

garments, typically under a waistcoat so it is properly concealed. The orange color detonation cord connects the explosives vest or jacket to the striker sleeve, which is adhered to the bomber's left-hand wrist with duct tape. On reaching the target, the ring of the striker sleeve is pulled with the right hand and the blast occurs. There is no evidence of any intoxicant administered to the suicide bombers before the attack.

Since suicide bombers often either abort their missions or are arrested before they can detonate their explosives, they have been able to narrate their pre-attack emotions. The bombers' felt no fear of death or consequence before the attack. Some bombers, however, were anxious about missing the target, such as detonating their explosives early or too late (for example, after a convoy has already passed). Before the attack, they would feel pride that Allah had chosen them for such a great mission. Thoughts of their family did not enter their mind. They experienced no abnormal physical reactions such as sweating, dry mouth, restlessness, heart palpitations, or abnormal movements of the body. Breathing remained normal. There were no speech abnormalities, nor did they appear to be in a hurry.⁴⁴

Post-Mission Activities

At the completion of a successful mission, the Taliban leaders do not always inform the other trainees about the real location of the suicide blast. They also sometimes give them false information about where the attack occurred.⁴⁵ When an attack occurs in Afghanistan, however, the leaders inform the recruits of this fact.

After an attack takes place, the *amir* of the Pakistani Taliban and the *amir* of the training camp visit the family of the suicide bomber, provided that the family is in Waziristan or accessible.⁴⁶ Although the other trainees at the camp feel loss for their former friend, they are consoled by the notion that the bomber has reached paradise. No specific funeral rituals or celebrations are offered at the camp for those who go on suicide missions. They are, however, remembered in prayers. The

families of the bombers rejoice over the martyrdom mission, and some mothers wear new black dresses to greet local women after the death of their son. One bomber, however, explained that while the mother of the bomber is typically sad, they cannot overtly express their true feelings due to threats from the Taliban.

Also, contrary to the general public's perception, the Taliban do not regularly pay compensation to the families of suicide bombers after an attack.⁴⁷ Any posthumous compensation package is largely a myth. In some cases, when the parents of a bomber are extremely destitute, they are given a small amount of financial assistance.

Conclusion

The suicide bomber training camps in South Waziristan have been shuttered as a result of Pakistan's October 2009 military operation. Yet insight into how the Waziristan camps functioned helps to provide context for how and why individuals choose to use their body as an explosive device. Moreover, although the South Waziristan camps have been closed, they may have been relocated elsewhere. Continuing to deny militants safe haven to train and plan for attacks is essential to reducing their operational capabilities in Pakistan and in the region.

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Iran's Ambiguous Role in Afghanistan

By Sajjan M. Gohel

IRAN IS PLAYING a pivotal role in Afghanistan's post-Taliban development. It is a large source of foreign direct investment, and provides assistance in critical national infrastructure, road construction, distribution of energy supplies, and agricultural and communications development. Iran also shares ethnic, linguistic and religious links with millions of Afghan Shi'a. This is particularly true with Afghanistan's Shi'a-minority Hazara community, which resides in the central and northern regions of the country. As a result of these positive connections, Iran has been viewed as a potential stabilizing force in Afghanistan, with its interests largely aligned with those of the Western mission: concern about the Taliban insurgency, resistance to al-Qa`ida and weakening the opium trade

Paradoxically, Iranian-made armaments have been discovered in the hands of Afghan Taliban fighters, raising concern and questions about Tehran's overall strategy in Afghanistan. An August 2009 report authored by General Stanley A. McChrystal, the commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, cited Iran's "ambiguous role" in the country, stating that Iran is providing aid to the Afghan government while at the same time allowing weapons to pass into the hands of the Taliban.¹ U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates has also accused Tehran of playing a "double game" in Afghanistan.² This "ambiguous" role has created confusion over Iran's true intentions toward its neighbor.

1 Stanley A. McChrystal, "COMISAF'S Initial Assessment, Secretary of Defense Memorandum June 2009, Initial United States Forces - Afghanistan (USFOR-A) Assessment," Headquarters, International Security Assistance Force, Afghanistan, August 30, 2009. General McChrystal's exact words were, "Iran plays an ambiguous role in Afghanistan, providing developmental assistance and political support to GIROA while the Iranian Qods Force is reportedly training fighters for certain Taliban groups and providing other forms of military assistance to insurgents. Iran's current policies and actions do not pose a short-term threat to the mission, but Iran has the capability to threaten the mission in the future."

