

Iran's Policy on Afghanistan

The Evolution of Strategic Pragmatism

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Preface

Given the recent election of a new Iranian President, Hassan Rouhani, and the proposed withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan in 2014, now is an excellent time to review the Iranian policy towards Afghanistan and to assess its likely future direction.

There is a clear need for cooperative policy approaches based on better understanding of the interests and worries of Afghanistan and its neighbours. SIPRI launched the Wider Central Asia (WCA) Initiative in January 2012 with the express purpose of promoting and facilitating such dialogue and cooperation on security in Afghanistan's neighbourhood. Our Initiative has brought together experts and officials from Iran, Pakistan, the five Central Asian states Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, as well as from Europe and the United States. It has also complemented structured dialogues with independent analysis.

This policy paper finds that Khomeinist ideology, an early driver of Iran's policy in Afghanistan, will remain central to Iran's current strategy of pragmatic support for a democratic and multi-ethnic Afghanistan founded on moderate Islamic values. In view of Iran's political isolation, Afghanistan may even provide the Rouhani regime with a political springboard to engage with the international community on converging interests.

I would like to congratulate the author, Dr Bruce Koepke for this excellent and thorough analysis of Iran's policy on Afghanistan over the past three and a half decades. Gratitude is also due to the anonymous reviewers for their feedback on the paper as well as the numerous regional officials and experts who have contributed their insights and energy to the WCA initiative. I would also like to thank the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, which generously funds the initiative. Finally, thanks to those within and outside SIPRI who helped in the development of this report, in particular Dr Neil Melvin, Shannon Kile, Theresa Höghammar, Mahsa Moghadaszadeh and Dr Christine Adams, and the SIPRI editors, especially Dr David Prater.

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Summary

Iran's foreign policy since its 1979 Islamic Revolution has been shaped by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's ideology and Islamic solidarity, and strongly influenced by the country's relations with the United States as well as by wider geopolitical changes in its region. Iran's policy on Afghanistan over three decades has been broadly constructive and often generous, albeit not consistently transparent. Its Afghanistan strategy is complex and multifaceted but also adaptable and quite pragmatic.

In the aftermath of the inclusion of Iran in the 'Axis of Evil' in 2002 by US President George W. Bush, hardliners in the Iranian Government increasingly assumed control of the direction of Iran's Afghanistan policy. Pledges made by the administration of Iranian President Mohammad Khatami in support of the reconstruction of Afghanistan were nevertheless fulfilled and Iran's policy remained supportive of Afghanistan's democratization and stabilization. However, with the election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005, signs of another, concurrent strategy gradually emerged, aiming—at times—to subtly undermine the efforts of the foreign military based in Afghanistan, especially US and British troops.

In order to draw some conclusions about the Iranian Government's foreign policies on Afghanistan under its newly elected President, Hassan Rouhani, and after the proposed withdrawal of foreign troops in 2014, it is important to review Iran's policies on Afghanistan since 1979. In particular, over the past two decades Iran's strategic approach, embedded in early post-revolutionary ideals, has begun to crystallize in the form of a pragmatic interest in supporting a democratic and multi-ethnic Afghanistan.

Having invested heavily in Afghanistan over the last 34 years, Iran will undoubtedly seek to maintain, if not strengthen, its political, cultural and social influence over its eastern neighbour in order to secure its own national security and geopolitical position. Cooperation between the two Islamic republics is expected to increase after 2014. This will support Iran's goal of consolidating itself as a regional power and could facilitate its role as mediator in the reconciliation process between the Afghan Government and insurgents. President Rouhani is in a strong position to cooperate constructively with the international community, and especially the USA, on the stabilization of Afghanistan and its neighbourhood. Indeed, it could act as a political springboard for engagement with the international community on a number of broader political issues of mutual concern.

1. Introduction

Iran is one of Afghanistan's most important neighbours. The two countries share a 936-kilometre-long border as well as many historical, cultural, linguistic, economic, ethnic and religious ties. In the period 1978–79 both countries experienced significant upheavals that were to have lasting impacts: the April 1978 Communist coup d'état in Afghanistan and the February 1979 revolution in Iran that established the Islamic republic.

Iran's Islamic Revolution, which was the outcome of a popular uprising led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini against the US-supported government of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (1941–79), had a significant influence on Afghanistan's minority Shia community. Iran's engagement with Afghanistan since its own revolution in 1979 has remained subject to the influence and interests of diverse and frequently competing factions, ministries and departments. Shaped by Khomeinist ideology and vehement opposition to the USA, Iran's Afghanistan strategy has also been quite adaptable and pragmatic.¹ As Afghanistan became an arena for the long-term deployment of US soldiers, divergent interests among the factions within the administration of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005–13) led to the evolution of a dual strategy in Afghanistan. This entailed an official government policy supportive of the administration of Afghan President Hamid Karzai and a simultaneous strategy that has at times sought to undermine the efforts of the USA and some of its allies in Afghanistan.

Since the fall of the Taliban regime in late 2001, the Iranian Government has committed considerable resources to the political and economic reconstruction of Afghanistan. In fact, Iran has been one of Afghanistan's largest international donors, as reflected in pledges made at the 2002 Tokyo International Conference on Reconstruction Assistance to Afghanistan, and continues to contribute approximately \$50 million annually.² Iran has also offered refuge to more than 2.5 million Afghans who have fled the country's protracted conflict since 1979, and employment to more than 1.5 million undocumented migrant workers whose remittances have supported families and communities across Afghanistan.³

The main persistent motives for Iran's policy are the notion of Islamic solidarity, support for Shia co-religionists and Dari-speaking ethnic minorities in northern and western Afghanistan, and Iran's economic interests and ambitions

¹ On Khomeini's political Islam see Martin, V., *Creating an Islamic State: Khomeini and the Making of a New Iran* (IB Tauris: London, 2000).

² Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Headquarters for Afghanistan, Iran and Afghanistan's Reconstruction* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs: Tehran, 2004), p. 4.

³ Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (note 2); Koepke, B., 'The situation of Afghans in the Islamic Republic of Iran nine years after the overthrow of the Taliban Regime in Afghanistan', eds J. Calabrese and J.-L. Marret, *Transatlantic Cooperation on Protracted Displacement: Urgent Need and Unique Opportunity* (Middle East Institute Press: Washington, DC, 2012), pp. 57–69; and American Institute of Afghanistan Studies and the Hollings Center for International Dialogue, 'Afghanistan's other neighbors: Iran, Central Asia, and China', Report of Conference in Istanbul, 24–26 July 2008, <http://www.bu.edu/aias/reports/aon_conference.pdf>, p. 6.

to assert its position as a regional power. International events—including the sanctions imposed on Iran in the wake of the 1979 seizure of the US embassy in Tehran, the terrorist attacks on the USA of 11 September 2001 and the subsequent invasion of Afghanistan, and the imposition of further sanctions linked to Iran's nuclear programme—have also influenced Iran's Afghanistan policy. Iran is especially concerned about the potential for a military strike, launched from US and allied bases in Afghanistan, in retaliation for its intransigence over its nuclear programme. Regional counternarcotics and security issues as well as competition with Saudi Arabia over guardianship of the Islamic community and regional dominance are further critical influences.

At the summits of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in Lisbon in 2010 and Chicago in 2012, the Afghan Government and states contributing to the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) agreed to a transition plan involving the withdrawal of all foreign combat troops and the handover of all security matters to Afghan security forces from 2015 onwards. The Iranian Government had lobbied for this withdrawal for seven years, based on its conjecture that foreign troops have contributed to continued insecurity in Afghanistan and the region. Nevertheless, the USA's persistent hedging about its military plans in Afghanistan after 2014 will not alleviate the Iranian Government's security concerns anytime soon.

This paper continues by providing an overview of Iran's policies on Afghanistan between 1979 and 2001 (in chapter 2) and its support for Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001 (in chapter 3). It then uses this context to address a series of questions about the withdrawal of ISAF and reconciliation talks with the Taliban, along with Iran's interest in participating in the development of a new regional security environment. Is the Iranian Government interested in assuming a stabilization role in Afghanistan and will it step in and assume a stronger supporting role? Can greater cooperation between Afghanistan and Iran be expected? What does the withdrawal of US military and civilian personnel mean for future opportunities for dialogue and cooperation between the Iranian and US governments? With reconciliation increasingly being raised as a possible solution to Afghanistan's security quagmire, how is Iran likely to respond to the possible integration into Afghan political life of moderate elements of the Taliban? These questions allow the identification of possible policy directions that Iran, under its new president, Hassan Rouhani, may take on Afghanistan (in chapter 4). Chapter 5 presents conclusions and recommendations.

