

IRAN AND THE GLOBAL JIHAD

EXPLORING HOW THE “IMPOSSIBLE” BECAME INEVITABLE

K R O N O S

KRONOS

Kronos is a strategic advisory firm founded by Major General James E. Livingston, USMC (Ret) and Michael S. Smith II to provide global stakeholders the situational awareness solutions they need to address strategic and tactical threats to their interests. We help our clients achieve their organizational goals by providing them the resources they need to better understand and define their operational environments – rather than allowing their organizational capabilities and goals to be defined by them.

Kronos harnesses the resources of a diverse international network of talented professionals with highly valuable skill sets who have extensive experience helping officials address complex national security threats, both domestic and foreign.

Kronos is strongly positioned to assist private companies who support official missions, defense and intelligence organizations operating in mission critical zones, as well as policy makers in Washington.

Kronos Advisory, LLC
USA
kronos@kronosadvisory.com

SUMMARY

Today, support Iran's Shiite revolutionary leaders provide radical Sunnis is manifesting the most immediate threats to Western interests. In this essay, Ronald Sandee and Michael S. Smith II leverage a variety of sources to highlight the history of this support while positioning an argument that Western governments have essentially accommodated the radical Iranian regime's use of terrorism as an instrument of foreign policy since the inception of their Islamic Republic.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Former senior Dutch counterterrorism analyst **RONALD SANDEE** is a U.S.-based terrorism researcher and international security consultant with Kronos Advisory, LLC, serving as the firm's Chief Global Jihad Analyst. He recently co-founded the Centall Group, an international security consultancy.

MICHAEL S. SMITH II is a Principal with Kronos Advisory, LLC, a strategic advisory firm established in 2011 by Smith and MajGen James E. Livingston, USMC (Ret) to assist U.S. national security managers with irregular warfare-related concerns. He is also a counterterrorism advisor to members of Congress and a contributing expert to the Congressional Anti-Terrorism Caucus (ATC).

IRAN AND THE GLOBAL JIHAD

EXPLORING HOW THE “IMPOSSIBLE” BECAME INEVITABLE

On this occasion it was a lapse that has had a legacy of recurrent attacks through the years, from the '80s to '93, to Khobar, to East Africa, to the Cole, and all the other well-known terrorist attacks. But we could have, I think, sent a very, very powerful signal. At the time, we had the intelligence, we had the means to do it, and our failure to do it — to respond to the 1983 attack on the Marine barracks in Beirut — has had a very tragic, bitter, recurrent result.¹

—**Robert C. “Bud” McFarlane**

National Security Advisor to President Ronald Reagan (1983-85)

The doctrinal differences between Sunni and Shia Muslims are of minor importance, far less than those that divide the rival churches of Christendom.²

—**Bernard Lewis**

Iran is not a monolith. And while it may be easy for interested parties to grasp this oft-stated axiom, Iran is still by no means an easy country for Western political and social scientists to understand. As many Iran analysts are beholden to explain, Iran is a complex country to understand because its power structures — opaque and almost Byzantine like — completely contrast what we might expect to find in a country that was home to the region’s first democratic election outside Israel, and, moreover, was quite close with the West a few decades ago.

Prepared by Ronald Sandee and Michael S. Smith II

RELEASED MARCH 2013

Yet what you don't often hear is that even before the Islamic Revolution became a serious threat to the status quo in Iran, preoccupied by the Soviet Union and convinced the Shah could withstand any internal challenges to his authority the West made a strategic mistake, dropping its guard in Persia and much of the Middle East. For Washington, not only were Iran and many of its neighbors allies whose citizenries did not pose challenges to U.S. interests on par with threats posed by communists, significant changes were made in operational intelligence gathering that severely limited America's abilities to both forecast and later monitor, let alone influence developments in Iran. A key result: Since the ayatollahs came into power, American analysis of the Islamic Republic's activities, and particularly Iranian foreign policy, has often been mired in misapprehensions. Today, we see that many flawed assumptions — both the results of and reasons for inadequate applications of intelligence resources focused on addressing threats posed by Iran — have delivered Washington's fundamental failure to discern the external objectives of the pseudo-theocratic regime in Tehran. Indeed, in hindsight this failure has made it exceedingly difficult for the West to grasp just how Iran has pursued those objectives: As a central player in the jihads being waged against the United States and its allies by terrorists who target our interests globally.

Prelude to Vulnerability

Histories written about the Global Jihad, which is commonly recognized as a Sunni vehicle for mobilizing confrontation with the West, are incomplete without some examination of the impacts of Western governments' policies on this phenomenon. Such introspections have yielded controversial assertions regarding the ramifications of Western "inaction" during the past three decades. According to some critiques, the West's failures to respond to early terror plots operationalized by radical Shiites backed by Iran served to embolden the wills of radical Shiite and Sunni actors — both state and non-state actors, and eventually often working in concert with one another — to use terrorism to counter "apostate" interests in the Muslim world, and to challenge them beyond. Meanwhile, more collegial assessments of Western governments' failures to proactively shield their interests from this phenomenon take into account political and bureaucratic realities, and seek to contextualize the atmosphere in which decisions were made, or avoided.

Among the factors that apparently influenced these realities early on were top officials' unwavering focus on the Soviet threat, along with reduced interest in human intelligence work, notably in Washington. Robert McFarlane, a member of President Reagan's National Security Council in 1983, cites the dearth of human intelligence work in the Middle-East at the time as a critical impediment to sound policymaking. One derivative was the assumption that killing radical Shiites responsible for the October 1983 Iran-backed attack that left 241 American servicemen

1. Robert C. McFarlane, Interview with Michael S. Smith II, 23 July 2012;

http://www.kronosadvisory.com/Kronos_Iran.Terrorism.and.Americas.Portfolio.of.Squandered.Opportunities.pdf

2. Bernard Lewis, *The Middle East: A Brief History of the Last 2,000 Years* (New York: SCRIBNER, 1995), 67.

dead in Beirut would have generated tensions in U.S.-Saudi relations, thereby limiting America's access to Gulf oil. According to McFarlane, this assumption became the calculus for President Reagan's cancellation of a joint U.S.-French strike on facilities in Bekaa Valley where terrorists who would claim victory against the U.S. in Lebanon were trained to kill Americans and their allies.³

Reflecting on the influence of these factors, McFarlane once observed that "In Iran we were totally in the dark — by choice."⁴ Rolling the dice to pursue CIA Director Admiral Stansfield Turner's vision of a high tech-centric approach to intelligence collection that would showcase America's technological superiority, in 1978 the Carter administration made massive cuts to America's human collection (Humint) resources to instead emphasize satellite interception, communications intelligence and other advanced capabilities part of America's rapidly expanding high-tech espionage portfolio.⁵ In total, 820 positions were cut from Langley's Directorate of Operations, the main Humint collection department, bringing the total number of Humint operators below one thousand.⁶ As Robert Gates, who served as Deputy Director of Central Intelligence from 1986-89 once put it, the impact of emphasizing technical means over Humint was that "the perceptions became more important than the facts."⁷

"And it was a very, very misguided policy under [DCI] Admiral Turner that led to the cashiering of as many as 600 agents/assets. These were not American, but these were assets on the ground, local nationals who had been working for us in the Middle East," McFarlane recently explained.⁸ Indeed, in hindsight we see that, inasmuch as these factors impaired decision-makers' abilities to identify the looming threats posed by radical Islam, the resultant problems in intelligence work — analysis in particular — would also perpetuate the West's failure to understand the expanse of Iran's influence on what has since been labeled the Global Jihad. And, ultimately, the West's failure to interrupt it.

The Revolution

Of Ayatollah Khomeini's ascension to power in Iran, Bernard Lewis wrote, "The Islamic revolution in Iran was, in its way, as authentic a revolution as the French or the Russian," adding: "what happened in Iran was a revolution in the classical sense, a mass movement with wide popular

3. Robert C. McFarlane, Interview with Michael S. Smith II, 23 July 2012.

4. Deborah Hart Strober and Gerald S. Strober, *The Reagan Presidency: An Oral History of the Era* (Washington: Brassey's, 2003), 398.

5. Deborah Hart Strober and Gerald S. Strober, *The Reagan Presidency: An Oral History of the Era* (Washington: Brassey's, 2003), 398; Robert M. Gates, *From the Shadows: The Ultimate Insider's Story of Five Presidents and How They Won the Cold War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 138-39.

6. Robert M. Gates, *From the Shadows: The Ultimate Insider's Story of Five Presidents and How They Won the Cold War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 139; In 1976, CIA's Directorate of Operations examined its personnel needs in a post-Vietnam environment and concluded the staffing level should be reduced by 1,350 positions over a five-year period.

7. Robert M. Gates, *From the Shadows: The Ultimate Insider's Story of Five Presidents and How They Won the Cold War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 139.

8. Robert C. McFarlane, Interview with Michael S. Smith II, 23 July 2012.

participation that resulted in a major shift in economic as well as political power, and that inaugurated, or, perhaps more accurately, continued, a process of vast social transformation. ... It arose from deep discontents; it was inspired by passionate beliefs and driven by ardent hopes.”⁹

What is now clear is that Khomeini and his “revolutionaries” were just as focused on establishing mechanisms to assert and preserve their authority as leaders of the regime they had deposed. A system of checks and balances would be imposed to secure what effectively became a totalitarian’s role in government for the newly empowered Supreme Leader. Then, following Khomeini’s death, authorities bestowed upon his successor the power to prevent any erosion in the Islamic Revolution’s, and thus the regime’s primacy — regardless of any declining support among Iranians.

The regime remains partly elected and partly unelected, with its unelected authorities capable of ousting elected officials from office, including the president himself. At the pinnacle of Iran’s unelected institutions are Khomeini’s successor, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, and members of the Guardians Council.¹⁰ Although power struggles have occurred, ultimately it is the Supreme Leader who has “the final say in everything,” according to former Iranian president Mohammed Khatami.¹¹

A critical objective for the regime is to export the Islamic Revolution once led by Khomeini, who famously decried the United States the “Great Satan” and Israel the “Little Satan” soon after seizing power of Iran. To export the Revolution is to do more than merely help radical Islamists undermine or usurp other Muslim regimes; commonly stated objectives include the destruction of the U.S. and Israel.

