

Bin Ladin and the Problem of State-Supported Terrorism

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Brief Analysis

Today's meeting between Taliban representatives and U.S. officials to discuss the extradition of Osama Bin Ladin highlights the centrality of state-sponsorship and official safe-haven extended to the Saudi terrorist and his organization.

In September and early October, the U.S. District Court, Southern District of New York, unsealed two documents in the Osama Bin Ladin case. These documents -- a September 14 complaint and an October 7 indictment -- provide the best information available to date about the organizational infrastructure of al-Qa'eda (The Base), Bin Ladin's terrorist network. In addition to operational details, the documents contained revelations about Bin Ladin's collaboration with the governments of Sudan and Iran, including his efforts to procure weapons of mass destruction. If the allegations contained in these documents are true, Bin Ladin's network is a veritable "terrorist internationale" -- a web of terrorist-supporting states and organizations, dedicated to fighting the United States and striking at U.S. global interests.

Bin Ladin's Activities: East Africa: On October 7, a federal grand jury issued a 238-count indictment against four al-Qa'eda members (Wadih el-Hage, Fazul Abdullah Mohammed, Mohamed Sadeek Odeh, and Mohamed Rashid Daoud al-'Owhali). The indictment connects al-Qa'eda to Egyptian Islamic extremists, naming Egyptian Islamic Jihad leader Ayman Zawahiri, and Gama'a Islamiyya leaders Shaykh Omar Abdel Rahman and Ahmed Refai Taha as un-indicted co-conspirators in the East Africa embassies outrage.

> The four indicted men appear to epitomize the small army of bin Ladin supporters and activists. El-Hage, an American citizen and resident of Texas, was a personal secretary to Bin Ladin; Fazul, from Comoros, was intimately involved in planning and executing the Nairobi bombing; al-'Owhali, a passenger in the Kenya truck-bomb (who had expected to die in the attack) had met Bin Ladin in 1996 and had requested an "operation"; Odeh, a Palestinian from Jordan, was a member of al-Qa'eda whose role in the planning of the Nairobi and Dar es-Salaam attacks is unclear. With the exception of Fazul, who remains a fugitive, these men are currently in U.S. custody. The indictment ties Bin Ladin to al-Qa'eda and describes how Bin Ladin established businesses in the Sudan and Kenya to fund his operatives. It also mentions some of the financial and distribution logistical enterprises set up to ensure al-Qa'eda agents of a steady stream of arms and money. Not coincidentally, the indictment also mentions how Bin Ladin

attempted to recruit American citizens -- like el-Hage -- who could travel internationally with relative ease and communicate orders and messages to the global network of al-Qa'eda terrorists.

Killing Americans: In addition to the allegations related to the August 1998 embassy blasts, the court documents describe other al-Qa'eda efforts since 1992 to kill Americans. Bin Ladin and ranking members of al-Qa'eda reached a decision in or around 1992 to launch attacks against U.S. forces stationed on the Arabian peninsula, including both Saudi Arabia and Yemen, as well as U.S. forces in the Horn of Africa, including Somalia. From 1992 through 1996, Bin Ladin and his associates in al-Qa'eda issued several fatwas (religious edicts) calling for the killing of Americans. Likewise, the October 7 indictment contains a count entitled "conspiracy to kill U.S. nationals," which provides specific details about al-Qa'eda's role in the killing of Americans in Somalia in 1993. The indictment mentions that al-Qa'eda footsoldiers Odeh and Fazul (who were later implicated in the U.S. embassy bombings) trained and provided material assistance to the Somali personnel responsible for killing eighteen American soldiers on October 3-4, 1993.

> The September 14 FBI complaint also described efforts by al-Qa'eda, since 1993, to procure enriched uranium "for the purpose of developing nuclear weapons," to be used against American citizens and installations abroad.

Bin Ladin Ties to Iran and Sudan: Additional information about the al-Qa'eda organizational structure comes from an eight-page September 14 federal complaint requesting a warrant for the extradition from Germany of top Bin Ladin lieutenant Mamdouh Mahmud Salim. A member of al-Qa'eda's Majlis al-Shura (consultative council), Salim was, according to the complaint, qualified to issue fatwas. The complaint discusses at some length the formal and informal ties of al-Qa'eda with Iran and Sudan. This relationship was described as a "tripartite arrangement . . . to work together against the United States, Israel, and the West."

> According to the complaint, from 1992 to 1996, during the period when Bin Ladin lived in Sudan, Khartoum and Tehran were closely collaborating with al-Qa'eda. In fact, according to court documents, ranking members of (the Sunni Muslim) al-Qa'eda had agreed to "put aside [their] differences with Shi'ite Muslim terrorist organizations, including the Government of Iran and its affiliated terrorist group Hizballah, to cooperate against the perceived common enemy, the United States and its allies." According to Salim, "Sunni and Shi'a could resolve their differences once the common enemy was vanquished." Likewise, Sudan and the ruling National Islamic Front (NIF) were considered by al-Qa'eda to be "an Islamically correct group," and a suitable country "where jihad could take place."

The complaint made the following allegations concerning specific Iranian and Sudanese state-sponsorship for Bin Ladin:

- Al-Qa'eda officials had several meetings with an Iranian religious official in Khartoum and sent emissaries to Iran;
- Al-Qa'eda operatives traveled to Tehran to arrange for training by Iran of al-Qa'eda members in the use of explosives;
- Members of al-Qa'eda received explosives training from Iranian-backed Hizballah in Lebanon;
- Bin Ladin operatives helped the NIF to obtain communications equipment for Sudanese intelligence;
- Al-Qa'eda and the NIF worked together to obtain weapons and explosives;
- Al-Qa'eda and the NIF collaborated in an effort to develop chemical weapons;

- Bin Ladin operatives were involved in arranging weapons production in Sudan in a joint effort between al-Qa'eda, Khartoum, and Tehran; and
- Al-Qa'eda provided and maintained guest houses and training camps in Sudan.

American authorities apparently learned of the Iran-Sudan-Bin Ladin "tripartite agreement" in 1996.

U.S. Policy Toward Sudan and Iran: Roughly two years have passed since an FBI informant tipped off U.S. authorities to the Iranian and Sudanese state sponsorship of Bin Ladin. Since then, the U.S. government has taken a number of steps against the terrorist-supporting regime in Khartoum. In November 1997, the administration placed an economic embargo on Sudan. In December 1997, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright met with Sudanese opposition leaders in Uganda.

In contrast, in the years since U.S. authorities were alerted to the Bin Ladin-Iran connection, the United States has begun to reassess its policy toward Tehran. The administration has waived Iran-Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA) sanctions and has made overtures alluding to prospects for repairing bilateral relations. Clear evidence linking Iran to Bin Ladin appears to be less important than the potential import in Iran of the election of Muhammad Khatami. The recently unsealed court documents do not comment on Iranian support for Bin Ladin after 1996, when Bin Ladin moved to Afghanistan. Khatami was elected in May 1997, nearly six months after Bin Ladin left Sudan.

Conclusion: In his speech following the retaliatory strike against Bin Ladin's Afghani camp and the al-Shifa plant in Sudan on August 20, President Clinton said Bin Ladin's network was "not sponsored by any state." Despite administration protestations to the contrary, state sponsorship of terrorism remains a much larger issue than has been represented. As court documents indicate, Bin Ladin is not a lone wolf, but rather a central cog in a large international terrorist network that has included states like Iran and Sudan. Addressing the "Bin Ladin problem" will require refocusing attention on the larger and more difficult issue of state-sponsorship.

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