

Washington's Tall Tale of Iranian-Al Qaeda Alliance

Based On Questionably Sourced Book 'The Exile'

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The U.S. assassination of [Qassem Soleimani](#) in January touched off a new wave of disinformation about the [top Iranian major general](#), with Trump administration allies branding him a global terrorist while painting Iran as the world's worst state sponsor of terrorism. Much of the propaganda about Soleimani related to his alleged responsibility for the killing of American troops in Iraq, along with Iran's role in Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen.

But a second theme in the disinformation campaign, which has been picked up by mainstream outlets like the Wall Street Journal and National Public Radio, was the claim that Soleimani deliberately unleashed al-Qaeda terrorist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's campaign to kill Shiites in Iraq. That element of the propaganda offensive was the result of the 2017 publication of "[The Exile](#)," a book by British journalists Adrian Levy and Cathy Scott-Clark, which spun a new version of the familiar U.S. propaganda line of a supposed Iranian terror alliance with al-Qaeda.

Levy and Scott-Clark introduced the theme of secret collusion between the two open adversaries with an article in the *The Sunday Times* in early 2018, dramatically entitled "[Tehran in devil's pact to rebuild al-Qaeda](#)." Soleimani, they claimed, "first offered sanctuary to bin Laden's family and al-Qaeda military leaders," then proceeded to "build them a residential compound at the heart of a military training center in Tehran."

But those two sentences represented a grotesque distortion of Iran's policy toward the al-Qaeda personnel fleeing from Afghanistan into Iran. Virtually every piece of concrete evidence, including an [internal al-Qaeda document](#) written in 2007, showed that Iran agreed to take in a group of al-Qaeda refugees with legal passports that included members of bin Laden's family and some fighters and middle- and lower-ranking military cadres – but not Zarqawi and other al-Qaeda military leaders — and only temporarily and under strict rules forbidding political activity.

The crucial fact that Levy and Scott-Clark conveniently failed to mention, moreover, was that Iranian officials were well aware that al-Qaeda's leadership figures, including military commanders and with their troops, were also slipping into Iran from Afghanistan, but Iranian security forces had not yet located them.

Keeping the legal arrivals under closer surveillance and watching for any contacts with those illegally in the country, therefore, was a prudent policy for Iranian security under the circumstances.

In addition, having bin Laden's family and other al-Qaeda cadres under their surveillance gave Iran potential bargaining chips it could use to counter hostile actions by both al-Qaeda

and the United States.

Al-Qaeda documents undermine narrative of cooperation with Iran

Careful study of the enormous cache of internal al-Qaeda documents released by the U.S. government in 2017 further discredited the tall tale of Iranian facilitation of al-Qaeda terrorism.

Nelly Lahoud, a senior fellow at the New American Foundation and former senior research associate at the West Point Combating Terrorism Center, translated and analyzed 303 of the newly available documents and [found nothing](#) indicating Iranian cooperation with, or even knowledge about the whereabouts of Zarqawi or other al-Qaeda military leaders prior to their detentions of April 2003.

Lahoud [explained in a September 2018 lecture](#) that all actions by al-Qaeda operatives in Iran had been “conducted in a clandestine manner.” She even discovered from one of the documents that al-Qaeda had considered the clandestine presence of those officials and fighters so dangerous that they had been instructed on how to commit suicide if they were caught by the Iranians.

Adrian Levy and Cathy Scott-Clark were well aware that those al-Qaeda operatives living in Tehran’s military training center were under severe constraints, akin to a prison. Meanwhile, senior figures like Zarqawi and Saif al-Adel, the head of the al-Qaeda shura council, were far away from Tehran, planning new operations in the region amid friendly Sunni contacts. These plans included Zarqawi’s campaign Iraq, which he began organizing in early 2002.

Nevertheless the authors declared, “From [the Iranian training center], al-Qaeda organized, trained and established funding networks with the help of Iran, co-ordinated multiple terrorist atrocities and supported the bloodbath against Shi’ites by al-Qaeda in Iraq....”

