



## **WikiLeaks Analysis – Iranian Support for Terrorism, and the al-Qaeda Connection\***

By Justin Katz, ICT Intern Team\*\*

### **Introduction**

In the context of the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq at the end of 2011, the Islamic Republic of Iran is currently in a unique position to extend their hegemonic influence into the Iranian Gulf and the Middle East region. As revealed by a number of classified cables exposed by WikiLeaks and other open sources, they intend to accomplish this largely through the implementation and control of proxy terrorist connections. A number of such cables and articles will be analyzed, in order to investigate to what extent these threats are being communicated by U.S., Saudi Arabian, and British intelligence officials.

One of the most troubling assertions in this context, is that Iran has established an “alliance of convenience” with leadership elements of the Sunni trans-national Jihadist group, al-Qaeda. As will be discussed, through a number of specific threat assessments, opinions of the implications of this alliance vary from source to source. However, when taken together, what we see is a picture of an Iranian – al-Qaeda connection that is uneasy, fragile and timid, but altogether potentially very dangerous.

Additionally, it will be of interest to look into evidence of concerns regarding Iranian support for insurgency and terrorism in a destabilized Iraq, as exposed through various WikiLeaks cables. The Iranians do not enjoy overwhelming support among the Shi’a there, and as such there is a notable split between the communities, as to whether or not Iranian influence is welcomed. Lastly, we will look inside the status of terrorism financing. With a particular focus on Iranian funding of Hezbollah through Saudi territory, it is of interest to see what steps the United States, as well as the Gulf Cooperation Council, are seeking to counter the ongoing threat.

\* Disclaimer: Although we do not condone the actions of WikiLeaks, its staff and its sources, the information is now in the public domain and therefore it is important for a research institute to analyze the contents of the materials.

\* Mr. Justin Katz is currently studying his MA in Diplomacy and Conflict Studies at the Lauder School of Government, Diplomacy and Strategy and interning at the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT). The views expressed in this publication are solely those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT).



## IRAN AND SAUDI ARABIA

### Background: Iranian Saudi Rivalry

In order to properly understand the Iranian connection to terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda, it is important to understand the regional context in which these alliances are taking place. Iran and Saudi Arabia are neither natural allies nor natural enemies, but have long competed as major oil producers and self-proclaimed defenders of Shi'a and Sunni Islam, respectively. Until the Iranian revolution in 1979, their rivalry was managed and controlled by the United States, with whom both were strategic allies. But after the Shah was overthrown, Saudi Arabia's leadership became frightened by both the Ayatollah Khomeini's denunciation of the Saudi monarchy as antithetical to Islam, and his ambitions to export the revolution to the Arab world. Saudi Arabia remained an ally of the U.S., and Iran became an "implacable" foe.

The rivalry accelerated by the Arab Spring, the two countries are competing for global energy markets and for political influences in the region. At the moment, Iran finds itself currently in an advantageous position to expand its influence in the region, and there are numerous countries in which this dynamic will take place: The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has a Shi'a minority of 10-15%, that primarily live in the oil rich Eastern provinces. The now Shi'a controlled government of Iraq has come under increasing Iranian influence, although differences within the Shi'a communities there will complicate Iranian advancement. Also, the Shi'a majority country of Bahrain has witnessed significant unrest, likely at the prodding of Iranian operatives, not to mention Iranian support for Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Hamas in Gaza, which continuously represent additional concern. All of these Shi'a regions are potentially exploitable by Iranian covert intelligence, and the potential for Iranian-backed terrorist attacks to further their interests must be considered.



While the presence of these Shi'a populations are nothing new, given the current geopolitical climate, it is interesting to see Iran attempting to expand its sphere of influence through the use of terrorist organizations, in an effort to undermine their Sunni neighbors. In recent developments, Saudi Arabia is attempting to destabilize the Iranian-Syrian alliance, by declaring its support for the 'pro-democracy' movement in Syria. If the Saudis win this particular battle, Iran will likely pursue a much more aggressive policy against Saudi Arabia across the region, particularly in Bahrain and Iraq, and as such will be more inclined to increase support for its proxy terrorist connections.

