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Al-Qaeda Loses an Iraqi Friend

By Bobby Ghosh/Baghdad

Al-Qaeda has lost its most powerful friend in Iraq: Harith al-Dari, the country's most influential Sunni cleric and a prominent anti-American figure, has rejected al-Qaeda's vision of an Islamic state, telling TIME that Iraqis "will not accept such a system." In a sharp departure from his long-standing view of the terror group, al-Dari now says al-Qaeda has "gone too far." He also repudiates recent statements on Iraq by Osama bin Laden's deputy, saying: "Ayman al-Zawahiri doesn't represent Iraqis."

But al-Dari's change of heart on al-Qaeda is not necessarily good news for the Bush Administration. The Sunni cleric remains an implacable foe of the U.S. occupation, and of the Shi'ite-led Iraqi government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. He is dismissive of the "surge" in Baghdad, insisting that no solution to Iraq's problems is possible while American troops remain — and rejects as "insincere and meaningless" al-Maliki's efforts to reach out to the Sunnis.

As leader of the Association of Muslim Scholars (AMS), the largest Sunni clerical body, al-Dari is the sect's most prominent figure in Iraq. Many U.S. military commanders and Iraqi government officials believe he is the spiritual head of the insurgency, and accuse his son Muthanna of personally commanding a deadly terror group known as the Brigades of the 1920 Revolution (named after an anti-British uprising led by Harith al-Dari's grandfather). Both al-Daris deny direct connection with the Brigades, but say Sunni insurgent groups are part of a legitimate, nationalist resistance to occupation. He has given religious sanction to some of the insurgency's more controversial tactics, such as kidnapping and killing foreigners, citing precedents from Islamic history.

In the past, Harith al-Dari and other AMS figures have given at least tacit backing — and occasionally open support — to al-Qaeda, believing the terror group would help the Sunni insurgency achieve its goal of driving American forces from Iraq. But in recent months, many Sunni leaders have grown uncomfortable with al-Qaeda's indiscriminate bombing campaign, which targets Iraqi civilians more

often than U.S. forces. Now, al-Dari says, insurgent groups "have changed their view of Al-Qaeda."

Al-Dari says the "harsh actions" — suicide bombings and attacks on civilian targets — of al-Qaeda's foreign fighters in Iraq are "unacceptable." He also accuses the group of trying to take over sole command of the fight against the Americans, pushing aside home-grown insurgent groups. But there may also be a personal reason for al-Dari's change of heart: his nephew, also known as Harith and a top commander of the Brigades, was murdered by al-Qaeda in March.

But if the senior cleric's attitude toward al-Qaeda has changed, al-Dari says he has not softened his view of the U.S. presence in Iraq. "The occupation cannot continue," he says. "As long as the Americans are in Iraq, there will be violence." Like other Sunni leaders — and some Shi'ite ones — he wants the Bush Administration to set a timetable for a withdrawal.

Al-Dari also remains inflexible in his hatred of the al-Maliki government, which he accuses of "serving foreign masters" — a reference to the close ties of leading Shi'ite politicians to Iran. The loathing is mutual. Top government leaders, from President Jalal Talabani on down, have described al-Dari as an inciter of ethnic and sectarian violence. Last November, the Interior Ministry [issued a warrant for his arrest](#). Ever since, he has divided his time between several Arab states, monitoring al-Maliki's actions from afar. Not even the Prime Minister's recent decision to allow many former Baath Party officials back into government has impressed the Sunni cleric. "They are inviting the former Baathists to register their names, but you know what will happen after that," he says, alluding to the murder of many former officials by Shi'ite death squads accused of operating under government protection.

Like many other Sunni leaders, al-Dari says al-Maliki's efforts at sectarian reconciliation have been empty promises. "All he does is say, 'Come and join us,' " he says. "But he doesn't change any of the things that make us feel we are being victimized by his administration." For there to be any meaningful reconciliation, he says, the government must first dismantle the interior and defense ministries, which are currently controlled by Shi'ite parties, and bring back some senior officers from the old army. "Once these ministries are under the control of professionals instead of sectarian interests, you will see peace returning quickly," he says. "And then the Americans can leave with their dignity and leave us with ours."

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