The task of spreading the Revolution abroad is in the purview of Iran’s Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC), which is also tasked with neutralizing internal threats to the Revolution. Of the IRGC’s five branches, it is the special operations division known as Quds Force that has been assigned responsibility for exporting the Islamic Revolution beyond Iran’s borders.

The Quds Force is a relatively small unit with high-level cadres mainly in the ranks of colonels and generals who are involved in strategy, planning and executing sensitive operations abroad, to include oversight of attacks conducted by Iran’s various terrorist proxies. The commander of the Quds Force, Major General Qasem Soleimani, is directly subordinated to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei.

Setting the Tone

While the seeds of the Revolution were arguably planted in Iran by Khomeini and his adherents from abroad, the Islamic Republic’s adventures abroad appear to have begun in June 1982.

9. Bernard Lewis, *From Babel to Dragomans: Interpreting the Middle East* (New York: Oxford Univ Press, 2004), 301.

10. Ray Takeyh, *Hidden Iran: Paradox and Power in the Islamic Republic* (New York: Times Books, 2006), 2.

11. “Iran and the West: The Pariah State,” BBC Two, 14 February 2009, min 34:40-34:46.

Two weeks after Israel launched Operation Peace for Galilee and invaded Lebanon, Iran dispatched its first batches of Revolutionary Guardsmen to the Levant. In early June 1982, Mohsen Rafiqdoust, one of the founders of the IRGC, was summoned from the Iraqi front to Tehran to devise a plan to deploy troops to Lebanon. Crafted with input from other generals, his plan for intervention in Lebanon was presented to Khomeini by then head of the IRGC, Mohsen Rezaei. Khomeini initially opposed the plan, viewing Israel's actions as features of a Western plot to lure Iran into a second front. Yet the IRGC leadership turned to Grand Ayatollah Montazeri for help in persuading the Supreme Leader to harness this opportunity, and Khomeini soon changed his position. Although he became convinced of the plan's merits, Khomeini nevertheless cautioned, "However, we should not send our men to fight. We should stick to organizing and training."¹²

The IRGC deployed 1,000 troops to train young Shiite Lebanese men.¹³ The commander of the unit was a young radical named Ahmad Motevaselian, who had honed his battlefield expertise while suppressing an Azeri rebellion in northern Iran. Attached as a diplomat to the Iranian embassy in Beirut, Motevaselian was kidnapped a few weeks after his arrival in Lebanon. In response, the IRGC hired a group of Palestinians to kidnap the president of the American University of Beirut, David S. Dodge, who was used to pressure the release of Motevaselian and three others. Dodge was smuggled out of Lebanon to Damascus, flown to Tehran, and then spent months in Iran's infamous Evin prison.¹⁴

The kidnapping of David Dodge revealed a direct link between the kidnappers and Iran — a mistake Iran was unwilling to repeat. Khomeini instructed the IRGC troops deployed to Lebanon to carefully disguise their influence on and involvements in developments there, thus cementing what would become Iran's *modus operandi* for the first two decades of its involvement in the Global Jihad arena.

One of the first to join the IRGC training courses in Lebanon was Imad Mughniyah. Originally a member of Fatah, Mughniyah left Fatah to join the Islamic Amal; Mughniyah eventually became the military leader of Hizballah until his death in a targeted strike in Damascus. From the start of his involvement with Hizballah, Mughniyah's IRGC handler employed extreme security precautions to conceal their interactions. Aware of their enemies' technological superiority, Mughniyah's handler preferred to rely on channels of communication that would be difficult for intelligence agencies to detect or monitor: No phone contact took place between them; information was exchanged either in person, or using couriers. A clever operative, it was his Iranian handler who also eventually came up with the name Islamic Jihad Organization. This entity — the name

12. "Iran and the West: The Pariah State," BBC Two, 14 February 2009, min 2:41-4:46.

13. "Iran and the West: The Pariah State," BBC Two, 14 February 2009, min 4:13-4:40.

14. Hala Jaber, *Hezbollah: Born with a Vengeance* (New York: Columbia Univ Press, 1997), 100; Robert Baer, *The Devil We Know: Dealing with the New Iranian Superpower* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2008), 63.

of which is now understood to have been one of several pseudonyms used by Hizballah — claimed credit for the 1983 bombings of the U.S. Marine Corps barracks and American embassy in Beirut.¹⁵

One observer who took great interest in both the truck bomb tactics used against American servicemen in the Levant, as well as the subsequent U.S. military withdrawal from Lebanon following such attacks was a radical Sunni of Yemeni background born and raised within the territory of Iran's most proximate enemy today, Saudi Arabia. Indeed, the American pullout from Lebanon signified “the decline of American power and the weakness of the American soldier, who is ready to wage cold wars but unprepared to fight long wars. This was proven in Beirut in 1983, when the Marines fled,” Usama bin Ladin later remarked, acknowledging he first conceived his attack on the World Trade Center during this period.¹⁶

During the 1980s, the new Iranian regime was keenly interested in establishing “plausible deniability” as a cover for foreign operations. In turn, the IRGC and especially the Quds Force refined their tactics and methods to establish what can be called Iran's “indirect approach” to engaging the regime's enemies.

Shortly after the Iran-Iraq War subsided, a new opportunity for adventures abroad arose when the impoverished, Islamist-led country Sudan solicited aid from Tehran. By 1991, both countries were courting each other. And by the end of 1991 an alliance was cemented between Shiite Iran and Sunni Sudan when president Rafsanjani flew in from Senegal with a delegation of more than a 150 top officials, including Intelligence Minister Falahian, IRGC Commander Rezai, IRGC Chief of Staff Zolqadr, and Quds Force Commander Ahmad Vahidi (presently Iran's minister of defense). During his visit, Rafsanjani expressed confidence in the bright future of relations between both countries, and proclaimed Sudan the “vanguard of the Islamic Revolution in the African continent.”¹⁷

Within months, the Iranians deployed hundreds of IRGC troops to Khartoum, opening a headquarters at the Kobar prison in North Khartoum. Concurrently, many veterans of the Afghan jihad, by this time viewed as battle-hardened security threats by governments in their home countries, were allowed to travel through Iran to Sudan in order to settle with prominent jihadi financiers and leaders like Usama bin Ladin. In Sudan, the Afghan veterans were designated as the Armed Islamic Movement (AIM), or, as they called themselves, the Islamic Army. They were all welcomed by the Islamic regime in Sudan, but particularly by its influential leader behind the scenes, Hasan al-Turabi, who had nearly claimed a position of authority in Sudan that would have been a mirror image of the one Khomeini held in Iran.

15. Robert Baer, *The Devil We Know: Dealing with the New Iranian Superpower* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2008), 62-65.

16. John Miller, “Exclusive Interview with Osama bin Ladin: Talking with terror's banker,” ABC News, 28 May 1998.

17. Ronald Sandee, “Islamism, Jihadism and Terrorism in Sudan,” American Enterprise Institute, 6 August 2004; http://www.aei.org/files/2004/08/06/20040809_SANDEEremarks.pdf

Few individuals have played as vital a role in the Global Jihad as then Sudanese strongman Hasan al-Turabi. As an academic, theologian and lawyer, al-Turabi was able to define a theological compromise that was acceptable for both revolutionary Shiites from Iran and radical Sunni Muslims from other countries, notably Afghan Jihad veterans who would later come to represent the “vanguards” of the Global Jihad.¹⁸ From the Iranian side, an important role in exploiting this “compromise” was handed to Sheikh Muhammad Said Nou’mani, then an advisor to the Iranian minister of culture and official representative of the Iranian Supreme Leader in the Horn of Africa.¹⁹

According to Jamal al-Fadl, a former al-Qa’ida member who served as a witness in the 1998 East Africa embassies bombings trial, Nou’mani was associated with Usama bin Ladin and the Islamic Army whose members would fill the ranks of what is today known as al-Qa’ida. Al-Fadl testified that Nou’mani was responsible for facilitating at least eight al-Qa’ida members’ travels to Lebanon for advanced explosives training.²⁰ Subsidized and likely developed by the IRGC, the course in Lebanon cemented future cooperation between al-Qa’ida’s elite and Iran. As partially documented by the 9/11 Commission Report, in the years that followed a close relationship was developed between the IRGC, al-Qa’ida leadership and Hizballah’s ruthless terrorism masterminds like Imad Mughniyah and Hasan Izz-al-Din. Meanwhile, MOIS operatives were actively courting, screening, training, equipping and strategically guiding radical Islamist groups from throughout Africa and the Middle East, operating from the Iranian Cultural Center in Omdurman close to Khartoum. Together with the groups of bin Ladin and al-Zawahiri, the Iranians devised plans for advancing the jihad in the Horn of Africa, and Somalia became the next target.

The relationship between the government of Iran and al-Qa’ida was finally formalized early in 1993 during meetings in Tehran attended by four original founders of al-Qa’ida, each of them members of its Shura council. According to Jamal al-Fadl, when bin Ladin was questioned by al-Qa’ida members about this development, he responded that “our biggest enemy is ourselves,” adding that “all Muslims must unite and defend ourselves.”²¹

Authorities in Cairo eventually accused Iran of guiding and directing the armed activities of the Afghan veterans in Egypt and other Arab states. By this time, al-Qa’ida’s noticeable activities

18. Ronald Sandee, “Islamism, Jihadism and Terrorism in Sudan,” American Enterprise Institute, 6 August 2004.

19. FD-302 FBI, Transcript of Interview with Jamal al-Fadl, 2/4/1998 (SNY101-0092) (Al-Fadl 3501-1).

20. FD-302 FBI, Transcript of Interview with Jamal al-Fadl, 2/4/1998 (SNY101-0092) (Al-Fadl 3501-1); Al-Fadl recalls five of the eight individuals as follows: Abu Jafar al-Tayyar (believed to be an aka of Abu Ubayda al-Masri, who has lived in Iran and possesses an Iranian passport), Abu Islam al-Masri, Abu Talha al-Sudani, Haydar al-Dosari, and Salam al-Masri. Others included Saif al-Islam al-Masri, Saif al-Adl, and probably Abu Mohammad al-Masri. All became senior al-Qa’ida operatives.

