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## Iran Reaps Benefits from the Afghan War

By Ehsan Azari

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As the Afghan war proceeds in an uncertain path, Iran, Afghanistan's western neighbour, seems to have been reaping all the benefits. Each of the U.S.'s policy setbacks provide a great gift to the Iranian clerical rulers by helping them enhance their clout in the region and expand their international maneuvering space against the West.

To begin with, Iran's recent strategic gains derive heavily from the fall and rise of two military and political entities in Afghanistan, the Taliban and the Northern Alliance, which has now changed its name to the United Front. In the late 1990s, when the Northern Alliance still held sway over a small contiguous territory in the north of the country, it was hired by the US Special Forces to oust the Taliban from power in late 2001 with stunning speed. The post-Taliban era produced a huge power vacuum in Afghanistan which was filled with Iran's long-time protégé.

This was a strategic flaw in the US-led Western invasion of Afghanistan which caused short term pleasure but long term pain. The Northern Alliance government in Kabul vociferously crossed the ethnic threshold by alienating the country's dominant Pashtuns who have traditionally ruled Afghanistan for many centuries. Such an imbalanced power-structure in Afghanistan and a Pashtun political and economic disenfranchisement offered fertile ground for the revival of the Taliban. Iranian mullahs found once again their Afghan constituency back in power in Kabul, ironically with the help of their greatest adversary. By using the powerful warlords of the Northern Alliance, Iran remains a major political architect in making a minefield in Afghanistan against Western strategic interests. President Hamid Karzai's erratic flirtation with the Iranian ruling elite is hardly

surprising. "In my view, protesting against a country that is friendly and fraternal is wrong," he said in response to widespread protests in Afghanistan over public executions of Afghans in Iran. Karzai tries to find a foothold for the warlords of the Northern Alliance in the future of Afghanistan. With the rise of the Taliban insurgency, the warlords and Karzai's own corrupt family members seem to have been in a state of existential fear for survival. This anxiety reached its climax when the Obama administration set July 2011 as the date for the beginning of the United States' troop withdrawal in Afghanistan.

The Northern Alliance is the staunch supporter of Karzai and his family members, for they, on one hand, give the government in Kabul a Pashtun colour, and sustain their close relationship with Iran, on the other. Following the fall of the communist regime in Kabul, Iran formed the Northern Alliance in 1992. With the help of Russia and India, Iran turned the alliance into a defensive bulwark against the influence of the US and Saudi Arabia. But the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan was an Iranian disaster for they soon established a powerful base for supporting Sunni minority rights in Iran. The situation changed quickly. The 9/11 event was heaven-sent for the Iranian Mullahs. Without firing a shot, the Iranian Mullahs got rid of the Taliban. This explains why high ranking members of Iran's Revolutionary Guards helped the fall of the Taliban government in Kabul in 2001 by fighting alongside and advising the Northern Alliance in the month after the September 11 terrorist attacks. In the meantime, Iran doesn't want to see a Western success in Afghanistan. Much like Pakistan, Iran also provides tactical assistance to the Taliban to hurt the US and its allies. As the top US commander in Afghanistan General Stanley McChrystal said recently in Kabul, "there is clear evidence of Iranian activity-in some cases providing weaponry and training to the Taliban."

Built on its traditional two-pronged policies of Pan-Farcism and export of Shia extremism vis-a-vis Afghanistan, Iran has built a complex web of ideological spheres of influence in Afghanistan within the Afghan Dari/Farci speaking and Shia minorities that occupy all power ministries in the Karzai government from behind the scene. Though, it has failed to set up a Hezbollah-like terrorist militant group in Afghanistan.

Since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Iran's clerical rulers have spent a substantial amount of petro-dollars on foreign policy, transplanting Shia militancy in Afghanistan. Iran actively supports the Afghan ethnic Hazara group in central Afghanistan financially and militarily. Recent clashes between Hazara and Pashtun nomads in central Afghanistan were set off by Iranian interference in the country. The Iranian ruling elite see Pashtuns as its historical regional rivals and its efforts are directed to prevent them from reinstating their traditional military and political status in Afghanistan and across the region.

Thus, the US-led invasion of Afghanistan enabled Iran to get rid of its casus belli. Iranian mullahs seem to be in a euphoric mood now. They sense the good old days of the expanding eighteenth-century Safavid Shia Empire that ushered in Iran and its neighbourhood a two-century of violent and centralised religion-based terrorism by forcefully converting other sects of Islam to Shiism. Like present day Iranian rulers, the

Safavid kings held Islamic leaders to be the divinely ordained heads of state and religion. This pattern persists today even more strongly. In a false messianic gesture, the Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has recently boasted that if the prophets were alive today they would choose to live under a regime like present-day Iran's. The Safavid Empire was toppled at its birthplace--Isfahan-- by mutinous Afghan tribes in 1772.

Any further Pashtuns military and political weakness in Afghanistan will make the Iranian clerical ruling class stronger and their desire for nuclear bombs increased. Increased Western involvement in Afghanistan plus a lack of a Western holistic approach towards the Afghan war would be used by Iranian dictators to distract the world's attention from their nuclear programmes and to multiply its attempts to encourage terrorism against the West in Afghanistan and the Middle East. If, God forbid, Iran joins the nuclear club, its repressive theocracy would perpetuate its survival. The revival of the Pashtun tribal culture imbued with a moderate Sunni Islam could, on the contrary, re-order the geopolitical balance in the region. It could also effectively roll back Iranian potential support for transnational terrorist threat against regional democracies and contain its malignant hegemonic ambitions.