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Is Iran Supporting the Insurgency in Afghanistan?

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EFP's ("superbombs") seized in Baghdad

Violence and instability in Afghanistan continue to rage in the form of an organic insurgency shaped by local identities, networks, and interests. Operating under the nebulous rubric of the Taliban, the insurgents in Afghanistan have evolved in sophistication, lethality, and geographic scope in recent years. While the presence of transnational radical Islamists led by al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan augments the tactical and operational capabilities of the insurgents, myriad factors help fuel the violence that confronts the American-led Coalition. The reach of regional state actors, for instance, impacts the insurgency in Afghanistan. The machinations of Afghanistan's neighbors, in essence, define its geopolitics. Pakistan's impact on Afghan politics, society and the insurgency receives the most attention. Another influential actor in Afghanistan that is drawing more attention of late, however, but whose role in Afghan affairs is far less understood, is Iran.

Iran's interests and reach into Afghan society are well known. Official U.S. and regional sources, however, often paint a confusing picture of the nature of Iran's activities in Afghanistan. Iran is frequently described as a force for stability in Afghanistan, with interests that largely converge with those of the U.S. mission there, namely their shared opposition to the Taliban and al-Qaeda. Yet reports that Iranian-made munitions are finding their way into the hands of the Taliban coupled with allegations that Iran is actively providing insurgents with operational and material support are increasingly making headlines. These claims are echoed in General Stanley A. McChrystal's unclassified August 2009 assessment of the situation in Afghanistan (McChrystal is commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan). [1] At the same time, General McChrystal's report cites Iran as a source of development aid and support for Kabul. These apparently contradictory assessments of Iran's activities in Afghanistan are underlined by what the report calls Tehran's "ambiguous role" in Afghanistan. U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates has also accused Tehran of playing a "double game" in Afghanistan through its alleged support for armed factions and its friendly relations with Kabul (Agence France-Presse, June 12; Asia Times [Hong Kong], July 8). In spite of Kabul's close ties with Tehran, Afghan security sources have made similar claims implicating Iran in the insurgency in Afghanistan (RFE/RL, June 22, 2007).

An Iranian Footprint on the Battlefield

Proof of Iran's role in aiding the insurgency in Afghanistan, according to U.S. and regional sources, is based on evidence that Iran has provided weapons, explosives, and other forms of material support to elements of the Taliban and other militants since 2007. British forces reportedly intercepted at least two shipments of Iranian-made arms in Helmand province in southern Afghanistan between April and June 2007 (BBC, June 11, 2007). British forces also claimed to have uncovered Russian-made SA-7 "Strella" and SA-14 "Gremlin" man portable, low-altitude surface-to-air missiles that are believed to have originated in Iran (The Times [London], March 1). Armor-piercing bullets, mortars, C-4 plastic explosives, and anti-tank mines of Iranian origin are also reported to have appeared on the battlefield (The Times, March 1; August 5, 2007). A ten-ton cache of arms and munitions of Iranian, Chinese and Russian manufacture was uncovered in western Afghanistan's Herat province, located beside the border with Iran (RFE/RL, September 14, 2007). More recently, Afghan police reported seizing explosives-packed jerry cans they believed to have originated in Iran during a search of militants traveling on the Bagram-Kabul highway (Weesa [Kabul], September 9). The Afghan National Army (ANA) claims to have uncovered 14 Iranian-made missiles of unidentified specification in Herat (Tolo TV [Kabul], October 19). Detonators for explosives and related items reported to have originated in Iran have also been uncovered throughout Afghanistan (Asharq al-Awsat, September 12).

Many observers have traced the appearance of advanced armor piercing explosives in Afghanistan, namely Explosively-Formed Penetrators (EFPs - an advanced form of shaped charge), back to Tehran (Wired, January 28; al-Jazeera [Doha], February 27, 2007). Significantly, the appearance of EFPs in the arsenal of armed factions in Iraq was also blamed on Iran. Dubbed a "superbomb" for their ability to pierce armored vehicles, including battle tanks, EFPs have been blamed for many U.S. and Coalition casualties in Afghanistan (Gulf Times [Doha], July 4, 2007; Wired, August 23, 2007).

In addition to allegedly providing weapons and related support to insurgents in Afghanistan, Iran is also accused of operating militant training and logistical camps across the country, particularly in the western provinces of Herat and Farah, as well as on Iranian soil, specifically the eastern provinces of Kerman and Khorasan along the Iranian-Afghan border (Weesa, January 29). Colonel Rahmatullah Safi, police chief for Afghanistan's western provinces of Herat, Baghdis, and Farah, reported that at least twenty armed militants had crossed the border on pickup trucks from Iran into Farah en route to confront Coalition forces (RFE/RL, June 22, 2007).

