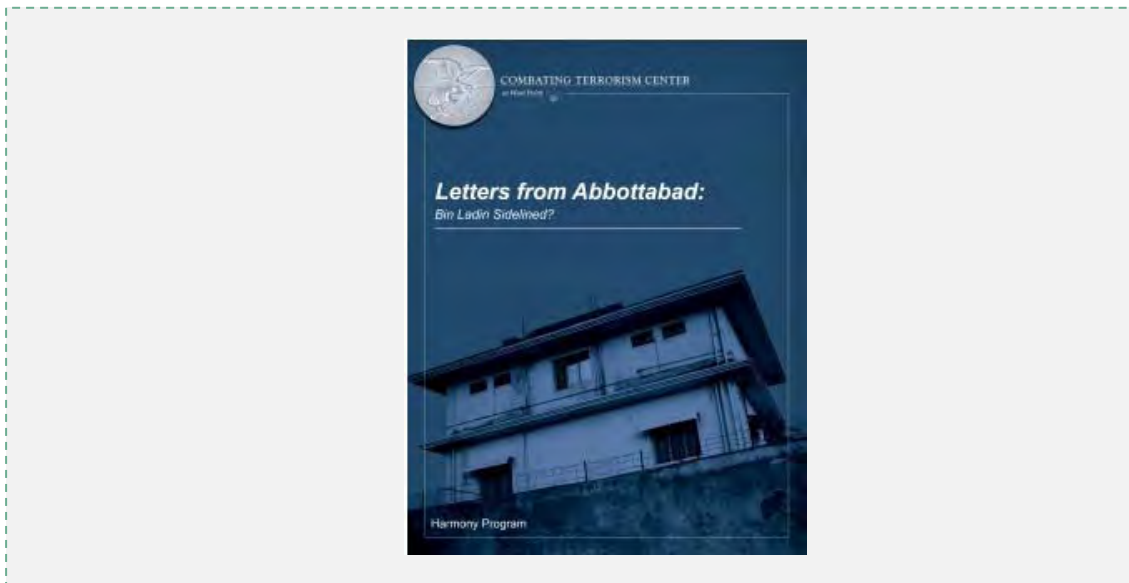




June 14, 2012

**Documents captured by the United States army in an Al-Qaeda safe house in Pakistan expose the ambivalent relations between Al-Qaeda and Iran. However, to further its own interests, Iran permits Al-Qaeda to use its territory to transfer operatives, funds and weapons to focal terrorist arenas in the Middle East and beyond.**



The front cover of the CTC analysis of 17 internal Al-Qaeda communications.

## Overview

1. On May 3, 2012, a year after Osama bin Laden was killed by an elite navy SEAL team unit, the United States released 17 de-classified documents captured in an Al-Qaeda safe house in Abbottabad, Pakistan. They were issued in both the original and in English translation and an analysis in a book entitled *Letters from Abbottabad: Bin Laden Sidelined?*, published by the Combating Terrorism Center located at West Point.<sup>1</sup>
2. The 17 letters were part of 6,000 documents found in computers and on hard drives taken from a secret bin Laden compound in Abbottabad. They were written between

<sup>1</sup> For the original letters see <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/letters-from-abbottabad-bin-laden-sidelined>

2006 and 2011, and include electronic letters and drafts written by bin Laden and other Al-Qaeda leaders.

3. The documents include correspondence from 2009 and 2010 between Osama bin Laden and a senior Al-Qaeda figure (aka Atiah) dealing with the release of Al-Qaeda operatives detained in Iran, and Al-Qaeda's view of Iran in general. The letters clearly reflect Al-Qaeda's grave suspicions of Iran, which it regards as an infidel Shiite country headed by a gang of criminals whose policy towards Al-Qaeda is hypocritical.

