

## The Long War Journal: Iran and the Taliban, allies against America

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Map of Afghanistan and Herat province.

Over the past several years, US military officials have repeatedly pointed out that the Iranian regime provides assistance to the Taliban in Afghanistan. In particular, US officials have noted that the Iranians have shipped arms, including anti-aircraft missiles, to the Taliban on numerous occasions.

For some, this cooperation is surprising. After all, the Shiite Iranians and the Sunni Taliban were not allies in the pre-September 11 world. In fact, they were bitter rivals, even enemies.

The US-led invasion of Afghanistan clearly changed the Iranians' priorities, however. But did the Iranians begin their rapprochement with the Taliban only after September 11? Or, had the groundwork for the type of cooperation we see in Afghanistan today already been laid?

The answer to these questions can be found, in part, in the unclassified documents prepared by the US government for Gitmo detainee Khairkhwā Said Wali Khairkhwa (ISN #579). Khairkhwa is one of more than 200 detainees remaining at Gitmo. His fate will ultimately be decided by the Obama administration's inter-agency review boards.

During Khairkhwa's time at Gitmo, US officials produced several memos for his combatant status review tribunal (CSRT) and administrative review board hearings (ARB). In addition, Khairkhwa testified at his CSRT and one of his ARB hearings. The Defense Department's transcripts of Khairkhwa's testimony, as well as the memos produced by the government, can all be readily found online. (See, for example, *The New York Times*' web site [here](#).)

### Links began well before September 11 attack

The story laid out in the government's memos and in Khairkhwa's own testimony reveals new details about the collusion between Iran and the Taliban. Interestingly, this cooperation began even before the September 11 attacks.

The story begins in 1998 when the Taliban and Iran were on the verge of war. In August of that year, the Taliban slaughtered hundreds of Shiites, including nine Iranian diplomats, in Mazar-e-Sharif, Afghanistan. The Iranians responded by positioning thousands of uniformed Revolutionary Guardsmen and other forces on Iran's easternmost border with Afghanistan. Mullah Omar and Ayatollah Khomeini traded verbal barbs in the press. The world openly fretted over the prospect of war.

Enter Khairkhwa. For years, Khairkhwa had been the public voice of the Taliban, acting as its Pashto spokesman and doing interviews with the BBC and Voice of America. Khairkhwa was trusted by the Taliban's most senior leaders to spin news for their regime. This was no small task given the Taliban's continual human rights abuses. Khairkhwa was, according to the US government's unclassified files, also the Taliban commander who helped take Mazar-e-Sharif in 1996. At the time, Mazar-e-Sharif was hotly contested territory.

In 1999, the Taliban would trust Khairkhwa with another mission. He was installed as the governor of Afghanistan's westernmost province of Herat. Khairkhwa served in that capacity until the Taliban's fall in late 2001.

The US government alleges that during that time Khairkhwa became a major drug trafficker with ties to senior al Qaeda leaders, including Osama bin Laden. Khairkhwa reportedly built three walled compounds that he used to manage his opium trade. And he allegedly oversaw one of Osama bin Laden's training facilities in Herat as well. One US government [memo](#) notes that only Khairkhwa or bin Laden himself "could authorize entrance" to the facility, which was one of bin Laden's "most important bases" and "conducted terrorist training two times per week."

Khairkhwa denied that he was a drug dealer and that he had significant ties to senior al Qaeda leaders during his hearings at Gitmo. But it is clear that US intelligence officials did not believe Khairkhwa's denials. The allegations were repeatedly included in the memos prepared for Khairkhwa's case.

### Khairkhwa assigned a Taliban liaison to Iran

Khairkhwa played another, more provocative role as well.

According to the US government's unclassified files, Khairkhwa was installed as the governor of Herat "to improve relations between Iran and the Taliban government."

By his own admission, Khairkhwa began meeting with the Iranians in early 2000. The US government's unclassified documents cite at least two instances when Khairkhwa took part in meetings between senior Taliban and Iranian officials: one on Jan. 7, 2000, and a second time in late 2001.

The government's Oct. 7, 2005, ARB summary of evidence memo for Khairkhwa (see [here](#)) includes this allegation:

"On 7 January 2000, the detainee and three other Taliban officials attended a meeting with Iranian and Hizbi Islami-Gulbuddin Hikmatyar faction officials. Present at the meeting were Afghan Hizbi Islami-Gulbuddin leader, Gulbuddin Hikmatyar and Ayman Al-Zawahiri [emphasis added]. Topics of discussion included United States intervention in the region, restoration of peace in Afghanistan and strengthening the Taliban's ties with [the] Iran[ian] government."

