

# AL-QAEDA AND IRAN: ALLIANCE AGAINST THE US

August 2022

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*Al-Qaeda and Iran: Alliance Against the U.S.*

Iran (Shia) and Al-Qaeda (Sunni) seem like unlikely bedfellows given the Shia-Sunni divide that often exists in Islamic society. This divide, however, has not precluded cooperation in certain conditions, as

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the two have found "[common](#) cause in their mutual hatred of America; both can see the virtue in having more anti-U.S. violence, whatever the source."

Iran has collaborated with [Al-Qaeda](#) covertly and often by proxy due to the latter's notorious reputation. This covert cooperation began in the early 1990s in Sudan, continued after Al Qaeda relocated to Afghanistan, and even manifested itself on Iranian soil before, during, and after the September 11 attacks. Although such cooperation has been known by authorities, for the first time in July 2011, the U.S. formally accused Iran of forging an alliance with Al-Qaeda that includes harboring Al Qaeda operatives on Iranian territory and helping Al-Qaeda transit money, weapons, and fighters.

This Alliance Against America between, the world's leading state sponsor of terrorism and the most infamous international terrorist group, is a formidable and menacing threat to American interests. This report documents the development of the Iran – Al-Qaeda alliance from the early 1990s to the present day.

## *Origins*

### **Iran, Al-Qaeda, and Hezbollah (1992-1996)**

Iran-Al-Qaeda links are not new. Ties between the two were initiated in the early 1990s when [Hasan Al-Turabi](#), the leader of Sudan's National Islamic Front, began to encourage Sunni-Shia reconciliation in order to defeat the common enemy, namely America and its allies. [According](#) to the U.S. court record for the 1998 U.S embassy bombings, [Osama bin Laden](#) was living in Khartoum when the Sudanese religious scholar Ahmed Abdel Rahman Hamadabi brought Sheikh Nomani, an emissary of Iran, to meet the developing Al-Qaeda leadership. Sheikh Nomani "had [access](#) to the highest echelons of power in Tehran."

As a result of this meeting, "Iran and Al-Qaeda [reached](#) an informal agreement to cooperate, with Iran providing critical explosives, intelligence, and security training to bin Laden's organization." The 9/11 Commission determined, "discussions in Sudan between Al-Qaeda and Iranian operatives led to an informal agreement to cooperate in ... for [actions](#) carried out primarily against Israel and the United States." This meeting was the [first](#) in a series of meetings between Iran and Al-Qaeda.

The 9/11 Commission Report has a section devoted exclusively towards investigating Iranian ties to Al-Qaeda entitled, "[Assistance from Hezbollah and Iran to Al-Qaeda](#)." The report [states](#) that shortly after these meetings in Sudan in late 1991 or 1992, "senior Al-Qaeda operatives and trainers traveled to Iran to receive training in explosives. In the fall of 1993, another such delegation went to the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon for further training in explosives as well as in intelligence and security. Bin Laden reportedly showed particular interest in learning how to use truck bombs such as the one that had killed 241 U.S. Marines in Lebanon in 1983. The relationship between Al-Qaeda and Iran demonstrated that Sunni-Shia divisions did not necessarily pose an insurmountable barrier to cooperation in terrorist operations."

Iran and [Hezbollah](#) function in a patron-client relationship. [The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps \(IRGC\)](#) supported Hezbollah operationally and financially amidst the turmoil of the Lebanese Civil War in the early 1980s, enabling it to develop into a deadly and proficient organization. Creating and

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maintaining Hezbollah was not only useful for exporting the Islamic Republic's revolutionary ideology; it also provided Iran with a convenient terrorist proxy through which Iran could operate with impunity.

Therefore, Iran was able to limit the risks of cooperating with Al-Qaeda directly by engaging Al-Qaeda through Hezbollah. After the Khartoum meeting with Sheihk Nomani, "Iran [consulted](#) Hezbollah and Al-Qaeda was invited to send a contingent to Lebanon." Not only did Al-Qaeda come out of Lebanon with "[training](#) and propaganda videos," but it also received "a large amount of explosives from Iran that were used in the bombing of the East African targets."

Additionally, it was Imad Mughniyah, Hezbollah's notorious terrorist mastermind [responsible](#) for the 1983 Beirut barracks bombing," who [inspired](#) Osama to develop coordinated, simultaneous attacks as a regular modus operandi, and this has been the hallmark of most subsequent Al-Qaeda operations." Moreover, "Both Hezbollah trainers and experts from Iran's Ministry of Information and Security [trained](#) Al-Qaeda fighters in Sudan (in existing Al-Qaeda facilities), Lebanon (in Hezbollah camps) and Iran (in officially run bases)."

## *Consolidation*

### **1996-2000 Iran Strengthens Ties with Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan**

After Al-Qaeda's banishment from Sudan in response to its unsuccessful attempt to assassinate Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and its subsequent relocation to Afghanistan in 1996, Iran continued to provide Al-Qaeda with assistance. In the mid-1990s, senior Al-Qaeda operative [Mustafa Hamid](#) negotiated a secret relationship between Osama bin Laden and Iran that allowed many Al-Qaeda members safe transit through Iran to Afghanistan. Iran facilitated travel for Al-Qaeda fighters through Iran to Afghanistan, and "Iranian border guards were [instructed](#) not to stamp their passports, presumably to prevent their home governments from suspecting that they had traveled to Afghanistan." As evidence of this burgeoning relationship, it is [reported](#) that between 1996 and 1998, nearly 10 percent of Osama bin Laden's outgoing calls were to Iran.

For the first time, on August 7, 1998, Al-Qaeda successfully employed Iran-Hezbollah terrorist tactics to devastating effect. Al-Qaeda carried out two simultaneous suicide truck bombings outside the U.S. embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, killing 223 people and injuring thousands more.

