The Religious Composition of the Kurdish Society: Sufi Orders, Sects and Religions", in Abdul-Jabar, op. cit., pp. 114-139.

[26] ICG telephone interview with Hania Mufti of Human Rights Watch, 4 February 2002. The three villages are Hawar, Hawara Kon, and Daratu.

[27] "Kurdish Islamist Group Targets Religious Moderates," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Iraq Report, vol. 5, N°23, 2 August 2002. For a description of the Naqshbandi order, see Helkot Hakim, "The origins of the Naqshbandiyya Sufi Order", in Abdul-Jabar, op. cit., pp. 140-145.

they faced extortion by Ansar activists seeking funds to finance their operations.[28]

During 2002 reports accumulated of heightened activity by Ansar al-Islam, but no independent sources exist to confirm most of them. Villagers and Ansar followers who defected or were captured by the PUK have asserted the growing presence in Howraman of non-Kurdish fighters of various origins – Iraqi, Jordanian, Moroccan, Palestinian, and other nationalities. These fighters, presumably "Afghan Arabs" seeking a new refuge after the U.S.-led military campaign brought down the Taliban, are said to have organised camps where Ansar fighters are trained in infantry skills and suicide bombings, and to have engaged in the development of and experimentation with chemical agents.[29] U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell strongly made this case in his address to the U.N. Security Council on 5 February 2003, even if he seemed to misidentify the camp's presumptive location.[30]

Ansar al-Islam has also been accused of the attempted assassination of the PUK prime minister, Barham Salih, in Suleimaniyeh in April 2002, during which five of his bodyguards were killed.[31] Finally, U.S. intelligence has accused Ansar al-Islam (and the Baghdad regime) of harbouring wanted al-Qaeda operatives, including Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian suspected of having ordered the killing of Laurence Foley, an official of the U.S. Agency for International Development in Jordan in October 2002.[32] This accusation, too, was raised publicly by the Secretary of State.

Because there is no independent access to the Ansar-controlled area, it is impossible to verify the group's true numbers and capabilities. Former Ansar followers have spoken of several hundred fighters, including about 100 non-Kurds.[33] They appear to be equipped with fairly new weaponry and munitions, including 82mm and 120mm mortar rounds that have improved their capabilities[34] but still leave them no match for the PUK. Press reports indicate that if Ansar were reinforced by other Islamist groups, it might be able to muster at most some 2,000 hardened fighters against a PUK offensive.[35]

IV. PURPORTED LINKS

Ansar al-Islam's predecessor, Jund al-Islam, emerged on 1 September 2001, just days before the terror attacks in the United States. In the immediate aftermath of these attacks it was accused of being a part of the al-Qaeda network by the prime minister of the eastern half of the Kurdistan Regional Government, Barham Salih, whose party, the PUK, had faced the brunt of the Islamists' advances since late 1993. Speaking in the U.S. in mid-October, a few weeks after the 23 September ambush that cost the lives of 42 PUK fighters, Salih made a number of claims that he based on the interrogations of detained Jund members. He asserted that the group was created at the behest of al-Qaeda, that it included several

[28] ICG telephone interview with Hania Mufti of Human Rights Watch, 4 February 2002.

[29] Tim Judah, "In Iraqi Kurdistan", *New York Review of Books*, 26 September 2002; "How Kurdistan's first suicide bomber changed his mind", *Observer*, 25August2002; and the International Institute for Strategic Studies, "Al-Qaeda in Northern Iraq? The elusive Ansar al-Islam", *Strategic Comments*, vol. 8, issue 7, 7 September 2002.

[30] The picture Mr. Powell displayed on a monitor during his speech purported to show a "Terrorist Poison Explosives Factory" in Khurmal. That village, however, has not been under the control of Ansar al-Islam, but of Komaleh Islami, which has denied the charge. The PUK, which has funded Komaleh, has likewise asserted that the Secretary of State is mistaken. C.J. Chivers, "Kurds Puzzled by Report of Terror Camp", *New York Times*, 6 February 2003.