2 Mark Thompson, "U.S. Forces Get New Protection in Afghanistan," *Time Magazine*, October 28, 2009.

44 Ibid.

45 Mir Janan, September 2008.

46 Abid Mehsud, July 2008.

47 Ishaq Mehsud, June 2008.

This article attempts to explain Iran's paradoxical relationship with Afghanistan by providing the history of Iran's pre-9/11 relations with the country, examining its actions after the fall of the Taliban in 2001, and assessing Iran's overall goals in Afghanistan. It finds that while the theocratic Shi'a Muslim state of Iran should have little in common with the Sunni fundamentalist Taliban militia, elements within the Iranian military or government may be willing to assist Taliban fighters for a number of short-term interests. Although Iran does not want a hostile Sunni regime to take power on its eastern border, elements within its security forces may want to retain the capability to escalate tensions in Afghanistan in response to Western pressure on either Iran's ongoing nuclear program or its clandestine activities in Iraq and Lebanon. Moreover, Iran appears most interested in carving out influence in Afghanistan's western Herat Province at the expense of heightened Taliban violence elsewhere in the country.

Tehran's Pre-9/11 Afghan Dynamics

To understand Iran's role in Afghanistan today, it is necessary to examine its actions during the 1979 Soviet invasion and subsequent occupation of Afghanistan. The Soviet invasion created a conundrum for Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Khomeini. Khomeini was obligated to speak against the invasion of an Islamic country by "godless communists," yet he could not afford to directly antagonize the Soviet Union. The start of the invasion coincided with the U.S. Embassy hostage crisis in Tehran that irreversibly damaged U.S.-Iran relations.³ As Iran became increasingly isolated during the hostage crisis, it began to tilt in favor of the Soviet Union to counter the growing U.S. influence with the Arab-Afghan mujahidin. As a result, although Tehran condemned the Soviet occupation and demanded it withdraw its forces, the clerical regime was careful not to allow its policy to damage its otherwise amiable relations with Moscow.⁴ At the same time, the Soviet occupying forces

did not dominate the Hazarjat region in central Afghanistan, the stronghold of the Shi'a community and where Iran's leverage was highest.⁵

In 1992, following the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, the United Nations sponsored a conference for a political resolution to transfer power to Afghan Interim Government (AIG) President Sebghatullah Mojaddadi and his successor Burhanuddin Rabbani of Jamaat-i-Islami.⁶ To consolidate his power base, however, Rabbani, an ethnic Tajik, resorted to pitting one ethnic group against the other including the Shi'a political faction Hizb-i-Wahdat (Party of Unity), led by Abdul Ali Mazari.⁷ Interestingly, the Iranian clerical leadership supported Rabbani against the Shi'a Hizb-i-Wahdat and provided Rabbani's government with food and resources. Tehran's apparent logic was that by supporting Rabbani, its strategic interests in newly independent Central Asian states would be protected by a Tajik-dominated government in Kabul.⁸

A three-year war with Rabbani's government exhausted Hizb-i-Wahdat's military strength and resources.⁹ As a result of Tehran's failure to support his party, Mazari made a fatal move by agreeing to a peace deal with the emerging Taliban.¹⁰ As a consequence, the Taliban forced Hizb-i-Wahdat to surrender its arms and relinquish its territory to members of the Taliban. Mazari and several members of Hizb-i-Wahdat's leadership were taken hostage and murdered in March 1995.¹¹ In 1996, the Taliban eventually overthrew the Rabbani government.¹² This enabled the Taliban to gain a foothold within central Afghanistan, which they would not relinquish until the U.S.-led invasion in 2001.

5 Sayed Askar Mousavi, *The Hazaras of Afghanistan: An Historical, Cultural, Economic and Political Study* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997).

6 Hafizullah Emadi, "The Hazaras and Their Role in The Process of Political Transformation in Afghanistan," *Central Asian Survey* 16:3 (1997): p. 381.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid., p. 383.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid., pp. 383-384.

