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Al-Qa'ida's Contested Relationship with Iran

The View from Abbottabad

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This study is dedicated—with much love, gratitude and sadness—to the memory of Barry Hindess, who died on May 19, 2018. No words are adequate to describe the great and critical political thinker that Barry was; he would disagree with all of them!

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Introduction

Al-Qa'ida has defied the international community by carrying out a global campaign of terrorism while rejecting the legitimacy of the world order of nation-states. Despite Al-Qa'ida's rejection of the state system, various states, including Iran but also Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, have been accused of enabling Al-Qa'ida to advance their respective interests.

The story of Al-Qa'ida's links, if any, to Iran, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan has largely been told either through the accusatory lens of those who believe that these states have conspired to enable Al-Qa'ida or through the defensive lens of each of these states.

In recent months, Iran has come under particular scrutiny as a result of debates as to the merit of the Iran deal, or Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). When President Trump announced on May 8, 2018, that “the Iran deal must either be renegotiated or terminated,” he remarked that the “Iranian regime is the leading state sponsor of terror,” adding that Iran “supports terrorist proxies and militias such as ... al Qaeda.”¹

This study canvasses nearly 300 declassified documents recovered in May 2011 by U.S. Special Forces during the raid on the compound of Al-Qa'ida leader Usama bin Ladin (UBL) in Abbottabad, Pakistan. By focusing on Al-Qa'ida's *voice*—in the form of its own communications—this report avoids much of the challenge of politicization that occurs when discussion of Iran's relationship to Al-Qa'ida is based on commentary by Iran's rivals.

This study canvasses nearly 300 declassified documents recovered during the raid on the compound of Al-Qa'ida leader Usama bin Ladin.

This study consists of five sections. In addition to this introductory section, Section II provides key findings, Section III provides a description of the declassified documents and their value for research, Section IV is a detailed analysis of several declassified documents that include elaborate descriptions of the nature of Al-Qa'ida's relationship with Iran, and Section V consists of concluding remarks.

Key Findings

A systematic examination of nearly 300 declassified documents in Arabic offers the following findings:

- **Al-Qa'ida views Iran as a hostile entity**, a hostility that is evident throughout the documents examined for this study.
- The examined documents provide **no evidence of cooperation between Al-Qa'ida and Iran** on planning or carrying out terrorist attacks.
- **The presence of jihadis in Iran was out of necessity, not a result of strategic planning.** Jihadis, including Al-Qa'ida members, and their families as well as members of bin Ladin's family fled Afghanistan to Iran following the 9/11 attacks and the resultant fall of the Taliban regime.
- **Al-Qa'ida perceived Iran as having adopted a relatively relaxed policy initially**, allowing jihadis and their families to reside temporarily before processing many of them out in coordination with their home countries.
- However, when jihadis began to set up communications with entities outside Iran, thereby violating the terms of the security measures set by the regime, **Al-Qa'ida experienced a campaign of arrests and deportations.**
- Following the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, **Al-Qa'ida perceived Iran's policy as one of detention/imprisonment**, refusing to allow jihadis to leave Iran. Some jihadis managed to evade arrest and adopted stringent measures to maintain a clandestine presence in Iran.
- One Al-Qa'ida document suggests that **in 2004, Iranian authorities reached out and wanted to establish contact with UBL.** This document suggests that Iranian officials wanted UBL to exert influence and pressure over Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi's indiscriminate attacks against the Shia and their holy sites in Iraq.
- However, the declassified documents reveal that **Iran was not the only state to have reached out to Al-Qa'ida.** One document written in 2011 suggests that British intelligence similarly reached out to Al-Qa'ida, through Libyan jihadis residing in the United Kingdom, offering to

withdraw from Afghanistan if Al-Qa'ida undertook a serious commitment not to mount any attacks against Britain or its interests.

- **Al-Qa'ida viewed and used Iran as a passageway to smuggle people and money clandestinely.** Al-Qa'ida members entrusted with these secretive smuggling missions were trained to kill themselves if they feared being captured by Iranian authorities.
- **Bin Ladin distrusted Iran.** Letters he composed to his wife Umm Hamza, soon after her release from detention by Iranian authorities in 2010, highlight the extent of his distrust and make it evident that he had no close connections to Iranian officials.
- The documents reveal that **Al-Qa'ida was pragmatic in its efforts to secure refuge for or the release of its personnel and their families, and to facilitate the financing of its enterprise.** They show that Al-Qa'ida would have been prepared to cooperate with Iran on a transactional basis to secure the release of jihadis and their families detained by the Iranian regime. However, Al-Qa'ida's commitment to its own ideological principles, in particular its rejection of the legitimacy of the regimes of Muslim-majority states, including Iran, outweighed its willingness to collaborate with them at a more strategic level.

Methodology

Most of the evidence undergirding claims of state support for Al-Qa'ida's terrorism is not available in open sources. As a result, accusations of state support are marred by politicization, with states like Iran and Saudi Arabia each accusing the other of harboring and/or enabling Al-Qa'ida.

Captured battlefield documents are a different genre of literature. Internal communications among Al-Qa'ida members and their families provide a unique window into the group's decision-making and the immediate (and long-term) considerations that were on the minds of its leaders when these documents were drafted.

Examined and analyzed systematically, such documents offer what one may term Al-Qa'ida's *voice*, unfiltered by the group's desire to project unity and strength publicly or by the strategic interests of rival powers summarizing Al-Qa'ida's objectives and tactics.

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Given Al-Qa'ida's enmity toward Iran (and other states), evident on the pages of many of its internal documents, Al-Qa'ida's *voice* cannot serve as a reliable source on the inner workings of Iran and other states' policies. However, its *voice* can point to the type of activities resulting from Al-Qa'ida's alleged relationship with Iran. When such communiqués concern operational activities, they are an invaluable source of information.

The corpus of captured internal documents is extensive: The Harmony Program, consisting of captured battlefield documents provided by the U.S. Department of Defense, is home to a very large collection. The Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) at West Point has served as the principal outlet for making Harmony documents available to the public; it is also through the CTC that the first 17 declassified documents, recovered in the raid on the compound of UBL in Abbottabad, Pakistan, were released in 2012.² Subsequently, the Office of the

Director of National Intelligence (DNI) released three batches of declassified materials in 2015 (103 items), 2016 (113 items) and 2017 (49 items), recovered during the same raid, dubbing them “Bin Laden’s Bookshelf.”³ In November 2017, the Central Intelligence Agency released “nearly 470,000 additional files”⁴ recovered during the same raid.

This report canvassed all the declassified documents released by the CTC in May 2012 and those released by the Office of the DNI in 2015-17. In addition, this study analyzes two key documents released by the CIA in November 2017: a 19-page document that was likely written by a jihadi operative and a 220-page document erroneously described as UBL’s handwritten journal.

While Al-Qa’ida’s internal communications help avoid some of the challenges arising from reliance on politicized statements by rival states, they pose their own challenges for analysis. The CTC rightly warns that “there is no way to know just how representative documents captured by U.S. forces are of the larger body of information produced by al - Qa’ida or other insurgents.”⁵

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Other considerations are also warranted. For instance, the extent to which the documents represent the inner worldview and/or working of the group is not always evident: Some documents consist of rough drafts with several duplicates, their author(s) unknown; it is not known which draft was adopted or whether the author’s vision was embraced by the group or dismissed; and it is not always evident if a letter reached its intended destination. In short, not all captured battlefield documents are equal as far as their value to understanding Al-Qa’ida’s views.

The Documents

Of the nearly 300 documents canvassed for this report, four sets of documents are analyzed in detail below. The first is a 19-page document, likely written by a trusted Al-Qa'ida operative, reporting how Iran dealt with jihadis and their families who fled to Iran starting in late 2001 after the fall of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. The second is a key two-page handwritten document, analyzed alongside other relevant declassified documents, that suggests Iranian officials sought to make contact with UBL in 2004. The third is a set of several documents that provide insight into how Al-Qa'ida used Iranian territory as a passageway to smuggle money and personnel clandestinely. The fourth set of documents includes a 220-page document consisting, in part, of transcribed discussions that took place during UBL's family gatherings in Abbottabad in the wake of the Arab Spring and UBL's letters to his wife Umm Hamza.

The 19-Page Document: An Internal Assessment of the Al-Qa'ida-Iran Relationship

Among the more than 470,000 files obtained from Abbottabad and released by the CIA, one 19-page document stands out for providing an internal Al-Qa'ida description of the relationship between the group and jihadists in Iran and the Iranian government. In an article published by the *Long War Journal* the same day the CIA released the files, Thomas Joscelyn and Bill Roggio refer to it as a “never-before-seen 19-page document” that “contains a senior jihadist’s assessment of the group’s relationship with Iran.”⁶

→ AUTHOR'S NOTE

The CIA did not provide translation of the documents it released on November 1, 2017. Although I benefited from the translation of the documents made available by the Office of the DNI (through its website and through the CTC website), this study is based on the Arabic documents. Unless otherwise stated, all translations of Arabic documents in this piece are my own. When referring to documents released by the Office of the DNI, I included the English title used on the website and added the link to the original Arabic; documents made available through the CTC website are referred to according their Harmony Program number.