[31] ICG interview with Barham Salih, Suleimaniyeh, May 2002.

[32] Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Unknown: The CIA and the Pentagon take another look at Al Qaeda and Iraq", *New Yorker*, 10 February 2003. Goldberg cites intelligence officials as claiming Zarqawi heads an al-Qaeda sub-group in the Ansar enclave, called Jund al-Shaam (Soldiers of the Levant) – which Goldberg refers to as Jund al-Shams (Soldiers of the Sun) – and is al-Qaeda's main specialist in chemical and biological terrorism. It is, however, not at all clear who Al-Zarqawi is, and whether he is indeed an al-Qaeda operative. See Ed Vulliamy, Martin Bright and Nick Pelham, "False trails that lead to the al-Qaeda 'links'", *Observer*, 2 February 2003.

[33] Mullah Krekar, interviewed in Norway, said Ansar al-Islam had 700 members. Richard Norton-Taylor, "Iraqi Islamist denies link with Baghdad", *Guardian*, 3 February 2003. This figure seems to accord with PUK estimates, which put the number at about 650. Of these, as few as 30 and as many as 150 are said to be non-Kurds. C.J. Chivers, "Kurds Face a Second Enemy: Islamic Fighters on Iraq Flank", *The New York Times*, 13 January 2003.

[34] ICG telephone interview with BBC reporter Quil Lawrence, Suleimaniyeh, 2 February 2003. PUK commanders told Lawrence that the rounds fired by Ansar were clearly of recent manufacture.

[35] The International Institute for Strategic Studies, "Al-Qaeda in Northern Iraq? The elusive Ansar al-Islam", *Strategic Comments*, vol. 8, issue 7, 7 September 2002. The IMIK and Komeleh Islami are the groups that it is suggested might contribute reinforcements in this scenario.

Arabs in addition to 34 Iraqi Kurds who had received training in Afghanistan, and that the PUK had killed a senior Jund commander, a Syrian who, he said, was the personal envoy of Osama bin Laden, on 8 October 2001.[36]

Journalists making the trek to northern Iraq since Salih's presentation have fleshed out the accusations, interviewing several Jund/Ansar detainees held by the PUK.[37] Their statements should be received with a good deal of scepticism since they were made in custody and in the presence of PUK guards. [38] Colin Powell echoed these accusations in his February 5 speech before the U.N. Security Council.[39] No independent sources have ever been presented to corroborate the link between Ansar and al-Qaeda.

Ansar defectors were cited in The *New York Times* as stating in January 2003 that Ansar's fifteen-member leadership council includes several persons who had visited al-Qaeda bases in Afghanistan.[40] The association of such figures with al-Qaeda training camps does not automatically translate into supervision over or direction of Ansar al-Islam's activities by bin Laden's network. Ansar's leader, Mullah Krekar, has strenuously denied the accusation, admitting – with an undertone of condescension – his admiration for bin Laden as "a good Muslim", even as he stressed the Kurdish roots of the Ansar experiment ("We have perceived the Islamists in Kurdistan as being a part of the Kurdish national movement").[41]

Yet, given the amorphous nature of al-Qaeda, Ansar's outlook and conduct, as well as reports by Howraman villagers that non-Kurdish fighters move around in the area controlled by the Kurdish Islamists, some connection between Ansar and al-Qaeda is plausible.[42] The situation may well turn out to be a miniature replication of Afghanistan after 1996, with Ansar taking on the role of the Taliban and harbouring elements of al-Qaeda. In the absence of hard evidence, though, the exact nature of a link remains unclear.