21. The four were Abu Hajer al-Iraqi, Abu Ayoub al-Iraqi, Abu Ubaidah al-Banshiri and Abu Rida al-Suri; See FD-302 FBI, Transcript of Interview with Jamal al-Fadl, 11/10/1996 (SNY101-0024) (Al-Fadl 3501-1); James Bruce, “Arab Veterans of the Afghan War – Trained forces in waiting, Jane’s Intelligence Review,” Jane’s Intelligence Review, April 1995).

in Sudan entailed administrating basic training courses for members of Middle Eastern jihadi groups that were conducting terror attacks throughout the region in order to topple the “infidel regime” — namely, the Egyptian groups al-Gamma al-Islamiyya and al-Zawahiri’s Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ), whose members were featured prominently in the AIM. Yet direct evidence of Tehran’s involvement in brutal terror campaigns underway in Egypt and Algeria was elusive — even though Iran’s interest in undermining nonaligned regimes in its neighborhood was anything but a closely guarded secret.²² Commenting on this situation, a senior U.S. official said: “What all this shows is that Iran is prepared to fish in troubled waters where it can.”²³

A study produced by the State Department’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research in August 1993 offered the following elucidation: “Evidence suggests Tehran relies on its own network to support these Arab mujahidin. Members of Iran’s Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) provide terrorist training to veterans, and probably other Islamic militants, in Sudan, according to various reports.”²⁴ Later, of the tripartite agreement between Iran, al-Qa’ida and the Sudanese, CIA reported: “Eventually an agreement was reached to collaborate politically and militarily. The primary goal of this collaboration was to confront Israel and the United States, while the secondary goal was to undermine Arab regimes which supported Israel and the United States.”²⁵

As al-Qa’ida began to deploy fighters to Somalia, the Iranians and Sudanese helped prepare the ground for a serious fight. Iran propped up the Somali Revolutionary Guard, a militia whose members were trained in camps in Sudan; meanwhile, the Sudanese activated their surrogate in Somalia, the Somali Islamic Union Party.²⁶ Next, the Iranians convinced the Sudanese leaders that a deployment of U.S. Marines in Somalia was a first step in Washington’s plan to topple the regime in Khartoum. So by mid-1993, militants were pouring into Somalia to prepare for a conflict that would deliver yet another major blow to the United States 10 years after the Iranians had driven American Marines out of Beirut. This time in another part of the world, but with the same player in the shadows: Iran’s IRGC, with coordination managed by its elite and clandestine special operations division, the Quds Force.

Various intelligence reports have noted the Quds Force’s involvement in assisting Sunni groups undergoing training in Sudan to spread their jihads throughout the Middle East and Africa

22. James Bruce, “Arab Veterans of the Afghan War – Trained forces in waiting,” *Jane’s Intelligence Review*, April 1995.

23. Chris Hedges, “Sudan and Iran ‘smuggling arms across the desert to FIS militants,’” *The Guardian*, December 28, 1994, 10.

24. U.S. Department of State Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR), “The Wandering Mujahidin: Armed and Dangerous,” *Weekend Edition*, 21-22 August 1993, 3.

25. CIA, “Terrorism: Establishment of a Tripartite agreement among Usama bin Ladin, Iran and the NIF,” 31 January 1997.

26. Stefano Bellucci and Massimo Zaccaria, “From Parties to Movements, Islam and Politics in the Horn of Africa,” *Interpreting Islamic Political Parties*, ed. M.A. Mohamed Salih (New York: Macmillan, 2009), 103-115; Shaul Shay, *Somalia Between Jihad and Restoration* (New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2008), 60-62.

at this time. Meanwhile, there are indications Iran may have played an important role helping groups other than just al-Qa'ida pursue their global attack focus. Indeed, American news reports reveal federal authorities discovered evidence of Iranian elements' involvements in the planning and financing of the February 1993 attack on the World Trade Center in New York.²⁷ Coordinated by al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya's spiritual leader Omar Abd al-Rahman, the so-called "Blind Sheikh," one participant in the attack who fled to Egypt confessed to Egyptian authorities that the plot was operationalized with approval from two self-described Iranian intelligence agents.²⁸ While this participant in the attacks disavowed his confession to Egyptian authorities following his extradition to the U.S., American authorities reported they had traced nearly \$100,000 in funds that had been sent to some of the suspects from abroad, which included transfers made from Iran.²⁹ Apparently, tens of thousands of dollars of this aid was wired to several of the attack coconspirators from Iran.³⁰

A Nearer-Western Front

During the 1990s, an opportunity for Iran to gain a much desired foothold in Europe arose with the crisis in the Balkans. While it is not well-known that Iran was involved with the jihadi fighters in Bosnia, the perhaps less controversial role Iranian operatives played training the Bosnian army, police and intelligence service is well documented. The Iranians facilitated massive shipments of arms to Croatia and Bosnia.³¹ During this crisis, Iran was actively involved in gathering intelligence on NATO forces in Bosnia, and frequently used humanitarian organizations to support these operations. Iranian NGOs operating in Bosnia served multiple purposes, with the Iranian Red Crescent not only assisting displaced and injured civilians, but also transporting arms and fighters, and gathering intelligence.³²

About 200 Quds Force staff were operating in Bosnia in the mid-1990s; so too were some 1,000 to 3,000 Muslim volunteer fighters, including members of Hizballah and al-Qa'ida. Initially, the volunteers fought as disorganized groups. Later, they were included in the al-Mujahid Brigade,

27. Bruce Hoffman, "Responding to Terrorism Across the Technological Spectrum," United States Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, 15 July 1994. Accessed via <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/00267.pdf>

28. Mary B.W. Tabor, "Questions Linger in Explosion Case; Trial of Four of Seven Suspects in Bombing of World Trade Center Opens Today," *The New York Times*, 14 September 1993.

29. Richard Blumenthal, "\$100,000 from abroad is linked to Suspects in the Trade Center Explosion," *The New York Times*. 15 February 1993.

30. Unattributed, "The Bombing: Retracing the Steps — A special report; Fitting the Pieces of Terrorism — Accounts Reconstruct Planning of Trade Center Explosion," *The New York Times*, 26 May 1993.

31. Extract of letter written in Arabic by Dr al-Fatih Ali Hassanein to Sheikh Kamal Saraj al-Din, Austrian dossier P010111390: The first weapons shipment arrived in Bosnia in 1992. In a letter from Vienna by Dr. al-Fatih Ali Hassanein of Third World Relief Agency to Sheikh Kamal Saraj al-Din, Hassanein wrote that on August 7, 1992 a plane with equipment from Iran landed in Zagreb. He advised 15 vehicles had arrived from Iran with the delegation, as had a couple of Iranians arrived from England.

32. Report on Radical NGO activities in Bosnia, January 1998.

part of the 7th Division of the Bosnian army's Third Corps. As this unit became part of the official Bosnian army, Quds Force instructors began training these volunteer recruits.³³

Of Iran's additional activities, NATO sources indicate a top Quds Force official used inside information from the American Embassy in Sarajevo to plan a terrorist attack on U.S. forces in Bosnia.³⁴ This attack was scheduled to occur four years after the February 1996 raid on the Pogorelica terrorist training facility located 50 kilometers north of Sarajevo; the U.S. officer who led the raid said it was "crystal clear" this facility was run by Iranian operatives.³⁵ Following the raid, U.S. officials were unnerved by the discovery of a toy car that had been turned into a bomb.³⁶

The Vanguard's Settle Next Door

In mid-1996, bin Ladin was forced to leave Sudan, and returned to Afghanistan after al-Turabi's efforts to negotiate his return to Saudi Arabia failed. In Sudan, Iran's civilian intelligence service, the MOIS, had managed an indirect relationship with al-Qa'ida's founder and leader. But late in 1996, bin Ladin wanted to meet with the Iranians. Through the intermediary services of both jihadi veteran Mustafa Hamid (aka Abu Walid al-Masri; the father-in-law of Egyptian-born al-Qa'ida military commander Saif al-Adl) and Tajik Islamic opposition leader Abdullo Nuri this meeting was arranged.³⁷

Soon after his decampment from East Africa, bin Ladin spent several months in Qom, Iran.³⁸ Of course, other prominent Sunni radicals, including leadership figures from al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya and al-Zawahiri's EIJ, were also able to find safe haven in Iran around this time. (Some, like Mustafa Hamza, Mohammed Shawqi Islambouli and Rifa'i Ahmed Taha, have recently returned to Egypt, where the new Muslim Brotherhood-led government has been allowing them to return to their homes.) In subsequent years, numerous reports indicated bin Ladin and his lieutenants held regular meetings with officials in Iran.

Iran's point man for contacts with the Afghan veterans had always been Ayman al-Zawahiri. While the Egyptian-born pediatrician-turned-jihadi mastermind was close to bin Ladin, his organization, the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, did not officially join with bin Ladin's al-Qa'ida until 1998; moreover, it was not until June 2001 that these jihadi enterprises formally merged to establish

33. Ronen Bergman, *The Secret War with Iran: The 30-Year Clandestine Struggle Against the World's Most Dangerous Terrorist Power* (New York: Free Press, 2007), 228.

34. John R. Schindler, *Unholy Terror: Bosnia, al-Qa'ida, and the Rise of Global Jihad* (St. Paul, MN: Zenith Press, 2007), 243.

35. John R. Schindler, *Unholy Terror: Bosnia, al-Qa'ida, and the Rise of Global Jihad* (St. Paul, MN: Zenith Press, 2007), 242-243.

36. John R. Schindler, *Unholy Terror: Bosnia, al-Qa'ida, and the Rise of Global Jihad* (St. Paul, MN: Zenith Press, 2007), 242.