The anonymously authored document is dated January 2007. The author of the 19-page document, henceforth referred to as “the author,” undertook to write his report in response to concerns raised by senior jihadis upon hearing of the physical presence of fellow jihadis in Iran. Thus, addressed to “our Sheikhs/leaders and those who support us,” the 19-page report is intended to clarify to them “how our jihadi brothers dealt with the Iranian-Rafidi regime, and how they perceive the current and future of this relationship.”

→ AUTHOR'S NOTE

The term “Rafidi/Rafida,” common in jihadi literature, literally means “rejectionists”; it is a derogatory term used to refer to the Shia as those who rejected the legitimate authority of the first three caliphs who succeeded the prophet Muhammad. Sunnis accept the legitimacy of the first four caliphs. The Shia reject the legitimate authority of the first three and consider the fourth caliph, ‘Ali bin Abi Talib (d. 661), the prophet’s cousin and son-in-law, to have been the rightful successor to the prophet. Jihadis who are driven by sectarianism consider that all Shia should be made, forcefully if necessary, to renege on their “false” beliefs, whereas jihadis who are driven by strategic considerations believe that the Shia masses should be forgiven on account of their ignorance and that only the elites (scholars, clerics and leaders) should be the target of their enmity. The author of the 19-page document examined here does not engage in theological arguments, and his approach suggests that he adopts the latter view.

Joscelyn and Roggio rightly highlight the value of this document, but they do not give it the analysis that it deserves. Most likely, the author is/was a trusted operative. Nevertheless, the document provides valuable information, so much so that the author explicitly instructs his readers to treat his report “with utmost secrecy/confidentiality (*ghayat al-siriyya*).”

Judging by the content of the document, the author entered Iran in early 2002, coinciding with the large and sudden campaign of arrests mounted by Iranian authorities (to be discussed below); it is most likely that the author evaded arrest. At the time of writing his report, he was either on the run in Iran or had left Iran altogether. Further, the author was either a member of Al-Qa’ida or a trusted jihadi in the group’s orbit. It is likely that he had met UBL before (but not after) the 9/11 attacks of 2001,⁷ and that he was in close contact with many members of

Al-Qa'ida, including some in UBL's immediate circle. He also appears to have many close connections with members of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG). The fact that the document reached UBL suggests that the author's views were valued among Al-Qa'ida's leadership.

→ **AUTHOR'S NOTE**

If I am to speculate about the author, I would contend that he is not as senior as Abu Hafs al-Mauritani (his ego does not seem bothered by the fact that the Iranians dealt with al-Mauritani as if he was the leader of all the jihadis who entered Iran). But the fact that he would take part in meetings with Sayf al-'Adl (head of Al-Qa'ida's military committee) and Abu Mus'ab al-Suri (a renown jihadi military strategist) may suggest that he is not just an ordinary fighter, but a trusted operative. His concluding lines that he will write separately about the possibility of mounting attacks in Iran further implies that he has the credentials of an operative. Toward the end of the document, when describing the situation of those detained in Iran, the author notes that "we (those who are on the outside) follow up the news of the [detained jihadi] brothers through contacting their wives." It is not evident if "on the outside" means outside Iran or "not detained." If I am to speculate further as to his whereabouts at the time, I would say that he was on the run in Iran and not always in a position to have access to information about the jihadi world. For example, he doesn't mention further contact with Sayf al-'Adl, who would later be detained in Iran. If he did, he would at least be aware that members of UBL's family were also detained in Iran; the impact of this is absent from his assessment. Further, despite his many contacts with the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, and while he was aware that the leader of the group, Abu 'Abdallah al-Sadiq, and Abu al-Mundhir (al-Sa'idi), one of its founding members, were imprisoned in Libya, he was unaware that they were engaging in the Libyan government's deradicalization initiative that began in 2005-06.

The document's very existence provides insight into the nature of the relationship between Al-Qa'ida and Iran. That the author finds it necessary to explain why some jihadis are present in Iran suggests that not all jihadi leaders were consulted on the decision to allow jihadis to head to Iran following the fall of the Taliban in 2001. It appears that just as the United States found the presence of some Al-Qa'ida members in Iran to be objectionable, some jihadi leaders were

similarly disturbed, though for different reasons, and asked fellow jihadis to explain themselves.

→ **AUTHOR'S NOTE**

Various governments have long accused jihadi groups of receiving support from Iran, and jihadis have consistently rejected the accusation. See interview with Ayman al-Zawahiri, “Mawqifuna min Iran,” dated April 1995, with Nashrat al-Ansar, in which he accuses Iran of reneging on the principles of the Islamic Revolution of 1979 that claimed to support all Muslims and of adopting a sectarian line instead that favors Shia.

What follows is a detailed analysis of the author’s description of how jihadis assessed Iran’s foreign policy, the nature of the relationship between jihadi groups and Iran, its different phases, and the different conditions/considerations that governed each phase.

A hostile and distrustful relationship

The author of the 19-page document provides an assessment of Iran’s relationship with jihadis framed by politics and national interest. He believes that any cooperation that Iran might be prepared to lend to jihadis would be to serve its foreign policy against the United States, which he deems to be characterized by an enmity that is “real and genuine.” The author rejects common jihadi claims that portray the enmity between Iran and the United States as “theatre” to mislead Sunnis. Instead, he explains the relationship using a political framework, somewhat inspired by a realist perspective, stressing that both states are driven by their national interests and are prepared to do whatever it takes to undermine each other. He writes, “Iran is prepared to support and assist—with money, weapons and whatever is needed, any person who wants to attack America without implicating the Iranians directly and explicitly.” The Iranian regime, he argues, “exemplifies political pragmatism,” by which he means the “Machiavellian” way premised on the principle of “the goal justifies the means.”

However, this view should not be read as implying a cooperative relationship that Iran would want to establish with jihadis. The United States, the author believes, is similarly prepared to partner with armed non-state actors to serve its interest; “they [i.e., the Americans] did so with a group well known to us comprised of

Baluch brothers based in the provinces of Sistan and Baluchistan.” He is likely referring to Jundallah, a jihadi group that carried out many violent attacks inside Iran. Some media reports also claimed that the group was supported by the United States.⁸ On November 3, 2010, the United States added Jundallah to the list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs), describing the group as having “engaged in numerous attacks resulting in the death and maiming of scores of Iranian civilians and government officials.”⁹ If the United States had supported Jundallah prior to 2010, designating it as a terrorist organization would make it challenging to continue to support it, given the extraordinary measures such a designation entails on entities associated with FTOs.¹⁰

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As noted earlier, Al-Qa’ida and other jihadis are by no means objective observers of the foreign policies of Iran and the United States. However, the author’s genuine assertion that jihadis should not or do not trust Iran (just as they do not trust the United States) is suggestive of the jihadis’ overall hostility toward Iran and lack of a developed collaborative relationship. This expression of distrust is consistent with jihadi leaders’ public statements as well as all declassified internal communiqués on the topic of Iran that I have examined.

The author’s views are shaped by the longer acrimonious relationship that jihadis had with Iran. He relates that before 9/11, members of the Egyptian jihadi organization the Islamic Group (*al-Jama’at al-Islamiyya*) fled Egypt and headed to Iran, taking advantage of the tensions between the two countries, but “it was a failed and bitter experience.” The Iranian regime, according to the author, exercised undue pressure on group members, causing them to seek refuge with the Taliban as soon as the opportunity presented itself. As to Al-Qa’ida, the author of the 19-page document knows of “no leader or any known personality who entered Iran prior to the fall of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan [i.e., the Taliban]” in 2001. In short, Iran is no friend of jihadis. In the author’s mind, “both the United States and Iran are our enemies.”

A jihadi explanation of the arrival in Iran

According to the document, the decision to relocate to Iran following the fall of the Taliban was not a decision that jihadis took lightly, precisely because of Al-Qa'ida's (and jihadis more generally) hostile relationship with the country. The author is at pains to explain this decision as one of last resort. He asserts that the arrival of jihadis in Iran did not happen as a result of "Machiavellian" collusion because, unlike the Iranians, "our [jihadi] brothers reject [concealing our principles]." Instead, jihadis headed to Iran out of the "necessity" dictated by their circumstances at the time, and the relationship they sought with Iran was limited to allowing "the brothers either to pass through Iran or to reside there [temporarily]."

Recounting these conditions, the author of the document relates that a "rapid collapse" and "chaos" ensued following the Taliban's overthrow. Amid the confusion, "a large number of brothers, many of them with their families, headed to Pakistan, especially to Karachi." Then the Pakistani authorities "began a campaign of arrests capturing our brothers."