2. Iran's engagement in Afghanistan: from the Islamic Revolution to the fall of the Taliban, 1979–2001

Soviet-backed Afghanistan: 1979–92

Between 1979 and 1992, Iran's nascent foreign policy as an Islamic republic was shaped by Ayatollah Khomeini's ideology of *velayat-e faqih* (guardianship of the jurist), which vests the Iranian Supreme Leader with ultimate decision-making power on all political matters. Another fundamental tenet of this ideology was his vision to export the revolution. The first 10 years of Iran's policy on Afghanistan, therefore, were largely shaped by Khomeini and, following his death in 1989, by his successor Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Prior to the 1978 coup d'état in Afghanistan, the country's Shia community—comprising Hazaras, the largest group, sizeable Qizilbash and Sayyid, and smaller Tajik, Pashtun and Baluch ethnic groups—had traditionally been marginalized by Sunni Pashtun Sadozai and Muhammadzai rulers, with limited political representation. This seemed likely to change with the establishment of the first Communist regime in Afghanistan under the Khalq faction of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) led by Presidents Nur Mohammad Taraki (April 1978–79) and later Hafizullah Amin (1979).⁴ Some Afghan Shias therefore initially welcomed the Communist system. However, the rule under Taraki and Amin was chaotic, brutal and without a clear strategy.⁵ When rural conservatives were targeted and some clerics arrested, Afghan Shia clerics realized that they needed to act to ensure their stake in future governments. Many 'look[ed] to Iran as a model', not only because of its own Shia revolution but since most *marja-e taqlid* (high-ranking authoritative interpreters of Shia religious law) are Iranian.⁶

The 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan installed Babrak Karmal of the PDPA's Parcham faction as president. Karmal was seen by the Soviet Union's political leadership as being able to counter the rural mujahideen-led insurgency and develop Soviet-style institutions. In the wake of its own revolution that same year, Iran was largely preoccupied with its domestic policy. Its attention was soon drawn to two complicated challenges: the 1979–81 hostage crisis at the US embassy in Tehran and the 1980–88 Iran–Iraq War. Budgetary constraints

⁴ See Ibrahim, N., *The Failure of a Clerical Proto-State: Hazarajat, 1979–1984*, Crisis States Research Centre (CSRC) Working Paper no. 6 (CSRC: London, June 2006), p. 1; Ibrahim, N., *At the Sources of Factionalism and Civil War in Hazarajat*, CSRC Working Paper no. 41 (CSRC: London, Jan. 2009); Ibrahim, N., *The Dissipation of Political Capital among Afghanistan's Hazaras: 2001–2009*, CSRC Working Paper no. 51 (CSRC: London, June 2009); and Rubin, B. R., *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System*, 2nd edn (Yale University Press: New Haven, CT, 2002), p. 50.

⁵ Ibrahim, *The Failure of a Clerical Proto-State* (note 4), p. 1; and Maley, W., *The Afghanistan Wars*, 2nd edn (Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2009), p. 28.

⁶ Martin (note 1), pp. 194, 232.

consequent to the war also curtailed the formulation of a comprehensive strategy on Afghanistan.⁷

At the same time, in line with the principles of Islamic solidarity, Iran felt obliged to offer refuge to all Afghans fleeing the Communist regime. This formed the foundation of what became an extremely relaxed and generous refugee policy. At the peak of the refugee crisis, in 1991–92, Iran hosted more than 3 million Afghans.⁸ Concomitantly, Iran's economy became reliant on the labour of Afghan refugees and undocumented workers in construction, agriculture and domestic and municipality services. Afghans in Iran also provided officials with an extensive network of contacts across Afghanistan, even more so when they were eventually repatriated.⁹

Iran's support for Afghan Shia resistance groups

Iran provided assistance to Afghan Shias on an ad hoc basis via Iranian clerics, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the offices of the President, the Supreme Leader and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). However, initial logistical and financial support in the early 1980s only reached the Shia groups in the central highlands that embraced Khomeinist Islamism. This preference seems to have exacerbated divisions and infighting within the Afghan Shia clergy, a considerable percentage of whom followed Ayatollah Abu'l Qasim Khu'i, an Iranian-born Islamic jurist residing in Najaf, Iraq, who was not interested in propagating political Islam.¹⁰

In the period 1978–86, nine Shia groups emerged and joined the anti-government resistance in Afghanistan. All but one of these groups had been established in Iran, the exception being Shura-ye Ittefaq (Unity Council), which was formed in Afghanistan. These groups were predominantly ethnic Hazara; Harakat-e Islami (Islamic Movement) was the main non-Hazara group, comprising mostly ethnic Qizilbash and Sayyids. Seven of the nine groups ascribed to Ayatollah Khomeini and his version of political Islam, while the Pasdaran-e Jihad-e Islami (Guardians of the Islamic Jihad) and Sazman-e Nasr (Victory Organization) were directly financed and armed by the IRGC 'to export their style of revolution towards Muslim countries such as Afghanistan'.¹¹ Shura-ye Ittefaq and Harakat were the only mujahideen factions that followed Ayatollah Khu'i as a *marja-e taqlid*.¹²

Between 1987 and 1989, Iran helped to resolve disputes among the Afghan Shia factions and encouraged them to support a political rather than military solution to Afghanistan's conflict. With the end of the Iran–Iraq War, Iran's Afghanistan policy became progressively more cohesive under President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989–97), shifting towards support for the establishment of a multi-

⁷ Rashid, A., *Taliban: Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia* (IB Tauris: London, 2000), p. 199.

⁸ Koepke (note 3).

⁹ Ibrahim, *At the Sources of Factionalism and Civil War in Hazarajat* (note 4), p. 4.

¹⁰ Ibrahim, *The Failure of a Clerical Proto-State* (note 4), p. 4.

¹¹ Ibrahim, *The Failure of a Clerical Proto-State* (note 4), p. 14.

¹² On the 9 Shia mujahideen groups see Ibrahim, *At the Sources of Factionalism and Civil War in Hazarajat* (note 4), pp. 11–12.

ethnic government comprising both Sunni and Shia representatives. As the Communist Afghan regime imploded following the withdrawal of Soviet troops in 1988–89, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the USA—the backers of the Peshawar Alliance, a group of seven Sunni mujahideen factions—made preparations to install only Sunni leaders in the future interim government. Marginalized from these discussions due to its feud with the USA and regional tensions with Saudi Arabia, the Iranian Government broadened its engagement to include non-Shia and non-Pashtun groups throughout the interregnum period from 1989 until 1992.

In 1988 the Peshawar Alliance had announced a ‘government-in-exile’ comprised exclusively of Sunnis.¹³ In response, Iran stressed that Hazaras had been among the first to successfully resist the Communist regime, directly challenged Pakistan’s preference for Sunni mujahideen, and stepped up its lobbying and demands for the political representation of Shias. Iran continued to push for Shia representation and in 1989 supported the establishment of Hezb-e Wahdat (Islamic Unity Party), which united all Khomeinist factions under the leadership of Ali Mazari, a Nasr commander. Iran also began to extend support to Dari-speaking, Sunni non-Pashtun groups such as Jamiat-e Islami (Islamic Society), Junbish-e Melli (National Islamic Movement) and Ismaili Shia factions. The Farsi–Dari language thereby became a point of cohesion for diverse Afghan groups and minorities in north, west and central Afghanistan.¹⁴

With the defeat of the Communist regime in April 1992, the Peshawar parties agreed to appoint Sebghatullah Mujadidi of the Jabha-ye Nejat-e Melli (National Liberation Front) as interim Afghan president until June 1992, and to then appoint the head of Jamiat, Burhanuddin Rabbani, as his successor. Iran’s persistent lobbying was finally rewarded in July 1992 with the inclusion of Wahdat in the Leadership Council of the new regime. This was a success for Iran’s foreign policy and long-term aspirations. However, deep rifts soon became apparent among the resistance groups. As Afghanistan once more became entangled in armed conflict, neighbouring countries again began to sponsor their favourite proxies: Saudi Arabia and Pakistan supported Sunni factions, Uzbekistan supported Junbish, Tajikistan (and later India) supported Jamiat, and Iran backed the Shia groups.¹⁵

The Rabbani presidency: 1992–2001

In the period 1992–96 the Rabbani administration, backed by Iran among others, became embroiled in internecine fighting with former resistance groups, leading to civil war and, eventually, the emergence of the Taliban, which took control of Kabul in 1996.¹⁶ Never controlling the entire country, the Taliban’s Islamic

¹³ Olesen, A., *Islam and Politics in Afghanistan* (Curzon Press: London, 1995), p. 291.

