

The Iranian Intelligence Services and The War On Terror

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Afghanistan and Pakistan

The terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 did not come as a surprise to the Iranian intelligence community, primarily because they had been engaged in their own covert war against the Taliban and its international Islamist allies for many years. Indeed, under different political circumstances, Iranian intelligence could have provided valuable help to the U.S. in the war against Salafi Islamist terrorism.

Iran's Ministry of Intelligence & National Security (VEVAK) and the intelligence directorate of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) arguably have a better understanding of Wahhabi/Salafi terrorist networks and their institutional and ideological roots in Saudi Arabia than most other major intelligence organizations. They have gained such knowledge through the penetration of Wahhabi missionary/terror groups in Pakistan, which has been a priority for Iranian intelligence over the past 20 years. This priority stems not only from Iran's self-perceived responsibility to protect Pakistan's Shi'a community, but more importantly from a desire to pre-empt Saudi-sponsored Wahhabi subversion amongst Iran's tiny Sunni minority.

Iran's most formidable adversary is the Sipah Sahaba Pakistan, a murderous Wahhabi-Deobandi organization that has received logistical and financial help both from Saudi intelligence and sympathetic elements in Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). After the assassination of its leader, Maulana Azzam Tariq, in October 2003, Sipah Sahaba pointed the finger of blame at Pakistan's Interior Minister, Faisal Saleh Hayyat (who happens to be a Shi'a Muslim) and Iranian intelligence operatives. [1] This bloody feuding between Iranian intelligence and hardline Pakistani Sunni groups dates back to the early 1990s, and until very recently was an important feature of urban strife in cities like Karachi, Lahore and Quetta. Many of these hardline Sunni groups were later co-opted into al-Qaeda or formed constituent parts of its broad satellite networks.

More broadly, Iranian intelligence was alarmed by the growing power of the Taliban and the crucial support given to it by Pakistan's ISI and Saudi Arabia's Istikhbarat al-`Amm-with the tacit approval of the United States. Through well-established channels of communication, they warned several Western intelligence agencies of the potential disaster arising from an alliance between the Taliban and the network coalescing around Osama bin Laden. The tensions between Iran and the Taliban culminated in September 1998 with the slaying of 10 Iranian diplomats and a journalist by Pakistani members of the Taliban inside the compounds of the Iranian consulate in Mazar-e-Sharif. The diplomats were mostly officers of the intelligence directorate of the IRGC. Iran even considered military action against the Taliban in retaliation, but eventually backed off from a confrontation.

Yet even before the emergence of the Taliban, the VEVAK designated Salafi/Wahhabi terrorism as the primary threat to Iranian national security in 1994 and, contrary to unsubstantiated reports in Arab and

western media, has never had any friendly contacts with al-Qaeda. [2] Indeed, any suggestion of friendly contacts has to grapple with credible evidence pointing to bitter acrimony between the two sides. It is interesting to note, that Iranian intelligence has long been suspected by pro al-Qaeda Saudi security circles of masterminding the assassination of Abdullah Azzam in November 1989.

While it is possible that other Iranian intelligence agencies-in particular the Qods force of the IRGC-may have facilitated the escape of al-Qaeda elements from Afghanistan in the closing stages of the war in October-December 2001, there is no reliable, publicly-available evidence to validate this. Furthermore, it is unlikely given the ideological vision and geo-strategic ambitions of the IRGC and al-Qaeda are hugely divergent, despite sharing an enemy in the U.S.

Iraq

More recent accusations that Iranian intelligence is fostering instability in occupied Iraq are also questionable for a simple reason: Iran has no interest in destabilizing Iraq. On the contrary, it has every reason to ensure that Iraq emerges from its current trauma as a stable and unitary state. The United States may have limited interests in Iraq-after all it will sooner or later depart the arena-but Iran has to contend with a volatile neighbor that invaded it in September 1980. Thus, reports in western and Arab media regarding Iranian intelligence activity in Iraq are not only grossly exaggerated but completely miss the essence of Iranian involvement in the country. A case in point is an ideologically-charged article by a former CPA official accusing Iranian intelligence of promoting instability in Iraq. [3]

Reports in certain western and Arab media usually refer to Shi'a organizations-in particular SCIRI and al-Daawa-as facilitators of Iranian influence in Iraq. While it is beyond dispute that SCIRI and al-Daawa are solid Iranian allies, they do not constitute the strongest links in Iran's network of influence. In real terms, Jalal Talibani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and Ahmad Chalabi's now largely defunct INC have received more logistical and financial help from Iran than the SCIRI and al-Daawa respectively. The PUK has been a reliable Iranian ally in Iraqi Kurdistan since the early 1980s. Ahmad Chalabi, meanwhile, has been sponsored by Iran since the early years of the Iran-Iraq war. Chalabi's Petra Bank in Jordan (which was later embroiled in a fraud and embezzlement scandal and was subsequently closed down in August 1989) reportedly funded the Iranian war effort. Another Chalabi-linked bank, Mebco, is alleged to have financed Iranian intelligence operations in Europe in the late 1980s. Mebco had its banking license withdrawn by the Swiss federal banking commission in April 1989.

