



## Iranian Influence in Afghanistan: Imam Khomeini Relief Committee

By Ahmad Majidiyar and Ali Alfoneh

*This is the first in a series of Middle Eastern Outlooks documenting Iran's growing influence in Afghanistan.*

*As the United States targets the Taliban in Afghanistan, Iran is using soft-power tactics to combat U.S. influence and win over the minds of the people. This Outlook examines the activities of the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee, a charitable organization that aims to promote Iran's ideological and political goals in Afghanistan. Since the early 1990s, the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee's Afghanistan arm has been expanding its budget and reaching more and more Afghans, which poses a growing threat to U.S. interests. To succeed in Afghanistan, the United States must focus not only on the hard power of the military, but also on a comprehensive soft-power strategy.*

Operation Enduring Freedom—the war in Afghanistan—is now the longest war in American history. U.S. casualties are increasing, and public support for the war is in decline. But the United States is not alone in the sandbox. The State Department and Pentagon expend much effort getting NATO members to commit troops and adopt rules of engagement that can contribute to the U.S. mission. Beyond the international coalition, Pakistan, China, and Iran are all actively involved in Afghanistan.

These countries sometimes act at cross purposes to U.S. goals. U.S. officials, for example, frequently express concern over Iranian arms shipments to the Taliban. “Iran is covertly supplying arms to Afghan insurgents while publicly posing as supportive of the Afghan government,” said Dennis Blair, director of national intelligence, to the U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence.<sup>1</sup>

While U.S. military and intelligence focus on Iranian hard power, they seldom discuss Iranian

soft-power efforts in Afghanistan, which are largely coordinated by the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee. The Imam Khomeini Relief Committee is the most prominent among several Iranian state-sponsored organizations operating in Afghanistan. Its ostensible goal is to provide humanitarian aid to poor communities. However, with about thirty-five thousand Afghans

### Key points in this Outlook:

- The Imam Khomeini Relief Committee is part of Iran's larger goal of using soft power to gain influence in Afghanistan and throughout the region. An ostensible charity, it actively promotes Iran's ideological and political goals in Afghanistan. In particular, it promotes Shiism and incites anti-American sentiment.
- The charity and its assets are under the control of Iran's supreme leader. It receives government funding, donations from private individuals both inside and outside Iran, and religious taxes, and it engages in fundraising activities outside Iran.
- To combat this threat, the United States must add soft-power strategies to its military tactics in the Afghanistan war.

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on its payroll<sup>2</sup> and tens of thousands of indirect beneficiaries, Iran's largest charity aims to advance Tehran's ideological and political ends in Afghanistan, promote Shiism, and incite anti- American sentiment.

## Background

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and his followers secretly formed his covert charity in 1963 both to support the families of shah-era political prisoners and to finance subversion against the shah. On March 5, 1979, as Khomeini consolidated the Islamic Revolution, he formally established the organization as the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee.<sup>3</sup>

Today, the committee's governing statute places the charity and its assets under the supreme leader's control and defines its mission as "providing livelihood and cultural support to the needy and underprivileged people living inside and outside the country in order to secure self-reliance, to strengthen and increase piety, and to preserve human dignity."<sup>4</sup> An additional article charges the organization to "support as much as possible the needy outside the country based upon the Islamic Republic of Iran's government policies."<sup>5</sup> The committee has no shortage of resources: it receives government funding, donations from private individuals both inside and outside Iran, religious taxes, and revenues from its own income-generating programs.<sup>6</sup> It also engages in fundraising activities outside Iran.<sup>7</sup>

Structurally, the committee consists of three subordinate offices: a Central Council staffed by the supreme leader's appointees and led at present by Habibollah Asgar-Owladi, the Office of the Superintendent chaired by Hossein Anvari, and an Audit Unit headed by Abolfazl Haji-Heidari. The Imam Khomeini Relief Committee's superintendent, who serves a five-year term, can establish or close down branches outside Iran, contingent on the Central Council's approval.<sup>8</sup> The committee's structure mirrors Iran's administrative divisions with offices in each province, county, township, and rural district.<sup>9</sup>

Inside Iran, the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee has been quite effective at its ideological mandate. Last year, for example, many rural poor refrained from joining the antigovernment protests because they feared losing the social security benefits the committee provides. The committee helps the disadvantaged with food, shelter, education, and health care. "According to the information we have, none of these families

[helped by the charity] got involved in the destructive scenes, which is natural because they have touched the warmth of people's donations," Anvari told the *Financial Times*.<sup>10</sup>

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Mohammad Mohammadi-Fard, coordination and international affairs deputy; Hadi Dehbashi, Foreign Offices executive affairs director; and Hamed Azimi, head of the Office for Expansion of Relations with Iranians Abroad, direct the committee's activities outside Iran.<sup>11</sup> The Imam Khomeini Relief Committee also operates in Azerbaijan, Comoros, Iraq, Lebanon, the Palestinian territories, Syria, and Tajikistan.<sup>12</sup>

## Activities in Afghanistan

In Afghanistan, the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee, led by Massoud Ashkan,<sup>13</sup> focuses its assistance on orphans, the physically disabled, and the elderly.<sup>14</sup> In addition, it offers computer classes and distributes food aid, blankets and fuel, interest-free loans, and marriage assistance to destitute young people.<sup>15</sup> The organization also provides medical services through a Kabul hospital, which has a daily capacity of two hundred patients and sends some patients to Iran for further treatment. The committee also provides free services to the general public to commemorate special days such as the anniversary of the Islamic Revolution, the anniversary of the death of Khomeini, and Ramadan.<sup>16</sup> At present, nearly thirty-two thousand Afghans from over seven thousand families are enrolled in the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee's aid and educational programs (see table 1).