During this early period, the author relates that while jihadis were still in Khost, in eastern Afghanistan, debating whether to keep fighting or withdraw to Waziristan in neighboring Pakistan, some raised the option of making contact either with Hizbullah or with Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq.¹¹ The author was informed that Hizbullah had sent an emissary through some Afghan leaders offering support to jihadis following the U.S. invasion. According to the author, both options were rejected by jihadis.

The author was among those who withdrew to Waziristan, then moved to Karachi where he stayed for three months, after which "orders reached us to head to Iran." The author added that "many of the brothers did so begrudgingly."

The first wave of jihadis to enter Iran was led by Abu Hafs al-Mauritani, who had the authorization of the "Crisis Leadership" (*qiyadat al-azma*) to "reach an understanding (*tafahum*) with the Iranians permitting our brothers to pass through Iran and/or reside there." This authorization did not come from UBL and his top commander, Ayman al-Zawahiri. They were not part of this leadership or committee, according to the author, for "no contact was established with them following Tora Bora," presumably referring to the Battle of Tora Bora near the Pakistani border in December 2001.

Al-Mauritani had been the head of Al-Qa'ida's legal committee, and he claims that he had disapproved of the group's decision to carry out the 9/11 attacks.¹² Al-Mauritani also claims that he was not a member of Al-Qa'ida at the time he headed to Iran.¹³ The author of the 19-page document learned that the Iranian

authorities dealt with al-Mauritani as if he was the leader of all the jihadis who entered Iran.

Crossing the border into Iran was done through both legal and illegal routes. The author relates that, initially, some managed “to obtain an official visa from the Iranian Consulate in Karachi, while others [crossed into Iran] without a visa. After that [initial phase], most of those who went to Iran did so illegally, i.e., through smuggling and border crossing, which is not difficult to do.” The reason that some opted to obtain a visa, the author explains, was to facilitate their travel from Iran onward. As to those who stayed in Iran, he notes, they “resided in the city of Zahedan.” According to the author, by the time he was writing in 2007, the jihadi experience in Iran had progressed through three different phases.

Phase One: Zahedan (late 2001 through early 2002)

The author describes the first phase of jihadi presence in Iran as one marked by Iranian authorities providing safe passage for jihadis and their families; that would see them reside temporarily in the city of Zahedan only to be safely processed out. In return, the author continues, Iranian authorities demanded that jihadis comply with some “security conditions” that they set. Among these, he indicates that jihadis were forbidden to communicate by phone “because America monitors [all forms] of communications.” The authorities also demanded that jihadis “refrain from any activities, movements or form assemblies that would attract attention.”

If Iranian authorities did indeed set these conditions, as the author claims, then one can surmise that Iran did not wish for jihadis who entered Iran to be operational. That the authorities forbade jihadis to engage in any form of communications further suggests that they had no plans to allow jihadis to reconnect with those outside Iran or to enable a network to form in Zahedan that would serve as a base for international activities.

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During this initial period, the author claims that Abu Hafz, with the support of Iranian authorities, was able “to process [the safe passage] of many of the brothers from the Arabian Peninsula (Saudi Arabia and other [Gulf states]), managing to send them off to their home countries or to other countries like Syria.” During this phase (and the subsequent one), he explains, “most Saudis and Kuwaitis and those from the Gulf generally were [allowed to leave Iran] either with the assistance of the Saudi embassy in Tehran or without it.”

According to the author then, Iran was not the only state that supported jihadis and their families who fled Afghanistan either to return to their home countries or to find refuge elsewhere. Other states, including Saudi Arabia, were involved in liaising with Iran to support their nationals to return home.

It seems that Iranian authorities underestimated the jihadis’ resourcefulness. The author writes that “our brothers did not comply with the agreements and Abu Hafz was not capable of controlling them.” He observes that “they were of different nationalities and types,” which suggests that the jihadis who entered Iran belonged to different groups and may have entered without coordination with their own leadership. The author expresses low esteem for many of them, describing them as “anarchic” (*fawdawijyun*). He laments that they violated the terms set by Iranian authorities; they used mobile phones, purchased cars, formed groupings and “in a short period they set up guest-houses.” On a number of occasions, he adds, they went outside Zahedan, where they set up special telecommunications antennas and established “direct contact with the brothers in Chechnya. It stands to reason that the Americans listened in on these [calls].” In short, he admits that the jihadis’ activities “attracted a lot of attention, including forming connections with the Sunnis (*ahl al-Sunna*) in the city.” It is possible that some of *ahl al-Sunna* the author is referring to may have had connections with Jundallah, the group noted earlier that pursued attacks on Iran. If so, it may explain why Iranian authorities decided to change their policy, arresting and detaining jihadis before sending them off to other countries.

As to why Iran would have allowed the jihadis to enter in the first place, the author suggests that it may have done so out of “taqiyya and conceit ... God knows best.” In this context, the author is using “taqiyya” (dissimulation) in a pejorative sense, implying that the Iranian regime was prepared to fake its religious beliefs to deceive jihadis into believing that Iran was on their side. But he remarks that “as far as ordinary/low ranking individuals in the [Iranian] intelligence, the Basij and others, they appeared to be genuine in their affection for the brothers; they saw them as heroes who struck a blow at America.”

As noted above, Al-Qa’ida’s internal communications cannot be taken as objective descriptions of Iranian policy. Sources beyond Al-Qa’ida’s internal communications suggest an additional explanation for Iran’s policy toward jihadis fleeing Afghanistan that lies between “taqiyya” and “God knows best”—the only answers offered by the author of the 19-page document. In the

immediate aftermath of 9/11, State Department officials Ryan Crocker and, later, James Dobbins met in Geneva with Iranian diplomats led by Mohammad Javad Zarif, then deputy minister of foreign affairs. Interviews conducted by Adrian Levy and Cathy Scott-Clark with Crocker and Dobbins reveal that the reformist government of Iranian President Mohammad Khatami shared “maps of Taliban and Al Qaeda military positions,”¹⁴ hoping to assist the United States so as “to be rid of the Taliban and Al Qaeda altogether.”¹⁵ According to Levy and Scott-Clark, Iran’s shared border with Afghanistan and “a history of vicious anti-Shia pogroms and massacres undertaken by Sunni zealots from there,” in addition to the “instability kicked up by [Taliban leader] Mullah Omar’s regime and its kinship with Osama bin Laden,”¹⁶ “put Iran in the unusual position of seeing—for the first time in many years—its foreign policy goals coalesce with those of the United States.”¹⁷

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Beyond sharing the maps with the United States, Iran further supported efforts to bring together various Afghan factions to assemble a U.S.-sponsored interim authority in the capital, Kabul, paving the way for elections.¹⁸ In December 2001, and at a meeting in Bonn, Germany, Zarif indicated to Dobbins that soon “Iran will reveal that it holds other pieces of this puzzle.”¹⁹ If Khatami “was repositioning his country, and glancing toward the West,” as Levy and Scott-Clark remark, Iran may have intended to use the jihadis crossing its border as a source of valuable intelligence to be gifted to the United States according to terms suitable to Iran’s interests. Following this logic, if jihadis could find safe passage through Iran, it would be likely that others, perhaps more senior jihadis, would follow the same path.

If an attempt at rapprochement with the United States was driving Iran’s policy toward jihadis, Iran soon discovered that it was a futile attempt. Within weeks of the Bonn meeting between U.S. and Iranian diplomats, President George W. Bush declared in his State of the Union address that Iran (along with Iraq and North Korea) constituted an “axis of evil.”²⁰ Without referring to this fact explicitly, the author of the 19-page document says that early 2002 marked a new phase in Iran’s dealings with jihadis entering the country.

Phase Two: Arrests and the Aftermath (early 2002 until March 2003)

According to the document, the honeymoon period between Iranian authorities and jihadis who had entered Iran ended with the close of the Zahedan phase. Following the jihadis' violation of the terms set by the authorities, "everything changed," the author wrote. The onset of this second phase coincided with Iran being positioned as a member of the "axis of evil" by the U.S. administration, though the timing is absent from the author's assessment. This phase lasted from early 2002 until March 2003, around the start of the U.S.-led Iraq War.

The author claims that Iranian authorities launched a campaign to arrest many members of Al-Qa'ida and other groups, telling them that the "Americans had taped many of your communications, they brought it to us, protested that we are giving refuge to terrorists." It is "when the news of the campaign of arrests was still fresh" that the author of the document entered Iran, arriving in Zahedan. The crackdown caused jihadis to flee the grip of Iranian authorities, "gradually spreading across different Iranian cities," including Tehran (where the author himself and others headed), Isfahan, Mashhad, and Bandar Abbas.

How did the jihadis settle in these different cities? In the author's words:

Everyone began to rent houses through trusted *ahl al-Sunna* brothers. Many of them, may God reward them, rushed to help their jihadi brothers, urged by the righteous scholars and Sheikhs who are loyal to and supporters of the Taliban and Al-Qa'ida. So each group [of jihadis] was assisted by a few Kurdish or Sunni Baluchi brothers who worked with them to rent houses for families and bachelors alike. In many instances, the brothers forged documents and used fake IDs to rent houses. This is a simple matter in Iran.

