

THE AL-QA'IDA-QODS FORCE NEXUS

SCRATCHING THE SURFACE OF A "KNOWN UNKNOWN"

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KRONOS

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ISSUE SUMMARY

Despite a nearly decade-long effort to dismantle al-Qa'ida and its affiliates, these terrorists still pose the most immediate threats to America's security. Al-Qa'ida and affiliated movements also threaten many other major and emerging powers alike. Yet one ascendant power, Iran, has quietly forged a strong working relationship with Core al-Qa'ida's leaders. This relationship has been established to counter American influence in the Middle East and South Asia. Through it, Iran will likely also help al-Qa'ida mobilize terrorists to carry out attacks against the U.S. and our allies, providing the support required to extend al-Qa'ida's operational reach.

Attention to the longstanding ties between top Iranian officials and al-Qa'ida leaders, including Osama bin Laden's top lieutenant, Ayman al-Zawahiri, has been eschewed by a pervasive fundamental attribution error: "Shiite Iran will not work with Sunni militants comprising the ranks of al-Qa'ida." This assessment fully ignores readily available evidence to the contrary. Indeed, such relationships span back to the early 1990s, when top officials from the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps' clandestine Qods Force, working in concert with Iran's chief global terrorist proxy, Lebanese Hizballah, began training and equipping bin Laden's warriors. Then, following the 1996 attack on the Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia that killed 19 Americans, more evidence surfaced of operational linkages between al-Qa'ida and the Qods Force, an official Iranian paramilitary organization which possesses a mandate from Iran's Supreme Leader to fund, train, and equip Islamist terrorists. These very operational linkages are referenced within the 9/11 Commission Report, whose authors acknowledged the relationship between al-Qa'ida and Iran demonstrates that Sunni-Shiite divisions "did not necessarily pose an insurmountable barrier to cooperation in terrorist operations."

Since 9/11, these partnerships have become all the more pronounced. Hundreds of al-Qa'ida members, along with family members of Core al-Qa'ida leaders like Osama bin Laden, have found refuge inside Iran. Officials now know Iran's minister of defense, formerly a commander of the Qods Force, furnished safe houses for many of these terrorists. Officials also know that while under

"house arrest" inside Iran al-Qa'ida's top military commanders like Saif al-Adl were able to coordinate attacks against Western targets. Examples of these attacks include the May 2003 bombings in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia that killed eight Americans.

Since 2005, Iran has rapidly evolved from a theocracy into a garrison state. With help from the Islamic Republic's unelected officials, notably Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i, and Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (a former member of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps), the IRGC has seized control of most critical sectors inside Iran. Having secured their future grips on power by elevating the domestic roles of the IRGC, Iran's leaders are now pursuing their lust for regional hegemonic status. Their strategy entails both a persistent quest for nuclear weapons – the acquisition of which Iran's leaders view as the means to ensure their recent regional gains will be irreversible – and support of terrorist organizations which are able to help Iran destabilize unfriendly states, and perhaps even Iran's entire neighborhood.

Today, the Middle East is more volatile than at any time since the Islamic Revolution's leaders seized control of Iran, and hardliners in Tehran are better positioned than ever before to influence the future of this critical region. Concurrently, with support from a state sponsor like Iran, al-Qa'ida will be better positioned than ever before to strike the West and our allies, and to foment chaos in both the Arab world and South Asia that would ultimately benefit Iran. As the implications of working partnerships between Iran and al-Qa'ida carry weighty implications for not just the security of the Middle East and South Asia, but also America's national security interests, it is incumbent upon policy makers in Washington to address this issue. For if left unchecked, Iran's relationship with al-Qa'ida could cost America and our allies dearly.

This report focuses on the history of Iran's relationship with al-Qa'ida, and briefly addresses potential implications of these ties. Additionally, its author provides a list of recommended action items for Members of the United States Congress, as well as a list of questions that may help Members develop a better understanding of this issue through interactions with defense and intelligence officials.

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SCRATCHING THE SURFACE OF A “KNOWN UNKNOWN”

Report Prepared by Kronos Principal Michael S. Smith II

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During the past decade, the Islamic Republic of Iran's strategy for preserving and expanding its regional influence — more specifically, Iran's growing role defining the security environment in the Middle East and South Asia — may be viewed as twofold: Support terrorist groups while engaging in a persistent quest of weapons of mass destruction.¹ Of course, the stakes are much higher than mere regional interests. For he who controls the security environment in the Middle East and South Asia wields substantial influence over a critical component of the global economy: The world's oil markets.

Tehran no-doubt views the acquisition of nuclear weapons as the means to ensure the Islamic Republic's recent regional gains will be irreversible. Concurrently, Iran's regional position is bolstered by the network of Kalashnikov-toting militias which form the backbone of Shiite power that is today represented by the web of clerics and centers of Shiite religious learning.² From Hizballah in Lebanon to the Badr Brigade and Mahdi Army of Muhammad (aka Sipah'i Muhammad) in Pakistan, Shiite militias project Shiite power and enforce the will of the clerics.³ All these militias have been organized, trained, and funded by Iran's Revolutionary Guards.⁴

Meantime, Iran's support for Islamist terrorism has not been limited to funding, training, and arming Shiite militias.

Today, the relationship between Iran and al-Qa'ida represents one of the most challenging issues confronting America's policy makers and national security strategists.

This is not because it is particularly difficult to understand the synergistic, short-term agendas of the Iranian regime and Core al-Qa'ida — both have made enormous investments in efforts to mobilize deadly terrorists to counter American influence in the Muslim world. Rather, it is largely a function of Tehran's success disguising the operations of a shadowy paramilitary force which possesses an official mandate to support Islamist terrorism: The Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps' elite Qods Force.

Operating globally, the Qods Force has maintained a highly secretive existence, with limited awareness of even its membership numbers among most Iranian officials. Coupled with the evasiveness of decision-makers within the al-Qa'ida network, the Qods Force's clandestine existence has made it terribly difficult to discern the full scope of partnerships between Iran's chief ambassador to the realm of Islamist terrorism and that realm's leading actors.

Signs of cooperation between Iran and al-Qa'ida's leadership date back to the 1990s. This relationship has continued since 9/11, with Iran allowing hundreds of al-Qa'ida members and affiliates fleeing Afghanistan to enter its borders. One of them, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, went on to become the most wanted man in Iraq. Another, Saif al-Adl, recently returned to the field, and was soon appointed to oversee international terror operations by Osama bin Laden. Yet the assumption Iran would never work with Sunni militants for years eschewed much needed attentiveness to this lethal issue among officials in Washington.

¹ Barnett, Thomas P.M. *Blueprint for Action: A future worth creating*. G.P. Putnam's Sons. 2005.

² Nasr, Vali. *The Shia Revival: How conflict within Islam will shape the future*. W.W. Norton & Co. 2006.

³ Nasr, Vali. *The Shia Revival: How conflict within Islam will shape the future*.

⁴ Nasr, Vali. *The Shia Revival: How conflict within Islam will shape the future*.

THE IRGC

When analyzing the “Iranian agenda” it is important to understand Iran is not a monolith — there are multiple centers of power in the country.

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution most institutions within Iran have developed parallel organizational structures. These parallel organizations are generally created as “guardians” of the Islamic Revolution, and the whole armed forces of Iran have in the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps a “second,” “shadow” or parallel set of armed forces. This organizational layering makes for a truly Persian puzzle. Still, one thing is certain: At the center of Iran’s agenda is the ongoing effort to both preserve and spread its Islamic Revolution while reducing the varying degrees of influence America and our allies have throughout the Middle East and South Asia. Iran seeks to achieve these objectives through an array of proxies — but especially Shiite *and* Sunni militants — to which Iran provides substantial financial, logistical, and tactical support.

The Iranian (Islamic) Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), or “Pasdaran,” is a paramilitary organization established on May 5, 1979 by Iran’s Islamic Revolution leader Ayatollah Khomeini. The Pasdaran was organized to counter threats to the new republic posed by leftist guerrillas and officers within Iran’s regular military suspected of continued loyalty to the Shah. Through Iran’s new constitution, Ayatollah Khomeini entrusted defense of Iran’s territorial integrity and political independence to the military. Meantime, the Supreme Leader provided the IRGC an official mandate to preserve and spread the Islamic Revolution itself.

Considered the military vanguard of Iran, the IRGC is composed of five branches: Ground Forces, Air Force, Navy, Basij militia, and the Qods Force special operations division.⁵ While the IRGC’s membership is believed to total roughly 125,000, the IRGC-commanded Basij Resistance Force, an all-volunteer paramilitary wing, consists of as many as one million conscripts.⁶

On September 1, 2007, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamene’i appointed Mohammad Ali Ja’fari (aka Aziz Ja’fari) to serve as the fourth commander of the IRGC. Khamene’i’s decision to replace previous IRGC Commander Yahya Rahim Safavi was ostensibly made due to the Supreme Leader’s concerns regarding Major General Rahim Safavi’s emerging power, which is assessed to have been reduced upon his transition to the role of special military advisor to the Supreme Leader.⁷ Such assessments are based on observations of the tremendous political capital wielded by IRGC leaders.

IRGC Commander Ali Ja’fari is an asymmetrical warfare strategist who relies heavily on lessons learned in the Iran-Iraq war. Regarding the IRGC’s approach to anti-U.S. operations, he said in Tehran on September 3, 2007, that given “the enemy’s” numerical or technological superiority, under his command the IRGC will use asymmetric warfare capabilities such as those used by Hizballah in its 2006 conflict with Israel in Lebanon. He would also base the Guard’s strategies on assessments of the strengths and weaknesses of U.S. Forces in Afghanistan and Iraq. The same month, Radio Farda, the Iranian branch of Radio Free Europe, reported Ja’fari has extensive fighting experience and reportedly close relations with the commanders of the former Badr force of the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI).⁸ Now called the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, ISCI is one of the most powerful political parties in Iraq.⁹

The Revolutionary Guards Corps now functions as an intelligence organization both within and beyond Iran’s borders. It exerts considerable influence on government policies.¹⁰ Many Iran experts assert the IRGC’s operations have expanded far beyond its original mandate. They contend the IRGC has evolved into a socio-military-political-economic force with influence reaching deep into Iran’s power structure.¹¹ Believing the greatest challenge to the Islamic Republic will come from within, IRGC Commander

⁵ Backgrounder: Iran’s Revolutionary Guards. Council on Foreign Relations. Last updated 22 June 2009. Online via <http://www.cfr.org/iran/irans-revolutionary-guards/p14324>

⁶ Cordesman, Anthony H. “Iran’s Revolutionary Guards, the Al Quds Force, and Other Intelligence and Paramilitary Forces (Rough Working Draft).” Center for Strategic and International Studies. 16 August 2007. Online via http://csis.org/files/media/isis/pubs/070816_cordesman_report.pdf

⁷ Yahya Rahim Safavi (Unclassified). Intellipedia Stub. Last updated 1 May 2009.

⁸ Sepehri, Vahid. “Iran: New Commander Takes Over Revolutionary Guards.” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. 4 September 2007. Online via <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1078520.html>

⁹ Karouny, Mariam. “Iraq’s SCIRI party to change platform: officials.” Reuters. 11 May 2007. Online via <http://www.reuters.com/article/2007/05/11/us-iraq-party-idUSYAT15330920070511>

¹⁰ Wehrey, Frederic, et al. “The Rise of the Pasdaran: Assessing the Domestic Roles of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps.” RAND (National Defense Research Institute). 2009. Online via http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2008/RAND_MG821.pdf

¹¹ Backgrounder: Iran’s Revolutionary Guards. Council on Foreign Relations. Last updated 22 June 2009. Online via <http://www.cfr.org/iran/irans-revolutionary-guards/p14324>

Ja'fari has pursued the so-called "mosaic doctrine," elevating the Guard's role inside Iran since 2007.¹²

In many respects, the rise of the Pasdaran reveals the evolution of the Iranian state itself. Once a theocratic state, the Islamic Republic has evolved into a garrison state, in which the military dominates political, economic, and cultural life, and preserves the regime from domestic rather than external opponents.

The Iranian constitution forbids the Supreme Leader from being fully autocratic. Effectively circumventing this tenet of Iran's constitution, Ayatollah Khamene'i has used his position as commander-in-chief of the armed forces, especially his tight control over the Revolutionary Guards, to expand his power.¹³ The evidence of such power grabbing became widely apparent as Khamene'i, during the presidency of Ahmadinejad, appointed many former Revolutionary Guards commanders to top political positions, blurring the line between military and civil authority.¹⁴

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad himself is a former IRGC member.¹⁵ During his first term, current and former IRGC members carved out their place in government. They were appointed to serve as the regime's ambassadors, mayors, undersecretaries, provincial governors, and 14 of the country's 21 cabinet ministers are IRGC veterans. Some analysts even say the organization, with its control of strategic industries, commercial services, and black-market enterprises, has evolved into one of the country's most influential domestic institutions.¹⁶

Following the post-presidential reelection protests of 2009, more senior IRGC officials were moved into important government positions. It is believed the IRGC's leadership may also be transforming the Basij militia into a professional, full-time force.

Another tool for extending the IRGC's reach at home has been privatization, initially intended as a means to stimulate Iran's economy but criticized more recently as a shell game to grow the IRGC's financial resources. The IRGC takeover of a majority share in the nation's telecommunications monopoly amplified concerns in Iran over what some call the rise of a "pseudogovernment."¹⁷ (For further description of the Revolutionary Guard's economic stake in Iran's telecommunications, see: "Analysis: Iran — Telecom 'Privatization' Extends IRGC's Economic Reach," Open Source Center, 14 October 2009.¹⁸)

The Revolutionary Guard also owns a majority stake in Iran's state television company.¹⁹ Hardline influencers from the IRGC use the "Great Satan" narrative famously promulgated by Islamic Revolution leader Ayatollah Khomeini to rationalize suppression of both domestic and foreign media.²⁰ In 2009, Basij militia commander Mohammad Reza Naqdi announced what he called a new era of "super media power" cooperation between the media and the Revolutionary Guards.²¹ Discussing the tasks of the Basij, IRGC Commander Ja'fari stated that proper security measures must be taken in "confronting the soft threats and cultural invasion" perpetrated by the United States.²²

The Pasdaran's foreign operations are usually coordinated with the Committee on Foreign Intelligence Abroad and the Committee on Implementation of Actions Abroad.²³ As with agents of Iran's Ministry of Intelligence (MOIS), IRGC personnel operate through front companies and NGOs.²⁴ According to Ray Takeyh of the Council on Foreign Relations, "Many of the front companies engaged in procuring nuclear technology are owned and run by the Revolutionary Guards. They're developing along the lines of the Chinese military, which is involved in many business

¹² Rubin, Michael. "Iran 2025" (Report prepared for the International Future Operational Environment Seminar). American Enterprise Institute. June 2010. Online via <http://www.aei.org/docLib/RubinIranNewportNews.pdf>

¹³ Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (Unclassified). Intellipedia Stub. Last updated 28 March 2011.

¹⁴ Iran: The Role of the IRGC in the Iranian Economy (Unclassified//FOUO). Open Source Works/Intellipedia Stub. Last updated 1 May 2009.

¹⁵ Baer, Robert. *The Devil We Know: Dealing with the new Iranian superpower*. Crown Publishers. 2008.

¹⁶ Backgrounder: Iran's Revolutionary Guards. Council on Foreign Relations.

¹⁷ Times Topic: Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps. The New York Times. Last updated 9 October 2009. Online via http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/organizations/i/islamic_revolutionary_guard_corps/index.html

¹⁸ OSC product REDACTED.

¹⁹ "Master Narratives: Iran." Open Source Center, Institute for Analysis, and Monitor 360. February 2011. OSC product REDACTED.

²⁰ "Master Narratives: Iran." Open Source Center, Institute for Analysis, and Monitor 360.