37. James Risen, "Bin Laden sought Iran as an Ally, U.S. Intelligence documents say," *The New York Times*. 31 December 2001.

38. Confidential Western intelligence source.

the Qaidat-al-Jihad group.³⁹ Since 1991, al-Zawahiri had made regular visits to Tehran. He was able to build a personal relationship with Ahmad Vahidi, commander of the Quds Force until 1998 and presently Iran's minister of defense. According to Ronen Bergman, during the late 1990s, Iran "gave financial and logistical assistance to an al-Qa'ida terror cell that was active in Hamburg, Germany."⁴⁰ As Hamburg is home to a large Iranian-run Islamic Center, coordinating communications with this cell was likely quite easy.

The more intense links between Iran's IRGC and MOIS on one hand and al-Qa'ida on the other surely resulted in the exchange of information, logistical support, and the transfer of arms to support al-Qa'ida operations in Southwest Asia and beyond. It seems that there was also extensive strategic consultation and knowledge exchange. How else can one reasonably explain "coincidences" such as Iran's ambassadors to Kenya, Kazem Tabatabai, and Tanzania, Ali Saghaian, along with their respective cultural attachés, Ahmad Dargahi in Kenya and Mohammed-Javad Tashkiri in Tanzania, being withdrawn from their posts two weeks before al-Qa'ida's attacks on U.S. embassies in each country?⁴¹

Another Central Asian Alliance

In the early 1990s, Juma Namangani and Tohir Yuldashev were active in the Fergana Valley in Uzbekistan and were involved in leading positions in the Adolat movement. When the Uzbek government became repressive of radical Muslims, the two were forced to leave the country. Namangani decamped for Tajikistan, and Yuldashev soon settled in Iran.⁴² The relationship between Iranian officials and Yuldashev was thus born, and when a new jihadi organization was established in Tajikistan in 1998 named the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) the Quds Force and MOIS were involved. From the IMU's inception, Quds Force instructors in Mashhad trained elements of the IMU in guerilla warfare and sabotage. The 1999 bombings in Tashkent were likely the handiwork of a special IMU unit trained in Iran.⁴³

After 9/11, Iranian intelligence officers linked up with IMU fighters in eastern Afghanistan to give them advice and help with their evacuation to the Mir Ali area in North Waziristan. IMU fighting units have also found refuge in Iran. Their stays in Iran are ostensibly coordinated

39. Ronald Sandee, "Qaidat al-Jihad's Near Future," NEFA Foundation, May 2011.

40. Ronen Bergman, *The Secret War with Iran: The 30-Year Clandestine Struggle Against the World's Most Dangerous Terrorist Power* (New York: Free Press, 2007), 231.

41. Martin Sieff, "Iranian resistance says Teheran withdrew envoys before blasts," *The Washington Times*, 12 August 1998.

42. *Kommersant*, 19 January 2001.

43. As with jihadi groups in Africa earlier in the decade, the Iranians assisted the IMU with screening recruits, training, equipping fighters, and strategic guidance. Some of the training has been provided in Iran, and the Quds Force continues to facilitate IMU fighters with travel, official documents, and access to arms and explosives. A U.S. intelligence official who addressed this situation with the press in 2002 advised, "The Iranians are helping to coordinate IMU activities." Bill Gertz, "Terrorists trained by Iran tracked from Uzbekistan," *The Washington Times*, 8 April 2002.

by the Quds Force, which is guiding and coordinating Iranian intelligence operations in Central Asia.⁴⁴

It was also with Iran's help that the IMU opened an office in Khartoum and established training facilities in Sudan.⁴⁵ And to this day, Iran is allowing IMU recruiters and facilitators to operate in the Sunni Makki Mosque in Zahedan.⁴⁶ This city in East Iran is not only home to Iran's Special Headquarters for Afghanistan; it is a main hub for volunteers heading to fight the jihad in Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as a common waypoint upon their returns to Iran.⁴⁷

Acquiescent of jihadis use of its territory as a preferred route since well before 9/11, the regime in control of Iran has been able to closely monitor the flow of jihadis both into and out of the Afghanistan-Pakistan theater. Indeed, officials in Tehran were aware of the frequent travels through Iran's borders of al-Qa'ida members. What's more, it is not a secret that al-Qa'ida agents responsible for an attack that would become a hallmark of the Global Jihad used the Iran route in the buildup to the 9/11 attacks.⁴⁸

Unforced Errors

"Several factors contributed to the threat posed by Iran. One of them was our very victory in the Cold War," Robert McFarlane recently related.⁴⁹ He explained: "At the end of the Cold War, a war which really had kept the lid on regional disagreements, tribal, cross-border, ethnic, racial turmoil, the constraints and power blocks that came with that war were no longer dominant in influencing, or in limiting the political behavior of countries throughout the world, but especially in the Middle East. And people at the grassroots and at the top began to reflect on things and think: We have seen that the socialist model has been disproven, but look at the democratic model, not all that impressive, from their point of view. ... So it was a fertile ground for an evangelist like Khomeini and other radicals like bin Ladin to prosper, to say that if you don't believe socialism works, if you don't believe democracy works, maybe we ought to fall back on God. Well, that's an easy sell. That is, until you begin to peel back the onion about what they are describing as 'God's will.'"

Commenting both on the rise of radical Islam in the post-Cold War era and challenges manifest by the limited scope of Washington's national security priorities during the 1980s thru

44. Bill Gertz, "Terrorists trained by Iran tracked from Uzbekistan," *The Washington Times*, 8 April 2002.

45. Ronald Sandee, "Islamism, Jihadism and Terrorism in Sudan, remarks at the American Enterprise Institute," 6 August 2004.

46. Nicolas Kulish and Souad Mekhennet, "In Plot Suspect, Germany Sees Familiar Face," *The New York Times*, 7 September 2007; <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/07/world/europe/07fritz.html>

47. Simone Kaiser, et al., "How the CIA helped Germany foil terror plot," *Der Spiegel*, 10 September 2007.

48. CIA, "11 September: The Plot and the Plotters," 1 June 2003.

49. Robert C. McFarlane, Interview with Michael S. Smith II, 23 July 2012.

the 1990s, McFarlane asserts: “we really ought to have been paying attention through better intelligence in the Middle East to the grand bargain struck between the Wahhabi mosque and the royal family in Saudi Arabia, in which the royal family agreed to fund the Wahhabi proselytizing and evangelical work, along with its subversive work, as long as they kept it overseas and didn’t criticize the royal family in exchange for its financing of those Wahhabi efforts. ... And if we had better intelligence back then, we could have seen how profound a threat these early Islamist movements were.”

During the late-1990s, Donald Rumsfeld and other prominent figures from America’s security community issued mostly unheeded warnings regarding declining attention to the craft of strategic analysis, and security rules that prevented adequate sharing of information.⁵⁰ According to authors of the 9/11 Commission Report, other self-imposed deficiencies may be viewed as drivers in America’s failures to identify both the tactical foci and the strategic underpinnings of the Global Jihad that would be led by al-Qa’ida. Among these were the understaffing of translators capable of fulfilling the requirements of FBI counterterrorism agents, who had yet to complete “an assessment of the overall terrorist threat to the U.S. homeland.” Additionally, budget cuts to CIA’s Directorate of Operations at the Cold War’s end left the Intelligence Community with a frustrating shortage of Clandestine Service officers throughout the 1990s.⁵¹ Of course, the 9/11 Commission Report also highlights what may be viewed in hindsight as mesmerizingly myopic calculations that fostered inaction in the face of several opportunities to kill bin Ladin before al-Qa’ida struck the U.S. homeland on September 11, 2001.

Iran, 9/11, and the “Murky” Correlation

Even with a federal judge’s recent affirmation of evidence that the Islamic Republic of Iran played a meaningful role in the 9/11 attacks, for many terrorism analysts Iran’s involvement in the deadliest terrorist attacks on America’s homeland remains unclear.⁵² Yet years earlier, various developments, including those addressed in reports reviewed by 9/11 Commission staffers, pointed to a preponderance of evidence that Iran was a prime candidate for participation in the 9/11 plot. For instance, was it another coincidence that the two al-Qa’ida members who assassinated Ahmad Shah Masoud, leader of the Northern Alliance and a key U.S. asset in Afghanistan, obtained their counterfeit Belgian passports and other needed documents with help from the Iranian Embassy

50. National Commission On Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States*, 2004, 91; <http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/911/report/911Report.pdf>

51. National Commission On Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States*, 2004, 77, 90.

52. Fiona Havlish, et al v. Usama Bin Laden, et al, 03-CV-9848 (GBD); http://information.iran911case.com/Havlish_Order_of_Judgment_Signed_12_22_11.pdf

in Brussels? When we consider that Iranian agents also helped furnish the two assassins with a camera they converted into an IED used to kill Masoud as they posed as journalists two days before the 9/11 attacks, we see it probably was not.⁵³

As the 9/11 Commission Report indicates, evidence of noteworthy interactions between Iran and al-Qa'ida did exist. But given very little time to review classified reports on linkages between Iran and al-Qa'ida, its authors were only able to reveal general details such as the fact that some of the 9/11 attackers had traveled through Iran, and al-Qa'ida members were trained in camps in Lebanon linked to Iran.⁵⁴ Still, prior to the publication of the 9/11 Commission Report, Hamid Reza Zakeri offered more details about Iran's purported role in the attacks in testimony before a German judge.^{55 56}

Zakeri testified he saw one of al-Qa'ida's pilots in its 9/11 attacks, Lebanese Ziad Jarrah, at an Iran-backed camp where trainees underwent flight lessons. Furthermore, Zakeri claims that early in the summer of 2001, when he entered a display room at Iran's MOIS headquarters that contained a target wall, he noticed models of the World Trade Center in New York, the White House, Pentagon, Camp David, and CIA headquarters in Virginia.⁵⁷ Zakeri also claims that after he left Iran in July 2001, he briefed officials at the U.S. embassy in Baku on these observations, and warned a major attack on the U.S. was planned for 20 Shahrivar, a date that coincided with September 10, 2001.⁵⁸

In mid-2000, direct negotiations were underway between Iran's leadership and al-Qa'ida, which was already receiving a myriad of different forms of support from Tehran. Further, according to Zakeri, accompanied by 29 others, in January 2001 the second-in-command of al-Qa'ida visited Iran. Zakeri also testified that on 4 and 5 May, 2001, Saad bin Ladin and three others flew by helicopter to Iran for meetings with top officials, including Supreme Leader Khamenei and former president Rafsanjani.⁵⁹

Days after the meetings Zakeri claims took place between Iranian officials and Saad bin Ladin, a memorandum allegedly issued by the Supreme Leader's Intelligence Office articulated guidelines for Iran's cooperation with al-Qa'ida.^{60 61}

53. Ronen Bergman, *The Secret War with Iran: The 30-Year Clandestine Struggle Against the World's Most Dangerous Terrorist Power* (New York: Free Press, 2007), 232.

