

THE IRAN LOBBY: Alive, Well and Changing the Face of the Middle East

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In February 2009, as President Barack Obama and his new administration were settling into office, the Center for Security Policy published a report I wrote entitled “RISE OF THE ‘IRAN LOBBY’ Tehran’s front groups move on—and into— the Obama Administration.”¹ This occasional paper from the Center was offered as a warning about the constellation of forces that was just then moving into power positions from which to influence U.S. foreign policy in ways supportive of the Tehran regime’s objectives. Today, five years later, the disastrous fruits of that network’s efforts are evident across the Middle East in ways both predictable and unforeseen: Iran stands on the brink of deploying deliverable nuclear weapons, Turkey’s leadership sponsors HAMAS terrorism and harbors both neo-Ottoman ambitions and a visceral hatred of the Jewish State of Israel, and an Islamic State proclaiming itself a Caliphate sweeps armies and borders before it, oddly enabled by both Iran and Turkey.

For anyone wondering how this could possibly have happened—and in plain view—Michael Ledeen’s column of 29 August 2014 helps clarify. Citing former U.S. Ambassador William Miller, Ledeen revealed that during the 2008 presidential campaign President Obama “used a secret back channel to Tehran to assure the mullahs that he was a friend....and that they would be very happy with his policies.”² As Miller reportedly confirmed to Ledeen, he was that “secret back channel.” Miller served in Iran during the Shah’s rule and as chief of staff for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. He also at one time belonged to a group called The Campaign for a New American Campaign on Iran (CNAPI)³ that was founded in 2008 but reportedly grew out of a November 2007 meeting at the Washington, DC headquarters of Grover Norquist’s organization, Americans for Tax Reform. The CNAPI website⁴ no longer exists but when last accessed by this author in 2008, featured a mission statement promoting direct U.S. bilateral diplomacy with Tehran and strongly opposing any consideration of military options to pressure the Iranians on their nuclear weapons program. In addition to Miller, other CNAPI affiliates at the time included the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR—a HAMAS-Muslim Brotherhood front group), the National Iranian-American Council (NIAC), and Ambassador Thomas Pickering. Along with other advocates of accommodation with Tehran, Miller also was a signatory to an 18 November 2008 “Joint Experts’ Statement on Iran,” that launched the so-called American Foreign Policy Project with a press conference on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C. – an event moderated by NIAC’s founder-president Trita Parsi.

What followed, at the urging of these and key figures brought into the Obama administration, was an abject series of U.S. overtures to Tehran and a protracted series of negotiations marked by Iranian intransigence and U.S. willingness to give ground repeatedly. All of this took place amidst gathering evidence⁵ that Iran was increasing uranium enrichment in both quantity and levels of enrichment, was developing a parallel plutonium route to a bomb, was working on a nuclear warhead, had tested nuclear warhead trigger devices, and quickly was approaching a level

¹ Clare M. Lopez, “RISE OF THE ‘IRAN LOBBY’ Tehran’s front groups move on—and into— the Obama Administration,” *Center for Security Policy Occasional Paper Series*, (2009).

² Michael Ledeen, “Obama’s Latest Big Lie: ‘We Have No Strategy,’” *pjmedia*, last modified 2008, <http://pjmedia.com/michaelledeen/2014/08/29/latest-big-lie-we-have-no-strategy/?print=1>.

³ “CAMPAIGN FOR A NEW AMERICAN POLICY ON IRAN (CNAPI),” DiscoverTheNetwork.org, last modified October 20th, 2014, <http://www.discoverthenetworks.org/printgroupProfile.asp?grpId=7436>.

⁴ Clare M. Lopez, “RISE OF THE ‘IRAN LOBBY’ Tehran’s front groups move on—and into— the Obama Administration”.

