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Afghanistan war logs: Iran's covert operations in Afghanistan

Behind-the-scenes help of the Taliban includes

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The militia group of the former Afghan prime minister Gulbuddin Hekmatyar is said to have received money from Iran. Photograph: Reuters

Iran is engaged in an extensive covert campaign to arm, finance, train and equip Taliban insurgents, Afghan warlords allied to al-Qaida and suicide bombers fighting to eject British and western forces from Afghanistan, according to classified US military intelligence reports contained in the war logs.



The secret "threat reports", mostly comprising raw data provided by Afghan spies and paid informants, cannot be corroborated individually. Even if the claims are accurate, it is unclear whether the activities they describe took place with the full knowledge of Tehran or are the work of hardline elements of the semi-autonomous Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, ideological sympathisers of the Taliban, arms smugglers or criminal gangs.

The Iranian government has repeatedly denied accusations that it is aiding militants fighting to oust President Hamid Karzai's pro-western government. It blames the presence of western forces for Afghanistan's instability.

Summaries of classified diplomatic cables produced by the US embassy in Kabul, contained in the war logs, reveal high-level concern about Tehran's growing political influence in Afghanistan. Senior US and Afghan officials appear at a loss over how to counter Iran's alleged bribery and manipulation of opposition parties and MPs whom Afghan government officials dismiss as Tehran's "puppets".

If the war logs are to be believed, Iranian involvement in Afghanistan has steadily widened from 2004 to today, amid record levels of military and civilian casualties and spreading violence.

A threat report originated by Isaf (International Security Assistance Force) headquarters in February 2005, covering Regional Command South, classified secret, says for example that Taliban leaders and former officials of the Taliban government toppled by the US in 2001 are planning a series of attacks in Helmand and Uruzgan provinces.

"This joint group currently resides in Iran. The group consists of eight main leaders, all of whom travel with seven bodyguards," the report says. "The leaders travel into Afghanistan to recruit soldiers ... Initially, the joint group will attack NGOs and GOA [government of Afghanistan] officials ... If these attacks are successful, they will start to attack US forces. The group will use hit-and-run tactics using AK-47 assault rifles and IEDs."

In addition, the report claims: "The Iranian government has offered each member of the group 100,000 rupees (\$1,740) for any Afghan soldier killed and 200,000 rupees (\$3,481) for any government official."

In January 2005 it is reported that Iranian intelligence has delivered 10 million Afghanis (\$212,000) to a location on Iran's border. In the language of the war logs, "Iranian intelligence" usually appears to be a reference to Sepah-e Pasdaran-e Enghelab-e Islami – the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps.

"The money was transferred to a 1990s model white Toyota Corolla station wagon ... hidden with various foodstuffs. The Corolla was occupied by four members of the Hezb-e-Islami Gulbuddin [HIG] terrorist organisation [the al-Qaida-allied militia led by the former mujahideen leader and notorious warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar]. The money was transported to an unknown location," it is claimed.

The war logs refer to other covert Iranian or Iranian-backed activities. Whether they carry official blessing is unclear. In June 2006 it is reported that two Iranian "secret service" officers have arrived in Syahgerd village in Parwan province with false Afghan identities. The two have been previously spotted in Kabul. Their cover names are provided. Abdul Jalil is about 37 and has a "short black beard"; Ahmaddin is about 25, "tall, white complexion, long hair and brown eyes".

The report, sourced to "humint" (human intelligence), continues: "These two Iranians are tasked to instigate local Afghan people into making propaganda against the Afghan government authorities and CF [coalition forces] members. Also they are helping HIG and Taliban members in carrying out terrorist attacks against the Afghan governmental authorities and CF members, especially against the American forces." No evidence is offered to corroborate this statement.

This report also claims: "In Birjand, Iran, there is an important base where Iranian officials train Taliban and HIG members. From that location they use [sic] to send to Afghanistan explosive devices and vehicles ready to be used as SVBIEDs [suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices]."

This is not the first time Iranian links to IEDs and suicide bombings have been alleged. In May 2006, a report from "Source NY-9013" claims Hekmatyar's men are equipping 200 vehicles to deliver IEDs after having bought the cars in Pakistan and Iran. "HIG members in Pakistan provide the remote control devices for these cars." In April, 2008, the Taliban are said to have received Iranian-made parts for 20 remote-controlled IEDs to be used against the British in Sangin.

If the war logs intelligence is to be believed, Iran is also ready to host Taliban leaders and their men, to offer treatment if they are injured in the fighting and act as a conduit for foreign insurgents anxious to join the fray. A report marked secret, and dated September 2005, lists a number of Taliban commanders who have gathered in Mashhad, Iran, supposedly to plan future attacks. Another in October 2006 claims Iranians have "provided support on the ground" by organising transports for injured people [meaning Taliban fighters] to Tehran". No corroboration is offered.

In March 2009 military intelligence reports that a party of more than 100 Afghan and foreign-born Taliban, including 15 Chechen fighters, have moved from Iran into Afghanistan with the intention of launching suicide attacks. In May 2009, General Stanley McChrystal, the then US and Nato commander, appears to refer specifically to this intelligence finding. "The training [of insurgents] that we have seen occurs inside Iran with fighters moving inside Iran," he said.

If some of the more creative reports are to be believed, Iranian subversion also extends to alleged plans to slip poison into the tea of Afghan government officials, supposedly a tidier method of assassination than suicide bombs; and the fomenting of political unrest in the relatively stable northern provinces.

Summaries of US embassy diplomatic cables and situation assessments contained and distributed through the war logs offer firmer ground than some of the raw intelligence data, given that they are evidently written by American officials and represent an official record, or official evaluation, of high-level meetings.

The cables reveal deep concerns among the western allies and Karzai's government about Tehran's parallel attempt to extend its political leverage in Afghanistan, in part by allegedly proffering lavish bribes.

The cables include accounts of consultations between British Foreign Office officials and senior US counterparts such as Eliot Cohen, US secretary of state Condoleezza Rice's then special regional representative, the Pentagon's Eric Edelman, and former US ambassador to Kabul Ronald Neumann. They discuss, among other things, how best to handle Karzai and promote national reconciliation without talking to the Taliban.

"Over the past several months Iran has taken a series of steps to expand and deepen its influence," says a secret cable sourced to the US embassy in Kabul and written in May 2007 by CSTC-A DCG for Pol-Mil Affairs [combined security transition command deputy commanding general for political and military affairs]. The cable cites the creation of the opposition National Front and National Unity Council, which it claims are under Iranian influence.

These worries notwithstanding, the cables also reflect the Afghan government's continuing perception that it must maintain friendly relations with Iran, in order to "marginalise" pro-Iranian groups in the country but also because of its own chronic weakness.

A "non-combat event" intelligence report dated April 2007 says that "the [Afghan] ministry of foreign affairs [MFA] wants to keep the issue of the Iranian-made weapons recently found in Kandahar under the radar screen in the lead-up to the visit of Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to Afghanistan. According to MFA, President Karzai supports the plan to avoid additional friction with Afghanistan's neighbours". Anxious to avoid more problems with Karzai, the US apparently agrees to play along.