Iran has well established espionage networks in Iraq that date back to the decades before the Islamic revolution in 1979. Many officers of the Organization of Intelligence & National Security (SAVAK) were recalled by the re-constituted post-revolutionary intelligence agency in the early 1980s, as they were reputed to have unrivalled expertise on the Iraqi Baath party. Instead of exploiting the security capabilities of its obvious allies in Iraq, Iran is likely to rely on its traditional espionage network to gather vital information on the likely course of the country's political future in the decisive years ahead.

In the final analysis, Iran's interests in Iraq do not diverge from its interests in post-war Afghanistan. In both cases, Iran desires peaceful and stable neighbors who do not export subversion inside its own borders. It is now widely acknowledged that Iran's involvement in Afghanistan is not only benign, but positively helpful. In due course similar assessments may be made of Iran's involvement in Iraq. Furthermore, the Iranians abandoned exporting their "Islamic revolution" to neighboring countries many years ago, and Iran's allies in Iraq have little desire to recreate the Iranian experience. [4]

Wider Issues

Aside from the war on terror and the American led occupation of Iraq, broader misunderstandings of the Iranian intelligence community also exist. Major western intelligence agencies-including those in the U.S.-failed to grasp the institutional and ideological complexities that underpinned the evolution of the post-

revolutionary Iranian intelligence community in the period 1980-84. The core event during this time was an intense rivalry between the nascent Intelligence Directorate of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and the skeleton structure of the old SAVAK. The result was a compromise in the form of the creation of a Ministry of Intelligence & National Security (VEVAK) in 1984 that signified, first and foremost, a constitutional revolution in intelligence/security organization in Iran. The SAVAK was an "organization" largely outside the orbit of government control, whereas its post-revolutionary successor was positioned into the mainstream of the Iranian civil service in the form of a "ministry." Another feature of the compromise arrived at in 1984 was the powers granted to the IRGC to maintain its own separate intelligence directorate. [5]

The VEVAK has around 15,000 officers and support staff, who, unlike the former SAVAK, are all civilians. The Ministry's foreign intelligence directorate boasts around 2,000 officers whose top priority is intelligence gathering in Central Asia, Pakistan, Iraq, the Sheikdoms of the Persian Gulf and Saudi Arabia. Although VEVAK officers are vetted for ideological conformity, very few of them can be considered "Islamists". Thus the loyalty of the individual VEVAK officer to the ruling clergy is, at best, haphazard. Broadly speaking, VEVAK officers subscribe to a civic-based Iranian nationalism accentuated by mild undertones of Shi'a Islam.

While there have been recent cases of information sharing between the VEVAK and U.S. intelligence agencies-routed through Jordanian intelligence-there is much ill feeling between the two sides. Much of this dates back to the late 1980s, especially after VEVAK dismantled an extensive CIA network in the Iranian military, civil service and private sector in 1989. The Ministry had worked closely with military intelligence (J2) in inflicting one of the greatest losses of intelligence assets on the CIA.

Despite this acrimonious history, U.S. intelligence officials are well aware of the professional qualities of the VEVAK and the ideological gulf that separates the Ministry from its clerical political masters. The implications of this ideological gulf are far-reaching, insofar as there is likely to be non-interference by the VEVAK in the evolutionary political transformation that is eroding the grips of the ruling clergy on the levers of power. The broadest implication is that, whatever consensual political system eventually succeeds the theocratic regime, it will be able to retain the country's impressive security/intelligence system largely in its current form.

From a wider geo-strategic perspective, it is likely that the priorities of the intelligence community of post-Islamic Iran will broadly resemble that of pre-Islamic Iran. This will involve terminating the country's extremist pro-Arab stance and re-orientating intelligence cooperation in the region within an Iran-Israel-Turkey axis. This will truly transform the face of the Middle East and might even decisively turn the tide against Salafi Islamism and its Saudi patrons.

NOTES:

1. Sipah Sahaba made similar allegations in September 1998, after its then deputy secretary general Allama Shoaib Nadim and three of his companions were assassinated in Islamabad.
2. In June 1994, a huge bomb detonated inside the Imam Reza shrine in Mashhad, killing more than 20 worshippers. Initially Iranian authorities blamed the Iraqi-based Mojahedin-e-Khalq, but a report produced by the Ministry of Intelligence in October 1994 identified the culprits as operatives of Pakistan's "Lashkare Jhangvi"-the sister organization of Sepah Sahaba.
3. Bad Neighbor, The New Republic, 26 April 2004.
4. Refer to author's interview with Dr. Hamid Bayati, European representative of SCIRI in the May 2003 edition of the Middle East Intelligence Bulletin.

5. The Intelligence Directorate of the IRGC is relatively small, boasting no more than 2,000 officers. Its officers are heavily vetted for ideological conformity, and unlike the VEVAK, their loyalty to the Islamic regime is beyond doubt. The IRGC's intelligence organs are primarily involved in intelligence gathering in the Muslim world. The IRGC's Sepahe Qods (Jerusalem Corps) is controlled by its Intelligence Directorate and carries out covert operations in countries as far afield as Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon and Bosnia. The Qods force's national HQ is in the southwestern city of Ahvaz and it is headed by Qasem Soleimani.