12 Mohsen Milani, "Iran's Policy Towards Afghanistan," *Middle East Journal* 60:2 (2006): pp. 242-243.

The Taliban regime in Afghanistan was highly antagonistic to Iran, and Tehran viewed it as a security threat. In August 1998, the Taliban captured Mazar-i-Sharif, the interim capital of the Northern Alliance. In addition to killing hundreds of Shi'a Muslims, the Taliban stormed the Iranian Consulate in the city and killed eight Iranian diplomats and an Iranian journalist, and held 50 other Iranian nationals captive. Tehran was incensed by the killings and dispatched 200,000 troops to the border as the government decided whether or not to invade. War was averted when the Taliban, after the threat from Iran and under pressure from the United Nations, returned the bodies of the murdered diplomats and sent the remaining Iranian captives home. The killings and the capture of Iranians were seen in Tehran as a national humiliation and perhaps a clear reminder of Tehran's failed policies in Afghanistan.¹³

Post-Taliban Afghanistan

During the period of reformist Iranian President Mohammad Khatami, Iranian opposition to the Taliban and its al-Qa'ida ally was such that Tehran cooperated with Washington during Operation Enduring Freedom by providing vital intelligence support to the U.S. war effort.¹⁴ That level of cooperation, however, has somewhat dissipated and become more antagonistic.

Although the Iranian government has positive ties with Kabul and has supported a number of economic projects in the country, it appears to be maintaining leverage over the direction of the country by offering some support to the Afghan Taliban. Evidence has emerged that the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), through its special Quds Force, has provided weapons, explosives, roadside bombs, and other forms of support to elements of the Afghan Taliban. Through 2009, British military forces have intercepted shipments of Iranian-made arms in Helmand Province, which have included Russian-made SA-14 "Gremlin" man-portable, low-altitude surface-to-air missiles.¹⁵ Iranian-made

13 Tarock, p. 801.

14 "Iran and the West: After 9/11," BBC, August 3, 2009.

15 Michael Smith, "Missile Threat to British Troops,"

3 Mohsen Milani, "The Hostage Crisis," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, Vol. VII (New York: Columbia University, 2004), pp. 525-535.

4 Adam Tarock, "The Politics of the Pipeline: The Iran and Afghanistan Conflict," *Third World Quarterly* 20:4 (1999): p. 805.

rocket-propelled grenades have been found by U.S. troops in villages where the Taliban sought sanctuary, carrying markings such as “82 mm h-e lot O2 slash 87.”¹⁶ Although these markings are copies of U.S. military ordinances, the lot numbers are fabricated and do not exist in the United States.¹⁷

It is conceivable that much of the weaponry smuggled across the Iran-Afghanistan border to the Taliban has been primarily through arms dealers and other criminal elements seeking profit or opium. Individuals within the Taliban, however, have themselves identified two routes for their access to Iranian weaponry, which has been corroborated by British officials. First, there are Iranian businessmen who sell arms to the Taliban, and then smuggle them into Afghanistan. Second, there are those within Tehran’s state apparatus who allegedly “donate” weapons.¹⁸ In regard to the latter, it is not clear whether this is a directive from the central leadership in Tehran or instead decisions made by certain elements within the IRGC. Regardless, Iranian-made weapons are in high demand among Taliban fighters. A Kalashnikov rifle made in Iran, for example, costs \$200-300 more than one made in another country because the Iranian models are also capable of firing grenades up to 300 meters.¹⁹

Another concern in Afghanistan has been the discovery of AK-47s, C4 plastic explosives, mortars and advanced armor piercing explosives, known as Explosively-Formed Penetrators (EFPs), a shaped charge used with deadly effect by insurgents in Iraq.²⁰ EFPs, which appear to come from Iran, have earned the nickname in Afghanistan as “Dragons” because they are shaped so

that the explosive force is concentrated in the direction of the designated target rather than blasting in all directions and therefore weakening the impact.²¹ Unlike ordinary mines that can cause minor damage to military vehicles, a Dragon can completely destroy it. The Taliban have credited Iranian-supplied weapons as being responsible for successful attacks against NATO forces in southern Afghanistan.²²

Connections between Iran and the Taliban are also drawn from discoveries made by the Afghan authorities. In March 2009, Afghan security forces found a cache of Iranian-made explosives near the Bakhshabad Dam in Farah Province, a \$2.2 million coalition-sponsored project set to boost power and water supply in the area.²³ Mohammad Yunus Rassouli, the deputy governor of Farah Province, alleged, “Our reports indicate that the Iranian government is trying to prevent the construction of the Bakhshabad Dam. They will do whatever is necessary.”²⁴ In September 2009, Afghan police found explosives-packed jerrycans—which they thought came from Iran—during a search of Taliban fighters traveling on the Bagram-Kabul highway.²⁵