Following the embassy bombings, the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Southern District of New York unsealed its [indictment](#) of the terrorist organization Al-Qaeda and its leader [Osama bin Laden](#) on November 5, 1998. The key section of the indictment states the case explicitly: "Al-Qaeda forged [alliances](#) with the National Islamic Front in the Sudan and with the government of Iran and its associated terrorist group, Hezbollah, for the purpose of working together against their perceived common enemies in the West, particularly the United States."

In November 2011, a U.S. district court judge [found](#) that Iran was culpable for the bombings for contributing "material support" to Al-Qaeda essential for executing the attacks. According to the judge's [decision](#), "the government of Iran aided, abetted and conspired with Hezbollah, Osama bin

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Laden, and Al-Qaeda to launch large-scale bombing attacks against the United States by utilizing the sophisticated delivery mechanism of powerful suicide truck bombs... Prior to their meetings with Iranian officials and agents, bin Laden and Al-Qaeda did not possess the technical expertise required to carry out the embassy bombings in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam. The Iranian defendants, through Hezbollah, provided explosives training to bin Laden and Al-Qaeda and rendered direct assistance to Al-Qaeda operatives."

Iran was eager to cooperate further with Al-Qaeda, although Osama bin Laden was somewhat reluctant. The 9/11 Commission Report states, "Intelligence indicates the persistence of contacts between Iranian security officials and senior Al-Qaeda figures after Bin Laden's return to Afghanistan... Iran made a concerted effort to strengthen relations with Al-Qaeda after the October 2000 attack on the USS Cole, but was rebuffed because Bin Laden did not want to alienate his supporters in Saudi Arabia." Despite bin Laden's apparent reluctance, in March 2015, a U.S. federal judge found Iran, along with Sudan, liable in the bombing of the USS Cole in Yemen. The judge [stated](#) that "in the years leading up to the Cole bombing, Iran was directly involved in establishing Al-Qaeda's Yemen network and supported training and logistics for Al-Qaeda in the Gulf region.

## *A Dark Day*

### **Iran's Role in the September 11 Attacks**

The 9/11 Commission's chapter, "Assistance from Hezbollah and Iran to Al-Qaeda," documents Iran's facilitation of transit for Al-Qaeda members through its territory from 2000-2001. After listing various examples, the report [states](#), "In sum, there is strong evidence that Iran facilitated the transit of Al-Qaeda members into and out of Afghanistan before 9/11, and that some of these were future 9/11 hijackers. There is also circumstantial evidence that senior Hezbollah operatives were closely tracking the travel of some of these future muscle hijackers into Iran in November 2000."

At the same time, the report asserts, "We have found no evidence that Iran or Hezbollah was aware of the planning for what later became the 9/11 attack...We believe this topic requires further investigation by the U.S. government."

Further investigation has indeed revealed evidence suggesting Iran and Hezbollah were aware of the planning for 9/11. According to [The New York Times](#), "two defectors from Iran's intelligence service have testified that Iranian officials had 'foreknowledge of the 9/11 attacks,'" and one of the defectors also "claimed that Iran was involved in planning the attacks."

Those defectors have been called as witnesses in a case brought by families of the victims of the September 11 attacks. "The [court papers](#) also include sworn statements from staff members of the 9/11 Commission, including Dietrich Snell, a former top terrorism prosecutor at the Justice Department, who states in his affidavit that 'there is clear and convincing evidence the government of Iran provided material support to Al-Qaeda in the planning and execution of the 9/11 attack.' He said the support came in the form of 'facilitating the travel of members of the 9/11 conspiracy to and from Afghanistan and Pakistan.'"

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In December 2011, Judge George Daniels, presiding over the case, [ruled](#) that Iran was liable for the September 11 attacks because its support for Al-Qaeda allowed the attacks to occur. He also noted that Iran "continues to provide material support and resources to al-Qaida by providing a safe haven for al-Qaida leadership and rank-and-file al-Qaida members."

On March 9, 2016, the civil suit filed by two insurance companies and the families of the victims of the 9/11 attacks [ended](#) in a multibillion-dollar judgment against the government of Iran. U.S. District Judge George Daniels issued a default judgment against Iran. Earlier in the case, in 2011, Daniels [found](#), "The Islamic Republic of Iran provided material support or resources...to Al-Qaeda generally. Such material support or resources took the form of, inter alia, planning, funding, facilitation of the hijackers' travel and training, and logistics, and included the provision of services, money, laundering, training, expert advice or assistance, safehouses, false documentation or identification and/or transportation." According to attorneys on the plaintiff's committee, the ultimate judgment will be more than \$21 billion and would entitle plaintiffs to claim frozen Iranian assets as part of the settlement.

In a 2018 interview on Iranian state television, Mohammad-Javad Larijani, former secretary of the High Council for Human Rights, all but confirmed Iran's permissive relationship with Al-Qaeda, [stating](#), "[o]ur government agreed not to stamp the passports of some of them [members of Al-Qaeda] because they were on transit flights for two hours, and they were resuming their flights without having their passports stamped. However, their movements were under the complete supervision of the Iranian intelligence."

## Escape from Afghanistan

After the launch of Operation Enduring Freedom in October 2001 in response to the September 11 attacks, it is common knowledge that many members of Al-Qaeda, including Osama bin Laden, fled to the lawless Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Western Pakistan. What is less known is that the key elements of Al-Qaeda also escaped to Iran, in some cases, with Iranian authorities' assistance. In late 2001, for example, a senior Al-Qaeda operative based in Iran, [Mustafa Hamid](#), again negotiated with the Iranian government to relocate Al-Qaeda families to Iran.

In 2003, The Washington Post [reported](#) on a "decade-old relationship" between [Ayman al-Zawahiri](#), then Al-Qaeda's second-in-command, and Ahmad Vahidi, Iran's former Minister of Defense. In 2001, Vahidi reportedly provided "safe harbor for some Al-Qaeda leaders who were trapped in the mountains of Tora Bora" following negotiations with al-Zawahiri. According to a European intelligence analyst, "The [Quds] Force's senior leaders have longstanding ties to Al-Qaeda, and since the fall of Afghanistan, have provided some Al-Qaeda leaders with travel documents and safe haven."