54. National Commission On Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States*, 2004, 240-241.

55. Ben Aris, "German trial hears how Iranian agent warned U.S. of impending al-Qaida attack," *The Guardian*, 23 January 2004.

56. Confidential Source, Correspondence with Michael S. Smith II, August 2012.

57. Witness interview with Hamid Reza Zakeri by presiding German judge Klaus Rühle, 20 January 2004.

58. Witness interview with Hamid Reza Zakeri by presiding German judge Klaus Rühle, 20 January 2004.

59. Witness interview with Hamid Reza Zakeri by presiding German judge Klaus Rühle, 20 January 2004.

60. Tasking memo from Ali Akbar Nateq-Nouri to Mustafa Pourganad, 14 May 2001, published in Kenneth R. Timmerman, *Countdown to Crisis: The Coming Nuclear Showdown with Iran* (New York: Crown Forum, 2005), 320-321.

61. Confidential Source, Correspondence with Michael S. Smith II, August 2012.

Dated May 14, 2001, this document states: “Our emphasis should be the struggle with the Great Satan and Israel. This is our main agenda. It is not only important for tactical reasons, but for the greatness of Islam. Our main goal shall be to damage their economic structures and to damage their reputation and credibility. We shall concentrate on these two archenemies of the Islamic faith. We must also strike at their internal peace and security. This is imperative. In this path, we should be very careful, and very clever, in order not to leave any evidence behind that can impact negatively on us in the future.”⁶² The document continues, “The Leader (Khamenei) mentioned that at our next meeting we should analyze the ideological and logistical problems in reaching our goals and of improving our plans, especially in coordinating with fighters of al-Qa’ida and Hizballah, to find one target that is beneficial to both sides.” Its conclusion is unequivocal in conveying the Supreme Leader wished for the Islamic Republic’s ties to al-Qa’ida to remain a closely guarded secret: “... we should not leave any evidence of our support for al-Qa’ida that could give us problems or prejudice our standing. The Leader suggests that we limit our relations with al-Qa’ida to only two people, as before ...”⁶³ Although dismissed by U.S. intelligence officials, pursuant to rigorous testing of the ink, seal and paper at least one European intelligence service determined the document is authentic; furthermore, French authorities reportedly hold in high regards both the memo and its source, who has testified in numerous terror-related court cases.⁶⁴

Public awareness of this relationship would prove extremely problematic on many levels for all parties should information about the Iran-al-Qa’ida nexus come to light. Fortunately for the government of Iran and Core al-Qa’ida, Western intelligence agencies lacked stables of sources positioned to more thoroughly expose these ties. Of course, politically, after 9/11 there was ample reason for Western intelligence officials to not only avoid dot-connecting along these lines, but to both cast aspersions on anyone who claimed to possess knowledge of this relationship and discourage revelations of official intelligence reports on the history of these “Old School Ties,” as the title of one U.S. intelligence report characterized them. Curiously, however, as far back as November 1996, in talking points on Iran distributed to American ambassadors by the State Department, INR officials cited reports of linkages between Tehran and a key Sunni terrorist organization with close ties to bin Ladin’s network, al-Zawahiri’s Egyptian Islamic Jihad.⁶⁵

Prevalent for years following 9/11, the notion Iranian officials would not sanction cooperation with Sunni radicals was not without criticism from prominent figures in America’s

62. Tasking memo from Ali Akbar Nateq-Nouri to Mustafa Pourganad, 14 May 2001, published in Kenneth R. Timmerman, *Countdown to Crisis: The Coming Nuclear Showdown with Iran* (New York: Crown Forum, 2005), 320-321.

63. Tasking memo from Ali Akbar Nateq-Nouri to Mustafa Pourganad, 14 May 2001, published in Kenneth R. Timmerman, *Countdown to Crisis: The Coming Nuclear Showdown with Iran* (New York: Crown Forum, 2005), 320-321.

64. Confidential Source, Correspondence with Michael S. Smith II, August 2012.

65. Cable Reference ID No. 96STATE237921 (S), 17 November 1996 (Published by Wikileaks.org 27 April 2011).

national security community, including former CIA Director Jim Woolsey.⁶⁶ This view clearly flew in the face of Iran's ostensible provisions of safe haven to so many top figures from al-Qa'ida. These included prominent jihadis like Saif al-Adl and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, terrorists considered priority targets by numerous governments. As former CIA Persian Gulf military analyst Kenneth Pollack put it, Tehran was aware of al-Qa'ida's massive presence inside Iran at the time of the Riyadh attacks in 2003 due to — in the very least — the numerous complaints about their presence inside Iran issued by American officials.⁶⁷ “Thus, at some level their freedom had to have been intentional,” Pollack wrote in his 2004 book on the history of conflict between Iran and America.⁶⁸ He further assessed that, due to the IRGC's, MOIS's and other Iranian security services' fears of American aggression, coupled with their desire to head it off by going on the offensive, Iranian officials may have seen real value in enabling, or even encouraging, al-Qa'ida to attack the United States.⁶⁹

While Pollack's analysis of motives underlining this relationship today seems more reasonable than ever before, for Iran, the overarching prerogative for maintaining this relationship is likely far more strategic than tactical in orientation. Even if al-Qa'ida's “shadow Shura” in Iran was given the freedom to coordinate major international terrorist attacks like the May 2003 attacks in Riyadh and Casablanca, and regardless of whether al-Qa'ida's interests may be surmised with the principle “the enemy of my enemy is my friend,” as bin Ladin's former bodyguard Nasser al-Bahri put it in a July 2012 interview that addressed relations between Core al-Qa'ida and the Iranian regime.^{70 71}

A Pivot

There were initially signs the regime wanted Washington to view Iran as a prospective partner in its efforts to deliver justice to the radical Islamists the Bush administration deemed responsible for the 9/11 attacks.⁷² However, soon after America — whose president eventually labeled Iran as part of an “Axis of Evil” — encircled the Islamic Republic's territory, the regime

66. Kenneth R. Timmerman, *Countdown to Crisis: The Coming Nuclear Showdown with Iran* (New York: Crown Forum, 2005), 242.

67. Kenneth M. Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle: The Conflict Between Iran and America* (New York: Random House, 2004), 358.

68. Kenneth M. Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle: The Conflict Between Iran and America* (New York: Random House, 2004), 358.

69. Kenneth M. Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle: The Conflict Between Iran and America* (New York: Random House, 2004), 359.

70. Ronald Sandee, “Implications of Iran's Release of Senior Core al-Qa'ida Leaders: A report prepared for members of the Congressional Anti-Terrorism Caucus,” NEFA Foundation, 22 November 2010.

71. Nasser al-Bahri, Interview broadcast by Alaan TV, 18 July 2012, trans. Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI.org); http://www.memritv.org/clip_transcript/en/3506.htm

72. Kenneth M. Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle: The Conflict Between Iran and America* (New York: Random House, 2004), 343-361.

made a strategic pivot, adopting what may be viewed as the “direct approach” to its relations with radical elements. This, after rejecting U.S. demands that al-Qa’ida leaders believed by American counterterrorism officials to have been holed up in Iran be arrested and deported.⁷³ And this transition would soon yield major issues for the security environments of Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as Israel.

Years after the Bush Administration launched its so-called war on terror, Iran’s role as a major financier of Hamas and Hizballah was being played in a manner which the Iranians either intended for, or at least were not concerned about Western detection. Concurrently, nearer to its territory, the regime’s extensions of support to insurgent elements fighting Western forces both in Iraq and Afghanistan — providing money, safe training bases, and proliferating sophisticated weaponry — soon also became apparent to the U.S.

In July 2007, Spokesperson for the Multinational Forces in Iraq General Kevin Bergner explained, “Special Groups” is the term U.S. military officials used when referring to “militia extremists, funded, trained and armed by external sources ... specifically by Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps Quds Force operatives.”⁷⁴ He noted the Quds Force’s goal is to develop the Iraqi Special Groups into a network similar to that of Lebanese Hizballah. “In addition to training, the Quds Force also supplies the Special Groups with weapons and funding of 750,000 to three million U.S. dollars a month. Without this support, these Special Groups would be hard pressed to conduct their operations in Iraq,” Bergner said.

Complicating analysis of Iran’s activities in Iraq, eventually it would emerge that radical Sunnis are among the insurgent forces Iran has indeed supported in Iraq. Notable among these elements are al-Qa’ida-affiliated militants once under the command of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Responsible for bloody campaigns targeting Shiites, including the attack on a Shiite religious site that drove Iraq into a sectarian civil war, these elements’ activities confound overly-simplistic analysis of Iran’s interest in supporting al-Qa’ida being limited to purely tactical concerns. For, despite these incidents, Zarqawi could use rear bases inside Iran that were secured by the Quds Force.⁷⁵ More recently, the fact Iran has not meted out consequences for Ayman al-Zawahiri’s calls for jihadis to fight the regime’s top ally, Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad, offers further indication of the high priority assigned to maintaining working relations with al-Qa’ida by the regime’s top officials.⁷⁶

Reporting on documents leaked to Wikileaks that highlight Iran’s support for Sunni militants operating in Afghanistan, The Wall Street Journal noted, “One of the more remarkable

73. Unattributed, “U.S. worries al-Qaeda may be active in Iran,” The Associated Press via USA Today, 23 October 2003.

74. Unattributed, “MNF-I spokesman details secret cell involvement in Iraq,” Operation New Dawn: Official Website of United States Forces — Iraq, 2 July 2007.

