

## Now, it's Iran; Politicians switching blame for Afghan mess a matter of convenience

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This Christmas, Chief of Defence Staff Rick Hillier led yet another of his "surprise" annual holiday visits to Kandahar. As a show of political solidarity, Defence Minister Peter MacKay accompanied Hillier on this year's Turkey-tour. No photo op can occur without the media's co-operation and this time he made sure he stole the spotlight from his charismatic chief of defence staff.

In a media scrum held shortly after he landed at the airfield - and reading from notes prepared before he left Ottawa, MacKay used the opportunity to point the finger of blame at Iran. That's right folks, six years after the toppling of the Taliban by the U.S. coalition, it is Iran which is to blame for the renewed insurgency. In order for Canada and our NATO allies to successfully win the war, we must find a way to stop the flow of weapons and foreign fighters entering Afghanistan from Iran.

Since Canada does not have an independent intelligence agency like the CIA or the British MI6, it is not surprising that MacKay's allegations of Iranian interference echo those currently emanating from the U.S. State Department. Those who have been even casually following the bouncing ball of blame for the Afghanistan mess will recall that up until only a few weeks ago we were being advised that Pakistan was the problem.

Foreign fighters (who are actually Pashtu tribesmen sharing a common clan and religious belief with their Afghan neighbours) entering from Pakistan were the root of all evil. Despite the fact that the Pakistani military has lost more than 1,000 soldiers killed fighting Taliban supporters along their north west frontier, they were being demonized by NATO commanders in Afghanistan for their failure to close the border. Now instead of looking eastward at the Pakistani border, MacKay is telling us the enemy is coming in from the west - and bringing weapons.

We need to stop this flow of military hardware if we are to be successful in Kandahar, runs MacKay's logic. The problem with this naively simple theory is that there is no need to bring munitions into Afghanistan. After three decades of continual warfare, wherein bordering states and global superpowers poured weaponry into their factional proxies, there remains an almost limitless supply of hidden munitions caches. Does Iran wish to exert influence and control over Afghanistan? Certainly they already have a solid foothold in Herat - the westernmost province which is largely populated by ethnic Persians and they also hold a tremendous political meatcleaver over the head of Afghan President Hamid Karzai.

Iran is currently home to approximately three million Afghans claiming refugee status. Revocation of that status, followed by forced repatriation would all but collapse the fragile Afghan economy. As a result, Karzai knows he must keep Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on friendly terms. The Kabul government is more concerned with a flood of unemployed refugees coming across the Iranian border than an alleged trickle of weaponry.

To be fair to MacKay, foreign fighters operating in Afghanistan are a major obstacle to NATO's potential success and eventual withdrawal. However, these are not the idealistic Muslim jihadists but the approximately 20,000 western mercenaries currently employed as private security contractors. Unlicensed and unregistered, these

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