According to the author, Iran sought to find jihadis, arrest them and deport them all "without exception" during this second phase. The author learned from individuals close to Abu Hafis that those arrested were treated "very well." Upon arrest, they were interrogated respectfully and files were created for each. They were then placed in "relatively respectful prisons, in fact, they even housed the first waves of brothers in hotels, some kind of house arrest, until the [Iranians] managed to send them off [to other countries]." The authorities offered them several destinations, including their home country, Pakistan, Iraq, Malaysia and Turkey.

The author relates that several waves of jihadis chose to go to Iraq, like Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, while others went to Malaysia. He claims that it was relatively easy to go to Malaysia, but the high cost of living meant that many went there

only to transit to other destinations. Pakistan, according to the author, seems to have been the most dangerous destination for jihadis; many members of Al-Qa'ida who chose to go there met their death. It seems that Iranian authorities did not coordinate the jihadis' journey with Pakistani officials; they "would place the jihadi on the border (inside Pakistani territory) and would say to him: 'Go...!'" So harsh was the journey, the author relates, that some jihadis attempted to sneak back into Iran, only to be arrested by Iranian authorities later. Those who chose to go to Turkey, he also notes, were also smuggled into the country, having to walk on their own from the border.

Iran sought to find jihadis, arrest them and deport them all "without exception" during this second phase.

The jihadis from Gulf countries appear to have fared better than most, since "most of them were able to leave," according to the author. They either did so on their own by contacting their embassies in Tehran, or the Iranian authorities arrested them, then sent them off to their home countries. It is noteworthy that the author follows up with a clarification regarding Saudi nationals:

With respect to the Saudi brothers specifically, the [Iranians] proposed to a few of them (very few)—among those who had recently become jihadis and whom they judged to be ideologically malleable—that they would be prepared to support them and train them in Hizbullah training camps in Lebanon if they wished; that they would support them with money and other [kinds of assistance] if they wanted to hit American targets only in Saudi Arabia and the rest of the Gulf ... it did not reach me that they proposed to anyone to attack the local governments, like the Saudi regime for example, or others. I am also not aware that any of the brothers accepted any of these proposals. These kinds of propositions were only made to ordinary/low-ranking newly enlisted brothers whom the Iranians believed they would accept. As far as I know, they did not make such proposals to known jihadi veterans.

The clarification about Saudi nationals needs to be understood with the author's jihadi readership in mind. The phase he is describing precedes the 2003 campaign of attacks in Saudi Arabia mounted by Saudi militants, the first

regional jihadi group to adopt the Al-Qa'ida brandname QAP (Al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula).²¹ Most likely, this is not about who is *responsible* for the attacks, but rather who takes the *credit*. The author assumes that his senior readership is aware that Iran cannot take credit for the attacks mounted by the Saudi-based QAP, and his clarification is to reinforce this assumption.

Phase Three: The Iraq War (March 2003 through January 2007)

According to the author, the Iranian authorities changed their policies with respect to jihadis yet again. This third phase “began around the time of the American invasion of Iraq and the fall of Saddam’s regime. The last large wave of brothers they captured consisted of two large groups in Tehran and a third in Mashhad ... consisting of a large number of brothers with their families, some of them consist of a few leaders from Al Qa’ida and other jihadi groups.” This was the phase when the author was writing his report, which as noted earlier is dated January 2007. As of March 2003, when Iranian authorities arrested jihadis, they did not permit them to leave Iran; instead, they imprisoned them. The author of the document knows of only four men who were released from prison during this phase: three young Libyans who entered Iran legally, two of whom had European passports, and an Egyptian who was released “for humanitarian reasons, they (i.e., Iranian authorities) said, because his wife was seriously ill, nearing her death.”

The author relates that the authorities put jihadis in residential buildings guarded with security. Women “whose husbands were in prison” were placed in two special houses without security guards, although Iranian security personnel “would stop by to check on their needs, bringing female [security personnel], some of whom spoke Arabic, to deal with them.” It seems that family visits were allowed. It was on one of these visits that a “few brothers managed to escape,” taking advantage of the weak security measures resulting from the demanding logistical needs of those visits. He is likely referring to the fact that such visits necessitated the removal of male security personnel to conform to the norms of sex segregation that some conservative Muslims follow.

As to those who were not captured by Iranian authorities, the author indicates that they adopted stringent measures to evade the security apparatus. He indicates that they spread across different parts of the country, and they refrained from meeting or sharing one another’s addresses, “except on rare occasions out of necessity.” They also seem to have avoided the use of mobile phones, minimized their internet use and limited their interactions with the Sunnis of Iran. Apparently, many arrests of jihadis resulted either because Iranian Sunnis openly shared information about them that eventually reached the authorities, or because the authorities were tracking Iranian Sunnis for months, collecting information that led to arresting their jihadi acquaintances.

What caused the Iranian authorities to shift their policy from deporting jihadis to imprisoning them? According to the author:

We've come to ascertain, without any doubt, that with the American invasion of Iraq—the fall of Saddam, the beginning of jihad and resistance there, the salient and rapid rise of al-Zarqawi, the emergence of the name of Al-Qa'ida, and the rapid unfolding of events, Iranian authorities decided to keep our brothers as a bargaining chip.

What then is the jihadi leadership's view of Iran?

The author reiterates a line common in the Abbottabad documents, including UBL's own letters, which concerns the need to:

Remain (operationally) quiet in Iran, not causing any incidents, given that it serves as a passageway for our brothers into Afghanistan, an arena of support for movement and logistics, notwithstanding that this is all being conducted in a clandestine fashion, and that its value has recently diminished.²²

He did not rule out the possibility of jihadis changing their quiet stance just as Iran changed its policy from deporting jihadis to imprisoning them. But it seems that at that time, the jihadis were not planning on carrying out attacks in Iran; instead, they wanted to pursue “diplomatic means towards releasing our brothers detained there.” The author goes on to speculate that “the Iranians may release them if America began to bomb Iran, [and if they were to do so] it would be out of spite, wishfully assuming that everyone would be fighting on the same side against America.” If that is indeed what the Iranian authorities were hoping to achieve by imprisoning the jihadis, then the author thinks that the jihadis would see this differently. At the outset of his report, he firmly states that while the United States is the “current enemy” (*aduww najiz*) of jihadis, the Iranians are “the postponed enemy” (*mu'ajjal*).

If Iran is the “postponed enemy” of the jihadis, the author is nevertheless resigned to the fact that, at least for the time when he was writing, the presence of jihadis in Iran was undermining Al-Qa'ida's operational abilities:

The captive Al-Qa'ida brothers in Iran are undoubtedly a burden, limiting and preventing Al-Qa'ida's [operational] abilities. Notice, for example, Sheikh Usama's silence about Iran and the Rafida. In my view, this is in part out of consideration for the captive Al-Qa'ida brothers in Iran.

In light of the author's distrust of Iran, these comments indicate that Al-Qa'ida would likely entertain cooperation with Iran on a transactional basis to secure the release of its members and their families from detention in Iran.

The Two-Page Letter: Iran Reaches Out to Al-Qa'ida

A two-page handwritten letter,²³ most likely from July 2004, lends further credibility to the assessment provided by the author of the 19-page document. The letter strongly suggests that Iran reached out to establish contact with Al-Qa'ida, and with UBL in particular, in the hope that he could exert influence over Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi to stop attacks against the Shia and their holy sites in Iraq. It also suggests that to achieve this, Iran wanted to use detained jihadis, including members of UBL's family, as a bargaining chip in this potential cooperation. Other Al-Qa'ida documents suggest that after the "third phase" that was marked by arresting without releasing jihadis (as described by the author of the 19-page document), Iran did not start to release Al-Qa'ida detainees until 2009. Iran was probably exchanging them for an Iranian diplomat that Al-Qa'ida kidnapped in Peshawar, Pakistan.²⁴

The Office of the DNI made the two-page letter publicly available as part of "Bin Laden's Bookshelf." It is doubtful that the intelligence community that analyzed the documents exploited the information in this letter to its fullest. To start with, the letter was released as two separate documents: One page (the second) was declassified and released in May 2015, and the other (opening page) in March 2016.²⁵ Further, the same key words, "al-'umda" and "al-marda," used on both pages of the same Arabic letter, are rendered as "mayor" and "patients" respectively in the document declassified in 2015, and as "chief" and "sick people" in the document declassified in 2016. This suggests that the same Arabic two-page letter was treated as two separate documents.

The letter strongly suggests that Iran reached out to establish contact with Al-Qa'ida, and with UBL in particular.

Given the volume of captured materials, such translation inconsistencies are understandable. In this case, most likely, two individuals worked separately on each of the pages of the same letter, failing to make the connection between the

two pages. Had they done so, it would have become clear that the two pages form a single letter and that al-‘umda/chief was a code word for UBL while al-marda/patients was code for UBL’s family detained in Iran.

