

Unlikely alliance

Iran's secretive relationship with Al-Qaeda

Regional tensions have created a strong incentive for Iran to co-operate with Al-Qaeda, but the strains of this relationship are likely to limit its closeness, writes **Daniel Byman**

KEY POINTS

- Iran has a longstanding relationship with Al-Qaeda that involves travel assistance and a limited safe haven. However, Iran has tempered this support with occasional crackdowns and other limits on Al-Qaeda activities in Iran.
- Tehran has many motivations for working with Al-Qaeda, including maintaining a bargaining chip to ratchet-up pressure on the US, and ensuring co-operative behavior from the Sunni jihadist movement.
- Iran's relationship with Al-Qaeda is fraught with tension and is unpopular among many Al-Qaeda constituents, limiting the extent of co-operation.



On 16 February 2012, the US Department of the Treasury designated the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS), Iran's primary intelligence organization, for its "support to terrorist groups, such as Al-Qaeda and Al-Qaeda in Iraq... again exposing the extent of Iran's sponsorship of terrorism as a matter of Iran's state policy".

For almost 30 years, Iran has worked with leading terrorist groups, such as Lebanese Hizballah and Hamas, to advance its interests in the Middle East and has provided these groups with training, funding and weapons. According to the US Department of State's *Country Reports on Terrorism 2010*, released on 18 August 2011: "Iran remained the most active state sponsor of

terrorism... Iran's financial, material and logistic support for terrorist and militant groups throughout the Middle East and Central Asia had a direct impact on international efforts to promote peace, threatened economic stability in the Gulf, and undermined the growth and democracy."

Iranian connections to Hizballah and Palestinian militant groups, such as Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), are well-documented, but its ties to Al-Qaeda remain, for the most part, shrouded in secrecy, or at least concealed in classified channels. Nevertheless, several documents released over the past decade help shed light on Iran's ties with Al-Qaeda.

For instance, according to *The 9/11 Commission Report*, published in July 2004, Iran

and Al-Qaeda worked together during the early-1990s while senior Al-Qaeda leaders were based in Sudan. In addition, the written works of Al-Qaeda senior leader Sayf al-Adl – who is wanted by the US for his alleged role in the 1998 US embassy bombings in Tanzania and Kenya – also provide a unique insight into Iran's support for Al-Qaeda, especially in the years leading up to 2001.

These reports document several instances in which Iran has lent support to Al-Qaeda, enabling the group to conduct attacks more effectively and avoid US and coalition counter-terrorism efforts. Nevertheless, distrust between Tehran and the group's members also appears to have prevented the two sides from developing a closer working relationship. Doc-



Documents recovered during the raid on Osama bin Laden's Abbottabad compound in Pakistan in May 2011 (seen here) show the relationship between Iran and Al-Qaeda is "fraught with difficulties". According to the report; "References to Iran show that the relationship is not one of alliance, but of indirect and unpleasant negotiations over the release of detained jihadis and their families, including members of Bin Laden's family."

Documents recovered during the raid on Osama bin Laden's Abbottabad compound in Pakistan in May 2011 show the relationship was "fraught with difficulties," as described by the *Combating Terrorism Center (CTC)* report *Letters from Abbottabad: Bin Laden Sidelined* published on 3 May 2012. According to the report, "references to Iran [in the documents] show that the relationship is not one of alliance, but of indirect and unpleasant negotiations over the release of detained jihadis and their families, including members of Bin Laden's family. The detention of prominent Al-Qaeda members seems to have sparked a campaign of threats, taking hostages and indirect negotiations between Al-Qaeda and Iran that have been drawn out for years and may still be ongoing"

These reports only partly describe the nature of connections between Iran and Al-Qaeda, but do at least help to identify several critical Iranian motivations for working with the group. These include Tehran's desire to gain some leverage over the US, to maintain its options in an often-hostile region, and to deter an Al-Qaeda attack on Iranian territory and interests. At the same time, Iran provides an important lifeline to Al-Qaeda, which continues to suffer from the impact of drone strikes targeting its Pakistan-based leadership.

