

Al Qaeda Kurdish Battalions

AT A GLANCE

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HOW TO CITE

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SUMMARY

Formed: 2007

Disbanded: Group is active.

First Attack: May 2007: AQKB militants drove a car bomb into the Kurdistan Interior and Security Ministry building. (19 killed)¹

Last Attack: September 2010: AQKB militants were arrested after a foiled AQKB suicide bomb attack targeted security officers in Sulaymaniyah, Iraq. (2 injured)²

OVERVIEW

Al Qaeda Kurdish Battalions (AQKB) is a Kurdish, Salafist militant organization affiliated with Al Qaeda (AQ) that operates in Iraqi Kurdistan. Since its formation in March 2007, the group has primarily targeted the Kurdistan Regional Government. However, beginning in April 2014, AQKB may also be engaged fighting the Islamic State (IS).

NARRATIVE SUMMARY

Al Qaeda Kurdish Battalions (AQKB) is a Kurdish, Salafist militant organization affiliated with Al Qaeda (AQ) that operates in Iraqi Kurdistan. Al Qaeda announced AQKB’s formation in a video entitled “Back to the Mountains,” which it released in March 2007.³ The video called upon Iraq’s Kurdish population to turn against its political leaders, whom AQ deems traitors to Islam because of their secular ideology. AQKB’s membership is believed to be primarily composed of former members of the Islamic Movement of Kurdistan (IMK).⁴

There are several competing theories about the impetus behind AQKB’s formation. Some analysts believe that when the 2007 U.S. surge and Sunni Awakening expelled Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) from southern and central Iraq, AQ leadership turned its attention to establishing a new foothold in Iraqi Kurdistan. Although AQ had historically attracted little support among Iraq’s Kurds because of their largely secular-nationalist beliefs and the strength of their security forces,

the strong U.S. presence in the center and south of the country left AQ with few other options. Other sources pin the emergence on the group on the 2007 referendum on the future of Kirkuk. Many Islamist groups were, at the time, attempting to gain support in Northern Iraq in order to thwart a vote in the referendum that would bring Kirkuk under the authority of the KRG. Still others believe that AQ established AQKB in response to the Kurdish peshmerga's decision to participate in the U.S.-backed Baghdad Security Plan.

From 2007 through 2010, AQKB perpetrated a series of attacks in Iraqi Kurdistan.⁵ AQKB primarily targeted secular Kurdish parties in the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), namely the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP).⁶ Among its most notorious attacks were its May 2007 bombing of the Kurdistan Interior and Security Ministries building in which 19 people were killed and its July 2007 attack on Kurdish border security forces in Penjwin, Iraq in which eight Kurdish soldiers were killed.⁷

After 2010, the group largely faded into obscurity, and there is little verifiable information about its current activities. Although it was initially aligned with AQI and was a member of its umbrella organization, the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI), AQKB released a statement in April 2014 in which it denounced AQI's successor organization, the Islamic State (IS). Some reports suggest that AQKB militants are fighting IS alongside the KDP and PUK in northern Iraq. However, such reports have not been verified.⁸

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

A. LEADERSHIP

Very little is known about the leadership of AQKB. The group has pledged its allegiance to AQ central leadership and is believed to take orders from Ayman al-Zawahiri, the leader of AQ.⁹

Abdallah Hassan al-Surani (2007-unknown): Surani has released public statements of behalf of AQKB and is believed to be the group's official spokesman.¹⁰

Dilshad Kalari (unknown to unknown): Very little is known about Kalari although some sources believe him to be the operational leader of AQKB.¹¹

B. NAME CHANGES

There are no recorded name changes for this group.

C. SIZE ESTIMATES

AQKB is thought to be relatively weak and small in numbers.¹²

D. RESOURCES

AQKB's resources and benefactors are largely unknown. However, given the group's close affiliation with Al-Qaeda, it is likely it has received funds from AQ central leadership.¹³ There has also been some speculation that the group has received funds from Western sources, particularly Canada, since taking up arms against the Islamic State in 2014; AQKB nevertheless remains designated as a foreign terrorist organization by the Canadian government.¹⁴

E. GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATIONS

Disclaimer: This is a partial list of where the militant organization has bases and where it operates. This does not include information on where the group conducts major attacks or has external influences.

