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## Group tied to old guard could gain in Iraq unrest

By ADAM SCHRECK

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As clashes this week raise fears of a destabilizing new eruption of sectarian fighting in Iraq, a shadowy militant group linked to the top fugitive from Saddam Hussein's regime could stand to gain by attracting new Sunni Muslim support.

The Army of the Men of the Naqshabandi Order depicts itself as a nationalist force defending Iraq's Sunni minority from Shiite rule and as an alternative to the extremist version of Islam championed by al-Qaida, whose branch here alienated many in the community during the height of the country's sectarian bloodshed in the middle of the last decade.

The Naqshabandi Army boasted online that it contributed to the wave of violence that followed a government crackdown Tuesday on a Sunni protest site in the town of Hawija. The deadly clash there prompted assaults by Sunni gunmen in a string of towns and cities, mainly in the north. The violence has claimed more than 170 lives.

In a posting on its website, the group urged its fighters to prepare to storm Baghdad to confront "with an iron fist ... the enemies of Arabism and Islam" — a reference to the Shiite-led government that many Sunnis believe is too closely allied with neighboring Shiite powerhouse Iran. While it says foreign diplomats are not its target, it warned that those who ally themselves with the government can expect no mercy.

It's not just propaganda, say officials and analysts.

"The intelligence we have clearly indicates — beyond any doubt — that the Naqshabandi Army is involved in the recent clashes" in the north of the country, said Shiite lawmaker Hakim al-Zamili, who sits on parliament's security and defense committee.

He told The Associated Press that the group is thought to have a cache of small and medium-sized arms, and is continuing to carry out attacks against army positions. "They are intensifying efforts to recruit more people and gather more weapons," he said.

The group, believed to be made up largely of former officers and other former members of Saddam's regime, occasionally claims responsibility for attacks on government security forces. Estimates of its size range from 1,000 to five times that.

It takes its name from the Naqshabandi order of Sufism, Islam's mystical movement, which counts many followers in northern Iraq. The militant group touts its Sufi credentials, though it is unclear how many in its ranks are adherents to the spiritual order. But the Sufi claim helps differentiate it in the eyes of the Sunni public from al-Qaida in Iraq, whose radical version of Islam usually vilifies Sufis.

Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri, a former Saddam deputy who is the highest member of his inner circle still on the run, is believed to have a significant role in the Naqshabandi Army, which proudly touts Saddam-era symbols on its website.

Al-Douri was named as the head of a new insurgent coalition in 2007 called the Supreme Command for Jihad and Liberation, in which the Naqshabandi Army is the main component. Al-Douri was the "king of clubs" in the deck of playing cards issued to help U.S. troops identify key members of Saddam's regime, but he disappeared with the regime's fall in 2003. He had not been seen in public until last year, when a man purporting to be him turned up in an online video wearing a Saddam-era military uniform and railing against Iraq's Shiite-led government.

Another video of him aired in January to rally Sunni protesters demonstrating against the government, promising them the support of "all the national and Islamic forces ... until (their) legitimate demands are achieved."

Sunnis formed the backbone of the insurgency after Saddam's fall. But they also were key to the downturn in violence after tribal leaders turned against al-Qaida in Iraq, angered over its killing of civilians.

The Naqshabandi Army is maneuvering to present itself as the Sunnis' champion.

Tuesday's bloodshed followed four months of largely peaceful protests staged by Iraq's Sunni minority against the government. They complain of discrimination and political marginalization under the Shiite-led government.

An organizer of protests in the western city of Fallujah, in the country's Sunni heartland, said fighters from the group had contacted the protesters months ago offering to protect their rallies. But the protesters turned them down, wanting to maintain their movement's peaceful image, said

the organizer, who spoke on condition he be identified only by his nickname Abu Ahmed for fear of government reprisals.

But after the Hawija crackdown, the Naqshabandi Army renewed its offer of protection, and the protesters accepted, he said.

The group "told us that they are different from al-Qaida and they do not kill their fellow Sunnis. They said that their goal is to defend Sunnis and to fight pro-Iran Iraqis," he said. "Our protesters now need real armed protection."

The group this week took credit for several attacks in the post-Hawija unrest, including a mortar attack on security forces and the destruction of an army vehicle near Suleiman Beg, a small town north of Baghdad that was seized by gunmen Thursday. Security forces retook control of the town after the gunmen withdrew Friday.

It was also behind deadly clashes this week in the key northern city of Mosul, Interior Ministry spokesman Lt. Col. Saad Maan Ibrahim said. The group is "trying to recruit more people and expand its operations to other Sunni provinces by taking advantage of current sectarian tensions," he said.

Michael Knights, an analyst at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, described the group as patient and strategically focused with a fairly stringent recruitment process that draws heavily on former members of Saddam's elite Republican Guard.

"The big bang — a resurgence of Sunni militancy in Iraq — is exactly what JRTN has been trying to foment," he said, using the abbreviation of the group's full name in Arabic. "JRTN didn't create the conditions, but it's the organization that's best equipped to exploit it."

In January, uniformed members of the Naqshabandi Army appeared in an online video urging Iraqis to continue with the anti-government protests that began in December in many Sunni areas.

The U.S. Treasury Department froze the group's assets in 2009 after it carried out raids against U.S. and coalition forces using armor-penetrating grenades, rockets, and roadside bombs. Among the attacks was a strike on a coalition convoy in Hawija in August of that year.

The department said the group intends to overthrow the Iraqi government and reinstate rule by the Saddam-era Baath Party.

Iraqi analyst Ibrahim al-Sumaidaie predicted that the Naqshabandi Army as well as al-Qaida's Iraq arm will gain support following the Hawija crackdown.

"It's a dangerous situation," he said. "We have two paths — to get a compromise solution, or to head to a new civil war."

Some Sunnis appear willing to turn to it if the sectarian violence spirals.

"We are against any outlawed armed groups," said Mohammed Youssef, a Mosul shop owner. "We do not want any Shiite-Sunni fighting, but if the Shiite armed groups move aggressively against Sunnis, then we will all support the Naqshabandi Army. It is different from al-Qaida."