The committee's goal, however, is not simple charity. As in Lebanon and the Palestinian territories, in Afghanistan it often agitates against common enemies like the United States and Israel. On the anniversary of Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution, for example, the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee sponsored a competition at the Iranian Embassy in Kabul among more than one thousand aid recipients in Afghanistan to test knowledge of Khomeini's Last Will and Testament.<sup>17</sup>

Each year, the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee also organizes Qods [Jerusalem] Day rallies to express solidarity

TABLE 1

IMAM KHOMEINI RELIEF COMMITTEE CLIENTS IN AFGHANISTAN, 2008–2009

Branch name	Recipients of permanent support		Recipients of occasional support		Expenditure in U.S. dollars
	Families	Individuals	Families	Individuals	
Kabul	2,350	9,145	287	1,440	818,143
Herat	1,160	5,235	198	684	324,152
Mazar-e-Sharif	827	3,635	65	338	217,810
Zaranj	1,214	3,916	1,253	7,541	349,358
Total	5,551	21,931	1,803	10,003	1,709,463

SOURCE: *Gozarash-e Amari-ye 1387* [1387 Statistical Report] (Tehran: Imam Khomeini Relief Committee, 2008–2009), available in Persian at [www.emdad.ir/gozashat/files/s/1387/fasle19.pdf](http://www.emdad.ir/gozashat/files/s/1387/fasle19.pdf) (accessed July 3, 2010), 456.

with the Palestinians and opposition to Israel, usually through temporary organizations like the Qods Day Celebration Committee, the Cultural Shura of Qods, or the Cultural Council of Supporters of Sacred Qods.<sup>18</sup> At a 2008 rally in solidarity with Palestinian children described as a “spontaneous sentimental act,” Afghan children said they received money from the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee to pledge to Palestinian children. “We have come here on the orders of the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee to help Palestinian children,” twelve-year-old Mariam told Pajhwok Afghan News. Laila, thirteen, said the committee also organized a march in front of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan office.<sup>19</sup> The political potential of the Qods Day rallies has not gone unnoticed by the Afghan press. Kabulpress, an independent Afghan news website, accused the Iranian government of exploiting Qods Day to advance its “satanic policies” in Afghanistan.<sup>20</sup>

The Imam Khomeini Relief Committee’s work in Afghanistan began in the early 1990s, when it opened two offices in Kabul and an office in the northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif. Between 1994 and 1995, the committee established branches both in the city of Bamyan and in the Yakawlang district of Bamyan Province, which is predominantly inhabited by Shia Hazaras. After the Taliban took Kabul in 1996, the committee relocated its Kabul offices to Pul-e Khomri, the capital of the northern Baghlan Province, and to the Panjab district in Bamyan Province.<sup>21</sup> In 1998, as the Taliban advanced north, the committee shut down its offices inside Afghanistan but continued to provide assistance to northern Afghan provinces through offices in neighboring Tajikistan.<sup>22</sup>

After the ouster of the Taliban, the Iranian government immediately set the stage for a soft-power offensive in Afghanistan. It dispatched Hassan Kazemi Qomi,

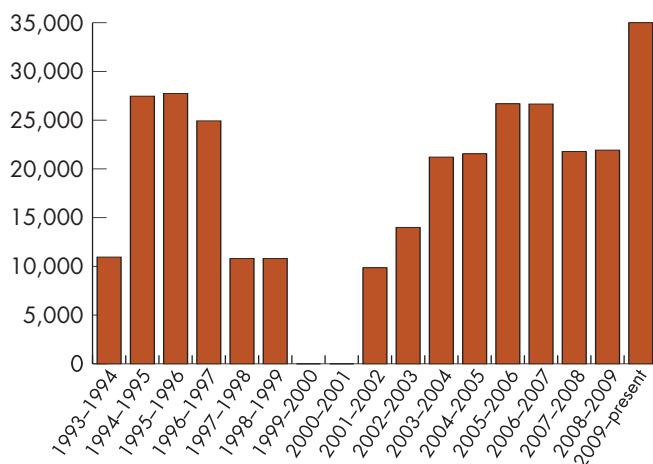
Qods Force commander and liaison to Hezbollah in Lebanon, to be Iran’s consul-general in Herat and coordinate Iranian assistance to Afghanistan.<sup>23</sup> The Imam Khomeini Relief Committee reopened its offices in Kabul and, in 2003, also opened branches in the western provinces of Herat and Nimruz,<sup>24</sup> giving it extensive coverage in areas populated by Persian speakers and Afghan Shia. In November 2003, the Iranian media spoke of Iranian support for forty-four major infrastructural projects in Herat Province alone.<sup>25</sup>

