



February 28, 2013

## Iran as an exporter of terrorism and subversion: Nigerian security services reported the arrest of a terrorist squad that had been trained in Iran and was planning an attack on U.S. and Israeli/Jewish targets in Lagos, Nigeria



The main suspect in the affair, a Shi'ite cleric named Abdullahi Mustapha Berende  
([www.longwarjournal.org](http://www.longwarjournal.org), February 20, 2013)

### Overview

1. On February 20, 2013, Nigeria's Department of State Security Service announced the exposure of an **Iranian-backed** terrorist squad. It was planning to carry out **an attack on U.S. and Israeli/Jewish targets in Lagos**, the business capital and largest city in Nigeria. The three-member squad was led by a **Nigerian Shi'ite cleric who had been trained in Iran and received instruction in IED manufacture** (punchng.com, February 21, 2013).
2. The arrest of the Nigerian squad is yet another example of the intensive subversive and terrorist activities carried out by Iran across the globe, including in Africa. These activities are aimed **not only against Israel** but also **against the United States** (for instance, a terrorist and espionage network exposed in Azerbaijan in 2012 was planning to hit Israeli and U.S. targets) **and its Arab allies** (such as Saudi Arabia and Bahrain).

3. The modus operandi exposed by Nigeria's intelligence services is particularly noteworthy for **the use made by Iran of Shi'ite populations in various countries across the globe** (in the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, and Central Asia). **For its missions of subversion and terrorism, Iran recruits ordinary citizens or clerics who study at Iranian religious seminaries, universities, and education institutions.** Studying in Iran is meant to assist in the creation of an ideological, socio-religious, and cultural infrastructure within the Shi'ite communities for the purpose of spreading Khomeini's brand of radical Shi'ite Islam.<sup>1</sup>

### Indoctrination of African students



African students who study in the Iranian city of Qom with a poster condemning the United States and Israel and supporting the Iranian regime at a Jerusalem Day demonstration (September 18, 2009). Left: African students carrying a poster condemning Israel and the United States and waving (left) the Hezbollah flag. Right: a poster written in Hausa, a language spoken in the predominantly Muslim northern part of Nigeria. At the center is a Nigerian flag whose pole touches the poster (Fars News Agency).

### The terrorist squad and its activity in Nigeria

4. The squad was headed by **Abdullahi Mustapha Berende**, a 50-year-old Shi'ite cleric and leader of a Shi'ite sect in Ilorin,<sup>2</sup> Nigeria. He was arrested in December 2012. The two other squad members were **Sulaiman Olayinka Saka** and **Saheed Adermi Adewumi**. Another suspect, **Bunyamin Yusuf**, is said to be at large. The squad

<sup>1</sup> For an example of how educational, religious, and social activities are used as a vehicle for exporting subversion and terrorism, see our April 18, 2012 Information Bulletin: "[Latin America as a Terrorist, Subversive, Criminal Arena for Iran and Hezbollah](#)".

<sup>2</sup> Ilorin is one of Nigeria's largest cities and the capital of Kwara State, in the southwestern part of Nigeria.

members were gathering information on Israelis and Americans living in Nigeria (punchng.com, February 21, 2013).

5. Marilyn Ogar, deputy director of public relations in Nigeria's State Security Service, gave the following details about the activity of the terrorist squad:

a. **The squad leader's recruitment, training, and handling:** Berende, a Shi'ite Muslim preacher, **stayed in Iran in 2006, during which time he took a six-month *da'wah* course at Imam Khomeini University.** While in Iran, he was recruited by "some Iranian elements". When he came back to Iran for additional studies in 2011, **he received training in the use of the AK-47 assault rifle and pistols as well as in IEDs. He was invited by his handlers to Dubai for further briefing in April 2012.**

b. **Creating a terrorist squad:** Berende's mission was to establish a terrorist squad in the southwestern part of Nigeria, **with particular emphasis on the city of Lagos.** In his bid to establish the terrorist squad, Berende recruited the three other suspects (punchng.com, February 21, 2013).

c. **The missions and their execution:** Berende was asked by the Iranians **to collect intelligence on public places and hotels frequented by Americans and Israelis.** He admitted that he personally took photographs of **the Israeli cultural center (Chabad House) in Lagos, which he sent to his handlers** (punchng.com, February 21, 2013). In addition, Berende collected information on USAID offices in Lagos (news2.onlinenigeria.com, February 21, 2013).

d. **Communications:** Berende's Iranian handlers directed him to secure their communication by using codes to represent targets, e.g. Uncle (Israel), Aunt (America).

e. **Payment:** Berende received \$4,000 from the Iranians upon completion of his training in Iran; €3,500 in April 2012 at the meeting in Dubai; and another \$20,000, out of which he used \$10,000 to rent and furnish a house in Lagos as well as a shop for his business. He also spent \$5,000 to cover visa processing expenses (punchng.com, February 21, 2013).

## Iran's reaction

6. **Iran, as usual, denied the allegations** of having trained operatives to carry out attacks on Israeli and U.S. targets. **Hossein Amir-Abdollahian**, Iran's deputy foreign minister for Arab and African affairs, said that the allegations against Iran were made up by the enemies of Iran and Nigeria because of the good relationship that the two countries enjoy. He went on to say that Iran and Nigeria have a close friendship, and that despite the extensive efforts made in recent years by their enemies to disrupt that friendship, the relations and cooperation are only improving (Press TV, February 22, 2013).