²¹ Fassihi, Farnaz. "Revolutionary Guards Extend Reach to Iran's Media: Planned news agency fits with move to dominate accounts of events" The Wall Street Journal. 4 November 2009. Online via <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB125730352972127145.html>

²² "Master Narratives: Iran." Open Source Center, Institute for Analysis, and Monitor 360.

²³ Qods (Jerusalem) Force: Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC – Pasdam-e Inqilab). Global Security. Online via <http://www.globalsecurity.org/intell/world/iran/qods.htm>

²⁴ MacAskill, Ewen. "Iranian spies 'used Red Crescent to enter war zones.'" Guardian News and Media. 28 November 2010. Online via <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/nov/28/iranian-spies-red-crescent-war>

²⁵ Wright, Robin. "Iranian Unit to Be Labeled 'Terrorist.'" The Washington Post. 15 August 2007. Online via <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/08/14/AR2007081401662.html>

enterprises. It's a huge business conglomeration."²⁵

IRGC leaders often express their willingness to proliferate ballistic missiles capable of carrying WMD. When sanctioning the organization in 2007 for its role in global terrorism, the U.S. Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control reported the IRGC's ballistic missile inventory includes missiles that could be modified to deliver WMD, and the IRGC "is one of the primary [Iranian] regime organizations tied to developing and testing the Shahab-3." Furthermore, "The IRGC attempted, as recently as 2006, to procure sophisticated and costly equipment that could be used to support Iran's ballistic missile and nuclear programs."²⁶

THE IRGC-QODS FORCE

Among the myriad military and intelligence agencies that make up Iran's security forces none has the skill and reach of the Qods Force (QF). Founded by Ayatollah Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani²⁸, the timing of this organization's inception is murky, with official documents suggesting the organization was founded in 1990.²⁹ However, some official data sources and experts point to accounts of Qods Force operations dating back to the early 1980s. Whatever the case, today the Qods Force is an elite unit nominally within the command structure of the IRGC. Its name, Qods (Quds), is the Arabic word for Jerusalem, and this name signifies a promise that one day the IRGC will liberate Jerusalem from the Jewish colonizers and destroy Israel.³⁰

QF is a highly specialized unit that manages much of the IRGC's extraterritorial operations. Its primary functions entail training Islamist terrorist groups and destabilizing unfriendly regimes. QF is also responsible for gathering information its constituents require for targeting and attack planning. Although its operations sometimes appear at odds with the public voice of the Iranian regime, it is not a rogue outfit; QF receives direction from the highest levels of government. Its leaders report directly, albeit informally, to

According to the Council on Foreign Relations, Mohsen Sazegara, a founding member of the IRGC and now a U.S.-based Iranian dissident, said though the original charter of the elite force was to create a "people's army," years of political and military changes have transformed the unit into a shadowy behemoth. He advised the IRGC's business dealings range from construction and manufacturing to black-market enterprises, like the illegal importation of alcohol. "I don't know of any other organization in any country like the Revolutionary Guards," Sazegara said. "It's something like the Communist Party, the KGB, a business complex, and the mafia."²⁷

Supreme Leader Khamene'i, employing complementary diplomatic and paramilitary strategies.³¹

Along with the IRGC, QF has been sanctioned by the U.S. Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control for its involvement in anti-U.S. operations in South Asia and the Middle East, functioning as a "global terrorist organization."³² According to former CIA case officer and Iran expert Robert Baer, QF has "a well-deserved reputation for having been the most organized, disciplined, and violent terrorist organization in the world, arguably more so than al Qaeda."³³ Baer describes Qods Force agents as the "bad guys ... who 100 percent have American blood on their hands."³⁴

Headquartered in the former U.S. Embassy in Tehran, details regarding the full scope of QF's ranks are reportedly kept secret from even members of the Iranian Parliament.³⁵ Iran observers have speculated these ranks include anywhere from 2,000-20,000 members.

Like its predecessors, QF's ranks are filled with the IRGC's most skilled warriors. They comprise highly secretive commando units sent abroad to help usurp regimes unfriendly to Iran through coups, gun down enemies of the

²⁶ Fact Sheet: Designation of Iranian Entities and Individuals for Proliferation Activities and Support for Terrorism. U.S. Treasury Department. 25 October 2007. Online via <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/hp644.aspx>

²⁷ Backgrounder: Iran's Revolutionary Guards. Council on Foreign Relations.

²⁸ Timmerman, Kenneth R. Countdown to Crisis: The coming nuclear showdown with Iran. Crown Forum. 2005.

²⁹ Unclassified Report on Military Power of Iran. U.S. Department of Defense. April 2010. Online via <http://www.foxnews.com/projects/pdf/IranReportUnclassified.pdf>

³⁰ Baer, Robert. The Devil We Know: Dealing with the new Iranian superpower.

³¹ Unclassified Report on Military Power of Iran. U.S. Department of Defense. April 2010.

³² Fact Sheet: Designation of Iranian Entities and Individuals for Proliferation Activities and Support for Terrorism. U.S. Treasury Department. 25 October 2007. Online via <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/hp644.aspx>

³³ Baer, Robert. The Devil We Know: Dealing with the new Iranian superpower.

³⁴ Zunaira, Zaki. "The Al Quds: Iran's Elite Secretive Guard." ABC News/International. 14 February 2007. Online via <http://abcnews.go.com/International/story?id=2875127&page=2>

³⁵ Shane, Scott. "Iranian Force, Focus of U.S., Still a Mystery." The New York Times. 17 February 2007. Online via <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/17/world/middleeast/17quds.html>

Islamic Revolution, and battle Israeli forces in southern Lebanon.

According to the U.S. Department of Defense, QF has been “involved in or behind some of the deadliest terrorist attacks of the past 2 decades.”³⁶ QF was behind the two U.S. Embassy truck bombings in Beirut, the 1983 Marine barracks bombing that killed 241 U.S. soldiers, and most of the foreign hostage-taking in Lebanon during the 1980s and early 1990s.³⁷ It is also known to have directed Saudi-based Hizballah al-Hijaz, an organization created by the IRGC, to plan attacks against Americans. This directive is said to have manifest the 1996 attack on the Khobar Towers that killed 19 Americans and wounded another 372.³⁸ An attack which authors of the 9/11 Commission Report suggested al-Qa’ida may have played a role in.

Promoted from the rank of brigadier general to major general by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamene’i earlier in 2011, Qassem Soleimani serves as the commander of the IRGC’s Qods Force.³⁹ Soleimani is named on U.S. Treasury Department and United Nations Security Council watch lists for his alleged involvement in terrorism and the proliferations of nuclear and missile technologies.⁴⁰ Preceded by Ahmad Vahidi, Soleimani has commanded the Qods Force for approximately 13 years.⁴¹ It has been assessed Soleimani may someday be appointed to command the entire IRGC.⁴²

Soleimani’s influence in Iraq was widely reported early in 2008 as he helped U.S.-backed Iraqi leaders negotiate a deal with radical Shiite cleric Muqtada al Sadr to stop the fighting in Iraq’s largely Shiite south.⁴³ According to U.S. diplomats, since at least 2003 Soleimani has been the point man directing the formulation and implementation of Iran’s Iraq policy. His authority in this area is second only to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamene’i. American diplomats

have further reported that through his QF officers and proxies in Iraq, notably Iranian Ambassador and QF associate Hassan Kazemi-Qomi, Soleimani employs the full range of diplomatic, security, intelligence, and economic tools to influence Iraqi allies and detractors in order to shape a more pro-Iran regime in Baghdad and the provinces.⁴⁴

Other notable QF-affiliated government officials include Ahmad Vahidi, the Iranian general who presently serves as the Islamic Republic’s Minister of Defense. Vahidi previously served as a commander of the Qods Force.⁴⁵ Like many QF officials, Vahidi is linked to terrorist attacks, and is wanted by Interpol for his alleged involvement in Hizballah’s bombing of a Buenos Aires, Argentina-based Jewish center in 1994.⁴⁶ The attack killed 85 people.⁴⁷ Vahidi later oversaw the 1996 Khobar Towers attack in Saudi Arabia.⁴⁸ Along with General Soleimani, Vahidi’s name appears on the U.S. Treasury Department’s list of Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons.⁴⁹

GLOBAL OPERATIONS

The Qods Force is active in dozens of countries. According to former U.S. Army intelligence officer David Dionisi, QF is assessed to be organized into eight different directorates based on geographic location: Western countries (Europe and the United States); Iraq; Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the Indian subcontinent; Palestine, Lebanon, and Jordan; Turkey; North Africa (Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria, Sudan, and Morocco); Arabian Peninsula; Republics of the former Soviet Union.⁵⁰ Given Tehran’s growing ties with the Chavez regime, it is perhaps unsurprising that the Department of Defense mentioned QF’s increased presence in Latin America, “particularly Venezuela,” in its April 2010 unclassified report on the military power of Iran.⁵¹

³⁶ Unclassified Report on Military Power of Iran. U.S. Department of Defense. April 2010.

³⁷ Baer, Robert. *The Devil We Know: Dealing with the new Iranian superpower.*

³⁸ Pollack, Kenneth M. *The Persian Puzzle: The conflict between Iran and America.* Random House. 2004.

³⁹ “Iran: Supreme Leader Promotes Qods Guards Commander.” Fars News Agency (Tehran). 24 January 2011. OSC product REDACTED.

⁴⁰ Strobel, Warren P. and Fadel, Leila. “Iranian who brokered Iraqi peace is on U.S. terrorist watch list.” *McLatchy Newspapers.* 31 March 2008. Online via <http://www.mclatchydc.com/2008/03/31/32141/iranian-who-brokered-iraqi-peace.html>

⁴¹ Alfoneh, Ali. “Iran’s Secret Network: Major General Qassem Suleimani’s Inner Circle.” *American Enterprise Institute.* March 2011. Online via <http://www.aei.org/docLib/MEO-2011-03-No-2-g.pdf>

⁴² Majd, Hooman. *The Ayatollahs’ Democracy: An Iranian challenge.* W.W. Norton & Co. 2010.

⁴³ Strobel, Warren P. and Fadel, Leila. “Iranian who brokered Iraqi peace is on U.S. terrorist watch list.”

⁴⁴ Cable: IRAN’S EFFORTS IN IRAQI ELECTORAL POLITICS. U.S. Embassy Baghdad. 13 November 2009. Online via <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/234583>

⁴⁵ Timmerman, Kenneth R. *Countdown to Crisis: The coming nuclear showdown with Iran.*

⁴⁶ Interpol. Online via http://www.interpol.int/Public/data/wanted/notices/data/2007/57/2007_49957.asp

⁴⁷ Lake, Eli. “Iran defense minister a terror suspect.” *The Washington Post.* 21 August 2009. Online via

<http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/aug/21/iranian-defense-minister-terrorist/print/>

⁴⁸ Timmerman, Kenneth R. *Countdown to Crisis: The coming nuclear showdown with Iran.*

⁴⁹ Office of Foreign Assets Control: Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons. U.S. Treasury Department. Last updated 4 April 2011. Online via <http://www.treasury.gov/ofac/downloads/t11sbn.pdf>

⁵⁰ Dionisi, David J. *American Hiroshima: The reasons why and a call to strengthen America’s democracy.* Trafford Publishing. 2005 and 2006. Accessible online via Google Books.

⁵¹ “Iran’s Qods force in Venezuela, Latin America: Pentagon.” *AFP.* 22 April 2010. Online via <http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5jvX-OYLKMT3NWFER4xXMDPSTmhBw>

SUPPORT FOR SHIITE MILITANTS

One of the most notable roles Iran has played in the history of Islamist terrorism is its central involvement in 1982 in the creation of Hizballah. Established by the IRGC, Hizballah is today Iran's chief global terrorist proxy.

The Qods Force plays a key role assisting this terrorist organization. According to the U.S. Treasury Department, "The Qods Force has had a long history of supporting Hizballah's military, paramilitary, and terrorist activities, providing it with guidance, funding, weapons, intelligence, and logistical support. The Qods Force operates training camps for Hizballah in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley and has reportedly trained more than 3,000 Hizballah fighters at IRGC training facilities in Iran. The Qods Force provides roughly \$100 to \$200 million in funding a year to Hizballah and has assisted Hizballah in rearming in violation of UN Security Council Resolution 1701."⁵²

Apart from QF's role supporting terrorist organizations like Hizballah, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC)⁵³ — organizations which traditionally target Israeli interests — the Qods Force has also become a leading sponsor of insurgents battling U.S. forces in Iraq.

According to the U.S. Treasury Department, "the Qods Force provides lethal support in the form of weapons, training, funding, and guidance to select groups of Iraqi Shi'a militants who target and kill Coalition and Iraqi forces and innocent Iraqi civilians."⁵⁴ The Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) militia, also known as Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army, and Kata'ib Hizballah (KH, aka Hizballah Brigades in Iraq) are among these groups.⁵⁵

On September 13, 2007, the spokesperson for the Multinational Forces in Iraq, Major General Kevin Bergner, reported Qais Khazali, former spokesperson of the Mahdi

Army who was captured in Iraq in March 2007⁵⁶ after forming KH⁵⁷, and Lebanese Hizballah operative Ali Mussa Daquq, also captured in Iraq, "said in their own words that these criminal groups could not conduct these types of operations without the support they receive from Iranian Qods Force networks."⁵⁸

KH was designated a Foreign Terrorist Organization by the U.S. Department of State in 2009.⁵⁹ U.S. military officials in Iraq describe KH as a "small, but lethal Shia insurgent group that carries out attacks against Coalition Forces in Iraq with advanced weapons from Iran, such as improvised rocket assisted mortars (IRAMs), man-portable air-defense systems (MANPADS), IEDs, and EFPs [explosively formed projectiles/penetrators]."⁶⁰

U.S. Diplomats have also assessed that Iran may have played a role in the movement of the extremist group Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH, aka League of the Righteous, aka Khazali Network) away from the political reconciliation process in 2009.⁶¹ Military officials describe AAH as a Shiite Iraqi terrorist organization formed with QF support late in 2004 to function as an elite JAM unit that would oppose Coalition Forces in Iraq. It has publicly claimed more than 6,000 attacks since.⁶² Qais Khazali remains a key member of this QF proxy in Iraq.⁶³

On April 3, 2011, the satellite service of the pro-Iranian, Hizballah-affiliated Al-Manar Channel broadcast footage of Shiite groups' attacks on U.S. forces in Iraq in March 2011. The corresponding report noted the attacks on U.S. forces, carried out by KH and AAH, were launched to "express solidarity with the Bahrain revolution and to avenge the burning of a copy of the Holy Koran in the United States" by American pastor Terry Jones. The footage included scenes from a KH-led attack on a U.S. vehicle en route to the Calso Base in southern Iraq and the firing of "a barrage"

⁵² Fact Sheet: Designation of Iranian Entities and Individuals for Proliferation Activities and Support for Terrorism. U.S. Treasury Department.

⁵³ Current List of Foreign Terrorist Organizations. U.S. Department of State, Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism. Last updated 24 November 2011. Online via <http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/other/des/123085.htm>

⁵⁴ Fact Sheet: Designation of Iranian Entities and Individuals for Proliferation Activities and Support for Terrorism. U.S. Treasury Department.

⁵⁵ Cable: IRANIAN PLANS FOR IRAQ AS U.S. FORCES DRAW DOWN. U.S. Embassy Baghdad. 24 April 2009. Online via <http://www.titanherald.com/US-EMBASSY-CABLES/News/2010-12-05/11173/IRANIAN.PLANS.FOR.IRAQ.AS.U.S.FORCES.DRAW.DOWN.html>

⁵⁶ BBC Monitoring: Iraq Briefing 1600 GMT 22 Mar 07 (See "Former Sadr aide arrested for murder of US troops." AFP. 22 March 2007) Caversham BBC Monitoring in English. 22 March 2007. OSC product REDACTED.