Persistent discord

Ideological differences have hindered the development of deeper connections between Shia Iran and Sunni Al-Qaeda, and the rela-

tionship has often been contentious and defined by mutual suspicion or even outright hostility. For instance, in a video posted by Al-Qaeda's media wing, *As-Sahab*, on 17 December 2007, then Al-Qaeda deputy leader Ayman al-Zawahiri publicly denounced what he described as an "Iranian-Crusader" alliance based on Iranian collaboration with the US in its invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq. Zawahiri stated: "Iran has stabbed a knife into the back of the Islamic nation, and the traces of this stabbing will remain in the Muslim memory for a long time to come."

According to the CTC's May 2012 *Letters from Abbottabad* report, "relations between Al-Qaeda and Iran appear to have been highly antagonistic," with Al-Qaeda leaders angry and



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According to the *9/11 Commission Report*, Sudanese officials, including Hassan al-Turabi (pictured), founder of Sudan's National Islamic Front, made Sudan a home for a wide range of terrorist groups, including Al-Qaeda. While in Sudan, these groups also met with Iranian officials.

frustrated by Iranian behavior, particularly with regard to Al-Qaeda's efforts to secure the release of several jihadists detained in Iran.

In a communiqué dated 11 June 2009 and seemingly addressed to Bin Laden, Atiyah, a senior Al-Qaeda figure, wrote that Iran had released a number of mid-level operatives the previous month. According to Atiyah, Iran was pressured into expediting the release of these prisoners as a result of Al-Qaeda's escalating political and media campaign, the threats directed at Iranian interests by Al-Qaeda, and the kidnapping of an official in the Iranian consulate in Peshawar – referring to Hezmatollah Atharzadeh-Nyaki, who had been kidnapped in November 2008.

However, Atiyah also communicated a sharp annoyance over the absence of direct contact between Iran and Al-Qaeda in the negotiations. "They (the criminals) did not send any messages to us, and they did not talk to any of the brothers about it." He goes on to point out that, "this is nothing strange coming from them; in fact, this is their mentality and method. They don't want to show that they are negotiating with us or reacting to our pressure, they just do these acts to appear as if it is one-sided and as a matter of initiative on their behalf." Perhaps indicative of his true feelings, he adds: "We ask God to repel their evil... Amen"

According to *Letters from Abbottabad*, Bin Laden also had misgivings about the sincerity of the Iranian regime. When Iran did not hold up its end of the bargain to release members of the Bin Laden family, Bin Laden's son Khalid authored a letter to Ayatollah Khamenei expressing Al-Qaeda's displeasure that several letters requesting the release of prisoners had been ignored by the Iranian government.

Because antagonism on both sides is considerable, the two parties downplay the depth and nature of the relationship. For example, after the 2000 attack on the *USS Cole*, Iran tried to strengthen ties to Al-Qaeda, a move that Bin Laden reportedly rejected because he did not want to alienate his Saudi supporters, according to the *9/11 Commission Report*. Had Al-Qaeda's relationship with Iran been public knowledge, it would likely have lost potential recruits and donations from anti-Shia supporters. Iranian motivations for keeping its relationship with Al-Qaeda quiet are different, but no less profound. Despite its pariah status, Iran

still seeks trade, investment and other forms of relationships with the broader international community, and would become even more of an outcast if its interactions with Al-Qaeda were widely known.

A 'marriage of convenience'

Despite apparent and continuing sectarian issues, Iran has nonetheless demonstrated a repeated willingness to work with any organization that shares its objectives, including opposition to the US and hostility to Israel. The sectarian divide is far from absolute, and Iran has been able to transcend Shia-Sunni rifts to co-operate with a range of Sunni groups, most notably Gaza-based Hamas. Iran and Al-Qaeda have therefore been able to put aside their differences when it has been mutually beneficial for them to do so.

