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Iran flexes muscle with Taliban meeting

By Mina Habib
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Analysts say a recent visit to Tehran by a Taliban delegation is a clear indication of Iran's intention to boost its influence in Afghanistan following next year's pull-out of North Atlantic Treaty Organization forces.

The Taliban were keen to portray the meeting, which involved a delegation attending an Islamic conference, as a parallel government engaging in formal talks with its neighbor.

Although the Iranian government maintained an official silence over the visit, the Taliban confirmed that representatives from the political office it set up in Qatar three years ago had travelled to Iran by invitation.

Tehran and the Taliban have long had a difficult relationship, not least because of religious differences between the Sunni Taliban and the Shia-led government in Iran. The Iranians backed the opposition forces known as the Northern Alliance when the Taliban were in power between 1996 and 2001. In 1998, 11 Iranians, mostly diplomats, were killed in Mazar-e Sharif, and Tehran held the Taliban responsible.

While details of the recent meeting remained unclear, Pakistan's Express Tribune newspaper quoted an anonymous Taliban official as saying Iran shared its concerns about the position of the Shi'ite Hazara minority in Afghanistan, which faced severe discrimination under Taliban rule.

The Taliban gave assurances that all ethnic groups would have a role in Afghan politics after the NATO withdrawal, and in return they asked Iran not to support their opponents after the exit, the source added. However, in a telephone interview with IWPR, Taliban spokesman Qari Mohammad Yusuf Ahmadi dismissed these reports.

"These issues were not discussed at all," he said. "The purpose of the Taliban visiting Iran was to participate in this conference, just as the Taliban has already participated in conferences in Japan and France [in 2012]. Our purpose was to make clear on the world stage the Taliban's rightful claim to present information about issues in Afghanistan and the region."

He added that they discussed the question of Afghan refugees in Iran, and received official assurances that Tehran would relax its treatment of this group. This remains an important concern to the many Afghans who have relatives in Iran or who continue to travel, often illegally, to seek work there.

Kabul has tried to maintain good relations with Tehran over the past 12 years, despite tensions over the refugees and other issues including perceived attempts to expand Iranian cultural and religious influence in Afghanistan. The latter is a sensitive issue in Afghanistan. Recently, Kabul university students and civil society institutions staged a massive demonstration against Tehran's alleged interference, in which angry protestors burnt the Iranian flag.

The Afghan foreign ministry and the presidential office declined to give IWPR an interview despite repeated requests, but Kabul has always roundly condemned any contacts between the Taliban and foreign countries, insisting that the government must always be the conduit for such meetings.

Afghan parliamentarian Shukria Barakzai accused Iran of double standards. "With this move, Iran has shown that it will spare no efforts to achieve its malicious goals in Afghanistan," she said. "It has extended its hand in cooperation to the most extremist Sunnis, the Taliban, while Sunnis inside Iran are not even allowed to worship."

Despite their past hostility, observers say that common interests - most notably their shared enmity of the US - were bringing Tehran and the Taliban together.

Political analyst Wahid Mozhda noted that clandestine contacts between the Taliban and Iran had been reported for the last three years. "The Taliban demonstrated their independence with this trip," he said. "Looked at from another angle, they also showed the world that solving the issue of Afghanistan is impossible unless they are present."

Iran also stood to benefit from the meeting, Mozhda said, noting that the country has been criticized for backing President Bashar al-Assad in the Syrian civil war. "Iran has been specifically accused of supporting the Shia [ie Alawites] in Syria. With this move, it tried to show the world that Iran is a friend to the Sunnis, as well to as any enemy of the United States, and that it does not support the Shia alone."

Just as the US exerts various kinds of pressure on Iran, that country will also use any tool at its disposal - including the Taliban - against the Americans, he said.

But ordinary Afghans would not benefit from being caught in this power play, Mozhdha added. "These moves are not positive for the Afghans," he said. "We have no other option but to move towards peace; otherwise we will be in very bad shape after 2014."

Political analyst Jawed Kohestani also noted previous contacts between Iran and the Taliban, but that these had been kept highly confidential as Tehran was concerned about the possible repercussions. He suggested that Iran had become bolder since the Syrian civil war erupted, because its clear involvement, through Hezbollah members fighting for Assad, had not resulted in a severe US response.

"Iran has realized that the US and its allies can no longer use the military option against Iran because of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, because the US is busy in other parts of the world and because of its economic problems," he said. "Iran is no longer scared of the US."

Iran's invitation to the Taliban should be interpreted as a direct challenge to the status quo in Afghanistan, although, he added, "This does not mean that the Taliban will return to power."

There are some signs that the visit was controversial within the insurgents' own ranks.

"This is very damaging to the entire Afghan nation and the Taliban," Sayed Akbar Agha, former leader of a breakaway Taliban faction called Jaish al-Moslemin, told reporters. "Besides, it is impossible to ensure peace in Afghanistan through Iran."

Taliban spokesman Ahmadi dismissed such comments as personal opinion, adding, "Every individual has a right to comment, and every comment is limited to that person's vision."

But the meeting has also sparked concern among ordinary Afghans.

"Iran is a worse enemy than Pakistan," said Kabul resident Ferdaus as he sold vegetables from his roadside stall. "The country has killed hundreds, even thousands of Afghans there, forcing Afghan children into heavy labour and torturing Afghan refugees in the worst possible manner. It separated Afghan children from their families and deported them, created drug addicts and inflamed ethnic and religious divisions in this country."

"Despite all this malice, the Afghan government has called it an ally," he continued. "It's better that its evil face has been further exposed to the Afghan government and the world."