## Threats to Saudi Energy Facilities

In a classified cable between a Saudi leadership representative, and the U.S. Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Counter-terrorism, Frances Townsend, the former admitted that he was less concerned with the possibility of a terrorist attack upon the country's energy's facility, as he was with the potential of a missile attack from Iran. He claimed that the 35,000 security personnel can mitigate the threats posed by terrorist infiltration from the East, by increasing patrols and building perimeters, but that there is no way to counter an Iranian SCUD missile threat to the energy facilities. Similarly, he noted intelligence indications that pointed to the potential for them to target U.S. bases in Qatar and Bahrain.

His concern was that tightening sanctions on Iran will force them to up the ante, triggering an escalation leading to a missile launch. He was advocating therefore, for the U.S. to preemptively strike Iran, and noted that this was a perception shared by King Abdullah. Our analysis of this interaction, points to a potential intention to capitalize on the U.S.'s fear of an interrupted oil supply, in order to further their own aims of eliminating a powerful regional adversary. Although there may be validity to the intelligence that indicates the



threat of Iranian SCUDs to all of the mentioned facilities, there is no doubt that it is in the interests of the Saudis to play up this threat, in order to pressure a U.S. preemptive strike on Iran.

## **IRAN AND SAUDI ARABIA**

### **Threats to Saudi Stabilities**

This same redacted Saudi official as mentioned above, also pointed to a connection to what he described as an “alliance of convenience” between Iran and al-Qaeda. The official and an unnamed Saudi Prince agreed, that Iran would likely use such an alliance to target the Saudi leadership, and in addition Iran would use its “mini-Hezbollah” in the Shi’a prominent Eastern Province to attack the energy facilities. The dynamic of a Takfir Sunni group, such as al-Qaeda, allying itself with a Shi’a power is unsettling, and cause for concern that extends beyond the traditional alliance of interests between Shi’a groups and Iran. The combination of an attack on the energy facilities (by Shi’a groups) and the Saudi leadership (by al-Qaeda), would have a potentially devastating effect on the regime’s ability to maintain control. That being the case, upon analysis of CIA cables that detail threat assessments of al-Qaeda, current U.S. agencies, such as the CIA’s Counterterrorism Center’s Office of Terrorism Analysis, and the FBI’s Counterterrorism center, do not mention anything regarding a possible connection between the group and Iran. Despite this absence in the available U.S. intelligence linking the two, the Saudi claim to such a connection and the dangerous implications that it holds, have to be taken seriously. In addition, a number of different academic and scholarly sources have detailed what they claim to be damning evidence of such a connection.



## al-Qaeda Leadership Presence in Iran

A Foreign Policy article by Seth Jones looks deeply into why Tehran is currently, and has for some time, been accommodating al-Qaeda within its territory. He notes that Iran is in many ways a safer territory from which al-Qaeda can operate, and that the United States' ability to target operatives in Iraq, Pakistan and Yemen, does not apply to the country in which it has very limited operational reach. Accusing Tehran of having housed some of al-Qaeda's most senior leaders, such as Yasin al-Suri, Saif al-Adel, and Abu Muhammad al-Masri, the author claims that although the Iranian government has held most of them under virtual house-arrest, by limiting their movement and freedom, the mere presence of core al-Qaeda leadership means, that contrary to optimistic assessments, the group's demise is not imminent. To be sure, the terrorist group is not a puppet of Iran - as demonstrated by their attacks of Shi'a within Iraq (a move which Iran is inherently against), the partnership is nonetheless troubling as it confirms the fears of an "alliance of convenience" between two groups who share a hatred of the United States.

Much of the evidence marking such a connection is available within the public domain. Jones searched through the Harmony Database and West Point, declassified documents and U.S. Department of the Treasury sources, to find that sanctions have been imposed upon top AQ leadership within Iran specifically. Notably, in the summer of 2011, the Treasury stepped up the pressure, designating six al-Qaeda figures for sanctions, and publicly accusing Iran of having forged a "secret deal" with al-Qaeda, one that in the words of Treasury official, David Cohen, allowed the terror group to "funnel funds and operatives through Iranian territory." He claims to have found evidence that between 2001 and 2002, Iran's Quds force helped to transport several hundred of al-Qaeda linked individuals from Afghanistan. From their new restricted, yet safe, base of operations, these individuals were tasked with providing strategic support to the organization's leaders in Pakistan. Since then, after a number of U.S. State Department demands, that all of the individuals be expelled to



their home countries, the Iranian leadership has begun to fear that the U.S. might use this information as a *casus belli* for an attack against their country, and has subsequently consolidated control of the group (although not going so far as to restrict their operations). One thing that Jones fails to mention however, is that it appears in recent years, that a number of these operatives have been quietly moved out of the country. For example, last fall, Mauritanian news sources claimed, that the AQ leader, Mahfouz Ould Walid, had been repatriated to Mauritania and questioned by local authorities. While not vindicating Tehran of their connection and support to the organization, this is a noteworthy development.