Speaking before a US Senate Armed Services Committee hearing on 16 February 2012, the Director of National Intelligence, James Clapper, characterized this guarded alliance as a "marriage of convenience." This alliance has involved limited Iranian training assistance to Al-Qaeda operatives in the early-1990s, facilitating the transit of Al-Qaeda and associated jihadists through Iran to Afghanistan before and after the 9/11 attacks on the US, and allowing Al-Qaeda figures to stay in Iran under a loose form of house arrest that also gives them some degree of sanctuary.

During the nascent stages of the relationship in the early-1990s, Iran may have viewed Al-Qaeda as another potential surrogate and was willing to provide training with the hope that Al-Qaeda would evolve into a useful ally. According to the *9/11 Commission Report*, during Al-Qaeda's time in Sudan, Sudanese officials facilitated meetings between Al-Qaeda operatives and Iranian officials, which resulted in Iran providing tactical training.

"In late 1991 or 1992, discussions in Sudan between Al-Qaeda and Iranian operatives led to an informal agreement to co-operate in providing support – even if only training – for actions carried out primarily against Israel and the US. Not long afterward, senior Al-Qaeda operatives and trainers traveled to Iran to receive training in explosives. In [late] 1993, another such delegation went to the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon for further training in explosives as well as in intelligence and security," the report concluded.

Several motivating factors are behind Iran's continued support of Al-Qaeda since the early-1990s. First, having Al-Qaeda operatives in country gives Iran a bargaining chip and important leverage with the US and other adversaries. As reported by this author in a February 2012 *Foreign Policy* article: "Iran can loosen its restrictions on Al-Qaeda operatives in the country and facilitate their travel if it wants to stir the pot in Afghanistan or Iraq (or against the United States gener-

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ally); on the other hand, it can constrain their mobility or even surrender them if it wants to improve relations with Washington or Al-Qaeda's foes.”

Second, ties to Al-Qaeda (and other jihadists) afford Iran options for possible unforeseen disruptions and contingencies. For instance, in the event that Iranian bilateral relations with Saudi Arabia deteriorate – which, following the uncovering of a plot involving Iranian nationals to assassinate the Saudi Arabian ambassador to the US, Adel Al-Jubeir, in October 2011, seems plausible – Iran would benefit from the option of working with anti-regime Sunni jihadists.

Third, the provision of logistical support and a form of safe haven for Al-Qaeda has enabled Iran to protect itself from a possible attack against targets in Iran, and to ensure a measure of good behavior from the broader Sunni jihadist movement. In a 2005 letter addressed to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, then-leader of Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), that was made public in October 2005, Zawahiri requested that the Iraqi leader stop targeting Shia and Iranian assets, because Iran holds more than 100 of its members.

Transit route to Afghanistan

When Al-Qaeda was forced to leave Sudan in 1996, Bin Laden and his followers relocated to Afghanistan, which had recently come under Taliban control. Jihadist recruits quickly began to descend on Afghanistan to join Al-Qaeda's training camps. Al-Qaeda purposefully positioned some of the training camps near the Iranian border to make it easier for recruits travelling through Iran to reach Afghanistan. "The western frontier of Afghanistan bordering Iran was considered by Al-Qaeda strategists as an alternative base for their activities to escape and evade the intrusion of US Special Operations Forces that were targeting them prior to the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001," according to *Letters from Abbottabad*.

In his publicly available writings (cited by the *CTC*), Sayf al-Adl explained that Al-Qaeda chose the locations of the training camps to enable recruits to transit to and from Afghanistan and Pakistan to Iran, and travel from there to important fields of jihad such as Iraq. As Pakistani authorities began to exert pressure on Al-Qaeda and monitor their movements, it became difficult for its Arab brothers to reach Afghanistan, via Pakistan.