¹⁴ The Turkic-speaking ethnic groups of northern Afghanistan are mostly bilingual and therefore speak Dari.

¹⁵ Maley (note 5), pp. 168–72.

¹⁶ Maley (note 5), pp. 203–204.

Emirate of Afghanistan was recognized only by Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Afghanistan's seat at the UN General Assembly continued to be occupied by the Rabbani-led Islamic State of Afghanistan. During the five-year Taliban regime, the Iranian Government intensified its political and military engagement with both Shia Islamist groups and the anti-Taliban United Front (often referred to as the Northern Alliance).¹⁷ Even more significantly, the Iranian Government made concerted overtures to the international community to explore political solutions to the conflict.

Iran was not alone in failing to foresee that the fighting between former Afghan resistance groups in the post-Communist regime would collapse into anarchy as competing factions vied for power.¹⁸ Likewise, the rapid advance from mid-1994 of the radical, tribal and anti-modernist Sunni Pashtun Taliban, with the implicit support of Pakistan's Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence (the Pakistani intelligence agency), seemed to take Iran by surprise, possibly reflecting its limited contact with Pashtun tribes in southern and south-eastern Afghanistan.¹⁹

The renewed outbreak of civil war (1992–96) saw a series of attacks on Wahdat by formerly allied Sunni parties. As it became clear that the Shia's hard-earned political position would not be safeguarded by non-Pashtun Islamists, Iran began to explore alliances with more powerful Sunni Pashtun groups, despite their radical tendencies. Contact was made with Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the Sunni Pashtun Islamist leader of Hezb-e Islami (Islamic Party), and in all likelihood with the Taliban, albeit briefly.²⁰ Clearly, the rise of the Taliban, with their explicit anti-Shia dogma, stimulated the Iranian Government's more overt engagement in Afghanistan, intensifying both its support for the majority of anti-Taliban resistance groups and its advocacy for peace settlements through political dialogue.²¹

Internecine fighting between Afghan Shia groups

One of the first clashes during Rabbani's presidency occurred in June 1992 and was attributable to sectarian tensions between Wahdat and the Sunni Islamist Ittehad-e Islami (Islamic Union), backed by Saudi Arabia.²² In early 1993, fighting also broke out between former allies Wahdat and Jamiat. Exploring new avenues

¹⁷ Jabha-ye Muttahed-e Islami Milli bara-ye Nejat-e Afghanistan (National Islamic United Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan) was established in Oct. 1996 and included the Sunni Tajik Jamiat, Sunni Uzbek Junbish, and the Sunni Pashtun Ittehad-e Islami, as well as the Shia Hazara Wahdat and Shia Qizilbash Harakat.

¹⁸ See Maley (note 5); Saikal, A., 'The Rabbani Government, 1992–1996', ed. W. Maley, *Fundamentalism Reborn? Afghanistan and the Taliban* (Vanguard: Lahore, 1998), pp. 29–42; Rashid (note 7); and Rubin (note 4).

¹⁹ See Saikal (note 18), pp. 37–42; and Davis, A., 'How the Taliban became a military force', ed. Maley (note 18), pp. 43–71.

²⁰ Rubin (note 4), p. 273; Ahady, A.-U.-H., 'Saudi Arabia, Iran and the conflict in Afghanistan', ed. W. Maley (note 18), p. 130; Ibrahim, *At the Sources of Factionalism and Civil War* (note 4), p. 7; and Marsden, P., *The Taliban: War, Religion and the New Order in Afghanistan* (Oxford University Press: Karachi, 1998), p. 144.

²¹ Ahady (note 20), p. 126.

²² Ittehad-e Islami bara-ye Azadi-ye Afghanistan (Islamic Union for the Freedom of Afghanistan, now called Dawat-e Islami) is led by an influential member of Afghanistan's political elite, the Sunni Pashtun Islamist Abdul Rab al-Rasoul Sayyaf. Maley (note 5), pp. 53, 169.

of cooperation, the Iranian Government encouraged Wahdat to approach Hekmatyar's Hezb-e Islami.²³ Iran's engagement with and support for Hezb-e Islami reflected its recognition that buy-in from Sunni Pashtuns was necessary to keep a durable Islamist-ruled Afghan regime in power, as well as the fact that Hekmatyar, a strong critic of the USA, was a suitable partner in Iran's plan to ensure a friendly eastern neighbour.

In March 1995, as Jamiat attacked Wahdat-held sectors in Kabul, Mazari, the leader of Wahdat, reached out to the newly emerged Taliban, hoping that they would take on Jamiat's military wing, Shura-ye Nazar led by Ahmad Shah Massoud, and secure a solid position for Wahdat and Hazaras in the future government.²⁴ Despite this overture, Mohammad Akbari, a Shia Qizilbash commander and leader of a Wahdat splinter group, although apparently aligned with Mazari's Wahdat forces, began firing at the Taliban when they reached the area under his control.²⁵ It remains unclear whether Mazari and Akbari were acting independently of each other or if there had been miscommunication between the two Shia factions and their Iranian backers. The Taliban, however, immediately interpreting the attack as a betrayal of its agreement with Wahdat, killed Mazari on 13 March, thereby effectively ending any potential for dialogue with Iran. If the Iranian Government had been party to Wahdat's overtures, it became blatantly evident that this had been a miscalculation.

As a consequence, Iran began to support all groups that opposed the Taliban. Iran's perception of the Taliban as a particular threat to its national security was confirmed when they murdered eight diplomats and a journalist at the Iranian consulate in Mazar i Sharif on 8 August 1998. The Iranian Government was initially divided in terms of how to respond, with the IRGC advocating retaliatory military intervention while other senior officials feared that this could lead to attacks against Iranian national interests by radical Sunni Islamists affiliated with the Taliban.²⁶ The moderate approach of President Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005) ultimately prevailed; 200 000 soldiers were mobilized to Iran's eastern border in October 1998 as a show of force.²⁷ Yet notably, even as these military options were being mooted, the Taliban's kidnapping of several Iranians in Kandahar granted Iranian officials their first opportunity to engage directly with senior Taliban at the diplomatic level.²⁸

Iran's support for peace initiatives

In December 1997, Iran's MFA invited key Afghan resistance envoys to a conference in Esfahan.²⁹ At this event, the Iranian Foreign Minister, Kamal

²³ Ahady (note 20), p. 130; and Rubin (note 4), p. 273.

²⁴ Davis (note 19), pp. 43–71, 57.

²⁵ Davis (note 19), pp. 43–71.

²⁶ Iranian officials, Personal communications with author, 2010.

²⁷ Rashid (note 7), p. 197.

²⁸ Iranian officials, Personal communications with author, 2009; 'Iran in direct contact with Taliban over kidnapped diplomats', Agence France-Presse, 23 Aug. 1998; and Rashid (note 7), p. 75.

²⁹ [Afghanistan's peace conference in Esfahan], *Seraj*, vol. 4, no. 14–31 (1376 [1–3 Dec. 1997]), pp. 133–50 (in Farsi).

Kharazzi, expressed the opinion that a military solution would not succeed and that intra-Afghan negotiations needed to be encouraged in order to form a broad-based government with the participation of all parties. He stressed that Afghanistan needed to remain an integrated political entity. At the Organization of the Islamic Conference summit convened in Tehran later that month, President Khatami reiterated these points and stressed the need to restore 'peace to Afghanistan through negotiation'.³⁰

In July 1999 the Six Plus Two group (consisting of Afghanistan's six neighbours, China, Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, plus Russia and the USA), issued the Tashkent Declaration, which banned military aid to conflicting parties and called for the prevention of arms deliveries to Afghanistan.³¹ However, Iran—like other neighbours—nonetheless supplied arms to the anti-Taliban opposition while concurrently pursuing a diplomatic solution to the protracted conflict. By the late 1990s, under President Khatami Iran's policy on Afghanistan became progressively more pragmatic as it intensified its advocacy for a political solution to the conflict. The main peace initiatives in which Iran participated at that time included the Uzbekistan-initiated Six Plus Two meetings (which, from 1997, was the first forum in which US and Iranian officials met face-to-face to discuss Afghanistan), the Iranian-initiated Cyprus Process, and the United Nations-sponsored Geneva Initiative (which also included Iran, Italy, Germany and the USA and provided further opportunities for dialogue between the US and Iranian governments).³²

Iran's Cyprus Process, which convened meetings between 1999 and 2001, sought to assist Afghanistan to reach a political settlement. This diplomatic peace initiative involved Afghan leaders and former officials, including members of Hezb-e Islami, which had friendly relations with Iran; however, their participation reduced the initiative's broader credibility.³³

From March 2000, as it became increasingly apparent that the United Front would be unable to defeat the Taliban outright and that some form of peace settlement would therefore be necessary, the USA signalled its willingness to cooperate with Iran on Afghanistan. Iran responded by seeming to engage more seriously in the Geneva Initiative.³⁴ This reflected President Khatami's advocacy for détente, dialogue and confidence building with the international community and support for the process of state building in Afghanistan.³⁵

³⁰ Kamalian, H. (ed.), *Documents of the Eighth Islamic Summit (Session of Dignity, Dialogue Participation), 9–11 December 1997* (Office of the Chairman of the Eighth Islamic Summit: Tehran, 2000).