In addition to an alleged al-Qaeda link, accusations have been made that Ansar maintains close bonds with the regime of Saddam Hussein. This claim, also mentioned by the U.S. Secretary of State in his Security Council address, likewise arises from interviews with fighters captured by the PUK.[43] A senior Iraqi Arab commander of Ansar, "Abu Wa'el", is said to be employed by an Iraqi intelligence service.[44] The evidence for this is quite weak. Mullah Krekar has denied any tie to the Iraqi regime, citing irreconcilable differences and declaring Saddam Hussein the enemy.[45] He also has referred to Abu

[36] Presentation by the PUK's Barham Salih at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Washington, D.C., 11 October 2001. Goldberg ("The Unknown") incorrectly places the killing of the alleged al-Qaeda commander in November.

[37] See, for example, Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Great Terror", *New Yorker*, 25 March 2002; Scott Peterson, "Iraqi funds, training fuel Islamic terror group", *Christian Science Monitor*, 2 April 2002; and C.J. Chivers, "Kurds Face a Second Enemy: Islamic Fighters on Iraq Flank," *The New York Times*, 13 January 2003.

[38] The detainees were also in prolonged detention, with no trials scheduled. Al-Qaeda documents found in Afghanistan after the defeat of the Taliban also do not appear to provide strong proof of a link between al-Qaeda and Islamist groups in Iraqi Kurdistan. The documents are described by C.J. Chivers, "Kurds Face a Second Enemy: Islamic Fighters on Iraq Flank", *The New York Times*, 13 January 2003.

[39] Referring to an "associate" of Osama bin Laden named Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, Secretary Powell asserted that after leaving Afghanistan, Zarqawi "helped establish another poison and explosive training center camp", in an area controlled by Ansar al-Islam. Mullah Krekar says he has never seen or met Zarqawi. Don van Natta, Jr., "Exiled Mullah Denies Claims of Terror Ties Made by U.S.", *The New York Times*, 6 February 2003.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Mullah Krekar also asserted that he had never met Osama bin Laden, whose religious credentials he questioned, stating that since he was "neither a Mufti nor a Sheikh…we would not have needed him". The interview, carried out on Norwegian TV ("Intervju med mulla Krekar") on 31 January 2003, is available at http://www.nrk.no/kanal/nrk1/brennpunkt/2087935.html. But in June 2001, three months before the terror attacks in the United States, Mullah Krekar reportedly referred to bin Laden as the "jewel in the crown of the Muslim nation". Hiwa Osman, "Kurdish Islamic leader held", BBC News, World Edition, 13 September 2002.

[42] Human Rights Watch, which conducted extensive interviews in the area in 2002, gives credence to the possibility of links between Ansar al-Islam and al-Qaeda, but remains agnostic on the ongoing nature of such links. Human Rights Watch, "Ansar al-Islam in Iraqi Kurdistan", Human Rights News, 6 February 2003, available at:http://www.hrw.org/backgrounder/mena/ansarbk020503.htm.

[43] In Secretary Powell's words: "Baghdad has an agent in the most senior levels of the radical organisation, Ansar al-Islam….In 2002 this agent offered al-Qaeda safe haven in the region. After we swept al-Qaeda from Afghanistan, some of its members accepted this safe haven".

[44] Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Great Terror," *New Yorker*, 25 March 2002, p. 68.

[45] Mullah Krekar declared to the BBC: "I never had links with Saddam Hussein's family, Saddam Hussein's government, Saddam Hussein's party, not in the past, not now, not in the future, and not inside Iraq or outside, not directly, not indirectly. As a Kurdish man, I believe that he is our enemy,

Wa'el as "a toothless diabetic, too old and feeble to threaten anyone".[46] But more importantly, PUK officials, who stand most to gain from an Ansar-Baghdad collusion that might trigger U.S. intervention on the PUK's behalf, have stated there is no evidence of such a link. Barham Salih, for example, has said so repeatedly, emphasising that the Iraqi Arabs fighting with Jund/Ansar are quite clearly anti-regime.[47] Recent press reports suggest that some CIA officials also find the evidence for such a link less than convincing and have questioned its existence.[48]