[Under such arrangements](#), key members of Al-Qaeda's operational structure came to reside in Iran, including such infamous figures as [Saif al-Adel](#) (Security Chief), Saad bin Laden (Osama's son, Senior Operative), [Abdullah Ahmed Abdullah](#) (alias Abu Muhammad al-Masri, CFO of A.Q.) and [Abu Musab al-Zargawi](#) (future Chief of A.Q. in Iraq).

Nominally, Iran held these Al-Qaeda operatives under "[house arrest](#)," but in reality, Al-Qaeda was using Iran as a base of operations under the protection of the Quds Force. One Al-Qaeda member [noted](#) that there were several stages of restrictions, but in the end, it was "not really house arrest but rather a

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hospitality." By providing Al-Qaeda operatives such sanctuary, Iran has been in direct violation of [U.N. Security Council Resolution 1390](#), which prohibits the harboring of Al-Qaeda members.

Abu Hafs Mauritani, a leading figure of Al-Qaeda who was in Iran for roughly a decade after 9/11, [revealed](#) that Al-Qaeda members agreed not to carry out attacks from within Iran in exchange for maintaining a safe haven there. Over the next decade, as a means to further its own regional goals, the Iranian regime would permit Al-Qaeda to use its territory to plan terrorist attacks abroad as well as transit money, arms, and fighters across the region.

## *Continuity*

### **Iran's Covert Support for Al-Qaeda Since 9/11**

After the international community made the dissolution of Al-Qaeda a top priority, Iran downplayed its ties to the organization and at times portrayed itself as Al-Qaeda's enemy. However, according to Matthew Levitt and Michael Jacobson, analysts at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, "this [seemingly](#) tough stance served as cover for Tehran's ongoing dealings with the organization; the regime's support for Al-Qaeda continued throughout this period."

In 2010, as Commander of U.S. Central Command, General David Petraeus reported that Al-Qaeda [continues](#) to use Iran as a key facilitation hub, where facilitators connect Al-Qaeda's senior leadership to regional affiliates."

### **Iran's Harboring of Al-Qaeda**

Since 2001, Iran has harbored key Al-Qaeda operatives.

The group's operational structure [split](#) into two groups – Iran and Pakistan. The first part of Al-Qaeda's main operational structure was sent to Iran. This group was led by the head of Al-Qaeda's Security Committee, [Saif al-Adl](#), and the head of Al-Qaeda's Training Sub-Section, [Abdullah Ahmed Abdullah \(alias Abu Muhammad al-Masri\)](#). The group also came to include Osama bin Laden's two sons [Hamza](#) and Saad bin Laden.

In its 2010 "[Country Reports on Terrorism](#)," the U.S. State Department wrote that " Iran has repeatedly resisted numerous calls to transfer custody of its A.Q. detainees to their countries of origin or third countries for interrogation or trial. Iran also continued to fail to control the activities of some A.Q. members who fled to Iran following the fall of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan."

In January 2009, the U.S. Treasury Department [froze the assets](#) of four key Al-Qaeda operatives based in Iran, including Osama's eldest son Saad bin Laden. Regarding the action, former Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence, Stuart Levey, stated, "It is important that Iran give a public accounting of how it is meeting its international obligations to constrain Al-Qaeda."

In fact, as reported as far back as 2003, since Saad's "[arrival](#) in Iran... he has assumed a more active role in directing Al-Qaeda, and he has been identified as a senior leader." It is [believed](#) that Iran allowed Saad to relocate to Pakistan in late 2008.

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In March 2010, Al-Qaeda assisted Iran in negotiating the return of an Iranian diplomat who had been held captive by the Taliban in Pakistan for 15 months. This incident pointed to another dangerous sign of increased Iran-Al-Qaeda collaboration. In return for its help, Iran provided Al-Qaeda operatives based in its territory greater freedom of movement and loosened restrictions. As one example, Al-Qaeda's chief military strategist, [Saif al-Adel](#), was allowed by Iran to travel to Pakistan and open more contacts with other Al-Qaeda leaders. Remaining in Iran while possessing the freedom to travel "[suggests](#) that al-Adel and perhaps lower level Al-Qaeda figures now consider Iran a viable outpost, with fewer restrictions...." Furthermore, the "apparent easing of Iran's restrictions on Al-Qaeda... now opens up speculation that al-Adel could establish a 'satellite office' for the group in Iran."

In July 2018, a United Nations panel of experts, called the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, appointed pursuant to resolutions 1526 (2004) and 2253 (2015), found that, "Al-Qaida leaders in the Islamic Republic of Iran have grown more prominent, working with A[y]man al-Zawahiri and projecting his authority more effectively than he could previously."

In November 2020, Iran's ongoing harboring of Al-Qaeda operatives was [exposed](#) when the New York Times revealed that [Abdullah Ahmed Abdullah, alias Abu Muhammad Al-Masri](#), was gunned down in Tehran on August 7, 2020, along with his daughter, the widow of [Hamza Bin Laden](#). Iran initially sought to obfuscate the identity of the slain Al-Qaeda operative, reportedly A.Q.'s [second in command](#) at the time, with official media organs claiming the victims were a Lebanese history professor affiliated with Hezbollah and his daughter. Al-Masri allegedly ordered the Al-Qaeda bombings of U.S. embassies in Kenya in Tanzania on August 7, 1998. He was targeted for killing by two gunmen on a motorbike on the 22<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of those attacks. According to a senior U.S. official, Israeli agents acting at the behest of the U.S. carried out the assassination. Although initially under house arrest, al-Masri had reportedly been living freely in an upscale Tehran suburb since 2015. Israeli media cited intelligence [sources](#) that Iran provided a permissive environment from which al-Masri planned operations against Israeli and Jewish targets around the world.