³¹ Tashkent Declaration on Fundamental Principles for a Peaceful Settlement of the Conflict in Afghanistan, adopted 19 July 1999, reproduced in UN document A/54/174-S/1999/812, 22 July 1999.

³² Katzman, K., *Afghanistan: Current Issues and US Policy*, Congressional Research Service (CRS) Report for Congress RL30588 (US Congress, CRS: Washington, DC, 3 Dec. 2002), p. 8; and Parker, J. W., *Persian Dreams: Moscow and Tehran since the Fall of the Shah* (Potomac Books: Dulles, VA, 2008), p. 180.

³³ Katzman (note 32), p. 8; and Samad, O., 'Second Afghan peace movement calls for "coordinated efforts"', Azadi Afghan Radio in Afghanistan News Center, 2 Dec. 1999, <<http://www.afghanistannewscenter.com/news/1999/december/dec2j1999.htm>>.

³⁴ Parker (note 32), p. 181.

³⁵ Foundation for Dialogue among Civilisations, 'Our mission', [n.d.], <<http://dialoguefoundation.org/?Lang=en&Page=29>>; and Barzegar, K., 'Detente in Khatami's foreign policy and its impact on improvement of Iran–Saudi Relations', *Discourse: An Iranian Quarterly*, vol. 2, no. 2 (2000), pp. 155–78.

In the wake of September 2001, Iran provided extensive—albeit indirect—political, intelligence and logistical cooperation to the USA in an effort to oust the Taliban.³⁶ US and allied special forces were first deployed to Afghanistan as Operation Enduring Freedom in October 2001 with Iran offering considerable assistance ‘to allow American transport aircraft to stage from airfields in eastern Iran[,] . . . to perform search-and-rescue missions for downed American airmen . . . [and to allow] an American freighter packed with humanitarian supplies to off-load its cargo’ at an Iranian port.³⁷ Two months later, with the approval of the UN Security Council, additional foreign soldiers were deployed to support the establishment of ISAF, initially in Kabul, in order to ensure sufficient security to help jump-start post-civil war reconstruction.³⁸

By the end of 2001, Iran had clearly shown its willingness to cooperate with the international community and its genuine interest in supporting durable peace in Afghanistan.

³⁶ Dobbins, J., ‘Negotiating with Iran’, *Iran: Reality, Options and Consequences*, Part 2, *Negotiating with the Iranians: Missed Opportunities and Paths Forward*, Hearing before the Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs of the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, US House of Representatives, 7 Nov. 2007 (US Government Printing Office: Washington, DC, 2009); and Barzegar, K., ‘Role at odds: the roots of increased Iran–U.S. tension in the post-9/11 Middle East’, *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs*, vol. 1, no. 3 (2010), pp. 85–114.

³⁷ Pollack, K. M., *The Persian Puzzle: The Conflict between Iran and America* (Random House: New York, 2004), p. 346. See also Gerleman, D. J., Stevens, J. E. and Hildreth, S. A., *Operation Enduring Freedom: Foreign Pledges of Military and Intelligence Support*, Congressional Research Service (CRS) Report to Congress RL31152 (US Congress, CRS: Washington, DC, 17 Oct. 2001).

³⁸ UN Security Council Resolution 1386, 20 Dec. 2001.

3. Iran's engagement with Afghanistan: from the US-led invasion to the foreign withdrawal, 2001–14

The overthrow of the Taliban in November 2001, and of the Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein two years later, facilitated Iran's ascent as a serious and ambitious player in wider Central Asia as well as the Middle East. Iran no doubt hoped that the US intervention would be short-lived, and it most likely never anticipated that foreign troops would remain in Afghanistan for more than a decade. The defeat of the Taliban created a favourable political environment for the Iranian Government, whose embassy in Kabul had been closed since 1997.³⁹ Many Afghan political personalities backed by Iran were present in the transitional Afghan administration that remained in place until the 2004 presidential elections. Although President Karzai has since reshuffled his cabinet several times, a number of influential persons with good relations with the Iranian Government remain in senior positions.

Over the past decade Iran has pursued a strategy supportive of Afghanistan's political and economic reconstruction. At the same time, it has become uneasy about the growing Pashtun insurgency and wary of potential linkages between Afghan Sunni insurgents and Iranian terrorist groups such as the Sunni Baluch ethno-nationalist Jundullah. These critical concerns have fostered the Iranian Government's continued constructive engagement in Afghanistan.

Since the disputed Afghan presidential election of 2009, the relationship between Iran and Afghanistan has cooled, even more so since the signing of the 2012 Afghan–US Strategic Partnership Agreement, the marginalization of former United Front leaders from Karzai's administration and the Afghan Government's sporadic outreach to the Taliban.⁴⁰ As a consequence, some Iranian officials have increased their support for the two main political non-Pashtun opposition alliances: the National Front (Jabha-ye Melli) and the National Coalition (Etelaf-e Melli).

Iran's support for reconstruction

Iran's interest in more constructive international engagement was made evident at the December 2001 Bonn Conference when Iranian officials, in support of US policy, convinced members of the Sunni Tajik-dominated United Front to accept the proposed composition of the new transitional government under Hamid Karzai and to relinquish their demand for additional ministries. According to James Dobbins, the US representative at the Bonn Conference, the Iranian

³⁹ Rashid (note 7), p. 203.

⁴⁰ Enduring Strategic Partnership Agreement between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the United States of America, signed 2 May 2012, entered into force 4 July 2012, <<http://www.state.gov/s/l/treaty/caseact/c49619.htm>>.

diplomat Javad Zarif ‘achieved the final breakthrough without which the Karzai government might never have been formed’.⁴¹ This unprecedented Iran–US cooperation was thus largely responsible for the induction of a multi-ethnic, sectarian Islamic Afghan Government that included mujahideen leaders but had a Pashtun leadership.

Despite this, hard-line Khomeinist ideologues mostly opposed to Khatami’s moderate approach, including some members of the IRGC, continued to play a critical role in shaping Iran’s strategic priorities. Although Iran’s Afghanistan policy is mostly coordinated by the Afghanistan Headquarters, established in late 2001 and now located in the MFA, it has been consistently subject to the influence of multiple and often competing centres of power in the Supreme Leader’s Office, the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), the IRGC, the MFA, the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Finance, and the Ministry of the Interior.⁴²

These political divisions were exacerbated when in January 2002 US President George W. Bush described Iran as part of what he termed an ‘Axis of Evil’.⁴³ The Iranian Government’s tentative steps towards dialogue with the USA, fostered by President Khatami, came to an immediate halt and its Afghanistan policy shifted to become even more embedded in the Iran–USA foreign policy portfolio and dominated by hard-line conservatives and clerics. The majority of those government officials who had advocated engagement with the USA were marginalized and eventually stripped of senior responsibilities with the election in 2005 of the conservative President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Iran’s foreign policy subsequently began to focus more on monitoring the engagement of the international community and on developing its strategy towards the USA.

While perceiving that it has been consistently sidelined by the USA from engaging more actively in Afghanistan’s economy, the Iranian Government has nevertheless played a broadly positive role in Afghanistan’s reconstruction.⁴⁴ Not surprisingly, its efforts have consistently targeted geographical areas that fall within its sphere of interest: those occupied by Shias in the central highlands, northern regions and Kabul, communities with cultural and linguistic affinity, and those previously controlled by the United Front.

Between 2002 and 2007—a period considered by some Iranian officials to be the ‘golden era’ of its financial support—Iran committed \$560 million to Afghanistan.⁴⁵ In contrast, in the period 2007–13 its contributions were lower and mostly focused on the finalization of existing projects, and averaged approxi-

⁴¹ Dobbins (note 36), p. 12.