75. Bundes Kriminal Amt, Auswerte Bericht zu Ahmad Fadil Nazal Al Khalayleh alias Abu Musab al Zarqawi, (2004).

76. Ayman al-Zawahiri, “The Glory of the East Begins with Damascus,” As-Sahab Media Foundation, 27 July 2011.

reports describes a November 2005 trip that departed from Iran in which Mr. Hekmatyar, the militant leader, and Usama bin Ladin's financial advisor traveled to North Korea to close a deal with the North Korean government to obtain remote-controlled rockets to use against Coalition aircraft in Afghanistan."⁷⁷ Gulbuddin Hekmatyar previously lived in exile in Tehran while the Taliban ruled from Kabul. He was sent back into Afghanistan by the Iranians in February 2002.⁷⁸ Officials in Washington speculated the decision to facilitate Hekmatyar's return to Afghanistan was a signal in response to President George W. Bush's January 2002 State of the Union address, in which Iran was listed among the nations comprising an "Axis of Evil."⁷⁹ He is credited with helping broker the Taliban's sometimes tenuous post-9/11 relationship with al-Qa'ida.⁸⁰ In August 2009, Hekmatyar's network, Hezb-e-Islami Gulbuddin, was identified by General Stanley McChrystal as the third-most severe threat to the mission in Afghanistan.⁸¹

Of the regime's support for lethal factions of the Sunni Afghan Taliban, in October 2007 the U.S. Treasury Department advised: "The Quds Force is the Iranian regime's primary instrument for providing lethal support to the Taliban. The Quds Force provides weapons and financial support to the Taliban to support anti-U.S. and anti-Coalition activity in Afghanistan. Since at least 2006, Iran has arranged frequent shipments of small arms and associated ammunition, rocket propelled grenades, mortar rounds, 107mm rockets, plastic explosives, and probably man-portable defense systems to the Taliban. ... Through Quds Force material support to the Taliban, we believe Iran is seeking to inflict casualties on U.S. and NATO forces."⁸² Discussing the Taliban's relationship with Iran in 2010, a Taliban commander who reportedly received special training inside Iran explained to the press: "Our religions and our histories are different, but our target is the same — we both want to kill Americans."⁸³ While the Taliban commanders interviewed about their activities inside Iran provided no precise details about who was offering them training, the Taliban commander from Ghazni province said he had no doubt that Iranian police and intelligence services knew about the training camps. "The [Iranian] government is not sleeping," he said. "You just have to wiggle your ears in Iran and they will know about it."

77. Siobhan Gorman and Jay Solomon, "Reports Bolster Suspicion of Iranian Ties to Extremists," *The Wall Street Journal*, 27 July 2010.

78. Kenneth M. Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle: The Conflict Between Iran and America* (New York: Random House, 2004), 353.

79. Kenneth M. Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle: The Conflict Between Iran and America* (New York: Random House, 2004), 353.

80. Siobhan Gorman and Jay Solomon. "Reports Bolster Suspicion of Iranian Ties to Extremists." *The Wall Street Journal*. 27 July 2010

81. Stanley A. McChrystal. "Commander's Initial Assessment (Unclassified)." Presented to U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates, 30 August 2009.

82. U.S. Treasury Department, "Fact Sheet: Designation of Iranian Entities and Individuals for Proliferation Activities and Support for Terrorism," 25 October 2007; <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/hp644.aspx>

83. Miles Amoores, "Taliban fighters being taught at secret camps in Iran," *The Sunday Times*, 21 March 2010.

By 2009, there existed substantial evidence Iran sponsors radical Sunnis, and in January 2009 the U.S. Treasury Department designated four al-Qa'ida members operating in Iran.⁸⁴ Curiously, however, the same year, CIA reportedly shuttered its covert program focused on monitoring and targeting al-Qa'ida members in Iran, codenamed RIGOR.⁸⁵ Then, perhaps to the chagrin of politicians disinclined to have the U.S. assume a confrontational posture with Iran, early in 2010 then CENTCOM Commander General David H. Petraeus advised U.S. Senators: “al-Qa'ida continues to use Iran as a key facilitation hub, where facilitators connect al-Qa'ida's senior leadership to regional affiliates.”⁸⁶ Meanwhile, analysis of Iran's support for al-Qa'ida in the post-9/11 era — however seemingly passive when compared with its support for a former nemesis like the Taliban — has remained oversimplified, and typically centered on the principle, “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.”⁸⁷ And despite the fact al-Qa'ida's two most powerful members, Ayman al-Zawahiri and Saif al-Adl, each have longstanding ties to top Iranian officials, it seems the importance of this axis remains utterly underestimated by Western governments to this day.⁸⁸

The Vanguard's Lifeline

Al-Qa'ida is an enterprise that is self-defined not just by a radical Islamist persona, but also by a carefully organized hierarchy, in which “franchisees” generally defer to a central, or “Core” entity, itself characterized organizationally by a meticulously defined hierarchy.⁸⁹ Major acts of terrorism committed by its adherents are not just exponents of this enterprise's ideology, as defined by the Core. In most instances they are also manifestations of the Core's own rigid protocols that govern operations. Of note is the requirement that consensus be reached among key power holders within the hierarchy, and importantly among relevant officials within the Core, prior to the authorizations of any significant actions taken by members of this enterprise on behalf of it.

Given these self-imposed strictures, it is conceivable al-Qa'ida could have lost its operational capabilities following 9/11 had the U.S. and its allies succeeded in capturing and killing most of the Core's key power holders. For decision-making processes would have been fundamentally interrupted; thus official operations stalled, or even shut down altogether.

84. U.S. Department of the Treasury, “Treasury Targets Al Qaida Members in Iran,” 16 January 2009.

85. Adam Goldman and Matt Appuzo, “AP Exclusive: CIA tracks Al Qaida moving from Iran,” *The Associated Press*, 13 May 2010.

86. David H. Petraeus, Testimony provided to the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee, 16 March 2010.

87. Seth G. Jones, “Al Qaeda in Iran: Why Tehran is Accommodating the Terrorist Group,” *Foreign Affairs*, 29 January 2012.

88. Nasser al-Bahri, Interview broadcast by Alaan TV, 18 July 2012, trans. Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI.org).

89. Rohan Gunaratna and Aviv Oreg, “Al Qaeda's Organizational Structure and Development,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, volume 33, issue 12, 2010, pp 1043-1078;

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/1057610X.2010.523860>

However, as so many of these leaders, along with their mid-ranking prospective successors were able to evade America's reach, notably by taking shelter within Iran, America was — much as it remains today — unable to fully shutter al-Qa'ida, or truly disrupt its Core's abilities to manage the larger enterprise's affairs.

Indeed, given America's decades-long aversion to confrontation with Iran, pragmatism alone may account for why al-Qa'ida established in Iran its "management council," or "shadow Shura" after Quds Force operatives coordinated the movements of scores of al-Qa'ida members into Iran following 9/11.⁹⁰ Comprised of prominent figures like al-Adl, Sulayman Abu Ghaith, Abu al-Khair al-Masri, Abu Muhammad al-Masri, and Abu Hafs al-Mauritania, bin Ladin reportedly tasked this council with providing strategic support to al-Qa'ida's leaders in Pakistan.⁹¹

Put simply, nearly a decade before the U.S. Treasury Department announced in 2011 that it was conducting investigations centered on a "secret deal" between the government of Iran and Core al-Qa'ida, it was Iran that delivered al-Qa'ida the security blanket it required to not only survive America's response to the most catastrophic terrorist attacks that had befallen her homeland, but to also maintain its very operational capabilities. Still, the regime is doing more than just thwarting Washington's efforts to tackle what it came to regard as the most immediate threat to U.S. interests. It is also doing more than shoring up a mere tactical resource. It is keeping alive the embodiment of a preeminent strategic threat to the West and its allies in Iran's neighborhood — preserving a vital spring of inspiration that nourishes the vanguards of the Global Jihad, and conceivably may for generations to come.

America's Eye Remains Off the Ball

Of the American game football, it's been said the best defense is a good offense. Despite Washington's interest in leading what it once termed the "Global War on Terror," this maxim has not been applied to American efforts to address the glaring issue that is Iran's role in the Global Jihad being waged against the U.S. and its allies. Arguably, when it comes to Iran's role as a key player in the Global Jihad, in which Americans commonly view al-Qa'ida as playing a verisimilar role to that of quarterback, America has yet to begin playing what could reasonably be described as a defensive game. Instead, policies that may be surmised with the words "ignore," "avoid" and "suppress" have stymied meaningful and much-needed focus on the lethal threat nexus that is Iran and the Global Jihad. Perhaps as a result, Iran appears once in the Obama administration's current National Counterterrorism Strategy — and ostensibly as an afterthought in the brief section titled

90. Seth G. Jones, "Al Qaeda in Iran: Why Tehran is Accommodating the Terrorist Group," *Foreign Affairs*, 29 January 2012.

91. Seth G. Jones, "Al Qaeda in Iran: Why Tehran is Accommodating the Terrorist Group," *Foreign Affairs*, 29 January 2012.

“Other Terrorist Concerns Requiring Focus and Attention.”⁹² Indeed, counterterrorism professionals who are hopeful for movement toward a more direct effort to interdict Iran’s involvement in the Global Jihad should think twice about holding their breath. For recent developments, coupled with more popular interest in Iran’s nuclear program(s) suggest disrupting Iran’s role in the Global Jihad will not be a near-term priority for the U.S.