⁵⁷ Iraq: Multinational Force Newspaper Roundup for 23 Mar 07 (See Fiad, Maad. "A leader in al-Mahdi Army: Iran funds schisms inside al-Mahdi Army." Asharq Al-Awsat). Combined Press Information Center, MNF-Iraq. OSC product REDACTED.

⁵⁸ "KUNA: Us To Give Muqtada Al-Sadr Space To Uphold His Truce Pledge." KUNA (Official news agency of the Kuwaiti Government). 13 September 2007. OSC product REDACTED.

⁵⁹ Current List of Foreign Terrorist Organizations. U.S. Department of State, Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism.

⁶⁰ The Insurgency. Operation New Dawn: Official Website of United States Forces — Iraq. 31 July 2009. Online via http://www.usf-iraq.com/?option=com_content&task=view&id=729&Itemid=45

⁶¹ Cable: IRANIAN PLANS FOR IRAQ AS U.S. FORCES DRAW DOWN. U.S. Embassy Baghdad.

⁶² The Insurgency. Operation New Dawn: Official Website of United States Forces — Iraq.

⁶³ Chulov, Martin. "Qais al-Khazali: from kidnapper and prisoner to potential leader: Cleric and key member of Righteous League portayed as resistance hero with a big political future." Guardian.co.uk. 31 December 2010. Online via <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/dec/31/iran-hostages-qais-al-khazali>

of Katyusha rockets at Camp Victory in Baghdad (both on March 28, 2011). KH reportedly fired Katyusha rockets at Camp Basra the same day. Footage was also aired of a “10 Katyusha” rocket attack on the U.S. base “in Camp Al-Taji” by Kata’ib Al-Imam al-Qadim (The Brigades of the Coming Imam), which is identified in the report as a branch of AAH.⁶⁴

The Ramadan Corps is the unit which oversees QF operations in Iraq.⁶⁵ In 2008, QF Ramadan Corps Commander Brigadier General Ahmed Fruzandeh was also designated by the Treasury Department for his role leading terrorist operations against Coalition Forces and Iraq Security Forces, and for directing assassinations of Iraqi figures.⁶⁶

In 2007, General Bergner explained “Special Groups” is the term U.S. military officials use when referring to “militia extremists, funded, trained and armed by external sources ... specifically by Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps Quds Force operatives.” He noted QF’s goal is to develop the Iraqi Special Groups into a network similar to that of Lebanese Hizballah. “In addition to training, the Quds force also supplies the Special Groups with weapons and funding of 750,000 to three million U.S. dollars a month. Without this support, these Special Groups would be hard pressed to conduct their operations in Iraq,” Bergner said.⁶⁷

U.S. officials have alleged that QF is responsible for proliferating sophisticated roadside bombs, known as explosively formed projectiles/penetrators (EFPs), and other weaponry Iran’s Shiite allies in Iraq have used to kill U.S. troops. In his annual threat assessment provided to the Senate Armed Services Committee on March 10, 2009, Defense Intelligence Agency Director Michael D. Maples explained: “The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) is part of the Iranian government and has a central role in carrying out Iran’s policies in Iraq through its special operations command — the Qods Force. The IRGC-Qods Force holds the Iraq portfolio within the Iranian regime and posts officers in Iran’s diplomatic missions throughout Iraq, including Iran’s current Ambassador to Iraq, Hassan Kazemi-

Qomi, who is a Qods Force officer. The IRGC-Qods Force covertly trains, funds and arms Iraqi insurgents and militias. It also offers strategic and operational guidance aimed at undermining U.S. interests in Iraq. The IRGC-Qods Force junior partner, the Lebanese Hizballah, has trained Iraqi insurgents in Iraq, Iran and Lebanon.”⁶⁸

Director Maples added, “Iran is training Shia militants in use of IEDs and EFPs and efforts to defeat these weapons and the networks that design, build, emplace and fund them draw persistent counter-responses. The flow of new IED technologies and highly creative emplacement and employment methods underscore the enemy’s ability to adapt and react quickly and efficiently.”⁶⁹

The following month, the U.S. Department of Defense revealed that arms caches had been recently uncovered in Afghanistan, with “large amounts of Iranian manufactured weapons, to include 107mm rockets.” DoD assessed the Qods Force had delivered these weapons to Afghan militants. “While it is difficult to determine the exact time the arms were brought into Afghanistan, their recent manufacture date suggests lethal support is ongoing,” DoD explained.⁷⁰

The release in 2010 of volumes of U.S. diplomatic cables leaked to Wikileaks yielded more data about the IRGC’s activities in Iraq, which are managed by the Qods Force. According to these cables, official U.S. assessments indicate the IRGC has funneled anywhere from \$100-\$200 Million worth of support to organizations in Iraq which are helping Iran achieve its political objectives there.⁷¹ Indeed, in March 2010 then CENTCOM Commander General David H. Petraeus reported: “the Iranian regime has embarked on a broad campaign led by the IRGC-Qods Force to influence Iraqi politics and support, through various means, parties loyal to Iran. The Qods Force also maintains its lethal support to Shia Iraqi militia groups, providing them with weapons, funding, and training.”⁷²

Late in 2009, American diplomats explained: “Iran’s tools of influence include financial support to (and pressure

⁶⁴ “Hizballah TV Carries Video of Shiite Groups’ Attacks on US Forces in Iraq.” Al-Manar Channel Television. 3 April 2011. OSC product REDACTED.

⁶⁵ Unclassified Report on Military Power of Iran. U.S. Department of Defense. April 2010.

⁶⁶ CRS Report: “Executive Order 13438: Blocking Property of Certain Persons Who Threaten Stabilization Efforts in Iraq.”

Congressional Research Service. 19 January 2011. Online via http://assets.opencrs.com/rpts/RL34254_20100119.pdf

⁶⁷ MNF-I spokesman details secret cell involvement in Iraq. Operation New Dawn: Official Website of United States Forces — Iraq. 2 July 2007. Online via http://www.usf-iraq.com/?option=com_content&task=view&id=12653&Itemid=128

⁶⁸ Maples, Lt Gen Michael D. Defense Intelligence Agency Annual Threat Assessment. Testimony provided to the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee. 10 March 2009. Online via <http://armed-services.senate.gov/statemnt/2009/March/Maples%2003-10-09.pdf>

⁶⁹ Maples, Lt Gen Michael D. Defense Intelligence Agency Annual Threat Assessment.

⁷⁰ Unclassified Report on Military Power of Iran. U.S. Department of Defense. April 2010.

⁷¹ Fadel, Leila. “WikiLeaks cable shows embassy’s concern about Iranian influence in Iraq.” The Washington Post. 29 November 2010. Online via http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/11/29/AR2010112906179.html?wprss=rss_world

⁷² Petraeus, David H. Testimony provided to the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee. 16 March 2010. Online via <http://armed-services.senate.gov/statemnt/2010/03%20March/Petraeus%2003-16-10.pdf>

on) a cross-spectrum of Iraqi parties and officials; economic development assistance, notably to religious organizations; lethal aid to select militant Shia proxies; and sanctuary to Iraqi figures fearful of USG targeting or those seeking to revitalize their political/religious credentials, most notably Moqtada al-Sadr. This leverage also extends, to a lesser extent, to select Sunni actors, including such public figures as Iraqi Speaker Samarra'i, whose September visit to Tehran included meetings with several senior Iranian government officials.⁷³

In his book titled *The Shia Revival*, Middle East and South Asia political expert Vali Nasr notes many in Iran's leadership, including President Ahmadinejad and a large number of senior Revolutionary Guards officers, are veterans of the Iran-Iraq war. "Some fought in its most ferocious battles, such as the fight over the Faw Peninsula, when Saddam used chemical weapons. They see Iraq's pacification under a Shia leadership as a strategic objective: What they were not able to win in the Iran-Iraq war, they can now get courtesy of coalition forces and the Shia government in Baghdad."⁷⁴

The trajectory of this agenda is forecast in an official assessment of Iran's plans for Iraq as the U.S. draws down forces. In 2009, U.S. diplomats stationed in Baghdad wrote: "considering Iran's long history of confrontation with Iraq, its unease about enduring Iraqi-American cooperation, and its delegation of Iraq policy to the belligerent anti-American IRGC-QF, Iran will likely continue to support extremists in Iraq, perhaps building extremist groups into a Lebanese Hezbollah-style political-military organization as a hedge against a resurgent Iraqi central government."⁷⁵

While the U.S. may not officially be at war with Iran, information contained in these leaked cables suggests the Iranian leadership views things differently. Reporting on this material, *The Washington Post* revealed Qatari Prime Minister Hamad Bin Jassim al Thani, in February 2010, advised U.S. Senator John Kerry that Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad told him, "We beat the Americans in Iraq; the final battle will be in Iran."⁷⁶

SUPPORT FOR SUNNI MILITANTS

The Qods Force's support for militants inside Iraq has not been limited to Shiite groups alone. U.S. intelligence officials reportedly said materials confiscated from Iranians arrested inside Iraq late in 2006 indicate QF has provided substantial support to Sunni organizations, including al-Qa'ida's affiliates and Ansar al-Sunna.

Ansar al-Sunna has since changed its name to Ansar al-Islam.⁷⁷ Reportedly founded with funding from al-Qa'ida late in 2001, Ansar al-Islam was designated a foreign terrorist organization by the U.S. Department of State in 2004.⁷⁸ Officials' remarks about the materials confiscated in 2006 suggest QF officers were in communication with the Sunni insurgents who, on February 22, 2006, bombed the "Golden Mosque" in Samarra, one of the most important sites in the history of the Shiite faith.⁷⁹ Shiite clerics inside Iraq and Iran promptly announced American forces were responsible for this attack.⁸⁰ Analysts say this attack vaulted Iraq into civil war.

On October 25, 2007, the U.S. Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control issued a fact sheet to provide the basis for its designation of Iranian entities and individuals for proliferation activities and support for terrorism.⁸¹ The report cited QF's provision of material support to one of South Asia's most prominent contingents of Sunni militants, the Afghan Taliban. It states:

The Qods Force is the Iranian regime's primary instrument for providing lethal support to the Taliban. The Qods Force provides weapons and financial support to the Taliban to support anti-U.S. and anti-Coalition activity in Afghanistan. Since at least 2006, Iran has arranged frequent shipments of small arms and associated ammunition, rocket propelled grenades, mortar rounds, 107mm rockets, plastic explosives, and probably man-portable defense systems to the Taliban. This support contravenes Chapter VII UN Security Council obligations. UN Security Council resolution 1267 established sanctions against the Taliban and UN Security Council resolutions 1333 and 1735 imposed arms

⁷³ Cable: IRAN'S EFFORTS IN IRAQI ELECTORAL POLITICS. U.S. Embassy Baghdad.

⁷⁴ Nasr, Vali. *The Shia Revival: How conflict within Islam will shape the future.*

⁷⁵ Cable: IRANIAN PLANS FOR IRAQ AS U.S. FORCES DRAW DOWN. U.S. Embassy Baghdad.

⁷⁶ Fadel, Leila. "WikiLeaks cable shows embassy's concern about Iranian influence in Iraq."

⁷⁷ Kohlmann, Evan. "Ansar al-Sunnah Acknowledges Relationship with Ansar al-Islam, Reverts to Using Ansar al-Islam Name." Counterterrorism Blog. 16 December 2007. Online via http://counterterrorismblog.org/2007/12/ansar_alsunnah_acknowledges_re.php

⁷⁸ Gregory, Kathryn. Backgrounder: Ansar al-Islam (Iraq, Islamists/Kurdish Separatists), Ansar al-Sunnah. Council on Foreign Relations. Last updated 5 November 2008. Online via <http://www.cfr.org/iraq/ansar-al-islam-iraq-islamistskurdish-separatists-ansar-al-sunnah/p9237>

⁷⁹ Lake, Eli. "Iran's Secret Plan for Mayhem." *The New York Sun*. 3 January 2007. Online via <http://www.nysun.com/foreign/irans-secret-plan-for-mayhem/46032/>

⁸⁰ Knickmeyer, Ellen and Ibrahim, K.I. "Bombing Shatters Mosque In Iraq: Attack on Shiite Shrine Sets Off Protests, Violence." *The Washington Post*. 23 February 2006. Online via <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/02/22/AR2006022200454.html>

⁸¹ Fact Sheet: Designation of Iranian Entities and Individuals for Proliferation Activities and Support for Terrorism. U.S. Treasury Department.

embargoes against the Taliban. Through Qods Force material support to the Taliban, we believe Iran is seeking to inflict casualties on U.S. and NATO forces.

Iran's efforts to equip Sunni militants in Afghanistan have persisted since.

In March 2010, U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates met with President Hamid Karzai and ISAF Commander General Stanley A. McChrystal to review plans for a major American-led offensive in the city of Kandahar, the spiritual heart and birthplace of the Taliban. Discussing their assessments with reporters, Secretary Gates said of the Iranians: "They want to maintain a good relationship with the Afghan government. They also want to do everything they possibly can to hurt us, or for us not to be successful."⁸² Months prior, General McChrystal advised officials in Washington that QF was reportedly training fighters for certain Taliban groups and providing other forms of military assistance to insurgents.⁸³ Revisiting this issue, during a press conference held in March 2010, General McChrystal explained: "The training we have seen occurs inside Iran with fighters moving inside Iran. The weapons we have received come from Iran into Afghanistan."⁸⁴

Weeks after Secretary Gates' March 2010 visit to Afghanistan, while discussing the Taliban's relationship with Iran a Taliban commander who reportedly received special training inside Iran explained to the press: "Our religions and our histories are different, but our target is the same — we both want to kill Americans."⁸⁵ While the Taliban commanders interviewed about their activities inside Iran provided no precise details about who was offering them training, the Taliban commander from Ghazni province said he had no doubt Iranian police and intelligence services knew about the training camps. "The [Iranian] government is not sleeping," he said. "You just have to wiggle your ears in Iran and they will know about it."⁸⁶

The Ansar Corps is assessed to be the unit managing

many QF operations inside Afghanistan. In August 2010, Treasury designated four senior QF officers. Included on the list was General Hossein Musavi, commander of Qods Force's Ansar Corps, "whose responsibilities include IRGC-QF activities in Afghanistan." Treasury claimed General Musavi provided "financial and material support to the Taliban."⁸⁷

In January 2011 it was reported the ISAF is targeting Taliban leaders believed to be receiving support from QF. The organization reporting on this effort asserted a QF-supported Taliban and al-Qa'ida network is operating in the remote western province of Farah.⁸⁸

Soon thereafter, in March 2011 NATO forces in Afghanistan seized 48 Iranian-made rockets. Officials said the weapons were intended to aid the Taliban's spring offensive, noting the rockets were the most powerful illicit weapons ever intercepted en route from Iran to militants in Afghanistan. The shipment is regarded as a serious escalation of Iran's support for the Taliban insurgency.