4. Shiite Iran and Sunni Al-Qaeda **have a traditionally ambivalent relationship, the result of deep ideological and religious differences.** However, the two also **collaborate on operational matters to promote common interests.** One of Iran's goals in collaborating with Al-Qaeda is to prevent it from operating against Iran; another is to exploit its operational capabilities (and those of the global jihad) in the Middle East and around the globe to **attack their mutual enemies, i.e., the United States, Israel and the Jewish people.**

5. The letters show that the complex relations between the two have **improved since 2009 when Iran released Al-Qaeda operatives and relatives of bin Laden who had been detained several years previously.** A practical expression of the improved relations was **Iran's permitting an Al-Qaeda network to operate an important route in Iran from Afghanistan and Pakistan to focal points of terrorism in the Middle East and beyond. The network dealt with transferring operatives and funds** while the Iranian regime turned a blind eye and perhaps even provided practical support (despite Al-Qaeda's terrorist activities in countries like Syria and Iraq which harm Iranian interests, especially in view of regional upheavals).

6. In conclusion, Iran is important to Al-Qaeda for **advancing its logistic activities** (transferring operatives and funds) and **as a base for its operational activities,** which is why the Al-Qaeda leadership **regards the network in Iran as an important asset.** That is especially true in view of regional upheavals and **Al-Qaeda leadership's desire to strengthen its foothold in the area,** and in view of the Al-Qaeda's having been weakened in Pakistan by the targeted killings of many of its senior leaders there (the latest of whom was Abu Yahya al-Libi) and **the possibility that the release of detainees would strengthen its ranks.**

## The Documents Relating to the Release of Al-Qaeda Detainees and Al-Qaeda-Iran Relations

7. On **June 11, 2009**, a senior Al-Qaeda figure known as **Atiah**<sup>2</sup> sent a letter, apparently to **Osama bin Laden** (referred to in the letter as "our honored sheikh"). It covered three pages and related to the release of Al-Qaeda operatives held in Iran.<sup>3</sup>

8. **The main points relating to Iran were the following:**

1) Atiah reports to bin Laden that he is bringing him the good news: **the Iranians released a group of "brothers"** [i.e., Al-Qaeda operatives detained in Iran]. **They had, he says, begun releasing one group at a time the previous month**, thanks to Allah. He later notes that the **Iranians told the Al-Qaeda liaison person** that they would hand over [i.e., release] Azmarai's relatives, possibly within a week [according to the CTC analysis, and as can be seen from an document below, "Azmarai" is Osama bin Laden].

2) According to Atiah's letter, the Iranians leaked information to some of the released detainees that **they would free more Al-Qaeda operatives in the near future**. He also said the Iranians had speeded the release of the "brothers" [i.e., Al-Qaeda operatives], noting that **those who had been released were middle-level operatives**.

3) He then hypothesizes that **the Iranians released the Al-Qaeda operatives because of Al-Qaeda's "escalation efforts, which include political and media 'verbal' and the threat which we sent to them, and the apprehension of their associate, the [Iranian] trade deputy in the consulate in Peshawar** [a reference to Heshmatollah Attarzadeh Niyaki, abducted in November 2008 and released in March 2010]; and other things they saw from us, **brought fear to them** could be one of the reasons for a speedy process on their behalf."

4) Atiyah expresses anger at the Iranians [whom he calls "criminals"] for not having sent Al-Qaeda messages about the release and not even having spoken to any of the "brothers" [i.e., detained Al-Qaeda operatives] about it. He says there is nothing strange about it, it is the Iranians' **"mentality and method**. They don't want to show that they are negotiating with us or reacting to our pressure,

<sup>2</sup> **Atiyyatullah**, a pseudonym of **Jamal Ibrahim Eshtiwi al-Misrati**; others include **Sheikh Mahmoud** (under which name Osama bin Laden wrote to him, see below) and **Abu Abd al-Rahman**. He was born in the city of Misrati in Libya in 1970, studied the Islamic religion in Mauritania and joined the jihad in Alteria. At the end of the 1990s he went to Afghanistan, and was killed in Pakistan in a drone attack on August 22, 2011. According to the CTC, he and not Ayman al-Zawahiri, as is customarily believed, was **closest to bin Laden**.

<sup>3</sup> CTC letter number SOCOM-2012-0000012-HT.

