

Thinking the Unthinkable: ISIS, Iran, Al Qaeda & Syria. by Nehad Ismail (See also Axis of Opportunity Part 3 published by Defence Viewpoints on 25th June 2014)

Part Two

That leading members of al Qaeda were based in Iran from 2002 onward was known to the U.S. government at the time. In a letter that bin Laden wrote just five days before he died, he described a document from his son Saad, who had lived in Iran for years. The document exposes the truth of the Iranian regime's relations with al-Qaeda.

A letter to bin Laden from his chief of staff, dated 11 June 2009, contains a detailed account of a group of "mid-level" al Qaeda members recently released by Iran, including three Egyptians, a Yemeni, an Iraqi and a Libyan. In Feb 2014, the Lebanese Daily Star reported that the Obama administration accused Tehran of assisting al-Qaeda operatives based in Iran to transfer Sunni fighters to Syria.

The accusation, detailed in sanctions imposed by the U.S. Treasury Department, suggests Iranian officials are backing opposing sides in the Syrian civil war. The Treasury has information about al Qaeda men in Iran who assisted extremists and operatives transiting Iran on their way into and out of Pakistan and Afghanistan.

An individual named Sadikov, aka Jafar al-Uzbeki and Jafar Muidinov, serves as a "key extremist smuggler based in Mashhad, Iran, near the country's border with Afghanistan, and has provided visas and passports to numerous foreign fighters, including Al-Qaeda recruits, to facilitate their travel," the Treasury said, adding that "he also provided funding to Abdel-Aziz Khalil, aka Yasin al-Suri, who resumed leadership of Al-Qaeda's Iran-based network after being temporarily detained there in late 2011.

A US Treasury Department statement, 16 February 2012, designated the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) a supporter of international terrorist organisations.

According to al-Shorfa.com a web site sponsored by USCENTCOM: "The Iranian regime's continued interference in Syrian affairs is rooted in preserving its economic and political interests in the region...Iran's current goal is to abort the Syrian revolution and portray the ruling Syrian regime as waging a war on terrorism...Since the outbreak of the Islamic Revolution, Iran has worked to establish external bases through some of the armed groups that follow its policy directly, such as Hezbollah's branches in Lebanon, Iraq and Syria...The first organisation born of the womb of the Iranian intelligence [services] was the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI), which later became ISIL/ISIS under the leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi."

These contradictions raise questions about how far Iran is willing to go in using al-Qaeda and its affiliates to implement its policies. Iran is Assad's strongest ally, providing military, financial, diplomatic, and propaganda support. The U.S. has repeatedly accused Iran of using its Revolutionary Guards to train and deploy Shi'ite fighters to bolster Assad's forces.

Tehran's support of groups such as ISIL aims to "project a dark image of the Syrian opposition as nothing but al-Qaeda-affiliated extremist takfiri groups," said Sami Gheit, an economist and researcher with Al-Sharq Centre for Regional and Strategic Studies.

Many of ISIL's practices, including field executions, assassinations and beheadings, aim to tarnish the image of the Syrian revolution, said Mohammed Abdullah, a Syrian journalist residing in Cairo who is documenting the Syrian war, with a focus on the Iranian file. Abdullah points out that ISIS has never engaged the Syrian army or Hezbollah."In al-Raqa, for example, ISIL spared strategic Syrian regular army positions [the airport and the headquarters of the 17th Division and 93rd Brigade], despite the fact it controls the bulk of the territory in the province."

Abdullah also notes the discovery of official documents and passports issued by the Iranian authorities at ISIL's headquarters in rural western Aleppo earlier this year, including Iranian passports, documents belonging to fighters from Chechnya and Kazakhstan, and many Iranian SIM cards, all pointing to a connection between ISIL leaders and Iranian intelligence, of which rank and file of ISIS are likely ignorant.

Alex Rowell, in Now Media Me, gives the following examples of the collaboration between ISIS and the Syrian regime:

- ISIS bases have never been targeted by the Syrian regime

A government adviser told the New York Times' Anne Barnard this was indeed a deliberate policy, designed to "tar" the broader opposition and "frame [the] choice" as either Assad or the

extremists.

-As one ISIS defector told The Daily Telegraph, "We were confident that the regime would not bomb us. We always slept soundly in our bases.

-According to the same Daily Telegraph report, both ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra have raised millions of dollars through sales of crude oil from fields under their control to the regime.

- Nawaf al-Fares, the defected former Syrian ambassador to Iraq, has claimed the regime ordered a series of suicide bombings in Syria in 2012, carried out by the very jihadists he himself had sent to Iraq years previously.

The siege of Deir ez-Zor has been maintained by the army of Bashar al-Assad in the south and by ISIS to the north and east. Among the forces trapped in the middle are the Free Syrian Army (FSA), raising the question of whether ISIS was colluding with the Syrian government and its Iranian allies to defeat the more mainstream elements of the Syrian opposition. At the time of writing there are reports circulating of collusion between ISIS and Assad's army in Aleppo.

As the conflict in Syria and Iraq continues, more evidence of the collaboration between Iran, al Qaeda, ISIS and the Syrian regime will emerge.

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