The letter is addressed to a certain “Tawfiq” and authored by “Hafiz.” It is safe to assume that both Tawfiq and Hafiz are members of Al-Qa’ida. Since Hafiz is seeking guidance from Tawfiq about his next steps, it is likely that Tawfiq is more senior and possibly in contact with UBL at the time the letter was composed. It is dated “5/6”; judging by its content and the reference to attacks on Shia religious sites in Iraq by “al-Azraq,” the 5/6 is likely the Hijri (Islamic lunar calendar) for July 2004. The letter starts “today, Friday,” and Friday, July 23, 2004, would fall on the fifth day of the sixth month of the Hijri calendar. That date followed attacks in Baghdad and Karbala, Iraq, in March of 2004. At that time, the group al-Tawhid wa-al-Jihad, headed by Abu Mus‘ab al-Zarqawi/al-Azraq, was suspected of being behind these attacks but had not yet claimed responsibility.²⁶

According to the letter, Iranian authorities reached out to Al-Qa’ida through a “wasit” (intermediary). More specifically they sought to connect with UBL, which suggests that the intermediary had the blessing of a senior government official. The letter implies that Hafiz had already been in contact with this wasit and had requested that the intermediary provide him with reliable information about UBL’s family. It is likely that Hafiz had also asked that at least one member of UBL’s family be released to provide proof as to the safety of the rest. The wasit indicated that “the issue of sending a person is difficult.” The letter makes it clear that while Hafiz’s priority is the safety (and release) of UBL’s family, the wasit is explicit that Iran’s priority is protecting Iraq’s Shia shrines from al-Zarqawi’s indiscriminate attacks. In Hafiz’s own words, using the code words “al-‘umda” and “al-marda” to refer to UBL and members of his family detained in Iran respectively, the wasit told him that:

The Iranians are interested in connecting with someone from the side of al-‘umda/chief [i.e., UBL] and their interest is not limited to the issue of al-marda/the sick people [i.e., UBL’s family members]. Rather, in the first place, they are interested in the situation in Iraq, for they believe that the brothers there, specifically al-Azraq [i.e., al-Zarqawi] and his group are behind the attacks on the holy Shia sites. That is why the Iranians are keen to meet with a representative from the side of al-‘umda/UBL to discuss this issue, seek clarification about it and [look into] the possibility of cooperating (*ta’awun*).

Based on the message communicated to Hafiz by the wasit, Iranian authorities wanted specific assurances from UBL himself. In Hafiz’s words:

According to the intermediary, the Iranians would be prepared to give some kind of support and assistance if an understanding is reached on some issues (*tamma taswiyat ba'd al-niqat*) [that are of importance to them]. They need at the very least a letter signed by al-'umda/UBL in which he gives assurance that the Shia holy sites are not the target of our [jihadi] brothers, and that they are not among the targets that are to be hit. [They wanted UBL to make it clear] that what is happening in Iraq is the result of some erratic behavior [on the part of al-Zarqawi] and that al-'umda/UBL and his people are not pleased with these attacks and disapprove of targeting such places.

Hafiz informed the intermediary that a letter from UBL was not possible but that he might be able to arrange for a letter from one of his representatives. Even so, Hafiz doesn't seem to have much confidence in the exchange and is concerned about the lack of clarity. He told the intermediary:

Until now, we are still not confident or have any knowledge of the situation of al-marda/UBL's family, and it is therefore difficult to work (i.e., agree to the terms set by the Iranians) under these conditions.

He also "insisted" that Al-Qa'ida would not agree to anything unless Iran released "one of the patients/al-marda so that we can assess the situation." Hafiz informed Tawfiq that he would follow up with the wasit in three days and as a first step he would ask him:

To speak on the phone with one of the patients (i.e., a member of UBL's family), like Muhammad, the son of the chief (i.e., UBL) and with one of the Sheikhs [detained] there so that we could ascertain the seriousness of the intermediaries and that of those whom they represent; and also to be able to understand the level of importance that the Iranians assign to this issue.

Despite Hafiz's suspicion as to Iran's willingness to provide reliable information about UBL's family, he still recommends that "it would be appropriate to have a discussion with them to resolve the issue of al-marda/UBL's family and the possibility of getting some specialized assistance from them but without entering into any long-term agreements or make promises that we could not keep." In his mind, Iran finds itself "in a complicated position, and fears the escalation of events. That is why the Iranians wish to establish a relationship [with Al-Qa'ida] and activate it just in case something [unanticipated] happens that is not in the interest of their allies [in Iraq]." Hafiz's stance reveals that Al-Qa'ida is prepared

to enter into transactional arrangements with hostile powers to secure the safety of its personnel if such arrangements do not require commitment to “any long-term agreements.”

One cannot conclusively ascertain from the letter that the wasit was an emissary representing the views of Iranian officials. However, the mere fact that the wasit had the audacity to seek assurances from none other than UBL suggests that he was an emissary for senior Iranian officials who could determine the fate of UBL’s family.

This two-page letter appears to corroborate the view of the author of the 19-page document when he stated that “Iranian authorities decided to keep our brothers as a bargaining chip.” It is worth reiterating that Iran’s sharing of intelligence about the Taliban and Al-Qa’ida with U.S. officials (according to Crocker and Dobbins) did not stop the United States from describing Iran as a member of the “axis of evil.” Thus, by 2004, following the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Iran must have decided to use detained jihadis and their families to serve its own agenda in Iraq.

It is unlikely that cooperation ensued as a result of the wasit’s outreach to Hafiz. Other Al-Qa’ida documents intimate that it is only in 2009 that Iran began to release Al-Qa’ida prisoners (other than the two initial phases between 2001-2003 described by the author of the 19-page document). In a letter authored by ‘Atiyya/ ‘Atiyyatullah al-Liby in June of that year,²⁷ he expresses his delight that “the Iranians released a group of brothers in several batches last month.”²⁸ ‘Atiyya boasts that “our efforts, which included escalating a political and media campaign, the threats we made, the kidnapping of their friend the commercial counselor in the Iranian Consulate in Peshawar, and other reasons that scared them based on what they saw [we are capable of], to be among the reasons that led them to expedite [the release of these prisoners].”²⁹ His letter suggests that the Iranian authorities did not establish direct contact with Al-Qa’ida and that they informed Al-Qa’ida of their intent to release jihadi prisoners through an intermediary. In ‘Atiyya’s words, “the criminals did not send us any letter, nor did they send us a message through any of the brothers [they released]! Such behavior is of course not unusual for them; indeed, it is typical of their mindset and method. They do not wish to appear to be negotiating with us or responding to our pressures, as if to suggest that their actions are purely one-sided and based on their own initiative.”³⁰

This is not to say that Iran’s outreach to Al-Qa’ida in 2004, as suggested in the two-page document, did not yield any results. It is possible that Al-Qa’ida and UBL may have considered taking measures to address Iran’s concerns about the indiscriminate attacks carried out by al-Zarqawi against the Shia in Iraq. Letters authored by UBL show that he cared about the security of his jihadis and the well-being of their families,³¹ and they also reveal his profound affection for members of his own family. Thus it must have pained him not to know anything about the condition of his family members detained in Iran.

It is possible that this is why he accepted the pledge of allegiance of al-Zarqawi in December 2004,³² the only group that UBL accepted into the Al-Qa'ida fold. All other regional groups accepted into the Al-Qa'ida umbrella were admitted by Ayman al-Zawahiri, possibly without getting UBL's approval. Writings by Al-Qa'ida members point to UBL being exclusive about membership in Al-Qa'ida, and given that primary sources point to his disapproval of al-Zarqawi's rigid sectarianism, he may have hoped that this would moderate his attacks in Iraq.³³ In the same public statement accepting al-Zarqawi's pledge, UBL called on all jihadis to limit their attacks in Iraq, directing them against U.S. personnel (military, political and business entities) and all the Iraqis collaborating with them, but to spare civilians whenever possible.³⁴ This was likely UBL's way of calling on al-Zarqawi publicly to cease his indiscriminate attacks against Shia civilians in Iraq.

→ **AUTHOR'S NOTE**

I previously argued that UBL had hoped that his public statement before the 2004 U.S. presidential election would persuade the American public to vote the Bush administration out of office, which would have allowed him to claim victory “for both removing Bush from office and troop withdrawal from Iraq.” Had this happened, he would not have accepted al-Zarqawi into the fold of Al-Qa'ida. See Nelly Lahoud, *The Jihadis' Path to Self-Destruction* (London/New York: Columbia University Press) 2010, p. 206. In light of this two-page letter, I think UBL's concern over the safety of his family is a more compelling argument.