The Islamists have seen the secular Ba'athist regime in Baghdad as the enemy since their inception. Given the persistence of profound ideological differences as well as a history of atrocities committed by the regime against the Kurds regardless of their religious identification, a strong connection between Saddam Hussein and Ansar al-Islam is extremely unlikely. If Baghdad gives any support to Ansar, it is likely to be in the form of financial assistance and to be motivated by a desire to keep a finger in the pot, stir up trouble among the Kurds, and keep the PUK on the defensive, rather than strategic allegiance with Ansar's cause.[49] Inversely, Ansar might wish to keep in touch with the Ba'athist regime in case it loses other sources of support and as a hedge against the future, i.e., a possible return of the regime to the Kurdish region, a prospect that today looks extremely unlikely.

Whatever the nature of Ansar's putative links with al-Qaeda and the Iraqi regime, there can be no question that since its inception Ansar, like its predecessors, has enjoyed the active support of powerful factions in Iran. Ansar's bases are hemmed in by PUK fighters on one side and the Iranian border on the other. The mere fact that the militants are known to travel to and from their area through Iran suggests a degree of involvement that goes beyond a mere acceptance of their existence.[50] Any al-Qaeda fighters present in the Ansar-controlled enclave also would have had to have come from Afghanistan through Iran.

Any alliance between Sunnite Ansar al-Islam and Shi'ite Iran could only be temporary and tactical. Massive discrimination against Sunnite Kurds in Iran since the Islamic Revolution ensures that Ansar al-Islam's leadership will cooperate with radical conservative forces in Iran's security establishment only as long as it stands to gain and has no viable alternative.[51] For its part, the Islamic Republic has a long history of sponsoring Islamist movements in Iraqi Kurdistan. Despite religious and ideological differences, Iran has seen support for Kurdish Islamists as a means of keeping the PUK and KDP on the defensive and warning them not to move in the direction of Kurdish independence.

Especially after the Clinton administration brokered a cease-fire in the war between the PUK and KDP in 1998, Tehran sought to limit U.S. influence in the enclave by stepping up support for the Islamist groups. It has often mediated between the PUK and the Islamists, for example in 1997 when its efforts resulted in an IMIK-PUK accord that still holds. Iranian mediators are also said to have been involved in talks between the radical Islamists and the PUK more recently.[52]

PUK officials cited in the media claim that Ansar al-Islam has received weapons and munitions from Iran, including Katyusha rocket launchers and mortar rounds, and that its wounded fighters have been treated in Iranian hospitals. Moreover, the PUK claims Iranian officers have conducted artillery spotting on Ansar's behalf from the mountains inside Iran that tower over the Ansar-controlled area.[53] If Iran has indeed extended active logistical support to Ansar, it would have done so via a corps-size section of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, or Pasdaran, responsible for Iraqi Kurdistan, called the

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and as an Orthodox Muslim also, I believe that Saddam Hussein and his group are outside of Islam's zone". Pam O'Toole, "Mullah denies Iraq al-Qaeda link", BBC News, World Edition, 31 January 2003.

[46] Quoted by Mark Hosenball, "A Radical Goes Free", *Newsweek*, 27 January 2003.

[47] ICG interview, Suleimaniyeh, May 2002. He had said so earlier during a presentation in Washington in October 2001.

[48] Cited in Ed Vulliamy, Martin Bright and Nick Pelham, "False trails that lead to the al-Qaeda 'links'", *Observer*, 2 February 2003.

[49] The procurement of military equipment from Iraq would be an extremely difficult, if not prohibitive, trick to pull off for Ansar operatives. Given the geographical situation, such equipment would have to be transported through PUK-controlled territory, which has many checkpoints.

[50] See also ICG Middle East Report N°6, *Iraq Backgrounder: What Lies Beneath*, 1 October 2002, p. 29.

