



# The Iran-Al Qaeda Nexus

## Two Islamisms, One Goal

By Lucie Švejdová

Despite Tehran's robust public relations' efforts that lumps Iran, the EU and US together in combatting Islamist terrorism, the Islamic Republic's track-record reveals enhanced cooperation with an assortment of nefarious actors, terrorist groups and radical elements ranging from al-Qaeda to ISIS, Hezbollah to Saraya al-Ashtar. While utilising Shia terrorist groups are a reflection of Iran's foreign policy, Tehran has sought to shroud its relationship to Sunni groups. It argues that being a Shia theocracy has placed it in the crosshairs of terrorist groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS. However, It should be remembered that Iran routinely places its strategic priorities above its ideological orientation and has never hesitated to support Sunni groups (re: Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad) or even Christian groups (re: Iran supports Christian Armenia against Shia Azerbaijan) in pursuit of its overall strategic goals—1. Bleeding-out the US in the region, 2. Undermining stability in the Sunni Arab Gulf countries, 3. Achieving regional hegemony.

This briefing traces some of the particulars of the al-Qaeda-Iran relationship.

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Tehran views al-Qaeda as a 'tactical ally' and while the two are not in ideological parity they do recognise each other as retaining tactical and, to some degree strategic, harmony. Characteristically, tactical alliances are conditioned neither by ideological affinity, identical strategic objectives nor by mutual trust. Instead, tactical cooperation is conditioned by the perception of common interests and identification of a common enemy.<sup>1</sup>

This sets the blueprint for al-Qaeda-Iran cooperation—termed here as AQ-I. The AQ-I alliance commenced in the early 1990's when Osama bin Laden, himself, met with important Iranian and Hezbollah representatives — notably Imad Mughniyah — in Sudan. Encouraged by Hasan al-Turabi's initiative to establish an

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<sup>1</sup> To read full analysis on cooperative relations between militant actors see: Assaf Moghadam, "Marriage of Convenience: The Evolution of Iran and al-Qa'ida's Tactical Cooperation," *CTC Sentinel*, April 2017; available: <<https://ctc.usma.edu/marriage-of-convenience-the-evolution-of-iran-and-al-qaidas-tactical-cooperation/>>

unified global Islamic effort against ‘common enemies’ (re: primarily Saudi Arabia, the US and Israel), Iran and al-Qaeda reached an informal agreement to cooperate, trade expertise, intelligence and equipment.

Then, in April 1991, Ayman al-Zawahiri, al-Qaeda’s current leader and former bin Laden deputy (who was a vocal supporter of the 1979 Islamic Revolution), secretly visited Iran. During his visit, al-Zawahiri enquired whether Iran could support his organisation, the Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ) and assist it in overthrowing Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak. After al-Zawahiri’s request, Iran began to provide training for EIJ members in their camps in Iran and Sudan as well as provided \$2 million in direct financial support. As a result of the growing friendship between the Islamic Republic and al-Zawahiri, Iran extended its assistance to members of al-Qaeda. Towards the end of the 1990’s, Iran’s assistance to al-Qaeda expanded to include specialised training in building improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and operational training for suicide missions. This support from Tehran to al-Qaeda resulted in the successful attacks on the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998.<sup>2</sup> Iran became the key facilitation hub for al-Qaeda’s operatives and their regional affiliates. Bin Laden himself described Iran as al-Qaeda’s ‘main artery for funds, personnel, and communication,’<sup>3</sup> since Tehran allows the terrorist organisation to use its territory as a transit point for funnelling money and people from donors in Gulf countries such as Qatar.<sup>4</sup> It also became a route for smuggling jihadis between Iraq and Afghanistan and, importantly, emerged as a major actor in drug smuggling from the poppy fields of Afghanistan’s Helmand Province to Europe via Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey.

It was common practise, to secure logistics and facilitate al-Qaeda members’ transit between Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia, that Iranian border guards did not stamp terrorists’ passports to shield them from Saudi authorities. As a result, Iran is guilty of indirectly assisting the preparation of the 11 September attacks. In May 2018, a US Federal Judge (re: New York), in a default judgment, found: the Islamic Republic of Iran; the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps; and the Central Bank of the Islamic Republic of Iran, liable for the deaths of 9/11 victims and ordered Iran to pay billions of dollars in reparations to their families.<sup>5</sup>

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2 Assaf Moghadam, “Marriage of Convenience: The Evolution of Iran and al-Qa’ida’s Tactical Cooperation,” *CTC Sentinel*, April 2017; available: < <https://ctc.usma.edu/marriage-of-convenience-the-evolution-of-iran-and-al-qaidas-tactical-cooperation/>>.