⁴² Abbasi, E., ‘Iran and the reconstruction of Afghanistan’, *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs*, vol. 2, no. 3 (fall 2011), pp. 173–96.

⁴³ White House, ‘President delivers State of the Union address’, 29 Jan. 2002, <<http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html>>.

⁴⁴ See Bikdeli, A. (ed.), *Iran and Afghanistan’s Reconstruction 2001–2006* (Headquarters for Reconstruction for Afghanistan: Tehran, 2006); and Abbasi (note 42).

⁴⁵ Iranian officials, Personal communications with author, 2009–10.

mately \$50 million per year.⁴⁶ This largely reflected the impact of the wider political context, with the Iranian Government becoming increasingly critical of foreign efforts in Afghanistan as its relations with the USA continued to sour and as it was subject to further sanctions due to its nuclear programme. Iran's pragmatic policy sought to improve its own trade and transit to the east—particularly with the western Afghan province of Herat—and to consolidate its strategic influence in Afghanistan and establish a buffer zone against future insecurity.⁴⁷

Iran's priorities have been economic aid (e.g. road construction, energy, water supply, agriculture, health care, customs and trade), assistance in cultural and educational fields, and assistance in political and security affairs via support for regional counternarcotics offices and the construction of border posts. Religious non-governmental institutions such as the Iranian Red Crescent Society and the Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation have also provided financial assistance, while groups such as the IRGC and religious endowments (*bonyad*) have pursued their own agendas.⁴⁸ For more than a decade, the Iranian Government has implemented soft power activities in Afghanistan, such as supporting Shia religious and cultural groups, media outlets, education and health care projects in order to realize its long-term ambitions.

Since US President George W. Bush's 2002 'Axis of Evil' reference, Iran has clearly preferred to engage bilaterally with Afghanistan while also favouring trilateral arrangements (e.g. with Afghanistan and Pakistan or Afghanistan and Tajikistan). Iran has participated in regional and international conferences, from the 2001 Bonn Agreement to the 2013 Heart of Asia ministerial conference in Almaty, Kazakhstan.⁴⁹ It has also taken part in UN conferences on Afghanistan and is a main supporter of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), whose headquarters are in Tehran.⁵⁰ It is involved in the Istanbul Process, an inter-governmental forum launched in 2011 by the governments of Afghanistan and Turkey to foster cooperation and political dialogue between countries in the Heart of Asia region. Member countries have agreed to the implementation of a set of confidence-building measures; in 2012 Iran agreed to become the lead state

⁴⁶ 'Ahmadinejad welcomes expansion of Iran-Afghanistan cultural cooperation', Farsnews, 1 Jan. 2013, <<http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9107132103>>; and Iranian officials, Personal communications with author, 2010–11.

⁴⁷ On Herat as a model of Iranian soft power in Afghanistan see Toscano, R., *Iran's Role in Afghanistan* (Barcelona Centre for International Affairs: Barcelona, Jan. 2012), pp. 7–8.

⁴⁸ Abbasi (note 42), p. 184; and Potzel, M., *Iran und der Westen: Chancen für gemeinsames Handeln in Afghanistan?* [Iran and the West: opportunities for joint engagement?], Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP) Studie no. 16 (SWP: Berlin, June 2010), p. 12.

⁴⁹ The Heart of Asia region includes Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, China, India, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, the United Arab Emirates and Uzbekistan. See also UN General Assembly and UN Security Council, 'The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security: Report of the Secretary-General', A/67/889–S/2013/350, 13 June 2013, p. 6, paras 23–24; UN Security Council Resolution 1383, 6 Dec. 2001; and Kazemi, R. S., 'Over-promising, under-delivering: the outcome of the Afghanistan Conference in Kazakhstan', *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 30 Apr. 2013, <<http://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/over-promising-under-delivering-the-outcome-of-the-afghanistan-conference-in-kazakhstan>>.

⁵⁰ The 10 members of the ECO are Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

in the implementation of measures on education. Iran has also been a member of the International Contact Group on Afghanistan and Pakistan since 2010, and as of late 2012 had begun to reach out to some Scandinavian and Central European think tanks and institutes on international relations.⁵¹

A series of trade agreements signed by Iran and Afghanistan have reaffirmed and encouraged bilateral trade and economic exchange. Iran's trade exports to Afghanistan increased from \$150 million in 2002 to \$2 billion at the end of 2012.⁵² While Afghanistan's exports to Iran also increased during this period (from \$500 000 to just over \$1.1 million), the trade ratio of almost 2000 :1 clearly reflects Iran's economic might relative to its eastern neighbour. Iranian-funded projects have sought to connect Iran's Gulf ports of Chabahar and Bandar Abbas by road and rail to Dogharun in Khorasan Razavi and Milak in Sistan Baluchistan on the border with Afghanistan. A yet-to-be-completed railway project would also link Khaf, South Khorosan, with Herat.

President Karzai, while acknowledging Iran's generous support, has allegedly also been critical of its reconstruction efforts, especially in Herat, reportedly stating that Iran 'was trying to sabotage Afghanistan's development to prevent it from becoming an important regional transit hub, and to protect its natural gas exports to India and Pakistan from central Asian competition'.⁵³

Security and stability concerns

Iran's main concern during the Karzai administration has been the presence in Afghanistan of foreign military bases and troops, especially US and British forces. The initial deployment from late 2001 to 2003 coincided with President Khatami's attempt at détente with the West. Thus, despite the fact that its long-term enemy was leading the military intervention, Iran welcomed the elimination of the Taliban and al-Qaeda, two regional radical Sunni entities it perceived as hostile to its national interests.

Iran's leadership, not wishing to see Afghanistan slide back into civil war as it had after the Soviet troop withdrawal in 1989, was initially tolerant of ISAF's presence in Kabul. The Iranian Government appreciated ISAF's value in providing necessary security for the nascent government and training for Afghan security forces, but hoped that it would remain short-term and that ISAF troops would depart once the Taliban and al-Qaeda were defeated. However, in October 2003, when ISAF's mandate was extended to cover all provinces, Iran began to perceive the foreign military troops near its borders as a threat to its security.⁵⁴ From mid-2007, concerned that the USA could use its new bases to stage military

⁵¹ Christensen, J. B., *Strained Alliances: Iran's Troubled Relations to Afghanistan and Pakistan*, Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS) Report no. 2011:03 (DIIS: Copenhagen, 2011), pp. 42-49; and Iranian officials, Personal communications with author, 2013.

⁵² Tehran Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines and Agriculture, [Summary trade exports (Iran to Afghanistan), 2002-12], <<http://www.tccim.ir/ImpExpStats.aspx>> (in Farsi).

⁵³ Boone, J., 'WikiLeaks: Afghan MPs and religious scholars "on Iran payroll"', *The Guardian*, 2 Dec. 2010.

⁵⁴ ISAF's mandate was extended to include all provinces by UN Security Council Resolution 1510, 13 Oct. 2003.

strikes, the Iranian Government began to repeatedly stress the need for Afghanistan to take the lead on all security matters and began to call for a timetable for ISAF's withdrawal.⁵⁵

Iran's opposition to a long-term Afghan–US strategic security agreement was a key policy directive under Ahmadinejad. Financial incentives were allegedly paid to Afghan parliamentarians, senior officials in the Afghan President's Office and Iranian-supported Afghan media outlets to persuade Karzai not to sign an agreement.⁵⁶ The Iranian Government believes that the Strategic Partnership Agreement, which was eventually signed in 2012, has the potential to provoke further violence in Afghanistan as well as more widely.⁵⁷ Iran has also demanded that the USA clarify the number of US troops that will remain in Afghanistan after ISAF's withdrawal in 2014, its long- and medium-term plans, and the practical implications of its 'temporary bases', including assurance that these will not pose a threat to Afghanistan's neighbours. Iranian officials have nevertheless conceded the need for professional security training in order to realize the 'Afghanization of Afghanistan' and to implicitly safeguard Iran's own security, while clearly preferring that this responsibility be shouldered by NATO members other than the United Kingdom or the USA.⁵⁸

Drawing on statistics of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the Iranian Government has consistently criticized the counternarcotic efforts of both the international community and the Afghan Government.⁵⁹ Opium cultivation in Afghanistan increased significantly between 2001 and 2009—from the low of 185 tonnes of opium that were produced under Taliban rule in 2000–2001, production surged to 6900 tonnes in 2009.⁶⁰ Iran has set an example of cooperation on this issue since 2007 by seriously engaging with Pakistan and Afghanistan in the Triangular Initiative, a project brokered by the UNODC.⁶¹

⁵⁵ Borger, J., 'Iran offers to help US rebuild Afghanistan', *The Guardian*, 31 Mar. 2009; Khazaei, M., Permanent Representative of Iran, 'On the situation in Afghanistan', Statement before the UN Security Council, 15 Oct. 2007, <<http://iran-un.org/en/2007/10/15/>>; and Khazaei, M., Permanent Representative of Iran, 'On the situation in Afghanistan', Statement before the UN Security Council, 9 July 2008, <<http://iran-un.org/en/2008/07/09/>>.

