



What will Joe Biden do about the Iran-al-Qaida connection?

January 14, 2021 **Ilan I. Berman** *USA Today*

Related Categories: Islamic Extremism; Terrorism; Middle East; Iran

When it comes to foreign policy, it's already clear that one of the biggest differences between the outgoing Trump administration and the incoming Biden team will be Iran. In contrast to the current U.S. policy of "maximum pressure" toward the Islamic Republic, President-elect Joe Biden and his advisers have already promised a more conciliatory approach centered around a revival of the 2015 nuclear deal with Tehran.

But what about Iran's role as the world's leading state sponsor of terrorism? That's a title the Iranian regime has held since the U.S. government began formally keeping track of terrorist trends since 1984. Nevertheless, American attention to the issue has waxed and waned over the years in tandem with the priorities of successive administrations in Washington. The present White House, though, sees it as a major issue — and, in its final days in office, is working to make sure that the next one does as well.

Iran's ongoing relationship with al-Qaida

That was the broader context behind Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's Tuesday address at the National Press Club, in which the Trump administration's top diplomat outlined the deep and ongoing connections between Iran and al-Qaida. These connections, Pompeo contended, reflect a partnership that has provided strategic benefits to both parties and has been a major reason behind al-Qaida's continued relevance in recent years.

Over the past half-decade, he noted, Iran's notorious Ministry of Intelligence and Security as well as its feared clerical army, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, "have provided safe haven and logistical support" to the Bin Laden network, and as a result the group's leadership has now become centralized in the Islamic Republic. Indeed, it was precisely this arrangement that made it possible for al-Qaida's second-in-command, Abu Muhammad al-Masri, to gain sanctuary in Tehran, where he was targeted and killed last August, ostensibly by Israeli operatives.

The end result is nothing short of a game changer in counterterrorism terms. For American allies in the region, who could be targeted by Iran and al-Qaida working in tandem, the implications of this development are undoubtedly dire. But the Iran-al-Qaida partnership also represents a danger to the nascent normalization wave between Israel and the Arab states — the momentum of which could be blunted if al-Qaida, with Iranian backing, takes serious steps to destabilize the region anew.

Shiite and Sunni radicals work together

At bottom, though, the contention outlined by Pompeo is hardly new. For years, counterterrorism experts have questioned the conventional wisdom that Shiite and Sunni radicals simply cannot and do not cooperate. As proof that the opposite is true, they have pointed to things like past collusion between al-Qaida and Lebanon's terrorist powerhouse, Hezbollah, as well as Shiite Iran's longstanding sponsorship of Hamas, the Islamist group that serves as the Palestinian branch of the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood movement.

Yet the idea that Iran doesn't make common cause with Sunni extremists has proved to be a stubborn one and still holds sway in many corners — much to the detriment of a proper understanding of Iranian regime behavior. In the wake of Pompeo's presentation, which included reference to official intelligence assessments as well as publicly known instances of Iran-al-Qaida cooperation, that fiction should become more difficult to sustain.

The main thrust of the presentation, however, was undoubtedly political. The revelations put forth by Pompeo create some hard choices for the Biden camp. Short of simply disregarding these connections, the new White House will be at pains to explain why it remains eager to restart negotiations with Iran — and how it can do so without empowering precisely this sort of continued rogue behavior on Tehran's part.

"We ignore this Iran-al-Qaida nexus at our own peril," Pompeo urged. "We need to acknowledge it. We must confront it. Indeed, we must defeat it."

It's clear, though, that such an effort is no longer within the power of the Trump administration to prosecute. The onus now falls to its successor to tell us whether it will — and, if so, how.

