

Who, or What, Is the ‘Islamic Army of Iraq’?

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach and Hussein Askary

When Russian President Vladimir Putin, on Sept. 4, identified terrorists, like those who had organized the massacre of Beslan, North Ossetia, as “instruments” backed by foreign powers, committed to destroying Russia, he relocated “terrorism” in the global strategy of tension. In later statements, he identified those forces harboring such terrorist leaders (in London and Washington), thus pinpointing the origin of the threat. As Lyndon LaRouche has insisted for decades, naming the names is one crucial step in defusing terrorist threats.

A case in point is that of the “Islamic Army of Iraq” (IAI) which has recently grabbed headlines for a series of kidnappings and killings in Iraq. Although it operates on a smaller scale than the perpetrators in the Russian Federation, if the IAI can be exposed and identified, it could have strategic implications.

The IAI kidnapped Iranian diplomat Ferejun Jahani on Aug. 4, accusing him of having interfered in the internal affairs of Iraq. Then they kidnapped Italian journalist Enzo Baldoni on Aug. 21, and killed him shortly thereafter. French journalists Christian Chesnot and Georges Malbrunot were abducted on the same day, and have not been heard from since. Finally, two Italian women working with the Bridge to Baghdad humanitarian aid organization, were kidnapped on Sept. 8.

All the European hostages were explicitly opposed to the war and the occupation. So, why would any Iraqi resistance movement, fighting the occupation, have an interest in kidnapping or killing such people? Why kidnap French journalists, when France opposed the war?

Sheikh Abdul Salam al-Kubaisi, who is a Sunni leader of Iraq’s National Muslim Alliance, and who has helped negotiate the release of hostages, broke a taboo, when he questioned the authenticity of the IAI. It was reported in a German wire service, *Junge Welt*, that al-Kubaisi had been picked up for questioning by the U.S. authorities because of his search for the identity of the group. The real story, as reported to *EIR* by a high-level Iraqi source, is more intriguing: Al-Kubaisi had been negotiating the release of the two French journalists, and was on his way to a crucial appointment with representatives of the kidnappers. He was ambushed by American authorities, which action sabotaged his mission.

Al-Kubaisi’s explicit questioning of the authenticity of the IAI has been covered in the Arabic and Italian press, and

in the London *Guardian* of Sept. 16. In an article entitled, “Who Seized Simona Torretta?” the *Guardian* provided the most detailed picture of the Italian case. Torretta, who had begun her humanitarian aid work in Iraq in 1996, returned during the March 2003 war, and, despite security risks, remained during the occupation. On Sept. 8, she was kidnapped, along with her Italian colleague, Simona Paris, plus Iraqi colleagues Raad Ali Abdul Azziz and Mahnouz Bassam.

The political response to the event was two-fold: Some pro-war voices claimed that the women had been naive pacifists, who supported a vicious resistance. “Meanwhile,” wrote the *Guardian*, “a growing number of Islamic leaders are hinting that the raid on A Bridge to Baghdad was not the work of mujahideen, but of foreign intelligence agencies out to discredit the resistance.” What prompted this hypothesis was the unusual *modus operandi* of the kidnappers. “Nothing about this kidnapping fits the pattern of other abductions. Most are opportunistic attacks on treacherous stretches of road. Torretta and her colleagues were coldly hunted down in their home. And while mujahideen in Iraq scrupulously hide their identities, making sure to wrap their faces in scarves, these kidnappers were bare-faced and clean-shaven, some in business suits. One assailant was addressed by the others as ‘sir.’ ”

Furthermore, the assailants asked staff members for the women, by name, and dragged an Iraqi woman by her headscarf—not the behavior of an Islamist! “Most extraordinary was the size of the operation: rather than the usual three or four fighters, 20 armed men pulled up to the house in broad daylight, seemingly unconcerned about being caught. Only blocks from the heavily patrolled Green Zone, the whole operation went off with no interference from Iraqi police or U.S. military—although *Newsweek* reported that ‘about 15 minutes afterwards, an American Humvee convoy passed hardly a block away.’ ”

The kidnappers had AK-47s and other weapons not usually used by the resistance, and many wore Iraqi National Guard uniforms, “and identified themselves as working for Ayad Allawi, the interim prime minister.”

Thus the question raised is whether this was a “covert police operation.” Sheikh al-Kubaisi’s testimony on the affair supported this hypothesis. He reported that he had received the two women the day prior to their abduction. “‘They were scared,’ the cleric said. ‘They told me that someone threatened them.’ Asked who was behind the threats, al-Kubaisi replied: ‘We suspect some foreign intelligence.’ ” In other accounts, al-Kubaisi said they confided other important matters to him, which he did not want to reveal, out of concern for their security. He also said they had sought his assistance, to organize a humanitarian aid convoy to Fallujah. The *Guardian* noted that his views cannot be considered conspiracy theories, given his ties to many resistance groups, and his help in securing the release of hostages.