[51] For a detailed description of the social, legal and political discrimination of the Sunnite Kurds in Iran, see Wilfried Buchta: *Die iranische Schia und die islamische Einheit 1979-1996* (Hamburg, 1997), pp. 163-204.

[52] "Iran Pressures Talabani on Islamic Groups", RFE/RL, Iraq Report, vol. 4, N°35, 2 November 2001.

[53] The International Institute for Strategic Studies, "Al-Qaeda in Northern Iraq? The elusive Ansar al-Islam", *Strategic Comments*, vol. 8, issue 7, 7 September 2002.

Karargeh Ramazan, acting on behalf of the country's hardliners.[54]

Iranian Foreign Ministry officials have distanced themselves from the Kurdish Islamists,[55] and some see the arrest of Mullah Krekar by Dutch border authorities at Amsterdam airport upon his arrival from Tehran in September 2002 – apparently the result of an Iranian tip-off [56] – as a sign of either waning Iranian support for his group or sharp divisions within Iran's leadership over how to deal with it.[57] Following Mullah Krekar's arrest, Iran reportedly cut off or reduced its support for Ansar.[58] Should Ansar lose its Iranian sponsor, it would be deprived of its critical fall-back area across the border, and in the face of a concerted PUK assault, possibly with U.S. assistance, it would not likely survive as a viable fighting force.

V. TOWARD A SHOWDOWN?

Whatever the threat posed by Ansar al-Islam, in early 2003 the group sits in the crosshairs of U.S. power as Washington contemplates an attack on Iraq. The 11 September 2001 events have changed U.S. perceptions so that the mere possibility of an association with al-Qaeda renders Ansar a potential military target; reputed links with the regime in Baghdad only compound this.

The PUK has played a significant role in bringing Ansar al-Islam to the foreground of the debate. Correctly reading the signals emanating from Washington in the aftermath of 11 September, the PUK has ratcheted up its rhetoric against Islamists who for years have sought to spread their control over an area the PUK considers its exclusive province, thereby threatening the secular edifice of the Kurdistan Regional Government. Whatever the merits of the PUK's claims, it may have succeeded in its strategy of drawing the U.S. into this essentially local conflict. In spring 2002, U.S. and UK intelligence officers visited the Halabja area at the PUK's invitation in order to peer down at Ansar positions from nearby Shinirweh mountain.[59] In summer 2002, U.S. officials suggested the Bush administration might consider dispatching commandos to northern Iraq to knock out any possible chemical weapons facilities.[60] The arrest of Mullah Krekar in September 2002, and his 4-month detention in the Netherlands during which he was questioned by the FBI, has also been attributed to U.S. pressure.[61]

If the war on terrorism and a war on Iraq converge on Ansar al-Islam, this may put an end to the group's efforts to establish an Islamic Emirate in a corner of Iraqi Kurdistan. War and its aftermath are unlikely to uproot Kurdish Islamism from the area, however. Just as Sufi groups have persisted in Howraman through the ages, and conservative interpretations of Islam have emerged whenever other strategies to address people's vexing problems – ranging from spiritualism to secular nationalism and revolution – failed to deliver on their promises, so groups like Ansar al-Islam will find fertile ground. This, rather than a futile attempt at eradicating the symptoms of discontent, is the challenge the United States faces if and when it sets out to reshape the Iraqi state.

Amman/Brussels, 7 February 2003

[54] Karargeh Ramazan was the primary interlocutor for the PUK and other Kurdish parties in their dealings with the Islamic Republic during the Iran-Iraq war. ICG interviews with PUK officials in Suleimaniyeh and Halabja, May 2002.

[55] A spokesman of Iran's Foreign Ministry declared in August 2002, referring to Ansar al-Islam: "We find this group suspect and its activities unacceptable". Quoted by Daniel Williams, "Islamic Militants Harassing Iraqi Kurds", *The Washington Post*, 5 September 2002.

[56] Mark Hosenball, "A Radical Goes Free," *Newsweek*, 27 January 2003.