**they just do these acts to appear as if it is one-sided and as a matter of initiative on their behalf. We ask God to repel their evil... Amen."**

- With regards to the Iranian relationship and the problem with our detained brothers, we bring to you good news that they released a group of brothers in the last month (one group at a time), and all thanks to God the mighty. And the following individuals arrived to us:

- `Abd-al-Muhayman Al-((Masri) and his family.
- Salim Al-Masri (from Jihad group) and his family.
- Abu Suhayb Al-((Makki) (originally from Yemen; during the crusaders offensive he was accompanying Sheikh Aba Sulayman Al-Makki Al-((Harbi))), and his family.
- Abu Suhayb Al-((Iraqi)), and his family.
- Al Zubair Al-((Maghribi)) (A brother who worked with the Libyan fighting group), and his family.
- And on the way now (maybe he is in Quetta or close by, the important thing is that he crossed the Iranian borders, and asks God to keep him safe) Khalifah Al-Masri, and his family.

**CTC translation of a section of the letter written on June 11 about Iran's release of Al-Qaeda operatives**

9. A 49-page letter<sup>4</sup> was sent by bin Laden to Sheikh Mahmoud (i.e., al-Misrati). It is undated but **in our assessment was written in 2010** because it expresses condolences for the deaths of Abu Omar al-Baghdadi and Abu Hamza al-Mahaja, who died in targeted killings in April 2010. The section of the letter dealing with Iran refers to the following (ITIC emphasis throughout):

1) Bin Laden notes that "Brother Abdallah al-Halabi informed me that my family in **Iran is on the way to come to the brothers in Pakistan or Waziristan**, so as a precaution and to safeguard everyone, we have to assume that their arrival will be different from what we are used to when our brothers arrived who were coming from Iran in the past..."

2) **He also writes that "my son Ladin has been allowed by the Iranians to exit Iran and go to Syria as a show of good will to the rest of the detainees."** He asks for caution to be taken when they are released **so that they not be followed**. He then says that "it is preferred that we communicate with the Iranians if they release my family and no not release my daughter Fatimah, **as they promised that after the release of their prisoner with us** [apparently the Iranian trade deputy abducted by Al-Qaeda] that **they will release my family, which includes my daughter Fatimah**, and she is connected to her husband,

<sup>4</sup> CTC letter number SOCOM-2012-000009-HT

and it is not fair to separate women from their husbands, so she should be released with her husband and his other[i.e., second] wife Um Hafs."

10. The issue of Al-Qaeda's relations with Iran was noted in other letters:

1) An announcement was also sent to Al-Qaeda leader Sheikh Mahmoud deals with the transfer of Al-Qaeda operatives to Iran. It appears in a 4-page document dated August 27, 2010, and states that "With regard to what you had mentioned in a previous message, that some brothers [i.e., operatives] may go to Iran [perhaps from Pakistan] as part of a plan to protect the brother, thus I see that Iran is not suitable..."<sup>5</sup>

2) Another letter to Atiah Allah (written October-November 2006) deals with financing the Army of Islam (an Al-Qaeda-affiliated network in the Gaza Strip). In response to enquiries about finances, Atiah Allah says that the Palestinian Islamic Jihad receives money from Iran, **despite the fact that it is an infidel Shiite country.**<sup>6</sup>

## Relations between Al-Qaeda and Iran

### Overview

11. The release of the Al-Qaeda operatives held in Iran referred to in the documents and Al-Qaeda's suspicion of and hatred for Iran expressed in the **letters reflect a clearly ambivalent relationship.**

12. Their relations are complex and **based on interests** (some of them conflicting) on the one hand and their **basic religious and ideological differences** on the other:

1) **Al-Qaeda** is a jihadist Sunni organization which regards **Shiite Iran as an infidel country**, hostile, criminal and hypocritical toward Al-Qaeda. On the other hand, Al-Qaeda views Iran as a very important two-way route from Afghanistan and Pakistan (Waziristan, mentioned in the documents) to the Middle East, and from there to other areas around the world. Al-Qaeda is well aware that **the situation provides the Iranian regime with leverage against it:** it can detain Al-Qaeda operatives whenever it pleases and stall their movements, release them and/or enable them to operate from Iran. On the other hand, as revealed by the letters and documents, **Al-Qaeda feels it can also exert pressure on Iran and influence its considerations.**

<sup>5</sup> CTC letter number SOCOM-2012-0000003-HT.

