

Iran's Ties to Al-Qaeda

THE ISSUE

In a speech at the National Press Club on January 12, 2021, outgoing Secretary of State Mike Pompeo blasted Iran for the covert support and sanctuary it has extended to al-Qaeda. Secretary Pompeo charged that Iran had become the “new Afghanistan,” the country where al-Qaeda was based in 2001 when it launched the 9/11 attacks. According to Secretary Pompeo, Iran allowed al-Qaeda to open a new operational headquarters in Tehran, giving its leaders greater freedom of movement, as well as logistical support from the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Ministry of Intelligence and Security to carry out attacks against the United States and its allies. Some critics claim that these allegations are baseless, but that is far from true.

- The Islamic Republic of Iran is designated by the State Department as a state-sponsor of terrorism that trains, funds, arms, and supports a wide spectrum of Shia and Sunni terrorist militias in Gaza, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen. Although Iran's radical Shia regime gave priority to supporting Shia groups, such as Hezbollah, it also had a long history of supporting Sunni Arab terrorist groups, such as Hamas and Palestine Islamic Jihad, as well as al-Qaeda.
- As described on page 61 of *The 9/11 Commission Report*:

In late 1991 or 1992, discussions in Sudan between al-Qaeda and Iranian operatives led to an informal agreement to cooperate in providing support—even if only training—for actions carried out primarily against Israel and the United States. Not long afterward, senior al-Qaeda operatives and trainers traveled to Iran to receive training in explosives. In the fall

of 1993, another such delegation went to the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon for further training in explosives as well as in intelligence and security. Bin Laden reportedly showed particular interest in learning how to use truck bombs such as the one that had killed 241 U.S. Marines in Lebanon in 1983.

- The 9/11 Commission recommended that further investigation was needed to examine Iran's ties to al-Qaeda. It also concluded that al-Qaeda may have assisted the Iran-backed Saudi Hezbollah terrorists who carried out the June 1996 bombing that killed 19 U.S. Air Force personnel at the Khobar Towers residential complex in Saudi Arabia.
- Many senior al-Qaeda leaders and members of Osama bin Laden's family found sanctuary in Iran when they fled Afghanistan in 2003 after the fall of their Taliban allies. Iran initially denied the presence of al-Qaeda terrorists, then claimed that they were imprisoned or under house arrest and incapable of launching attacks. However, as *The Washington Post* reported on October 14, 2003, U.S. intelligence officials concluded that a May 2003 terrorist bombing in Saudi Arabia was planned and directed by al-Qaeda leaders located in Iran.
- Intelligence gathered during the U.S. raid on al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden's Pakistan compound in 2011 reinforced the links between Iran and al-Qaeda. The Navy SEAL team that killed bin Laden found a copy of a letter he sent to one of his subordinates in which he wrote: “Iran is our main artery for funds, personnel, and communication... There is no need to fight with Iran, unless you are forced to.”

- On November 13, 2020, *The New York Times* reported that U.S. intelligence officials revealed that al-Qaeda's number two leader, Abu Mohammad al-Masri, wanted by the U.S. government for plotting the 1998 truck bombings of two U.S. embassies in Africa and other al-Qaeda attacks, was killed by Israeli agents in the heart of Iran's capital at Washington's behest in August 2020.

HOW DO IRAN'S TIES TO AL-QAEDA HARM U.S. NATIONAL SECURITY?

Although Shia Iran and Sunni al-Qaeda have conflicting ideologies and sectarian agendas, they have many enemies in common, including the United States, Israel, and many Arab states. By covertly protecting and enabling al-Qaeda, Tehran has helped to preserve its enemies' enemy and further destabilized the Middle East. The limited but lethal coordination between the two allows both Iran and al-Qaeda to expand their threats to the U.S. and its allies.