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Stumbling Into a Proxy War With Iran in Afghanistan

By Flynt and Hillary Mann Leverett

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Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki delivered a speech recently that underscores a risk we have been highlighting recently, see [here](#) and [here](#)--namely, that the present direction of U.S. policy is raising the risks of renewed civil war in Afghanistan, which would simultaneously be a regional "proxy war" between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, on one side, and Iran, on the other.

Mottaki spoke in Kabul at the international conference on Afghanistan. Western media coverage of Mottaki's address tended to be rather superficial, focusing on it being longer than other speeches at the conference. But Mottaki's remarks were substantively important.

As Iranian media summarized the speech, see [here](#), "Mottaki called for a regional solution to the Afghanistan crisis and blamed growing insecurity and drug trafficking on foreign military presence in the war-ravaged country." More specifically, Mottaki outlined five principles that should guide efforts at post-conflict stabilization in Afghanistan:

-The Afghan constitution (ratified in 2004) should be the standard for judging particular initiatives and proposals and the international community should support the strengthening of Afghanistan's civil institutions.

-The presence of foreign military forces in Afghanistan will not help the situation and a timetable should be set for the withdrawal of such forces.

-Double standards must be avoided with regard to terrorism.

-Security and development are inseparably related, so more attention should be devoted to the reconstruction of Afghanistan and its infrastructure. (In this context, Mottaki highlighted Iran's contributions to Afghan reconstruction.)

-Regional cooperation is key to post-conflict stabilization in Afghanistan--including cooperation in energy, transportation, and other important economic sectors.

It is important to understand Mottaki's speech from an Iranian perspective. The Foreign Minister's address comes less than a week after a lethal suicide bomb attack at a Shi'a mosque in the southeastern Iranian city of Zahedan--an attack for which the Sunni extremist/Baluchi separatist group Jundallah claimed credit.

Iran has long charged that the United States supports Jundallah's anti-Iranian terrorist activities, see [here](#). (Interestingly, **the Obama Administration considered but then pointedly declined to designate Jundallah as a foreign terrorist organization in 2009**.) Tehran has also suggested that Pakistan and Saudi Arabia--two of the Islamic Republic's leading regional antagonists--support Jundallah, see [here](#).

With regard to the Zahedan attack, however, Iranian state media, see [here](#), have reported that "the group is unlikely to have carried out the attack since it was effectively disbanded after [its leader, Abdolmalek] Rigi was executed in Iran last month." Rather, Iranian media suggest that "extremist Wahhabis and Salafis trained by U.S. intelligence agents in Pakistan are believed to have carried out the bombings."

In his Kabul speech, Mottaki accused the United States of complicity in the Zahedan attack, declaring that interrogations and other evidence indicated the individuals who carried out the operation had been trained by international forces inside Afghanistan, see [here](#). (Over the weekend, Iran's deputy police chief warned that his country would "deal with insurgents" who take refuge with "neighbors on the eastern borders" of the Islamic Republic--a geographical orientation that covers both Afghanistan and Pakistan, see [here](#).) Today, the Islamic Republic's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, accused the United States of supporting the Zahedan attack.

In this context, Mottaki's remarks in Kabul take on a special--and ominous--significance.

-Past conversations with the Foreign Minister and more recent exchanges with senior Iranian diplomats indicate that, as a matter of policy, the Islamic Republic continues to oppose the Taliban's participation in Afghanistan's government. **Mottaki's observations in Kabul about observing the constitution signal that Tehran is opposed to modifying the constitution to facilitate the creation of power-sharing arrangements between the Karzai government and the Taliban.**

-Mottaki's call to set a timetable for the withdrawal of foreign military forces from Afghanistan is clearly directed at the United States. Apart from the risk that U.S. troops deployed in Afghanistan could at some point be turned against Iran, **Iranian officials judge that the prolonged U.S. military presence in Afghanistan is increasingly seen by much of the local population as an occupation**. From Tehran's perspective, **this occupation is fueling an escalating cycle of violence and instability that empowers Iran's Afghan adversaries**, principally the Taliban.

-The reference to "double standards" regarding terrorism is hardly opaque. The United States and its Western allies are not the only countries that believe they face a terrorist threat from an unstable Afghanistan. **Iran, too, believes it has been the victim of terrorist attacks perpetrated by Sunni extremists with roots in Afghanistan and ties to Pakistani intelligence**. Senior Iranian diplomats point out that the Islamic Republic has strongly supported the Karzai government in Afghanistan--and has put up with some significant problems as a result, such as the resurgence in opium production and drug trafficking out of Afghanistan. **Iran's patience with a heightened terrorist threat emanating, at least in part, from an unstable Afghanistan in which the influence of the Taliban and its main external backers, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, is growing is not likely to be infinite**.

-Mottaki's point about Iran's contributions to Afghan reconstruction is certainly accurate. However, our impression is that **Iran's reconstruction aid to Afghanistan--as well as its investment flows and burgeoning trade ties--is focused on the western (Herat) and northern (Mazar-e-Sharif) parts of the country**. These are precisely the parts of Afghanistan that Tehran would want to have in its strategic "orbit", as a buffer against the Taliban and Pakistani and Saudi influence, should Afghanistan move further down the path of renewed civil war.

-Mottaki's call for a regional approach to post-conflict stabilization in Afghanistan is, we believe, genuine. It is consistent with the Islamic Republic's constructive participation in the United Nations' "6+2 framework for Afghanistan prior to 9/11, and with the Islamic Republic's cooperation with the United States and the United Nations on Afghan issues after 9/11. But, **if the United States continues to support a one-sided effort by Karzai to negotiate power-sharing arrangements with the Taliban, Tehran will work with its Afghan allies to protect Iranian interests**. (For useful discussions of Karzai's approach to the Taliban, see Heather Hurlburt's [recent piece](#) in the Guardian and, at greater length, [Steve Coll's article](#) in The New Yorker.)

It is noteworthy that, before Mottaki traveled to Kabul, the Iranian Foreign Ministry announced preemptively that he would have no meetings with U.S. officials. Among those left in American foreign policy circles who understand the importance of serious U.S. diplomatic engagement with Iran, many assert facilely that Washington and Tehran can and should rejuvenate their difficult diplomatic interactions by cooperating over Afghanistan, because the United States and the Islamic Republic have "mutual interests" there. They should pay more attention. Right now, **Tehran does not support America's current strategy in Afghanistan and is not likely to be inclined to help the Obama**

Administration implement that strategy. The battle lines are being drawn now for the next round in Afghanistan's 20-year old civil war. The United States needs a new strategy in Afghanistan for a lot of reasons; preventing renewed civil war there is one of the more important ones.