

U.S. Uses False Taliban Aid Charge to Pressure Iran

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Global Research, July 04, 2009

[IPS](#) 2 July 2009

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

The Barack Obama administration has given new prominence to a Bush administration charge that Iran is providing military training and assistance to the Taliban in Afghanistan, for which no evidence has ever been produced, and which has been discredited by data obtained by IPS from the Pentagon itself.

The new twist in the charge is that it is being made in the context of serious talks between NATO officials and Iran involving possible Iranian cooperation in NATO's logistical support for the war against the insurgents in Afghanistan.

Since the early to mid-1990s, Iranian policy in Afghanistan has been more consistently and firmly opposed to the Taliban than that of the United States.

The Obama administration thus appears to be pressing that charge as a means of increasing the political-diplomatic pressure on Iran over its nuclear programme, despite NATO's need for Iranian help on Afghanistan.

CENTCOM commander Gen. David Petraeus declared in testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee Apr. 1, "In Afghanistan, Iran appears to have hedged its longstanding public support for the Karzai government by providing opportunistic support to the Taliban."

Defence Secretary Robert Gates told reporters in Brussels Jun. 12, "Iran is playing a double game" in Afghanistan by "sending in a relatively modest level of weapons and capabilities to attack ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) and coalition forces."

The State Department's annual report on terrorism, published Apr. 30, 2009, claimed that the Iranian Qods Force had "provided training to the Taliban on small unit tactics, small arms, explosives and indirect fire weapons." It also charged that Iran had "arranged arms shipments including small arms and associated ammunition, rocket propelled grenades, mortar rounds, 107mm rockets, and plastic explosives to select Taliban members."

The report offered no evidence in support of those charges, however, and Rhonda Shore, public affairs officer in the State Department's Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, refused to answer questions from IPS about those charges in the report.

A military official who refused to be identified told IPS the charge of Iranian assistance to the Taliban is based on "an intelligence assessment", which was limited to "suspected" Iranian shipment of arms to the Taliban and did not extend to training. That admission indicates that the charge of shipments of weapons to the Taliban by Iran is not based on hard evidence.

The only explicit U.S. claim of specific evidence relating to an Iranian arms shipment to

insurgents in Afghanistan has been refuted by data collected by the Pentagon's own office on improvised explosives.

In an April 2008 Pentagon news briefing, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Adm. Mike Mullen said in reference to Iranian authorities, "[W]e're seeing some evidence that they're supporting the Taliban in Afghanistan".

When pressed by reporters for the evidence, however, Mullen admitted that there was no "constant stream of arms supply at this point" and that the basis for the charge was primarily "evidence some time ago" that Iranians were providing armour-piercing EFPs (explosively formed projectiles) to the Taliban.

That was a reference to a July 2007 allegation by the U.S. command in Afghanistan, under obvious pressure from the White House, that Iranian-made EFPs had appeared in Afghanistan.

Col. Tom Kelly, a U.S. deputy chief of staff of the ISAF, told reporters Jul. 18, 2007 that five EFPs that had been found in Herat near the Iranian border and in Kabul were "very sophisticated", and that "they're really not manufactured in any other places other than, our knowledge is, Iran".

That was the same argument that had been used by the U.S. command in Iraq to charge Iran with exporting EFPs to Shi'a insurgents there.

But in response to a query from this writer last July, the Pentagon's Joint Improvised Explosive Device Defeat Organisation (JIEDDO), which is responsible for tracking the use of roadside bombs in Iraq and Afghanistan, provided the first hard data on EFPs found in Afghanistan. The data showed that there was no connection on which to base even an inferential connection between those EFPs and Iran.

Every one of the 13 EFPs reported to have been found in Afghanistan up to that time were "crude and unsophisticated", according to Irene Smith, a spokesperson for Gen. Anthony Tata, JIEDDO's deputy director for operations and training. In fact, the insurgents in Afghanistan had not shown the ability to make the kind of EFPs that had been found in Iraq, Smith said.

The U.S. command in Afghanistan, moreover, does not appear to be an enthusiastic supporter of the administration's political line on the issue. NATO officials began a serious dialog with Iran last March which focused on the possibility of moving supplies for NATO troops to Afghanistan from Iranian ports.

At an off the record seminar in Washington last month, a senior U.S. military officer in Afghanistan said the Iranian policy toward Afghanistan is neither a "major problem" nor a "growing problem" for the war against the Taliban, according to one of the attendees.

The lack of enthusiasm of the U.S. command in Afghanistan for charges of Iranian support for the Taliban suggests that the impetus for such charges is coming from those in the administration who are trying to ramp up the overall pressure on Iran to make concessions on its nuclear programme.

Gilles Dorronsoro, a specialist on Afghanistan and visiting scholar at the Carnegie

Endowment for International Peace in Washington, says he sees sharp differences between the position of those responsible for Afghanistan and those whose primary concern is Iran's nuclear programme.

"You have one discourse of officials in Afghanistan, who would support collaboration with Iran," Dorronsoro said in an interview with IPS. "It's very clear that those people don't want a crisis with Iran and don't want to push Iran too far."

But those who want to put pressure on Iran to stop its enrichment programme, he said, "are acting as though they are building some kind of legal case against Iran."

The Bush administration initially claimed it had evidence of Iranian aid to the Taliban in 2007 that didn't exist, only to have it refuted by the U.S. command in Afghanistan.

In April and May 2007, NATO forces in Helmand province found mortars, C-4 explosives and electrical components believed to have been manufactured in Iran. Then Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Nicholas Burns asserted that the United States had "irrefutable evidence" that those weapons were provided to the Taliban by the Qods Force of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

When State Department spokesman Sean McCormack was questioned about the Burns statement on Jun. 13, 2007, McCormack admitted that the charge was an inference.

Gen. Dan McNeill, then the top U.S. commander in Afghanistan, rejected the idea that any official Iranian role could be reasonably inferred from Iranian weapons showing up in Afghanistan.

"[W]hen you say weapons being provided by Iran, that would suggest there is some more formal entity involved in getting these weapons here," he told Jim Loney of Reuters. McNeill said he had "no information to support that there's anything formal in some arrangement out of Iran to provide weapons here."

The obvious alternative explanation for Iranian weapons in arms shipments is that drug lords and the Taliban have used commercial arms smugglers to get the weapons from Iran into the country. Arms dealers have close ties with Afghan officials, and have been reported to use police convoys to carry smuggled arms, according to a BBC2 television report last September.

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