According to press reports, intelligence officials mentioned a high-level Taliban leader sought other powerful weapons from top QF officials during recent meetings held inside Iran. In the alleged meeting, the Taliban leader is said to have asked the Iranians to provide more shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missile systems, such as the two Iran provided in 2007, which were used against both a British and a U.S. Chinook helicopter.⁸⁹

Classified documents leaked to Wikileaks also point to Iranian relationships with militants under the command of a well-known al-Qa'ida-affiliated jihadi in Afghanistan. In January 2005 it was reported that Iranian intelligence delivered 10 million Afghanis (\$212,000USD) to a location on Iran's border ("Iranian intelligence" appears to be a reference to the IRGC). "The money was transferred to a 1990s model white Toyota Corolla station wagon ... occupied by four members of the Hezb-e-Islami Gulbuddin [HIG] terrorist organization." HIG is the militia led by

⁸² Bumiller, Elisabeth. "Gates and Afghan Leader Review Plan for a Kandahar Offensive." The New York Times. 9 March 2010. Online via <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9E0DE6D61430F93AA35750C0A9669D8B63>

⁸³ McChrystal, Stanley A. Commander's Initial Assessment (Unclassified). Presented to U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates 30 August 2009. Online via http://media.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/documents/Assessment_Redacted_092109.pdf

⁸⁴ Miglani, Sanjeev. "General McChrystal says Afghan insurgents trained in Iran." Reuters. 30 May 2010. Online via <http://www.reuters.com/article/2010/05/30/us-afghanistan-iran-idUSTRE64T0U920100530>

⁸⁵ Amoores, Miles. "Taliban fighters being taught at secret camps in Iran." The Sunday Times. 21 March 2010. Online via http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/middle_east/article7069817.ece

⁸⁶ Amoores, Miles. "Taliban fighters being taught at secret camps in Iran."

⁸⁷ Fact Sheet: U.S. Treasury Department Targets Iran's Support for Terrorism Treasury Announces New Sanctions Against Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force Leadership. U.S. Treasury Department. 3 August 2010. Online via <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg810.aspx>

⁸⁸ Roggio, Bill. "ISAF captures Qods Force-linked Taliban leader in Afghan west." The Long War Journal. 10 January 2011. Online via http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2011/01/isaf_captures_qods_f.php#ixzz11IE66BXJ

⁸⁹ Dozier, Kimberly. "NATO forces seize rockets from Iran in Afghanistan." Associated Press. 9 March 2011. Online via http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20110309/ap_on_re_as/as_afghanistan_iran_3

Soviet occupation era Mujahideen leader and notorious warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.⁹⁰ Reporting on these leaked documents, *The Wall Street Journal* noted, "One of the more remarkable reports describes a November 2005 trip that departed from Iran in which Mr. Hekmatyar, the militant leader, and Osama bin Laden's financial adviser traveled to North Korea to close a deal with the North Korean government to obtain remote-controlled rockets to use against coalition aircraft in Afghanistan."⁹¹

Hekmatyar previously lived in exile in Tehran while the Taliban ruled from Kabul. This lethal jihadi was sent back into Afghanistan by the Iranians in February 2002.⁹² He is credited with having helped establish the Taliban's sometimes tenuous post-9/11 relationship with al-Qa'ida.⁹³

Officials in Washington speculated the decision to facilitate Hekmatyar's return to Afghanistan was a signal issued in response to President George W. Bush's State of the Union address delivered earlier in the year. In it, the American president included Iran among the nations comprising the so-called "Axis of Evil."⁹⁴ Hekmatyar's network has since gained such prominence that in August 2009 General Stanley A. McChrystal identified HIG as the insurgent group which posed the third-most severe threat to the mission in Afghanistan.⁹⁵

Iran's post-9/11 relationship with Sunni terrorists became all too apparent a little more than a year after Hekmatyar returned to Afghanistan to fight U.S. Forces.

On May 12, 2003, three truck bombs nearly simultaneously exploded at Western housing complexes in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Eight Americans were among the 34 people killed in these attacks. Intelligence officials confirmed al-Qa'ida was responsible for the attacks, and soon discovered some of the perpetrators had discussed their plans with senior-ranking AQ officials who were then located

in Iran.⁹⁶ The press reported the U.S. had evidence of communications between the Saudi AQ cell responsible for the attacks and the roughly half-dozen senior AQ personnel living inside Iran, including Saif al-Adl.⁹⁷

Formerly a colonel in the Egyptian Special Forces, al-Adl was then AQ's third in command.⁹⁸ Today he serves as AQ's international terror operations chief. He is reportedly focused on enhancing AQ's ability to carry out attacks in the West.⁹⁹ U.S. officials have expressed concerns about Saif al-Adl's relationship with the Qods Force.

According to former CIA Persian Gulf military analyst Kenneth M. Pollack, Tehran was aware of the AQ presence inside Iran at the time of the Riyadh attacks in 2003 due to — in the very least — the numerous complaints about their presence inside Iran issued by American officials. "Thus, at some level their freedom had to have been intentional," Pollack writes in his 2004 book on the history of conflict between Iran and America. Pollack further assessed that due to the IRGC's, MOIS's and other Iranian security services' fears of American aggression, coupled with their desire to head it off by going on the offensive, these groups may have seen real value in enabling, or even encouraging, al-Qa'ida to attack the United States.¹⁰⁰

On September 1, 2003, Jordanian authorities revealed Iran had refused a request for the extradition of Jordanian al-Qa'ida affiliate Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.¹⁰¹ Zarqawi was briefly jailed by the Iranians during his flight from Afghanistan to Iraqi Kurdistan, where he presided over al-Qa'ida's operations inside Iraq.¹⁰² Days later, it was reported Iran had also ostensibly rejected Saudi requests for extraditions of other high-profile AQ operatives, including Saad bin Laden (one of Osama bin Laden's sons) and Core AQ spokesman Sulaiman Abu Ghaith.¹⁰³

Discussing the 2007 National Intelligence Estimate titled

⁹⁰ Threat Report: Iran Intel financing TB and HIG. 30 January 2005. Online via <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/afghanistan/warlogs/777FBEB7-2219-0B3F-9F0C59FFD93575CF>

⁹¹ Gorman, Siobhan and Solomon, Jay. "Reports Bolster Suspicion of Iranian Ties to Extremists." *The Wall Street Journal*. 27 July 2010. Online via <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703700904575391664183556930.html>

⁹² Pollack, Kenneth M. *The Persian Puzzle: The conflict between Iran and America*.

⁹³ Gorman, Siobhan and Solomon, Jay. "Reports Bolster Suspicion of Iranian Ties to Extremists."

⁹⁴ Pollack, Kenneth M. *The Persian Puzzle: The conflict between Iran and America*.

⁹⁵ McChrystal, Stanley A. *Commander's Initial Assessment (Unclassified)*. Presented to U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates 30 August 2009.

⁹⁶ Pollack, Kenneth M. *The Persian Puzzle: The conflict between Iran and America*.

⁹⁷ Jehl, Douglas and Schmitt, Eric. "U.S. Suggests a Qaeda Cell in Iran Directed Saudi Bombings." *The New York Times*. 21 May 2003. Online via <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/05/21/international/middleeast/21IRAN.html>

⁹⁸ Al-Qa'ida's (mis)Adventures in the Horn of Africa, Part I Appendices, Appendix B: Cast of Characters from the Horn of Africa, IV Saif al-Adel. *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*. Online via <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/aq/pdf/Saif.pdf>

⁹⁹ Swami, Praveen. "Osama bin Laden appoints new commander to spearhead war on West." *The Telegraph*. 10 November 2010. Online via <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/8123261/Osama-bin-Laden-appoints-new-commander-to-spearhead-war-on-West.html>

¹⁰⁰ Pollack, Kenneth M. *The Persian Puzzle: The conflict between Iran and America*.

¹⁰¹ Ghayshani, Nabil. "Iran Reportedly Rejects Jordanian Demand to Hand Over Al-Zarqawi." *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*. 2 September 2003. OSC product REDACTED.

¹⁰² Brisard, Jean-Charles. *Zarqawi: The new face of al-Qaeda*. Other Press. 2005

¹⁰³ al-Murshid, Abd-al-Muhsin. "Sources: Iran Did Not Extradite Any Important al-Qa'ida Members to Saudi Arabia." *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*. 9 September 2003. OSC product REDACTED.

“The Terrorist Threat to the U.S. Homeland,” intelligence officials cited former QF commander Ahmad Vahidi as a facilitator of safe houses inside Iran for top AQ officials.¹⁰⁴ Penning his biography of Zarqawi while hiding in Iran, Saif al-Adl took care to note the government of Iran had not directly supported his associates in al-Qa’ida. He did, however, note Hekmatyar’s network provided substantial assistance, making housing arrangements for them once inside Iran.¹⁰⁵

Until his death on June 7, 2006, Zarqawi was the most wanted terrorist in Iraq. German intelligence officials who monitored his communications with members of the Tawhid cell in Germany report Zarqawi, who was wounded during the American offensive in Afghanistan late in 2001, found refuge and medical care in Mashhad, Iran on January 5, 2002. He is said to have remained in Iran until April, where he coordinated the retreat of members of his network from Afghanistan for deployment to Iraqi Kurdistan. His personal assistant noted that during his time in Iran Zarqawi had been “under the protection of the Iranian regime and the Hekmatyar group.” The claim that Zarqawi was under the protection of the Iranians was supported by information former bin Laden bodyguard Shadi Abdalla (also from Jordan) provided German investigators. Jordanian officials confirmed that in 2003 virtually all of the top officials from Zarqawi’s network were in Iran.¹⁰⁶

During the past decade, Iran’s relationship with al-Qa’ida is assessed to have been sustained by the mutual goal of reducing America’s influence in the Muslim world — Iraq and Afghanistan chiefly. In March 2010, then CENTCOM Commander David H. Petraeus advised the U.S. Senate

Armed Services Committee, “al-Qaeda continues to use Iran as a key facilitation hub, where facilitators connect al-Qaeda’s senior leadership to regional affiliates.”¹⁰⁷ Later in 2010, reports began to emerge in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region that top AQ officials believed to have been under close supervision inside Iran were again operating beyond the Islamic Republic’s borders.¹⁰⁸

In the very brief section of the 9/11 Commission Report titled “Assistance from Hezbollah and Iran to al Qaeda,” the report’s authors conclude: “We believe this topic requires further investigation by the U.S. government.”¹⁰⁹ Evidence of relationships between Iranian officials and al-Qa’ida chiefs, sometimes managed through Hizballah, did exist at the time of the report’s production. However, due to the debate about whether or not Shiite Iran would back Sunni militants, this situation was reportedly one that analysts had been discouraged from investigating, or even discussing in meetings with officials unless specifically asked to address it.¹¹⁰

Concerning the notion that religious divides meant Iranian officials would not partner with al-Qa’ida chiefs to strike the U.S., former CIA Director Jim Woolsey once explained: “This conventional wisdom is idiotic. I don’t remember what so-called expert was saying that Shia Islamists will never cooperate with Sunni Islamists or with secular terrorists, but I’ve thought this line of reasoning on totalitarians was wrong since I was a sophomore in college. ... Intellectuals get involved in policy analysis and they think the intellectual roots of a movement are more important than the fact that they are totalitarians. This is extremely dangerous.”¹¹¹

THE AQ-QF NEXUS

Within days of the 9/11 attacks, anticipating a U.S.-led offensive against militants inside Afghanistan bin Laden’s friend Gulbuddin Hekmatyar asserted, “We have to defend our country. ... Our response will depend on the methods the Americans use in their attack.” Then living inside Iran, Hekmatyar predicted: “All regional equations will

be changed. This time, we will clearly see the stances of countries like Iran, China, Russia, and Pakistan.”¹¹²

For many observers, Iran had sent a strong signal of what its stance would likely be when officials accommodated the flow of al-Qa’ida members into Iran’s borders before September 11, 2001. This policy remained intact after 9/11.

¹⁰⁴ Lake, Eli. “Iran Is Found To Be a Lair of Al Qaeda: Intelligence estimate cites two councils.” The New York Sun. 17 July 2007. Online via <http://www.nysun.com/foreign/iran-is-found-to-be-a-lair-of-al-qaeda/58507/>

¹⁰⁵ “Al-Qa’ida Commander Writes Al-Zarqawi ‘Jihadist Biography’” OSC Summary of Jihadist Websites. Open Source Center. 20 June 2009. OSC product REDACTED.

¹⁰⁶ Brisard, Jean-Charles. Zarqawi: The new face of al-Qaeda.

¹⁰⁷ Petraeus, David H. Testimony provided to the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee. 16 March 2010.

¹⁰⁸ Musharbash, Yassin. “Saif al-Adel Back in Waziristan: A top terrorist returns to al-Qaida fold.” Spiegel Online. 25 October 2010. Online via <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,725181,00.html>

¹⁰⁹ The 9/11 Commission Report: Final report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States. 22 July 2004. Online via <http://www.9-11commission.gov/report/911Report.pdf>

¹¹⁰ Timmerman, Kenneth R. Countdown to Crisis: The coming nuclear showdown with Iran.

¹¹¹ Timmerman, Kenneth R. Countdown to Crisis: The coming nuclear showdown with Iran.

¹¹² “Exiled Afghan Warlord Threatens To Take Up Arms Against United States.” AFP. 21 September 2001. OSC product REDACTED.

Authors of the 9/11 Commission Report acknowledged the relationship between al-Qa'ida and Iran demonstrates that "Sunni-Shia divisions did not necessarily pose an insurmountable barrier to cooperation in terrorist operations."¹¹³ And evidence of such working relationships between Sunni and Shiite extremists was available prior to the September 11, 2001 attack on America's homeland. For instance, among the talking points on Iran distributed to American ambassadors by the State Department in 1996, INR officials cited reports of linkages between Tehran and a key Sunni terrorist organization with close ties to Osama bin Laden's network, Egyptian Islamic Jihad (Cable Reference ID No. 96STATE237921 (S), 17 November 1996; Document Released by Wikileaks 27 April 2011).

THE COURTSHIP

For more than a decade, U.S. court documents have pointed to a relationship between al-Qa'ida and Iran. On November 4, 1998, the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Southern District of New York unsealed its indictment of bin Laden, charging him with conspiracy to attack U.S. defense installations. The indictment further charged that al-Qa'ida was allied with Sudan, Iran, and Hizballah.¹¹⁴

Less than a year before the 9/11 attacks, Ali Mohamed, a coconspirator in al-Qa'ida's 1998 attacks on the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, testified he was aware of certain contacts during the 1990s between Egyptian Islamic Jihad, on the one hand, and Iran and Hizballah, on the other.¹¹⁵ "I arranged security for a meeting in the Sudan between [Imad] Mugniyeh, Hezbollah's chief, and bin Laden. Hezbollah provided explosives training for al Qaeda. Iran supplied Egyptian Jihad with weapons," Ali Mohamed stated during his plea bargain hearing on October 20, 2000.¹¹⁶ "I was involved with the [Egyptian] Islamic Jihad organization, and the Islamic Jihad organization had a very close link to al Qaeda," he revealed. Accordingly, "the objective of all this, just to attack any Western target in the Middle East, to force Western countries to pull out of the Middle East," was based on the outcome of the 1983 attacks on the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut that were masterminded by Hizballah

security chief Imad Mugniyeh, and carried out with help from Iran.¹¹⁷

The Egyptian Islamic Jihad was then led by present day al-Qa'ida second in command Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri. In 1998, Zawahiri merged the organization with bin Laden's group to form the "World Islamic Front for Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders." Prior to this, Zawahiri had developed close ties with then Qods Force Commander Ahmad Vahidi, who today serves as Iran's minister of defense. Throughout the 1990s, Zawahiri traveled repeatedly to Iran as a guest of both Minister of Intelligence and Security Ali Fallahian and Ahmad Vahidi.¹¹⁸ (In 2007, intelligence officials advised the press that Ahmad Vahidi facilitated access to safe houses inside Iran for top AQ officials following the 9/11 attacks.¹¹⁹)

From 1992-1996, Osama bin Laden resided in Sudan with several of his top lieutenants, including Saif al-Adl.¹²⁰ QF Commander Ahmad Vahidi is said to have courted members of bin Laden's network during their stay in Sudan, and it has been reported several of bin Laden's children established residences in Iran after their father was forced to leave for Afghanistan in 1996.¹²¹

The fatwa issued in 1992 by al-Qa'ida's leaders who called for jihad against the Western "occupation" of Muslim lands was certainly appreciated by Saudi Arabia's stalwart foes across the Gulf in Tehran. Moreover, unlike many other Islamist leaders, bin Laden was focused on the big picture, calling for a war against the United States. Like the Iranians, he too had an axe to grind with the House of Saud.

