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<http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-South-Central/2013/0805/How-much-influence-will-Iran-have-in-post-US-Afghanistan>

How much influence will Iran have in post-US Afghanistan?

Though Iran has been sponsoring projects in Afghanistan for years, Afghans have grown skeptical of their neighbor's intentions.

By Scott Peterson

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Those who speculate that Iran will somehow absorb western Afghanistan into its sphere of influence when US and NATO forces drawdown in 2014 have not been through the doors of the threadbare “Public Library and Cultural Center” in Herat.

Iran built the domed structure and stocked its library and classrooms seven years ago, a \$190,000 project that it presented as a gift to the Afghan government. Today the center fulfills a critical need for its 700 mostly poor Afghan student members: English, math, art, Quran, and computer classes, and a study hall to prepare for university entrance exams.

But the dilapidated state of the center – from the worn carpets to the broken blue tiles above the entrance, which show hands clasped in Iran-Afghan cooperation – are emblematic of the limited reach of Iran’s “soft power” here, even in this city close to the border which boasts religious, cultural, and deep trade ties.

When Seyed Alireza Razavi became the center director a couple years ago, he approached Iranian officials for help – and an upgrade.

“I said it was very bad that Iran made this center but did not support it,” recalls Mr. Razavi, speaking in the library, the best of its kind in the Jubrayl district a few miles west of Herat city’s center. Many here are ethnic Hazaras, who share the Shiite faith with Iran. “Our doors are broken, desks and chairs and tables are damaged, we need materials and the heating system fixed,” recalls Razavi.

Iranian officials – who oversee an extensive network of clinics, charity work, and aid projects in Herat and across Afghanistan – said they would try to help. But six months later the Iranians told Razavi they could not provide the \$10,000 needed to repair the facility.

Another event in February illustrated the limits of ideological messaging from across the border. At the Iran consulate, Razavi offered to conduct a ceremony to mark the anniversary of Iran’s 1979 Islamic revolution. He received roughly \$600, and hoped to use any excess funds for the center.

“People raised their objections. They said: ‘This is not Iran! This belongs to Iran, not to us,’” recalls Razavi. “People want help from Iranian charity, but don’t want to be accused of being used as a tool by Iran.”

Signs of Iran’s presence are not hard to find in Herat: Two emergency electricity turbines were donated to the city early this year. Every time someone hits a light switch, they can thank Iran for the bulk of their electricity, provided at cut-rate prices.

And Iran’s largest charity organization, the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee (IKRC), is active in providing everything from payments of \$220 to newlyweds and \$600 - \$800 loans for farmers, to helping 7,000 families and 72,000 orphans across the country, according to official figures.

In Herat Province alone, the charity provided \$623,000 in non-cash assistance during six months in 2011, handing out flour, sugar, cooking oil, and cleaning products to poor families, and even vocational training (with stipends for transport) that included sewing and auto mechanic courses.

But signs of Iran’s actual influence in western Afghanistan – relative to that of the United States and other Western donors, which have spent magnitudes more than Iran on reconstruction and security – is much harder to find.

“It has been like a cold war between the US and Iran in Herat, and the US won,” says a local Afghan journalist who asked not to be named. “Iran’s influence is much less than eight years ago, because the US pushed it back. One thing we can say is the US has been effective in moving the media against Iran. Good thoughts toward Iran have changed a lot in eight years, negatively.”

Iran vs US support in Afghanistan

Such a stark portrayal may be news to US policymakers, for whom Iranian influence (and more dramatically that of Pakistan) is but one of a host of issues that cloud Afghanistan’s post-2014 future. Indicative perhaps of an apparent live-and-let-live modus operandi in this city, US

officials could not be quoted for this story and, likewise, Iranian diplomats and officials of the IKRC did not make themselves available to comment.

Iran's support of the post-Taliban government has not kept up with that of the US and Western donors. The US Agency of International Development alone has spent \$17 billion since the Taliban were forced from power in 2001, part of the \$93 billion overall spent by the US on Afghan reconstruction.