⁵ IAEA, *Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement and relevant provisions of the Security Council resolutions in the Islamic Republic of Iran* (Vienna: United Nations, 2011), available from <http://www.iaea.org/Publications/Documents/Board/2011/gov2011-65.pdf>.

of capability with its Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) nuclear delivery system that was projected to achieve sufficient range to reach continental USA by 2015. Nevertheless, a deeply politicized National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) issued in late 2007 by an Intelligence Community badly-penetrated by Iranian influence obliterated all possibility for a military response under the Bush administration by falsely declaring that Iran had halted its nuclear weapons program in 2003 and not re-started it. Fast forward to 2014 and, as CSP Senior Fellow Fred Fleitz wrote in his 2 October 2014 piece, “The Nuclear Giveaway,”⁶ the Obama administration appears so desperate to get a nuclear agreement with Tehran that the American negotiating team headed by Secretary of State John Kerry seems willing to concede just about everything Iran still seeks to enable a final dash to the bomb.

Speaking of NIAC, Caroline Glick’s Jerusalem Post article of 2 October 2014 shows just how closely the Obama administration continues to be associated with this Tehran advocacy group. “Netanyahu’s statements and policies”⁷ describes the appearance of Phillip Gordon, the White House coordinator for the Middle East, at a 27 September 2014 event held by NIAC, “a group that the vast majority of Iranian-Americans view as the unofficial lobby of the Iranian regime,”⁸ according to Glick (as well as the Iranian media itself, as I noted in my “Iran Lobby” paper). Speaking before this group whose ties to the regime found by a U.S. District Court judge co-responsible with al-Qa’eda for the attacks of 9/11⁹ and whose support to Iraqi terrorist militias both Sunni and Shi’ite directly caused thousands of American casualties, are hardly in dispute, Gordon’s comments demonstrated how successfully Iranian intelligence operations have penetrated Obama administration thinking. “The nuclear issue is too important to subordinate to a complete transformation of Iran internally,”¹⁰ he said. Translated into plain English, what that means is that the Obama administration could care less that the mullahs’ regime has the blood of thousands of Americans on its hands or that it continues to support Islamic terrorism or that it clings to power only because it jails, tortures, and murders its own citizens by the hundreds—so long as the White House can claim it “succeeded” in getting Tehran to sign another worthless piece of paper to lock in the November 2013 Joint Plan of Action that was described by an Iranian political commentator as “the Treaty of Hodaybiyya in Geneva.”¹¹

More Iranian regime maneuverings apparently play an important role with Tayyip Erdogan’s Turkish regime. According to reporting from the XX Committee’s John Schindler¹², a former intelligence analyst with the National Security Agency and professor at the U.S. Naval War College, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) maintains tight connections with Iranian intelligence and the IRGC’s Qods Force by way of a shadowy terrorist group called

⁶ Fred Fleitz, “The Nuclear Giveaway: The Obama administration is desperate for an agreement with Iran, but Congress must say no,” *National Review*, last modified October 2nd, 2014, <http://www.nationalreview.com/node/389241/print>.

⁷ Caroline B. Glick, “Netanyahu’s statements and policies,” *The Jerusalem Post*, October 2nd, 2014, <http://www.jpost.com/landedpages/printarticle.aspx?id=377946>.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ “U.S. DISTRICT COURT RULES IRAN BEHIND 9/11 ATTACKS,” *iran911case.com*, last modified December 11th, 2011, <http://iran911case.com/>.

¹⁰ Caroline B. Glick, “Netanyahu’s statements and policies,” *The Jerusalem Post*.

¹¹ Clare M. Lopez, “Iranians: Geneva is ‘Treaty of Hodaybiyyah,’” *Family Security Matters*, last modified December 22nd, 2013, <http://www.familysecuritymatters.org/publications/detail/print/iranians-geneva-is-treaty-of-hodaybiyyah>.

¹² “Erdogan’s Turkey and Iranian Intelligence,” *The XX Committee*, last modified September 23rd, 2014, <http://20committee.com/2014/09/23/erdogans-turkey-and-iranian-intelligence/>.