According to the *9/11 Commission Report*, it was well known, for example, that if a Saudi national traveled to Afghanistan via Pakistan, then on his return to Saudi Arabia his passport, bearing a Pakistani stamp, would risk confiscation. As a result, operatives often erased the Pakistani visas from their passports or traveled through Iran, which did not stamp visas directly in the passport. The commission collected evidence to show that eight to 10 of the 14 Saudi "muscle" operatives involved in the 9/11 attacks traveled into or out of Iran between October 2000 and February 2001.

In addition, Iran allowed Al-Qaeda to establish safe houses inside the country for recruits making the long trip to Afghanistan. Declassified and leaked documents prepared at the Guantanamo Bay detention facility, and cited in Thomas Jocelyn's May 2011 article in *The Long War Journal*, "Al-Qaeda's Interim Emir and Iran," contain numerous references to the guesthouses in Iran, which were reportedly funded by Bin Laden.

According to Sayf: "This passage was new and important to us in the Al-Qaeda. We took



Iran-based Al-Qaeda members reportedly played a role in the 12 May 2003 attacks on a housing complex in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia (aftermath seen here). According to unnamed intelligence sources the cell that carried out the attack was in communication with Sayf and Saad bin Laden.

advantage of it later on. We used it instead of the old route through Pakistan, particularly for the passage of Arab brothers. This issue prompted us to think of building good relations with some virtuous people in Iran to pave the way and co-ordinate regarding issues of mutual interest. Co-ordination with the Iranians was achieved later.”

Some evidence suggests that Tehran is still allowing Al-Qaeda operatives to travel to Afghanistan via Iran. A member of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) and Al-Qaeda operative, Adel Muhammad Mahmoud Abdul Khaliq – who was designated by the US Department of the Treasury in June 2008 for providing financial, material and logistical support for terrorism – reportedly traveled to Iran on at least five occasions between 2004 and 2007. Accord-

ing to the US Treasury, Khaliq was arrested in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) on charges of being a member of both Al-Qaeda and the LIFG in January 2007. Following his conviction in the UAE in late-2007, he was transferred in early 2008 to Bahraini custody to serve out the remainder of his sentence.

Several individuals have been identified in US Treasury designations as playing important roles in facilitating the movement of jihadists through Iran. On 16 January 2009, it designated four Al-Qaeda operatives in Iran, among them Mustafa Hamid (alias Abu Walid al-Masri), who reportedly served as the primary interlocutor between Al-Qaeda and the government of Iran. According to the designation, while living in Iran, “Hamid was harbored by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), which

served as [his] point of contact for communications between Al-Qaeda and Iran. In the mid-1990s, [he] reportedly negotiated a secret relationship between Osama bin Laden and Iran, allowing many Al-Qaeda members safe transit through Iran to Afghanistan.”

On 28 July 2011, the Treasury also designated six members of Al-Qaeda’s network that serves as the core pipeline through which Al-Qaeda moves money, facilitators and operatives from the Middle East to South Asia. Among the individuals named was Yasin al-Suri (alias Izz al-Din Abd al-Aziz Khalil), a prominent Iran-based facilitator whom Iranian authorities have allowed to operate in the country since 2005, and who has facilitated the travel of extremist recruits from Al-Qaeda from the Gulf to Pakistan and Afghanistan via Iran. The

US Department of State's Reward for Justice Program is offering a USD10 million reward for his capture.

In addition, during the trial of Ahmad Wali Siddiqui, who was arrested in 2010 on route to Germany from Afghanistan and charged with being a member of a terrorist organization, the defendant revealed that he and two of his co-conspirators – Rami Makanesi and Maamen Meziche – had traveled directly to Iran to meet with Al-Qaeda leaders. They feared that being Arabs they would be questioned and perhaps arrested if they traveled to Pakistan. According to Siddiqui, Makanesi and Meziche flew from Vienna to Tehran so as “to not get caught”. In March 2012, a German court sentenced Siddiqui to six years in prison for being a member of two terrorist organizations: Al-Qaeda and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU).

