

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

INFORMATION

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

FROM: SAMUEL BERGER

SUBJECT: Iranian response on al-Khobar

DECLASSIFIED
PER E.O. 13526

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KBH 2/9/2024

Last week we received a response from the Iranian government to the letter on the al-Khobar bombing that Omani Foreign Minister bin Allawi hand-delivered to President Khatemi. The response is mostly negative. Copies of the two messages are attached at Tabs A and B.

The basic thrust of the Iranian letter follows their traditional line. They flat out deny any involvement in the al-Khobar attack and are outraged by our claims. They go on to demand we turn over the captain of the crew of the USS Vincennes, the cruiser that accidentally shot down an Iranian airliner over the Gulf in 1988.

The positive side of the Iranian letter is that it affirms that Iran bears no hostile intent to the United States. It reaffirms Iran's commitment to the rule of law and to a policy of "détente."

The letter is clearly a consensus document. The reaffirmation of rule of law and détente are vintage Khatemi, while the denial and the counter demand that we turn over the crew of the Vincennes are old-style positions. Our message did not remain with Khatemi; what is unclear is only whether he shared it with the rest of the Iranian leadership because he wanted to do so or because he felt compelled to do so. Either way, this demonstrates that we cannot communicate privately with Khatemi.

Even more troubling, late last week, Iranian sources leaked the contents of our letter and the Iranian response to various media sources, including the Kuwaiti newspaper al-Watan. The Tehran Times has reported that Iran is considering publishing the entire text of our letter. The Iranian Foreign Ministry, however, tried to play down the leaks and said that exchanges

with the United States are not universal. Although there is much in the press reports that are fanciful -- secret meetings between Iranian and American officials in Rome and Geneva and that we included photos of the al-Khobar suspects with our letter -- there is much that is accurate, including details such as the Iranian insistence that we hand over the crew of the Vincennes.

There are conflicting reports as to which Iranian camp leaked the letter to the press -- Khatemi's people to show that they are not selling out to the United States or the hardliners to discredit Khatemi's effort to mend fences with us. Regardless, the Iranian hardliners are having a field day with it. They are using our request for the al-Khobar suspects as further evidence that the United States continues to interfere in Iranian internal matters and tries to dictate policy to Tehran.

We now need to decide quickly how to move ahead on the al-Khobar investigation. If the Iranians make good on their threats to publish the text of the letter we will come under intense pressure to take some action. The most pressing issue is whether to extradite Hani al-Sayegh to Saudi Arabia or bring him to trial here. Only by moving quickly in pursuit of the law enforcement aspects of the case can we hope to defuse pressure to take more direct action against Iran. I will consult with Janet and Madeleine on how to get this moving now.

Attachments

- Tab A Iranian Response
- Tab B Your Message to President Khatemi
- Tab C Al-Watan Article