

Bin Laden's Iran alliance: Pledges al Qaeda's service to combat U.S.

Part three of an exclusive three-part series of excerpts.

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By Richard Minter, SPECIAL TO THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Osama Bin Laden fled Afghanistan following the battle of Tora Bora in December 2001. He briefly retreated into the Pakistan-controlled portion of Kashmir in January 2002.

By June 2002, bin Laden had reportedly moved south into Baluchistan, a mountainous, autonomous tribal region in western Pakistan. It was a sensible place for him to hide. The Baluch are a nation without a country; their ancestral homeland straddles Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran. It is likely that his confederates have family and friends among the Baluch. A number of high-ranking al Qaeda operatives are ethnic Baluch, including Ramzi Yousef, the mastermind of the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, and Yousef's uncle, Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, the operational planner of the September 11 attacks.

The Baluch have a long history of harboring terrorists. Saddam Hussein financed Baluch terrorists against Pakistan as far back as 1969, Iraq expert Laurie Mylroie told me.

In July 2002, Pakistani president Pervez Musharraf announced that he was sending commandos into the tribal areas of Pakistan to flush out bin Laden. If Pakistani troops were quick and thorough, bin Laden would find himself surrounded—and perhaps even betrayed for the \$25 million price on his head. Relying on the goodwill of Baluch cutthroats, he must have known, was not a viable long-term strategy.

Seemingly desperate, bin Laden recorded an extraordinary audiotape and sent it via courier to Ali Khomeini, the grand ayatollah of Iran's Supreme Council. On that tape, according to a former Iranian intelligence officer I interviewed in Europe, bin Laden asked for Iran's help. In exchange for safe harbor and funding, he pledged to put al Qaeda at the service of Iran to combat American forces in Afghanistan and in Iraq, where al Qaeda leaders believed American intervention was inevitable. Bin Laden reportedly pledged, "If I die, my followers will be told to follow you [Khomeini]."

Apparently the taped appeal worked. Murtaza Rezaei, the director for Ayatollah Khomeini's personal intelligence directorate, began secret negotiations with bin Laden. Under the agreement between the Iranian Revolutionary Guard and al Qaeda, several convoys transported bin Laden's four wives, as well as his eldest son and heir apparent, Saad bin Laden, into Iran. Saad reportedly remains there today.

Then, on July 26, 2002, bin Laden himself crossed into Iran from the Afghanistan border near Zabol, traveling north to the Iranian city of Mashad.

Over the next year, bin Laden holed up in a series of safe houses controlled by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard between Qazvin and Karaj, two cities along a highway west of Teheran. He moved frequently to avoid detection or betrayal. He was not alone. Two intelligence sources told me bin Laden was "guarded by the Revo-lu-tionary Guard."

Bin Laden also traveled with al Qaeda's number two man, Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, who was wounded and required medical treatment, my sources said. For a time, bin Laden moved freely with and crossed into Afghanistan at will, usually through an Iranian border checkpoint near ZabolS.

Why would Iran, a predominantly Shi'ite Muslim land, work with a predominantly Sunni Muslim terror organization like bin Laden's? The short answer is personal connections, shared goals, and a common enemy. Ayman al-Zawahiri, a bona fide Sunni extremist, has received financial support from Iran since 1988. Bin Laden himself is believed to have met with Iranian intelligence officials at Islamic conferences in Khartoum, Sudan, in the early 1990s. Both bin Laden and the mullahs share an Islamist worldview that calls for the armed overthrow of Arab dictatorships and the restoration of a single caliph who will rule according to Shari'a law.

Finally, they share enemies, including many Arab leaders, the United States, and the rest of the Western world.

Whether the Sunni-Shi'ite divide is as wide among radical Islamists as some analysts say, few can dispute that Iran's increasing isolation and the U.S. occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq has provided Teheran with a strong incentive to seek out new allies.

Bin Laden is not the only senior al Qaeda member who has reportedly sought sanctuary. Saad bin Laden is believed to be hiding in the western city of Kermanshah, hard on the Iraq border. Saif al-Adel, Khalid Shaikh Mohammed's successor as commander of al Qaeda's military wing, is also said to be there ...

Administration officials expect bin Laden will most likely be captured in Pakistan. Yet policymakers would be wise to turn their attention to Iran's documented links to global terrorist networks, including bin Laden's. With vast oil revenues, a long history of supporting terrorists, and a fathomless desire to achieve its ideological aims at the expense of American lives, it certainly deserves its place on President Bush's "Axis of Evil."

Richard Minitier is also the author of "Losing Bin Laden: How Bill Clinton's Failures Unleashed Global Terror."

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