[57] ICG interviews with Kurdish sources, Fall 2002.

[58] The PUK's number two, Naywshirwan Mustafa Amin, in an interview with *The New York Times*. C.J. Chivers, "Kurds Face a Second Enemy: Islamic Fighters on Iraq Flank", *The New York Times*, 13 January 2003.

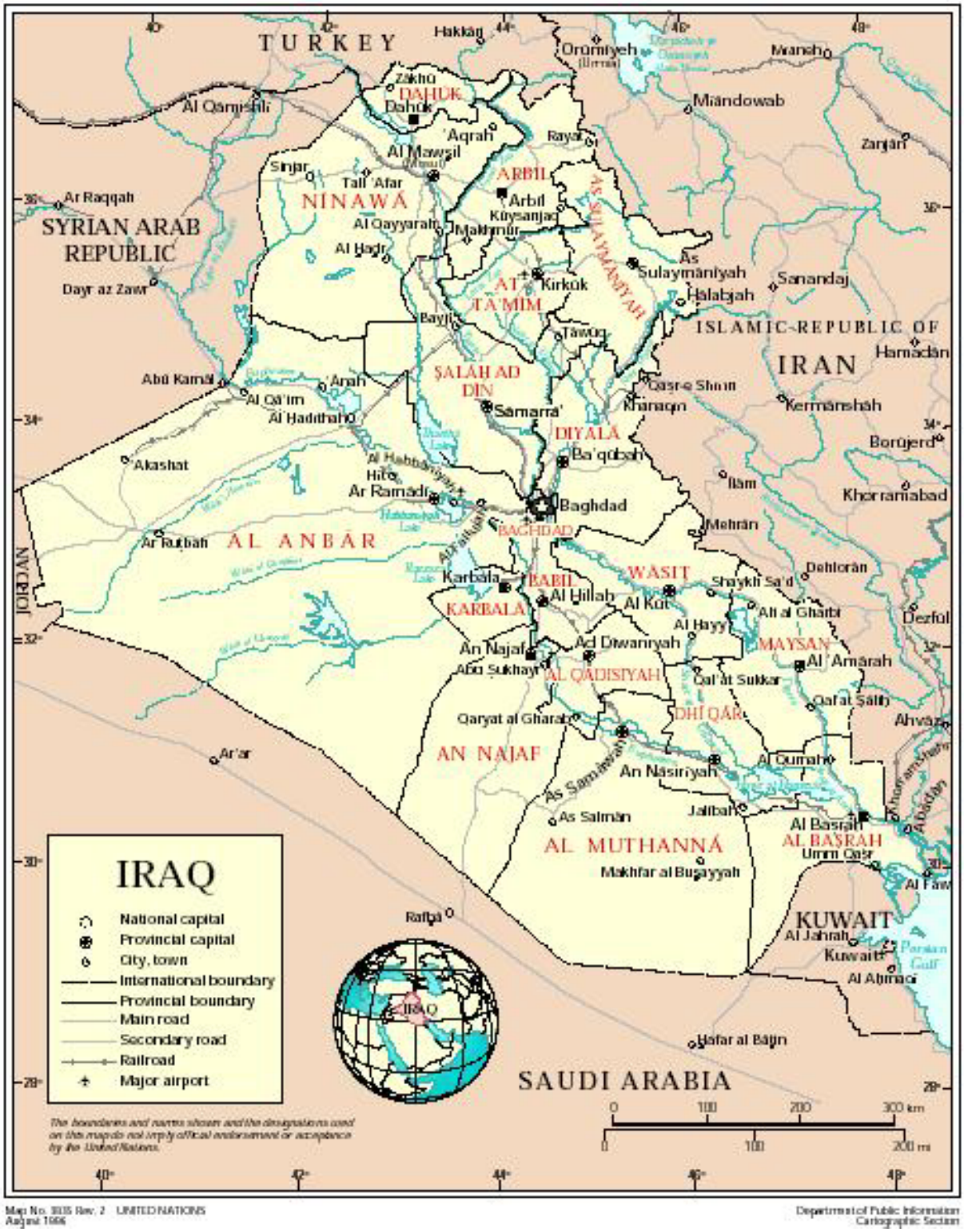
[59] "Weak Link", abcnews.com, 31 January 2003. The visit by U.S. officers was confirmed to ICG by a Kurdish commander who accompanied them. ICG interview, Halabja, May 2002.