AQKB is based primarily in Iraqi Kurdistan along the Iran-Iraq border, although some reports suggest that the group may have bases in the Iranian towns of Mariwan and Sanandaj. In the past, the group's members have also occasionally traveled farther south into Iraq to coordinate with AQI.¹⁵ There is also evidence that AQKB members traveled to Pakistan and Afghanistan to receive training, most likely from AQ operatives, on how to conduct chemical weapons attacks.¹⁶

STRATEGY

A. IDEAOLOGY AND GOALS

AQKB shares Al Qaeda's ideology and goals; it is a Sunni jihadist organization that seeks to implement Shariah Law and establish an Islamic caliphate in the Middle East.¹⁷

B. POLITICAL ACTIVITES

There are no recorded political activities for this group.

C. TARGETS AND TACTICS

Although AQKB has only perpetrated a handful of attacks since its formation in 2007, when it has carried out acts of terrorism it has most often used suicide and car bombings. However, there is also evidence that AQKB sought to carry out chemical weapons attacks and sent several of its members to Afghanistan and Pakistan to receive training with chemical weapons. The group allegedly sought to use an unmanned aircraft to carry out chemical attacks and blow up the Qaragul Bridge in the Sulaymaniyah province. Other forms of chemical attacks planned by AQKB included wiping the handles of cars used to transport Kurdish politicians with deadly poisons.¹⁸ There is no evidence that AQKB was ever put its plans to utilize chemical weapons into action.

AQKB's primary targets have included Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) buildings, troops, and employees in addition to non-Sunni religious groups, namely the Yazidis.¹⁹ The group's most notable attack was a truck bombing of the building of the Kurdish Ministries of the Interior and Security in Iraq, killing 19 people.²⁰ Reports also surfaced in 2014 that AQKB was fighting alongside other Kurdish groups against the Islamic State (IS).²¹

MAJOR ATTACKS

Disclaimer: These are some selected major attacks in the militant organization's history. It is not a comprehensive listing but captures some of the most famous attacks or turning points during the campaign.

September 2010: Several AQKB militants were arrested after the Kurdish security forces foiled an AQKB suicide bomb attack in Sulaymaniyah, Iraq. (0 killed, 2 wounded)²²

July 2007: AQKB operatives ambushed and killed seven border guards and another security force member in Penjwin, Iraq. (8 killed, unknown wounded)²³

May 2007: AQKB militants claimed responsibility for a car bomb that was detonated at the Kurdistan Interior and Security Ministries building, killing 19 civilians. (19 killed, unknown wounded)²⁴

INTERACTIONS

A. DESIGNATED/LISTED

- U.S. State Department Foreign Terrorist Organizations, January 1, 2012 to Present²⁵
- AQKB is also designated as a terrorist organization by the Canadian government.²⁶

B. COMMUNITY RELATIONS

AQKB's extreme Islamist ideology and terrorist tactics have rendered the group highly unpopular among Iraq's predominantly secular and nationalist Kurdish population.²⁷

C. RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER GROUPS

AQKB is an affiliate of Al Qaeda and has sworn allegiance to both Aymenn al-Zawahiri and former AQI leader, Abu Umar al-Baghdadi. The group was also a member of the Islamic State of Iraq, the umbrella organization founded by AQI.²⁸ However, AQKB released a statement in April 2014 making clear its opposition to AQI's successor organization, the Islamic State (IS). There are even reports that AQKB has actively fought against IS in northern Iraq.²⁹

AQKB's traditional enemies are the secular Kurdish organizations that participate in the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), namely the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). The majority of the group's attacks have been aimed at Kurdish government forces.³⁰

D. STATE SPONSORS AND EXTERNAL INFLUENCES

AQKB allegedly maintained bases in the Iranian towns of Mariwan and Sanandaj, suggesting that the Iranian government at least tacitly tolerated the group.³¹ There has also been some speculation that the group has received funds from Western sources, particularly Canada, since taking up arms against the Islamic State in 2014; AQKB nevertheless remains designated as a foreign terrorist organization by the Canadian government.³²

MAPS

- Global Al Qaeda
- Iraq

¹ "US Names al Qaeda-linked Outfit as Terrorist Entity." DaijiWorld. January 6, 2012.

http://www.daijiworld.com/news/news_disp.asp?n_id=126624. Accessed July 27, 2012.

