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“Assessing the Threat to the Homeland from al Qaeda Operations
in Iran and Syria”

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Chairman King, Ranking Member Higgins and members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me here today to discuss the threat posed by al Qaeda's operations inside Iran and Syria. These are complex topics that require a careful evaluation of the facts, and even then there is much we do not know. Yet, it is clear that al Qaeda's networks in Syria and Iran threaten American interests in various ways.

My testimony can be boiled down to two points. First, al Qaeda is fighting to establish a safe haven that covers parts of both Iraq and Syria and, if the terror network is successful, it will most likely increase the threat to the U.S. homeland. The effects of al Qaeda's growth in Syria have already been felt by neighboring countries. And European officials have expressed their concern that al Qaeda's network inside Syria could be used to launch attacks against their countries.

Second, while Iran's proxies and al Qaeda are at odds inside Syria, the two have repeatedly colluded since the early 1990s. Under the Obama administration, the Treasury and State Departments have repeatedly highlighted an "agreement" between the Iranian regime and al Qaeda that allows senior terrorists to operate on Iranian soil.

Al Qaeda's Iran-based network has not only facilitated the movement of terrorists to the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan, but has also been implicated in plots against the West and against Western interests elsewhere. In my testimony today, I am going to highlight three specific examples: Al Qaeda's 2010 Mumbai-style plot against European cities, the al Qaeda plot broken up in Canada in April, and the foiled plot against the U.S. and French Embassies in Cairo earlier this month. In all three instances, there are reported ties between the plotters and al Qaeda operatives inside Iran. This does not mean that Iranian officials planned these acts of terror. But the clear implication is that Iran's provision of safe haven has allowed al Qaeda terrorists to coordinate plots far beyond the Middle East, including just north of our border.

Al Qaeda in Syria

Al Qaeda did not start the Syrian rebellion, which comprises a number of groups. My written testimony focuses specifically on al Qaeda's activities inside Syria. The growth of al Qaeda's Syrian wing, the Al Nusra Front, is alarming. Al Qaeda has clearly capitalized on the violence. Al Qaeda emir Ayman al Zawahiri has repeatedly emphasized the importance of the effort to topple Bashar al Assad's regime. In February 2012, for instance, Zawahiri urged jihadists to make their way to Syria to fight the "pernicious, cancerous regime."¹ Just a few months earlier, in late 2011, the Al Nusra Front was established by Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), an al Qaeda affiliate that has sworn fealty to al Qaeda's senior leadership.² In April of this year, Abu Muhammad al Julani, the head of the Al Nusra Front, also reaffirmed his oath of loyalty to Zawahiri in an audio recording.³ Make no mistake about it: the Al Nusra Front is al Qaeda.

¹ Jason Burke, "Al-Qaida leader Zawahiri urges Muslim support for Syrian uprising," *The Guardian*, February 12, 2012. See: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/feb/12/alqaida-zawahiri-support-syrian-uprising>

² State Department Press Statement, "Terrorist Designations of the al-Nusra Front as an Alias for al-Qa'ida in Iraq," December 11, 2012. See: <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/12/201759.htm>

³ State Department Media Note, "Terrorist Designation of Al-Nusra Front Leader Muhammad Al-Jawlani," May 16, 2013. See: <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2013/05/209499.htm>. For a discussion of al Julani's statement, see:

While the Al Nusrah Front's resources are largely devoted to the fighting inside Syria, we have already witnessed the effects of al Qaeda's expansion beyond Syria's borders. As the Al Nusrah Front has ramped up its operations, AQI has also increased its operational tempo inside Iraq.⁴ In other words, AQI's operations in Iraq have not suffered even as the group has taken on a larger role inside Syria. This indicates that al Qaeda's overall capacity for violence has greatly increased inside both countries since late 2011.

Other neighboring states are feeling the effects as well. Consider just one example. Late last year, AQI plotted a complex series of attacks inside Jordan, with the ultimate target being the U.S. Embassy. According to *The Washington Post*, the plotters had fought inside Syria and carried their "new skills and a changed perspective toward their native country" back home with them.⁵ AQI's recruiting and facilitation network inside Jordan plays a significant role in the Al Nusrah Front's operations, making it likely that returnees will continue to pose a threat for the foreseeable future. The Al Nusrah Front poses security challenges for Syria's other neighbors as well. And the Al Nusrah Front's tentacles stretch far beyond Syria's immediate neighborhood. The group is pulling in fighters from numerous other countries throughout the Middle East and North Africa.⁶

European officials have sounded the alarm concerning the Al Nusrah Front's Western recruits. In an interview with *Spiegel Online* in April, German Interior Minister Hans-Peter Friedrich said that authorities were aware "of calls for those Europeans who have been trained in battle" in Syria "to return home and pursue jihad."⁷ Friedrich added, "We are following this development with great concern." Other European officials have expressed similar concerns.