Tawhid-Salam (aka Jerusalem Army) that is permitted to operate inside Turkey. Further, according to Schindler, Israeli intelligence long has considered Hakan Fidan, head of Turkish intelligence, to be “Tehran’s man.”¹³ Turkey, still a NATO member, not only has turned against its erstwhile partner, Israel, and now supports HAMAS’ genocidal agenda for the Jewish people, but also has played a complex role in the rise of the Islamic State (IS). While Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the U.S. all provided varying levels of funding, training, weapons and other assistance in the 2011-2013 timeframe to rebel Syrian and other jihadis who would go on to form IS, Turkey’s position as Syria’s geographical neighbor facilitated the passage of arms and fighters across its border, allegedly including surface-to-air missiles¹⁴ (MANPADs) that U.S. Ambassador Christopher Stevens, the CIA, and SOCOM (Special Operations Command) helped transfer by ship from Benghazi, Libya.

Although it would seem a given that IS’s brutal Sunni identity threatens not only the Iranian Shi’ite regime but most directly its two puppet regimes in Baghdad and Damascus, Iran has been notably hesitant to mount an all-out assault against IS—even though its IRGC/Qods Force and intelligence service (the MOIS or Ministry of Intelligence and Security) are providing advice and backing to shore up Iran’s Baghdad satrapy and ensure that key Shi’ite shrines do not fall into IS hands. In Syria, Iran’s terror proxy Hizballah deserves primary credit for keeping Bashar al-Assad in power. And yet neither Hizballah nor Assad focused on targeting IS when it was still in formation as ISIS (the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham) in the 2011-2013 period, but rather allowed ISIS relative freedom to go after other Syrian rebel groups, including the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and Jabhat al-Nusra (the al-Qa’eda franchise in Syria). ISIS returned the favor by holding back from attacking Bashar al-Assad’s government forces. Yet another Iranian connection surfaced with DNI James Clapper’s mid-September 2014 announcement about the existence of the Khorasan Group, a traveling recruitment unit of the AQ cell that has operated in collaboration with the IRGC/Qods Force and MOIS inside Iran since late 2001 (although Clapper himself naturally did not provide such a level of detail). In Syria, not to join the fray despite apparent connections with Jabhat al-Nusra, but rather to recruit for never-ending AQ-Iranian plots to blow up U.S. airliners, the Khorasan Group reportedly caused significant alarm when it was reported in early July 2014 that Ibrahim al-Asiri,¹⁵ AQAP’s evil genius bomb maker, had pledged *bayat* to IS and later was suspected of working with Khorasan as well. Following hard on a wrenching parade of atrocity videos featuring IS amputations, beheadings, crucifixions, and executions, this information finally goaded the U.S. and coalition partners to mount air strikes against IS positions, but with the possible exception of hits on the IS oil refining capability, these were mostly ineffective. IS has made clear in its online magazine Dabiq¹⁶ that it requires Western (‘Crusader’) ground troops to fight in order to kick off the final (Armageddon) battles of its End Times scenario.

A conclusive assessment of Iran’s role in all of this remains difficult as Tehran consistently cloaks its behavior in ambiguity, operates through proxies, and even appears to behave in ways that seem on the surface counter to its own interests (*e.g.*, enabling the rise of IS). What is certain is

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Mitchell Zuckoff and the Annex Security Team, *13 Hours: The Inside Account of What Really Happened In Benghazi* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2014)

¹⁵ Douglas Ernst, “ISIL recruits ‘underwear bomb’ creator: Al-Asiri pledges allegiance to terrorist army,” *The Washington Times*, last modified July 1st, 2014, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2014/jul/1/isis-nabs-underwear-bomb-creator-ibrahim-hassan-al/>.

¹⁶ *A Call to HIJRAH*, DABIQ, Vol. 3

that the regime's implacable hostility to the U.S., Israel, and the West has never wavered in the 35 years since the 1979 revolution—so, despite the continuing efforts of the Iran Lobby to convince us otherwise, we may be sure that U.S. national security interests, including the security of the homeland, remain fixed in its target sights.

And yet, despite Iran's obvious intent to do lethal harm to what it calls the "Great Satan," our important regional interests, and the homeland itself, the Iran Lobby advances steadily on Tehran's objectives. Its myriad front groups, useful fools, and fellow travelers are nothing if not dedicated to the mission: obtain official American cooperation for Iranian hegemony in the Persian Gulf region and power projection beyond—hegemony, it seems increasingly likely, that will be assured by nuclear weapons.