There was [reporting](#) in 2020 that [Saif al-Adel](#), Al-Qaeda's second highest-ranking member after [Ayman al-Zawahiri](#), may have returned to Iran. Then, in 2021, the United Nations (U.N.) confirmed that Saif al-Adel [was residing somewhere in Iran](#). Adel is believed to be the top contender to succeed the slain former leader of Al-Qaeda Zawahiri, in which case he would demand the loyalty of Al-Qaeda affiliate leaders around the world, and be tasked with developing strategy and coordinating terrorist activities among them. Iran could provide Al-Qaeda's next leader with a safe-haven. Afghanistan, Yemen, and Syria are also thought to be possible destinations for the future leader of Al-Qaeda, though these locations are more vulnerable to U.S. (and Israeli) counterterrorist operations.

Some analysts suggest that it is unlikely the future leader of Al-Qaeda will live permanently in Iran, given the religious tensions that exist between the Sunni terrorist group and the Shia theocratic regime in Iran. They contend that it would be difficult for an operative, such as Adel, who has resided in Iran for many years, to gain the support of Al-Qaeda's Hittin Committee, which [coordinates the group's global leadership](#). Adel's cooperation with the government of Iran, which supports legions of Shia terrorist proxies in the Levant, including in areas where Al-Qaeda also competes for influence, [creates distrust](#) among Al-Qaeda's ranks.

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Al-Qaeda adheres to an extremist version of Islam that views Shia people as apostates, and it often carries out violent attacks against Shia communities. Iran's Shia proxies, on the other hand, are known for committing atrocities against Sunni communities. This reality, however, does not preclude mutual interests between Iran and Al-Qaeda. While there are clear tensions between the Iranian regime and the Sunni terrorist organization based on religious differences, there are even [stronger motivations for cooperation](#), namely both of their enmities toward the west and their interest in evicting the U.S. from the Middle East. They both share the aim of committing terrorist attacks against the U.S. and its partners and allies in the region, including Israel and Saudi Arabia.

Iran and Al-Qaeda will both have to determine whether the benefits of cooperation outweigh the costs. It remains to be seen whether Iran will [expel Adel or facilitate his rise](#), or whether Adel will voluntarily relocate. The same can be said for [Abd al-Rahman al-Maghrebi](#), Zawahiri's son-in-law and another top contender to succeed Zawahiri, also believed to be residing in Iran.

However, the idea that religious differences will obstruct relations between Iran and Al-Qaeda is clearly not corroborated by the evidence, which shows a long history of cooperation. These differences may factor into leadership succession, but they are not likely to hinder ongoing "[operational coordination](#)" between Al-Qaeda and Tehran's security forces, nor serve as the main consideration behind where the next emir should be located. Because Iran continues to be an effective operational headquarters for Al-Qaeda, religious differences can be disregarded.

## Terrorist Operations

From its Iranian safe haven, Al-Qaeda members have planned terrorist operations that have killed dozens of people, including Americans. From Iran, Saif al-Adl helped [relay](#) orders from Ayman al-Zawahiri to Tanzim Qaedat fi al-Jazeeratul Arab (the Al-Qaeda Organization on the Arabian Peninsula).

For example, on May 12, 2003, Al-Qaeda commandos [attacked residential compounds](#) housing foreign workers in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, killing 35 people, including 8 Americans. The attacks were reportedly planned and ordered by Al-Qaeda operatives in Iran, specifically Saif al-Adel and Sa'ad bin Laden. Through the U.N., the U.S. [conveyed](#) its "deep concern that individuals associated with Al-Qaeda have planned and directed the attack in Saudi Arabia from inside Iran."

According to [intelligence sources](#), Sa'ad was also involved in planning the April 11, 2002, suicide bombing of a Tunisian synagogue on April 11, 2002, that left 21 dead.

An intercepted letter reportedly sent to the IRGC in 2008 by Ayman al-Zawahiri, Al-Qaeda's former leader, revealed an even deeper relationship between Iran and Al-Qaeda than previously thought. The correspondence was sent after the September 19, 2008, attacks on the American embassy in Sana'a, Yemen, which killed 19 people. The Daily Telegraph states, "In the [letter](#), Al-Qaeda's leadership pays tribute to Iran's generosity, stating that without its 'monetary and infrastructure assistance' it would not have been possible for the group to carry out the terror attacks. It also thanked Iran for having the 'vision' to help the terror organization establish new bases in Yemen after Al-Qaeda was forced to abandon much of its terrorist infrastructure in Iraq and Saudi Arabia."

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Another prime example of the threat posed by Al-Qaeda's pipeline in Iran comes from an al-Qaeda plot to derail a train going from New York to Toronto that was foiled in April 2013. After two of the terrorists had been arrested, Royal Canadian Mounted Police official James Malizia [said](#), "the individuals were receiving support from al-Qaeda elements in Iran."

## Al-Qaeda in Iraq

Following the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, Iran also [provided safe haven](#) to Al-Qaeda operative Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who went on to establish Al-Qaeda in Iraq, an Al-Qaeda offshoot that went on to kill untold numbers of Iraqis and Americans.

Zarqawi initially operated under the protection of the IRGC and its elite Quds Brigade. According to intelligence officials, the time Zarqawi spent in Iran was crucial for rebuilding his network before relocating to Iraq. While the Iranian regime eventually succumbed to U.S. pressure, forcing Zarqawi to leave Iran and arresting many of his personnel, the damage had already been done: Zarqawi's network was already rebuilt, even though the Iranian authorities could have prevented such an outcome at any time.

Iran's support for Zarqawi and other Al-Qaeda leaders belies the assumption made by individuals in the intelligence community that Iran's arrest and deportation of Al-Qaeda members underscored Iran's cooperation in the U.S. War on Terror. In the words of terrorism analyst [Thomas Joscelyn](#), "Iran's behavior can be explained by way of analogy. Like a corrupt cop in league with the mob, the Iranians have been willing to clamp down and turn over small-time operatives, while allowing bigger players to operate with impunity." Iran provided Zarqawi with such operational impunity.

