

"To Rebuild Afghanistan, Look Next Door"

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One of the best hopes for a prosperous Afghanistan is also the least appreciated: Iran. Its ties to Afghanistan are deep. As Hamid Karzai, interim leader of Afghanistan, told Iran's Parliament on Monday, the two countries have "a common culture and language and these bonds have made our friendship eternal." The occasion may have led Mr. Karzai to exaggerate, but not by much.

Iranians, especially the 65 percent of its population that is under 25, can best be described as masses of unemployed skilled labor and underemployed talent that have not been, and cannot be, absorbed into the domestic market because of the economic problems facing the government.

This labor force is culturally the closest to Afghanistan's among neighboring countries. Iranians speak the same language as a large percentage of the Afghani population and share the same literature. Such ties help explain why Iran has already committed \$500 million over the next five years to help Afghanistan.

In the warlord years, Iran mainly supported the Hezb-i-Wahdat group, which represented the interests of Afghan Shiites and particularly the Hazara ethnic minority. During the period of Taliban power, Iran continued to aid what there was of the Hezb-i-Wahdat active in the Northern Alliance. More important, Iran gave shelter to more than 3 million Afghan refugees - "a big burden on your shoulders," as Mr. Karzai put it Monday, to the applause of Iran's legislators. It also sheltered Ismail Khan, who has since returned to his power base in Herat, Afghanistan, and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a former prime minister of Afghanistan now sought by the Kabul government as a "war criminal." Many in Iranian political circles are seeking Mr. Hekmatyar's expulsion from Iran, an indication of how close Teheran has become to the new regime in Kabul.

Iran knows the good and the bad of Afghanistan, as Afghans know a great deal about Iran. They have been through many similar experiences in the past 25 years, particularly having to do with the overlap of church and state.

Many Afghan refugees are permanently settled now in Iran. But others wish to return home. Some already have. Together, these people form a ready-made network for cooperation between the two countries.

Such cooperation would directly benefit the United States in that it would help stabilize Afghanistan. There could be additional benefits. Discussions of Afghanistan have served in the past to give Teheran and Washington a means for talking to each other; until President Bush's "axis of evil" speech, they were performing this function again.

Private American efforts to employ Iranians in Afghanistan would not necessarily run afoul of American sanctions, which have been in place since 1979. Perhaps the most promising field is education. Afghanistan desperately needs to build school systems, and Iranians - in particular Iranian women, who are highly educated by regional standards - could help in that task. With access to education, women could become the next generation of doctors, engineers, lawyers, teachers and members of Parliament in Afghanistan, as women are in Iran.

An initiative in medical education is already being discussed by the University of Virginia and Shiraz University of Iran: to build a medical school together in Afghanistan. The Iranian reaction has been overwhelmingly positive.

America needs more than just a military legacy in the Islamic world. The United States should not end its involvement short of reconstruction; any partial solution would pose a serious threat to the Karzai government. If it or its successor falls, even the American military success story will be in doubt.

The reconstruction of Afghanistan with the help of the United States is also imperative for the simple reason that the whole Islamic world is tracking this experiment. America's leadership in economic and humanitarian development will help reduce terrorism. The Iranian people can be a positive force in reconstructing Afghanistan.

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