Makanesi's concerns were valid. He was arrested by Pakistani authorities in June 2010, extradited to Germany in August, and was sentenced on 9 May 2011 to four years and nine months in prison for joining Al-Qaeda and training at terrorist camps in Pakistan. Pakistani officials announced on 20 June 2012 that Meziche has been arrested near the Pakistan-Iran border, according to *Reuters*. According to US and European security officials cited *The New York Times* in January 2012, Meziche, who was hiding out in Iran, was close to 9/11 leader Mohammed Atta and spent time in the 1990s at terrorist camps in Afghanistan.

'House arrest' or safe haven?

In addition to travel assistance, Iran has provided limited safe haven to Al-Qaeda. However, Iranian policy towards Al-Qaeda's presence inside the country has been far from consistent, varying between offering a permissive operating environment to one that is hostile towards Al-Qaeda and involves occasional crackdowns on its activities inside Iranian borders. In his written testimony to the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee in March 2010, General David Petraeus, then commander of US Central Command and currently the director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), said: “Iranian authorities do periodically disrupt this network by detaining select Al-Qaeda facilitators and operational planners. Tehran's policy in this regard is often unpredictable.”



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During the 1990s, Iran was a popular destination for terrorist groups that needed a safe place to hold meetings. In 2004, Jessica Stern, who teaches at Harvard University, recalled from her interviews in Pakistan in the late-1990s that Sunni jihadists traveled to Iran to raise money and to meet operatives from other militant groups, such as Hizbullah.

Following the US-led invasion into Afghanistan, Al-Qaeda split into two groups: one followed Bin Laden and Zawahiri into Pakistan, the other, which included a group of senior officials who set up a “management council”, sought refuge in Iran, including Sayf, Abu Haf al-Mauritani (Al-Qaeda's senior theologian), Sulayman Abu Ghayth and one of Bin Laden's sons, Saad. Initially, Iran restricted the group's ability to operate inside Iran, placing some

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officials under various forms of house arrest and sending many suspected jihadists back to their home countries, where they usually faced arrest. For a time, Iran even appeared to be siding with the US. As Iran expert Gary Sick noted in a 2003 essay in the *Washington Quarterly*, Iran supported the US war against the Taliban and even gave assurances of limited assistance to the US military effort.

However, after Iran was branded as a central node in the “Axis of Evil” during the January 2002 State of the Union address by former US President George W. Bush (a decision motivated, in part, by Iran's role in the shipment of weapons to Gaza), Iran seemingly relaxed its control over Al-Qaeda.

For instance, during the lead-up to the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, Iran allowed Sunni jihadists to use its country as a base to prepare to resist coalition forces. At the time, Iran felt threatened by the imminence of the US invasion of its neighbor and talk of regime change in the Middle East. According to Middle East political analyst Gary Gambill, AQI's Zarqawi traveled to Iran to meet with Sayf, who the Iranian government still allowed to meet with other jihadists.

Iran-based Al-Qaeda members were reportedly also able to orchestrate, or at the very least communicate with, the terrorist cell responsible for the 12 May 2003 attacks on a housing complex in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The cell that carried out the attack was in communication with Sayf and Saad bin Laden, who US officials believe also organized the April 2002 suicide attack targeting a synagogue in Tunisia, according to a June 2005 report by *Dateline NBC*.

According to an unnamed former US intelligence official cited by *Dateline NBC*, Saudi authorities – with US and British assistance – discovered that Al-Qaeda leaders in Iran were communicating with the cell in Saudi that had carried out the attacks. “The Saudis let the Ira-

Rewards for Justice



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(Left) Yasin al-Suri, alias Izz al-Din Abd al-Aziz Khalil, a prominent Iran-based facilitator who Iranian authorities have allowed to operate in the country since 2005, was designated by the US Treasury on 28 July 2011 for his involvement in facilitating the travel of extremist recruits from Al-Qaeda from the Gulf to Pakistan and Afghanistan via Iran. The US Department of State's Reward for Justice Program is offering a USD10 million reward for his capture. (Right) Sayf al-Adl is Al-Qaeda's most senior Iran-based member. He was reportedly released in April 2010 after eight years in the country and returned to Pakistan.

nians know and... demanded that the Iranians put a halt to the operations of the management council, leading to the Iranians putting the 20 to 25 Al-Qaeda officials in Iran under virtual house arrest," the official said.

