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Long War Journal

Taliban leader, police link Iran to attacks in Afghanistan

By Bill Roggio

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According to both the Afghan police and a recently captured Taliban commander, Iran is training and supporting the operations of the Taliban in southwestern Afghanistan.

A Taliban commander named Mullah Gul Ahmad, who led a group of 30 fighters and was captured recently by police in Nimroz province, said he was recruited in the eastern Iranian town of Zahedan, a known hub for Iranian Qods Force's operations in Afghanistan.

"I studied at a religious school in Iran where someone named Khaled provoked me to perform jihad against Americans," Ahmad said in a confession obtained by the Afghan interior ministry and aired on Afghan television two days ago. Ahmad claimed that he and his group fought in Helmand province after receiving training in Iran.

Sayed Mohammad Faqir Askar, a police chief in Farah province, said other Taliban fighters captured in the province have also admitted to training in Iran and being based in Iran.

"Some individuals who have been detained by our security forces have confessed that they have terrorist centers in border regions of Iran and they are trained in how to use weapons and lay mines," he told Tolo TV. "In fact, these terrorists are trained in Baluchistan area of Iran."

Another anonymous Afghan official said that both Iran and Pakistan are sponsoring terrorist groups in Farah.

"Based on the information we have and based on the information the people of Farah Province share with us, neighboring countries interfere in this province, they provide Afghan government armed opponents with weapons and support them in other spheres as well," the official told Tolo TV. "In fact, government officials and the people in this province confirm this issue."

The Afghan officials said that training camps for the Taliban and al Qaeda are located in the Iranian cities of Zahedan, Birjan, Maibod, and in the Shamsabad area near Tehran.

In previous reports on Iranian support of terrorist groups in Afghanistan, the Iranian cities of Mashad and Tayyebat have also been identified as staging points for operations by Iran's Ansar Corps, the Qods Force subcommand tasked with aiding the Taliban, al Qaeda, and other terror groups.

Farah province is a hub for al Qaeda's operations in the Afghan west

The Qods Force is supporting a Taliban and al Qaeda network that currently operates in the remote western province of Farah, an investigation by The Long War Journal has discovered.

Farah province is a known haven for al Qaeda and allied terror groups, and serves as a main transit point for foreign fighters and Iranian aid flowing into Afghanistan. The presence of al Qaeda cells has been detected in the districts of Bakwah, Balu Barak, Farah, Gulistan, and Pusht-e Rod; or five of Farah's 11 districts.

ISAF and Afghan special operations teams have intensified their activity in the province of Farah since October 2010. There have been eight reported raids in Farah, and one in Nimroz targeting a commander who operates in Farah, since the beginning of October, and 14 raids total since March 2010.

In the course of the 14 raids, ISAF has killed three al Qaeda-linked commanders; Mullah Aktar, Sabayer Saheb, and Mullah Janan, and captured three more leaders who have not yet been named. All of these commanders have been linked to Iran's Ansar Corps.

ISAF has been hesitant to comment on the scope of this network, however. "Due to operation security concerns we are not able to go into further detail at this time," an ISAF public affairs official told The Long War Journal at the end of November 2010. In a follow-up inquiry on Jan. 10, ISAF again would not comment on the network.

Background on Iran's covert support for the Taliban and al Qaeda in Afghanistan

Iran's Ansar Corps operates much like the Ramazan Corps, which supports and directs Shia terror groups in Iraq. [See LWJ report, Iran's Ramazan Corps and the ratlines into Iraq.] The Ansar Corps' headquarters is based in Mashad in northeastern Iran.

On Aug. 6, 2010, the US Treasury added General Hossein Musavi, the commander of the Ansar Corps, and another Qods Force commander to the Treasury's list of specially designated global terrorists, for directly providing support to the Taliban in neighboring Afghanistan.

ISAF and Afghan forces have targeted several Taliban commanders with known links to Iran's Qods Force - Ansar Corps. [See LWJ report, Taliban commander linked to Iran, al Qaeda targeted in western Afghanistan.]

For years, ISAF has stated that the Qods Force has helped Taliban fighters conduct training inside Iran. As recently as May 30, 2010, former ISAF commander General Stanley McChrystal said that Iran is training Taliban fighters and providing them with weapons.

"The training that we have seen occurs inside Iran with fighters moving inside Iran," McChrystal said at a press conference. "The weapons that we have received come from Iran into Afghanistan."

Al Qaeda helps Taliban fighters enter Afghanistan from Iran, and is known to facilitate travel for its own operatives moving into Afghanistan from Mashad, where the Ansar Corps is headquartered. Al Qaeda additionally uses the eastern cities of Tayyebat and Zahedan to move its operatives into Afghanistan. [See LWJ report, Return to Jihad.]

In March of 2010, General David Petraeus, then the CENTCOM commander and now the ISAF commander, discussed al Qaeda's presence in Iran in written testimony delivered to the Senate Armed Services Committee. Al Qaeda "continues to use Iran as a key facilitation hub, where facilitators connect al Qaeda's senior leadership to regional affiliates," Petraeus explained. "And although Iranian authorities do periodically disrupt this network by detaining select al Qaeda facilitators and operational planners, Tehran's policy in this regard is often unpredictable."

Iran has recently released several top al Qaeda leaders from protective custody, including Saif al Adel, al Qaeda's top military commander and strategist; Sa'ad bin Laden, Osama's son; and Sulaiman Abu Gaith, a top al Qaeda spokesman. [See LWJ report, Osama bin Laden's spokesman freed by Iran.]

In March 2010, a Taliban commander admitted that Iran has been training teams of Taliban fighters in small unit tactics. "Our religions and our histories are different, but our target is the same - we both want to kill Americans," the commander told The Sunday Times, rebutting the common analysis that Shia Iran and Sunni al Qaeda could not cooperate due to ideological differences.