The government's second and more recent ARB summary of evidence memo (dated June 16, 2006) modified this allegation. US intelligence officials did not allege that Hekmatyar or Zawahiri personally attended the meeting. (See [here](#).) Instead, the government's allegation reads:

"On 7 January 2000, the detainee and three other Taliban officials attended a meeting with Iranian and Hizbi Islami-Gulbuddin Hekmatyar faction officials [emphasis added]. Topics of discussion included United States intervention in the region, restoration of peace in Afghanistan, and strengthening the Taliban's nascent ties with Iran."

It is not clear why the US government removed the part about Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a long-time ally of Osama bin Laden, and top al Qaeda terrorist Ayman al Zawahiri personally attending the meeting. At the time, Hekmatyar was sheltering in Iran under the care of the Revolutionary Guards Corps.

Regardless, the rest of the details about the meeting between the Taliban and the Iranians were substantively unchanged. And a memo prepared for Khairkhwa's third ARB hearing (see [here](#)) notes that Khairkhwa did meet with Ayman al Zawahiri to discuss US "intervention" in the region.

During his hearings at Gitmo, Khairkhwa did not deny that he attended the meeting with the Iranians in January of 2000. Khairkhwa also did not deny a second meeting with the Iranians in late 2001. The US government's Sept. 2, 2004, CSRT summary of evidence memo for Khairkhwa states (see [here](#)):

"Detainee was present at a clandestine meeting in October of 2001 between Taliban and Iranian officials in which Iran pledged to assist the Taliban in their war with the United States."

The government's unclassified summary of evidence memos for Khairkhwa's first and second ARB hearings (see [here](#) and [here](#)) allege that the meeting between the Taliban and the Iranians took place in November of 2001, not October.

"In November 2001, the detainee met with an Iranian diplomatic delegation. The Iranian Government was prepared to offer anti-aircraft weapons to the Taliban for use against the United States and Coalition Forces operating in Afghanistan."

In all likelihood, therefore, this post-September 11 meeting between the Taliban and Iranian officials took place in November, and the US government simply refined its allegation in the latter memos. Khairkhwa discussed this post-September 11 meeting with the Iranians during his CSRT hearing. Khairkhwa did not deny attending the meeting or that the Iranians "pledged to assist the Taliban in their war with the United States," but claimed that he had only set up security for the meeting and was not the only Taliban official present.

Khairkhwa [explained](#):

"Yes, I participated in that meeting with the Iranians. There was a committee that came from Kandahar and I joined them and was just sitting there. They were conducting the meeting. My job was for the security of this committee. I was not the sole representative of this committee to talk with the Iranians. They were responsible; my job was to provide security and safety for the committee."

Later in his testimony, Khairkhwa made it clear that the Taliban sent a delegation from its central government to attend the meeting. Khairkhwa undoubtedly wanted to downplay his own role in the secret meetings.

"The meeting with the Iranians, it was designed and conducted by the committee that came from Kandahar, which was the central government at the time. I was just a security member," Khairkhwa said.

During his second round ARB hearing, Khairkhwa denied that the Iranians offered anti-aircraft weapons at the November 2001 meeting. He claimed that the Iranians made this offer only at the Jan. 7, 2000, meeting, which took place on Iranian soil. Khairkhwa also denied that any representatives of Hekmatyar's group attended.

"Yes. There was a meeting with the Taliban delegation on Iran's soil," Khairkhwa [said](#). "There were no Gulbuddin representatives."

Khairkhwa told his Gitmo board that the Taliban had difficulty procuring arms because of international sanctions that had been levied against the regime. "The Iranians offered to buy weapons for us because we were on restriction and could not buy them," Khairkhwa explained. "That is the truth."

Khairkhwa also claimed that the arms deal was never consummated. However, history does not bear out Khairkhwa's denial.

In fact, [multiple press outlets](#) have reported that the Iranians have been supplying anti-aircraft missiles, mines, and other arms to the Taliban.

There is another important aspect to the meetings between the Iranians and the Taliban that Khairkhwa attended as well. A US government [memo](#) produced for Khairkhwa's third ARB hearing notes that in addition to anti-aircraft missiles, the Taliban and Iran negotiated "an open border to Iran for any Arab or Taliban to smuggle money or goods out of Afghanistan."

This, too, came to fruition. For example, *Time Magazine* [reported](#) in early 2002 that Taliban and al Qaeda terrorists slipped across the border into Iran in order to avoid

American forces.

Khairkhwa's testimony and the US government's evidence against Khairkhwa confirm a central point in this Long War against terrorism. Even one-time enemies like the Taliban and Iran can conspire when it comes to countering their mutual enemy: America. And, somewhat surprisingly, they had begun to plan their countermeasures even before the September 11 attacks prompted America's response in the region. According to the US government's files, that planning may have even involved senior terrorists, including al Qaeda's second in command, Ayman al Zawahiri.

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