That amount dwarfs the \$310 million that Iran was reported to have spent in Iran up to 2007, of the \$560 million it pledged for Afghanistan rebuilding in 2002.

President Hamid Karzai admitted in 2010 to his office receiving bags full of cash from Iran, which the New York Times reported was "part of a secret, steady stream of Iranian cash" worth millions and meant to "advance Iran's interests."

But Iran was not alone. In April, the Times reported that the CIA had also sought to buy influence by funneling tens of millions of dollars in off-the-books cash via suitcase and backpacks to the presidential palace, "and unlike the Iranians, it still is."

'Struggling with a neighbor'

But despite Iran's history of help, senior Afghan officials in Herat often take a dim view of the Islamic Republic, accusing it of meddling, and supporting anti-government militants in suicide and other attacks – charges that Iran denies. Anti-Iran protests targeted the Iranian consulate last December over the alleged killing of several Afghan workers by Iranian security forces, forcing it to close temporarily.

"I feel very clearly the unfriendliness of Iran, because they killed a few people the other day on the borderline. [The dead] are not thieves and they are not smugglers, they are normal laborers," says Said Fazilullah Wahidi, the new governor of Herat. He said he grew used to "struggling with a neighbor" for six years in his previous job as governor of Kunar Province along the Pakistan border.

He says Afghans who want to get visas to cross into Iran to work are met with corruption and high costs, so some sneak across the border, which isn't safe.

"We are not happy," says Mr. Wahidi. He says he has also heard of Afghan trucks being stopped for no reason. "I don't know why they say these things.... I don't like external interference in my province."

Afghanistan's problems are "coming from the neighbors," adds Wahidi. But the US, also, "should leave soon.... We need an independent Afghanistan."

Herat's police chief also has few good things to say about Iran, echoing common complaints that blame outsiders for all Afghanistan's problems.

“For five or six years, everyone hears that Iran interferes and creates problems. The international community also heard, but what did they do to prevent that?” asks Rahmatullah Safai. “Yet as police chief in Herat, I did not see any evidence of that. But it’s possible, maybe they hired Afghans in Afghan clothes, maybe they do their work [attacks] through them.”

Mr. Safai was for years part of the Afghan border guard which frequently intercepted Iranian-made roadside bombs, he says, though there have been few recent reports. Iranians “want to undermine the Afghan government,” Safai charges, and “create challenges for America in Afghanistan.”

Iran says it wants a stable Afghanistan

Iranian officials counter that they want a stable Afghanistan. Iran’s policies “are based on an independent [model of] behavior” for “the development of the security of Afghanistan,” Iran’s former ambassador to Kabul, Mohammad Taherian, told the diplomacy.ir website in June.

Those Afghans who have been helped by the IKRC are not small in number. Ministry websites in Tehran indicate that 10,000 “student packages” have been distributed, and that students of poor families can receive a monthly allowance of \$20, and even 30 percent of fees for private universities.

“Political turbulence has had no effect on the [charity’s] work because our work is not political and its goal is humanitarian,” Reza SalmAbadi, the head of the IKRC in Afghanistan, was quoted saying in June.

Indeed, that has been the experience of the Herat cultural center, says director Razavi: “We can define [IKRC] that they help the poor people. They always tell us: ‘If you have poor people, introduce them to us.’”

Today inside the center, there is little trace of Iran’s revolutionary ideology, aside from a set of school textbooks based on Iran’s curriculum.

“People may look like they support the Iranians, but in their thinking they are pro-American.... We think that, hopefully, the US is trying to build Afghanistan,” says Razavi. But he adds that in this district “we’ve never seen any help from the Americans.”

The Iran consulate did send workers to fix the leaking dome roof four months ago. In the art room, paints, brushes, and canvas are provided by the students themselves.

“Maybe [with Iran’s] budget, they aren’t able to pay as much,” adds Razavi. “But I can say Iran does not want to do more because right now they see Afghanistan as an American country.”