## Joint Operations

Documents leaked from U.S. military intelligence in 2010 "[outline](#) Iran's alleged role in brokering arms deals between North Korea and Pakistan-based militants, particularly militant leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Al-Qaeda." In this deal, Hekmatyar reportedly departed from Iran to North Korea in 2005 "to close a deal with the North Korean government to obtain remote-controlled rockets to use against coalition aircraft in Afghanistan." Further intelligence reports revealed a 2006 "Al-Qaeda-Hekmatyar plot to equip suicide bombers and car bombs to attack Afghan government and international targets - using cars and equipment obtained in Iran." And lastly, an April 2007 report detailed an operation in which "Al-Qaeda, 'helped by Iran,' bought 72 air-to-air missiles from Algeria and hid them in Zahedan, Iran, in order to later smuggle them into Afghanistan."

## *Recognition*

### **U.S. Acknowledges Iran-Al-Qaeda Alliance 2011-Present**

While the relationship between Iran and Al-Qaeda has long been public knowledge, until recently, the U.S. government had hesitated to formally link the two entities. This changed on July 28, 2011, when "the U.S. for the first time formally [accused](#) Iran of forging an alliance with Al-Qaeda in a pact that allows the terrorist group to use Iranian soil as a transit point for moving money, arms and fighters to its bases in Pakistan and Afghanistan."

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The Treasury Department provided evidence of an extensive fund-raising operation that draws from donors in Persian Gulf countries such as Kuwait and Qatar and uses Iran-based Al-Qaeda operatives. Six Al-Qaeda members were sanctioned for overseeing this network, headed by Syrian national Ezedin Abdul Aziz Khalil. The U.S. offered up to a [\\$10 million reward](#) for information leading to Khalil.

The Treasury designation is particularly notable because it accuses Iran of being "an [important](#) link in Al-Qaeda's financing and recruitment." It also states that the relationship dates back to 2005.

David Cohen, the Treasury Department's Former Undersecretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence, [said](#), "By exposing Iran's secret deal with Al-Qaeda allowing it to funnel funds and operatives through its territory, we are illuminating yet another aspect of Iran's unmatched support for terrorism."

In 2012, the U.S. government further exposed ties between Al-Qaeda and Iran. On February 16, 2012, [the Treasury Department designated the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security \(MOIS\) for its support of Al-Qaeda](#), as well as other terrorist organizations. According to Treasury, "MOIS has facilitated the movement of al Qa'ida operatives in Iran and provided them with documents, identification cards, and passports. MOIS also provided money and weapons to al Qa'ida in Iraq (AQI)... and negotiated prisoner releases of AQI operatives."

This was followed by an [additional designation action on October 18, 2012](#) "of Adel Radi Saqr al-Wahabi al-Harbi (al-Harbi), a key member of an al-Qa'ida network operating in Iran and led by Iran-based al-Qa'ida facilitator [Muhsin al-Fadhli \(al-Fadhli\)](#)." According to Treasury, "Al-Fadhli took over the Iran-based facilitation network from Yasin al-Suri in late 2011," and al-Harbi serves as his deputy. In this role, al-Harbi "facilitates the travel of extremists to Afghanistan or Iraq via Iran on behalf of al-Qa'ida, and is believed to have sought funds to support al-Qa'ida attacks." The network is also sending funds and fighters to support Al-Qaeda-affiliated elements in Syria. Cohen stated, "Today's action... further exposes al-Qa'ida's critically important Iran-based funding and facilitation network" and "Iran's ongoing complicity in this network's operation."

In its 2015 "[Country Reports on Terrorism](#)," the U.S. State Department wrote that "Iran remained unwilling to bring to justice senior al-Qa'ida (A.Q.) members it continued to detain and refused to publicly identify the members in its custody. Iran previously allowed A.Q. facilitators to operate a core facilitation pipeline through Iran since at least 2009, enabling A.Q. to move funds and fighters to South Asia and Syria."

This was followed by a New York Times report on September 17, 2015, that [revealed](#) Iran released five senior members of Al-Qaeda as part of a prisoner swap with Al-Qaeda's branch in Yemen, which was holding an Iranian diplomat Nour Ahmad Nikbakht. The release of Saif al-Adel was confirmed along with Abdul Khayr al-Misri, Abul Oassam, Sari Shabab, and Abu Mohamed al-Misri. The Iranian's release of these Al-Qaeda operatives prompted fears that they would join other terrorists in Syria planning attacks on the West, and provided further evidence of Iran's ongoing relationship with Al-Qaeda. Shortly after his release, Saif al-Adel was [reportedly](#) living in Syria in 2016.

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On July 20, 2016, the U.S. government again revealed Iran's collaboration with Al-Qaeda. The Treasury Department [blacklisted](#) three members of Al-Qaeda living in Iran, saying they had helped the jihadist group. [Yisra Muhammad Ibrahim Bayumi](#), mediated with Iranian authorities as of early 2015, the Treasury said, and helped Al-Qaeda members living in Iran. Bayumi has been residing in Iran since 2014 and had been able to facilitate Al-Qaeda funds transfers in 2015, suggesting he had some freedom to operate since moving to Iran. [Abu Bakr Muhammad Ghumayn](#) had control of the group's financing and organization inside Iran as of 2015.

## **U.N. Acknowledges Iran-Al-Qaeda Relationship**

In July 2018, a United Nations panel of experts [found](#) that Al-Qaeda leaders in Iran have "influenced events in the Syrian Arab republic, countering the authority of Abu Mohammed al-Jawlani and causing formations, breakaways and mergers of various Al-Qaeda-aligned groups in Idlib." The report also specifically named Al-Qaeda operatives Abu Muhammad Al-Masri and Sayf Al-Adl as key facilitators.