Thus, al Qaeda's arm in Syria has already impacted the security of neighboring countries and added a new threat to European nations. But we've been asked to assess the threat to the U.S. homeland. While I am not aware of any specific plots against the homeland that have been tied to al Qaeda's presence in Syria so far, the lessons of the past are plain to see. At least three observations concerning the potential threat emanating from Syria come to mind.

First, the 9/11 Commission stressed in its final report that sanctuaries are necessary for large-scale terrorist plotting.⁸ "Many details...illustrate the direct and indirect value of the Afghan sanctuary to al Qaeda in preparing the 9/11 attack and other operations," the commission found.⁹

Thomas Joscelyn, "Al Nusrah Front leader renews allegiance to al Qaeda, rejects new name," *The Long War Journal*, April 10, 2013. See: http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/04/al_nusrah_front_lead.php

⁴ See, for example: Greg Jaffe, "Iraq attacks raise specter of al-Qaeda's return," *The Washington Post*, July 23, 2012. See: http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/iraq-attacks-raise-specter-of-al-qaedas-return/2012/07/23/gJQAVgB74W_story.html

⁵ Joby Warrick, "In foiled Jordanian terror plot, officials see hand of resurgent al-Qaeda in Iraq," *The Washington Post*, December 2, 2012. See: http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/in-jordanian-terror-plot-officials-see-hand-of-resurgent-al-qaeda-in-iraq/2012/12/02/43f1698c-3421-11e2-bb9b-288a310849ee_story.html

⁶ The Al Nusrah Front is being assisted by Chechens and others, too. There are even credible reports of jihadists from China traveling to Syria to fight.

⁷ Matthias Gebauer and Veit Medick, "Interior Minister: Boston Points to 'Dangerous Phenomenon'," *Spiegel Online*, April 25, 2013. See: <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/german-minister-says-authorities-concerned-about-lone-wolf-terrorists-a-896493-2.html>

⁸ 9/11 Commission Report, pp. 365 – 374.

⁹ 9/11 Commission Report, pp. 366.

It was for this reason that the commission recommended that the U.S. government craft a strategy for disrupting terrorist sanctuaries. When the commission published its final report in 2004, there was a palpable fear that Iraq would become the next Afghanistan. “If, for example, Iraq becomes a failed state, it will go to the top of the list of places that are breeding grounds for attacks against Americans at home,” the commission wrote.¹⁰ We could make the same observation about Syria (and Iraq) today. Al Qaeda’s affiliate is attempting to establish a safe haven stretching across both countries. If al Qaeda is successful, and this is not a certainty at this point, then this will almost certainly lead to new plots against the U.S. homeland.

Second, we have already seen the connection between gains made by al Qaeda’s affiliates on the ground “over there” and the threat to Americans “over here.”¹¹ The most striking example of this can be found inside Yemen, where al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) made significant advances beginning in 2009. Yet even as AQAP rose in prominence, some counterterrorism analysts assumed that the threat to American interests was confined to inside Yemen. AQAP’s attempted bombing of Flight 253 on Christmas Day 2009 changed that thinking. Here is what the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence found in its analysis of the intelligence failures leading up to that attempted attack: “Prior to the 12/25 plot, counterterrorism analysts at NCTC, CIA, and NSA were focused on the threat of terrorist attacks in Yemen, but were not focused on the possibility of AQAP attacks against the U.S. homeland.” The 12/25 plot is just one of several by AQAP against the homeland. We should not make the same analytic mistake with respect to other al Qaeda affiliates, whether they are in Syria, Iraq or elsewhere. This does not mean that these affiliates will immediately devote resources to attacks on the U.S. homeland, but the potential is always there.

Third, a violent rebellion inside Syria has already been tied to a catastrophic terrorist attack on the U.S. homeland – albeit indirectly. Consider the following history. One of the paths to 9/11 began in Syria in the early 1980s, when the Assad family’s regime brutally crushed a rebellion launched by the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. Members of the Brotherhood were forced to flee to neighboring states and Europe. Some of them evolved into elite al Qaeda operatives.