Furthermore, Afghan border police have intercepted consignments of anti-tank mines and mortars bound for Afghan Taliban fighting NATO forces.²⁶ More alarming is that Iranian weapons are being discovered in provinces such as Helmand, which is seen as the key battleground between the Taliban and NATO forces. In May 2009, following an operation to clear Taliban fighters from the town of Marja, coalition forces found 44 bricks of Iranian-made explosives and dozens of Iranian-made mortars.²⁷ Marja developed international significance in 2010 following the initiation of “Operation Moshtarak,” a counterinsurgency operation jointly

conducted by British, American and Afghan forces.²⁸ Afghanistan is the world’s largest producer of opium, and Helmand is where much of the country’s poppy crop is grown; the proceeds from the drug trade help bankroll the Taliban, especially when it comes to purchasing weapons and explosive materials.²⁹

While identifying the alleged role of the Quds Force in supporting elements of the Taliban insurgency, McChrystal’s report also mentioned that Tehran’s strategy and actions do not adversely harm the U.S.-led coalition’s Afghan assignment in the short-term.³⁰ McChrystal does believe, however, that Iran is capable of threatening the mission in the long-term.³¹ Ironically, just as Tehran ignored the situation to its own detriment in the 1990s, it stands to lose a great deal again if there were a resurrection of a Taliban-led order in Afghanistan.

Reasons Behind Iran’s Policy

If it is true that elements within the Iranian government are providing weapons to Taliban fighters, then Tehran is playing a dangerous double game in Afghanistan. By covertly assisting the Taliban, they are hoping to achieve two strategic objectives.

First, by providing the Taliban weapons to battle NATO troops, Tehran is presuming that with the Taliban preoccupied, it will leave Herat alone and not disturb the “economic sphere” that Iran is developing in the province. One of Iran’s main objectives is to create

¹⁶ *Times*, March 1, 2009; Alastair Leithead, “Iranian Influence in Afghanistan,” BBC, June 11, 2007.

¹⁷ Lara Logan, “Cooperation Rises Between Iran and Taliban,” CBS News, October 7, 2009.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Kate Clark, “Taliban Claim Weapons Supplied by Iran,” *Daily Telegraph*, September 14, 2008; Kate Clark, “Assignment,” BBC, September 18, 2008.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Significantly, the appearance of EFPs in Iraq has also been blamed on Iran. For details on the EFPs in Afghanistan, see David Hambling, “‘Deliberate Slip’ Reveals Afghan Superbombs,” *Wired*, January 28, 2009; Greg Bruno, “Iran and the Future of Afghanistan,” Council on Foreign Relations, March 30, 2009.

²² Clark, “Assignment.”

²³ Clark, “Taliban Claim Weapons Supplied by Iran.”

²⁴ “Tehran Accused of Complicity in Growing Weapons Trade,” Institute for War and Peace Reporting, April 20, 2009.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Chris Zambelis, “Is Iran Supporting the Insurgency in Afghanistan?” *Terrorism Monitor* 7:33 (2009).

²⁷ Ben Farmer, “Iranian Weapons Getting Through to Taliban,” *Daily Telegraph*, June 8, 2009.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Operation Moshtarak is designed to clear central Helmand of the Taliban and set the conditions for the Afghan government to introduce increased security, stability, development, rule of law, freedom of movement and reconstruction in the area. Moshtarak means “together” in Dari. The name is designed to signal that the Afghan army is now playing an equal role in fighting the Taliban. The assault on the town of Marja is the biggest test so far for Afghan forces. The town’s population is about 80,000 people, of whom up to 2,000 are thought to be Taliban. For details, see “Operation MOSHTARAK Begins,” British Ministry of Defense, February 13, 2010.

²⁹ “Crime and Insurgency: The Transnational Threat of Afghan Opium,” United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), October 2009.

³⁰ According to McChrystal, “Iran’s current policies and actions do not pose a short-term threat to the mission, but Iran has the capability to threaten the mission in the future.”