While the letter strongly suggests that Iran reached out to Al-Qa'ida, other declassified documents reveal that Iran was not the only state that made such an effort. One letter addressed to UBL and authored by Mahmoud/Sheikh 'Atiyya, dated April 5, 2011, includes a passage suggesting that British intelligence reached out to Al-Qa'ida. 'Atiyya indicates that he received an email from “Libyan brother ‘Urwa” who was still in Iran, in which ‘Urwa told him that “some of the Libyan brothers in Britain told him that the British intelligence spoke with them ... and requested that they try to contact those whom they know in Al-Qa'ida.” According to Urwa, British intelligence asked the “Libyan brothers to propose to their Al-Qa'ida contacts that Britain is prepared to withdraw from Afghanistan if Al-Qa'ida commits explicitly that it will not carry out any attacks against Britain

or its interests.”³⁶ ‘Atiyya responded to Urwa that “we will think about this issue and reach a suitable arrangement, and that I will relay this idea to the leadership (i.e., UBL).”

→ AUTHOR'S NOTE

If Urwa’s email is reliable, it is somewhat surprising that ‘Atiyya entertained a “suitable arrangement” with the UK. It is true that UBL said in one of his public statements that Al-Qa’ida would not attack states like Sweden, but this was to highlight to the American people that “security is one of the pillars of human life” and if they wanted “to prevent another Manhattan,” they should vote for governments like that of Sweden. Had UBL not been killed, it is difficult to envisage that he would consider the UK on par with Sweden as far as its foreign policies are concerned. It is possible that ‘Atiyya’s perspective was colored by the fact that a few weeks before he wrote his letter, the UK committed forces to the NATO-led military intervention in Libya. Though jihadi leaders did not explicitly praise Western countries for their initial stance vis-à-vis the Arab Spring, they were nevertheless surprised that the military intervention was not intended to ensure the survival of the autocratic rule of Col. Muammar Gadhafi. Instead, the intervention was framed in the broader spirit underpinning U.N. Resolution 1973 to “ensure the protection of civilians.”

Iran as Al-Qa’ida’s Treacherous Passageway

This third subsection examines a series of documents that provide insight into how Al-Qa’ida used Iranian territory and whether it collaborated with Iran. The documents examined provide no evidence that Al-Qa’ida established ties with Iranian authorities. They do point to Al-Qa’ida using Iran as a passageway to smuggle people and money clandestinely.

One letter dated 2007, from a senior Al-Qa’ida leader to a certain “Karim,” explicitly states that Iran is “the principal route for us as far as moving money, people and correspondence [with our supporters/enablers], and also because of the issue [that Iran holds Al-Qa’ida members and their families as] captives.”³⁷ This line has often been quoted out of context by Al-Qa’ida and Iran’s rivals, as an incontrovertible proof of the collusion between Al-Qa’ida and Iran.

Most likely, Karim is Abu Hamza al-Muhajir,³⁸ who was Abu ‘Umar al-Baghdadi’s deputy in Iraq; they were the leaders of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI, proclaimed

in October 2006), the parent group of today's Islamic State, and were both killed in 2010.

The letter is explicit that Al-Qa'ida does not wish for Karim to provoke Iran by making threats that ISI cannot carry out. Far from suggesting collusion between Al-Qa'ida and Iran, the author of the letter fears that such empty threats would be "a political liability/failure for you [i.e., ISI] (*siyasiyyan tu'tabaru khasaratan lakum*)." Though the author does not encourage Karim to strike Iran, he advises him that "if you believe that you are capable of inflicting harm on Iran, my opinion is that you carry out your attacks quietly, without any forewarning or [rhetorical] threats. [This way] you would let [Iran] know, or [Iran] would come to realize, that you are behind the strike." Nowhere does the letter suggest that the Iranian government is the source of the funds or that it is facilitating their passage.

The documents examined point to Al-Qa'ida using Iran as a passageway to smuggle people and money clandestinely.

If Iran was not directly involved in Al-Qa'ida's use of Iranian territory as a passageway, it raises the question of how Al-Qa'ida managed to use Iranian territory to move money and people without collaborating with the authorities. One anonymized document gives a glimpse as to how this occurred. It was composed in either late 2004 or early 2005,³⁹ and consists of 15 instructions, most of which were to be carried out by Al-Qa'ida operatives.⁴⁰ It was written by someone senior, whose position in the organization permitted him to give authorization to disburse large sums of money and to provide guidance on how the media campaign against the United States should be conducted. The second item in the letter states that "we need assurances as to the safety of Azmarai's children." Azmarai is one of the names that UBL is referred to in internal communiqués. This request points to the seniority or proximity to senior figures of the author.⁴¹ In addition, it again emphasizes the importance of detained jihadis and their families, and UBL's family in particular, to the Al-Qa'ida-Iran relationship rather than operational cooperation.

Some instructions in the letter concern Iran, and the following passage is worth citing:

Brother ‘Abdallah al-Halabi⁴² should be tasked with preparing a report about the ways and means through which he could move to receive some funds for us from his *known source* (emphasis added). He should not proceed [at this point], he should merely send us a plan [that assesses] the degree to which [such a mission] would be safe, and include all the important details [that we ought to consider] before we authorize his mission.

The “known source” is most likely a reference to an individual or set of individuals located in Iran, given that the letter to Karim mentioned earlier explicitly states that Iran is where money can be moved to/from jihadis. If the known source is indeed in Iran, the letter’s request for an analysis of the safety of such a mission shows that Al-Qa’ida did not take it for granted that it could send its operatives safely in and out of Iran to get its funds. The author of the letter adds that al-Halabi, who was entrusted with “secrets concerning the jihadis’ work,” needed to be prepared mentally, religiously and physically to kill himself if he feared that he was in imminent danger of being captured. The instructions to al-Halabi are explicit:

[In the meantime], he [i.e., al-Halabi] ought to prepare himself and read the study by ‘Abd al-‘Aziz al-Jarbu’ (Select [legal studies] on committing suicide for fear of disclosing secrets), it is included among the files which you sent us. He should take a small and simple method/tool that would assist him to commit suicide to avert falling captive should he find himself in an extremely dangerous situation.

In this instruction, the author of this letter makes it clear that Al-Qa’ida cannot afford the risk of al-Halabi’s capture and the possibility that he may confess under duress his knowledge of Al-Qa’ida’s plans and the whereabouts of its leaders.

The Personal Is Political

This subsection examines the way in which Iran is mentioned in UBL’s more personal correspondence, as well as its notable absence in this body of literature. The first document analyzed in this section is a 220-page handwritten document, transcribing discussions about the Arab Spring that UBL had with his family at Abbottabad. That Iran does not receive much attention in this document suggests that Al-Qa’ida did not maintain a substantial relationship with the country. The second set of documents consists of a series of letters that UBL sent to his wife Umm Hamza, which illustrate the extent of his personal distrust of Iran.

The 220-page handwritten document

One of the documents declassified by the CIA is a long handwritten Arabic document, totaling 220 pages (228 including blank pages). Its description as UBL's "handwritten journal" by Thomas Joscelyn of the *Long War Journal* is inaccurate.⁴³ The handwriting is not that of UBL.⁴⁴ A close reading of the document also shows that in a couple of places its author/transcriber uses the Arabic feminine declension (e.g., *ana hazima* - 'I am resolved to'), and references to "al-walid" (father) make it clear that the author was UBL's daughter, possibly but not conclusively Miriam. The document was composed during the last two months of UBL's life, starting on March 6, 2011, possibly a day or a few days earlier,⁴⁵ and ending on May 1, a day before he was killed. The reason for including the description of this document in this study is not because it offers insight about Al-Qa'ida's alleged ties to Iran, but because of the absence of references to any ties to Iran.

Some of the early pages of the document consist of a transcribed interview with UBL. Though incomplete, the interview tackles UBL's early life, his interest in jihad, early travels and contact with the West, but it does not proceed to give his full biography. It is not clear whether his daughter was recording her father's responses to a set of questions he was sent by a journalist or if she was collecting his thoughts.

The bulk of the document consists of summarizing and commenting on the news related to the Arab Spring, including transcribing some news programs (e.g., *bila hudud* - *al-Jazeera*). These are mixed with annotations of daily gatherings by UBL and members of his family during which they discussed the unfolding Arab Spring events. Those identified by name are his son Khaled, his wife Umm Hamza, his daughter Miriam and "Sumayya the secretary who coauthors the statements (*taktub al-rasa'il*)" of UBL. The authors of *The Exile*, who interviewed members of UBL's family, note that at the time of the raid that killed UBL, his daughter Sumayya was 19.⁴⁶ If Sumayya the daughter is the same as Sumayya the "secretary," she is either gifted in coauthoring UBL's statement at the age of 19 (and younger), or the word "taktub" could mean that she typed. Alternatively, a different Sumayya residing in Abbottabad coauthored UBL's statements. But judging by these intimate family sessions, it is likely that UBL's (private and public) statements are a joint venture with members of his family: The transcribed sessions we have in this document show these family gatherings as a form of brainstorming, and all involved partake in contributing ideas. For example, the female transcriber mentions an "idea" she has about restructuring Al-Qa'ida; in several places, the document includes references to Miriam's input to UBL/Al-Qa'ida's strategy, such as "Miriam's paragraphs ... are amended" and they were to be included in UBL's public statement in response to the Arab Spring.