In 2012, we saw what could actually constitute an attempt to deescalate concerns regarding the Iran-al-Qa’ida threat nexus, if not an outright effort to diminish confidence it even exists: Declassified for initial analysis conducted by experts at the Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point, a select group of the documents obtained during the May 2011 raid on bin Ladin’s Abbottabad compound indicate the spirit of relations between Iran and al-Qa’ida was quite plausibly anything but cooperative.⁹³ However, soon after CTC’s highly-publicized review of these documents was released on the one-year anniversary of bin Ladin’s death, terrorism analyst Thomas Joscelyn reported a senior U.S. intelligence official noted other documents collected during the Abbottabad raid point to instances of collusion between Iran and al-Qa’ida.⁹⁴ Of course, it is intriguing that earlier in 2012 the U.S. Treasury Department designated Iran’s MOIS for supporting, among others groups, al-Qa’ida and its franchise in Iraq.⁹⁵

Could the issues of Iran’s sponsorship of terrorism and its prospective acquisition of nuclear weapons, which Usama bin Ladin declared a “religious duty” for Muslims, one day become intertwined? While it is conceivable they may, developments to date — nay, the lack thereof — suggest Iran, which has long had access to biological and chemical weapons, is very cautious about not just the support it provides to radical Islamists, but also how it leverages terrorism to advance its agenda. And herein we see the regime’s mastery of its use of terrorism to spread its Islamic Revolution without provoking reprisals from its enemies. Further, it is worth noting recent events indicate Iran may be attempting to utilize awareness of its roles in numerous terrorist plots to divert Western attention from its ostensible pursuit of nuclear weapons technologies.^{96 97} The focus on which, according to U.S. foreign policy scholar Michael Ledeen, constitutes “a strategic mistake because they’re killing us just fine without nuclear weapons.”⁹⁸

92. The White House, National Strategy for Counterterrorism, 28 June 2011; http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/counterterrorism_strategy.pdf

93. Nelly Lahoud, et al., “Letters from Abbottabad: Bin Ladin Sidelined?” The Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point, 3 May 2012.

94. Thomas Joscelyn, “Analysis: Spinning Iran and al Qaeda, Part 1,” Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, 5 May 2012.

95. U.S. Department of Treasury, “Treasury Designates Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security for Human Rights Abuses and Support for Terrorism,” 16 February 2012.

96. Mark Hosenball, “New York police link nine 2012 plots to Iran, proxies,” Reuters, 20 July 2012.

97. Jay Solomon, “Iran’s Nuclear-Arms Guru Resurfaces,” The Wall Street Journal, 29 August 2012.

98. Michael Ledeen, Interview with Michael S. Smith II, 9 July 2012.

Still, as the symbolic victory of developing a nuclear weapon, or several, would no-doubt generate a paradigm shift in the thought processes of Iran's foremost radical leaders, notably Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's recent description of a nuclear-armed Iran as tantamount to a nuclear-armed al-Qa'ida could prove to be more than just a theatrical argument. Indeed, if the regime does construct a nuclear weapon officials must carefully consider the extents to which it is prudent to base predictive analysis of the regime's future actions on the notion that past behaviors will necessarily continue to serve as strong indicators of future activities. This is particularly the case with respect to the regime's ostensible unwillingness to share WMD it already possesses with terrorists to date. For the leaders of a nuclear-armed Iranian regime will likely be emboldened to spread their Revolution more aggressively than before. Certainly, Iran's leaders may decide not to place nuclear technologies into the hands of trusted terror agents who also wish to see an apocalyptic demise of Western influence in the world. Yet as the psychological impact of a group like al-Qa'ida equipped with harder-to-trace chemical and biological WMD would be immense, a move to proliferate items more difficult to trace back to Iran may be one of several attractive options for regime leaders whose sense of "Allah's will" bolstering their war with the West will be at an all-time high.

Indeed, al-Qa'ida spokesman Suleiman Abu Ghaith, who is known to have spent years in Iran following 9/11 as a member of al-Qa'ida's "shadow Shura," stated: "We have the right to kill four million Americans — two million of them children — and to exile twice as many and injure and cripple hundreds of thousands. We have the right to fight them by chemical and biological weapons, so they catch the fatal and unusual diseases that Muslims have caught due to their [U.S.] chemical and biological weapons."⁹⁹

Of course, when it comes to terrorists' prospective uses of WMD in future attacks on enemies shared by the Iranian regime, the regime's proliferation of such materials to al-Qa'ida may not be a prerequisite for the realizations of any such "worst case" scenarios as these. Thus-far-difficult-to-confirm intelligence reports indicate that following the 9/11 attacks Saif al-Adl may have smuggled into Iran fissile materials acquired by Core al-Qa'ida leaders.¹⁰⁰ As is well known, U.S. government reports indicate that during the early 1990s al-Qa'ida was actively pursuing fissile materials, including uranium, while its leaders were in Sudan, and in his first interview after 9/11 bin Ladin told a Pakistani newspaper in November 2001 that he already had acquired nuclear and chemical weapons and would use similar weapons if Washington used them against him.¹⁰¹ Then, in May 2003, a radical Saudi cleric who was later arrested alongside al-Qa'ida members involved in

99. Unattributed, "New al Qaeda threats," CNN, 10 July 2002.

100. Ronald Sandee, "Implications of Iran's Release of Senior Core al-Qa'ida Leaders: A report prepared for members of the Congressional Anti-Terrorism Caucus," NEFA Foundation, 22 November 2010. (Presented to ATC Co-Founder Congresswoman Sue Myrick)

101. Hamid Mir, "Osama claims he has nukes," Dawn (Karachi), 10 November 2001.

planning the May 2003 Riyadh attacks issued a fatwa titled “A Treatise on the Legal Status of Using Weapons of Mass Destruction Against the Infidels.”¹⁰² According to former CIA Director George Tenet, once in custody this cleric confirmed al-Qa’ida had been negotiating for the purchase of Russian nuclear devices.¹⁰³ Perhaps tellingly, not long after bin Ladin’s aforementioned November 2001 interview, Ayman al-Zawahiri shared with a journalist, “If you have 30 million dollars, you can go to the black market in Central Asia, make contact with a disgruntled Russian scientist and get from him suitcase nuclear weapons.”¹⁰⁴

Former CIA Director George Tenet has since indicated that the USIC took al-Qa’ida’s prospective acquisition of nuclear devices from Russian sources seriously — so seriously that high-level meetings were held between U.S. and Russian officials to address reports of former Soviet scientists collaborating with al-Qa’ida on this front.¹⁰⁵ Regarding the prospective attempts to work with the Iranians in countering al-Qa’ida’s uses of such technologies, Former CIA Director George Tenet notes in his 2007 autobiography that the U.S. reached out to the regime to notify it that one al-Qa’ida member known to be in Iran, and ostensibly detained by the regime, had apparently conducted experiments with explosives to test the effects of producing a nuclear yield. Ironically, Tenet recalled: “We passed this information to the Iranians in the hope that they would recognize *our common interest in preventing any attack against U.S. interests.*”¹⁰⁶ (Emphasis added)

The Question

While the authenticity of a memo that purportedly demonstrates al-Qa’ida’s survival is an official priority for the regime remains in question, one thing is certain: However much abhorred by the international community, Iran’s sponsorship of radical Islamist elements has yet to give rise to a unified Western alliance of countries willing to take actions to curtail this decades-old policy. Meanwhile, as Iran’s activities demonstrate priority is given to al-Qa’ida’s survival, the West’s preference for inaction constitutes a most vexing anomaly for those focused on developing sound counterterrorism policy.

Since the regime came to power, for America’s national security managers other threats have taken higher priority than those associated with Iran’s sponsorship of terrorism. As Robert McFarlane recently put it, for Ronald Reagan’s administration, it was the Soviet threat “to the exclusion of all else.”¹⁰⁷ At the Cold War’s end, concerns over WMD proliferation trumped interest

102. George Tenet, *At the Center of the Storm: My years at the CIA* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 274.

103. George Tenet, *At the Center of the Storm: My years at the CIA* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 274.

104. Peter Bergen, “Reevaluating Al-Qa’ida’s Weapons of Mass Destruction Capabilities,” CTC Sentinel, Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point, September 2010.

105. George Tenet, *At the Center of the Storm: My years at the CIA* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 276.

106. George Tenet, *At the Center of the Storm: My years at the CIA* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 275.

107. Robert C. McFarlane, Interview with Michael S. Smith II, 23 July 2012.

in radical Islamist movements. Following 9/11, al-Qa'ida and Affiliated Movements became, and have since remained a prevalent focus of U.S. national security policy. In 2012, we see that Iran's ostensible advance toward the attainment of nuclear weapons is further distracting policymakers in Washington from the "known known," which is Iran's use of radical Islamist groups to wage asymmetric wars against America, Israel and others.

When it comes to the use of terrorism to advance its agenda, it is clear the regime is just as sensitive to public perceptions in the West, along with the implications of these perceptions on policymaking as top decision-makers in Western capitals. Clearly, the regime measures its involvement in the Global Jihad accordingly — hence the absence of commensurate, retaliatory force projected from the West. And the regime has clearly benefited from, and continues to relish in the West's failure to recognize the Islamic Republic's responsibility for bolstering radical movements, notably al-Qa'ida. But before Iran adopts a more aggressive posture, or the means to more fully deter foreign intervention into its pursuits (ie by attaining nuclear weapons capabilities), the U.S. and its allies can write a new chapter in the history of policymaking focused on threats posed by the regime.

In recent years, the U.S. has made noteworthy gains in the Obama administration's so-called war on al-Qa'ida, imperiling the integrity of the Core's and several key franchises' hierarchies. As a result, the U.S. is rapidly reducing this enterprise's operability. Indeed, this may explain why members of al-Qa'ida's "shadow Shura" in Iran, notably Saif al-Adl, were sent back to Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas in 2010 to boost al-Qa'ida's operational capability.¹⁰⁸ Still, much as we saw with the Cold War's conclusion, each defeat suffered by al-Qa'ida could constitute a double-edged sword. For ultimately — and as the growing detectability of Quds Force operations like its foiled 2011 plot to attack foreign officials and facilities in Washington indicates may already be happening — as terrorists find it more difficult to strike the West, Tehran will be left with few options but to deploy the regime's own agents to confront us directly.¹⁰⁹ Thus the question is: For how much longer will the West's default policy of inaction fuel Iran's Global Jihad?