Evaluating the Evidence

In spite of the appearance of Iranian-origin weapons on Afghan soil and reports that Tehran is actively supporting the insurgency in Afghanistan, U.S. and regional officials, including the Kabul government, appear to take great care not to accuse Iran of operating a deliberate policy aimed at undermining the NATO and U.S. mission and overall stability in Afghanistan. A number of reasons may be behind this logic. First, there may be little concrete evidence of official Iranian involvement in the transfer of weapons to insurgents in Afghanistan. Instead, corrupt elements within the Iranian security forces or independent smugglers may be trafficking weapons and explosives across the border for profit or in exchange for opium (Asia Times, June 22, 2007). Cross-border smuggling is a part of life on the Iranian-Afghan frontier. Moreover, from a technical perspective, military officials and other observers have suggested that the EFPs and other forms of IEDs that are linked to Iranian support or expertise often contain a uniquely Afghan signature in their design and deployment, even though some of the dual-use components used to manufacture these devices may have originated in Iran due to the high volume of bilateral trade between Iran and Afghanistan. The technology for deploying EFPs and other sophisticated IEDs is also widely available these days due to the Internet and communication between militants with experience in various theaters, making it possible that local insurgents have procured the necessary materials and expertise themselves to effectively deploy EFPs and other advanced weapons systems (Wired, August 23, 2007).

Washington understands that Tehran's support to Kabul is crucial to Afghan and regional stability. The presence of Iranian-origin weapons in Afghanistan may not necessarily prove that Iran is formally operating a policy designed to sabotage the U.S.-led Coalition effort. Factions within the Iranian security services, however, namely the elite Quds (Jerusalem) Force, may be following an agenda parallel to Tehran's normal diplomatic and economic relations with Kabul and stated commitment to support peace and stability in Afghanistan. An elite special operations organization within Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) that emerged in the 1980s, the Quds Force aims to advance key aspects of Iranian foreign policy. The track record of the Quds Force includes special operations in theaters as varied as Lebanon, Iraq, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Sudan, and Afghanistan.

The reported presence of Quds Force operatives in Afghanistan likely represents an effort on the part of Tehran to counter growing U.S. diplomatic pressure against its nuclear program and other points of contention. Iran also feels threatened by the robust U.S. military presence on its eastern and western flanks. In other words, Tehran may see an opportunity to hit back at Washington in a limited manner in Afghanistan to increase its bargaining leverage on other

matters it deems vital to Iranian security and interests. On the U.S. side, Washington may have long ago accepted Tehran's "ambiguous role" as a constructive and obstructive force in Afghanistan as a necessary cost of U.S. intervention. While highlighting the alleged role of the Quds Force in supporting elements of the insurgency in Afghanistan, General McChrystal's assessment also mentions that Iran's current policies and activities do not threaten the U.S.-led Coalition's short-term mission, but does maintain that Iran is capable of threatening the mission in the long-term. [2]

Iran's Stake in Afghanistan

Understanding the dynamics of Iranian involvement in Afghanistan is essential to grasping the U.S.-Iranian interface in Afghanistan. On account of its geography and the ethnic, linguistic, and sectarian links its people share with millions of Afghans, Iran's influence and interests in Afghanistan go back millennia. By virtue of its growing regional influence and historic links to Afghanistan, Iran is crucial to Afghanistan's development and prospects for long-term peace and stability. Examples of Iran's influence and reach in Afghanistan abound:

- Iran has emerged, among other things, as the fourth largest source of foreign direct investment in Afghanistan in 2009 (Ferghana.ru, April 12). Iranian investment includes major developments in sectors as varied as critical infrastructure, energy, agriculture, health care, and communications.
- Iran also provides humanitarian aid on a wide scale. Iran's efforts encompass the development of Afghan educational and cultural institutions and the empowerment of civil society organizations.
- Tehran has also been keen on shoring up its contacts with local political leaders and other notables, including local warlords and tribal leaders in Afghanistan's western provinces (IWPR [Kabul], October 12).

While the locus of the Iranian presence in Afghanistan is found in the country's western provinces such as Herat, Iran's diplomatic, economic, and cultural influence is felt throughout much of the country, a reality not lost on the government in Kabul.