One such former Syrian Muslim Brother is named Mohammed Zammar, a key recruiter of al Qaeda’s Hamburg cell, which provided the suicide hijack pilots for the 9/11 operation. One of Zammar’s fellow Syrian Brothers, Mamoun Darkazanli, has been identified as an important backer of the Hamburg cell and served as an imam at the mosque where Mohammed Atta and his fellow hijackers regularly met. Al Qaeda’s cell in Spain at the time of 9/11 was run by a former Syrian Muslim Brother named Imad Yarkas, who was convicted on terrorism charges. And one of Yarkas’s minions, also a former Syrian Muslim Brother, may have performed surveillance on the World Trade Center in 1997 that was used to plot the 9/11 attack.

Still another former Syrian Brother who rose through al Qaeda’s ranks is an ideologue named Mustafa Setmariam Nasar (a.k.a. Abu Musab al Suri), who was tied to al Qaeda’s terrorist plotting inside Europe, including the 2004 Madrid train bombings and the 2005 attacks in London. Nasar played a prominent role in al Qaeda’s operations prior to being detained in 2005 and transferred to Syrian custody. Nasar is a widely influential jihadist thinker and a key

¹⁰ 9/11 Commission Report, p. 367.

¹¹ This “over there”-“over here” dynamic was first used in the 9/11 Commission’s final report. See p. 362.

advocate of small-scale terrorist attacks inside the West. He was reportedly freed by the Assad regime in the wake of the current rebellion.¹²

In sum, the Syrian civil war is likely providing new talent for al Qaeda's international operations and has led to established threats like Nasar being freed. We cannot know with certainty if or when al Qaeda operatives inside Syria will attempt to launch an attack against the U.S. homeland. And America's defenses have greatly improved since 9/11, making it more difficult for such an attack to succeed. However, we should be mindful that the Syrian conflict opens new possibilities for al Qaeda, which is always probing our defenses for a weakness.

Al Qaeda's Network in Iran

There is no doubt that Iran and al Qaeda are on opposite sides of the Syrian war today. Iran supports Bashar al Assad's crumbling regime, while al Qaeda's Al Nusra Front is one of the leading insurgency groups opposed to Assad. This obvious conflict of interest must create new tension between al Qaeda and Iran. It may very well lead their relationship in a new direction. However, it would be a mistake to assume, absent significant evidence, that the fight in Syria will necessarily end the relationship between the Iranian regime and al Qaeda, which has always simultaneously entailed both mistrust and collusion.

In fact, al Qaeda and Iran have frequently worked together even in the face of divergent interests. For example, Iran allowed some al Qaeda leaders to operate on its soil following the 9/11 attacks, but placed them under a form of house arrest in 2003. This reportedly prompted Osama bin Laden to threaten the Iranians with violence if they did not release al Qaeda leaders and al Qaeda family members from custody. The Iranians did not release all of the al Qaeda members from house arrest, but the two still found common ground for cooperation. Then, in 2009, al Qaeda kidnapped an Iranian diplomat, holding him hostage in order to force the Iranians' hand in freeing these same al Qaeda members. This led to a hostage exchange between the two. But despite such antagonistic episodes, Iran and al Qaeda have repeatedly cooperated when it suits their common interests.

Under the Obama administration, the U.S. Treasury Department has led the way in exposing al Qaeda's Iran-based network and the agreement that led to its existence. Since July 2011, the Treasury Department has issued three separate designations targeting al Qaeda's Iran-based network. It is important to note that this network remains active under an "agreement" between Iran and al Qaeda, even as the two support opposite sides in the Syrian war. In addition, the State Department has repeatedly pointed to this same agreement, issuing rewards for al Qaeda leaders inside Iran.

¹² David Samuels, "The New Mastermind of Jihad," *The Wall Street Journal*, April 6, 2012. See: <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702303299604577323750859163544.html>

The Treasury Department targets Iran's "secret deal" with al Qaeda

On July 28, 2011, the Treasury Department designated six al Qaeda members who formed the core of al Qaeda's Iran-based network at the time.¹³ Some of the terrorists are based elsewhere, but work with Iran-based facilitators to move fighters and money. The Treasury Department explained that this al Qaeda network is "headed by Ezedin Abdel Aziz Khalil, a prominent Iran-based al Qaeda facilitator, operating under an agreement between al Qaeda and the Iranian government." Khalil is otherwise known as Yasin al Suri.