## **Bin Laden's Letters Reveal Ties to Iran**

In the weeks following the May 2, 2011 raid on Osama bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, by U.S. Navy SEALs, U.S. Intelligence sifted through the recovered materials in search of clues that would reveal ongoing Al-Qaeda plots, identities and locations of Al-Qaeda personnel, and other information of immediate importance. On May 20, 2015, and March 1, 2016, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) released a sizeable tranche of declassified documents, many of which further expose the relationship between Al-Qaeda and Iran.

In a 2007 letter to a terrorist named "[Karim](#)," bin Laden gives justification for why Iran should not be attacked: "Iran is our main artery for funds, personnel, and communication, as well as the matter of hostages...There is no need to fight with Iran unless you are forced to." Bin Laden strongly advises against any attack on Iran, going to great lengths to urge any ambitious operatives to seek advisement or permission before any form of reprisal against Iran.

Another bin Laden letter explains how Al-Qaeda members sought refuge in Iran after 9/11. In a [message](#) to Shaykh Abu Muhammad, he says, "Following the September 11 attacks...they entered Iran swiftly through various routes and not through the official gates. A month later, other brothers joined with their families...it is known that the entry into Iran without a passport is not considered a crime."

The former Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, Michael Flynn, alarmingly [revealed](#) in July 2016 that Al-Qaeda operatives based in Iran worked on chemical and biological weapons, according to a letter written to Osama bin Laden.

More documents from the raid indicate that Tehran offered Al-Qaeda [assistance](#)—specifically "money, arms... [and] training in Hezbollah camps in Lebanon, in exchange for striking American interests in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf." At the same time, the relationship was not without its [tensions](#)—for example, bin Laden ordered an Iranian diplomat to be kidnapped in exchange for the release of an Al-Qaeda commander.

## **Iran's Double Game: Support for Al-Qaeda in Syria**

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Iran has played an integral role in sustaining the Syrian regime amidst the ongoing civil war, which began as a popular uprising in March 2011. At the same time, though, Iran has tacitly supported the opposing sides of Syria's civil war by [allowing senior Al-Qaeda members operating from Iranian soil to facilitate the movement of Sunni fighters into Syria](#).

Sky News [reported](#) that Iran reached an agreement with Al-Qaeda members in which they "agreed not to turn their guns on the regime of Bashar al-Assad." Instead, al-Zawahiri said they are in Syria to "develop external attacks, construct and test improvised explosive devices and recruit Westerners to conduct operations."

In September 2015, the U.S. launched missile strikes against the Khorasan Group in Syria, a new Al-Qaeda cell that formed in 2012 to fight the Assad regime in Syria, and poses a "[direct threat](#)" to the U.S. homeland. [According](#) to the Obama administration, the Iranians have knowingly allowed the Al-Qaeda facilitators inside Iran to funnel support to Al Nusra, which houses the Khorasan operatives.

The record of Khorasan's leaders underscores Iranian support for al-Qaeda operations. The Khorasan Group was run by longtime Al-Qaeda leader [Muhsin al-Fadhli](#), who formerly operated the Al-Qaeda network in Iran with government approval. In 2012, when the Treasury Department sanctioned Fadhli, it [revealed](#) that he "began working with Al-Qaeda's Iran-based facilitation network in 2009 and was later arrested by the Iranians." However, the regime "subsequently released" Fadhli in 2011, and he quickly assumed Al-Qaeda's top post in the country. Treasury stated that Fadhli and his Al-Qaeda comrades in Iran worked "to move fighters and money through Turkey to support al-Qaeda affiliated elements in Syria." The Treasury Department also sanctioned Fadhli's deputy in Iran, [Adel Radi Saqr al-Wahabi al-Harbi](#), in the designation. On July 21, 2015, the Pentagon announced that Muhsin al-Fadhli was killed in an airstrike in Syria earlier in the month.

On February 6, 2014, the U.S. Treasury Department [designated](#) Jafar al-Uzbeki, a senior Uzbek member of Al-Qaeda, for moving fighters into Syria through Iran, charging that Mr. Jafar "[is part of an Al-Qaeda's network operating from Iran... with the knowledge of Iranian authorities](#)." According to Treasury, the network "[uses Iran as a transit point for moving funding and foreign fighters through Turkey to support Al-Qaeda-affiliated elements inside Syria, including the Al-Nusrah Front](#)." Additionally, [the network has moved fighters into Pakistan and Afghanistan from Iran](#).

Additionally, on September 24, 2014, the U.S. Treasury Department [added](#) Umar al Qatari, who has provided financial, material, and technological support for both Al Nusra and Al-Qaeda, to its list of specifically designated global terrorists. Al-Qatari has been tied to Muhsin al Fadhli, for delivering "thousands of dollars to al Fadhli in Iran."

On August 22, 2014, the Treasury Department designated a Saudi known as Snafi al-Nasr, another member of Al-Qaeda's Khorasan Group who had operated in Iran. The Treasury said that Nasr served as the "chief of Al-Qaeda's Iran-based extremist and financial facilitation network" in early 2013. Like Fadhli, Nasr [relocated](#) to Syria, where he became a senior member of the Al Nusra Front. It is likely that Iran had the power to stop terrorists such as Fadhli from leaving Iranian soil.

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Additionally, the United States sanctioned Yisra Muhammad Ibrahim Bayumi, who liaised with Iranian officials, in July 2016. As a part of the designation, the Treasury Department [stated](#) that Bayumi secured “funds from Syria for Al-Qaeda funds transfers.”

James Phillips, a senior research fellow at the Heritage Foundation, has [said](#) “the growing strength of al-Qaeda’s two offshoots in Syria has helped to preserve Syria’s Assad regime. By discouraging Western countries from aiding Syrian rebels, whose cause has been hijacked by Al-Qaeda. Iran’s double game in simultaneously fighting and enabling al-Qaeda raises disturbing questions about whether Tehran can be trusted to cooperate against the Islamic State or comply with the terms of any agreement on its nuclear program.”

