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CIA Pays the Potentate

Afghanistan's problems can't be solved by bribing President Karzai

By Philip Giraldi
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The *New York Times* is reporting that the CIA has been paying Afghan President Hamid Karzai millions of dollars every month. The money, which Karzai has acknowledged and described as an “easy source of petty cash,” does not go directly to the president but instead is delivered in bundles of \$100 notes via bags or even suitcases to the presidential office, where it is distributed by the Afghan National Security Council. That an intelligence service just might try to put a foreign head of state on the payroll should not necessarily surprise anyone, though why that should be done with a basket case client state like Afghanistan might raise some disturbing

questions about the real nature of the sometimes fractious bilateral relationship. What is apparently more concerning to the *Times* is the implication that much of the money has been invested by the Karzai government in buying the loyalty of warlords, who, ironically, have done so much to weaken the authority of Karzai's own central government. As bags of cash are quite fungible, some money likely even found its way into the hands of the Taliban further down the food chain, suggesting that U.S. tax dollars are being used to fund the insurgents who are killing American soldiers.

But looking at the situation from Karzai's perspective it is necessary to reckon with the fact that he will be an ex-president after elections in April 2014 since he cannot run again. What power he currently enjoys will go to whoever replaces him, possibly a hand-picked successor but equally possibly someone who does not like him very much. If Karzai wants to maintain his viability in Afghanistan and protect his interests he has to have his own powerbase and he is doing that in the time honored Afghan fashion by working with tribal and local power brokers. So no one should be surprised that Karzai regards the CIA cash, which he refers to as "ghost money," as a gift from Washington that he can use to buy the personal loyalty of regional heavyweights and ensure both his future relevance and his safety.

From the CIA point of view, the money being given to the president's office is a pittance relative to the cost of the war. Assuming that Karzai is not being completely frank with his State Department interlocutors, a likely assumption, having another channel to him might be regarded as not only desirable but essential. It would give Washington an extra seat at the table in the Afghan presidential office. The income stream is also an inducement for the Karzai administration to be cooperative on issues that are considered to be vital. And the moves by Karzai to create his own political powerbase independent of his office would also be regarded as a plus by Langley as it could suggest that he might continue to be a viable source or even an agent of influence for years to come.

On the downside, the monumental corruption of the Karzai regime must have been a concern, as was the demonstrated connection of the president's brother Ahmed Wali Karzai (now deceased) with drug trafficking. Even for a senior level bureaucrat in Washington it would have been presumptuous to believe that more under the table money would buy influence without fueling still more corruption. Indeed, the *Times* quotes one U.S. official as saying off the record that "The biggest source of corruption in Afghanistan was the United States." Nor would money received directly in any way diminish the enormous profits coming from drugs, which is all part and parcel of the political and personal patronage network that makes the Afghan government operate like a criminal cartel. And as for buying access and influencing policy, Karzai has been resistant to some initiatives being advanced by Washington, including the plan for the CIA to continue to run counter-insurgency operations using its own militias post 2014. Karzai is insisting that the Afghan government will take charge of the effort. The *Times* even suggests that Karzai's unwillingness to be accommodating is a demonstration that he cannot be bought. Or at least that he cannot be bought for a paltry few million dollars.

There is a long history of CIA buying foreign heads of state. In the Middle East, the late King Hussein of Jordan received \$7 million yearly from the Agency and a succession of Christian presidents of Lebanon and their parties benefited similarly. Nearly all the Generals who headed

military style governments in Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s were on the CIA payroll. In Europe, the process was more subtle, with the money generally going to a political party or even a faction within a party rather than to a politician.

As one who has personally carried and delivered bags of CIA cash to buy foreign politicians, I must confess to having generally negative feelings regarding the process. Prior to 9/11, the money very often went to politicians and leaders who were either anti-communist or accommodating of U.S. commercial interests. Today, the money generally winds up in the hands of a leader who will cooperate with U.S. global security policies regarding counter-terrorism and in opposition to the so-called rogue states Iran and North Korea.

Back in the 1970s and 1980s allegations that a left leaning political party might be supported by Moscow frequently led to the funding of other organizations willing to publicize and oppose that connection. This pattern was repeated throughout Western Europe, most notably in countries like France and Italy where local Communist parties, associated unions, and front organizations were believed to be capable of winning elections.

The CIA's efforts were sometimes successful, but many of the schemes concocted on the fly to counter the red menace and economic nationalism turned out to be counterproductive in achieving the stated goal of US foreign policy, the development of stable multi-party democracies. In Italy, for example, the CIA interfered in elections through the 1970s in its attempt to keep the Partito Comunista Italiano (PCI) out of power even though it was hardly a pawn of Moscow, and the US government's support of the various unstable coalitions propped up around the Christian Democrats institutionalized corruption that continues to this day. It also inhibited the development of a genuine democratic opposition party.

CIA-fueled conservative political dominance inevitably produced what is now referred to as "blowback." It empowered the Communists in places like Portugal, Italy, France, and Spain, making them appear to be genuine nationalists—which some were—resisting American hegemony. The CIA continued to fund various political groups and labor unions into the 1990s, long after the presumed Communist threat to disrupt Western European political solidarity with the United States had subsided.

Elsewhere, the CIA's funding of local politicians representing military governments often had long-term consequences that eventually harmed US interests. The overthrow of President Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala in 1954 led to a series of despotic regimes and a civil war that killed at least a quarter of a million people. The pattern was repeated in a number of other nations in Central and South America, to include El Salvador, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Colombia, and Bolivia, countries that are only now recovering from the years of military or authoritarian rule.

In all the examples cited above, the CIA was able to influence political development in the countries involved, for better or for worse. So does Agency cash delivered to the Karzai president's office accomplish anything along similar lines if one assumes that the United States will have vital interests in Afghanistan after 2014? Probably not. Karzai will be gone and will likely be enjoying his hundreds of millions of corruption-generated dollars in a place like Dubai, leaving behind a new set of thieves in the presidential palace. Afghanistan will continue its slow

slide into chaos as the few remaining donor nations that actually come up with the cash become nervous about long term prospects due to the corruption. The Agency will continue to tout the belief that it has some special access to senior level Afghan officials, who it will continue to pay off with some regularity, but the “Great Game” in Central Asia has already moved far beyond the point where it can be fixed by buying a president.