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How Iran Won the Afghanistan Deal with the US in 2001

TUESDAY, JUNE 24, 2014

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The text of this article has been selected from: “[Iran and the United States; the Failed Past and the Road to Peace](#)”, authored by Seyed Hossein Mousavian with Shahir Shahidsaless, exclusively sent to Iran Review.Org by Seyed Hossein Mousavian.

Part (2): How Iran Won the Afghanistan Deal with the US in 2001

Qasem Soleimani: "We would win if the Americans crossed us"

The tragic events of September 11, 2001 could have opened a new chapter in Iran–US relations. Iran was among the first countries to denounce the 9/11 Twin Tower terror attacks in New York. Immediately following the condemnation, the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) of Iran actively began to work within the new paradigm that was created by the September 11 terrorist attack and the subsequent US declaration of a “war on terror.” We were also concerned with the extremist Salafis and the Taliban, whose ideologies we viewed as hostile towards Shia Iran and also dangerous to the broader region.

Prior to George W. Bush assuming the presidency, a round of talks between Iran and the US began in 1998 but it was not bilateral. UN diplomat Lakhdar Brahimi initiated those talks under the banner of “6+2.” The countries involved included six neighbors of Afghanistan—China, Pakistan, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan—as well as Russia and the United States. They met in New York to address the situation in Afghanistan. But in 2001, before the 9/11 attacks, and more seriously after the tragic events, there began substantive negotiations between the Iranian and US governments, seeking avenues of cooperation on Afghanistan.

Ambassador Ryan Crocker, who had lived in Iran before and knew Farsi, led the US team in its negotiations. Iran’s negotiations team consisted of Iranian ambassadors Reza Ziaran, Zargar Yaghoobi, and Mohammad Ebrahim Taherian and a member of the security establishments. The meetings covered a host of issues from terrorism to drug trafficking, and even casual talks about historical issues between the two countries. The talks were not hidden from Ayatollah Khamenei and he did not exert any objection to the talks, provided that they were focused on Afghanistan and not Iran–US relations.

In his speech at [Carnegie International Endowment](#), Crocker describes the atmosphere of those talks in this way: “During those pre-attack discussions—and you’ll remember the air war began in early October—the Iranian thrust was, you know, what do you need to know to knock their blocks off? You want their order of battle? Here’s the map. You want to know where we think their weak points are? Here, here, and here. You want to know how we think they’re going to react to an air campaign? Do you want to know how we think the Northern Alliance will behave? Ask us. We’ve got the answers; we’ve been working with those guys for years. This was an unprecedented period since the revolution of, again, a US–Iranian dialogue on a particular issue where we very much had common interest and common cause.”

During a fall 2012 conference in Berlin, James Dobbins told me that Hamid Karzai was the United States’ favored candidate to lead the new Afghan government. “Iranians also supported us,” Dobbins said.

Dobbins highlighted the role of Javad Zarif in the success of the Bonn Conference and the establishment of the new Afghan government. According to a report by [Michael Hirsh](#), in an interview Dobbins, “pointed out that Karzai was a Pashtun from the south, like the majority of the Afghan population.” Tajiks from the Northern Alliance, historically rivals to the Pashtuns, led by Yunus Qanooni, tenaciously demanded the majority share in the new government “since they were the people that had captured Kabul according to Dobbins.” Dobbins says “that by 4.00 a.m., they had reached a very critical moment. Nobody was able to change Qanooni’s mind. Zarif finally and authoritatively whispered in Qanooni’s ear that, ‘This is the best deal you can get.’ And Qanooni said, ‘OK.’”

Even after the creation of a new Afghan government at the Bonn Conference, talks continued. But suddenly, there came a veritable bombshell. President Bush, only a few weeks after the Bonn Conference, stunned us by including Iran in the “axis of evil” during his January 2002 State of the Union address. Talks continued but the Iranians’ appetite for cooperation was diminished. Every person involved, from Khatami down, had the same feeling—betrayed! The word *namaknashnas* (a person one feeds, and later expresses betrayal rather than appreciation) was the word frequently used to characterize George Bush’s behavior.

In the aftermath of Bush’s address, Khatami told me, “I am confident that Bush put the final nail in the coffin of Iran–US relations.” He added, “I guess any improvement in relations must be ruled out, atleast during my presidency.” This did not mean that we would stop our efforts, but the high level of hope after overthrowing the Taliban was replaced with pessimism. Khatami was confident that for at least 10 years, any attempt at rapprochement bearing meaningful fruit would be impossible. Ayatollah Khamenei had warned some Iranian officials at the very beginning that “the Americans’ invitation for cooperation is tactical.”

After one of the SNSC meetings, Qasem Soleimani, the commander of Qods Army, told me, without holding back on his ill feelings toward George Bush’s response to Iran’s invaluable assistance, that when cooperation had begun, he had suspected that the US request for our help might have been a tactical move and not intended to lead to long-term cooperation. But I also viewed Iran’s assistance as a no-lose proposition. If the US was sincere, we would help them topple our arch enemy and al-Qaeda, an extremist terrorist group that threatened our security, the region, and the international community. Then broader cooperation would be possible. Qasem jokingly responded that “in that case, the dreams of you westoxicated diplomats would come true.” Nonetheless, he agreed that even if the US was not sincere, we would still have eliminated our enemy.

Qasem posited that if the US wanted to betray us and break away from us once they were established in Afghanistan, they would become trapped like the Soviets before them. Americans were not familiar with the complexities of Afghanistan. “Americans do not know the region, Americans do not know Afghanistan, Americans do not know Iran,” Qasem added. In any case, we would win, he argued, and if the Americans crossed us, they would have to leave in defeat.

**Ambassador Seyed Hossein Mousavian, a former Iranian ambassador and spokesman for Iran’s nuclear negotiators, is a research scholar at Princeton’s Woodrow Wilson School. His latest book is [Iran and the United States, An Insider’s View on the Failed Past and the Road to Peace](#) published by [Bloomsbury Academic](#).*

****Part (1): [Why Ayatollah Khamenei is Pessimistic about Relations with the United States](#)***

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