<sup>6</sup> Atiah Allah refers to Shiite Iran as "rejectionist," that is, it rejects the legitimacy of three out of four of the first Caliphs of Islam.

2) **Radical Shiite Iran** regards Al-Qaeda, despite its anti-Western nature, as a hostile organization fundamentally opposed to the ideology of the Islamic Revolution. Therefore, Iran has a basic interest in preventing Al-Qaeda from acting against it. Iran also wants to prevent Al-Qaeda's ideas and activities from seeping into the country and to prevent it from holding subversive activities for the Sunni population living in areas near the Iran-Afghanistan border. **On the other hand**, in recent months Iran has invested a great deal of effort in attacking Israeli-Jewish and Arab targets abroad, so far without success. Thus it would like to **exploit Al-Qaeda's anti-Western stance and avail itself of the organization's operational-terrorist capabilities**, using them against their common enemies, i.e., Israelis and Jews, Arabs and Westerners. At the same time, they want to **preserve the utmost secrecy**, to keep from being exposed to pressure and responses from the United States and the West. .

13. Based on a complex system of considerations, Iran's willingness to provide Al-Qaeda operatives with a safe haven on Iranian soil and to allow them to operate from its territory **was subject to ups and downs in the past decade** (see below). However, beginning in 2009 (as noted in the documents), Iran secretly began releasing Al-Qaeda operatives detained in previous years and allowed Al-Qaeda to use its territory for operational purposes. **Al-Qaeda exploited that geographical-political advantage to transfer operatives, funds and weapons from Afghanistan and Pakistan to focal points of terrorist activity in the Middle East and beyond.** However, in our assessment, it is possible that recent publications about Iran's ties to Al-Qaeda's logistic network affected the organization's freedom of activity to a certain extent.

## Iranian Aid to Al-Qaeda

### The Period Before the 9/11 Attacks

14. **According to a ruling handed down by a New York court in December 2011, Iran, in collaboration with Hezbollah, trained Al-Qaeda operatives who, among other activities, helped carry out the terrorist attack on the establish African American embassies in Nairobi and Dar es-Salaam in 1998.** The ruling stated that in the 1990s Iran regarded Al-Qaeda as a useful tool for attacking American interests, and **that Iran encouraged and aided the connection between Hezbollah and Osama bin Laden/Al-Qaeda to carry out large-scale attacks against the United**

**States.** The judge also ruled that technical support from Iran and Hezbollah was critically important for carrying out **Al-Qaeda's attacks on the American embassies in east Africa.**<sup>7</sup>

15. The **American 9/11 Commission Report** contains a section dealing with Iranian aid to Hezbollah and Al-Qaeda. The Commission concluded that while there was no proof that Iran or Hezbollah knew of the plan to attack the United States, there was evidence that **Iran did provide Al-Qaeda with operational support, especially in facilitating the transit of terrorist operatives through its territory.** Paragraph 126 of the report reads (ITIC emphasis):

"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 also is circumstantial evidence that senior Hezbollah operatives were closely **tracking the travel of some of these future muscle hijackers into Iran in November 2000.**"

16. The Report also states that **detainees interrogated by the United States reported that the Iranians had agreed to facilitate the passage of Al-Qaeda operatives to Afghanistan through its territory, and Iranian border guards refrained from stamping the passports of Al-Qaeda operatives as they crossed the border,** because evidence of travel through Iran would have prevented the hijackers from obtaining visas at American embassies abroad or gaining entry into the United States. According to the Report, there was evidence that **several operatives involved in hijacking the planes on September 11 used that route.**

### **Allowing Operatives Passage through Iran (2001-2003)**

17. At the end of 2001, after the attack on the Twin Towers, American military involvement **toppled Al-Qaeda's infrastructure in Afghanistan. Most of the Al-Qaeda operatives** fled and **many of them, including Osama bin Laden, found refuge in Pakistan, while some went to the Middle East and the West. Iran was prepared to receive them and/or allow them passage through its territory en route to other locations.**

