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How Iran and al-Qaeda made a deal

By Syed Saleem Shahzad
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ISLAMABAD - On March 30, Heshmatollah Attarzadeh, the commercial attache at the Iranian consulate in Peshawar, capital of Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province, was "recovered from outside Iran and returned to Iran" after being abducted by militants on November 13, 2008.

In a terse statement, the Iranian Intelligence Ministry announced that Attarzadeh had been freed after a "complicated intelligence operation" by Iranian intelligence forces, without giving further details, apart from a dig at Pakistan: "Following the failure of the Pakistani government to secure the release of Attarzadeh, my ministry took the initiative and managed to rescue the diplomat," Intelligence Minister Heydar Moslehi said.

Attarzadeh, 59, was more outspoken. In an interview with the Iranian state-owned Press TV, he said Israel's Mossad and the Central Intelligence Agency of the United States, under orders from the US, were behind his abduction.

Iran's First Vice President Mohammad Reza Rahimi, after a meeting with Attarzadeh, did not comment on these claims, instead taking time for a little back-patting. "The freedom of the diplomat shows the all-out might of the Islamic Republic of Iran and its all-around dominance in the realm of intelligence," Rahimi was quoted by the semi-official Fars News Agency as saying.

Investigations by Asia Times Online show that while the Iranians did indeed secure Attarzadeh's release, it came at a price: a deal with al-Qaeda that resulted in the release of high-profile prisoners from Iranian custody. And in the negotiating process, Iran supplied weapons to a top Taliban commander allied with al-Qaeda.

The mean streets of Peshawar

At about 7.30 on the morning of November 13, 2008, Attarzadeh was in the Hayatabad neighborhood on his way to the Iranian consulate in Peshawar, where he had worked for the previous three years. Peshawar is the freewheeling capital of North-West Frontier Province, which was recently renamed Khyber Pakhtoonkhwa to reflect its dominant ethnic Pashtun population.

Attarzadeh's car was intercepted by two other cars and in a hail of gunfire forced to stop. Attarzadeh was seized by at least two armed men, bundled into one of the vehicles and taken to the South Waziristan tribal area on the border with Afghanistan, home of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP- Pakistani Taliban). Attarzadeh's bodyguard, a Pakistani police officer, was shot dead in the initial exchange of gunfire.

The incident made international headlines and Iran's Foreign Ministry called it an "act of terrorism". A day before Attarzadeh's abduction an American aid worker had been shot and killed outside the Iranian consulate in Peshawar.

Typically in such abductions, a ransom demand quickly follows. In this case there was only silence.

An Iranian diplomat in the Pakistani southern port city of Karachi told Asia Times Online in early 2009 that the Iranian government was prepared to pay any amount of ransom or listen to any demands, but there had not been a word from the captors.

Alarm bells began to ring. Attarzadeh had been clearly targeted in a well-planned abduction; something bigger than ransom was at stake.

Tehran set about trying to get back its man, starting with official Pakistani channels, including appeals to the Foreign Office and the powerful Inter-Services Intelligence. Nothing happened. The Iranians then turned to Afghan contacts in Zabul province, who in turn used their tribal connections to make contact with top Taliban commander Sirajuddin Haqqani, the son of veteran mujahid Jalaluddin Haqqani.

Sirajuddin is headquartered in Pakistan's North Waziristan tribal area and his network spreads through the Afghan provinces of Paktia, Paktika, Khost, Ghazni and Wardak, in addition to the capital, Kabul. The Haqqani network has strong ties with al-Qaeda commanders as well as with Punjabi fighters. It is considered the strongest and the most effective resistance network against foreign forces in Afghanistan.

Taliban and al-Qaeda become involved

Iran requested Sirajuddin to use his influence to secure the release of Attarzadeh. According to people familiar with the Haqqani network who spoke to Asia Times Online, this happened in mid-2009. Sirajuddin said he would look into the case, and in return some of his men visited Iran.

Sirajuddin wasted no time and made contact with members of the al-Qaeda-linked TTP

who were holding Attarzadeh. The captors arranged for the diplomat to talk by telephone with his family in Iran. Ostensibly, the call was to inform Attarzadeh that an in-law of his had died, possibly his mother-in-law.

This was the beginning of a better relationship between Tehran and the militants, who, in Iran's eyes, were tarred with the same brush as al-Qaeda. Shi'ite-majority Iran had been deeply upset by al-Qaeda's Jordanian militant, Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi, who until his death in 2006 had conducted a vicious campaign against Shi'ites and the shrines of revered descendants of the Prophet Mohammad in Iraq.

Al-Qaeda now stepped directly into the picture. It requested that in return for Attarzadeh being allowed to speak with his family, al-Qaeda should be allowed to speak to some of its members who had been apprehended in Iran in the wake of the September 11, 2001, attacks on the US.

A senior al-Qaeda-linked militant told Asia Times Online on the telephone, "Iran had not put them in jail. Instead, the al-Qaeda members and their families were placed in different houses. Later, they were brought together in a compound with comfortable private housing. Sirajuddin Haqqani's men visited them and reported back to al-Qaeda that they were in good condition."

Some of these "captives" in Iran were then given access to telephones to speak with al-Qaeda's *shura* (council) members in North Waziristan, the militant said. "This relationship developed very patiently. Video footage of the Iranian diplomat was sent to his family to show that he was in good condition."

