



Insight

Iran and al Qaeda: An Unholy Alliance

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Late last month, the Obama Administration slapped sanctions on six al Qaeda members for funneling money and people through Iran to Pakistan and Afghanistan. The sanctions themselves, which bar Americans from engaging in financial transactions with those persons, may not have much practical effect. Much more significant, however, is the allegation that these individuals have been operating under an “agreement” between al Qaeda and the Iranian government.

While charges of cooperation between al Qaeda and Iran are nothing new, this was the most explicit U.S. government admission of such a relationship, and could open up a new chapter in the way the U.S. deals with Iran.

The relationship between Iran and al Qaeda has never been easy to understand. Conventional wisdom held that, due to sectarian differences, Sunni al Qaeda would never cooperate with Shia Iran, and vice versa. During the last Presidential campaign, liberals mocked John McCain as foolish for suggesting such a link. Many liberals viewed allegations of Iranian support for al Qaeda as nothing more than an effort by conservatives to build a case for war with Iran, similar to what some liberals contend was a false pretext for war in Iraq.

The reality has always been more complex. We have long known that prior to 9/11 there was some relationship between Iran and al Qaeda. For instance, while the 9/11 Commission found no evidence that Iran knew about the attacks in advance, it did find that Iran had facilitated the secret travel to Afghanistan of numerous al Qaeda members, including some of the hijackers. Reports also suggest cooperation in training militants.

In the aftermath of 9/11 and the invasion of Afghanistan, Iran gave the appearance of siding with the West. Tehran arrested scores of al Qaeda members, including bin Laden family members, and in 2002 even handed some over to Saudi authorities. Al Qaeda leaders publicly complained about the treatment of their members by Iranian authorities, and the two sides appeared to fight a proxy war in Iraq through their Sunni and Shia patrons.

Yet Iran’s commitment to fighting to al Qaeda has been unconvincing at best. While claiming to hold al Qaeda operatives under “house arrest,” Iranian authorities didn’t stop them from organizing attacks, which calls into

question whether they were in fact prisoners or guests. In any event, several high-level operatives were released by Iranian authorities in recent years and returned to their leadership roles without skipping a beat. And for at least the last six years, according to the Treasury Department, Iran has been “a critical transit point for funding to support al Qaeda’s activities in Afghanistan and Pakistan.”

Religious differences may divide them, but politics makes strange bedfellows. Iran and al Qaeda are united by their common antipathy towards America, Israel, and moderate Middle Eastern leaders. Both also share a desire to change the status quo in the Middle East – Iran to increase its own regional influence and al Qaeda, more ambitiously, to establish a new Islamic caliphate. This may be just a marriage of convenience, but it ought to be taken very, very seriously.

So, what does all this mean?

1. Iran’s apologists can’t explain this one way. For years, conservatives have been portrayed as overly simplistic on Iran. The regime’s support for Hezbollah and Hamas, it was argued, must be viewed in the context of Middle Eastern politics. Iran’s nuclear program, it was alleged, isn’t that far along and at any rate doesn’t merit a forceful response. Tehran’s interests in Iraq and Afghanistan are legitimate, it was said, even if their tactics are not. Iran’s political leadership, it was stressed, is divided between reformers and hard-liners, and therefore requires kid gloves.

Reflecting this kind of thinking, Iran was the poster child for the Obama Administration’s engagement policy. Now not only has the Administration abandoned that track, but they’ve gone farther than the Bush Administration ever did in painting a picture of Iranian collusion with America’s number one enemy. The Administration should use the latest revelations to put to rest once and for all the myth that the Iranian regime really isn’t so bad.

2. Focusing on al Qaeda means focusing on Iran. As the Obama Administration orchestrates America’s withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan, they insist that their top priority, rather than “nation building,” is countering al Qaeda. Well, al Qaeda has lost its safe haven in Afghanistan. Its operations in Pakistan, Yemen and elsewhere are under pressure. If the organization has an actual agreement allowing it to operate in Iran, Tehran may well be one of al Qaeda’s most strategic allies, or at least one of the safest places for it to do business.

If we’re really serious about crippling al Qaeda, we need to hone in on its Iranian enablers, and to bring our international allies on board. As an added benefit, stopping the flow of money from Iran into Afghanistan will

also improve the chances for stability in Afghanistan after we leave.

3. Ron Paul is dead wrong about Iran's pursuit of a nuclear weapon. During the latest GOP debate, Ron Paul seemed to downplay the significance of Iran's acquiring nuclear weapons, likening it to other nuclear states like Israel, India, or China. But Iran is not just some other country. Iran would be the first state sponsor of terror to get The Bomb.

Iran's cooperation with al Qaeda makes the danger of its nuclear weapons program even more acute. Iran could use al Qaeda to cover up its role in a nuclear attack against one of their shared enemies. Even if Iran did not give al Qaeda a nuclear weapon outright, the combination of Iran's nuclear capacity with al Qaeda's eagerness to inflict mass casualties would give the two outsized influence in an already unstable region.

The revelation of an agreement between Iran and al Qaeda should add urgency to our efforts to stop Tehran's nuclear weapons pursuit. Sanctions are important, as are the multilateral negotiations. The Stuxnet virus appears to have been a good cyber-warfare tactic against the program, and the mysterious killings of Iranian scientists also may have set it back. Still, the international community seems reluctant to come up with stronger means of persuading Iran to give up its nuclear program. The Administration should use intelligence on the Iran-al Qaeda agreement to build support for a more muscular international response to Iran's nuclear ambitions.

Placing economic sanctions on six individuals who probably don't have much, if any, contact with Americans should represent just the beginning of our response to intelligence about an agreement between the Iranian government and al Qaeda. Now it's up to the Administration to use this information to build a stronger consensus for countering Iran's dangerous ambitions.