18. Around October 2001 Iran sent a delegation to Afghanistan to promise safe passage to Iran for Al-Qaeda operatives and their families. **The activity was undertaken by the Quds Force of Iran's Revolutionary Guards.** American

---

<sup>7</sup> According to Sky News, February 15, 2012.

administration experts testifying in federal court at a lawsuit brought by families of 9/11 victims said that **Iran had given asylum to Al-Qaeda leaders and operatives after the American invasion of Afghanistan.**<sup>8</sup>

19. **Between 2001 and 2003 the Iranians facilitated the transit through its territory of several hundred Al-Qaeda-affiliated operatives.** In 2002 Al-Qaeda established a "management council" in Iran to support Al-Qaeda leaders in Pakistan and helped organize groups of militants to oppose the al-Karazai regime in Afghanistan. It was reported that there were hundreds of Al-Qaeda operatives in Iran. The ITIC reported that among them senior operatives including **Saif al-Adel** (from Egypt), **Abu Khaif** (from Mauritania) and **Abu Musab al-Zarqawi** (from Jordan), who was killed by the Americans in Iraq. **At the same time, the Quds Force provided asylum in Iran for the families of Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri.**<sup>9</sup>

### **Al-Qaeda Operatives Detained by Iran (2003-2009)**

20. Al-Qaeda's use of Iran as a highway worried the United States. According to American sources, at the end of 2002-beginning of 2003 the United States held direct talks with Iran and **demanding that the Iranians expel the Al-Qaeda operatives in their country.** The Iranians refused, but the Iranian minister of intelligence accepted responsibility for liaising with them.<sup>10</sup> Apparently the American pressure did influence the Iranian regime, because early in 2003 Iran detained the operatives' network. Some of them were **imprisoned** while others were unofficially held under **house arrest** and enjoyed relative freedom of action.<sup>11</sup>

### **Release of the Operatives and the Renewal of Their Activity in Iran**

21. **In 2009-2010 Iran released the Al-Qaeda operatives,** requiring them to keep a low profile. At the end of 2010 the London Times reported that **Iran had released senior Al-Qaeda operatives from prison so that they could help rebuild the organization's damaged infrastructure.** Among those released were **Saif al-Adel**, who is on the FBI's wanted list for his involvement in bombing of the American embassies in east Africa, **Suleiman Abu Ghait** (a Kuwaiti accused of being Al-Qaeda's spokesman at the time of the 9/11 attacks) and **Abu Kheir al-Masri** (or Abu Muhammad al-Masri), one of Ayman Zawahiri's top aides, who was also involved in the

---

<sup>8</sup> Iran911case.com.

<sup>9</sup> Longwarjournal, October 13, 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Seth G. Jones, "Al Qaeda in Iran," *Foreign Affairs*, January 29, 2012.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.



bombings of the American embassies in east Africa. **Osama bin Laden's relatives were also released**, proved by the documents found in the safe house by the Americans.

22. The activity of the Al-Qaeda leaders' network in Iran **continued throughout 2011**. According to various published reports, it was headed by **a senior operative named Izz al-Din Abd al-Aziz Khalil, aka Yassin al-Suri**. The network was used to **move terrorist operatives and funds from the Middle East to Afghanistan and from Afghanistan back to focal points of terrorism in the Middle East and beyond**.<sup>12</sup> Around March-April 2012 ties between Al-Qaeda and Iran were revealed in the media and in our assessment, to a certain degree curtailed the extent of Al-Qaeda's freedom of activity in Iran.

---

<sup>12</sup> Dore Gold, "The Secret Al-Qaeda-Iranian Collaboration: the Significance for Israel," (Hebrew), JCPA.org.il website; Jones, "Al-Qaeda." According to the Washington Post, July 28, 2011 "The allegations of a Iran-to-Pakistan network center on a Syrian operative, Ezedin Abdel Aziz Khalil. Khalil has directed the flow of cash and recruits from Persian Gulf states to Pakistan through Iran, according to U.S. officials and documents."