## **U.S. Accuses Iran of Providing a New Operational Base for Al-Qaeda**

In [January 2021](#), U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo confirmed that [Abu Muhammad al-Masri](#) was killed on the streets of Tehran in August 2020. He also [revealed](#) how Iran’s regime “has given a new operational headquarters to Al-Qaeda” and how it has performed “many functions that were previously directed from Afghanistan and Pakistan, including authorization for attacks, propaganda, and fundraising.” Such [disclosures](#) are consistent with a report from Israel’s Channel 12 that al-Masri was “planning attacks on Israeli and Jewish Diaspora targets when he was killed.” At the same time, the U.S. government [sanctioned](#) Iran-based Al-Qaeda leaders as Specially Designated Global Terrorists under Executive Order 13224—they are [Muhammad Abbatay \(AKA Abd al-Rahman al-Maghrebi\)](#), who is the [son-in-law](#) of Al-Qaeda’s chief Ayman al-Zawahiri, and Sultan Yusuf Hasan al-Arif. Separately, members of the Al-Qaeda Kurdish Battalions, which operate on the border between Iran and Iraq, were also [sanctioned](#).

In December 2021, the Biden administration published the 2020 Country Reports on Terrorism. The State Department’s acting coordinator for counterterrorism [noted](#) at the time that “we remain deeply concerned about the fact that Al-Qaeda senior leaders continue to reside...in and around Tehran, and that there has been a facilitation of them that allows them to remain active as leaders within the Al-Qaeda global enterprise.” With the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, the plans of the Al-Qaeda leadership inside Iran has become an open question, with [reports](#) from U.S. Central Command that Al-Qaeda is rebuilding in Afghanistan and that their numbers were up slightly. How the Al-Qaeda leadership in Iran is contributing to that rejuvenation, particularly with Tehran’s improved relations with the Taliban in recent years, will be important to watch in 2022.

## *Conclusion*

### **A Long-Standing Alliance Against America**

Beginning in the early 1990s, Iran and Al-Qaeda initiated their Alliance Against America - a partnership that would only intensify over time. Prior to the September 11 attacks, Iran, primarily through its proxy Hezbollah, provided Al-Qaeda with critical training, explosives, and logistical support. Such support culminated in Iran facilitating the transit of some of the 9/11 hijackers through its territory.

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Following the September 11 attacks, Iran portrayed itself as an enemy of Al-Qaeda, but in reality, their relationship became even more deeply rooted. The Iranian regime, via the IRGC's elite Quds Force, provided key members of Al-Qaeda's leadership safe haven in Iran to continue their terrorist operations and avoid arrest by international authorities. Some Al-Qaeda operatives continue to reside in Iran.

With formal U.S. recognition in July 2011 that Iran has forged an alliance with Al-Qaeda and especially after the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, it is time that the U.S. government and its citizens recognize this Alliance Against America and demand that the Iranian regime stops providing sanctuary to one of America and the international community's deadliest foes.

## Al-Qaeda Leaders That Have Resided/Traveled in Iran



**Ayman al-Zawahiri (Deceased)**

Position: Head of Al-Qaeda

Connection: [Zawahiri](#), the current leader of Al-Qaeda, has long maintained ties to Iran. Throughout the 1990s, as the leader of Egyptian Islamic Jihad, Zawahiri was a [frequent guest](#) in Iran of Ali Fallahian, Iran's then-Minister of Intelligence, and Ahmad Vahidi, then-head of the IRGC's Quds Force. In 2003, The Washington Post reported on this "[decade-old relationship](#)" between Zawahiri and Vahidi, who had since become Iran's Minister of Defense. Zawahiri's relationship with Vahidi was reportedly instrumental in achieving safe harbor for Al-Qaeda

operatives seeking sanctuary from the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001.



**Abd al-Rahman al-Maghrebi**

Position: Emir of Al-Qaeda's Media Arm Al-Sahab

Connection: The U.S. government accused Iran of harboring al-Maghrebi in January 2021, and revealed al-Maghrebi "is responsible for overseeing al-Qaeda's activities worldwide."

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**Atiyah Abd al-Rahman (Deceased)**

Position: Served as Al-Qaeda's operation leader, became 2nd in command following bin Laden's death

Connection: Al-Rahman planned attacks on Western targets on behalf of bin Laden. At some point after 9/11, Rahman returned to Afghanistan, where he liaised between its groups in Iraq, Iran, and Algeria. Bin Laden then appointed Rahman as an emissary to Iran, which enabled Rahman to [travel](#) freely to and out of Iran. On August 22, 2011, Rahman was [killed](#) by a CIA drone strike.



**Saif al-Adel**

Position: Chief of Military Operations of Al-Qaeda

Connection: Saif al-Adel disappeared after 9/11 and later [re-emerged](#) in Iran with other leading Al-Qaeda members under the protection of the Quds Force. From Iran, al-Adel masterminded terrorist attacks abroad. In September 2015, Al-Adel was reportedly one of the senior al-Qaeda leaders released from Iranian custody in exchange for an Iranian diplomat kidnapped in Yemen. There are strong indications that al-Adel then [relocated](#) to Syria. But there are other [reports](#) al-Adel may still be in Iran. As of August 2016, there is a \$5 million reward for information leading to his capture, which the U.S. [doubled](#) to \$10 million in 2018.

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**Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (Deceased)**

Position: Head of Al-Qaeda in Iraq

Connection: Following the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, Iran [provided safe haven](#) to Al-Qaeda operative Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who went on to establish Al-Qaeda in Iraq. Zarqawi initially operated under the protection of the IRGC and its elite Quds Brigade. According to intelligence officials, the time Zarqawi spent in Iran was crucial for [rebuilding](#) his network before relocating to Iraq. Al-Zarqawi was [killed](#) in a 2006 U.S. drone strike.