² "US Names al Qaeda-linked Outfit as Terrorist Entity." DaijiWorld. January 6, 2012.

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³ Khalil, Lydia. "The Kurdish Brigades: Al-Qaeda's Kurdish Henchmen." The Jamestown Foundation, Terrorism Focus 4(14), 18 May 2007. Web. 24 Aug. 2015.; Roggio, Bill. "'Al Qaeda in Kurdistan' Breaks ranks with ISIS over Syria." The Longwar Journal, 1 May 2014. Web. 24 Aug. 2015

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⁵ Khalil, Lydia. "The Kurdish Brigades: Al-Qaeda's Kurdish Henchmen." The Jamestown Foundation, Terrorism Focus 4(14), 18 May 2007. Web. 24 Aug. 2015.

⁶ Khalil, Lydia. "The Kurdish Brigades: Al-Qaeda's Kurdish Henchmen." The Jamestown Foundation, Terrorism Focus 4(14), 18 May 2007. Web. 24 Aug. 2015.

⁷ "US brands al-Qaeda Kurdish Battalions 'terrorist'." Reuters, Date unknown. We. 27 July 2012.; "US Names al Qaeda-linked Outfit as Terrorist Entity." DaijiWorld, 6 January 2012. Web. 27 July 2012.

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- ⁸ Taylor, Scott. "Flying Blind on ISIS." NOW, 25 March 2015. Web. 25 Aug. 2015.; "We should not champion individual volunteers fighting with foreign forces." Espritdecorps, 26 Nov. 2014. Web. 24 Aug. 2015.; Roggio, Bill. "'Al Qaeda in Kurdistan' Breaks ranks with ISIS over Syria." The Longwar Journal, 1 May 2014. Web. 24 Aug. 2015.
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- ¹¹ Khalil, Lydia. "The Kurdish Brigades: Al-Qaeda's Kurdish Henchmen." The Jamestown Foundation, Terrorism Focus 4(14), 18 May 2007. Web. 24 Aug. 2015.
- ¹² "US Designates Kurdish Group Terrorists." Rudaw, 15 Jan. 2012. Web. 24 Aug. 2015.
- ¹³ Roggio, Bill. "US adds Al Qaeda Kurdish Battalions to list of terrorist groups." January 5, 2012. http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/01/us_adds_al_qaeda_kur.php. Accessed July 27, 2012.; Khalil, Lydia. "The Kurdish Brigades: Al-Qaeda's Kurdish Henchmen." The Jamestown Foundation, Terrorism Focus 4(14), 18 May 2007. Web. 24 Aug. 2015.
- ¹⁴ Taylor, Scott. "Flying Blind on ISIS." NOW, 25 March 2015. Web. 25 Aug. 2015.; "We should not champion individual volunteers fighting with foreign forces." Espritdecorps, 26 Nov. 2014. Web. 24 Aug. 2015.
- ¹⁵ Khalil, Lydia. "The Kurdish Brigades: Al-Qaeda's Kurdish Henchmen." The Jamestown Foundation, Terrorism Focus 4(14), 18 May 2007. Web. 24 Aug. 2015.; Hawkins, Scott. "Transcript of Al-Qaeda Kurdish Battallion." Prezi, 19 Nov. 2014. Web. 25 Aug. 2015.
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- ³¹ "US Designates Kurdish Group Terrorists." Rudaw, 15 Jan. 2012. Web. 24 Aug. 2015.
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