Independently of press reports, *EIR* has received confir-

mation by authoritative Iraqi sources, that the IAI is phony. One Iraqi source reported on Sept. 17, that the kidnappers of the French, whether Iraqis or other Arabs, were “penetrated by foreign intelligence,” by the Americans or British. As for the Italian women, he said, “I can swear 100 oaths, that their kidnappers are from intelligence services, either those of the current Iraqi government, or other foreign intelligence services which are active in Iraq.” He believed that one aim of the operation was to discredit the resistance, and noted that demonstrations mounted against the resistance, had indeed been organized by the Allawi government, by Ahmed Chalabi networks, and by some non-governmental organizations financed by the occupation.

Also on Sept. 17, when reports were published that French Defense Minister Michèle Alliot-Marie had reason to believe that the journalists were alive, another member of the al-Kubaisi family, and representative of the top Sunni religious association trying to negotiate their release, reiterated the charge that such attempts were being sabotaged. “We are under the impression that the American forces do not want the hostages to be freed, because each time we get near a solution, these forces push for a military escalation,” said Mohammed Ayash al-Kubaisi, the group’s representative abroad. “We believe these forces have political aims, seeking to create a chaotic situation which does not contribute to progress,” he told Agence France Presse.

Such continuing exposure of the IAI has upped the pressure on the political forces behind the group. According to one Saudi website on Sept. 19, the IAI had delivered the two journalists to a recognized resistance movement, which was proceeding to negotiate a release.

Cui Bono?

To fill out the picture, one must add a few other pieces to the puzzle, to wit, the political responses by the Allawi government. The Prime Minister himself issued an outrageous statement in a meeting with foreign press, on Aug. 29, in which he said that the French were themselves to blame. As quoted by *El Pais*, Allawi stated: “What happened to the Italian journalist is what right now the French journalists are living through, and this is what will happen also to all those who like France were opposing the war against terrorism; nobody is safe. And to avoid the confrontation is not a solution. France and other democratic nations cannot just feel comfortable by taking a passive position. The United States and Great Britain and all those states which fight in Iraq are not only fighting to protect Iraqis, but also to protect their own country.” In a clear threat to France, Allawi then said: “Those governments which take a passive position with respect to the situation in Iraq will be the next targets of the terrorists. There will be attacks in Paris, Nizza, Cannes. . . . Now is the time to fight against terrorism the same way Europe fought against Hitler.” He again warned France, mafia-style: “Let me tell you that the French, despite all the noise which they make with

their ‘No to the war,’ will soon have to fight against terrorists.”

The French government, appalled by this attitude, avoided any direct contact with the Allawi government or the U.S. authorities, in its attempt to free the journalists. As reported above, Sheikh al-Kubaisi, who was working closely with the French, was prevented from carrying out his mission, by U.S. interference. In addition, a new offensive launched by the U.S. military in the area where they had been kidnapped, also reportedly frustrated plans to have the journalists released.

That the French government may share al-Kubaisi’s suspicions, was indicated by the dramatic cooling of relations between Paris and Baghdad. Interim President Ghazi al-Yawer had been invited to visit France, during a European tour in early September, but the French cancelled the invitation. He had planned to address the European Parliament in Strasbourg on Sept. 14, but after the French made known that they considered his presence there “inopportune,” as long as the fate of the journalists remained unknown, al-Yawer cancelled the visit.

Also in the case of the Iranian diplomat kidnapped, reportedly by the same group, the political context is important. Allawi’s government, most notably his Defense Minister al-Shalaan, had publicly accused Iran of meddling in Iraqi affairs, and gone so far as to label the neighboring country “Iraq’s number one enemy.” When Ferejun Jahani was abducted, it was reported that he had been accused of interfering in Iraqi internal affairs. Statements charging Iran with interference are a regular feature of press briefings by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and other neo-cons in Washington.

All major Islamic organizations, including the Hezbollah, Islamic Jihad, the International Association of Islamic Scholars, Iraqi resistance groups, and Islamic groups in Europe, have roundly condemned the kidnappings and the IAI, and demanded the release of the hostages. Yet, as noted by the *Guardian*, neither the Allawi government nor the White House has followed suit.

Finally, a note on Allawi. As widely reported after the June “transfer of sovereignty” to the interim government, Allawi had been an intelligence official working for Saddam Hussein in England, surveilling Iraqi students there. He became a dissident and was signed up by both British and U.S. intelligence, beginning in the 1980s. He was the proponent of a military coup against the regime, which was attempted, but failed. He bragged, in a meeting with journalists on Sept. 7, that he had worked with “at least 15” foreign intelligence services.

If the preliminary identification of the IAI can be fully documented—and *EIR* is continuing its investigation—it will drive the last nail into the coffin of the Allawi government. It would also fuel the process of discrediting the entire war adventure launched by the Cheney-Bush regime, helping it along to a speedy downfall.