

America Funding Al-Qaeda!

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Reports emerge that the United States is funding an Al-Qaeda linked terror group to attack Iran. "OUR WAR on terror," American President George W Bush told a joint session of Congress in September, 2001, "begins with Al-Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated."

Six years on, evidence has begun to emerge that President Bush's administration may be funding one of the terrorist groups it promised to defeat, a group, moreover, reported to have been once commanded by Khalid Sheikh Mohammad, the architect of the September 11, 2001, bombings that sparked off the global war on terror.

Early this month, ABC News journalists Brian Ross and Christopher Isham broke the news that the US was funding Islamist terror group *Jundullah* or *Allah's Brigade* to carry out strikes against Iran. According to ABC News, US support to *Jundullah* was being routed to its leader, Abdul Malik Regi, a shadowy former Taliban member also alleged to be involved in large-scale narcotics trafficking through Iranian exiles with connections in West Asia and Europe.

Both Pakistan and the US have responded to the ABC News report with irate denials, but the Ross-Isham account corroborates what Iran has long been claiming. In February, *Jundullah* set off a bomb in the Iranian city of Zahedan, killing at least 11 members of Iran's Revolutionary Guard. Soon afterwards, Iranian authorities secured a confession from an alleged perpetrator, Nasrollah Shamsi Zehi, who said he got training at a secret camp in Pakistan. Iranian state television broadcast the confessions against a backdrop of the US Central Intelligence Agency logo, making clear just where it believed responsibility for the terror enterprise in fact lay.

Relatively little is known about *Jundullah's* birth. According to Pakistani journalist Syed Saleem Shahzad, top Taliban leader Nek Mohammad set up the organisation in 2003 to target US and United Kingdom assets in Pakistan, as well as that country's pro-western military leadership.

Mohammad's new group soon showed its teeth. In 2004, a *Jundullah* cell made a near-successful attempt on the life of Karachi corps commander, Lieutenant-General Aslam Saleem Hayat. Eleven persons died in the bombing, which is thought to have been organised by two of Mohammad's first recruits Mohammad Attaur Rahman and Musaad Aruchi. Interestingly and perhaps significantly for the *Jundullah*-Iran story Aruchi was handed over by Pakistan to the US soon after his 2004 arrest, and now figures in the Human Rights Watch list of "ghost-detainees", a record of terror suspects held incommunicado without legal rights.

Several successful *Jundullah* attacks took place in the wake of the Karachi strike, notably a twin car-bomb attack outside the Pakistani-American Cultural Centre in Karachi, which left one person dead and 34 injured. *Jundullah's* growth was facilitated by its close links with the Jamaat-e-Islami, the largest of Pakistan's mainstream Islamist parties. Karachi-based cardiologist Akmal Waheed and his orthopaedist brother Arshad Waheed, who were arrested in the course of a 2004 crackdown on *Jundullah* cadre, had both been active in the Jamaat-e-Islami-supported Pakistan Islamic Medical Association. Attaur Rahman, the Karachi University graduate who was among *Jundullah's* founders, had also been a member of the Jamaat-e-Islami's student wing, the Islami Jamiat-e-Tulaba, an organisation that contributed hundreds of cadre for the jihad in Jammu and Kashmir.

For reasons that remain unclear, *Jundullah* now turned its energies towards the Iranian province of Sistan-Balochistan. Regi initiated this second campaign in June 2005. *Jundullah* kidnapped a team of Iranian security and intelligence officers. In a video-taped declaration delivered to al-Arabiya television, *Jundullah* said the attack had been carried out to avenge Iranian atrocities against the ethnic-Baloch minority. In a second video, released three weeks later, *Jundullah* released images of the execution of Iranian intelligence officer Shehab Malik.

SUNNI-SHIA CONFLICT

What precise operational links, bar their common Al-Qaeda lineage, tie the Karachi *Jundullah* and Regi's Iranian operation is unclear. But both share a number of points of ideological affiliation. *Jundullah* literature on Iran is built around discourse characterising its operations as part of a larger Sunni resistance to the Shia Iranian state. Most ethnic Baloch in Iran are Sunni,

and the Sistan-Balochistan province's backwardness has fuelled anger against real and imagined discrimination.

Karachi-based Islamists, likewise, have often executed murderous strikes on groups they believe to be heretics, a category that includes the Shia community as a whole and the Barelvi sect. On April 26, 2006, the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi which, like Jundullah, is an offshoot of the south Waziristan-based Al-Qaeda bombed a Barelvi gathering at Karachi's Nishtar Park, killing 47 people and injuring over 100.

None ought to be surprised if it turns out ABC News, or other journalists who have put out less-specific accounts over the last two years, are right. Like many other countries, the US has a long record of backing terrorist groups to further its perceived strategic interests. Containing Iranian influence in West Asia is a major US foreign policy objective, and there is increasing evidence that the covert war is growing in scale.

Media reports suggest the US has been making use of the Mujahideen-e-Khalq, a far-right organisation complicit in the 1991 anti-Shia massacres in Iraq, and designated a global terrorist organisation in 1997 for attacks inside Iran. US covert support is also thought to exist for a Kurdish terrorist group that has executed strikes against Iran, the Partiya Jiyana Azad of Kurdistan, or Party of Free Life of Kurdistan.

The odds are the ABC News expose will do little to deter the Sunni Islamist-US joint venture war against Iran. On April 13, Iran announced the arrest of 90 Jundullah cadre, who were reported to have created stockpiles of weapons and explosives. Iran's Intelligence Minister, Mohseni Ejeie, also pointed to the threat from the west, noting that "ten days ago, we arrested a group of seven people who wanted to carry out several bomb attacks." Iran's Khuzestan province, home to a substantial ethnic-Arab minority, has seen several bombings over the last two years, which have been blamed on terror groups backed by the UK. To the east, Iran's patience with Pakistan appears to be wearing thin. In the wake of the Zahedan bombing, Pakistan's Ambassador to Tehran was summoned to explain just how Jundullah terrorists trained on its soil, and there have been media reports of tensions along the border.

What could lie ahead? An escalating cycle of terror is one possibility. ABC News reported that US Vice-President Dick Cheney and Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf discussed the covert war against Iran when they met in February. US government officials Ross and Isham spoke to claim that it was appropriate to deal with Jundullah because the Islamist terror group had, in return for support, proved helpful in tracking Al-Qaeda figures.

For Jundullah, too, the alliance perhaps brokered through prisoners such as Aruchi makes sense. It relieves the pressure imposed by western counter-terrorism operations and provides the terror group with a renewed stockpile of war material, at little cost other than selling out some of its one-time comrades: a time-honoured tradition in all covert warfare.

Iran may have little choice other than to step up the heat against the US and the UK in Iraq but to anyone with a memory that stretches longer than the previous night's television news, this is the least danger. Two decades ago, in pursuit of its Cold War objectives, the US funded, armed, and trained the terrorist organisation that executed the September 11, 2001, terror strikes. Now, it seems to be doing the same thing again, presumably in the blithe hope that the results will be different this time around. Despite President Bush's fine words, it appears no lessons have been learned from history. □□□