**Saad Bin Laden (Deceased)**

Position: Senior Al-Qaeda Operative, Terrorist Operations Planner

Connection: Under the auspices of the Quds Force, Osama's son Saad reportedly [fled to Iran](#) to escape the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan. In Iran, he assumed a more senior and active role in Al-Qaeda, including planning terrorist operations abroad. As of 2008, the U.S. government [believed](#) Saad might have relocated to Pakistan with the assent of Iran. In 2010 Saad bin Laden reportedly [traveled](#) from Iran to Pakistan. In September 2012, Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri confirmed in a videotape that Saad was [killed](#) in a drone strike.

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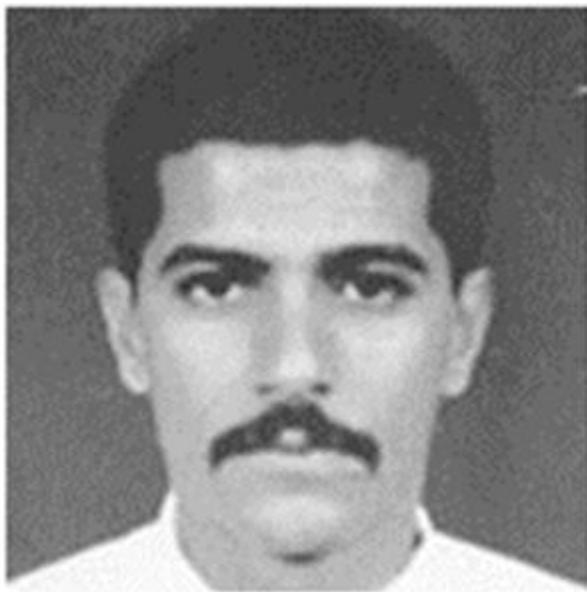


**Hamza bin Laden (Deceased)**

Position: Bin Laden's Son, formerly believed to be the next Al-Qaeda leader

Connection: Hamza moved to Iran in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, where he [spent](#) roughly ten years between 2001 and 2011. Hamza was sponsored by Tehran, where his ideology was shaped by a special team of Taliban ideologues. In 2008, while living in Iran, Hamza appeared in a videotape calling for the destruction of "Britain and its allies," also attacking the United States, France, and Demark. In 2010, news came out that Iran was indeed hosting Bin Laden's family in a high-end residency complex in Tehran, including Hamza bin Laden.

His whereabouts since his reported release in 2011 were unknown, but [reports](#) indicated he was being groomed for a leadership role in Al-Qaeda. In 2019, U.S. officials [confirmed](#) they had intelligence that Hamza Bin Laden was dead.



**Abdullah Ahmed Abdullah (Deceased)**

Position: Chief Financial Officer of Al-Qaeda

Connection: Abdullah, one of Al-Qaeda's top operational deputies, reportedly [arrived](#) in Iran shortly after the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan under the protection of the IRGC's elite Quds Force. In 2015 Abdullah Ahmed Abdullah was reportedly one of the operatives [released](#) by Iran in exchange for an Iranian diplomat. In the [2015 Country Reports on Terrorism](#), the State Department describes Abdullah as Al-Qaeda's most experienced operational planner. Abdullah was [reportedly](#) gunned down in a targeted killing by Israeli agents acting on behalf of the U.S. in a Tehran suburb on August 7, 2020.

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**Abdullah Muhammad Rajab Abd al-Rahman (alias Ahmad Hasan Abu al-Khayr al-Masri and Abdul Khayr al-Masri) (Deceased)**

Position: Deputy leader of Al-Qaeda

Connection: After the fall of Afghanistan in 2001, Abd al-Rahman fled to Iran. In 2015, Abu Khayr al-Masri was reportedly one of the five jihadists who were reportedly released from Iranian custody in exchange for an Iranian diplomat who had been kidnapped in Yemen.



**Suleiman Abu Ghaith (Imprisoned)**

Position: Official Al-Qaeda Spokesman

Connection: The notorious Kuwaiti preacher reportedly arrived in Iran in early 2002. In 2010, Iran reportedly allowed Abu Ghaith to return to Afghanistan in exchange for an Iranian diplomat who was kidnapped by the Taliban in Pakistan in 2008.

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Ezedin Abdel Aziz Khalil

Position: Al-Qaeda Facilitator and Financier in Iran

Connection: Khalil has lived and operated in Iran since 2005 under agreement between al-Qaeda and the Iranian government. In his role as Al-Qaeda's representative in Iran, Khalil works with the organization's senior leaders to transfer money and recruits via Iranian territory to Pakistan and Afghanistan. The U.S. is offering up to a \$10 million reward for information leading to Khalil—the first time such money is being offered for an Al-Qaeda financier



Muhsin al-Fadhli (Deceased)

Position: Leader of Al-Qaeda in Iran, head of the Khorasan Group in Syria

Connection: Al-Fadhli is an Iran-based senior Al-Qaeda facilitator and financier. Al-Fadhli began working with Al-Qaeda's Iran-based facilitation network in 2009. In 2013 Al-Fadhli reportedly arrived in Syria, where he became a leader of the Khorasan group, a cadre of Al-Qaeda operatives who were sent to Syria to plot attacks against the West. Al-Fadhli was killed in a U.S. airstrike in Syria on July 8, 2015.

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Adel Radi Saqr al-Wahabi al-Harbi (Deceased)



Position: Deputy to Muhsin al-Fadhl; Logistics for the Khorasan Group, an affiliate of al-Qaeda fighting in Syria.

Connection: In 2013, the Department of Justice said that al-Harbi worked as a logistics person, facilitating "the travel of extremists to Afghanistan or Iraq via Iran on behalf of al-Qaeda and is believed to have sought funds to support al-Qaeda attacks." Al Harbi joined Al-Qaeda's network in Iran in 2011. On April 17, 2015, he was reported to have been killed in fighting against Syrian forces while serving as a member of the Khorasan Group, an affiliate of al-Qaeda fighting in Syria.

## *Key Resources*

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