In spite of reports alleging Iranian support for the Taliban, in reality Iran stands to lose a great deal with the resurrection of a Taliban-led order in Afghanistan. The emergence of the Sunni fundamentalist and virulently anti-Shi'a Taliban represented a major threat to Iran at the height of its power prior to 2001. The rise of the Taliban added to the stream of Afghan refugees, especially Shi'a Afghans, who sought refuge in Iran. The influx of refugees seeking sanctuary in Iran added to the already large refugee community residing in Iran since the years of the anti-Soviet struggle. Over 1.5 million Afghan refugees are believed to reside in Iran today, an issue that remains a point of contention between Tehran and Kabul. [3] The assassination of 11 Iranian diplomats in the northern Afghan city of Mazar-i-Sharif in August 1998 after the Taliban overran the city almost sparked an Iranian invasion. Iran at the time, along with Russia and India, was a staunch supporter of the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance forces operating in northern Afghanistan. Iranian opposition to the Taliban and its al-Qaeda ally was such that Tehran cooperated closely with Washington in the run-up to Operation

Enduring Freedom by providing vital intelligence support for the U.S. war effort. While Tehran may relish seeing the United States stumble in Afghanistan, the prospects of having to contend with a reinvigorated Taliban backed by al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and in neighboring Pakistan is not likely to sit well in Tehran.

Afghanistan and the Iranian War on Drugs

Much has been said about the rapid expansion of the opium trade in Afghanistan and the nexus between transnational drug trafficking, insurgency, and international terrorism in South and Central Asia. Few countries, however, have felt the impact of this trend more than Iran, especially on the domestic social level. Iran has one of the highest rates of drug addiction in the world. An October 2009 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) study estimates that at least one million Iranians are addicted to opiates; Iranians are believed to consume at least 15 percent of the world's opium, and these figures are believed to be on the rise. [4] Iran's borders with Afghanistan and Pakistan place it along one of the world's busiest and most violent narcotics trafficking routes; 40 percent of the opium that flows out of Afghanistan is estimated to transit Iran before making its way to global markets. Iran also boasts the highest rate of opium seizures in the world. [5] Iran's counter-narcotics efforts, however, have come at a steep price. Tehran is contending with increasingly violent bands of traffickers operating within its borders, many of whom are linked to militant groups in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, in effect blurring the lines between organized crime and violent militancy. Based on current trends, the ongoing violence and instability in Afghanistan will only exacerbate Iran's domestic problems relating to the drug trade.

Conclusion

Iran's strategic calculus in Afghanistan is shaped by the interplay of local, regional, and international dynamics. While the robust Western military presence in the region poses serious challenges to Iran, there is little evidence to suggest that Tehran's strategy involves an intensive effort to support the Taliban's efforts to oust NATO and Coalition forces from Afghanistan. To achieve such an objective would require a far more vigorous and transparent effort on Tehran's part to inflict significant damage on the Coalition on a regular basis. Such an approach would vindicate the claims of Iran's nefarious motives in Afghanistan, thus further harming Iran's standing in the international community. Ongoing violence and instability in Afghanistan is a recipe for future flows of refugees, increased opium traffic, and violent militancy spilling over Iran's borders. Such a scenario is not in Iran's interest.

The rapidly-expanding Taliban insurgency and the growing instability in Pakistan pose the greatest threats to the U.S.-led Coalition in Afghanistan, not Iran. Instead, Iran appears keen on playing a delicate balancing game that enables it to leverage its influence in Afghanistan, thereby bolstering its bargaining position on issues such as its nuclear program and the political future of Afghanistan and Iraq. At the same time, Iran has the potential to raise the stakes in Afghanistan if need be, as it does in Iraq, and to do so with devastating consequences for the United States in the event of a future crisis; indeed, a potential U.S. invasion of Iran, for instance, or for that matter, a potential Israeli attack on Iran, is sure to play itself out in Afghanistan.

Notes:

1. See “COMISAF’S Initial Assessment, Secretary of Defense Memorandum June 2009, Initial United States Forces – Afghanistan (USFOR-A) Assessment,” Stanley A. McChrystal, General, U.S. Army Commander, United States Forces – Afghanistan, International Security Assistance Force, Afghanistan, 30 August 2009, 2-10, media.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/documents/Assessment_Redacted_092109.pdf

2. Ibid

3. See “Afghanistan and Pakistan: Understanding and Engaging Regional Stakeholders,” Karim Sadjadpour, Testimony before the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, March 31, 2009, www.carnegieeurope.eu/publications/

4. See “Addiction, Crime and Insurgency: The Transnational Threat of Afghan Opium,” United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), October 2009, p. 1.

5. Ibid, pp.2, 7.