3 Quoted by Thomas Joscelyn and Bill Roggio in ‘Analysis: CIA releases massive trove of Osama bin Laden’s files,’ *Long War Journal*, 1 November 2017; available: < <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/11/analysis-cia-releases-massive-trove-of-osama-bin-ladens-files.php>>.

4 Assaf Moghadam, “Marriage of Convenience: The Evolution of Iran and al-Qa’ida’s Tactical Cooperation,” *CTC Sentinel*, April 2017; available: < <https://ctc.usma.edu/marriage-of-convenience-the-evolution-of-iran-and-al-qaidas-tactical-cooperation/>>.

5 See, for example: Aaron Katersky, ‘Iran ordered to pay billions to relatives of 9/11 victims,’ ABC News, 1 May 2018; available: <<https://abcnews.go.com/International/iran-ordered-pay-billions-relatives-911-victims/story?id=54862664>>.

Following the US intervention in Afghanistan, Iran provided safe-havens for al-Qaeda operatives and associates including Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (the founder of ISIS), Abu al-Walid al-Masri (a long-time al-Qaeda-Iran middleman), Saad bin Laden and Hamza bin Laden (al-Qaeda's current second in command). The CIA's release of documents seized during the raid on Osama bin Laden's compound in 2011 exposed that Iran 'offered some Saudi brothers in al Qaeda everything they needed, including money, arms and training in Hezbollah camps in Lebanon, in exchange for striking American interests in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf.'<sup>6</sup>

This relationship has not ceased. From their sanctuary in Iran, al-Qaeda members have been free to orchestrate acts of international terrorism. For example, in 2003, US intelligence intercepted communications suggesting that a cell of al-Qaeda leaders, among them Saad bin Laden and Saif al-Adel, direct bombing of a residential compounds in Riyadh.<sup>7</sup> Iran has also served as a staging ground for attacks against the West, including the foiled 'Europlot,' which envisioned commando-style attacks in Germany, France and the UK.<sup>8</sup> Evidence is also mounting that suggests Iran and al-Qaeda collaborate in the Yemen Civil War. According to information published by Yemen's Interior Ministry, Houthi militias — part of Iran's regional 'axis of resistance' under the direct command of Tehran — coordinates their operations to further destabilise the country with both al-Qaeda and ISIS. It is believed the leaders of al-Qaeda have settled in the city of Sanaa with the consent of the Houthi militia.<sup>9</sup> Increased cooperation between al-Qaeda and Iran in Yemen is increasing the threat of ballistic terrorism. As Iran continues its support for the Houthi militias, the ballistic missile expertise Tehran provides is being transferred to al-Qaeda's most notorious franchise: al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).

While Iran cannot be held accountable for direct participation in al-Qaeda's attacks, the AQ-I played a significant role in al-Qaeda's survival and enhanced global position throughout the Global War on Terror. Iran's sheltering of al-Qaeda's senior leadership and its facilitation of the group's activities contributed to the slow renaissance of the organisation at the end of which the organisation re-emerged more powerful than ever. As Bruce Hoffman observes, 'nearly seven years after the killing of Osama bin Laden, al-Qaeda is numeri-

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<sup>6</sup> Quoted by Thomas Joscelyn and Bill Roggio in 'Analysis: CIA releases massive trove of Osama bin Laden's files,' *Long War Journal*, 1 November 2017; available: < <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/11/analysis-cia-releases-massive-trove-of-osama-bin-ladens-files.php>>.

<sup>7</sup> Douglas Jehl and Eric Schmitt, 'AFTEREFFECTS: HAVENS; U.S. Suggests a Qaeda Cell in Iran Directed Saudi Bombings,' *The New York Times*, 21 May 2003; available: < <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/05/21/world/aftereffects-havens-us-suggests-a-qaeda-cell-in-iran-directed-saudi-bombings.html>>.

<sup>8</sup> Assaf Moghadam, "Marriage of Convenience: The Evolution of Iran and al-Qa'ida's Tactical Cooperation," *CTC Sentinel*, April 2017; available: < <https://ctc.usma.edu/marriage-of-convenience-the-evolution-of-iran-and-al-qaidas-tactical-cooperation/>>.

<sup>9</sup> 'Yemen Interior Ministry Undersecretary Accuses Houthis of Coordinating with ISIS, Qaeda,' *Asharq al-Awsat*, 26 July 2018; < <https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/1343836/yemen-interior-ministry-undersecretary-accuses-houthis-coordinating-isis-qaeda>>.

cally larger and present in more countries than at any other time in its history.<sup>10</sup>  
The Islamic Republic of Iran thus has its fair share in the rise of al-Qaeda 2.0.

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10 Quoted by Ed Blanche, 'Al-Qaeda 2.0 emerges from power struggles,' *The Arab Weekly*, 01/07/2018; available: <<https://thearabweekly.com/al-qaeda-20-emerges-power-struggles>>.