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United States to Iran: "Step Aside, Please"

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October 26, 2010

[Malou Innocent](#) ^[2]

Those pesky Iranians [are at it again](#) ^[3]:

Iran confirmed on Tuesday it was helping with the reconstruction of Afghanistan, even though it had originally denied reports it had given "bags of money" to its war-devastated neighbor.

On Monday, Afghan President Hamid Karzai said the country had received money from several "friendly countries" and specifically named the United States and Washington's diplomatic adversary, Iran, describing the money as a "transparent" form of aid.

Karzai said his office received sums up to 500,000-700,000 euros (\$360,000-\$975,000) once or twice a year from Iran and that he would continue to ask for Iranian money.

[This is déjà vu](#) ^[4]. Of course, much like the last time, my grouse is with American, not with Iranian, involvement in the region. Why?

Well, Iran is right next to Afghanistan. So it strikes me as absurd that if the United States claims to have interests in Afghanistan—a faraway country on the other side of world—that Iran, which lies adjacent to Afghanistan, would not have interests there, too.

But the bipartisan consensus in Washington is that only America gets to exert its political influence over strategically peripheral regions of the world.

Aside from simple geography there are historical factors at play too. After the United

States helped fund the rise of modern Islamic fundamentalism in the 1980s during the anti-Soviet jihad, countries in the Middle East, as well as South and Central Asia, were left to clean up the mess. Given this track record of America swooping in, creating turmoil, and rapidly extracting its forces, why *wouldn't* Iran want to pursue its own interests in Afghanistan, even with U.S. forces there? Iran, Pakistan, India, et cetera, all vividly remember being stuck holding the bag; thus, these countries have little incentive to wait on the sidelines until U.S. forces withdraw.

In the context of recent history, it seems that Iran is greasing the wheels with Karzai simply to hedge its bets. (There are unconfirmed reports that Iran is also providing limited assistance to the Taliban [5].) But it has long been an open secret that Iran has given foreign aid to Afghanistan's Hazara and Tajik populations [6]; I can attest to Iranian assistance to Herat province in particular.

Given all of this, it appears that the regional "Great Game" (a cliché but it works well nonetheless) is certainly afoot. Countries in the region are intensifying their scramble for influence among other competing regional powers. Of course, peace and prosperity in Afghanistan would be to the benefit of all surrounding states. However, one country's perception of a threat is not always shared with other states, and this cuts against the notion of a common "peace."

In the end, mitigating Iranian threats to U.S. interests in Afghanistan assumes that we should be there in the first place. We should not.

More by

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[4] http://www.cfr.org/publication/12521/irans_involvement_in_iraq.html

[5] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/oct/26/iran-cash-payments-to-afghanistan>

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