

Iran, the next target?

By David Pratt

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Iran's borders are porous places. Having crossed back and forward through the mountains that flank Iraq to the west, and the deserts of Afghanistan in the east, I can vouch for this. On both sides of these frontiers lie a shadowy world of smugglers and safe houses, Iranian Revolutionary Guards and Iraqi, Kurdish, and Afghan militias.

Here, drugs, guns, fuel, and just about anything else that makes a fast black-market buck slips past daily. Over the years, so too have spies, agents provocateur, assassins, saboteurs, and if last week's findings of the 9/11 Commission are to be believed, al-Qaeda terrorists.

We are told that some time between October 2000 and February 2001, between eight and 10 al-Qaeda men arrived at the Iranian border from Osama bin Laden's training camps in Afghanistan en route to wreak havoc in the US .

According to documents found in the files of the US National Security Agency and published in the 9/11 report, Iranian border guards were under orders not to stamp the passports of these 'muscle' hijackers, thus ensuring their travel documents were 'clean' and less likely to raise the suspicions of US customs and visa officials.

Inevitably, the claims have raised questions about the extent of any relationship between Tehran and al-Qaeda, as well as where and how the future war on terror might be fought out.

There is no shortage of Bush administration hawks who think it is a clear-cut case of Iran acting as conduit, benefactor and sanctuary for al-Qaeda. But one US intelligence official was recently quoted in Newsweek magazine, saying: "We just don't have good intelligence about what is going on in Iran."

The Iranians have, not surprisingly, disputed the allegations. Hamid Reza Asefi, the Iranian foreign ministry spokesman, compared Iran's lack of control of its remote 900km border with Afghanistan to the US's own problems with Mexico.

It wasn't just the border crossing by al-Qaeda terrorists from Afghanistan that the 9/11 Commission pointed to as implicating Iran. Just months before the attacks on New York and Washington, the Iranian-sponsored Lebanon-based Islamic group Hezbollah appears to have been shadowing another three of the al-Qaeda hijackers as they flew from Saudi

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Arabia to Lebanon and onward to Iran.

The men were identified as Wail al-Shehri and Waleed al-Shehri – who were hijackers on American Flight 11, one of the two planes to crash into the World Trade Centre – and Ahmed al-Nami – who flew on United Flight 93, which ploughed into a Pennsylvania field after passengers tried to overwhelm the terrorists.

About the same time the trio was apparently being tracked by Hezbollah, a ‘senior Hezbollah operative’ was on the same Beirut-bound flight as Ahmed al-Ghamdi – who ended up on United Flight 175, the other airliner to fly into the Twin Towers.

While the commission noted these bits of raw intelligence, it ‘found no evidence that Iran or Hezbollah was aware of the planning for what later became the 9/11 attack’.

The report, however, is clear that as far back as 1991 or 1992, al-Qaeda and Iranian operatives struck an accord to provide training for assaults on Israel and the US, and terrorist leaders went to Iran for instruction in explosives.

“Intelligence indicates the persistence of contacts between Iranian security officials and senior al-Qaeda figures” after Osama bin Laden returned to Afghanistan from Sudan in 1996, it notes.

It quotes captured terrorist leader Walid bin Attash, known as Khallad, as saying Tehran tried to strengthen ties with al-Qaeda after the 2000 attack on the USS Cole but was rebuffed by bin Laden out of concern for Saudi sensitivities.

But two senior al-Qaeda operatives in US custody, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and Ramzi Binalshibh, told their interrogators that Iran’s assistance was limited to transiting through Iran. They also denied any relationship between the hijackers and al-Qaeda.

According to some Bush administration think tanks however, the events of 9/11 and Iran’s support for Hezbollah are not the only signs of Tehran’s links to Islamic terror. This time last year, the Sunday Herald reported on a day-long conference, held in Washington by the neo-conservative American Enterprise Institute (AEI).

Entitled The Future Of Iran – Mullahcracy, Democracy, And The War On Terror, the questions posed on the conference brochures were an indicator of its political aims. What lies ahead for Iran? What steps can the United States take to promote democratisation and regime change?

The delegates’ message was clear. Overshadowed until then by their much louder drum-beating for war against Saddam, the task now should be to focus US attention on dealing with Iran. Tehran, they said, has been accelerating a major nuclear programme, and has infiltrated ‘agents’ into Iraq to support the likes of militant shi’ite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, and create problems for the US-dominated occupation there.

One recent report by the respected independent London-based agency the Institute for

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War and Peace Reporting (IWPR) will be music to the ears of AEI . It suggests that the militant Islamic group Ansar al-Islam is reorganising in Iran where its surviving 800 or so members fled after US air and ground strikes against their bases in northern Iraq. Most Ansar founding members fought in Afghanistan and had strong ties with al-Qaeda.

Only last week Norwegian authorities dropped charges against Ansar's founder Mullah Krekar, saying there wasn't enough evidence to convict him of attempted murder, kidnapping and the funding of terrorism he allegedly committed during his time as acting leader in pre-invasion Kurdish Iraq. According to the IWPR, however, Ansar is regrouping, courtesy of its Iranian hosts.

"The radical group's presence appears to have, at the very least, the acquiescence of the Iranian authorities, and some sources report that Iranian intelligence offers logistics and possibly military training," said the IWPR report.

Last year President Bush made it clear that, if re-elected this November, regime change in Iran would be on his agenda. With the administration on message that all is well in Iraq and Afghanistan – despite bad news almost daily – some observers believe it is resorting to a diversionary tactic to take the heat off these negative stories. Put simply, that means blame Iran for everything, and make the point whenever possible that it is next in Washington's crosshairs.

As Bush said last week, despite the CIA finding "no direct connection between Iran and the attacks of September 11", nevertheless "we will continue to look and see if the Iranians were involved".

So is Iran next in line for punitive US military action for being a harbinger of Islamic terror? Many analysts believe that trumping up charges against Tehran is one thing, but that a military invasion would be at best impractical and at worst totally reckless – more to do with demonstrating Bush's resolve to resist evil in the world in what, after all, is an election year.

It's a game the administration cannot keep up indefinitely. Last week the Council on Foreign Relations issued a report with a more positive take on relations between the two countries titled *Iran: Time For A New Approach*. Not only does it question the tension between the US and Iran, it recognises Iran as a 'critical actor in the post-war evolution' of Afghanistan and Iraq.

Should the US choose to go down the Iran-bashing route, it will have little effect except to increase that country's hostility toward America at a time when a new generation of reformists within Iran should be embraced rather than manipulated or alienated.

Should Washington screw up, it will only serve to give greater voice to those like the conservative Iranian analyst who recently pointed out that it was not in Iran's interest to

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crack down on al-Qaeda unless there was a wider rapprochement with Washington.

“Al-Qaeda is like a dangerous snake,” he said. “If you see it attacking someone who says he is your enemy, you will not attract the snake’s attention so it attacks you. With this snake, there are no effective half measures – either you kill it or leave it free, as wounding it will make it angry and more dangerous.”

Washington should perhaps take note.

David Pratt is Foreign Editor of the Sunday Herald, Scotland’s top Sunday newspaper.