[60] Pam O'Toole, "FBI questions Iraqi Kurd militant", BBC News, World Edition, 27 September 2002. Obviously, such a strike has not taken place.

[61] Mullah Krekar was released in late January 2003 after the Dutch Minister of Justice decided there was no basis either to hold him or surrender him to Jordanian authorities, who had made an extradition request on the basis of alleged involvement in heroin trafficking. He was put on a plane to Norway, his original destination. Norwegian authorities had started proceedings in September 2002 to cancel his refugee status in light of his frequent travel back to Iraq in violation of the restrictions incumbent on that status. Pam O'Toole, "Mullah denies Iraq al-Qaeda link", BBC News, World Edition, 31 January 2003; and Hiwa Osman, "Kurdish Islamic leader held", BBC News, World Edition, 13 September 2002.

APPENDIX A

MAP OF IRAQ



APPENDIX B

ABOUT THE INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP

The International Crisis Group (ICG) is an independent, non-profit, multinational organisation, with over 80 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

ICG's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, ICG produces regular analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international decision-takers.

ICG's reports and briefing papers are distributed widely by email and printed copy to officials in foreign ministries and international organisations and made generally available at the same time via the organisation's Internet site, *www.crisisweb.org*. ICG works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The ICG Board – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring ICG reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policy-makers around the world. ICG is chaired by former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari; and its President and Chief Executive since January 2000 has been former Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans.

ICG's international headquarters are in Brussels, with advocacy offices in Washington DC, New York and Paris and a media liaison office in London. The organisation currently operates eleven field offices (in Amman, Belgrade, Bogotá, Islamabad, Jakarta, Nairobi, Osh, Pristina, Sarajevo, Sierra Leone and Skopje) with analysts working in over 30 crisis-affected countries and territories across four continents.

In *Africa*, those countries include Burundi, Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sierra Leone-Liberia-Guinea, Somalia, Sudan and Zimbabwe; in *Asia*, Indonesia, Myanmar, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Kashmir; in *Europe*, Albania, Bosnia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia; in the *Middle East*, the whole region from North Africa to Iran; and in *Latin America*, Colombia.

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Foundation and private sector donors include The Atlantic Philanthropies, Carnegie Corporation of New York, Ford Foundation, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, William & Flora Hewlett Foundation, The Henry Luce Foundation, Inc., John D. & Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, The John Merck Fund, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, Open Society Institute, Ploughshares Fund, The Ruben & Elisabeth Rausing Trust, the Sasakawa Peace Foundation and the United States Institute of Peace.

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International Crisis Group

International Headquarters
149 Avenue Louise, 1050 Brussels, Belgium · Tel: +32 2 502 90 38 · Fax: +32 2 502 50 38
E-mail: icgbrussels@crisisweb.org

New York Office
400 Madison Avenue, Suite 11C, New York 10017 · Tel: +1 212 813 08 20 · Fax: +1 212 813 08 25
E-mail: icgny@crisisweb.org

Washington Office
1629 K Street, Suite 450, Washington DC 20006 · Tel +1 202 785 1601 · Fax: +1 202 785 1630
E-mail: icgwashington@crisisweb.org

Paris Office
51 Rue Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 75001 Paris, France · Tel: +33 1 44 88 60 20 · Fax: +33 1 44 88 24 26
E-mail: icgparis@crisisweb.org

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