Anti-Iran think tanker Sadjadpour jumps on the conspiracy bandwagon

Karim Sadjadpour of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, a reliable fount of anti-Iran spin, responded within days of the Soleimani assassination with an article in the Wall Street Journal’s right-wing editorial section that reinforced the budding disinformation campaign.

Entitled “[The Sinister Genius of Qassem Soleimani](#),” Sadjadpour’s op-ed argued that in March 2003, before the U.S. invasion of Iraq, “Soleimani’s Quds Force freed many Sunni jihadists that Iran had been holding captive, unleashing them against the U.S.” He cited “The Exile” as his source.

Levy and Scott-Clark did indeed spin a tale in the book of Zarqawi’s troops — and Zarqawi himself — being rounded up and locked to the same prison as those al-Qaeda members who entered with passports in March 2003. The authors claimed they were released within days. But the only sources they cite to support their claims were two people they interviewed in Amman, Jordan in 2016.

So who were these insider sources? The only identifying characteristics Levy and Scott-Clark offer is that they were “in Zarqawi’s group at the time.” Furthermore, neither of these

sources is quoted to substantiate the claim that Zarqawi was arrested and then released from prison, and they are mentioned only in a footnote on the *number* of Zarqawi's troops that had been sent to the prison.

Sadjadpour offered his own explanation — without the slightest suggestion of any evidence to support it — of why Soleimani would support an anti-Shiite jihadist to kill his own Iraqi Shiite allies. “By targeting Shiite shrines and civilians, killing thousands of Iran’s fellow Shiites,” he wrote, “Zarqawi helped to radicalize Iraq’s Shiite majority and pushed them closer to Iran—and to Soleimani, who could offer them protection.”

In late January, on National Public Radio’s weekly program “Throughline,” Sadjadpour pushed his dubiously sourced argument, opining that Soleimani had figured out how to “use the al Qaeda jihadists of Zarqawi ... to simply unleash them into Iraq with the understanding that you guys do what you do.”

The BBC promotes “The Exile” as the book’s narrative crumbles

In a [BBC radio documentary](#) broadcasted in late April, titled “Iran’s Long Game” (an allusion to Iran’s alleged long-term plan for domination of the entire Middle East), Cathy Scott-Clark told a story intended to clinch the case that Iran had helped Zarqawi: Other prisoners “heard conversations in the corridors” in which Iranian authorities allegedly assured Zarqawi, “You can do whatever you want to do ... in Iraq.”

That story does not appear in her book, however. Instead, Adrian Levy and Scott-Clark related a comment by Abu Hafs al-Mauritani, a spiritual adviser to bin Laden, on hearing about the arrest and subsequent release of Zarqawi from another prisoner who eavesdropped by tapping the pipes leading into his room.

That narrative had already been definitively contradicted long before, however, in an account provided by Saif al-Adl, the most senior member of the al-Qaeda top leadership in Iran. Al-Adl had fled with Zarqawi from Afghanistan across the border into Iran illegally in late 2001 or early 2002 and was apprehended in April 2003 — weeks after the alleged events portrayed in al-Mauritani’s story.

In a memoir smuggled out of Iran to Jordanian journalist Fouad Hussein, which Husayn published in 2005 in an Arabic-language book (but [available online](#) in an English-language translation), Saif al-Adl described an Iranian crackdown in March 2003 that captured 80 percent of Zarqawi’s fighters and “confused us and aborted 75 percent of our plan”.

Because of that round-up, al-Adl wrote, “[T]here was a need for the departure of Abu-Mus’ab and the brothers who remained free.” Al-Adl described his final meeting with Zarqawi before his departure, confirming that Zarqawi had not been caught prior to his own apprehension on April 23, 2003.

Levy and Scott-Clark cited Saif al-Adl’s memoir on other matters in “The Exile,” but when this writer queried Scott-Clark about al-Adl’s testimony — which contradicted the narrative that underpinned her book — Scott-Clark responded, “I know Fuad Hussein well. Most of his information is third hand and not well sourced.”

She did not address the substance of al-Adl’s recollections about Zarqawi, however. When asked in a follow-up email whether she challenged the authenticity of Saif al-Adl’s testimony, Scott-Clark did not respond.

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