The Long War?

During the 1980s, the prevailing context of national security concerns pertaining to Iran was centered on the question of whether Iran, vis-à-vis the sort of incursion the Soviets had undertaken in neighboring Afghanistan, might become the final piece in what appeared to some as Moscow's efforts to construct a bridge to a warm water port in the Gulf. Despite concerns

108. Syed Saleem Shahzad, "How Iran and al-Qaeda made a deal," Asia Times Online, 30 April 2010; http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/LD30Df01.html; Seth G. Jones, "Al Qaeda in Iran: Why Tehran is Accommodating the Terrorist Group," Foreign Affairs, 29 January 2012.

109. Brian Murphy, "Ambassador plot casts light on Iran's strike force," The Associated Press, 13 October 2011.

raised by Robert McFarlane and several other members of the National Security Council during the 1980s, the Reagan administration was ultimately not concerned with the question of whether Iran itself would come to represent an existential threat to U.S. interests.¹¹⁰ Indeed, the Soviet threat was far more immediate in the minds of most Western national security managers — and far more disconcerting than the bluster of newly-empowered Shiite ayatollahs whose country appeared to be the next target of ruthless Soviet expansionism.

Later, during the Clinton presidency, it would seem the focus of concerns related to Iran among national security managers in Washington was basically twofold: Firstly, there were indications energy-rich Tehran was endeavoring to establish a nuclear program as the U.S. sought to curb WMD proliferation in the post-Cold War era; secondly, there was the separate issue of the regime's support for terrorist groups that were hampering peace talks between Palestinians and Israelis.¹¹¹ Meanwhile, there was mounting, albeit classified evidence Iran may have been developing a globally-focused asymmetric strike force in the form of Sunni jihadis emboldened by their self-perceived victories over the Soviets in Afghanistan and, later, the U.S. in Somalia. However, there is little evidence of any impacts on policymaking during the 1990s by any analysis — if any such analysis was actually permitted among U.S. government entities — that explored the question of whether Iran's Islamic Revolution represented an existential threat to the U.S. Particularly one that a recent federal judgment issued against Iran for the regime's involvement in the 9/11 plot suggests the Revolution may indeed be.

On September 20, 2001, President George W. Bush advised Congress that “Our war on terror begins with al-Qa’ida, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated. . . . And we will pursue nations that provide aid or safe haven to terrorism. . . . From this day forward, any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime.”¹¹² Later, his administration realized the Iranian regime had made its territory a hub for key al-Qa’ida figures in need of either shelter from Coalition forces, or rear operating bases from which to plan more attacks.¹¹³ Yet his administration, which endeavored to lead a “Global War on Terror,” never overtly moved to interdict what reasonable assessments might qualify as the lifeblood of the Global Jihad today: The substantial support delivered by Iran to radical Sunni groups which target U.S. and allied interests globally. And today, we see that perhaps it would have been more prudent for the president's speech writers to have substituted Iran for al-Qa’ida in President Bush's assertion put

110. Robert C. McFarlane, Interview with Michael S. Smith II, 23 July 2012.

111. Derek Chollet and James Goldgeier, *America Between the Wars, from 11/9 to 9/11: The Misunderstood Years Between the Fall of the Berlin Wall and the Start of the War on Terror* (New York: Public Affairs, 2008), 149.

112. George W. Bush. Address to a joint session of Congress. 20 September 2001.

113. Kenneth M. Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle: The Conflict Between Iran and America* (New York: Random House, 2004), 358-361.

forth on September 20, 2001: “Al-Qa’ida is to terror what the Mafia is to crime. But its goal is not making money, its goal is remaking the world and imposing its radical beliefs on people everywhere.”

More recently, according to Michael Ledeen, America’s intelligence in Iran became “so lousy that no one saw the Green Revolution as a legitimate challenge to the regime.”¹¹⁴ Therefore, the Obama administration passed on the opportunity to bolster an Iranian-led effort to deliver regime change in Tehran, which Ledeen asserts has long been believed by American analysts as the only means to interrupt the Iranian government’s use of terrorism to advance its foreign policy agenda.

Curiously, the same year the Green Revolution emerged in Iran, CIA shuttered a covert, Bush-era pilot program focused on monitoring and targeting al-Qa’ida members inside Iran. When we consider that the Obama administration’s actions indicate it considered complicating relations with a nuclear-armed Pakistan an acceptable risk when devising plans to strike al-Qa’ida members who have taken shelter beyond Afghanistan, it is rather interesting to consider the Obama administration may have been averse to developing actionable intelligence pertaining to al-Qa’ida’s presence in Iran — apart from, that is, activities the Treasury Department may be able to address with non-kinetic means. Additionally, it would seem reasonable to deduce that if interrupting a crucial present day source of support for al-Qa’ida were a priority, the Obama administration would have mentioned Iran more than once in its current National Counterterrorism Strategy. Meanwhile, and as intelligence reports indicate the Quds Force’s hand is evident in nearly a dozen terror plots in 2012, as well as, of course, a plot to attack foreign officials and facilities in Washington, D.C. last year, it is clear Ayatollah Khamenei has not unclenched his fist.

Indeed, signed into law in 2012, the legislation titled “The Countering Iran in the Western Hemisphere Act of 2012,” which is the most recent legislation focused on countering threats posed by Iran to pass either the House or Senate, focuses on containing Iranian influence and countering its use of terrorism in the Western hemisphere — not globally. Thus it would seem that officials remain highly averse to advancing proposals focused on disrupting all forms of support Iran is providing to terrorist groups, and, of particular note, to Sunni groups whose leaders use Iranian territory as safe haven. One conceivable explanation for this is that officials in Washington remain largely unaware of the leadership role which Iran has played for decades as the top state sponsor of the Global Jihad, both directly and indirectly through its support of the regime in Sudan that made its territory a key haven for jihadis following their victory over the Soviets in Afghanistan. Indeed, it is not uncommon for even top Core al-Qa’ida “experts” from venerable organizations like CIA to discount Shi’ite Iranian leaders’ willingness to support radical Sunnis who pose the most immediate threats to US and allied interests. This, and there exists an abundance of evidence

114. Michael Ledeen, Interview with Michael S. Smith II, 9 July 2012.

that demonstrates radical Shiites in control of Iran are not just willing to serve as hosts for leaders of al-Qa'ida, al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya, and the EIJ, or key purveyors weapons and safe training facilities to Afghan Taliban elements, but also as major financiers of entities such as Hamas.

In his 1936 work titled *The Story of Human Error*, American psychologist Joseph Jastrow observed, "The most persistent error in the field of medicine is complacency — the tendency to accept the prevailing belief as final. This error leads to the subordination of fact to theory; all new findings are interpreted only in the light of the prevailing philosophy; the old is clung to with passionate persistence." Jastrow was keenly familiar with the influence of perceptions, however misleading, on conclusions. Years earlier, while studying optical illusions he discovered what is known as the "Jastrow illusion," an optical illusion established by presenting two identically-sized conical figures on a page, one positioned above the other, with the bottom figure set slightly to the right. As the bottom figure in his illustration extends further to the right on the page than the upper figure, the positioning of the bottom figure renders the perception of it actually being larger than the identically-sized upper figure. Yet perhaps more familiar is Jastrow's rabbit-duck illustration: Much as with Danish psychologist Edgar Rubin's famous vase image, in which the viewer initially perceives a centrally-positioned vase or the faces of two people looking at one another, Jastrow's "ambiguous image" may be perceived interchangeably as two things, either a rabbit or a duck.

How is this relevant?

Today, we see that decision-makers in the West look at the picture of the Global Jihad and view it as the domain of al-Qa'ida, its affiliates, and other like-minded radical Sunnis. Grouped together, these elements are perceived in a manner similar to the centerpiece of Edgar Rubin's famous vase image. For it seems taboo to position the West as the centerpiece, with those elements and Iran looking upon us, even if from different vantage points. Indeed, it is clearly rare for decision-makers who are ultimately responsible for implementing new security policies to look at the picture of the Global Jihad and see the image before them as one that is interchangeable between al-Qa'ida on the one hand and the Iranian regime on the other. This, and one might have been erased from that picture if it were not for the other's support.

Clearly, until certain complacencies that have hindered analysis of, and thus policymaking focused on this threat nexus are overcome — and Western governments accept the fact that Shiite Iran's ardent support for radical Sunnis is now a foremost impediment to efforts focused on dismantling al-Qa'ida — the West's willful blindness will likely yield more opportunities for power holders in Iran to write new chapters in the histories of both the regime's and al-Qa'ida's wars with us. Given this predicament, perhaps national security managers in Washington would be well advised to allocate resources to not only studies focused on the psychology of terrorism and other research that improves America's irregular warfare-fighting capabilities, but also studies focused on the influence of illusory perceptions on our national security priorities, along with ways to

prevent them from impacting policymaking. For, and as John Adams once put it, “facts are stubborn things; and whatever may be our wishes, our inclinations, or the dictates of our passion, they cannot alter the state of facts and evidence.”

While effecting regime change could be the surest way to disrupt the government of Iran’s involvement in the Global Jihad, its role as the world’s top state sponsor of Islamist terrorists, or its pursuits of nuclear weapons technologies, it is unlikely war-fatigued, cash-strapped Western states will lead this charge. And as the regime has been transforming Iran into a veritable garrison state, it is becoming less likely regime change will occur in Iran without outside support. Meanwhile, Western states, the US in particular, do possess the means to disrupt Iran’s support for groups like al-Qa’ida. However, and as Iran’s leaders are aware, biases spawned by largely assumptive analysis continue to deter much-needed focus on the lethal issues stemming from Iran’s support for Sunni groups. Thus it would seem our own imagination — more specifically, a prevailing view among government analysts in the West that things which are in fact happening are not — has made the “impossible” not just inevitable, but perhaps even sustainable for decades to come.

KRONOS
