

Iraq: Foreign Fighters Continue To Wreak Havoc

By RFE/RL analyst Kathleen Ridolfo

A Sunni Arab tribal leader in restive Diyala Governorate announced this week that tribal fighters obtained Al-Qaeda records documenting the names of 6,000 suicide bombers who have carried out attacks in Iraq since the fall of the Hussein regime.

The revelation comes amid reports that three Kuwaiti nationals -- one who served time in the Guantanamo Bay detention center -- blew themselves up in Mosul last week.

Sheikh Sabah al-Shammari, spokesman for the Awakening Council of Ba'qubah Clans, told Iraqi media outlets that the documents revealed that the majority of the suicide bombers were foreign Arab nationals. He said the documents also revealed that widows of suicide bombers were present in training camps set up by Al-Qaeda in the Hamrin mountain area of Diyala. At least 15 women were being trained for suicide operations, he said.

The continuing reports of foreign fighters infiltrating from Arab states come as some neighbors have moved more aggressively to secure their borders, but they might also highlight problematic frontiers with other countries, including Syria and Iran.

Iraq has witnessed a surge in female suicide bomb attacks in recent months. At least two of those attacks were carried out in Diyala. A May 1 attack in Diyala was carried out by a woman who wore an explosives-filled vest and was pretending to be pregnant. She blew herself up outside a cafe and a children's shoe store. A male accomplice blew himself up at the scene as police and medical personnel tried to assist the wounded. At least 29 people were killed and 52 others wounded. While it remains unclear whether those attacks were perpetrated by foreign fighters, it is clear that insurgent bomb attacks in Diyala Governorate, which lies northeast of Baghdad, have not subsided despite the growing presence of Iraqi and coalition security forces.

Meanwhile, a former detainee from the Guantanamo Bay detention center reportedly carried out a suicide bomb attack in Mosul on April 30. According to Kuwaiti and pan-Arab media reports, Kuwaiti national Abdallah Salih al-Ajmi was released from Guantanamo in late 2005 and, upon returning to Kuwait, appeared to have been rehabilitated. Family members said they were shocked to learn that he carried out a suicide attack along with fellow Kuwaiti national Nasir al-Dawasari some three weeks after disappearing from home.

Al-Ajmi's cousin, Salim al-Ajmi, told Al-Arabiya that his family was surprised when people in Iraq telephoned the family to say Abdullah was in Iraq. "His recent behavior was normal; we never expected him to go back to his past behavior," Salim al-Ajmi said. "We noticed that he would disappear every now and then. He would not return home or socialize after his return [from Guantanamo] like he used to do in the past."

He added that the Kuwaiti government "did not fail to give those young men [who were in Guantanamo] the chance to return to society," noting Abdullah and others "were offered assistance." Al-Ajmi said that Abdullah had an excellent financial situation and was married following his release from Guantanamo, with one child and another on the way.

The Kuwaiti website "Al-Siyasah" quoted sources on May 6 as saying a third Kuwaiti national was involved in the April 30 Mosul attack, identifying him as Badr al-Harbi. According to the website, al-Harbi had spent time in Afghanistan and was later jailed in Kuwait on unknown charges. The report said the Interior Ministry was looking for him when he disappeared, apparently fleeing to Syria for Iraq alongside the other two Kuwaitis. The sources told "Al-Siyasah" that al-Harbi was in a second suicide vehicle.

Meanwhile, a Yemeni state security court of appeals this week reduced a jail term for a national convicted of trying to go to Iraq for jihad. Bashir Muhammad Nu'man was sentenced last week to five years in prison for using a forged passport to travel to Syria with the intention of joining Al-Qaeda. The appeals court reduced the sentence to two years in prison for Nu'man, who was said to have been arrested in Syria and extradited to Yemen in February 2007, reportedly without offering any explanation.

The continuing flow of foreign fighters from Arab neighboring states to Iraq raises concerns that Iraq's neighbors are not abiding by pledges to help improve security in the war-torn country. Foreign ministers from Iraq's neighboring states reiterated commitments to help stem the flow of foreign fighters at a recent security meeting in Kuwait. The meeting came on the heels of increased U.S. and Iraqi pressure for neighboring states to do more.

It also came just one week after officials from neighboring states met in Damascus for a security cooperation meeting that focused on the flow of foreign fighters to Iraq, in which participants endorsed the view that Iraq's security was the joint responsibility of all regional states.

Delegates in Damascus vowed to follow up on pledges made at the November security meeting in Kuwait and to "quickly name the liaison officers [on border security] who have not yet been named, to exchange information, and to hold another meeting on the sidelines of [an upcoming] interior ministers' meeting in Amman" in October. As RFE/RL reported at the time, that point demonstrates the snail's pace at which recommendations are being carried out, if they are being carried out at all.

Kuwaiti Interior Minister Jabir Khalid al-Sabah told the website "Al-Jaridah" last week that the men definitely did not enter Iraq via the Kuwait-Iraq border. He said the Interior Ministry does not restrict people from traveling abroad, and suggested the men had obtained visas before going to Syria. "The whole blame should be put on those who established these groups [such as Al-Qaeda], who took money from domestic and foreign destinations to destroy the sound human ideology, spoil it with falsehood, and call on Kuwaiti youth to [carry out] jihad," al-Sabah said. He added that the ministry does its best to keep suspected persons under surveillance and refer them to the authorities for arrest when appropriate.

Some neighboring states have taken the initiative to secure their borders with Iraq. Indeed, it does not appear that Arab foreign fighters have had any success in crossing the Kuwaiti, Saudi, or Jordanian borders into Iraq.

Syria has long been considered the main access point for foreign fighters, and despite some claims that the Syrian authorities are taking steps to control that flow, it is clearly not doing enough. Likewise, Iran has been reported to be another entry point for foreign fighters, particularly for Arabs entering Iraq from Afghanistan. Until Iraq can improve security along its porous borders with Iran and Syria, the problem will remain a major impediment to Iraqi security for years to come.