Regardless of shifts in deportations, tightening of control, or strategic differences, Jones argues that Iran is still an important al-Qaeda hub. According to U.S. Treasury Department accounts, Tehran has permitted a key operative, known as Suri (born in 1982 in Syria), to operate discreetly within Iran, since 2005. He has collected money from donors and transferred it to AQ's leadership in Pakistan and other franchise groups. In addition, he has facilitated the travel of extremist recruits from the Gulf to Pakistan and Afghanistan; and according to U.S. State Department records, "arranges the release of al-Qaeda personnel from Iranian prisons." Similar arguments expressing concern have come from the U.S. Director of National Intelligence (DNI), James Clapper, during a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing in February 2012. He states that the Iranians have been paying attention as to how the U.S. goes after al-Qaeda, in both Afghanistan and Iraq, and that they "do not allow them to provoke any operations directly from Iran" at this time. However, the DNI elaborated that "the Iranians have a sort of standoff arrangement with al-Qaeda, allowing them to exist there" and develop their organizational infrastructure.

### **Possible al-Qaeda Retaliation for an Attack on Iran**

It is most likely that Iran is holding AQ leaders within its territory as an act of defense. Jones argues, that so long as Tehran holds several leaders under its control, the group will likely



refrain from attacking Iran. But there is also a potential offensive component for Iran as well – the utilization of proxy terrorist groups to further its foreign policy objectives. al-Qaeda’s willingness and ability to strike the United States, make it an attractive partner in that regard. While it remains unclear exactly to what extent these two actors are working together on an operational level, there is a postulation that in the event of an American or Israeli attack, Iran is in a position that it could choose to step-up its material support for AQ (including but not limited to: money, weapons, and travel documents), and encourage it to launch attacks in retaliation. This viewpoint can be questioned however, as the al-Qaeda core arguably does not have the capacity to launch attacks at the moment, a point driven home further by the fact, that they haven’t successfully done so since the 2005 London bombings. Nonetheless, there is cause for concern in this regard: DNI James Clapper, has expressed apprehension, that Iran may use al-Qaeda as a “surrogate or proxy” against the West in the future. In any such circumstance of an Iran supported AQ attack, the regime would surely attempt to hide its role in any plotting. Jones argues, that based on Iran’s cautious approach over the past decade, Tehran’s mostly likely strategy, in the event of an attack on its nuclear sites, would be to gradually increase its support of AQ. That way it could go slowly, and back away at any time, rather than choosing an all-or-nothing approach from the start. This claim of an assisted retaliatory attack therefore, is one that is of limited probability, but nonetheless the potential for such an eventuality cannot be ignored, as it is a case of low probability, but extremely high risk. Essentially, “this is a warning [from Iran] to the West, that ‘if you consider attacking our facilities then there will be consequences’,” said Anthony Skinner, the director of the political risk consultants, Maplecroft. “This would be a significant development, that would represent a massive upgrade in al-Qaeda’s capacity to strike.”



## British Intelligence and the 2012 Olympics

Other governments have also expressed apprehension about the implications of this connection. According to a report in the Weekly Standard by Thomas Joscelyn, the British internal intelligence service, MI5, is concerned about the possibility of Iran and al-Qaeda teaming up for a joint attack against the 2012 Olympic Games in London. Apparently, there is little empirical evidence to support such claims, and the threat analysis is more the work of speculative extrapolation than of raw intelligence. Nonetheless, such fears are warranted, based on the actors' histories, and should be regarded seriously. The intelligence memo reportedly reads: "Against the background of intensive co-operation over recent months between Iran and al-Qaeda – with a view to conducting a joint attack against Western targets overseas... Iran has significantly stepped up its investment, maintenance and improvement of operational and intelligence ties with the al-Qaeda leadership in Pakistan in recent months." The analysts are notable for looking at trends, increases in connectivity between the two actors, and putting it together with the emergence of a target of opportunity as large as the Olympic Games.

