

Thinking the Unthinkable: ISIS, Iran, Al Qaeda & Syria. Part One (a supplement to Axis of Opportunity Part 3, published by Defence Viewpoints 25th June 2014)

In a response to al Qaeda Emir Ayman al Zawahiri's latest attempt at reconciliation with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Sham, ISIS spokesman Abu Muhammad al Adnani made a startling admission: Al Qaeda has ordered its fighters and branches to refrain from attacking the Iranian state in order to preserve the group's network in the country. (Long War Journal, May 2014)

ISIS was established on April 8, 2013, when its subsidiary organisation, Jabhat al Nusra, merged with the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), itself a successor to al-Qaeda in Iraq.

The organisation's leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, recently announced the establishment of the Islamic Caliphate. The group is now to be known simply as the "Islamic State". A document declared the new caliphate stretches from Iraq's Diyala province to Syria's Aleppo, and that "the words 'Iraq' and 'the Levant' have been removed from the name of the Islamic State in official papers and documents."

This may well be an Iranian ploy designed to play on the West's worst fears and accept the previously unthinkable: Bashar al Assad's regime is the only bulwark against the new Islamic threat.

ISIS's clash with its former ally, al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra, or the al-Nusra Front, sparked accusations that ISIS was nothing but a means for the Syrian Military Intelligence Directorate, along with the Iranians, to plant agents of the Assad regime and of Iran within the Syrian opposition, spreading confusion in its ranks and diverting it from the fight against Assad and into internecine struggle. [Jerusalem Centre for Public Affairs, June 2014.]

During the occupation of Iraq, Syria sent al-Qaeda operatives to attack US forces. Syrian intelligence, in partnership with Iran, recruited al Qaeda fighters to infiltrate the ranks of the Salafists now fighting in Syria. These fighters broke into Iraqi prisons to liberate their comrades, creating the basis for expanding ISIS.

Iranian Collusion:

Why would Iran support a Sunni jihadist organisation such as ISIS? In Syria, ISIS has forced the West to choose between the regime of Bashar al-Assad or a terrorist outfit. Iran assumed that the West would back Assad, as have the Russians and the Chinese. Iran is exploiting Western fears of terrorism to make common cause against ISIS.

But ample evidence exists to prove Iran's collusion with al Qaeda. The 9/11 Commission Report established that Iran "facilitated the transit of al-Qaeda members into and out of Afghanistan before 9/11, including future hijackers". Iran, according to the report, wished to conceal evidence of its past cooperation with al-Qaeda, even as these relationships continued.

ISIS emerged suddenly in Syria, as the collapse of Assad's regime seemed imminent. The emergence of ISIS saved the Syrian regime by threatening the world with an alternative terrorist regime to replace Assad's. The same scenario repeated in Iraq. Nouri al-Maliki, believed by many Iraqis to be an Iranian puppet, was about to lose his position as Prime Minister. Sunni, Shi'ite and Kurds leaders unanimously refused to renew his term. The sudden dramatic military successes of ISIS changed that. The ISIS connection with the Syrian leadership, and hence with Iran, raises serious questions. It was recently noted that President Assad released ISIS operatives from his prisons, and for the most part, spared ISIS attack by the Syrian army. Two leading American analysts wrote in the Washington Post that "the non-jihadist Syrian opposition insists that ISIS is a creation of Iran."

David Butter, a leading expert on Syria and an associate fellow at Chatham House, told Channel 4 News recently that the links between ISIS and Syrian intelligence date back to 2003: "The leaders of ISIS have already worked hand in glove with Syrian intelligence, whether supplying them with weapons or supplying money flowing from their racketeering activities around Mosul...Assad has a long history of supporting terrorist groups and activity in the region. There have been pictures of ISIS flags on buildings that have escaped shelling and reports of supposed collusion on oil and gas deals".

When ISIS was formed in April last year, Syrian activists claimed it served the interests of Assad and his main ally, Tehran. A report in the Economist magazine on 21 June 2014 explained how ISIS was less interested in toppling the Assad's regime than fighting other

groups. ISIS has attacked civilian and rival opposition groups, such as the Islamic Front and the Free Syrian Army (FSA), who have successfully driven it out of much of its former turf in the north. ISIS has never targeted Assad's regime, and not a single barrel bomb has been dropped by that regime on ISIS.

Al-Qaeda's relations with Iran are generally accepted as long established. While Muslim-majority countries from Afghanistan to Morocco have suffered al-Qaeda violence over the past decade, Iran has remained largely unscathed. The former al-Qaeda leader in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who was killed in June 2006 in a U.S. airstrike, was treated by Iran's Revolutionary Guards for wounds he sustained in fights in Iraq. In 2011, a Washington D.C., district court ruled that Iran had provided al-Qaeda with material aid and support to carry out the Nairobi and Dar Es Salaam bombings in 1998.

After the fall of the Taliban, hundreds of al-Qaeda elements fled Afghanistan and sought refuge in Iran. Iran sought to extend its influence to Islamist organisations of the takfiri ideology which had pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda. It attracted and trained those elements, providing them with funds and equipment. Among these were Yassin al-Suri, accused of financing terrorism; Mohsen al-Fadhli, al-Qaeda's leader in Iran; and his Saudi deputy, Adel Radi Saqr al-Harbi.

A CNN report by Peter Bergen in March 2013 focused on top al-Qaeda members living in Iran, including Sulaiman Abu Ghaith, Osama bin Laden's son-in-law. According to U.S. intelligence, another of bin Laden's inner circle who moved to Iran was the formidable military commander Saif al-Adel, a former Egyptian Special Forces officer who had fought against the Soviets in Afghanistan. From his Iranian refuge, Saif al-Adel authorised al-Qaeda's branch in Saudi Arabia to launch a series of terrorist attacks in the Kingdom beginning in Riyadh in May 2003, a campaign that killed scores of Saudis and expatriates. Saad bin Laden, one of bin Laden's older sons who has held a leadership role in the group, has also been identified in Iranian sanctuary. U.S. intelligence also discovered al-Qaeda operatives living in the northern Iranian town of Chalus, on the Caspian Sea.

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