

U.S. and Iran Increase Competition to Influence Afghanistan

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United States officials have expressed concern over the so-called Iranian intervention in Afghanistan in recent days, claiming that Tehran is trying to challenge Washington's interests in Afghanistan through groups that it supports like the Taliban. General Kenneth Mckenzie, the U.S. Central Commander, came to Kabul after rising threats and concerns over Iran's supposed interference in the Afghan war. He stayed in Kabul for three days, analyzing the situation and restraining Iran's possible actions while meeting with American forces occupying the country. Iran's warnings and threats against the U.S. military in Afghanistan is the main agenda of this high-profile military trip to Kabul according to sources. At the same time, Iranian diplomat Ebrahim Taherian who specializes in Afghan affairs came to Kabul and voiced his country's concerns about recent U.S. actions during a meeting with Afghan leaders.

Following Taherian's trip to Kabul, Tadamichi Yamamoto, the UN special envoy to Kabul, went to Tehran to urge Iranian officials not to involve Afghanistan in their complications with the U.S. The flow of Iranian and U.S. diplomats and troops to Kabul shows that the conflict between the U.S and Iran has certainly spread to Afghanistan, an inevitable outcome since Afghanistan is on Iran's eastern border and hosts thousands of American soldiers. The U.S. and Iran have been involved in proxy wars for many years in countries in the Middle East, including Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, but surprisingly to a very low level in Afghanistan.

Iran was actually among the countries that supported the abolition of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. During the Taliban's rule in Kabul, the fundamentalist organization was a major threat to Iran. In 1998, the Taliban set fire to the Iranian consulate in Mazar-i-Sharif and killed at least 10 Iranian diplomats. However, the Islamic Republic's cooperation with the U.S. in Afghanistan led to opposition and hostility. Iran then sought to secure relations with the Taliban and became a refuge for family members of a number of senior Taliban officials. More recently, Iranian officials have confirmed their relationship with the Taliban, but they said they were not seeking military and/or arms cooperation with the Taliban and were committed to the principle of government-to-government relations. But local officials in southwestern Afghanistan have repeatedly spoken of Iran's military and arms cooperation with the Taliban.

Effectively, Iran has many leverages that are challenging and pressuring the U.S. The presence of at least 3.5 million Afghan refugees in Iran has provided Tehran with a good opportunity to use them to achieve its goal of challenging the U.S everywhere across the region, including Afghanistan.

As Iran neighbors Afghanistan, it is unsurprising that it is one of the largest economic and trade partners of the war-torn country. Economic ties between the two countries have reached \$4 billion. Iran has widespread cultural, historical and social influence in Afghanistan. Nearly 25% of Afghanistan's population are also Shi'ite who have much attachment to Iran. However, Tehran's contacts in Afghanistan were not limited to Shi'ites as demonstrated by Iran's attempts to have relations with all political authorities and social groups in the country. Iran's deep relations with the Afghan political community became clear after the U.S. assassination of Qassim Soleimani, the commander of Iran's famed Revolutionary Guards' Quds Force.

Wide and broad partnerships between the two countries provide Tehran with a favorable platform to pursue its goals and programs with open arms in Afghanistan. When U.S.-Iranian relations reached the level of potential military conflict, Kabul declared that it would not allow its territory to be used against any another country, an indirect reference that Afghanistan will not be used to attack Iran. The U.S. has several important military bases on the Iranian border with Afghanistan such as Shindand that could be utilized in any conflict with Iran.

During the period of national unity, Afghanistan's policy of neutrality towards the countries of the region, especially Iran, changed. The disruption of the balance in foreign policy has prompted the countries of the region to reconsider their support for the Afghan central government. The end of neutrality in foreign policy was a great opportunity for the Taliban. They were able to expand their relations with the countries of the region.

This of course does not overlook that Kabul and Tehran are involved in some issues, such as the long running water dispute, drug production and trafficking, and Iran's relations with the Taliban. However, with the U.S. seeking an agreement with the Taliban and withdrawing from Afghanistan, the escalation of the conflict with the Islamic Republic will certainly have an impact on Washington's goals in the region and in Afghanistan. The U.S. ensured that Iran was the only neighbor ignored in the peace talks - meaning that no true peace can be found in Afghanistan as Iran has thousands of years of relations with Afghanistan. As a strategic partner of Kabul and Afghanistan's influential neighbour, Iran is affecting the current volatile situation. Only a balanced and impartial policy can reduce the country's vulnerability, but non-the-less, the U.S. cannot ignore Iran's role in finding peace in Afghanistan.

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