"Iran is the leading state sponsor of terrorism in the world today," Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence David S. Cohen said when announcing this designation. "By exposing Iran's secret deal with al Qaeda allowing it to funnel funds and operatives through its territory, we are illuminating yet another aspect of Iran's unmatched support for terrorism," Cohen explained. He continued: "Today's action also seeks to disrupt this key network and deny al Qaeda's senior leadership much-needed support."

The Treasury Department described Iran as "a critical transit point for funding to support al Qaeda's activities in Afghanistan and Pakistan" and noted that "Iranian authorities maintain a relationship with Khalil and have permitted him to operate within Iran's borders since 2005." Khalil's activities included moving "money and recruits from across the Middle East into Iran, then on to Pakistan," where they served other senior al Qaeda leaders.

The Treasury Department hinted at the game Iranian authorities play in their relationship with al Qaeda. Khalil "works with the Iranian government to arrange releases of al Qaeda personnel from Iranian prisons." After they are released, "the Iranian government transfers them to Khalil, who then facilitates their travel to Pakistan."

One of the al Qaeda leaders then working with Khalil and included in the July 2011 designation was Atiyah Abd al Rahman, who was subsequently killed in a drone strike the following month, on August 22, 2011 in North Waziristan, Pakistan.¹⁴ According to the Treasury Department, Rahman was al Qaeda's "overall commander in Pakistan's tribal areas and as of late 2010, the leader of al Qaeda in North and South Waziristan, Pakistan." The Treasury Department added: "Rahman was previously appointed by Osama bin Laden to serve as al Qaeda's emissary in Iran, a position which allowed him to travel in and out of Iran with the permission of Iranian officials."

A little more than two weeks prior to the Treasury Department's designation, *The Wall Street Journal* reported that Rahman was al Qaeda's "operations chief" and was working with bin Laden to assemble a terrorist cell capable of hitting America on the tenth anniversary of the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks.¹⁵ According to the newspaper, the intelligence tying Rahman to the plot was

¹³ See U.S. Treasury Department Press Release, "Treasury Targets Key Al-Qa'ida Funding and Support Network Using Iran as a Critical Transit Point," July 28, 2011. The press release can be found online at: <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1261.aspx> (last accessed May 20, 2013).

¹⁴ Bill Roggio, "Al Qaeda announces death of Atiyah Abd al Rahman," *The Long War Journal*, December 1, 2011. See: http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2011/12/al_qaeda_announces_d.php

¹⁵ Siobhan Gorman, "Bin Laden Plotted New Attack," *The Wall Street Journal*, July 15, 2011. See: <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702304521304576446213098582284.html>

found in communications recovered during the May 2011 U.S. raid on bin Laden's safe house in Abbottabad, Pakistan. Anonymous officials told *The Wall Street Journal* that the “plans were only in the discussion phase” and there were no “signs the nascent plot ever went beyond the early planning.”

The Treasury Department designates Iran’s MOIS for supporting al Qaeda, among other acts

On February 16, 2012, the U.S. Treasury Department designated the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) “for its support to terrorist groups as well as its central role in perpetrating human rights abuses against the citizens of Iran and its role in supporting the Syrian regime as it continues to commit human rights abuses against the people of Syria.”¹⁶

Al Qaeda and its affiliate, al Qaeda in Iraq, are among the terrorist groups supported by the MOIS, which is Iran's chief intelligence agency. “Today we have designated the MOIS for abusing the basic human rights of Iranian citizens and exporting its vicious practices to support the Syrian regime's abhorrent crackdown on its own population,” Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence David S. Cohen explained in a press release. Cohen added: “In addition, we are designating the MOIS for its support to terrorist groups, including al Qaeda, al Qaeda in Iraq, Hizballah and HAMAS, again exposing the extent of Iran's sponsorship of terrorism as a matter of Iranian state policy.”

The MOIS is assisting al Qaeda in a variety of ways. The Treasury Department revealed that “MOIS has facilitated the movement of al Qaeda operatives in Iran and provided them with documents, identification cards, and passports.” In addition, the MOIS has “provided money and weapons to al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI)...and negotiated prisoner releases of AQI operatives.”

The Treasury Department “further exposes” Iran-al Qaeda relationship

On October 18, 2012, the U.S. Treasury Department designated Adel Radi Saqr al Wahabi al Harbi, who is “a key member of an al Qaeda network operating in Iran and led by Iran-based al Qaeda facilitator Muhsin al Fadhli.”¹⁷ This is the same network that was previously headed by Ezedin Abdel Aziz Khalil (a.k.a. Yasin al Suri), as revealed in the Treasury Department’s July 2011 designation discussed above. Al Fadhli took over as chief of al Qaeda's Iran-based network in late 2011, after the U.S. Government openly identified and offered a reward for his predecessor.

Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence David S. Cohen explained that the October 2012 designation built upon the July 2011 designation and “further exposes al Qaeda's critically important Iran-based funding and facilitation network.” Cohen added: “We will

¹⁶ U.S. Treasury Department Press Release, “Treasury Designates Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security for Human Rights Abuses and Support for Terrorism,” February 16, 2012. See: <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1424.aspx>

¹⁷ U.S. Treasury Department Press Release, “Treasury Further Exposes Iran-Based Al-Qa’ida Network,” October 18, 2012. See: <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1741.aspx>

continue targeting this crucial source of al Qaeda's funding and support, as well as highlight Iran's ongoing complicity in this network's operation.”

Muhsin al Fadhli is a longtime al Qaeda operative who was previously designated by the US government in 2005. Al Fadhli is so trusted within al Qaeda that he was one of the few terrorists with foreknowledge of the 9/11 attacks. When he was first designated in 2005, al Fadhli was “considered an al Qaeda leader in the Gulf” who “provided support to Iraq-based fighters for attacks against” the U.S.-led Coalition. Al Fadhli was also a “major facilitator” for deceased AQI [al Qaeda in Iraq] leader Abu Musab al Zarqawi. And prior to his involvement in the Iraqi insurgency, al Fadhli “was involved in several terrorist attacks that took place in October 2002 including the attacks on the French ship MV Limburg and against U.S. Marines on Faylaka Island in Kuwait.”

Al Fadhli “began working with al Qaeda's Iran-based facilitation network in 2009 and was later arrested by the Iranians,” according to the Treasury Department. Al Fadhli “was subsequently released by the Iranians in 2011 and went on to assume the leadership of the facilitation network from Yasin al Suri later that year.” Today, al Fadhli's Iran-based network provides “funding for al Qaeda activities in Afghanistan and Pakistan”, and moves “fighters and money through Turkey to support al Qaeda-affiliated elements in Syria.” Al Fadhli is also “leveraging his extensive network of Kuwaiti jihadist donors to send money to Syria via Turkey,” according to Treasury.

Al Harbi serves as al Fadhli's deputy. In that capacity, according to Treasury, al Harbi “facilitates the travel of extremists to Afghanistan or Iraq via Iran on behalf of al Qaeda, and is believed to have sought funds to support al Qaeda attacks.” Al Harbi joined al Qaeda's network in Iran in 2011, but was previously added to Saudi Arabia's Most Wanted List. The Saudi Ministry of Interior charged al Harbi with “traveling to Afghanistan to join al Qaeda and providing technical support on the Internet to the terrorist group.”

Explanation of the “agreement” between Iran and al Qaeda

The Treasury Department's October 2012 announcement contained new details concerning the “agreement” between Iran and al Qaeda. “Under the terms of the agreement between al Qaeda and Iran,” Treasury reported, “al Qaeda must refrain from conducting any operations within Iranian territory and recruiting operatives inside Iran while keeping Iranian authorities informed of their activities.”

“In return,” Treasury continued, “the Government of Iran gave the Iran-based al Qaeda network freedom of operation and uninhibited ability to travel for extremists and their families.” If al Qaeda members “violate these terms” they “run the risk of being detained by Iranian authorities.”

The previous head of the network, Ezedin Abdel Aziz Khalil (a.k.a. Yasin al Suri), “agreed to the terms of this agreement with Iran with the knowledge of now-deceased al Qaeda leader 'Atiyah 'Abd al Rahman.” Rahman, who was killed in a drone strike in August 2011, is discussed above.

Despite the U.S. government's efforts, however, Treasury says that “Iran continues to allow al Qaeda to operate a core pipeline that moves al Qaeda money and fighters through Iran to support al Qaeda activities in South Asia.” And “this network also sends funding and fighters to Syria.”

Al Qaeda’s network in Iran tied to plots against Western interests

Under the Obama administration, the Treasury and State Departments have made it clear that al Qaeda’s network inside Iran plays a vital role in shuttling terrorists to and from the Middle East and South Asia. In this section, I am going to extend this analysis, pointing to ties between this same network and three plots against Western interests outside of war zones. The first plot was in 2010, when al Qaeda sought to launch Mumbai-style attacks against Western cities. The al Qaeda operatives selected to take part in the attacks used Iranian soil to transit to and from northern Pakistan. After the plot was disrupted, some of them were sheltered inside Iran as well.

