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aka Ansar al-Sunna; Ansar al-Sunna Army; Devotees of Islam; Followers of Islam in Kurdistan; Helpers of Islam; Jaish Ansar al-Sunna; Jund al-Islam; Kurdish Taliban; Kurdistan Supporters of Islam; Partisans of Islam; Soldiers of God; Soldiers of Islam; Supporters of Islam in Kurdistan

Description: Ansar al-Islam (AAI) was designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization on March 22, 2004. AAI was established in 2001 in the Iraqi Kurdistan region with the merger of two Kurdish violent extremist factions that traced their roots to the Islamic Movement of Kurdistan. On May 4, 2010, AAI's leader Abu Abdullah al-Shafi'i was captured by U.S. forces in Baghdad; he remained in prison at the end of 2016. On December 15, 2011, AAI announced a new leader: Abu Hashim Muhammad bin Abdul Rahman al Ibrahim. AAI seeks to expel western interests from Iraq and establish an independent Iraqi state based on its interpretation of Sharia law.

In March 2012, a Norwegian court convicted Iraqi citizen and AAI founder Mullah Krekar (aka Najmuddin Faraj Ahmad) of issuing threats and inciting terrorism, and sentenced him to six years in prison. Living in Norway on a long-term resident permit, Krekar appealed, and in December 2012, an appeals court affirmed his convictions for issuing threats and intimidating witnesses, but reversed his conviction for inciting terrorism. The appeals court reduced his prison sentence to two years and 10 months. He was released from prison in late January 2015, but was arrested again shortly after for praising the January 2015 Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris in a television interview.

Activities: AAI has conducted attacks against a wide range of targets including Iraqi government and security forces, and U.S. and Coalition Forces. AAI has carried out numerous kidnappings, murders, and assassinations of Iraqi citizens and politicians. The group has either claimed responsibility, or is believed to be responsible, for attacks in 2011 that resulted in 24 deaths and wounded 147. In 2012, the group claimed responsibility for the bombing of the Sons of Martyrs School in Damascus, which was occupied by Syrian security forces and pro-government militias; seven people were wounded in the attack. In 2014, AAI claimed responsibility for attacks near Kirkuk, Tikrit, and Mosul, Iraq, primarily directed against Iraqi police and security forces and, in one instance, an oil field.

During summer 2014, part of AAI issued a statement pledging allegiance to ISIS. In 2015, however, reports suggested that a faction of AAI in Syria continued to oppose ISIS. In June 2015,

for example, AAI urged factions in Aleppo to confront ISIS "militarily and religiously." In 2016, AAI continued to operate in Syria.

Strength: Precise numbers are unknown.

Location/Area of Operation: AAI is active primarily in northern Iraq, but also maintains a presence in western and central Iraq. AAI expanded its operations into Syria in 2011.

Funding and External Aid: AAI receives assistance from a loose network of associates in Europe and the Middle East.

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