According to the 9/11 Commission Report, around the time of bin Laden's arrival in Sudan discussions "between al Qaeda and Iranian operatives led to an informal agreement to cooperate in providing support — even if only training — for actions carried out primarily against Israel and the United States. Not long afterward, senior al Qaeda operatives and trainers traveled to Iran to receive training in explosives. In the fall of 1993, another such delegation went to the Bekka Valley in Lebanon for further training in explosives as well as in intelligence and security."¹²² Members of bin Laden's group could have received training directly from the IRCG as General

¹¹³ The 9/11 Commission Report: Final report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States.

¹¹⁴ The 9/11 Commission Report: Final report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States.

¹¹⁵ Bergen, Peter L. *The Osama bin Laden I Know: An oral history of al Qaeda's leader*. Free Press. 2006.

¹¹⁶ Bergen, Peter L. *The Osama bin Laden I Know: An oral history of al Qaeda's leader*.

¹¹⁷ Quds Force (Unclassified). Intellipedia Stub. Last updated 26 December 2010.

¹¹⁸ Timmerman, Kenneth R. "Iran cosponsors Al-Qaeda terrorism: Iranian young people are turning soccer games into anti-regime demonstrations as evidence mounts of their government's involvement in the Sept. 11 attacks." *Insight on the News*. 3 December 2001. Online via http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1571/is_45_17/ai_80681416/?tag=content;col1

¹¹⁹ Lake, Eli. "Iran Is Found To Be a Lair of Al Qaeda: Intelligence estimate cites two councils."

¹²⁰ "Al-Qa'ida Commander Writes Al-Zarqawi 'Jihadist Biography.'" OSC Summary of Jihadist Websites. 20 June 2009.

¹²¹ "Tehran's Special Friends." *Paris Intelligence Online*. 27 May 2010. OSC product REDACTED.

¹²² The 9/11 Commission Report: Final report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States.

Mohammad Bagr Zolqadr was running an IRGC training camp in Sudan. Zolqadr's ties to bin Laden were reportedly brokered by Ayman al-Zawahiri.¹²³

Authors of the 9/11 Commission report noted bin Laden "reportedly showed particular interest in learning how to use truck bombs such the one that had killed 241 U.S. Marines in Lebanon in 1983." According to *The New York Times*, intelligence reports suggest bin Laden's associates actually approached MOIS agents in 1995 and again in 1996, offering to join forces in an asymmetric war on America.¹²⁴ Additionally, a suspect charged in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing testified that a Hizballah official met with an AQ official in Sudan in 1996. The mediator for this meeting was Sheikh Nomani (Numeini).¹²⁵ Nomani is described as a representative of the Iranian government's interests, with access to the highest echelons of power in Tehran.¹²⁶

In a 1993 interview, Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri dubitably denied a partnership had developed between Egyptian and Iranian jihadists.¹²⁷ While hiding in Iran following 9/11, Saif al-Adl penned his biography of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Possibly following Zawahiri's example set in 1993, he took care to explicitly note the Iranian government had not assisted al-Adl and Zarqawi with their efforts.¹²⁸

THE NEW (OLD) BASE

Initially, Sudan proved an ideal venue for bin Laden to grow his "Islamic Army Shura." Around the time of his arrival, Sudan's Islamist leader Hassan Turabi convened a series of meetings between extremist organizations, including the Palestine Liberation Organization, Hamas, and Hizballah. Turabi sought to persuade members of such organizations to cast aside their divisions and join forces against their common enemy.¹²⁹ Yet in 1995, the Sudanese regime came under mounting pressure from the international community to sever its ties with bin Laden, who was protecting Egyptian Islamic Jihad members linked to the 1995 bombing of the

Egyptian Embassy in Pakistan's capital, as well as the 1995 attempted assassination of Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak. (Originally, Zawahiri planned to attack the U.S. Embassy in Islamabad, but it was too heavily fortified.¹³⁰) And in May 1996, bin Laden decamped Sudan, seeking refuge in Afghanistan. His home country, Saudi Arabia — one of Iran's chief enemies — had stripped bin Laden of his citizenship and was unwilling to receive him.

Upon his arrival in Afghanistan trusted friend Gulbuddin Hekmatyar lobbied Taliban chieftains for their support of bin Laden. Hekmatyar's relationships with various intelligence agencies with interests in Afghanistan dated back to the Soviet occupation era, as did his association with bin Laden.¹³¹ Also in 1996, Hekmatyar took up residence inside Iran. Hekmatyar had served as prime minister of Afghanistan before the government of Burhanuddin Rabbani was ousted by the Taliban that year.

Reports emerged in June 1996 of a special meeting hosted in Iran for members of various high-profile Islamist extremist and terrorist groups. The gathering coincided with that year's Arab Summit hosted in Cairo.

Organized by the IRGC and supervised by QF, the meeting reportedly attracted Palestinian Islamic Jihad leader Ramadan Shallah, Ahmad Salim of Egyptian Islamic Jihad, Hizballah security chief Imad Mugnyeh, a senior Hamas official, an envoy of bin Laden's network (Muhammad Ali Ahmad), Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's assistant, and representatives of numerous other terrorist groups.^{132 133} This meeting was reportedly organized to encourage representatives of these groups to set aside their ideological differences and focus on working to achieve their shared goals, fighting America and Israel. (It has been suggested bin Laden and Hekmatyar attended this terror summit.)

Hizballah's Imad Mugnyeh was reportedly assigned the responsibility of liaising with Islamist terror leaders on behalf of the Qods Force.¹³⁴ Mugnyeh was a superstar in the realm

¹²³ Timmerman, Kenneth R. *Countdown to Crisis: The coming nuclear showdown with Iran.*

¹²⁴ Levitt, Matthew. "New Arenas for Iranian-Sponsored Terrorism: The Arab-Israeli Heartland." *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, PolicyWatch.* 22 February 2002. Online via <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=1483>

¹²⁵ Schiff, Ze'ev. "Syria Has Allowed Hundreds of Qaida Men To Settle in Lebanon." *Ha'aretz (Tel Aviv).* 2 September 2002. OSC product REDACTED.

¹²⁶ Gunaratna, Rohan. *Inside Al Qaeda: Global network of terror.* Columbia University Press. 2002.

¹²⁷ "A Conversation with Shaykh Ayman al-Zawahiri" Circa 1993. Cited in: *Militant Ideology Atlas.* Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point. 2006. OSC product REDACTED.

¹²⁸ "Al-Qa'ida Commander Writes Al-Zarqawi 'Jihadist Biography.'" OSC Summary of Jihadist Websites. 20 June 2009.

¹²⁹ *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States.*

¹³⁰ Benjamin, Daniel and Simon, Steven. *The Age of Sacred Terror.* Random House. 2002.

¹³¹ Coll, Steve. *Ghost Wars: The secret history of the CIA, Afghanistan, and bin Laden, from the Soviet invasion to September 10, 2001.* Penguin Books. 2004.

¹³² "Ayatollahs Convene Terrorist Hard-Liners." *Corriere Della Sera (Milan).* 29 June 1996. OSC Product REDACTED.

¹³³ Afridi, Rahimi. "Report on Fundamentalist 'War' on West in Gulf." *Al-Watan Al-'Arabi.* 19 July 1996. OSC product REDACTED.

¹³⁴ Nurizadeh, Ali. "Iranian Intelligence Official Who Has Fled Abroad: Some of Our Organs Are Cooperating With Iraq To Smuggle Oil. Hamid Zakeri Talks About Some Revolutionary Guards Elements' Links With al-Qa'ida." *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat.* 18 February 2003. OSC product REDACTED.

of Islamist terrorism. Before 9/11, he had killed more Americans than any other terrorist.¹³⁵

Perhaps it is no coincidence that this type of meeting between the world's preeminent Islamist terrorist groups was arranged by Iran at a time when Tehran was encouraging Hizballah to unify the efforts of its various branches throughout the Muslim world. In a June 1996 report on this move it was explained, "In some states, as in Sudan, Iran feels that its financial support is going to hard-line groups that are not necessarily supportive of Iran's international aspirations. This is why Iran is currently trying to organize its Sudanese supporters in networks linked directly to the Hezbollah movement."¹³⁶

Also in June 1996, following Qods Force-issued orders to target Western facilities, Hizballah al-Hijaz bombed one such facility inside Saudi Arabia that was used to house U.S. troops, the Khobar Towers in Dhahran. Years later, materials produced by the 9/11 Commission stirred allegations of linkages between members of bin Laden's network and Hizballah al-Hijaz.¹³⁷ The attack occurred within weeks of bin Laden's departure from Sudan, landing him in Afghanistan after the Saudis had rejected a Sudanese offer to return him to the Kingdom if they would pardon bin Laden for his crimes. Indeed, the timing was likely anything but coincidental, and the 9/11 Commission Report states there are signs al-Qa'ida "played some role" in this attack that was ordered by Iran's Qods Force, then led by Ayman al-Zawahiri's friend Ahmad Vahidi.

This was not the first attack on a U.S. military facility in the Kingdom. Less than a year before, five Americans were killed in Saudi Arabia when a car bomb exploded in November 1995 outside a Saudi-U.S. joint military facility. Intelligence officials learned al-Qa'ida officials had decided a year earlier to attack a U.S. target in Saudi Arabia, and had shipped explosives to the Arabian Peninsula for this purpose. Several of bin Laden's associates later took credit.¹³⁸ (Iran had provided bin Laden's warriors explosives during bin Laden's stay in Sudan.¹³⁹)

Soon after the Khobar Towers attack in Dhahran, in August 1996 bin Laden issued a fatwa, calling on Muslims to drive American soldiers out of Saudi Arabia. He condemned the Saudi monarchy for allowing infidel forces into the land of

Islam's most sacred sites. He celebrated the attack on the Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia. He also praised the 1983 bombing in Beirut that killed 241 U.S. Marines.¹⁴⁰ Those focused on divisions between Sunnis and Shiites were no-doubt surprised that bin Laden was openly lauding the efforts of Shiite Muslims like the terrorists who carried out these attacks. As signals go, his extolment of these Iranian-backed attacks was as subtle as a hand grenade.

The following month, evidence of bin Laden's willingness to team with the Qods Force's chief terrorist surrogate, Hizballah, was front and center in press reports. An event featuring representatives of many such organizations was scheduled to take place in London on September 8, 1996. Organizers of the Rally for Revival originally planned to feature addresses delivered by prominent Sunni and Shiite extremists, including: Osama bin Laden, Egyptian Shaykh Omar Abd-al-Rahman, the blind cleric who was convicted of conspiring to blow up the New York World Trade Center in 1993, and Shaykh Mohammad Fadlallah, the spiritual leader of Lebanese Hizballah.¹⁴¹

Then, in an interview published in November 1996, bin Laden reflected on the Khobar Towers attack, explaining:

Terrorism — if it is against criminals, thieves, and bandits — is a legitimate thing adopted by all states in all ages. The blameworthy terrorism is the kind committed by thieves against nations. What happened in the Riyadh and al-Khubar blasts was praiseworthy terrorism, because it was against thieves, not individuals but major states which went there to plunder the riches of this nation and to encroach on its greatest holy sites. It is a great honor for every Muslim to defend his qiblah [direction to which Muslims turn in praying] and liberate it from these aggressors who are plundering its riches. ...

We had thought that the Riyadh and al-Khubar blasts were a sufficient signal to sensible U.S. decision makers to avert a real battle between the Islamic nation and U.S. forces, but it seems that they did not understand the signal. ...

Understanding the signal means withdrawing all forces from the region, because we believe that the U.S. Government committed the biggest mistake when it entered

¹³⁵ Timmerman, Kenneth R. Countdown to Crisis: The coming nuclear showdown with Iran.

¹³⁶ Taheri, Amir. "Iranian Hezbollah Planning To Set Up International Organizational Structure." Al-Sharq Al-Awsat. 12 June 1996. OSC product REDACTED.

¹³⁷ Eggen, Dan. "9/11 Panel Links Al Qaeda, Iran: Bin Laden may have part in Khobar Towers, report says." The Washington Post. 26 June 2004. Online via <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A6581-2004Jun25.html>

¹³⁸ The 9/11 Commission Report: Final report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States.

¹³⁹ Gunaratna, Rohan. Inside Al Qaeda: Global network of terror.

¹⁴⁰ The 9/11 Commission Report: Final report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States.

¹⁴¹ Blitz, James. "Mideast States Attack Islamic Rally Go- Ahead." Financial Times. 6 September 1996. OSC product REDACTED.

*a peninsula which no non-Muslim nation has ever entered for 14 centuries despite the presence of imperialist forces in the region.*¹⁴²

THE GOOD NEIGHBOR

In 1998 al-Qa'ida simultaneously attacked U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, employing Hizballah's famed truck bomb techniques. The attacks killed 224 civilians, and wounded more than 5,000 others.¹⁴³

Identified with bin Laden, Mohammad Atef, Zawahiri, Mamdouh Mahmud Salim (aka Abu Hajer) and Abdullah Ahmed Abdullah (aka Abu Mohamed el Masry, aka Saleh, aka Triple A) as a member of al-Qa'ida's shura council, Saif al-Adl was indicted for his alleged role as a coconspirator in the attacks. According to American prosecutors, he had provided military and intelligence training to members of al-Qa'ida and its affiliated groups, including Egyptian Islamic Jihad. The indictment also noted al-Adl was a member of al-Qa'ida's military committee.¹⁴⁴ Phone records obtained by U.S. officials investigating the 1998 U.S. Embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania revealed 10 percent of the calls made from the Compact-M satellite phone used by bin Laden and his key lieutenants at this time were to Iran.¹⁴⁵

According to Saif al-Adl's biography of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, around 1999 al-Adl assumed responsibility for helping al-Qa'ida cultivate a relationship with Zarqawi.¹⁴⁶ In this document, al-Adl references al-Qa'ida's reliance on Iran as a primary transit point for members of Zarqawi's network who were making their way to Afghanistan for training at a camp near Herat in the years prior to 9/11. "This passage was new and important to us in the al-Qa'ida. We took 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 coordinate regarding issues of mutual interest. Coordination with the Iranians was achieved later," al-Adl wrote.

Authors of the 9/11 Commission Report revealed there

was evidence 8 to 10 of the 14 Saudis involved in the 9/11 attacks traveled into or out of Iran between October 2000 and February 2001. According to the report, evidence also suggests Hizballah operatives were closely tracking the travels of several 9/11 hijackers into Iran as early as November 2000. The Iranians were even willing to facilitate safe passage without stamping AQ members' passports, making it very difficult to track their movements. Identified by the 9/11 Commission as the "coordinator" of the 9/11 plot, Ramzi Binalshibh is reported to have stopped in Iran en route to Afghanistan after each of his repeated meetings in Europe with 9/11 hijacker Mohammad Atta.¹⁴⁷

Al-Qa'ida attacked the USS *Cole* in October 2000, killing 17 American sailors. The 9/11 Commission Report notes one of the coconspirators, Tawfiq bin Attash (aka Kkallad), informed terrorism investigators the Iranians sought to strengthen ties with al-Qaida following the *Cole* bombing. Concerned about his Saudi supporters' impressions of any such relationships, bin Laden reportedly rebuffed them.