The second al Qaeda plot was foiled by Canadian authorities in April. Canadian officials revealed that the plotters received “direction and guidance” from al Qaeda members in Iran. The third al Qaeda plot was broken up by Egyptian authorities earlier this month. The cell reportedly targeted the U.S. and French Embassies in Cairo and received assistance from a senior al Qaeda leader who may be the same terrorist who currently heads al Qaeda’s network in Iran.

2010 Mumbai-style plot against Europe

In March 2012, an alleged al Qaeda operative named Ahmad Wali Siddiqui went on trial in Koblenz, Germany.¹⁸ Siddiqui was reportedly slated to take part in one of the final plots ordered by Osama bin Laden, who wanted to launch Mumbai-style attacks in European cities. Siddiqui’s testimony, as well as other evidence, demonstrated that this al Qaeda cell used the very same Iran-based terror network that, according to the Treasury Department, operates “under an agreement between al Qaeda and the Iranian government.”

During his testimony, Siddiqui, a dual German and Afghan citizen, discussed the time he and his fellow plotters spent at the same mosque attended by al Qaeda’s 9/11 Hamburg cell, as well as his own transformation into a violent jihadist. “We wanted to fight...against Americans,” Siddiqui told the court. Siddiqui initially joined the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), a terrorist organization closely allied with al Qaeda, in northern Pakistan. He quickly migrated to al Qaeda itself. According to the German indictment, senior terrorists decided to send Siddiqui back to Germany to take part in a potentially devastating attack intended “to weaken Europe’s economy.” After Siddiqui was captured in Afghanistan, he revealed the nascent plot.

¹⁸ This section is based on an article I co-authored for *The Weekly Standard*. Benjamin Weinthal and Thomas Joscelyn, “Al Qaeda’s Network in Iran,” *The Weekly Standard*, April 2, 2012. See: http://www.weeklystandard.com/articles/al-qaeda-s-network-iran_634428.html

In testimony before the court, Siddiqui described how he and his co-conspirators planned different travel routes in order to avoid suspicion beginning in early 2009. But their travels had a common theme: Iran was their principal gateway to jihad.

According to Siddiqui, two of his co-conspirators—Rami Makanesi and Naamen Meziche—traveled from Vienna to Tehran in order “to not get caught.” Their trip was booked in a Hamburg travel office by an unknown Iranian. Siddiqui explained that the pair could not travel directly to Pakistan because they are Arabs. Pakistani authorities would have questioned the duo’s intentions and perhaps detained them, but by traveling through Iran they avoided such scrutiny.

When Makanesi and Meziche arrived in Tehran, Siddiqui explained, they called a facilitator known as “Dr. Mamoud,” who works for the IMU. The two were ushered to Zahedan, a city on the eastern border of Iran, close to both Afghanistan and Pakistan. There, Siddiqui says, Dr. Mamoud “welcomed them.”

Zahedan is a well-known hub of al Qaeda and IMU activity. The IMU has repeatedly used the city’s Makki mosque, the largest Sunni mosque in Iran, to shuttle fighters into Afghanistan and Pakistan. Al Qaeda has an established presence there, too. For instance, before his May 2011 suicide at Guantánamo, an Afghan detainee named Inayatullah allegedly admitted to authorities that he was al Qaeda’s emir of Zahedan, from where he delivered recruits to senior al Qaeda leaders in Pakistan. Even since Inayatullah’s capture, al Qaeda fighters have continued to travel through Zahedan, as Makanesi and Meziche did. And, as explained below, the al Qaeda plot disrupted in Canada in April reportedly involved this very same hub in Zahedan.

Meziche has long been known to European counterterrorism officials. His father-in-law, Mohamed al-Fazazi, was a radical preacher whose sermons and spiritual advice guided al Qaeda’s 9/11 Hamburg cell. Meziche was reportedly close to Mohamed Atta, the lead hijacker in the 9/11 attacks, and Ramzi bin al-Shibh, al Qaeda’s point man for the 9/11 operation. Bin al-Shibh reportedly tried to call Meziche just days before the 9/11 attacks. Meziche was later implicated in Al Qaeda in Iraq’s operations after European officials found that he had been recruiting fighters for the organization.