Even after the arrests, Iran "remained unwilling to bring [Al-Qaeda members] to justice... and refused to publicly identify senior Al-Qaeda members in its custody," according to the US Department of State's *Country Reports on Terrorism 2009*. According to a May 2003 CNN report, Iranian officials admitted holding several Al-Qaeda operatives during a meeting with the UN representative for Afghanistan, Sayf being primary among them.

Available evidence points to an easing of Iranian restrictions on Al-Qaeda personnel over the past few years, and several high-profile Al-Qaeda figures have reportedly been released by Iran, although concrete evidence of their current status and whereabouts is not available in open sources. In January 2009, Mike McConnell, then director of national intelligence, told reporters that Saad bin Laden had left Iran and was probably operating in Pakistan, according to *The New York Times*. In July 2009, *National*

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Public Radio cited intelligence officials who claimed Saad had been killed in a drone strike in Pakistan. However, conflicting reports suggest Saad may still be alive. In April 2012, Abu Hafis al-Mauritani reportedly left Iran for Mauritania, according to a *Long War Journal* report.

After eight years in Iranian captivity, Sayf was reportedly released and returned to Pakistan in April 2010, according to an October 2010 report in German news magazine *Der Spiegel* which cited Noman Benotman, a former Libyan jihadist who now works for a UK-based counter-radicalization think tank.

The Director of National Intelligence, James Clapper (pictured), characterized the guarded alliance between Iran and Al-Qaeda as a "marriage of convenience". This involves limited Iranian training assistance to Al-Qaeda operatives in the early-1990s, facilitating the transit of Al-Qaeda and associated jihadists through Iran to Afghanistan after the 9/11 attacks, and allowing Al-Qaeda figures to stay in Iran under a loose form of house arrest.

Conclusion

The hostility between the Iran and its enemies such as the US and its regional Arab allies shows no sign of abating and may even increase in the event of a crisis over Iran's nuclear program. For Tehran, this creates a strong incentive to continue co-operation with groups such as Al-Qaeda. In the event that it comes under attack, Iran would turn to its surrogate groups to execute contingency strikes on its behalf, as well as to help to safeguard the regime.

At the same time, however, the strains in the Iran-Al-Qaeda relationship are likely to limit its closeness. Iran would not welcome becom-



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ing Al-Qaeda's main base in the Muslim world. The opprobrium and associated risks would be too high, as would the political costs at home. Similarly, Al-Qaeda would lose financial support and recruits if it were seen to be too close to Iran. So the uneasy mix of co-operation and hostility that have characterized the relationship is likely to continue.

The leadership transition from Bin Laden to Zawahiri is not likely to fundamentally change this relationship. Zawahiri was clearly influential in Al-Qaeda's decision to work with Iran, despite its many risks. Zawahiri is a pragmatist and recognizes the benefits of the relationship

but, equally, knows he must cultivate Sunni jihadists and donors in general and thus will be hesitant to develop too close an embrace.

A bigger shift may occur should Al-Qaeda lose its haven in Pakistan. Its leaders there are under assault from US drone strikes, and media reports of intelligence documents gathered from the raid that killed Bin Laden suggest he saw these attacks as devastating to his group. The Abbottabad documents reveal Bin Laden's fears for the safety of "brothers" in Waziristan and he wanted them to depart. Those released by Iran were therefore a way of filling out the ranks to replace those being killed or leav-

ing Pakistan. A haven in Iran, even if Tehran greatly restricted Al-Qaeda's freedom of operations, offers some degree of sanctuary, as the US would be unlikely to conduct drone attacks in Iran as it has done in Pakistan. ■

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