

US pressures Norway to extradite leading exiled Kurd

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Mullah Krekar, the alleged leader of Ansar al-Islam, a militia based in northern Iraq and Iranian Kurdistan, was arrested on January 2 in his apartment in Oslo, Norway's capital city. Krekar, whose real name is Faraj Ahmad Najmuddin, is charged with directing terrorist activities in Iraq through his leadership of the militia.

The case against Krekar is built largely on the testimony of two young men alleged to be members of Ansar al-Islam. Both are currently held under arrest by the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) in Iraq, and have issued statements saying that in 2003 Krekar encouraged them to blow themselves up.

The mullah's detention in Norway is the product of a campaign whereby the United States has used military might and diplomatic arm-twisting in an attempt to liquidate the Ansar al-Islam group, which it has categorised as the "missing link" of Al Qaeda involvement in Iraq.

The Bush administration insists that Krekar is the active leader of Ansar al-Islam, an Islamic fundamentalist Kurdish separatist group. It has placed Ansar on its list of prohibited terrorist organisations and since 2002 has been pressuring the Norwegian authorities to arrest Krekar, who, with his family, has had asylum in Norway for more than 10 years.

Krekar insists that he ceased to lead Ansar al-Islam in 2002. He has charged that the US government's pursuit of him is politically motivated, as Ansar al-Islam is a long time rival of one of the US occupation's two Kurdish allies in Iraq, the PUK, which would like to see the militia pushed out of the area of northern Iraq under its jurisdiction.

In March 2003, US Special Forces, helicopters and air support, and 6,000 PUK fighters launched an offensive on the much smaller Ansar al-Islam's stronghold in northern Iraq near the Iranian border, where it was estimated to have only 600 to 800 fighters and to control 15 villages. US involvement in the operation was likely to have been a payoff to the PUK, which had been engaged in bitter fighting with Ansar, in return for the PUK's support for the invasion of Iraq.

Human Rights Watch, which visited Kurdish Iraq in 2003, has stated that hundreds of Kurdish Islamic militants, many of whom are probably members of Ansar al-Islam, are held by the PUK and the other main pro-occupation party, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). The human rights group has observed that these prisoners are held for prolonged periods without any legal basis. Some prisoners made reports of torture and ill-treatment by their captors for suspected links with Ansar al-Islam. Krekar's own brother-in-law has been kidnapped.

The double suicide bombing in the northern Iraqi city of Irbil on February 2, which claimed over 100 lives, was blamed by the PUK on

Al Qaeda working through Ansar al-Islam. The dead were among hundreds present at the offices of the KDP and the PUK. No group claimed responsibility for the attacks, the single bloodiest in Iraq since the summer. The pro-occupation Kurdish parties and US officials blamed Ansar al-Islam and Al Qaeda, without attempting to substantiate the claim. "All indications point to the involvement of Islamic terrorists with Al Qaeda connections," said Barham Salih, prime minister of the PUK-dominated sector of the Kurdish region.

Talks had been held between the PUK and Ansar al-Islam between December 2001 and late March 2002, aimed at concluding a political agreement between the rival groups, but an assassination attempt in April 2002 against Barham Salih led to their collapse. Ansar al-Islam denied any involvement in the incident, but PUK officials later issued the names of three suspects it had apprehended and claimed there was evidence linking them to Ansar. In June 2002, relations between the two groups deteriorated further as the PUK held Ansar al-Islam responsible for coordinating suicide bombings.

It was at this time that the US stepped up its campaign against Ansar. When Mullah Krekar went to Iran in September 2002, he was detained and questioned at Tehran airport and denied entry to the country by Iranian authorities reportedly responding to US demands that he be treated as a terrorist. He was forced to leave on a flight that took him to Schipol airport in the Netherlands, where he was arrested by Dutch police.

Krekar has reported that he was questioned by two groups of "visitors"—whom he assumed to be intelligence agents—while he was in custody in Amsterdam. He said a group from Brussels wanted to know whether he had any relationship with Saddam Hussein. Another group claiming to represent the US authorities asked whether he had contact with Osama bin Laden. He remained in detention in the Netherlands for another three months. During this time, the Dutch authorities received and rejected an extradition request from Jordan, where Krekar faces accusations of drug smuggling. It has been said that the Jordanian claim is a pretext for its authorities to interrogate Krekar on behalf of the US.

Upon Krekar's return to Norway from the Netherlands at the start of 2003, US authorities asked the Norwegian government to limit the mullah's freedom of movement and monitor his activities. The US State Department said they suspected Krekar had connections to international terrorism, adding that Ansar al-Islam had access to chemical weapons. According to the *New York Post*, investigators from the US Federal Bureau of Investigation and the New York police had been in Norway in September 2002 with the aim of tracking down suspects linked to Al Qaeda. Krekar, in custody in Amsterdam, was apparently one of those being investigated by the US authorities.

