

Al-Qaeda Using Kuwaiti Route

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Cross-border trade and holes in security wall make Kuwait's frontier an easy option for militants.

Al-Qaeda fighters are infiltrating Iraq from Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, as United States officials point the finger of blame at Syria and Iran, IWPR has learned

Former military officers in Basra, who asked not to be named for fear of retribution, said that the militants are coming through the Abdali-Safwan border crossing, 47 kilometres southwest of Basra.

"The crossing is the most secure for them, and far from the coalition's aerial surveillance patrols," one source told IWPR.

Another former military officer said he knew first-hand of an Iraqi who had been with al-Qaeda for many years and had just returned via Abdali-Safwan.

"They started using this route after pressure increased on Syria to control its border with Iraq," he said.

On November 2, Iraq's top international administrator Paul Bremer said al-Qaeda members were "coming in mostly through Syria".

"We know they are coming, there is no speculation," Bremer said, calling for better cooperation from the Syrian authorities to stop the flow.

Bremer was speaking just hours after 15 soldiers died when a United States helicopter was shot down in central Iraq, as well as the recent spate of car-bombs in Baghdad and the upsurge in attacks on US forces.

While Bremer said foreign fighters were sneaking in from Syria and Iran, he did not mention Kuwait, a staunch US ally. In the case of Iran, Washington believes it is the Ansar al-Islam group rather than al-Qaeda that is coming across the mountainous frontier of north-east Iraq.

Speaking the same day, US defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld said between 200 and 300 "foreign terrorists" had been captured in Iraq.

An IWPR source who has had recent contact with al-Qaeda members said there were now 4,500 Islamic fighters across Iraq. "They are mostly from Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Yemen and other Gulf countries," he said.

The Iraqi side of the Kuwaiti-Iraqi border has been largely unmanned since the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime. While there are frontier controls on the Kuwaiti side, security is lax and there are no restrictions on Kuwaiti passport-holders entering Iraq, according to Mohammad Hashim, a Kuwaiti trader who frequently crosses.

Lieutenant-Commander Richard Whalley, spokesman for the multi-national division in Basra, said he was

unaware of any infiltration through the Kuwaiti border.

The Abdali-Safwan crossing is a particularly easy way to cross into Iraq. There is a free-trade zone located near Safwan, just inside Iraqi territory. Sprawling across eight square kilometres, the trading zone does brisk business, especially on Fridays when it is jam-packed with shoppers from Iraq looking at the used cars, electronic goods and household items offered by Kuwaiti traders.

Infiltrators can also cross through breaches in the security wall that runs along the border. Until this year, Kuwait's 187-km frontier with Iraq was sealed with a security belt consisting of an earthen wall, a 10-metre-wide trench and four banks of electric fencing and barbed wire.

In the run-up to the war, US forces broke through the security barrier in nine places to create gateways for their troops to enter Iraq. According to Whalley, the gates were closed after the war, but he said it is still possible to walk across, "That's why we have regular patrols with the Iraqi police."

He insisted that the Kuwaiti border with Iraq is "firm and secure".

Islamic militants who use the Kuwaiti route are believed to head first to Zubayr and Abu al-Khasib, areas south of Basra where there are pockets of Sunni Muslims.

Zubayr in particular has developed a reputation among Iraqis as a hard-line Wahhabi fundamentalist area. A few weeks ago, rumours were circulating in Basra that Saddam was now in Zubayr.

Many of the infiltrators move north to safer hideouts in the central Sunni area of Iraq, where – if they are Arabs – they can easily blend in with local people.

IWPR has been told that the porous border with Saudi Arabia is also being used by al-Qaeda men. Not only are there no security fences along most of the 700 km border, there is a network of desert guides who will take anyone over – no questions asked – for a modest sum, usually about 200 US dollars.

The Kuwaiti authorities appear to be waking up to the dangers on their stretch of border. On November 3, the Kuwaiti daily Al-Siyasa reported that border guards had increased their patrols and now had orders to shoot anybody who did not respond to their commands.

Kuwait's security service has opened files on Kuwaitis who had fought in Afghanistan, Chechnya or Bosnia, the intention being "to prevent them entering Iraq", the paper said.

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