⁵⁶ Rosenberg, M., 'With bags of cash, C.I.A. seeks influence in Afghanistan', *New York Times*, 28 Apr. 2013.

⁵⁷ 'Iran opposes foreign military bases in Afghanistan', Press TV, 15 Nov. 2012, <<http://www.presstv.com/detail/2012/11/15/272346/iran-against-foreign-bases-in-afghanistan/>>; 'Kabul defense ties reviewed', *Iran Daily*, 14 Dec. 2011, <http://www.iran-daily.com/1390/9/23/MainPaper/4123/Page/2/MainPaper_4123_2.pdf>; 'The US wants to stay in Afghanistan', *Iranian Diplomacy*, 11 July 2012, <<http://www.irdiplomacy.ir/en/page/1904035/The+US+Wants+to+Stay+in+Afghanistan.html>>; Office of the Supreme Leader Sayyid Ali Khamenei, 'Supreme Leader meets Afghan President', 25 June 2011, <<http://www.leader.ir/langs/en/?p=contentShow&id=8232>>; and 'US military presence in Afghanistan destabilizes region: Iranian FM', *Tehran Times*, 15 June 2012, <<http://www.tehrantimes.com/politics/98750-irans-salehi-warns-about-us-military-bases-in-afghanistan>>.

⁵⁸ Borger (note 55); and Iranian officials, Communication with author, 2010.

⁵⁹ 'Tehran, Kabul sign anti-drug agreement', Press TV, 29 Dec. 2010, <<http://edition.presstv.ir/detail/157761.html>>.

⁶⁰ United Nations, *The Opium Economy in Afghanistan: An International Problem* (United Nations: New York, 2003), p. 6; and UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and Afghan Ministry of Counter Narcotics, 'Afghanistan Opium Survey 2009: summary findings', Sep. 2009, <http://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Afghanistan/Afghanistan_opium_survey_2009_summary.pdf>.

⁶¹ Koepke, B., 'Regional cooperation', ed. W. Danspeckgruber, *Working Toward Peace and Prosperity in Afghanistan* (Lynne Rienner: Boulder, CO, 2011), pp. 17–24.

Similarly, Iran has worked closely on refugee repatriation with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Afghan Government via tripartite agreements. More recently, it has cooperated with Afghanistan and Pakistan in the Afghan Solutions Strategy facilitated by the UNHCR to advance the voluntary repatriation and sustainable reintegration of Afghans.⁶² In this arena, too, Iran has remained critical of Afghanistan's efforts to provide adequate socio-economic conditions to attract and retain returnees.⁶³

Tensions over water rights have existed between Iran and Afghanistan since the early 1960s.⁶⁴ While Iran is currently not overtly vocal about this matter, the issue of equitable water rights along the Helmand River in Sistan Baluchistan and the Harirud River in Khorasan has political as well as regional security implications. A non-binding 1973 agreement applies only to the Harirud River, and provides that Afghanistan will supply Iran with an acceptable water discharge, but the construction of the Indian-funded Salma dam near Herat will have an impact on this already limited supply.⁶⁵

Possible reconciliation with the Taliban

Following their emergence in the mid-1990s, the Taliban's anti-Shia dogma was corroborated by their execution of Wahdat's leader Ali Mazari, their murder of Iranian diplomats in Mazar i Sharif and their atrocities against Shias in northern and central Afghanistan.⁶⁶ These views have been less overtly expressed since they re-emerged as a resilient insurgent group during the 2004 and 2005 Afghan presidential and parliamentary elections. Allegations that Iran harboured al-Qaeda and radical Sunni Islamists from late 2001 have prompted suspicions that there may have been direct negotiations between members of the Iranian Government and the Taliban.⁶⁷ It is also possible that Sunni Arab militants and their relatives who had sought refuge in Iran after the defeat of the Taliban were used as leverage to ensure immunity from attacks by the Taliban and other radical Sunni groups, and to secure the release of Iranian nationals kidnapped abroad by Sunni militants.

⁶² See UN High Commissioner for Refugees, International Conference on the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees, Geneva, 2-3 May 2012, <<http://www.unhcr.org/afghanistan/solutions-strategy.pdf>>.

⁶³ Koepke (note 3).

⁶⁴ Haji-Yousefi, A. M., 'Iran's foreign policy in Afghanistan: the current situation and future prospects', Paper presented at the Canadian Political Science Association Annual Conference, Waterloo, Ontario, 16-18 May 2011, <<http://www.cpsa-acsp.ca/papers-2011/Haji-Yousefi.pdf>>, p. 3.

⁶⁵ Houk, A., 'Transboundary water sharing: Iran and Afghanistan', Stimson Center, 22 Mar. 2011, <<http://www.stimson.org/spotlight/transboundary-water-sharing-iran-and-afghanistan/>>; Sinaei, V., 'Hydropolitics and human security: water cooperation in relations between Iran, Afghanistan and Turkmenistan', *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs*, vol. 2, no. 3 (2011), pp. 111-34; and Iranian officials, Personal communications with author, 2006-11.

⁶⁶ Maley (note 5), pp. 200-201.

⁶⁷ Documents found in Osama bin Laden's residence in Pakistan seem to support the thesis that he had considerable communication with contacts in Iran. 'Osama bin Laden documents show tension with Iran', *Huffington Post*, 5 Mar. 2012, <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/05/03/osama-bin-laden-documents_n_1474986.html>.

Until March 2009, the Iranian Government publicly reiterated that dialogue with the Taliban was unacceptable and that their refusal to compromise made any kind of reconciliation impossible. Karzai's appointment of former President Rabbani in October 2010 as the head of the 70-member High Peace Council (HPC)—which consists of jihadi leaders, former Taliban officials, religious scholars and civil society representatives with a mandate to promote peace and national unity through confidence building—may have helped to persuade some Iranian officials to support the concept of dialogue with the Taliban.⁶⁸ However, the rising insurgency also made the Iranian Government realize that durable peace in Afghanistan and, moreover, Iran's own domestic security could only be secured if all Afghan groups involved in the conflict found a way to share power through a political rather than military process.

In March 2011, in a clear departure from its foreign policy of the previous decade, the Iranian Government announced that it was supportive of the HPC and its dialogue with the Taliban, and even made an offer to host a mediation meeting between Afghan groups in Tehran.⁶⁹ At the same time, it stressed that reconciliation needed to be an intra-Afghan process incorporating all groups across the political spectrum, which clearly inferred the inclusion of the Iranian-supported non-Pashtun political opposition.

By September 2011 Iran had entered the busy arena of peace talks, inviting the HPC leadership—and, allegedly, two members of the Quetta Shura, the Taliban's Leadership Council—to the Islamic Awakening conference in Tehran. Tayyeb Agha, a former spokesman for Mullah Mohammed Omar (*amir ul-mo'menin*, the Taliban's spiritual leader) and his special envoy for peace negotiations, and Nik Mohammad, the former Taliban Deputy Minister of Commerce, appeared on the list of conference participants as members of the 'American Opposition Front'.⁷⁰ In early June 2013, the Taliban announced that two delegations had travelled from their offices in Doha, Qatar, to Tehran for talks with Iranian officials.⁷¹

Ahmadinejad's 'dual' strategy in Afghanistan

The period from 1997 to mid-2013, spanning the Khatami and Ahmadinejad presidencies, coincided with an intensification of the Iranian Government's geopolitical ambition to become a key regional player. During Khatami's rule, this

⁶⁸ High Peace Council, 'Peace message of late HPC Chairman Burhanuddin Rabbani', 1 May 2011, <<http://www.hpc.org.af/english/index.php/messages/35-general-peace-message-by-hpc-chairman-%20%20professor-burhanuddin-rabbani-;> and United Nations, Security Council and General Assembly, 'The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security', Report of the Secretary-General, A/65/612-S/2010/630, 10 Dec. 2010.

⁶⁹ 'Iran ready to host Afghan Peace Council', Press TV, 18 Mar. 2011, <<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/170521.html>>.

