

Heart of the Axis

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Articles & Testimony

The National Security Council is scheduled to hold a "senior level meeting" Thursday to formulate administration policy toward Iran. Electronic intercepts indicating senior al Qaeda operatives in Iran were behind the Riyadh bombings suddenly sparked official "concern" regarding the hospitality master terrorists enjoy with the compliments of their Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corp (IRGC) and Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) hosts.

They should be concerned. Experts now believe Iran's nuclear program is much farther along than previously thought. Iranian dissidents recently identified two previously undisclosed uranium-enrichment facilities. This mix of weapons of mass destruction, together with frenetic state sponsorship of terrorism and sheltering of al Qaeda leadership figures, places Iran firmly at the pinnacle of the Axis of Evil.

The problem is that officials should have been concerned long ago. The links between Iran, described by the CIA as the world's "foremost state sponsor of terrorism" several years running, and the network of networks that is al Qaeda are not new.

News that al Qaeda's current military operations chief, Saif al Adel, among the FBI's most-wanted terrorists, and Saad bin Laden, Osama's son and lieutenant, were in Iran surfaced last August, almost ten months ago.

In response to President Bush's Axis of Evil speech, Iran handed over 16 Saudi Arabian al Qaeda members to Saudi authorities last August. But even then, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld insisted that the regime continued to maintain a permissive attitude toward al Qaeda. Arab intelligence sources agreed, saying the transfer of the 16 detainees was a "pretense" aimed at countering American charges that al Qaeda operatives were finding refuge in Iran. Commenting on the transfer, Rumsfeld accused Iran of "permitt[ing] al Qaeda to enter their country" and "permitting al Qaeda to be present in their country today." Indeed, 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."

Almost a year ago, media reports highlighted the safe haven Iran continued to provide for "dozens of other al Qaeda fighters, and possibly more," including Saif al-Adel and Mahfouz Ould Walid (also known as Abu Hafs the Mauritanian), who functioned even then as al Qaeda's military committee plotting further attacks from Iran.

Truth be told, the Iranian link to al Qaeda was not new last summer either.

According to U.S. intelligence reports, bin Laden operatives approached Iranian agents in 1995 and again in 1996, offering to join forces against the United States. At the East Africa embassy-bombing trial, Ali Mohammed admitted to providing security for meetings between al Qaeda and Hezbollah, Iran's primary terrorist proxy organization. In fact, phone records obtained by U.S. officials investigating the embassy bombings show that, in the period leading up to the bombings, ten percent of the calls made from the satellite phone used by Osama bin Laden and his key lieutenants were to Iran. The Riyadh attacks are far from the first al Qaeda plot to lead back to Iran.

Nor is Iran only harboring members of al Qaeda's inner circle. It also hosts key terrorists and terror networks operating under the al Qaeda umbrella, such as Abu Musab al Zarqawi.

Secretary of State Colin Powell highlighted Zarqawi in his speech on Iraq to the United Nations. But Zarqawi and the networks he commands were active not only in Baghdad and northern Iraq, but in Iran as well.

For example, on February 15, 2002, Turkish police arrested two Palestinians and a Jordanian who entered Turkey illegally from Iran on their way to conduct attacks in Israel. The three were members of Beyyiat el-Imam, a group linked to al Qaeda. They had fought for the Taliban, received terrorist training in Afghanistan, and were dispatched on their mission by Zarqawi, then in Iran. German authorities linked Zarqawi -- who subsequently moved to central Iraq, then to Syria, Lebanon, Iraq again, and now back in Iran -- to Iranian-sponsored Hezbollah, as well as to a terrorist cell apprehended in Germany that had been operating under the name Tawhid.

Six months later, Turkish authorities arrested another Beyyiat member who confessed to collecting donations in Turkey for Chechen rebels, sending money to al Qaeda, and serving as a courier delivering European electronic equipment and forged passports to al Qaeda members in Iran.

Zarqawi and members of his Ansar al Islam group escaped aerial bombardments and ground assaults on their enclave in northern Iraq by crossing the border into nearby Iran. Some continued on to Georgia's Pankisi Gorge, a miniature Afghanistan and al Qaeda stronghold, but Zarqawi and others are believed to have remained in Iran.

Even if Iranian President Khatami and the rest of Tehran's elected officials were unaware the revolutionaries under Supreme Leader Khamenei were harboring al Qaeda leading up to last summer, they tolerated these terror leaders' continued safe haven in Iran for almost a year after their presence was publicly reported in the media.

Iranian officials maintain they recently arrested several al Qaeda operatives but claim they have yet to identify them. Regardless, Iran insists it will only hand the terrorists over to "friendly countries" like Saudi Arabia -- not the U.S. With al Qaeda reasserting itself, and leaders like al Adel playing a major part in that revival, partners in the war on terror cannot allow themselves to be placated by small-scale arrests as they were last summer.

Thursday's National Security Council meeting should work off the basic premise that Iran, with its advanced weapons-of-mass-destruction programs, can no longer be allowed to function as the world's "foremost state sponsor of terrorism." ❖

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