³¹ *Ibid.*

an economic sphere of influence in Afghanistan, with the ultimate goal of becoming a powerful strategic focal point for the transport and shipment of goods and services linking the Persian Gulf, Central Asia and the Far East.³² Iran also projects influence in Afghanistan through economic initiatives and various religious programs. The bulk of Iranian investment is in the Herat region and involves infrastructure projects, road and bridge construction, education, agriculture, power generation, and telecommunications projects. Iran has helped rebuild Afghanistan's radio and television infrastructure, and has increased its own radio and television programs in Dari.³³

It is in the Herat region that Iran's influence in Afghanistan is most visible. Until 1857, Herat was considered an "integral part" of Iran and served as the capital of the Persian Empire in the early 15th century.³⁴ When the British repelled Iranian advances toward Herat, Iran and the United Kingdom signed the Treaty of Paris in 1857. Although Iran abandoned its historic claim on Herat, it reserved the right, under Article VII of the treaty, to send forces into Afghanistan "if its frontier is violated."³⁵ Since then, Iran has occasionally sought to keep Herat as a buffer zone. For a few years, Ismail Khan, the Tajik governor of Herat, helped Iran realize that goal.³⁶

Today, Herat is one of the most stable and prosperous regions in Afghanistan.³⁷ It also benefited from the fact that Afghan President Hamid

Karzai made Ismail Khan minister of water and energy.³⁸ A small industrial city has been reconstructed, making it the industrial heartland of the country.³⁹ Following the completion of a highway from its border with Afghanistan, Tehran financed an extension linking Herat to Afghanistan's remote northern provinces. In 2009, a plethora of Iranian-built schools, health clinics and business centers around Herat were connected to the Iranian interior due to an \$80 million railroad project.⁴⁰ Herat's bazaars are filled with Iranian products, and the presence of the IRGC through the Iranian Consulate is openly visible.⁴¹ In addition, hundreds of trucks cross from Iran to Herat and vice-versa on a daily basis.⁴²

Second, it is plausible that the clerical regime wants to retain the capability to weaken stability in Afghanistan in reaction to Western pressure on its nuclear program or its clandestine activities in Iraq and Lebanon. Moreover, while Tehran wants a stable, friendly Afghanistan, it clearly wants to limit U.S. influence in the country. To achieve these aims, Iran may be covertly providing weapons and explosives to the Afghan Taliban to ensure that the West becomes preoccupied on other fronts.

Assessment

Today, strategic cooperation between Iran and the West should be theoretically possible because they have converging interests and common aversions in Afghanistan, such as the re-emergence of al-Qa`ida fighters, the Taliban and narco-traffickers. Indeed, Western capitals and Tehran could coalesce around stabilizing Afghanistan. Nevertheless, Tehran is seeking to influence Afghanistan's domestic and foreign policy while at the same time limiting the role Western states play in the region.

Kabul, which has become increasingly dependent on Iranian aid and infrastructure development, is reluctant to openly criticize elements within Iran on allegations of supplying the Taliban with weapons, especially considering that corrupt elements within the Afghan government itself have been doing the same for economic gain.⁴³

Iranian influence in Afghanistan is inevitable and some of it is constructive. Yet it is also duplicitous, paradoxical and potentially destabilizing to the region. As a consequence, Tehran is in danger of conceding reverse strategic depth to the same forces it occasionally and tacitly assists. Yet, until the clerical regime accepts that support by elements of the IRGC toward the Taliban will have a detrimental impact on Iran itself, its "ambiguous" policy will continue in the foreseeable future.

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32 Milani, "Iran's Policy Towards Afghanistan."

33 "Iran Exports \$10m to Afghanistan," BBC Monitoring Service, October 1, 2002.

34 Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, *Amir Kabir Ya Ghabra-man-e Mobareze Ba Astemar* (Tehran: Farahnai Press, 1927), p. 377.

35 J.C. Hurewitz ed., *The Middle East and North Africa in World Politics: European Expansion, 1535-1914* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1975), pp. 341-343.

36 In September 1995, Ismail Khan fled to Mashhad, Iran, after the fall of Herat to the Taliban, but he returned with rearmed fighters within a few months. In 1997, he was captured and imprisoned by the Taliban in one of the clashes. After spending three years in captivity, he escaped and fled a third time to Iran. Since then, Khan, who is now minister of water and energy in Afghanistan, has developed and built upon close relations with the clerical regime in Tehran.

37 Jason Motlagh, "Iran's Spending Spree in Afghanistan," *Time Magazine*, May 20, 2009.

38 Abubakar Siddique, "Proposed Afghan Cabinet Stocked With Familiar Faces," Radio Free Europe, December 21, 2009.

39 Motlagh.

40 Ibid.

41 Personal interview, Afghan diplomat, November 27, 2009.

42 Gulshan Dietl, "War, Peace and the Warlords: The Case of Ismail Khan of Herat in Afghanistan," *Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations* 3:2-3 (2004): p. 52.

43 Clark, "Assignment."