→ **AUTHOR'S NOTE**

I am familiar with two other Sumayya in the jihadi world. There is the daughter of Abu Hammam al-Sa'idi, also known as Abi Hammam al-Hawin; he was living in Dubai when the authorities in 1994 handed him over to Egypt, where he was imprisoned. His wife and daughter were living in Afghanistan in the 2000s; they were both well-liked and respected in the jihadi circle. See Fadil Harun, *al-Harb 'ala al-Islam*, p. 219. The other Sumayya is the daughter of Fadil Harun, the Al-Qa'ida operative; at the time she would have likely been in the Comoros Islands with her mother, and if she were not, Harun would have mentioned her close association with UBL in his autobiography that was posted online in February 2009.

The document reveals the importance UBL and his family were investing in the events of the Arab Spring, and their desire to put out a measured response that would capitalize on the protesters' desire to engender political change. In contrast, references to Iran are notably marginal. Iran is mentioned in relation to the events in Bahrain, where Saudi Arabia intervened to put an end to the protest that broke out. UBL and his family were reviewing the events and positing Iran's response if Saudi Arabia escalated its role in Bahrain.

If Iran was collaborating with Al-Qa'ida, UBL and his family would presumably propose some way to take advantage of the situation in countries undergoing Arab Spring protests and to agitate protests in Saudi Arabia. Instead, UBL's distrust of Iran and of its policy of "betrayal" is what gets mentioned during these intimate sessions with his family. For example, though UBL hoped that the Arab Spring would reach Saudi Arabia and bring down the regime, he also expresses concern as to whether Iran would choose to mobilize the Shia in the Gulf: "If Iran chooses to escalate, it can, for betrayal (*ghadr*) is intrinsic [to its politics], particularly because its regime espouses a militant revolutionary worldview."

UBL's Letters to Umm Hamza

Another set of documents that illustrate UBL's mistrust of Iran and lack of any special contacts with Iranian officials consists of the letters he wrote to his family, in particular his wife Umm Hamza. She, along with her son Hamza and his family (and UBL's other sons Muhammad and 'Uthman), were released from detention

in Iran in 2010, and she managed to join UBL in February 2011. Upon hearing of their release, UBL wrote to them to instruct them that before they head to Abbottabad, they should:

... leave behind everything she [i.e., Umm Hamza] brought with her from Iran, including books and clothes and to replace everything the size of which could fit in the eye of a needle since tiny tracking devices have been developed and that could be injected into even a pill. Since the Iranians cannot be trusted, it is probable that they would plant a tracking device in some of the belongings that you [i.e., addressed to all of them] have brought with you from Iran.⁴⁷

In another letter addressed to Umm Hamza, whom he knew had reached Waziristan, UBL asks if she has any clues as to why the Iranians released her and the others toward that region of Pakistan:

... do you know the reasons behind their decision? Did you hear anything after your release that caused or forced the Iranians to release you in the first place, or in the direction of Waziristan in particular?⁴⁸

In this same letter, UBL's mistrust of Iranian authorities reached an even higher level. The letter refers to one that Umm Hamza had written, in which she described a treatment she had received in Iran following an episode of "extreme dizziness." UBL's initial queries are those that one would expect from a caring husband:

... when did your dizziness start? How long did it go on for? [Please provide] more details as to its symptoms. Also include the date when it was diagnosed and treated.⁴⁹

As the letter progresses, UBL's concerns go beyond routine caring questions: "It does not escape you the importance of dates when it comes to many [medical] issues." Realizing that he is pushing for more intimate information that may offend his wife, he adds: "Please pardon my insistence, perhaps I am exhausting you with my request for more details." He goes on to ask Umm Hamza to see another female doctor (in Waziristan), to describe to her the symptoms from which she had suffered, and to ask her to do an X-ray or ultrasound, and "if no alien body (*jism gharib*) is found then we would have certainty [and peace of mind] to overcome our doubts."⁵⁰

UBL’s distrust of Iran and of its policy of “betrayal” is what gets mentioned during these intimate sessions with his family.

The language about conducting an ultrasound to verify that “no alien body” is found, along with symptoms of dizziness, suggest UBL was worried about a case of pregnancy. Umm Hamza was either 60 or 61 at the time UBL was writing the letter, so one can assume that he was not accusing his wife of infidelity or alluding to a case of rape that resulted in her getting pregnant at that age. However, he was concerned about the treatment she had received in Iran, and it is possible he feared that the Iranian authorities may have conspired with a medical practitioner to impregnate his wife artificially, perhaps through a hormone treatment she did not know about. This possibility might seem ludicrous, but it would not have surprised jihadis who harbored abundant distrust toward Iran.

Conclusion

That a relationship exists between states and terrorism is not surprising. Some political theorists have even argued that the capacity to engender terror is intrinsic to all states,⁵¹ and the modern era provides numerous examples of state terrorism and state-sponsored terrorism.⁵² States have also enabled terrorist groups both wittingly and unwittingly, e.g., during the Afghan jihad, resulting in unanticipated blowback. Yet the contention that a group like Al-Qa'ida, whose rejection of the legitimacy of nation-states is intrinsic to its core ideology, is amenable to act willingly to serve the agenda of Iran requires skepticism. The logical conclusion of such a contention underestimates the threat posed by groups like Al-Qa'ida that are staunchly resistant to routine kinetic and non-kinetic pressure mechanisms at the disposal of states.

The Abbottabad documents examined in this study provide no evidence that Al-Qa'ida's ties with Iran involved operational collaboration. No familiar or friendly references are to be found in any of the documents examined for this study. Letters dated 2004, 2006, 2007 and 2010 through to 2011, just before UBL was killed, include explicit hostile references to Iran. These letters are authored by UBL, members of his family, and Al-Qa'ida/jihadi operatives and leaders, including those trying to secure the release of UBL's family and other Al-Qa'ida personnel. UBL's own letters make it clear that he had no close ties to Iranian officials. If Iranian authorities did facilitate Al-Qa'ida's activities, the internal communiqués examined in this study demonstrate that UBL did not know of such collaboration.

Future research on this issue would benefit from an additional examination of the entirety of the Abbottabad corpus to investigate Al-Qa'ida's contested ties with not just Iran, but also with Saudi Arabia and Pakistan.

Notes

- 1 “Remarks by President Trump on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action,” *The White House*, May 8, 2018. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-joint-comprehensive-plan-action/>
- 2 Nelly Lahoud et al., “Letters from Abbottabad: Bin Laden Sidelined?,” *Combating Terrorism Center*, May 3, 2012. <https://ctc.usma.edu/letters-from-abbottabad-bin-laden-sidelined>
- 3 “Bin Laden’s Bookshelf,” *Office of the Director of National Intelligence*. <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/features/bin-laden-s-bookshelf>. (last accessed February 21, 2018).
- 4 “CIA Releases Nearly 470,000 Additional Files Recovered in May 2011 Raid on Usama Bin Laden’s Compound,” *Central Intelligence Agency*, November 1, 2017. <https://www.cia.gov/news-information/press-releases-statements/2017-press-releases-statements/cia-releases-additional-files-recovered-in-ubl-compound-raid.html>. (last accessed February 21, 2018).
- 5 “Harmony Program,” *Combating Terrorism Center*. <https://ctc.usma.edu/harmony-program/>
- 6 Thomas Joscelyn and Bill Roggio, “CIA releases massive trove of Osama bin Laden’s files,” *Long War Journal*, November 1, 2017. <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/11/analysis-cia-releases-massive-trove-of-osama-bin-ladens-files.php>. (last accessed February 22, 2018).
- 7 In his “Presidential Address to the Nation” in which he announced on October 7, 2001, the beginning of Operation Enduring Freedom, President George W. Bush justified the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan on the basis that the Taliban regime had sheltered Al-Qa’ida. In his words: “More than two weeks ago, I gave Taliban leaders a series of clear and specific demands: Close terrorist training camps; hand over leaders of the al Qaeda network; and return all foreign nationals, including American citizens, unjustly detained in your country. None of these demands were met. And now the Taliban will pay a price.” Statement can be accessed on: <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/10/20011007-8.html>
- 8 Muhammad Sahimi, “Who supports Jundallah?,” *PBS Frontline*, October 22, 2009. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2009/10/jundallah.html>. (last accessed March 4, 2018).
- 9 U.S. Department of State, “Secretary of State’s Terrorist Designation of Jundallah,” *Bureau of Counterterrorism and Countering Violent Extremism*, November 3, 2010. <https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/other/des/266649.htm> (last accessed March 4, 2018).
- 10 For historical context about the group and other Sunni militant groups active in Iran, including possible international support they receive from the intelligence agencies in Saudi Arabia (GDI) and Pakistan (ISI), see Stéphane A. Dudoignon, *The Baluch, Sunnism and the State in Iran: From Tribal to Global* (London: Hurst & Company) 2017, pp. 2-3, 226-237.
- 11 According to the author, Abu Mus’ab al-Suri proposed reaching out to Saddam’s regime, suggesting to renew old contacts with members of his regime.
- 12 Cathy Scott-Clark and Adrian Levy, *The Exile: The Stunning Inside Story of Osama Bin Laden and Al Qaeda in Flight* (New York: Bloomsbury), 2017. Cathy Scott-Clark and Adrian Levy interviewed Abu Hafs al-Mauritani extensively for their book *The Exile*. I am grateful to Adrian for giving me an advance PDF copy of the book and for many fruitful conversations, including respectful disagreements. The book is an outstanding source of information, but I believe that the authors took much of what their interviewees said to them at face value. Thus many inconsistencies come across even in the same story. I am of the view that information based on internal communiques should be privileged over interviews conducted long after the events took place.

