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How Iran Controls Afghanistan

By Fariba Nawa

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Afghanistan has suffered from foreign meddling since its inception. But while Pakistan's role has been widely discussed — most Afghans will point to concrete examples — Iran's involvement is more subtle.

Iranian influence is all encompassing--the Islamic government funds Afghan Shiite sects and politicians, has invested in building roads and providing fuel and transport, and is fighting hard against the Afghan opium trade that supplies millions of addicts. But Iran's lasting power on Afghanistan is cultural as well as political, broadcasting state radio and television programs inside Afghanistan.

Yet the country's biggest cultural influence is not imposed by the Iranian government.

The more than one million repatriating Afghan refugees from Iran – tens of thousands have been deported –bring the dialect, food, music, and clothes particular to Iran.

Some of the Afghans repatriates are migrant workers, similar to Mexicans in the U.S., some are construction workers who became addicted to drugs in Iran, others were able to get an education and acquire job skills, and most have lived there for over three decades.

Yet Iran will not grant them legal status; they do not have a right to a higher education, to own property, or to work. Most voluntarily return to Afghanistan because there are more

opportunities in their home country. These Afghans are changing Afghanistan's identity to be more Iranian – for better or worse.

My family escaped the Soviet invasion in 1982 and settled in the U.S.

I first returned to Afghanistan in 2000 when the Taliban reigned, but it was after the group's ouster that I witnessed the cultural changes brought on by immigration.

I was traveling through Afghanistan researching the drug trade for my book "Opium Nation" from 2002 to 2007, and my first confrontation with Iran's cultural impact was language.

Iran and Afghanistan both speak Farsi, but the Afghan dialect is called "Dari." I'm fluent in Dari but I no longer understood what many of the families in my hometown, Herat are saying.

Common words, idioms, and even Iran's use of French terms have invaded Afghan speech. The Herati folk songs I recalled hearing in shops as a child were replaced by Iranian pop produced in Los Angeles. The young Afghan activists and artists read Iranian websites and books.

These changes have given rise to tension between the Afghans who never left home and the Afghan returnees.

The skilled repatriates are resented for getting better jobs with aid companies and the Afghan government.

Conservatives view the Afghan women who grew up in Iran with disdain because they appear more liberal and courageous--they sing on TV, they're news broadcasters, business owners, and government workers. They voice their opinions loudly in a male dominated country.

The Hazara ethnic group in Afghanistan who were historically the poorest of minorities return richer, more literate, and united. They have made unprecedented advances in Afghanistan, including in the arts and in the government.

These returnees are called "Afghan-e badal," or counterfeit Afghans. Few of them have political connections to Iran, but their time living in the Islamic Republic taints them in the eyes of the Afghans who didn't leave as culturally inauthentic and politically suspect.

Several Afghans at NGOs I met told me that their returnee colleagues had clandestine connections to Iran. When I asked for tangible evidence, one of them told me. "I just know by that accent they use. They're sellouts."

While I'm not fully comfortable with this cultural invasion, I understand that Iran advanced while Afghanistan struggled to survive in the last three decades.

Culture is fluid and both countries share a common history. After all, my own husband is one of these Afghan returnees and he's a true patriot.

Repatriating Afghans have enough of a hard time readjusting to their battered country – ostracizing them is simply cruel.

However, Afghan bitterness toward the Iranian government is justifiable. The Islamic Republic backs religious divisions inside Afghanistan, using Afghan Shiites as pawns.

Shiite Afghans, who come from other ethnic groups as well, are encouraged to watch Iranian clerics give fiery speeches against Sunni Afghans. Iran built the road from Herat City to its border, one of the finest rebuilt highways, but the signs alongside the road bear Koranic verses picked by Iran's government.

My homeland is geographically determined as a buffer zone where empires and nations have fought their battles using Afghans as their pawns.

Extremist Sunni groups cross the Pakistani border to kill Afghan Shiite children and women. The carnage last month in Kabul at a Shiite mosque killed eighty people and was a new height in religious sectarian violence for Afghanistan. It won't be long before Iran recruits a group to bomb a Sunni mosque.

Iran and Pakistan were not such deadly influences on Afghanistan before the revolutions and wars inside these countries.

A harmonious cultural exchange was common among these neighbors. Pakistani couples took their honeymoon in Kabul while Iranian singers traveled to give concerts in Kabul in the 1960s.

Before the Soviet invasion, my mother, a Sunni, joined her Shiite friends to commemorate the death of Prophet Mohammed's grandsons during the month of Muharram.

One of my uncles married a Shiite woman, and while throughout history tensions existed between the two sects, the result was not as violent.

I can take pop music and the Iranian Farsi drawl, but Iran's sponsorship of sectarian violence must be stopped -- by the U.S. and other foreign powers invested in Afghanistan -- but mostly, by Afghans themselves who must unite to stand up to their neighbors.