In the build up to 9/11, Hizballah security chief Imad Mugniyeh had reportedly become al-Qa'ida's travel agent.¹⁴⁸ By 2001, Mugniyeh had risen to the top echelon of Hizballah's ranks and was a member of its shura council.¹⁴⁹

Between 1997 and 2003, Mugniyeh traveled to Iran, Afghanistan, Syria, Lebanon, Pakistan, and northern Iraq, and helped al-Qa'ida leaders from Afghanistan travel to Iraq through Iran, making use of his close relationship with the IRGC its Qods Force.¹⁵⁰ Although he is not mentioned in the 9/11 Commission Report, the report's authors reportedly reviewed intelligence documents which revealed Mugniyeh's direct role assisting 9/11 hijackers with their travels to Iran.¹⁵¹

Allegedly a former Iranian intelligence official, Hamid Reza Zakeri reportedly briefed U.S. intelligence officials on Iran's role assisting al-Qa'ida members some two weeks after Ramzi Binalshibh traveled to Spain for his final meeting with Mohammad Atta in July 2001. The report on Zakeri's remarks was not shared with members of the 9/11 Commission.¹⁵² It was reported Zakeri defected in 2003. In a press interview, Zakeri noted Ayman al-Zawahiri had close

¹⁴² 'Atwan, 'Abd-al-Bari. "Interview with Saudi oppositionist Usamah Bin-Ladin by chief editor 'Abd-al-Bari 'Atwan 'in Afghanistan's mountains'" (Interview date not provided). Al-Quds Al-Arabi. 27 November 1996. OSC product REDACTED.

¹⁴³ Wanted: Saif al Adel. U.S. State Department, Rewards for Justice. Online via http://www.rewardsforjustice.net/index.cfm?page=Al_Adel

¹⁴⁴ United States of America v. Usama bin Laden, et al. 4 November 1998. Online via http://www.haguejusticeportal.net/Docs/NLP/US/US_v_Usama_bin_Laden_et_al_Indictment_1998.pdf

¹⁴⁵ Levitt, Matthew. "New Arenas for Iranian-Sponsored Terrorism: The Arab-Israeli Heartland."

¹⁴⁶ "Al-Qa'ida Commander Writes Al-Zarqawi 'Jihadist Biography.'" OSC Summary of Jihadist Websites. 20 June 2009.

¹⁴⁷ Timmerman, Kenneth R. Countdown to Crisis: The coming nuclear showdown with Iran.

¹⁴⁸ Timmerman, Kenneth R. Countdown to Crisis: The coming nuclear showdown with Iran.

¹⁴⁹ "Lebanon — Updated Guide of Hizballah Officials' Biographic Information, Organizational Structure." Open Source Center. 18 January 2011. OSC product REDACTED.

¹⁵⁰ "Lebanon — Updated Guide of Hizballah Officials' Biographic Information, Organizational Structure." Open Source Center.

¹⁵¹ Timmerman, Kenneth R. Countdown to Crisis: The coming nuclear showdown with Iran.

¹⁵² Timmerman, Kenneth R. Countdown to Crisis: The coming nuclear showdown with Iran.

ties with former QF commander Ahmad Vahidi. He also mentioned Imad Mughniyeh met with Iranian intelligence officials to apprise them of al-Qa'ida's plans to attack the World Trade Center.¹⁵³ He speculated that Imad Mughniyeh had coordinated the logistics for many AQ members' flights from Afghanistan to Iran following 9/11.

THE WILLING HOST

In his book that was released late in 2001, Ayman al-Zawahiri ponders the question of whether it is better for jihadis confronted by the potential of mass detainments to stand and fight, or "disperse in the face of the storm and pull out of the field with the least possible casualties." Zawahiri, whose experiences in Egypt acquainted him with the realities of mass detainments wrote: "In my opinion, the answer is that the movement must pull out as many personnel as possible to the safety of a shelter without hesitation, reluctance, or reliance on illusions. The most serious decision facing someone under siege is the escape decision. It is the hardest thing to leave the family, the position, the job, and the steady style of life and proceed to the unknown, uncertainties, and the uneasy life. But as soon as the door of the cell closes behind the prisoner he wishes that he had spent his entire life displaced without a shelter rather than facing the humiliating experience of captivity."¹⁵⁴

Writing his Zarqawi biography, Saif al-Adl mentions the droves of AQ members who sought refuge in Iran following 9/11. Forecasting U.S. efforts to depose Saddam Hussein, al-Adl and Zarqawi drew up the plan for Zarqawi to enter Iraq through its uncontrolled northern areas, where leaders of QF-supported Ansar al-Sunna (now Ansar al-Islam) "expressed their willingness to offer assistance" to AQ as it developed an operational base inside Iraq.¹⁵⁵

Accounts of Zarqawi's activities inside Iran suggest the infrastructure he established was somewhat elaborate. Much of it was situated in places that were certainly familiar to Iranian intelligence officials who knew bin Laden's close ally Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. He set up a base in the Iranian city of Zahedan near the border with Pakistan, and another

base in Tehran at a farm owned by Hekmatyar, which Zarqawi used as his headquarters.¹⁵⁶

Soon, however, Iran's hospitality became questionable.

If nuance truly is the essence of statesmanship, Iranian President Mohammad Khatami was striving to put on display a statesman's persona during 2002 and 2003. Sensitive to the fact that his country's known support for terrorism did not play well for his newfound Western audience, Khatami made a specious effort to adjust appearances surrounding Iran's terror policy to meet international expectations. His brother, deputy speaker of the Iranian parliament, even introduced a bill proposing a ban on support for terrorism (Note: al-Qa'ida was reportedly the only terrorist organization cited by name in the bill).¹⁵⁷ Yet while Iran's president pursued an effort to demonstrate Tehran was not cooperating with the hoard of al-Qa'ida members who had entered the Islamic Republic's borders since 9/11 — arranging widespread detainments, but deporting few — Ayatollah Khamene'i appears to have taken an altogether different path.

Since Khatami's election, a struggle had arisen between his secular supporters and Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamene'i's camp of hardliners. Although Khatami had the legitimate support of the people, the Ayatollah and the rest of Iran's most powerful officials (all of them unelected) had the real power. The Ayatollah exercised this power at home and abroad through his control of the Revolutionary Guards, its secretive Qods Force, and the MOIS.¹⁵⁸ So in spite of the roundup of more than 100 AQ members according to some accounts — a kabuki dance of sorts that prompted even Zarqawi to leave for Syria in the spring of 2002 — reports soon emerged that QF was helping to hide al-Qa'ida's senior-most members, allegedly moving them in and out of the country.¹⁵⁹

While Iran was trying to keep the lid on its relationship with Sunni terrorists, al-Qa'ida's top personalities, bin Laden chief among them, reciprocated with a time-tested strategy: Mention Iran as little as possible. In his 2003 book comprised of various interviews he conducted with bin Laden, journalist

¹⁵³ Nurizadeh, Ali. "Iranian Intelligence Official Who Has Fled Abroad: Some of Our Organs Are Cooperating With Iraq To Smuggle Oil. Hamid Zakeri Talks About Some Revolutionary Guards Elements' Links With al-Qa'ida."

¹⁵⁴ Al-Zawahiri, Ayman. *Knights Under the Prophets Banner*. Extracts published by Al-Sharq Al-Awsat 2 December 2001. OSC product REDACTED.

¹⁵⁵ "Al-Qa'ida Commander Writes Al-Zarqawi 'Jihadist Biography.'" OSC Summary of Jihadist Websites. 20 June 2009.

¹⁵⁶ Husayn, Fu'ad. "Al-Zarqawi ... The Second Generation of al-Qa'ida." Al-Quds Al-Arabi. 14 May 2005. OSC product REDACTED.

¹⁵⁷ Zadeh, Ali Nuri. "Iranian sources say Sa'd Bin Ladin and five al-Qa'ida members have been deported. Khatami calls for handing Sayf al-Adl, Sulayman Abu-Ghayth, and Abu-Bakr over to their home countries." Al-Sharq Al-Awsat. 10 September 2003. OSC product REDACTED.

¹⁵⁸ Shahar, Yael. "Al-Qa'ida Links to Iranian Security Services Examined." International Policy Institute for Counterterrorism (Herzliyya). 20 January 2003. OSC product REDACTED.

¹⁵⁹ Zadeh, Ali Nuri. "Iranian sources say Sa'd Bin Ladin and five al-Qa'ida members have been deported. Khatami calls for handing Sayf al-Adl, Sulayman Abu-Ghayth, and Abu-Bakr over to their home countries."

Ahmad Muwaffaq Zaydan, formerly a correspondent with Al-Jazeera Television and the London-based newspaper Al-Hayah in Afghanistan and Pakistan, observes:

In my meeting with Usama, I noticed he kept silent on Iran, despite my various attempts to find out what his position was vis-à-vis Iran and Iranian politics. However, he was keen on avoiding attacking it despite the differences between the ideological school he belonged to and the Iranian school, which is unclear for many graduates of the Saudi Salafi school. However, it appeared as if he was walking on tight rope in this particular issue, for he had not made any statements, either praising or criticizing Iran, and kept the door open and somewhat ambiguous. For he could not criticize Iran because he might need its help or for other reasons. At the same time, he could not praise it as that might have cost him some popularity in the Gulf, which is not friendly with the Shiite school, particularly the Khomeini school. ... It was circulated amid his supporters and followers that he played a significant role in alleviating the tension between the Taliban and Iran during the fall of Mazar-i-Sharif, Afghanistan's northern capital, to the Taliban in 1997, and the expulsion of the Iranian Government's allies by the Uzbek and Tajik fighters.¹⁶⁰

Soon, however, Iran's anti-terror façade deteriorated.

On September 1, 2003, Jordanian authorities revealed that Iran had refused a request for the extradition of Jordanian al-Qa'ida militant Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.¹⁶¹ Zarqawi was briefly jailed by the Iranians during his flight from Afghanistan to Iraqi Kurdistan, where he presided over al-Qa'ida's operations inside Iraq.¹⁶² Days later, it was reported Iran had also effectively rejected Saudi requests for extraditions of other high-profile AQ operatives, including Saad bin Laden (one of Osama bin Laden's sons) and Core AQ spokesman Sulaiman Abu Ghaith.¹⁶³

Discussing the 2007 National Intelligence Estimate titled "The Terrorist Threat to the U.S. Homeland," intelligence officials cited former QF Commander Ahmad Vahidi as a

facilitator of safe houses inside Iran for top AQ officials.¹⁶⁴ In his biography of Zarqawi, Saif al-Adl notes that Hekmatyar's network provided AQ members who fled Afghanistan for Iran substantial assistance, making housing arrangements for them once inside Iran.¹⁶⁵ He explicitly denied Iran had assisted al-Qa'ida.

Zarqawi was the most wanted terrorist in Iraq until his death on June 7, 2006. German intelligence officials who monitored his communications with members of the Tawhid cell in Germany report Zarqawi, who was wounded during the American offensive in Afghanistan late in 2001, found refuge and medical care in Mashhad, Iran on January 5, 2002. He is said to have remained in Iran until April, where he coordinated the retreat of members of his network from Afghanistan for deployment to Iraqi Kurdistan. His personal assistant stated that during his time in Iran Zarqawi had been "under the protection of the Iranian regime and the Hekmatyar group." The claim Zarqawi was under the protection of the Iranians, who allegedly helped arrange his escape from Afghanistan late in 2001, is supported by information former bin Laden bodyguard Shadi Abdalla (also from Jordan) provided German investigators. Based on confessions of Jordanian Ahmad Mahmud Salih al-Riyati, Jordanian officials confirmed that in 2003 virtually all of the top officials from Zarqawi's network were in Iran.¹⁶⁶

But even before Zarqawi's rise in Iraq with help from Qods Force-backed Ansar al-Islam, Iran's post-9/11 relationship with Sunni terrorists became quite clear.

On May 12, 2003, in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia three truck bombs nearly simultaneously exploded at Western housing complexes. Eight Americans were among the 34 people killed in these attacks. Intelligence officials confirmed al-Qa'ida was responsible for the attacks, and soon discovered some of the perpetrators had discussed their plans with senior-ranking AQ officials who were then located in Iran.¹⁶⁷ The press reported the U.S. had evidence of communications between the Saudi AQ cell responsible for the attacks and the roughly half-dozen senior AQ personnel living inside Iran, including Saif al-Adl.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁰ Zaydan, Ahmad Muwaffaq. *Usama Bin Ladin Without Mask; Interviews Banned by the Taliban*. World Book Publishing Company (Lebanon). 2003.

¹⁶¹ Ghayshyan, Nabil. "Iran Reportedly Rejects Jordanian Demand to Hand Over Al-Zarqawi." *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*. 2 September 2003. OSC product REDACTED.

¹⁶² Brisard, Jean-Charles. *Zarqawi: The new face of al-Qaeda*. Other Press. 2005

¹⁶³ al-Murshid, Abd-al-Muhsin. "Sources: Iran Did Not Extradite Any Important al-Qa'ida Members to Saudi Arabia." *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*. 9 September 2003. OSC product REDACTED.

¹⁶⁴ Lake, Eli. "Iran Is Found To Be a Lair of Al Qaeda: Intelligence estimate cites two councils." *The New York Sun*. 17 July 2007. Online via <http://www.nysun.com/foreign/iran-is-found-to-be-a-lair-of-al-qaeda/58507/>

¹⁶⁵ "Al-Qa'ida Commander Writes Al-Zarqawi 'Jihadist Biography.'" OSC Summary of Jihadist Websites. 20 June 2009. OSC product REDACTED.

¹⁶⁶ Brisard, Jean-Charles. *Zarqawi: The new face of al-Qaeda*.

¹⁶⁷ Pollack, Kenneth M. *The Persian Puzzle: The conflict between Iran and America*.

¹⁶⁸ Jehl, Douglas and Schmitt, Eric. "U.S. Suggests a Qaeda Cell in Iran Directed Saudi Bombings." *The New York Times*. 21 May 2003. Online via <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/05/21/international/middleeast/21IRAN.html>

Formerly a colonel in the Egyptian Special Forces, Saif al-Adl (aka Muhamad Ibrahim Makkawi, aka Ibrahim Al-Madani¹⁶⁹), was by then AQ's third in command.¹⁷⁰ For some time Saif al-Adl had been a key manager of al-Qa'ida's relationship with Iran, coordinating meetings with the IRGC's leadership and MOIS officials. He served as al-Qa'ida's intelligence and security chief even before the death of Mohammad Atef in Afghanistan late in 2001. After Atef's death, al-Adl became the leader of al-Qa'ida's military committee. He was tasked with the defense of Kandahar when the Coalition attacked the city, and it was al-Adl who led AQ fighters from Gardez, Afghanistan who fought Coalition Forces during Operation Anaconda in March 2002.¹⁷¹

According to Saudi intelligence officials, al-Adl was the coordinator of the May 2003 attacks in Riyadh, which again bore the hallmarks of Hizballah's tactics. His hand is also evident in the attacks targeting Western and Jewish facilities that ensued in Casablanca, Morocco.¹⁷²

In June 2003, American intelligence officials advised the press Iran's MOIS and Qods Force agents were deeply involved in supporting terrorists, including al-Qa'ida.¹⁷³ The U.S. demanded the suspects behind the 2003 attacks in Riyadh be handed over directly to the Saudis, or to states which would then transfer these al-Qa'ida members to the Kingdom.¹⁷⁴ The Iranians countered with an offer to exchange them for members of the MEK (Majahideen-e Khalq), a designated terrorist organization that had helped Saddam Hussein maintain control over Iraq, but one with which the U.S. had signed a ceasefire agreement. (Reports surfaced that Pentagon officials were intent upon turning the MEK loose on Iran at some point.) The intelligence community assessed the Iranians would not hand over the top AQ officials Washington sought — a move which might

have triggered retaliatory attacks on Tehran.¹⁷⁵ The U.S. therefore declined the offer, leaving the Iranians reason to call Washington hypocritical, particularly when some of the 3,800 MEK members that fell into America's hands after the invasion of Iraq were designated "protected persons." Making matters more interesting, discussing this decision with the press a senior American official claimed, "A member of a terrorist organization is not necessarily a terrorist."¹⁷⁶

Clearly, Iran had replaced Afghanistan as the base from which al-Qa'ida Core was coordinating attacks. It proved a far more secure environment, one in which AQ officials were beyond the reach of the Americans. If the Iranians wanted to apprehend these terrorists, they could have done so, which they had previously demonstrated. Therefore at some level their freedom to operate — to orchestrate attacks abroad — must have been intentional.¹⁷⁷ Indeed, reports that emerged in subsequent years indicated Saif al-Adl and his father-in-law Mustafa Hamid, according to their relatives, were under the supervision/protection of the Revolutionary Guards.¹⁷⁸ (For many years prior to 9/11, Mustafa Hamid (aka Abu'l-Walid al-Masri)¹⁷⁹ had served as the chief liaison between Taliban leader Mullah Omar, Osama bin Laden, and, it is believed, Iranian security officials.)