The atmosphere continued to improve, and by the end of 2009 it was time to get down to the real business.

Al-Qaeda opened with a demand for the release of all of its members being held in Iran in return for Attarzadeh. Tehran would not agree with this. Negotiations along this line went back and forth.

Sirajuddin Haqqani, meanwhile, had seen an opportunity.

Deals emerge

Sirajuddin assured the Iranians that the Taliban bore no grudge against Iran or Shi'ites - their only aim was to defeat the Western coalition in Afghanistan. He wrote a detailed letter to Tehran in which he spelled out that neither his father (Jalaluddin) nor himself had ever been involved in anti-Iran activities. He said that they only worked for the resistance against anti-Islam forces, whether it be those of the Soviet Union or the US.

Iran has historic reasons to be wary of the Taliban. The Hazara, a predominately Shi'ite, Persian-speaking ethnic minority in Afghanistan, suffered extensive persecution under Taliban rule in the late 1990s. Taliban forces also killed at least eight Iranian diplomats in Afghanistan in the same period.

Sirajuddin's overtures worked. "The result of this communication was the delivery of several dozen sophisticated anti-aircraft guns, which shocked the Americans," the al-Qaeda-linked militant told Asia Times Online.

This was the prize Sirajuddin was after, the weapons to fight the curse of the militants in the tribal areas - drones, the US's unmanned aerial vehicles that rain missiles onto suspected al-Qaeda and Taliban targets. Scores of top leaders have been killed in such raids over the past year.

On January 24, near Hamzoni village in North Waziristan, a drone went down. Pakistani and US intelligence confirmed the incident but would not say whether the drone had crashed or been shot down.

The militants had no doubt, claiming that their new Iranian-supplied weapons were responsible. There were other reports of drones going down in North Waziristan. The US temporarily suspended drone attacks, without saying why.

Militant sources say that the US Central Intelligence Agency then sprung into action and after a week-long probe traced the anti-aircraft guns to Dand-e-Darpa Khel in North Waziristan. Their positions were pinpointed, and in February a string of drone attacks destroyed them all. Mohammad Haqqani, a brother of Sirajuddin Haqqani, was killed in one of the attacks.

The militant source claims that Sirajuddin recently received a fresh batch of weapons from Iran. The weapons, though, were something of a sideshow that developed out of Attarzadeh's abduction.

By this time Iran and al-Qaeda had finally come to an agreement: Attarzadeh would be exchanged for some al-Qaeda members, as well as one of Osama bin Laden's daughters.

"Al-Qaeda and Iran agreed to swap Osama bin Laden's daughter Iman, and some other prisoners were also released," the militant said. He refused to give details of the "other" prisoners.

On March 22, Iman bin Laden, 18, was allowed to travel to Syria after spending 112 days living in the Saudi Arabian Embassy in Tehran after escaping house arrest in a family compound. She joined her mother, Najwa bin Laden, in Syria.

Dozens of bin Laden's family members have been held in Iran since fleeing from Afghanistan after the US-led invasion in 2001. They were held for entering the country illegally and for not having proper travel documents.

While the militant would not give details of which al-Qaeda members were exchanged, a former director of a European intelligence agency who now works for an American strategic think-tank told Asia Times Online that one of them was most likely the high profile al-Qaeda leader, Saiful Adil, who has been involved in a number of al-Qaeda terror plots.

"Iranians posing as a security agency initially conducted an operation in the Pakistani tribal areas and in Afghanistan to secure the release of their diplomat, but it was a long haul," the former intelligence official said.

"During the process [of negotiation], the sides developed a rapport and Iman bin Laden was released as a gesture of goodwill and then prisoners were swapped. It still needs to be verified [officially] that the Iran diplomat was released by al-Qaeda and that Saiful Adil was released by the Iranian government," the official said.

New forces

While Iran, al-Qaeda and the Haqqani network have all benefited from the Attarzadeh saga, their cooperation has alarmed others.

"Saudi Arabia was the first country to show its concern over the growth of this new relationship," a senior Pakistani counter-terrorism official told Asia Times Online. "The second one was Egypt. Both countries separately approached Pakistan and there have been several interactions between Saudi intelligence agencies and Pakistani intelligence agencies to trace the roots and dimension of these relations."

"The Saudis and Egyptians have their eyes on the nexus in the Pakistani tribal areas as well as on the situation in Yemen, from where there could be a direct spillover into Saudi Arabia and then onto Egypt," the official said.

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) regrouped in January 2009 through a merger between two regional offshoots of al-Qaeda in neighboring countries Yemen and Saudi Arabia. Led by a former aide to bin Laden, AQAP has vowed to attack oil facilities, foreigners and security forces in an effort to topple the Saudi monarchy and Yemeni government, and establish an Islamic caliphate.

Iran has proxies in Yemen among the minority Shi'ite population and if the two factors - the Shi'ites and AQAP - develop ties, it would be a big blow for Saudi Arabia and other Arab states, the Pakistani official said.

"If Saiful Adil has been exchanged, Pakistan is not aware of this, it would be bad news for the Western world as it would mean a revival in al-Qaeda's international operations," the official said. He explained that Saiful Adil could possibly coordinate activities with Iran, as captured al-Qaeda leader Abu Zubaida did in the past with Hezbollah in Lebanon.

The deals made to have Attarzadeh released after his abduction in Peshawar may prove to be more far-reaching than ever imagined.