## IRANIAN INFLUENCE IN IRAQ

### Iraqi-Hezbollah

In a separate WikiLeaks classified cable, the U.S. Marine Corps 1st Intelligence Battalion and the CIA, demonstrated their concern over Iranian influence over the Shi'a community in the recently destabilized Iraq. Noticing an upsurge in insurgent activity from the Shi'a community, in particular in a town called Najaf, U.S. forces were able to identify terrorist cells of 'Iraqi-Hezbollah,' that they were part of the Badr Corps, and most of its members



were students from the Shi'a Islamic Institute, al-Hawza, in al-Najaf. Most notably, the Iranian government used Iraqi-Hezbollah, to confront the Iraqi-sponsored Mujahadin E-Khalq (MEK) terrorist group, as well as U.S. and coalition forces. All membership in this group was carefully coordinated with Iranian intelligence, and although the members were extremists, many were attracted by financial incentives, especially those who were refugees in Iran. Although the nature of the relationship between Iraqi-Hezbollah and the Lebanese group, Hezbollah, is not clear, intelligence has pinpointed that there were offices for Iraqi-Hezbollah recruitment in Lebanon, Damascus, Syria, and Tehran, Iran.

It is clear from these cables, that U.S. and coalition forces, operating in Iraq at the time, knew that much of the violence that they were encountering from Shi'a based insurgent groups, was being funded, trained, provoked and instigated by Iran. Furthermore, it became clear over time, that Iran infiltrated thousands of Iraqi-Hezbollah members from the Badr Corps, into positions in Northern Iraq before the beginning of the war, through the areas controlled by Jalal al-Talibani – demonstrating complex strategic planning for disruption of U.S. efforts in the country.

## A Split Within Iraqi's Shi'a

Given all of this, however, it is very interesting to note that there is tension within the Shi'a community, between those who support and are supported by Iranian hegemonic ambitions, and the Iraqi spiritual leaders in Najaf, who have long opposed Khomeini's belief that Shi'a clerics should be in power. As such, the fight for control has been created between the Iraqi Shi'a leaders and the pro-Iranian clerics, who seek to ferment insurgency, and subsequently administer the country.<sup>1</sup> At the time, the intelligence understood that the

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<sup>1</sup> WikiLeaks, US Marine Corps 1<sup>st</sup> Intelligence Battalion. (2003/4). *Who will govern the Iraqi Shi'a: The fight for Najaf.*



future of Iraq will more than likely entail a large level of Shi'a control, and to what extent these leaders will continue to have ties to Iranian-based terrorist groups remains to be seen.

Within this whole complex narrative, lies the element of Iranian control. The Iranians know, that due to the complex history under Saddam's rule over the Shi'a community there, if Najaf re-emerges as the center for Shi'a teaching, and if it is controlled by Iraqi religious leaders opposed to Khomeini's teachings (choosing to separate religion from politics), then Iran's claim, as the center to Shi'ism, will be weakened.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, it is in their interests, to supply as much financial incentive and covert influence over terrorist groups, as they can, in order to exercise the highest amount of influence in the weakened state of Iraq as possible.

## TERRORISM FINANCING

### Within Saudi Arabia

Existing in the background of all of these dilemmas, is the issue of how these terrorist organizations receive funding. Saudi Arabian charities are notoriously a source of income for such organizations, and a point of interest, is to see how Iranian support for terrorism fits into the picture. In the classified cable discussed earlier, the issue of the Joint 'Terrorist Finance Task Force' is discussed between a Saudi leadership representative and the U.S. Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism, Frances Townsend. In the dialogue, Townsend inquires about the progress being made to counter the efforts of Saudi Charities, that end up funding terrorist organizations. The Saudi representative agreed that this is a sensitive issue for the Saudis, and has been moving slowly due to the government's hesitancy to offend the religious sectors of the society. So far they have reported freezing 189 bank accounts, totalling approximately \$20 million in assets, that

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<sup>2</sup> WikiLeaks, US Marine Corps 1<sup>st</sup> Intelligence Battalion. (2003/4). *Who will govern the Iraqi Shi'a: The fight for Najaf.*



would have been directed towards supporting organizations. The Saudis sought to reassure the U.S., that they share interests in going after terrorist financing, but that it needs to be done “intelligently so as not to create economic martyrs for the religious extremists.”

Another interesting note of the above mentioned cable, was that Townsend asked about the status of Counter-terrorism cooperation between the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, to which the Saudi official responded that he was satisfied with UAE, not unsatisfied with Bahrain, but not comfortable with Kuwait’s. The cooperation with Bahrain, in these matters, will prove to have significant implications for the developments within the Gulf with regards to Iran.

