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Why Karzai readily admits receiving bags of Iranian cash

By Ben Arnoldy

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Afghan President Hamid Karzai says he accepts bags of cash from Iran. What do the Iranians want in return?

Afghan President Hamid Karzai admitted in a press conference Monday that his office accepts “bags of money” from the Iranian government.

That bald acknowledgment brings out into the open two uncomfortable facts confronting the US plan to build a modern democracy in Afghanistan. Just as in Iraq, Iran is successfully buying influence with Afghan leaders. And Mr. Karzai – like many members of Afghanistan's political class – sees bags of cash as a perfectly legitimate tool of statecraft.

Iran's efforts may extend beyond Karzai's palace. Members of Parliament say other politicians are taking Iranian money. And recent media reports claim that the Iranians are paying the Taliban to kill US soldiers.

What does Iran want for its bags of cash? First and foremost, Iran wants pressure put on international forces to leave its doorstep.

“The Iranians are happy with the Karzai regime being established in Afghanistan – in this way, the US and Iran are aligned. But when it comes to international forces in Afghanistan, the Iranians are quite unhappy about this,” says Waliullah Rahmani, head of the Kabul Center for Strategic Studies.

The US invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan put American forces on the ground on either side of Iran. In Afghanistan, US forces at Shindand Airbase are less than 75 miles from the Iranian border.

Yankees go home

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has called for the withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan as a means of stabilizing the region.

Foreign policy wags often point out that the American “war on terror” has inadvertently strengthened the regional clout of US-foe Iran. Yet, Iran and the US ultimately share an ally in Karzai, since both nations are opposed to a Taliban resurgence.

When in power, the Taliban killed Iranian diplomats and oppressed the Shia minority in Afghanistan. Afghanistan's new Constitution, written after the NATO invasion, officially recognized the rights of the Shiites for the first time in Afghanistan's history. Karzai's government also includes members of the Northern Alliance whom Iran supported in previous decades.

“It is not a strategic policy of the Iranians to support the revival of the Taliban in Afghanistan,” says Mr. Rahmani. “But tactically, in some areas, in order to weaken the international forces there are media reports that the Iranians have supported the Taliban.”

Bills to pay

Karzai said his office takes Iranian payments of \$700,000 to \$975,000 once or twice a year to cover presidential expenses. He was responding to a New York Times report Saturday alleging that his chief of staff received money from Iranian officials.

At press time, the US embassy in Kabul had not released a statement. Before Karzai's press conference, State Department spokesman Philip Crowley told Bloomberg that “Iran should not interfere with the internal affairs of the Afghan government.”

The United States, of course, funnels tens of millions of dollars into Afghanistan to influence internal affairs – even paying “salary supports” to a wide range of Afghan officials.

But “when it comes to giving bags of cash to the office of the president, this is something that will shock some people,” says Fawzia Kofi, a member of Parliament. “If Iran would like to support some projects like education, they are more than welcome to do so. But not by giving bags of cash without proper checks and balances and transparency,” she

says.

Ms. Kofi and retiring MP Sabrina Saqib say that they have heard many stories of Parliamentary candidates receiving Iranian money.

“They are worried that Afghanistan will agree with having a base for American troops here,” Ms. Saqib told the Monitor last month. Iran wants friendly lawmakers to head off any legislation that would grant permanent basing rights. “They are trying to have people around who – if this would be the case – they would disagree.”

Afghanistan has a significant Shiite minority, most of whom are ethnic Hazaras and who suffered particularly harsh persecution during Taliban rule, which has led to a strong reservoir of support in that community for the NATO mission. Areas under Hazara control have seen the least armed resistance to the international military presence. For example, New Zealand troops in Bamiyan Province have encountered only one hostile incident in the past nine years.

“A majority of this community is trying to make distance from the Iranians in trying to be with those democratic forces who are pushing for the dominance of a stable democracy,” says Rahmani, himself a Hazara. “You cannot see any demands of the Hazaras for the withdrawal of international forces.”