According to *Der Spiegel*, senior al Qaeda terrorists instructed Meziche and another member of the cell, an Iranian national named Shahab Dashti, to travel to Iran where “they would be told where in Europe they were to be deployed to begin building structures for bin Laden’s organization.”¹⁹ Once in Iran, Dashti “was to undergo facial plastic surgery” because he had already appeared in a propaganda video and was therefore recognizable to European authorities. However, Dashti did not get a chance to fool Western intelligence officials, because he was killed in a drone strike in northern Pakistan in early October 2010, after the Mumbai-style plot was uncovered.

Initial reports indicated that Meziche was killed in the same drone strike, but he survived it and was sheltered by the Iranians before being captured inside Pakistan. *The New York Times*

¹⁹ Hubert Gude, “Key Al-Qaida Witness: Hamburg Islamist to Stand Trial in Germany,” *Spiegel Online*, February 28, 2012. See: <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/key-al-qaida-witness-hamburg-islamist-to-stand-trial-in-germany-a-817984.html>

reported in January 2012 that Meziche and several other members of the cell are “waiting in Iran, trying to return to Europe.”²⁰ European authorities were not eager to see them come back, as they posed obvious security risks. Anonymous U.S. officials interviewed by the *Times* described Meziche and one of his Iran-based compatriots as “lower midlevel” al Qaeda operatives. “These two have been involved in al Qaeda external operations activities for some time now,” one official said. Citing multiple intelligence sources, the *New York Times* explained that “Iran appears to be harboring them in hopes that, when and if they leave, they will cause trouble in the West.”

Rami Makanesi, who set off for Tehran with Meziche, was arrested in Pakistan in 2010 and sentenced to nearly five years in prison last year by a Frankfurt court. Makanesi has his own ties to Iran-based al Qaeda operatives. According to Guido Steinberg, a researcher in the Middle East and North Africa division of the German Institute for International Security Affairs, Makanesi met a top al Qaeda operative known as Ezedin Abdel Aziz Khalil (a.k.a. Yasin al Suri) in February 2010. Khalil is the same al Qaeda leader who was designated by the Treasury Department in July 2011. Steinberg, in his analysis brief for IHS Jane’s, a military and intelligence consulting group, explains that Khalil asked Makanesi to “accompany him to Iran.” Makanesi said that Khalil “was responsible for funneling money and recruits via Iran and that he was known to cooperate with the Iranian government.”

When the Treasury Department designated Khalil in 2011, it also designated several other members of al Qaeda who utilize the Iran-based network. As explained above, one of them was Atiyah Abd al Rahman, who was subsequently killed in a drone strike in northern Pakistan. The Treasury Department explained: “Rahman was previously appointed by Osama bin Laden to serve as al Qaeda’s emissary in Iran, a position which allowed him to travel in and out of Iran with the permission of Iranian officials.” Makanesi seems to have at least known Rahman. According to Steinberg, Makanesi has explained that Rahman “was known to have lived in Iran for many years.”

The evidence in this matter is clear. The al Qaeda cell that was selected to take part in one of Osama bin Laden’s last plots against the West was facilitated by the same Iran-based network that the Treasury and State Departments have repeatedly pointed to as evidence of collusion between al Qaeda and the Iranian regime. This does not mean that Iranian officials orchestrated the plot or were otherwise directly involved. Then again, we cannot rule out the possibility. At a minimum, al Qaeda’s network in Iran played a key role.

Disrupted plot against trains in the U.S. and Canada

On April 22, 2013, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) announced that they had disrupted an al Qaeda plot to derail a passenger train traveling from New York to

²⁰ Souad Mekhennet, “Hiding in Iran, Raising Suspicions in Europe,” *The New York Times*, January 10, 2012. See: http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/10/world/middleeast/hiding-in-iran-raising-suspicions-in-europe.html?_r=0

Toronto.²¹ Canadian officials directly implicated al Qaeda in the plot. “This is the first known al Qaeda planned attack that we've experienced in Canada,” Superintendent Doug Best told reporters.²² “Had this plot been carried out, it would have resulted in innocent people being killed or seriously injured,” Assistant RCMP Commissioner James Malizia said. RCMP chief superintendent Jennifer Strachan explained that the plot “was definitely in the planning stage but not imminent.”²³ Strachan elaborated: “We are alleging that these two individuals took steps and conducted activities to initiate a terrorist attack. They watched trains and railways.”

Canadian officials added a key allegation: The plotters received “direction and guidance” from al Qaeda members in Iran.