## The Hajj

In a later classified cable also pertaining to terrorism financing, the Saudi Interior Ministry Officials (MOI) in Riyadh advised U.S. Special Advisor Richard Holbrooke over the expressed concern of the Hajj as a security loophole. Since pilgrims often travel with large amounts of cash, and the Saudis are unable to refuse them entry into the Kingdom on religious grounds, the MOI has become increasingly concerned with Iranian funds being transferred to Hezbollah via the Saudi Shi’a community.<sup>3</sup> The MOI has attempted to offset this loophole, by imposing a law that travelers have to declare if they are bringing cash over a certain amount, however, the issue of being able to transfer untraceable and large amounts of funds to terrorist proxies of organizations within the Kingdom, is a troublesome issue.

An MOI redacted senior advisor told Holbrooke, that Saudi actions were “based on the fact that Saudi Arabia was at war [with Iran], and had to act.” Authorities have detained over 4,000 individuals relating to financing, and were suspected to be ready to act, if instructions

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<sup>3</sup> WikiLeaks, Riyadh to US Embassy. (2009/5/22). *Saudi Interior Ministry Briefs Special Advisor Holbrooke and Treasury Das Glaser on Terrorism Finance.*



came through to do so. He further noted the concerns relating to the Hajj; many potential terrorist operators come through as pilgrims and slip through security screenings, and large amounts of funds are being transferred to Hezbollah via Saudi Shi'ites. He admitted that to this point, the Saudi's focus has been on funds from Sunni sources, but they need to focus on Shi'a sources as well. He further regrets that the Hajj was "still a vacuum in our security."<sup>4</sup> In this regard, when we look into Holbrooke's question about Saudi concerns over Iran, the MOI senior advisor's response becomes indicative, as to how pervasive Iranian potential to spread funds and influence via Saudi Arabia's Shi'a community is. The advisor claims, that in the Saudi view, Iran is a "serious contributor" to terrorism activities in many places, including Yemen, North Africa, and Latin America.

## CONCLUSION

Viewing all of this information at a glance, it is clear that "Iran is the leading state sponsor of terrorism in the world today," as stated by David S. Cohen, the U.S. Department of the Treasury's head of terrorism and financial intelligence. In the recent rounds of sanctions targeting al-Qaeda leaders, specifically living within Iran, "we are illuminating yet another aspect of Iran's unmatched support for terrorism." Regardless of these recent efforts, the al-Qaeda 'exiles' in Iran, "continue to be very much a blind spot for Western intelligence agencies."<sup>5</sup> That being the case, it is important to remember, that the connection is a subtle one, and is often seen as 'fraught and tenuous,' with Iran conducting a careful balancing act to both protect, and project their interests.

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<sup>4</sup> WikiLeaks, Riyadh to US Embassy. (2009/5/22). *Saudi Interior Ministry Briefs Special Advisor Holbrooke and Treasury Das Glaser on Terrorism Finance.*

<sup>5</sup> Lee, Mathew and Klapper, Bradley. "Iran Accused of al-Qaeda 'Secret Deal' by U.S. Officials." *The Huffington Post Newspaper.* (July 28, 2011). [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/07/28/iran-al-qaeda-deal\\_n\\_912512.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/07/28/iran-al-qaeda-deal_n_912512.html)



Mathew Levitt of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, is careful to point out, that although Iran has certainly provided some much-needed assistance to al-Qaeda over the years, the two have always been extremely wary and distrustful of one another, due to religious and political differences. Given these tensions, and in stark contrast to its strategic support for other Middle East terrorist groups, Iran’s tactical motivations for helping al-Qaeda are not entirely clear. It would appear that Tehran has allowed senior AQ leaders to remain in the country, at least in part, as leverage to prevent the Sunni extremist group from attacking the Shi’ite state. In addition to defensive measures, tolerating the presence of AQ operatives in Iran also serves as a point of leverage against the West. Levitt wisely recommends, that as the Obama administration seeks to counter both Iran’s nuclear ambitions, and their attempt to expand influence into the region, they should not lose sight of Tehran’s longstanding ties to AQ as well.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Levitt, Mathew. “The Iran and al-Qaeda Conundrum.” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*. (Jan. 29, 2009).



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