13 Ibid.

14 *The Exile*, p. 81.

15 Ibid., p. 35.

16 Ibid., p. 34.

17 Ibid., p. 35.

18 Ibid., pp. 80-81.

19 Ibid., p. 81.

20 “President Delivers State of the Union Address,” January 29, 2002. <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html>

21 The Saudi militants were the first to use the Al-Qa’ida branding, calling themselves Al-Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula (QAP). See Thomas Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and Pan-Islamism since 1979* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) 2010. p. 37. Note that it was in January 2009 that Saudi and Yemeni militants merged to form another Al-Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).

22 Note that the document is dated January 2007.

23 This single two-page document can be accessed under two separate documents: “My Generous Brother Tawfiq,” declassified March 1, 2016, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2016/arabic/Arabic%20My%20Generous%20Brother%20Tawfiq.pdf>; “Letter from Hafiz,” declassified May 20, 2015, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl/arabic2/Letter%20from%20Hafiz%20-%20Arabic.pdf>

24 “Letter from ‘Atiyatullah al-Libi,” SOCOM-2012-0000012, Combating Terrorism Center. <https://ctc.usma.edu/harmony-program/letter-from-atiyatullah-al-libi-original-language-2/>

25 See footnote 23.

26 “Deadly Attacks Rock Baghdad, Karbala,” *CNN*, March 2, 2004, <http://edition.cnn.com/2004/WORLD/meast/03/02/sprj.nirq.main/>. (last accessed June 20, 2018).

27 In 2010, UBL appointed ‘Atiyya as successor of Mustafa Abu al-Yazid (killed in May 2010), SOCOM-2012-0000019. ‘Atiyya was killed in a drone strike in August 2011.

28 SOCOM-2012-0000012.

29 SOCOM-2012-0000012. See also Alan Cowell, “Iranian Diplomat in Pakistan Is Freed,” *New York Times*, March 30, 2010. http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/31/world/middleeast/31iran.html?_r=1#. (last accessed June 19, 2018).

30 SOCOM-2012-0000012. For further analysis about the prisoners released in 2009 and 2010, see Nelly Lahoud et al., “Letters from Abbottabad: Bin Ladin Sidelined?,” *Combating Terrorism Center*, May 3, 2012. <https://ctc.usma.edu/letters-from-abbottabad-bin-ladin-sidelined>

31 Letter from UBL to ‘Atiyya, SOCOM-2012-0000015.

32 The transcribed statement in which UBL accepted al-Zarqawi in December 2004 could be accessed on the following link: https://sources.marefa.org/نص_خطاب_أسامة_بن_لادن_15_ذو_القعدة_1425_هـ_-_27_ديسمبر/كانون_الأول_2004_م. (last accessed July 17, 2018).

33 See for instance UBL’s letter to Abu al-Zubayr, the leader of al-Shabab, in which he declined a union with Al-Qa’ida, SOCOM-2012-0000005; almost a year after UBL’s death, Ayman al-Zawahiri welcomed al-Shabab into the fold of Al-Qa’ida; see also the anonymous letter that questions declining union between Al-Qa’ida and al-Shabab, SOCOM-2012-0000006.

34 Ibid.

35 See for instance the two letters intercepted by the intelligence community: “Zawahiri’s Letter to Zarqawi,” <https://ctc.usma.edu/harmony-program/zawahiris-letter-to-zarqawi-original-language-2/> , and “Atiyah’s Letter to Zarqawi,” <https://ctc.usma.edu/atiyahs-letter-to-zarqawi-original/>.

36 “Letter dtd 5 April 2011,” <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl/arabic/Letter%20dtd%205%20April%202011%20-%20Arabic.pdf>. This part is omitted from the English translation provided by the Office of the DNI. My own interpretation of this omission is that it was a mistake by the translator. I doubt that this omission was political; if it were, the Arabic document would not have been declassified. Having said that, I do wonder whether the original Arabic document was analyzed in its entirety by the intelligence community.

37 “Letter to Karim,” <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2016/arabic/Arabic%20Letter%20to%20Karim.pdf>

38 I am inclined to believe that “Karim” is Abu Hamza al-Muhajir for two reasons: (1) the context of the letter and the leaders of ISI in Iraq; (2) another Abbottabad letter also referring to Abu Hamza uses the name “Karumi.” I suspect that it’s either a spelling mistake or the two names refer to the same person. See SOCOM-2012-0000011, *Combating Terrorism Center*, <https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2013/10/Letter-from-Hafiz-Sultan-Original.pdf>. See also the analysis in Lahoud et al., “Letters from Abbottabad,” pp. 22-4.

39 I propose this dating because the author, when discussing attacks carried out in Saudi Arabia, refers to an attack that killed “a BBC photographer.” The author reflects on an ongoing jihadi campaign in Saudi Arabia, which lasted until 2006, but the attack he refers to suggests that it was a recent event, or at least not in the distant past. This attack occurred in June 2004. See “Two BBC men shot in Saudi capital,” *BBC*, June 7, 2004. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3781803.stm. (last accessed March 11, 2018).

40 “Draft of a Letter to Subordinates,” [https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2017/arabic/Draft%20of%20a%20letter%20to%20subordinates%20\(Arabic\).pdf](https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2017/arabic/Draft%20of%20a%20letter%20to%20subordinates%20(Arabic).pdf)

41 Since UBL is referred to in the third person, he cannot be the author of the letter, though it has the authority of his seniority. The author is not Ayman al-Zawahiri either, because the instructions mention “the Doctor,” which is a reference to al-Zawahiri.

42 Al-Halabi could possibly be the husband of Khadija, UBL’s daughter. He is referred to as Abu ‘Abdallah al-Halabi in several letters.

43 Thomas Joscelyn, “Read Osama bin Laden’s handwritten journal,” *Long War Journal*, November 1, 2017. <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/11/read-osama-bin-ladens-handwritten-journal.php>

44 Compare it to UBL’s handwritten will released by the Office of the DNI: “In regard to the money that is in Sudan – Bin Laden’s will,” <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2016/arabic/Arabic%20in%20regard%20to%20the%20money%20that%20is%20in%20Sudan.pdf>

45 The dates on the document are according to the Hijri calendar, with the first date listed falling on March 6 according to the Gregorian calendar. However, several undated pages precede that date. These could have been composed on March 6 or a few days earlier. The front page of the document indicates that it “follows notebook 1” and the title ends with “Revolutions 2” in reference to the Arab Spring. This suggests that there is another notebook (“Revolutions 1”) that may or may not have been recovered by the Special Forces during the raid.

46 *The Exile*, p. 513.

47 “Letter to sons ‘Uthman, Muhammad, Hamzah, wife Umm Hamzah,” [https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl/arabic/Letter%20to%20sons%20\(Uthman%20Muhammad%20Hamzah%20Umm%20Hamzah\).pdf](https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl/arabic/Letter%20to%20sons%20(Uthman%20Muhammad%20Hamzah%20Umm%20Hamzah).pdf)

20Uthman%20Muhammad%20Hamzah%20wife%
20Um%20Hamzah%20-%20Arabic.pdf

48 “Letter to my caring family,” <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2016/arabic/Arabic%20Letter%20to%20my%20Caring%20Family.pdf>

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid. Levy and Scott-Clark speak of UBL’s fear “that a chip could have been inserted into a filling by the Quds Force during one of her [i.e., his wife’s] frequent dental appointments,” *The Exile*, pp. 369-70. Other letters refer to the tooth filling. In this letter, however, Umm Hamza’s dizziness is a separate and additional concern for UBL.

51 See Barry Hindess, “Terrortory,” *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, Vol. 31, No. 3, 2006; see also Charles Tilly, “War Making and State Making as Organized Crime,” in Peter Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer and Theda Skocpol (eds), *Bringing the State Back In* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) 1985.

52 David Rapoport, “The Four Waves of Rebel Terror and September 11,” *Anthropoetics*, Vol. 8, No. 1, Spring/Summer 2002.



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