⁷⁰ Londoño, E., 'Iran's hosting of Taliban reflects desire for greater role', *Washington Post*, 29 Sep. 2011. Approximately 20 Shia and Sunni Afghans attended the conference, including prominent religious scholars, parliamentarians, and leaders and envoys of political parties who were well known to Iranian officials since the mujahideen period.

⁷¹ 'Towde Khabare: Taliban officials visit Iran', TOLONews, 3 June 2013, <<http://www.tolonews.com/en/towde-khabare/10722-towde-khabare-taliban-officials-visit-iran>>; and Khan, T., 'Neighbourhood watch: Taliban defy Afghan govt, successfully conclude Iran visit', *Express Tribune* (Karachi), 7 June 2013.

meant that Iran was prepared to extend intelligence and logistical support to the USA in order to assist the defeat of the Taliban regime in the hope that this cooperation would lead to ‘comprehensive talks on other regional and strategic issues between the two sides’.⁷² Iran perceived its engagement in Afghanistan as an ‘opportunity towards increasing its regional role geared to promoting national interests’.⁷³

The Iranian Government’s endorsement of the peace process since 2010, which has led to the visits of up to three Taliban delegations to Tehran (in March 2011 and June 2013), seems to demonstrate that Iran has an ambition to be a principal player in any peace settlement and to be acknowledged as having the capacity to advance such a challenging process. Coincidentally, Iran’s new policy on reconciliation emerged as ISAF reported fresh seizures of Iranian weapons en route to insurgents in Afghanistan, about which the UK and the USA have been making allegations since 2007.⁷⁴ In 2009 General David Petraeus, NATO commander in Afghanistan, accused the Iranian Government of demonstrating ‘a willingness to provide some degree of assistance to make the life of those who are trying to help the Afghan people difficult’.⁷⁵

The signing of a joint declaration on a long-term security partnership between the governments of Afghanistan and the USA in May 2005, alluding to the USA’s intention to remain in Afghanistan in the long term and potentially maintain military bases near Iran’s border for an unspecified period, would certainly have raised security concerns in the Iranian Government.⁷⁶ This declaration may have reinforced some Iranian hardliners’ perception of the need for an additional subsidiary strategy aimed at undermining to some degree the efforts of the USA and its allies in Afghanistan. Albeit a minor policy, this second, duplicitous strategy was realized by providing some military support to selected insurgents that ‘drains [US] resources and constrains future military options’ against Iran.⁷⁷ Clearly, the Iranian Government would oppose the reinstallation of Taliban rule; the primary focus of this strategy therefore has been to create ‘a major headache in Afghanistan’ for the USA.⁷⁸ Concomitantly, Iran seems to have been relatively unconcerned about being caught out in its attempts to destabilize NATO—its clear message to the international community is that Iran could act as a spoiler if provoked.

⁷² Barzegar (note 36), pp. 91–92.

⁷³ Barzegar (note 36), p. 97.

⁷⁴ ‘Iran leader denies arms supplies’, BBC News, 14 Aug. 2007, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south-asia/6945323.stm>>.

⁷⁵ Meyer, H., ‘Iran is helping Taliban in Afghanistan, Petraeus says’, Bloomberg, 14 Feb. 2009.

⁷⁶ White House, ‘Joint Declaration of the United States-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership’, 23 May 2005, <<http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2005/05/20050523-2.html>>; and Synovitz, R., ‘Afghanistan/U.S.: “Strategic Partnership” seen as move toward de facto rights for U.S. bases’, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 25 May 2005.

⁷⁷ Rubin, M., ‘Understanding Iranian Strategy in Afghanistan’, Presentation to the Royal Danish Defence College and RAND, Copenhagen, 14 June 2007, <http://americanforeignpolicy.org/library/documents/Rubin_Understanding_Iranian_Strategy_in_Afghanistan.pdf>.

⁷⁸ Milani, M., ‘Iran’s alleged ties to the Taliban’, PBS Frontline, tehranbureau, 10 Aug. 2011, <<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2011/08/irans-alleged-ties-to-the-taliban.html>>.

In private conversations with US officials, senior Afghan officials have alleged that Iran, like Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, is 'supporting its "preferred" Taliban groups', and that the Iranian Government's main interest in relations with the Taliban 'is to counter Western influence'.⁷⁹ It seems that Iran 'routinely encourages [the Afghan] parliament to support anti-coalition policies and to raise anti-American talking points during debates'.⁸⁰ The Iranian Government also privately acknowledges its support for certain Afghan political parties.⁸¹ In conversations with senior US officials, President Karzai has apparently stated that 'Iranian meddling is getting increasingly lethal' but in public he continues to downplay the likelihood of Iranian arms shipments to insurgents.⁸² Nevertheless, the detection of Iranian arms shipments to some elements of the insurgency—whether reflective of an officially sanctioned directive or the activities of rogue elements in some way affiliated with the Iranian Government—indicates the centrality of US relations to Iran's Afghanistan policy.

Iran continues to aspire to become an important player in the wider Central Asia region, as well as in the Middle East. However, under President Ahmadinejad Iran pursued a 'look east' policy, reflecting its increasing isolation consequent to sanctions, and manifested in its stronger economic relations with China, its interest in becoming a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and its preference for resolving regional conflicts within this framework rather than via a security mechanism involving the USA.

Since 2002 Iran's overarching public policy on Afghanistan has been to support the Karzai administration, respect Afghanistan's sovereignty, develop cordial neighbourly relations and encourage bilateral economic progress. Since 2007 Iran has repeatedly called for a timetable for the withdrawal of NATO troops and since 2009 has stressed the need for the implementation of an 'Afghanization' policy—that is, Afghanistan's management of its domestic affairs without explicit support from foreigners.⁸³ With the transfer of security responsibilities to the Afghan security forces scheduled to be completed by the end of 2014, it would seem that these two demands will soon be largely met.

⁷⁹ 'US embassy cables: Karzai insider on how US could "open the door" to Iran', *The Guardian*, 2 Dec. 2010; and Boone (note 53).

⁸⁰ 'US embassy cables: Iranian influence at Afghanistan Parliament', *The Guardian*, 2 Dec. 2010.

⁸¹ Boone (note 53).

⁸² 'US embassy cables: Iran "busy" trying to undermine the US in Afghanistan', *The Guardian*, 2 Oct. 2010.

⁸³ Borger (note 55).

4. Iran's post-2014 engagement in Afghanistan

Iran's newly elected president, Hassan Rouhani, who took office on 4 August 2013, and the new Afghan president to be elected in April 2014 will both be in office when Afghanistan's transition concludes in 2014 and the 2015–24 'transformation decade' commences.⁸⁴ Like many observers and Afghan officials, Iranian policymakers and experts believe that a renewed outbreak of armed conflict is a real possibility at the end of the transition period in December 2014.⁸⁵ The current insurgency by armed opposition groups in Afghanistan will inevitably also extend beyond 2014, particularly since peace talks with the Taliban are still at an elementary stage. In the best-case scenario, the Afghan Government will continue to assert itself as a sovereign state, handle the majority of its security responsibilities and remain on the path to democratization. In the worst-case scenario, a renewed outbreak of widespread, concurrent armed conflicts and the interference of neighbours such as Pakistan and Iran via their proxies may see Afghanistan once again struggling as a failed state, immobilized by divisions between powerful groups and a resurgence of militias. The drawdown of ISAF troops is also likely to be accompanied by progressive financial disengagement, with Western governments reluctant to allocate funds for development projects if the Afghan national security forces (ANSF) are unable to provide sufficient security.

Presidential elections in Iran and Afghanistan

Rouhani, a middle-ranking cleric, was elected as Iran's seventh president on 14 June 2013. He has held a number of important security, defence and diplomatic portfolios over the past 30 years, including secretary of the SNSC (1989–2005). There is no doubt that he is a trusted, long-standing and important member of Iran's political elite.⁸⁶ Bridging the gap between reformists (*islahtalaban*), traditional conservatives and principalists (*usulgarayan*)—conservative, hard-line Islamists who became mainstream with the election of Ahmadinejad in 2005—Rouhani represents a moderate compromise with the potential to ameliorate domestic tensions and rifts between ruling political factions, and to move Iran towards a gradual stabilization of its political system and its foundation of *velayat-e faqih*.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ International Afghanistan Conference in Bonn, 'Afghanistan and the international community: from transition to the transformation decade', Conference conclusions, 5 Dec. 2011, <http://www.auswaertigesamt.de/EN/Aussenpolitik/RegionaleSchwerpunkte/AfghanistanZentralasien/Bonn_Konferenz_2011/Ergebnisse/uebersicht_node.html>.