The Imam Khomeini Relief Committee’s activities in Afghanistan have grown steadily in recent years, with increasing numbers of beneficiaries (see figure 1). The organization has expanded its area of operation to eastern and southern Afghanistan to target disenfranchised Pashtun communities. Here the motivation may be political: in September 2007, the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee distributed fifty tons of food aid both to those neglected by the Afghan government and to victims of coalition air strikes in the southern Kandahar Province.<sup>26</sup> Last year, the committee distributed food aid both in Kandahar and in Jalalabad, the capital of the eastern Nangarhar Province.<sup>27</sup>

By 2008, the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee had forty-five offices in Afghanistan. Headquartered in Kabul, it has three main branches in Herat, Mazar-e-Sharif, and Zaranj, the capital of Nimruz. It also runs two “cultural branches,” three clinics, and thirty-six workshops.<sup>28</sup>

This year, the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee’s overall annual budget increased by 6 percent.<sup>29</sup> The committee’s budget pales in comparison to international aid to Afghanistan, but it effectively bolsters Iranian influence. While the Iranian government has given more than a quarter billion dollars in grants, and perhaps double that in loans, to influence Afghan politicians at the national

FIGURE 1  
IMAM KHOMEINI RELIEF COMMITTEE BENEFICIARIES  
IN AFGHANISTAN, 1993–2009



SOURCES: *Gozarsh-e Amari-ye 1387* [1387 Statistical Report] (Tehran: Imam Khomeini Relief Committee, 2008–2009), available in Persian at [www.emdad.ir/gozashat/files/s/1387/fasle19.pdf](http://www.emdad.ir/gozashat/files/s/1387/fasle19.pdf) (accessed July 3, 2010), 456; and “Komiteh-ye Emdad-e Emam Khomeini dar Afghanistan 50 Kelas-e Fanni Va Herfeh-i Dayer Kard” [Imam Khomeini Relief Committee Establishes 50 Professional and Technical Courses in Afghanistan], Imam Khomeini Relief Committee, available in Persian at [www.emdad.ir/news.asp?nu=1533](http://www.emdad.ir/news.asp?nu=1533) (accessed July 7, 2010). NOTE: Data are not available for 1999–2001 because the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee shut down its offices inside Afghanistan in 1998 as the Taliban advanced north. The committee continued to provide assistance to northern Afghan provinces through offices in neighboring Tajikistan.

and provincial levels, the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee garners influence among village leaders and poorer segments of society who otherwise would not enjoy trickle-down wealth.<sup>30</sup> Importantly, while the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee is expanding activities in Afghanistan, it provides no assistance to the 2 million Afghan refugees living under harsh conditions inside Iran.<sup>31</sup> Simply put, that is not where the Iranian government seeks to influence Afghans.

## Conclusion

Both President Barack Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton have endorsed smart or soft power. In her confirmation hearings to take the helm of the State Department, Clinton said, “We must use what has been called ‘smart power,’ the full range of tools at our disposal.”<sup>32</sup> The 2010 National Security Strategy refers repeatedly to the concept of soft power, if not the phrase itself. “Our moral leadership is grounded principally in the power of our example—not through an effort to impose our system on other peoples,” it declared. Later, it explained, “Successful engagement will depend upon the effective use and integration of different elements of American power. Our diplomacy and development

capabilities must help prevent conflict.”<sup>33</sup> Certainly, as Joseph S. Nye Jr. outlined in his seminal book, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*, soft power is an important component of U.S. strategy when coupled with hard power. Recognition of soft power’s role in U.S. strategy is also evidenced by the emphasis on civilian aid and development in the State Department’s Afghanistan and Pakistan Regional Stabilization Strategy.<sup>34</sup>

The flaw in the U.S. embrace of soft power, however, is the assumption that in Afghanistan, the United States and its NATO allies are alone in the sandbox. The fact remains that countries like Iran—competitors if not adversaries—also embrace a multifaceted strategy that combines hard and soft power. The U.S. military is well prepared to counter hard-power threats, but nowhere in the White House’s Afghanistan strategy does the

administration spell out how to counter the Iranian soft-power challenge.

Ostensibly, the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee is an ordinary charity rendering humanitarian assistance to the poor communities in Afghanistan. In reality, however, it is exploiting a variety of soft-power tools to further the Iranian government’s political and ideological agenda and undermine U.S. interests in Afghanistan. Indeed, the organization’s activities are integral to Iran’s larger plan to use soft power to gain influence not just in Afghanistan, but also throughout the region. As the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee expands its influence in the insurgency-ridden Pashtun-dominated areas of Afghanistan and exploits local grievances to provoke anti-American sentiment, the consequence of U.S. officials’ failure to address adversarial soft power grows.

## Notes

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