THE PLOT THICKENS

Core al-Qa'ida experts have speculated that when Saif al-Adl began delivering family members of his AQ brothers to Iran after 9/11, including members of bin Laden's own family, al-Adl may have carried with him an object known as "the fridge." The fridge is assessed to be a rudimentary nuclear device.¹⁸⁰

Security analysts recall that in his first interview after 9/11 bin Laden told a Pakistani newspaper in November 2001 that he already had acquired nuclear and chemical weapons

¹⁶⁹ Terrorism Review 19 May 2003. OSC product REDACTED.

¹⁷⁰ Al-Qa'ida's (mis)Adventures in the Horn of Africa, Part I Appendices, Appendix B: Cast of Characters from the Horn of Africa, IV Saif al-Adel. Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point. Online via <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/aq/pdf/Saif.pdf>

¹⁷¹ Sandee, Ronald. "Implications of Iran's Release of Senior Core al-Qa'ida Leaders" A report prepared for members of the Congressional Anti-Terrorism Caucus." The NEFA Foundation. Presented to Congresswoman Sue Myrick 22 November 2010.

¹⁷² Sandee, Ronald. "Implications of Iran's Release of Senior Core al-Qa'ida Leaders"

¹⁷³ "U.S. says Iran harbors al Qaeda 'associate.'" The Washington Times. 10 June 2003. Online via <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2003/jun/10/20030610-125659-6237r/?page=1>

¹⁷⁴ Pollack, Kenneth M. The Persian Puzzle: The conflict between Iran and America.

¹⁷⁵ Pollack, Kenneth M. The Persian Puzzle: The conflict between Iran and America.

¹⁷⁶ Jehl, Douglas. "THE REACH OF WAR: PEOPLE'S MUJAHEDDEEN; U.S. Sees No Basis to Prosecute Iranian Opposition 'Terror' Group Being Held in Iraq." The New York Times. 27 July 2004. Online via <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/07/27/world/reach-war-people-s-mujahedeen-us-sees-no-basis-prosecute-iranian-opposition.html?src=pm>

¹⁷⁷ Pollack, Kenneth M. The Persian Puzzle: The conflict between Iran and America.

¹⁷⁸ Al-Shafi'i, Muhammad. "Arab Afghans' Theoretician Abu-al-Walid al-Masri and his Family Are Detained in Iran. Safiyah al-Shami: His Family Is Trying To Get Documentation To Return to Cairo." Al-Sharq Al-Awsat. 3 February 2007. OSC product REDACTED.

¹⁷⁹ "Abu'l-Walid al-Masri: A Biographical Sketch." Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point, Harmony Project. Online via http://www.ctc.usma.edu/harmony/profile_pdf/Abu'l-Walid.pdf

¹⁸⁰ Sandee, Ronald. "Implications of Iran's Release of Senior Core al-Qa'ida Leaders"

and would use similar weapons if Washington used them against him.¹⁸¹ After bin Laden declined to comment on the question of where these weapons were acquired, journalist Hamid Mir asked Zawahiri about the matter in a follow up interview. Zawahiri reportedly explained, "Mr. Hamid Mir, it is not difficult. If you have 30 million dollars, you can go to the black market in Central Asia, make contact with a disgruntled Russian scientist and get from him suitcase nuclear weapons."¹⁸² The Central Intelligence Agency had also received reports from a Russian source that al-Qa'ida may have obtained a ten-kiloton nuclear device, probably from somewhere in the former Soviet Union.¹⁸³

In a pre-9/11 memo sent by chemist Abu Khabab al-Masri to al-Qa'ida's leadership, AQ's in-house weapons of mass destruction expert asked if it was possible to gather more information about nuclear weaponry "from our Pakistani friends who have great experience in this sphere."¹⁸⁴ It was later learned al-Qa'ida sought help from Dr. Sultan Bashiruddin Mahmood, a recently retired senior Pakistani nuclear scientist who was sympathetic to the Taliban.¹⁸⁵ Mahmood met with bin Laden several times in the weeks prior to 9/11. He reportedly failed a half-dozen polygraph tests during the investigation of his relationship with bin Laden after U.S. and Pakistani authorities became aware of their meetings, during which Mahmood's son alleges bin Laden grilled Mahmood for information about how to build a nuclear bomb.¹⁸⁶ Yet according to al-Qa'ida expert Peter Bergen, as of 2010 there was no hard evidence al-Qa'ida had ever possessed a nuclear weapon.¹⁸⁷

Whether by virtue of Tehran's view that it was in the Islamic Republic's short-term interests to shore up al-Qa'ida's organizational integrity by protecting AQ officials like Saif al-Adl, or by extension of such leaders' bargaining for safekeeping with an offer of access to AQ's resources, possibly to include a nuclear device, it is assessed that following the election of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005, Ayman al-Zawahiri, with his long-standing relationship with Iranian Minister of Defense Ahmad Vahidi, AQ military committee leader Saif al-Adl, and

Gulbuddin Hekmatyar had secured a trilateral partnership between Core al-Qa'ida, key factions of the Afghan Taliban, and the IRGC. This partnership is managed by the IRGC's secretive intelligence apparatus that handles the "outsourcing" of attacks on the Islamic Republic's enemies, the Qods Force.

Around this time, the Taliban began toning down its sectarian rhetoric, pledging friendly relations with all of Afghanistan's neighbors — to include Iran — should they return to power in Kabul.¹⁸⁸ Top al-Qa'ida officials, including one of its most lethal military officers, Saif al-Adl, were living inside Iran. (Although allegedly under house arrest, they were able to communicate with their supporters living outside Iran, often contributing materials to jihadi publications.¹⁸⁹) And Iran, with a hardline former IRGC official serving as president, was ramping up its support for a war against U.S. forces in its neighborhood. This war is being waged by Iran's Shiite and Sunni terrorist proxies.

An about-face had been made in Iran's "intermestic" policies regarding support for terrorism. These pursuits may be seen as strategic in as much as they are tactical. For according to Karim Sadjadpour of the Carnegie Endowment, Iran's hardliners have a vested economic interest in continued isolation from the West, as the Revolutionary Guard now controls large parts of Iran's nationalized economy.¹⁹⁰

Both Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamene'i and Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad have sought to legitimize their efforts by invoking the hardline anti-Americanism of the Islamic Revolution's original leader, Ayatollah Khomeini. A prevalent theme that has emerged in official Iranian narratives regarding the international economic sanctions imposed on the Islamic Republic is to dismiss their effectiveness while decrying them as a vain attempt by Washington to constrain Iran's growing influence and power. As recently as March 2011, in his annual Nowruz address to the nation Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamene'i dismissed the overall impact of economic sanctions against Iran. Extolling the efforts of Iranian officials to overcome

¹⁸¹ Mir, Hamid. "Osama claims he has nukes." Dawn (Karachi). 10 November 2001. OSC product REDACTED.

¹⁸² Bergen, Peter. "Reevaluating Al-Qa'ida's Weapons of Mass Destruction Capabilities." CTC Sentinel (Product of the Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point). September 2010.

¹⁸³ Friedman, George. *America's Secret War: Inside the hidden worldwide struggle between America and its enemies.*

¹⁸⁴ Jacquard, Roland. *L'Archive Secretès d'al Qaida.* Jean Picollec (Paris). 2002.

¹⁸⁵ Allison, Graham. *Nuclear Terrorism: The ultimate preventable catastrophe.* Henry Holt. 2004.

¹⁸⁶ Baker, Peter. "Pakistani Scientist Who Met Bin Laden Failed Polygraphs, Renewing Suspicions." *The Washington Post.* 3 March 2002. Online via <http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A29790-2002Mar2?language=printer>

¹⁸⁷ Bergen, Peter. "Reevaluating Al-Qa'ida's Weapons of Mass Destruction Capabilities."

¹⁸⁸ Gorman, Siobhan and Solomon, Jay. "Reports Bolster Suspicion of Iranian Ties to Extremists." *The Wall Street Journal.*

¹⁸⁹ "Abu'l-Walid al-Masri: A Biographical Sketch." *Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point, Harmony Project.*

¹⁹⁰ Monitor 360 interview with Karim Sadjadpour of the Carnegie Endowment. 3 December 2010. Cited in: "Master Narratives: Iran." *Open Source Center, Institute for Analysis, and Monitor 360.* February 2011. OSC product REDACTED.

Western antagonism, Khamene'i stated: "The government dealt with sanctions smartly and weakened the enemy's sword. Our officials scuttled this threat by double endeavor and double work. Today, the Westerners confess that sanctioning Iran is no longer effective."¹⁹¹

By covertly supporting militants from organizations like al-Qa'ida, Sunnis beholden to denying their relations with Shiites to avoid alienating most of their supporters, Tehran is able to asymmetrically confront the "Great Satan" and its allies while enjoying significant assurances of "plausible deniability." Aside from the fact that al-Qa'ida has many reasons to conceal such ties, Iran knows that for years America's analysis of terror-related issues has been guided by a fundamental attribution error: Shiite Iran would never partner with Sunnis from organizations like al-Qa'ida. This, despite historical examples to the contrary, including Iranian efforts to develop relations with even the Muslim Brotherhood.¹⁹²

Moreover, in Saif al-Adl Iran has a seasoned terrorism strategist who is a proponent of more diffuse, small-scale attacks versus the spectacular plots like the one that unfolded on September 11, 2001 — a series of attacks that al-Adl expressed concern over in letters sent to senior-ranking AQ officials. Support for smaller, lower-profile attacks than 9/11-styled ones is far easier for the Iranians to offer without provoking retribution from the international community. Still, not all of Iran's support has escaped America's attention.

According to official accounts regarding these ties, in November 2005 Osama bin Laden's friend Gulbuddin Hekmatyar departed from Iran en route to North Korea. He was visiting North Korea to close a deal to obtain remote-controlled rockets that would be used against Coalition aircraft in Afghanistan.¹⁹³ Reporting on official documents leaked to Wikileaks in 2010, *The Wall Street Journal* noted, "By April 2007, the reports show what appears to be even closer collaboration. A report that month describes an effort two months earlier in which al Qaeda, 'helped by Iran,' bought 72 air-to-air missiles from Algeria and hid them in Zahedan, Iran, in order to later smuggle

them into Afghanistan."¹⁹⁴ (Zahedan is home to one of the bases established inside Iran by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi after 9/11; an intelligence analyst says it is home to a QF base.)

This intelligence may have played a role in President George W. Bush's decision late in 2007 to substantially expand covert actions against Tehran after issuing a Presidential Finding focused on the regime's activities.¹⁹⁵ Reporting on this decision, the press revealed special operations had already included detaining members of the Qods Force and taking them to Iraq for interrogation. Now CIA and Joint Special Operations Command were tasked with conducting operations that would include the use of lethal force within the Islamic Republic's borders.

Months later, in the spring of 2008 Qods Force Commander Qassem Soleimani wrote to General David Petraeus. He advised: "You should know that I ... control the policy for Iran with respect to Iraq, Lebanon, Gaza, and Afghanistan."¹⁹⁶ As official U.S. assessments have since revealed, it is evident terrorists from al-Qa'ida and its affiliated movements, along with members of the Afghan Taliban, play critical roles in Iran's implementations of these policies.

THE GAME-CHANGER

In the spring of 2010 reports emerged from the Afghanistan-Pakistan region that top al-Qa'ida officials who had for years lived under supervision inside Iran were again operating beyond the Islamic Republic's borders.¹⁹⁷ Discussing reports that Saif al-Adl had left Iran, in April 2010 an intelligence source told the Dutch press, "With the release of Saif al-Adl the strike force of al-Qa'ida has at least doubled and possibly tripled."¹⁹⁸

As al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula heightened calls for jihad against the West, the counterterrorism community was gripped with concerns about smaller, albeit more frequent AQ-led attacks. Regarding AQAP's 2010 parcel bomb plot, in November 2010 it was reported: "The key suspect in the Yemen mail bombs plot is Ibrahim Hassan al-Asiri, a top al-Qaida bomb maker but the conspiracy bears the fingerprints of a more senior figure recently released by

¹⁹¹ "Iran Says Sanctions Have Little Impact, Reflect Washington's Weakness." Open Source Center. 15 April 11. OSC product REDACTED.

¹⁹² Baer, Robert. *The Devil We Know: Dealing with the new Iranian superpower.*

¹⁹³ Gorman, Siobhan and Solomon, Jay. "Reports Bolster Suspicion of Iranian Ties to Extremists." *The Wall Street Journal.*

¹⁹⁴ Gorman, Siobhan and Solomon, Jay. "Reports Bolster Suspicion of Iranian Ties to Extremists." *The Wall Street Journal.*

¹⁹⁵ Hersh, Seymour M. "Preparing the Battlefield: The Bush Administration steps up its secret moves against Iran." *The New Yorker.* 7 July 2008. Online via http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2008/07/07/080707fa_fact_hersh?currentPage=all

¹⁹⁶ Alfoneh, Ali. "Brigadier General Qassem Suleimani: A biography." American Enterprise Institute. January 2011. Online via <http://www.aei.org/docLib/suleimani.pdf>

¹⁹⁷ Musharbash, Yassin. "Saif al-Adel Back in Waziristan: A top terrorist returns to al-Qaida fold." *Spiegel Online.* 25 October 2010. Online via <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,725181,00.html>

¹⁹⁸ Olmer, Bart. "Iran Reportedly Releases a Top Al-Qa'ida Leader." *Telegraaf Online.* 15 April 2010. OSC product REDACTED.

Iran after nine years of 'house arrest.'¹⁹⁹ A Pakistan-based journalist with close ties to Sunni militants in South Asia forecast al-Adl is "likely to be the new face of al-Qaida in 2011, with operations emanating in Pakistan and spreading to Somalia, Yemen and Turkey to pitch operations in Europe and India."²⁰⁰ U.S. officials insisted that while in Iran, al-Adl and various other high-ranking AQ members remained active and had close relationships with IRGC commanders, particularly representatives of its clandestine Qods Force.²⁰¹

In Chapter 13 of his Zaraqawi biography, Jordanian journalist Fu'ad Husayn reveals that Saif al-Ald and Zaraqawi had discussed with him their anticipation of Iran's military engagement of America and Israel.²⁰² Describing these terrorists' global outlooks as pertains to Iran's potential future role in international affairs, with focus on Turkey's role in future conflicts between Western and Muslim nations, Husayn explains: "Al-Qa'ida is looking forward to Iran's confrontation with the United States and the Jews, since the global secret Iranian action against the Americans and Jews

will shuffle the cards and create better circumstances for al-Qa'ida to act. It will increase this circle of confrontation, undermine the Americans, and provide a larger area of action. In fact, al-Qa'ida is planning eagerly for the next stage."

