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The Iran-al-Qaeda Conundrum

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Brief Analysis

Last week, the Treasury Department issued terrorist designations for three senior al-Qaeda operatives who spent time in Iran, including Usama bin Laden's son, Saad. But the action, which targeted individuals unlikely to have assets in the United States or to move money in their own names, appears to be linked more to Iran than to al-Qaeda. During the designation announcement, Treasury undersecretary Stuart Levey noted, "It is important that Iran give a public accounting of how it is meeting its international obligations to constrain al-Qaeda." For the Obama administration, understanding the complicated relationship between Iran and al-Qaeda will be key as Washington begins to forge a new path in dealing with Tehran.

Iran's Ties to al-Qaeda Before September 11

Links between al-Qaeda and Iran are not new and have developed over time. Ties between the two first blossomed during the early 1990s when al-Qaeda was based in Sudan. Hasan al-Turabi, the leader of Sudan's National Islamic Front, encouraged relationships between Shiite and Sunni entities as part of his attempt to establish a unified global effort against the common enemy. As a result, Iran and al-Qaeda reached an informal agreement to cooperate, with Iran providing critical explosives, intelligence, and security training to bin Laden's organization.

Iran continued to provide assistance after al-Qaeda relocated to Afghanistan in 1996. Iranian officials were often willing to help facilitate al-Qaeda members' transit through Iran on their way to Afghanistan. Iranian border guards were instructed not to stamp their passports, presumably to prevent their home governments from suspecting that they had traveled to Afghanistan. Although the 9/11 Commission found no evidence that Iran was "aware of the planning for what later became the September 11 attacks," it concluded that "strong evidence" exists that Iran facilitated al-Qaeda travel -- including some of the September 11 hijackers -- to Afghanistan.

Iran's Ties to al-Qaeda Since September 11

After September 11, as the international community turned in force against al-Qaeda, Iran began to portray itself as an enemy of the terrorist organization, frequently highlighting its own actions against bin Laden's organization. However, this seemingly tough stance served as cover for Tehran's ongoing dealings with the organization; the regime's support for al-Qaeda continued throughout this period, even under then president Muhammad Khatami, long before the bombastic Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad assumed the position.

In 2002, for example, Iran handed over sixteen Saudi members of al-Qaeda to authorities in Saudi Arabia. Both U.S. and Arab officials were skeptical of the move, and according to one Arab intelligence officer, "a number of captured al-Qaeda operatives said the Iranians told them before their departure that they may be called on at some point to assist Iran."

After the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, Iran once again began hyping its aggressive actions. When reports surfaced that al-Qaeda leaders were residing in Iran, for example, Iranian officials regularly claimed that they had the terrorists under arrest. U.S. and Arab officials have frequently taken issue with these statements, believing that Tehran was overstating the measures it was taking against these dangerous operatives.

The latest Treasury designations make clear how skeptical the United States is of Iran's pronouncements. In the designations of two al-Qaeda members -- Mustafa Hamid and Ali Salah Hussain -- Treasury described their ongoing operational activity in Iran. Hamid was the primary interlocutor between al-Qaeda and the Iranian government, and according to Treasury, Hamid, while living in Iran, was "harbored by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), which served as Hamid's point of contact for communications between al-Qaeda and Iran." Hamid's ties to Iran date back to the 1990s, when he reportedly negotiated a secret relationship between Usama bin Laden and Tehran, allowing many al-Qaeda members to safely transit through Iran to Afghanistan. Ali Salah Hussain, on the other hand, was "responsible for smuggling al-Qaeda members and associates via networks in Zahedan, Iran." And Saad bin Laden, according to outgoing director of national intelligence Michael McConnell, has departed Iran and is now probably in Pakistan, reunited with al-Qaeda's core members.

There is also evidence that Iran may still be allowing al-Qaeda operatives to travel through its territory to reach Afghanistan. Libyan Islamic Fighting Group and al-Qaeda operative Adel Muhammad Mahmoud Abdulkhaleq, designated as a terrorist by Treasury in June 2008 for providing financial, material, and logistical support to terrorism, traveled to Iran five times between 2004 and 2007 on behalf of the two terrorist organizations.

The Bahraini government uncovered similar activities during this time period. According to its investigators, several members of an al-Qaeda-linked cell traveled from Bahrain to Afghanistan via Iran. They initially flew to Tehran and met up with several al-Qaeda-affiliated individuals at Tehran airport. Al-Qaeda facilitators passed the cell members along from "person to person" until they arrived in training camps in Afghanistan. In January 2008, five members of the cell were convicted of terrorist activities, including receiving explosives and weapons training, engaging in terrorism overseas, and terrorist financing. One of the individuals acknowledged that he had traveled to Afghanistan to engage in combat against coalition forces. While the Bahraini government does not know what role, if any, the Iranian government played in facilitating these individuals' travel to Afghanistan, this case -- like the others -- raises questions about the Iranian government's possible facilitation activities.

A Balancing Act

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. In a 1995 interview, when questioned about Iran, bin Laden's deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, accused Shiites of bringing about "heresy in Islam." Later, under the leadership of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) initiated a strategy of attacking

Iraqi Shiites in an effort to ignite a civil and sectarian war. Al-Zarqawi's successor actually threatened Iran directly, stating that AQI would attack the Islamic Republic if Tehran did not cease supporting Iraqi Shiites. AQI announced that it would give Iran "two months to stop all forms of support to the rejectionists of Iraq, and stop direct and indirect interference in the affairs" of Iraq.

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 opaque. It seems likely that Tehran has allowed senior al-Qaeda leaders to remain in the country at least in part as leverage to prevent the Sunni extremist group from attacking the Shiite state (indeed, Sunni extremist attacks have been a problem in Iran, such as the repeated attacks by Jundallah in Baluchistan and the Khuzestan bombings last year). Tolerating the presence of al-Qaeda operatives in Iran also serves as a point of leverage against the West.

As the Obama administration develops its Iran strategy, most of its attention will be focused, understandably, on Iran's nuclear activities and its ties to Middle East terrorist groups like Hamas, Hizballah, and the Taliban. While these issues are of critical importance, the new administration should not lose sight of Iran's longstanding ties to al-Qaeda as well. Understanding the full range of the Iranian regime's illicit activity will be essential for the incoming administration to develop a successful and comprehensive strategy to deal with Tehran.

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