Iran's deputy foreign minister for Arab and African affairs: the accusations against Iran were made up by the enemies of Iran and Nigeria (Press TV, February 22, 2013)

## Appendices

7. Two appendices follow:

- a. **Appendix I:** Iran's political and economic activity in Nigeria
- b. **Appendix II:** Exposure of an arms shipment from Iran to Nigeria (October 2010)

### Iran's political and economic activity in Nigeria

1. Nigeria is home to approximately 60 million Muslims, nearly half of its total population. **A Shi'ite minority of approximately 5-10 million people lives mostly in the north of the country.** Shi'ite Islam was virtually unknown in Nigeria until the 1980s, when **Ibrahim Zakzaky**, a local cleric, introduced Shi'ite elements into Nigeria's Sunni Islam. Zakzaky gained the support of people who were dissatisfied with the local religious establishment; they were identified as Shi'ites due to the similarity of their religious practices to Khomeini's. The Shi'ite community of Nigeria was occasionally persecuted, but it also allied itself with the Sunnis as part of Nigeria's Islamic Movement, a religious and political organization operating in the country's north and headed by Zakzaky himself (Wikipedia).

2. Similarly to other regions in the world (such as Latin America), **Iran considers Africa an important arena for the advancement of its political and economic influence.** In this context, Iran attempts to establish economic ties with African countries by offering them various projects in agriculture, energy, dam and road construction, housing, and more.<sup>3</sup> Iran's interest in Nigeria predates Ahmadinejad's presidency. Nigeria, Africa's most populous country and the fifth largest supplier of oil to the United States, was identified by Iran as **a regional power with the potential of serving its interests in Africa and supporting it in international forums.** The economic relations between the two countries were shaped in late 1990 and became stronger following a visit to Nigeria held by Iran's President Khatami in 2005.

**3. During President Ahmadinejad's visit to Nigeria in July 2009,** he attempted to further the issue of nuclear power as a cheap energy source. During his visit, Ahmadinejad had a meeting with the *ulama* (Muslim scholars) in Nigeria. He also received a warm welcome by the crowd in Abuja, Nigeria's capital city (An Iranian Intelligence Failure: Arms Ship in Nigeria Reveals Iran's Penetration of West Africa, by Jacques Neriah, published in Jerusalem Issue Brief Vol. 10 No. 35, April 7, 2011). In July 2010 Ahmadinejad visited Nigeria once again. During the visit, Saipa, Iran's second-largest car manufacturer, signed an accord to jointly produce and market budget vehicles in Nigeria (bloomberg.com, February 2, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> For more on Iran's activity in East Africa, see our July 31, 2009 research paper: ["Iran's activity in East Africa, the gateway to the Middle East and the African continent"](#).

### Exposure of an arms shipment from Iran to Nigeria



**Left: weapons found aboard the ship. Right: Nigerian security forces discover the weapons stowed aboard the ship.**

1. On October 26, 2010, the Nigerian security forces announced that an examination of the M/V Everest, which had arrived from Iran and docked in the Nigerian port of Apapa in July 2010, had **revealed 13 containers which held several tons of weapons**. The ship belonged to an Iranian company called Behineh Trading,<sup>4</sup> was operated by a French company called CMA-CGM, and flew the flag of the Marshall Islands.
2. The shipment was listed as containing building materials (stones and glass wool, behind which the weapons were hidden). Its port of destination was **Banjul** in Gambia, and it was addressed to a company with ties to the Gambian president (Israel's Channel 2, November 12, 2012). **Among the weapons were 107mm rockets, 120mm mortar shells, and small arms.**<sup>5</sup>
3. An investigation conducted by the Nigerian security services revealed two Iranian "businessmen" who sought refuge in the Iranian embassy in Abuja, the capital of Nigeria, when the affair was exposed. **The Gambian media later reported** that the

<sup>4</sup> On March 27, 2012, the U.S. Department of Treasury reported that Behineh Trading, which owned the ship that had transported arms to Nigeria, was designated as a "terrorist entity".

<sup>5</sup> For more details, see our March 15, 2011 Information Bulletin: "[In recent months two more Iranian attempts to ship weapons were exposed](#)".

two, Ali Akbar Tabatabaei and Azim Aghajani, **were senior Qods Force operatives**. A local Qods Force network of contacts was also exposed.

### **Aftermath of the exposure**

4. The exposure of the Iranian arms shipment **led to a serious diplomatic crisis between Iran and a number of African countries**. The Nigerians found the shipment particularly serious, both the public and the government. Following the discovery of the arms shipment, the Iranian foreign minister, Manouchehr Mottaki (since replaced), arrived in Nigeria for a meeting with his Nigerian counterpart. They agreed that the Iranians would cooperate with the interrogation and the affair would end relatively quietly. They also agreed that Tabatabaei, who had sought refuge in the Iranian embassy in Abuja, would be released, while Azim Aghajani would be detained and interrogated by the Nigerian security forces.

5. Azim Aghajani was in fact detained and indicted by a court in Nigeria, while Tabatabaei left for Tehran with Foreign Minister Mottaki (UPI, Lagos, January 18, 2012). Despite the arrangement reached with Iran, Nigeria reported the arms shipment to the UN sanctions committee and a panel of UN experts began investigating the affair (Haaretz, November 24, 2010).

6. The exposure of the arms shipment and the Iranian subversive activities in West Africa stirred tensions in Iran's relations with other countries (Gambia and Senegal). In November 2010, **Gambia**, the country of the shipment's final destination, announced it was severing diplomatic relations with Iran. **Senegal** accused Iran of subversion and recalled its ambassador from Iran (December 2010).