By allowing top al-Qa'ida leaders like Saif al-Adl, Sulaiman Abu Ghaith, and Triple A to resume their operations beyond Iran's borders, it would appear Iran has indeed shuffled the cards to improve the circumstances for al-Qa'ida to act. For many observers, this move conjured memories of Iran's decision to send Hekmatyar back to Afghanistan in 2002. It certainly stands to increase the circle of confrontation in Iran's neighborhood. And considering officials' expressions of concern about the expanded relationship between the Qods Force and top AQ members who found refuge in Iran after 9/11, this situation likely has tremendous implications for America's national security interests — both at home and abroad.

IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. SECURITY

A VIEW TO WORST CASE SCENARIOS

In terms of terror-related security prognoses, the worst possible scenario for America's national security interests does not entail al-Qa'ida partnering with a rogue nation.

The worst possible scenario for America's national security interests — assuming Osama bin Laden did not acquire a nuclear weapon years ago — consists of al-Qa'ida teaming with a rogue nation with nuclear capabilities. Particularly if that nation has a political legacy steeped in staunch anti-Americanism. But especially if its present day leaders sense their power may be threatened by Western interests, and that they derive greater security from being economically isolated from the West.

An equally poisonous scenario would be a nuclear-armed al-Qa'ida partnering with a rogue nation that might use al-Qa'ida's nuke to attack America or our allies, leaving only al-Qa'ida's fingerprints behind in the fallout. Or if that nation were to simply help al-Qa'ida smuggle such a weapon into one of its shared enemies' borders.

Iran is this nation.

Deepening ties with Iran to foster a partnership focused on countering American influence in the Muslim world is surely an attractive option in the eyes of al-Qa'ida's core

leadership. With the increase in drone attacks in Afghanistan and Pakistan, al-Qa'ida has suffered substantial setbacks at the hands of U.S. Forces. Yemen hardly makes for a stable base country these days. And the situation inside Somalia is much more complicated for al-Qa'ida than many observers may assume.

Aside from safe havens, Iran can provide al-Qa'ida's core leadership the financial, logistical, tactical, and other forms of support needed to bolster not only operational strength, but also organizational sustainability.

But what does Iran get in return?

The future of the Middle East is now fully a "known unknown." A revolutionary tide is rising in all reaches of the Arab world.

Perhaps presciently, the present day hardliners ruling in Persian Iran began taking steps years ago to secure their power by expanding the Revolutionary Guard's stakes in virtually all sectors of the country. The IRGC's already immense power, combined with its fealty to the Islamic Revolution, makes the notion that regime change in Iran could be easily achieved a severe stretch of the imagination. Add to that Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons capabilities, and — barring the use of military force that would likely

¹⁹⁹ "Egyptian vet seen behind Yemen bombs plot." United Press International. 2 November 2010. Online via http://www.upi.com/Top_News/Special/2010/11/02/Egyptian-vet-seen-behind-Yemen-bombs-plot/UPI-15811288722130/

²⁰⁰ "Egyptian vet seen behind Yemen bombs plot." United Press International.

²⁰¹ "Egyptian vet seen behind Yemen bombs plot." United Press International.

²⁰² Husayn, Fu'ad. "Al-Zaraqawi ... The Second Generation of al-Qa'ida." Al-Quds Al-Arabi. 27 May 2005. OSC product REDACTED.

overextend America's already heavily reduced war-fighting capabilities — this already tall order ventures into the realm of the impossible.

Although challenged by American interests in their neighborhood, particularly covert efforts to meddle in Iran's domestic affairs, the Ayatollahs and many other officials view their positions to be largely stable. As long as they remain loyal, their "intermestic" security forces will quash most any attempts to prompt the political paradigm shifts that are plaguing many regimes in the Middle East. This leaves Tehran free to pursue its game of regional influence expansion, the strategy for which relies heavily on asymmetric force capabilities (Read terrorist proxies).

Many regimes in the Middle East are presently focused on survival. Tehran, however, has been enlivened both by U.S. plans for troop reductions in Iraq and Afghanistan and the prospect of various additional regime changes, and is focused on regional ascendancy. To achieve the hegemonic status it lusts for, the regime in Tehran will most likely escalate its support for terror campaigns which will further challenge the status quo in various already unstable countries, notably those tied to the "Great Satan."

Viewing the losses of life caused by these campaigns as a means to degrade the American political will to maintain a substantial military presence on Iran's borders, it is highly likely Tehran will seek to strengthen al-Qa'ida's plans to reassert itself in Iraq and Afghanistan. It may even help al-Qa'ida grow its operability next to Saudi Arabia in Yemen. (Note: In an interview published in November 1996, bin Laden was asked if he would consider returning to Sudan or possibly even seek shelter in Iraq if conditions in Afghanistan required him to leave. He replied: "I can never return to Sudan. Not because I am not interested in Sudan, but because the mountains are our natural place. ... Iraq is not on (sic) the cards. The choice is between Afghanistan and Yemen. Yemen's topography is mountainous, and its people are tribal, armed, and allow one to breathe clear air unblemished with humiliation."²⁰³)

Many nations, including Saudi Arabia, along with neighboring Bahrain and Yemen, are not immune to the revolutionary tide that is rising in the Arab world. Positioning al-Qa'ida to help the Qods Force and its various proxies foment chaos that will challenge the supremacy of various regimes would be tantamount to throwing kerosene on the fires already burning in the Middle East.

Ultimately, Iran could benefit from a bonfire engulfing the Arab world. The subsequent oil price surges, brought on by

either concerns over or real supply interruptions, will only help the regime in Tehran.

Skyrocketing oil prices would also fuel serious problems for already beleaguered Western economies. Add to that an uptick in terrorist attacks in the West directed by Saif al-Adl — possibly to include a terrorist attack with a nuclear feature in the U.S., Europe, Israel, or Saudi Arabia — and Western markets could spiral to paralyzing depths.

Tehran is capable of fueling scenarios along these lines. What's more, doing so could yield one of the Islamic Revolution's core goals: Relegating the Great Satan's role in the world. Still, it is possible the apocalyptic overtones of the regime's rhetoric belie its leaders' true intentions, and Tehran's agenda is more contained than this.

A LESS ELABORATE VERSION OF EVENTS

In an address aired by the Islamic Republic of Iran News Network on April 13, 2011, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad claimed there are two opposing fronts in the world: "Justice-seekers and troops of Satan." He went on to express that it is among the basic rights of the non-Zionist nations to seek justice and friendship. He added that causing discord among Shiites and Sunnis or Arabs and Iranians was part of a "complicated plot" devised by the arrogant powers (Read America, Israel, and their allies). He then stated, "You should know that the regional states, especially the Iranian nation, are displeased with the exploitative and arrogant plans of America and its allies, as well as with the existence of the Zionist regime and will oppose it, continuing their fight until the rule of America and the Zionist regime is ended."²⁰⁴

In the very least, and as noted in a 2009 official assessment of what may be expected from Iran as the U.S. draws down forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, Iran, through its Qods Force, is likely to help terrorist groups unleash more deadly attacks on U.S. Forces as they exit Iran's neighborhood.

Just as members of the Iranian regime, al-Qa'ida's leaders are opportunists. Both view expanding attacks on U.S. Forces while Washington withdraws them from Iraq and Afghanistan as a means to legitimize a narrative that reads: The Americans are fleeing, and [insert either Iran or al-Qa'ida or the Taliban] forced their retreat.

Indeed, in a statement released on April 15, 2011, Ayman al-Zawahiri stated:

I would also like, before undertaking the issue of this noble, honorable, proud, and glorious uprising that is

²⁰³ 'Atwan, 'Abd-al-Bari. "Interview with Saudi oppositionist Usamah Bin-Ladin by chief editor 'Abd-al-Bari 'Atwan 'in Afghanistan's mountains"

²⁰⁴ "FYI — Ahmadinezhad Says New Middle East To Be Formed Without US, Israel." Open Source Center. 13 April 2011. OSC product REDACTED.

sweeping our ummah, to congratulate the Muslim ummah for the beginning of the U.S. withdrawal from the steadfast Afghanistan, for the U.S. forces have begun to turn over various provinces to the miserable Afghan Army. Likewise, the U.S. Secretary of Defense stated in Kabul in the first week of March that circumstances would become ready for the beginning of the withdrawal of the U.S. forces from Afghanistan next July. After him, General Petraeus affirmed his commitment to the beginning of the withdrawal of forces next July. This is a convincing admittance of defeat from the United States, for the United States began to withdraw as the forces of the mujahidin of the Islamic Emirate [of Afghanistan], under the leadership of the Amir of the Believers, Mullah Muhammad Omar, may God protect him, have advanced from victory to victory, and have widened the regions of their influence day after day.

The breaking of the United States in Afghanistan and Iraq is assistance and support to our peoples, who have risen up against the corrupt and corruptive tyrants. Indeed, our ummah is engaged in a single battle against the invaders of the modern Crusader campaign and against their proxies, our corrupt and corruptive rulers, and U.S. abandonment of her allies one after the other is among the signs of its retreat from conceit and arrogance since it received the strikes in New York, Washington, and Pennsylvania [the September 11 attacks]. The mujahidin pledge to their dear ummah that they will continue to launch strikes against the United States and its allies in the modern Crusader war until our ummah attains its freedom, achieves its sovereignty, and unites under the banner of the caliphate, by the grace of God and with His aid and support.²⁰⁵

Following the drawdown of more U.S. Forces from the theaters bordering Iran, the mere threats posed by such partnership will help Iran and al-Qa'ida, and the Taliban in the case of Afghanistan, exert substantial influence over the newly established governments in Iraq and Afghanistan. Of course, it may also be the case that Iran will continue to offer al-Qa'ida a safe base from which to conduct its operations so as to counter the prospects that either of these countries will align themselves too closely with the U.S., or to simply help al-Qa'ida carry out attacks on America, Europe, Israel, and Saudi Arabia.

Simply put, Iran will reap rewards from the mayhem al-Qa'ida can cause with support from a state sponsor.

The reasons Iran is likely to help al-Qa'ida, at least in the short term, are far reaching. In virtually every instance, the objectives that could be achieved through any such

partnerships carry weighty implications for U.S. national security interests.

It is one thing for al-Qa'ida's military commanders to operate without borders, but quite another yet-to-be-understood thing for these terrorists to operate freely with support from the chief paramilitary organization of an ascendant global power. The prospective scenarios that may be manifest by such relationships should be of paramount concern to all policy makers focused on securing U.S. interests at home and abroad.

It is incumbent upon America's defense and intelligence communities to identify opportunities to reduce the ability of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps' Qods Force to assist al-Qa'ida. To address this issue, Washington must develop a stronger strategy focused on punishing Iran for its support of al-Qa'ida, one which entails the use of hard power to neutralize certain threat features.

Just as the regime in Tehran has suffered little for its support of Hizballah, the repercussions of its (perhaps) more subtle relationship with al-Qa'ida have been equally minor. In fact, the Islamic Republic's nonelected and elected officials now appear to be deriving increased security from being economically isolated from the West. (What better way to ensure such isolation will persist, and thereby strengthen the future of the regime, than to support al-Qa'ida, the chief enemy of the "Great Satan.")

Given America's taxing pursuits in Iraq and Afghanistan, Iran surely assesses the likelihood its support for al-Qa'ida will manifest a military confrontation with America to be low. The Iranians assume economic sanctions will be the driving force behind America's response to their behaviors — sanctions which the regime in Tehran can actually benefit from. Policy makers must consider the gains that can be achieved in America's efforts to dismantle and destroy al-Qa'ida by challenging those assumptions.

While the U.S. may not presently be in a position to project a ground forces-intensive response to Iran's provocations in this vein, America also cannot afford for al-Qa'ida to grow its ties with Tehran. It is absolutely imperative for Washington to develop the resources needed to interdict this relationship at all levels. Stronger situational awareness solutions are likely the key to overcoming this threat. A greater understanding of certain features of the relationship between these actors will strengthen efforts to shield Americans from one of the chief threats to their security today. This threat is an operationally resurgent al-Qa'ida sponsored by a state like Iran.

²⁰⁵ al-Zawahiri, Ayman. "The Fifth Episode: Message of Hope and Glad Tidings to Our People in Egypt." 15 April 11. OSC product REDACTED.

ACTION ITEMS GUIDE FOR POLICY MAKERS

The following is a set of action items Kronos recommends for policy makers who may wish to develop a better understanding of this issue.

- Members should request access to official information about the history of al-Qa'ida's relationship with Iran, including documents produced by the Central Intelligence Agency like the report titled "Old School Ties."
- Members should request briefings on this issue from senior defense and intelligence officials.
- Members should write to Administration officials, raising questions about Iran's ties to al-Qa'ida.
- Members should seek meetings with Administration officials to gather information about what is being done to address this issue.
- Members of Intelligence, Armed Services, and Foreign Affairs committees should organize hearings with relevant agencies to seek additional information about this issue.
- Members should consider opportunities to fund investigations of this issue.

Note: REDACTED

QUESTIONS GUIDE FOR POLICY MAKERS

The following is a set of questions Kronos assesses may be useful to policy makers when discussing the issue of al-Qa'ida's relationship with Iran with representatives of defense and intelligence organizations.

- What is the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps' Qods Force (QF), and what is its modus operandi?
- Who is the leader of QF, and what is known about him?
- What role has QF played assisting Hizballah and other terrorist organizations?
- When did the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps develop a relationship with AQ?
- When did QF develop a relationship with AQ?
- When did the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) develop a relationship with AQ leaders?
- How have these relationships evolved?
- Who are the QF officers responsible for managing the AQ portfolio?
- What types of logistical support does QF provide AQ?
- What roles does QF play supplying/supporting AQ in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region?
- What is the QF Ansar Corps' role in Afghanistan?
- Which militant organizations operating inside Afghanistan has the Ansar Corps helped?
- What has QF's role been in Iraq?
- What led to Iran's recent decision to release many top AQ figures like AQ's international terror operations chief Saif al-Adl and "Triple A"?
- Why does QF support radical Sunni organizations?
- What role did Iran play in training elite fighters of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)?
- What is known about Saif al-Adl's relationship with QF?

- Who is Sheikh Nomani?
 - What role did Sheikh Nomani play helping AQ leaders like UBL develop their relationships with officials from Iran and Hezbollah leaders like Imad Mugniyeh?
 - When many top AQ figures fled Afghanistan for Iran following 9/11, is it possible Saif al-Adl carried with him a rudimentary nuclear device the Iranians could use in an attack that would appear to have been carried out by AQ?
 - Where are AQ family members kept inside Iran?
 - Is it assessed that Saif al-Adl's father-in-law Mustafa Hamid still plays the same prominent role liaising between Afghan jihadis and Iranian officials that he did when he reconnected UBL with the Tajik opposition and Iranian officials in 1996?
 - It has been suggested that when Mustafa Hamid wanted to leave Iran and relocate to the West he may have also wanted to help with counter-radicalization efforts. Was the USIC aware of this?
 - If so, why wasn't Mustafa Hamid brought here?
 - Are the AQ leaders recently released from Iran still under Iranian protection?
 - If so, are these AQ leaders influenced by Iranian officials, or perhaps viewed as puppets of the Iranians?
 - Discovered in Saudi Arabia, does Saif al-Adl's journal contain information regarding his relationship with Iran?
 - Who is Ahmad Vahidi?
 - What is known about the history of Ahmad Vahidi's role in QF?
 - What is known about Ahmad Vahidi's relationship with Ayman al-Zawahiri?
 - What is the history of travels to and from Iran by AQ leaders like al-Zawahiri before 9/11?
 - What is the history of such leaders' travels to and from Iran since 9/11?
 - It has been reported to Kronos that German court documents reveal before 9/11 a model of the Twin Towers was seen inside the IRGC-QF headquarters located in the former U.S. Embassy in Tehran. Has the USIC confirmed Iran was aware of the 9/11 plot prior to the attacks?
 - If so, have any assessments linked QF to the attacks?
 - If so, what is QF's role assessed to have been?
 - How many attacks carried out by AQ has QF been linked to?
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