According to *Reuters*, investigators think that one of the suspects “traveled to Iran on a trip that was directly relevant to the investigation of the alleged plot.”²⁴ *Reuters* added: “U.S. national security sources close to the investigation said that was a reference to a network of low-to middle-level al Qaeda fixers and ‘facilitators’ based in the town of Zahedan, close to Iran’s borders with Afghanistan and Pakistan, that moves money and fighters through Iran to support its activities in South Asia.”

This is, once again, the same al Qaeda network that operates under an “agreement” with the Iranian regime. Canadian officials say they have not find evidence implicating Iranian officials in the plot. But Iran’s provision of safe haven to al Qaeda is a significant factor by itself. More details about the al Qaeda’s cells contacts inside Iran will hopefully emerge during the forthcoming court proceedings.

Disrupted plot against the American and French Embassies in Cairo

On May 11, 2013, Egyptian interior minister Mohammed Ibrahim announced that an al Qaeda plot against a Western embassy and other targets had been disrupted. The interior minister said that two suspected terrorists are being held for questioning and a third is under house arrest. The Egyptian government did not initially say which embassy the three-man cell targeted. The *New York Times* reported, however, that “a Western official said the Egyptians had privately identified the embassy as the United States Embassy in Cairo.”²⁵ Subsequently, the Egyptians identified both the American and French Embassies as targets.

²¹ Royal Canadian Mounted Police, “RCMP Arrests Two Individuals for Terrorism-related Charges,” April 22, 2013. See: <http://www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/news-nouvelles/2013/04-22-ns-sn-eng.htm>

²² CBS News and Associated Press, “2 arrested in terror plot against Canadian passenger train, police say,” April 22, 2013. See: http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-202_162-57580804/2-arrested-in-terror-plot-against-canadian-passenger-train-police-say/

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Mark Hosenball, “Canada train plot suspect traveled to Iran: U.S. officials,” *Reuters*, April 25, 2013. See: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/04/25/us-arrests-iran-idUSBRE93O1D320130425>

²⁵ Ben Hubbard, “3 Arrested in Plot to Bomb Egyptian Cities and Embassy,” *The New York Times*, May 11, 2013. See: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/12/world/middleeast/egypt-arrests-3-in-plot-to-attack-cities-and-an-embassy.html>

The Egyptian interior ministry revealed three significant details about the plotters. First, the Egyptians alleged that they had been trained in the north Sinai, with the intention of fighting inside Syria. This again demonstrates how the war in Syria is having ripple effects throughout the region. Second, Ibrahim said the al Qaeda cell was in contact with the so-called “Nasr City Cell,” which has its own ties to al Qaeda. The Nasr City Cell has also been tied to the September 11, 2012 terrorist attack in Benghazi, Libya.²⁶ Third, Ibrahim pointed to two ties to al Qaeda’s network inside Iran.

Ibrahim said that one member of the al Qaeda cell had received “military training” inside Iran, as well as Pakistan. The interior minister also identified a key point of contact for the cell as a senior al Qaeda terrorist known as Dawud al Asadi, who told the trio “to get in touch with a terrorist cell in the Cairo neighborhood of Nasr City.”²⁷

Ibrahim did not offer many details about al Asadi, other than to describe him as “the head of al Qaeda in some west Asian countries,” which is somewhat vague. Dawud al Asadi is, in fact, one of the aliases used by Muhsin al Fadhli, the head of al Qaeda’s network in Iran.²⁸ Al Fadhli is described above. He was designated as the head of al Qaeda’s network inside Iran in October 2012. Therefore, if the al Asadi mentioned by the Egyptian interior minister is in fact Muhsin al Fadhli, then this is yet another indication that al Qaeda’s leadership inside Iran is projecting terror far beyond the mullahs’ borders.

²⁶ Thomas Joscelyn, “Egyptian interior minister: Al Qaeda cell plotted suicide attack against Western embassy,” *The Long War Journal*, May 11, 2013. See: http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/05/egyptian_interior_mi.php

²⁷ Ben Hubbard, “3 Arrested in Plot to Bomb Egyptian Cities and Embassy,” *The New York Times*, May 11, 2013. See: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/12/world/middleeast/egypt-arrests-3-in-plot-to-attack-cities-and-an-embassy.html>

²⁸ State Department Rewards for Justice, “Wanted, Information leading to the location of Muhsin al-Fadhli, Up to \$7 Million Reward.” See: <http://www.rewardsforjustice.net/index.cfm?page=fadhli>