On January 14, 2003, a source in the US State Department leaked to Norwegian Broadcasting that the US government would insist on Krekar's extradition to America. The Norwegian government quickly issued a statement denying that they were under any pressure over the fate of Mullah Krekar. "We have been in contact with American authorities ... and they made two things clear: they will not demand that Mullah Krekar be extradited to the USA and they are not preparing a formal protest against Norway for not arresting him on his arrival here," said a spokesperson for the Foreign Ministry.

However, in March 2003, Norwegian police arrested Krekar on various charges, including terrorism. Seven other men of Iraqi origin were also questioned by Norwegian authorities on related matters. The Norwegian police accused Krekar of terrorist connections and posing a security threat, as well as of breaching his asylum conditions.

That month, an Oslo Court ruled that Krekar should be remanded in custody for four weeks, pending an investigation of charges that he planned and prepared terrorist acts against the autonomous regional government of the PUK in Kurdish Iraq.

But the Norwegian Court of Appeal ruled in April that Krekar should be released. "The court has considered the appeal we submitted. There are insufficient grounds for holding him in custody. He will be released immediately," Krekar's defence counsel Brynjar Meling told Norwegian Broadcasting. Meling has stated that he believes his client is being persecuted by the Norwegian state for political reasons. The Supreme Court later upheld the Appeal Court's decision.

Ignoring the Norwegian judiciary's decision, the US continued to exert pressure on the Norwegian government, claiming that Krekar was the leader of Ansar al-Islam and that he had connections to both Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda.

Ansar al-Islam was being pushed as the "missing link" between Saddam Hussein and Osama Bin Laden in order to justify the US-led war against Iraq.

While highly dubious claims from the PUK that the Ansar al-Islam was in the pay of Saddam was meant to provide evidence of its links to Baghdad, evidence of its Al Qaeda connections had supposedly been discovered in Afghanistan by the *New York Times* and reported at the beginning of January 2003. On this basis, Washington was demanding that the tiny forces of Ansar al-Islam and their exiled clerical guru were to be treated as one of the major threats to world security.

Norway's Conservative and Christian Democratic government, which had officially opposed the invasion of Iraq, saw that supporting the US campaign against Ansar al-Islam provided it with an opportunity to improve relations with the Bush administration. This would be especially important for Norway's substantial oil industry, which did not want to be shut out of lucrative Iraqi contracts. Thus the case against Krekar had to be reopened.

During a meeting in September 2003 between US Attorney General John Ashcroft and Norway's foreign minister Jan Petersen on the "war on terrorism," the fate of Krekar was high on the agenda. Though Ashcroft would not publicly mention him by name, the foreign minister claimed after the meeting that "The Americans are very, very concerned with Mullah Krekar."

Despite initial reluctance to consent to Ashcroft's demands that Krekar be handed over to US custody, the Norwegian government—which has posed as a critic of the US concentration camp at Guantanamo Bay—manoeuvred to acquiesce to the US. Ashcroft said he was grateful for Norway's cooperation in the war on

terrorism: "Norway is one of the most valuable partners the US has." He claimed that the Ansar al-Islam group was "very dangerous" and—unchallenged by Petersen—stressed that the extradition of terror suspects from Norway to the US was not unimaginable. The Norwegian Supreme Court had already ruled that courts could not extradite terror suspects to countries where the suspects' rights may not be respected or where they face the death penalty—i.e., the United States.

Following Ashcroft's intervention, the Norwegian authorities stepped up their actions against Krekar. In October, Norwegian police filed preliminary terrorist charges against him. Then police from Italy—a key European ally of the US in the war against Iraq—were involved in the interrogation of Krekar at an Oslo court in December. The Italians stated that they suspected Norway was being used as a recruiting ground for terrorists and insurgents looking for Arab fighters against the US occupation of Iraq. Echoing Washington, they claimed that Al Qaeda and Krekar's group Ansar al-Islam were behind the activities.

Krekar later told *Aftenposten* that the Italian police had shown him about 75 photographs and that he was able to identify three of the people depicted: two Kurds and an Arab living in Italy.

As with many comparable figures, though Krekar has now fallen foul of US imperialism he claims to have been cooperating with US authorities and intelligence for several years. Last year, he told *Aftenposten*, "I am Saddam's enemy. If the USA pushes me harder [on his alleged links to the deposed Iraqi dictator], then I will reveal my proof"—a statement that indicates Krekar could expose some agreement with the US that Ansar may have had in the past to destabilise the Iraqi regime.

His group's links to the US may go back to the 1980s, as many of its cadres are veterans of the Mujihadeens of Afghanistan, where, with US support, they were engaged in fighting against the Soviet-backed government in the 1980s. Ansar has its roots in the Islamic Movement in Kurdistan (IMK), established in 1987 with Krekar as a leading figure. The IMK cooperated with the PUK and the KDP during the 1991 uprisings against Iraq's Baathist regime that were first encouraged and then abandoned by the administration of Bush Senior. Finally, Ansar al-Islam espouses the harsh ultra-orthodox Islamic ideology of Wahhabism, the doctrine promoted by the Saudi royal family, and quite distinct from the Sunni faith practised by most Iraqi Kurds. It is therefore very likely that the pro-US Saudi ruling dynasty has connections to Ansar al-Islam.



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