⁸⁵ Georgy, M. and Shalizi, H., 'Afghanistan says ready to work for peace without Pakistan help', Reuters, 27 Mar. 2013.

⁸⁶ For biographical information see Center for Strategic Research, <<http://www.csr.ir/departments.aspx?lng=en&abtid=09&&depid=106&&semid=283>>.

⁸⁷ 'The decline of Iran's hard-liners', Al-Monitor, 24 June 2013, <<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/06/iran-hard-liners-decline.html>>.

Supporting the 'growing role [of] religion and religious convictions ... in international relations, including at the regional level', Rouhani has had a long-standing interest in policies of moderation and economic development.⁸⁸ At the same time, he is known for his ability to negotiate and compromise: in November 2004, when he was the country's chief nuclear negotiator, Iran suspended its controversial uranium enrichment activities to build confidence about the peaceful nature of its nuclear programme, while negotiations proceeded on a mutually acceptable long-term arrangement.⁸⁹

Despite his well-established relationship with Ayatollah Khamenei, Rouhani's success will depend on his ability to work with Iran's ubiquitous security departments, including the IRGC, whose leaders are appointed by the Supreme Leader, and with the Majlis (parliament), which is controlled by principalists. His multi-factional cabinet is comprised of competent technocrats who are moderate members from the reformist, traditional conservative and principalist groups.⁹⁰

The coming months will provide clearer indications as to how Rouhani will move ahead. At best, Iran under Rouhani will more transparently cooperate with the Afghan Government, steering away from the Ahmadinejad-era dual strategy to engage more constructively with the international community. The signing of a strategic cooperation agreement with Afghanistan on security, intelligence and economic matters on Rouhani's first day in office indicates that the Iranian Government has a strong desire to improve relations with its eastern neighbour and is eager to initiate security measures that could balance the USA's influence in Afghanistan after 2014.⁹¹ This agreement includes cooperation in military training and measures to counter insurgency and organized crime, assistance with military operations, intelligence sharing on counter-insurgency matters, the expansion of trade and commerce, and the facilitation of tourism. It also states that the national security offices of both signatories will engage via trilateral mechanisms with the national security offices of India and Russia.⁹²

⁸⁸ Rouhani, H., 'Religion and international relations: some general reflections, with particular emphasis on the experience of the Islamic Republic', *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2010), p. 35; Mousavian, S. H., 'The rise of the Iranian moderates', *Al-Monitor*, 5 July 2013, <<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/07/rise-iranian-moderates.html>>.

⁸⁹ Kerr, P., 'Iran agrees to temporarily suspend uranium-enrichment program', *Arms Control Today*, vol. 34, no. 10 (Dec. 2004).

⁹⁰ On 14 Aug. 2013 the Majlis approved 15 of the 18 ministerial nominees submitted by President Rouhani. Only the nominations for the posts of Education, Science and Research and Technology, and Sports and Youth were rejected. Iranian Presidency, 'President Rouhani unveils proposed Cabinet list', 4 Aug. 2013, <<http://www.president.ir/en/70157>>; and 'Iranian parliament gives vote of confidence to majority of Rouhani's proposed ministers', *Farsnews*, 15 Aug. 2013, <<http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13920524000980>>.

⁹¹ 'The strategic agreement between Afghanistan and Iran, and its details' (in Dari), *Ufuq Magazine*, 6 Aug. 2013, <<http://www.ufuqmagazine.org/dari/15096>>; and Ruttig, T., 'Can Kabul carry two melons in one hand? Afghanistan and Iran sign strategic cooperation document', *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 6 Aug. 2013, <<http://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/can-kabul-carry-two-melons-in-one-hand-afghanistan-and-iran-sign-strategic-cooperation-document>>.

⁹² Arash, A., 'Afghan-Iran strategic agreement will damage relations with the west: political parties', *TOLONews*, 7 Aug. 2013, <<http://www.tolonews.com/en/afghanistan/11485-afghan-iran-strategic-agreement-to-hamper-relation-with-western-allies-political-parties>>.

The strategic cooperation agreement is significant insofar as Afghanistan has now agreed to cooperate with Iran as well as with the USA and other ISAF members on several security matters, including the conduct of joint military exercises.⁹³ This signals to the USA that the Iranian Government wants to be recognized as a major regional actor in Afghanistan after 2014 and is prepared to help with the training of the ANSF after transition, albeit perhaps symbolically as it well understands that the bulk of training will require support from Western countries. The agreement to cooperate on security matters with India and Russia but not with Pakistan indicates the signatories' perception of Pakistan as a threat to regional security.

Looking ahead to the Afghan presidential elections in April 2014, any joint candidate proposed by the National Front and National Coalition, with which Iran has well-established relations, has a good chance of posing a serious challenge to President Karzai's preferred candidate. Nevertheless, to guarantee stability, Iran may advise opposition groups to field a compromise Pashtun candidate, ideally a moderate Islamist with a mujahideen background. In the event that a less preferred candidate is elected as president, the Iranian Government will still be able to draw on a large number of Afghan allies in prominent political positions.

Iran's post-transition strategy in Afghanistan

Iran's post-transition strategy will continue to be driven by its relations with the USA and will be influenced by five factors: (a) the likelihood of the USA's maintenance of a significantly reduced but nevertheless sizeable troop presence in Afghanistan; (b) an active insurgency continuing to threaten the fledging Afghan democracy and generating instability near the Iranian border; (c) the possible reintegration of the Taliban into Afghanistan's political framework through peace talks; (d) the flourishing drug industry; and (e) the continuation of Iran's civilian nuclear programme and the likelihood of ongoing sanctions.

Relations between Iran and the United States

Neither the USA nor Iran wants to see a recurrence of civil war—both prefer the emergence of a security landscape that promotes state building in Afghanistan's nascent democracy. Nevertheless, Iran's policy on Afghanistan will continue to be driven by its relations with the USA. The as-yet-undecided future international military presence in Afghanistan, along with the possibility that reconciliation could culminate in the Taliban's return in some political form, could confront Iran with a scenario in which two of its main enemies play a strong role in Afghanistan after 2014. The presence of US bases, no matter how small, will remain a point of contention, and Iran will continue to demand exact details of military installations.

⁹³ See Ruttig (note 91).

Hence, Iran will continue to view any US efforts with suspicion and will advocate for the complete withdrawal of foreign troops and the closure of any US military bases, while tacitly acknowledging that the ongoing training and development of the ANSF into an effective force will be necessary to effectively oppose armed insurgents and stabilize the country. At the same time, any continuing US presence in Afghanistan could provide more hard-line Iranian officials with an opportunity to maintain a dual strategy aimed at bogging down US forces. Likewise, if Iran were to be attacked militarily, it could retaliate relatively easily by targeting US bases across its eastern border.⁹⁴ The new Afghan–Iranian strategic cooperation agreement hints that the Iranian Government would prefer the post-2014 ANSF security training to be performed by security experts from the immediate region, possibly including Iran but not from countries with which it has animosities such as the UK and the USA.

Future cooperation between Iran and the USA may draw on old relationships. It is plausible that Rouhani, in his previous capacity as National Security Advisor and secretary of the SNSC under Khatami, was well aware and supportive of Iran's more open Afghanistan policy. In the wake of September 2001, Javad Zarif, Iran's new foreign minister, is believed to have provided US troops in Afghanistan with Iranian intelligence.⁹⁵ The appointment in May 2013 of James Dobbins, who like Zarif was a key participant at the 2001 Bonn Conference, as US Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan is also timely and will help to foster bilateral Iranian–US talks on Afghanistan. Mohammad Ebrahim Taherian, Iran's former ambassador to Afghanistan and Pakistan, seems to perceive Dobbins' appointment as a positive signal, describing him as someone who 'has lots of experience with regard to . . . Afghanistan and Pakistan . . . and has been able to manage issues well'.⁹⁶

Yet, with existing conservative political coalitions in the Iranian leadership polarized and highly factionalized, it is not clear how much support Rouhani will achieve for a more cooperative approach to engagement with the USA. While the Supreme Leader stated in July 2013 that he was 'not optimistic about negotiation with the US' as he continues to consider them 'unreliable and dishonest', it is important to remember that he has previously condoned cooperation with the USA on Afghanistan and Iraq.⁹⁷

Insurgency, reconciliation and the future role of the Taliban

In general, Iran is likely to continue its support for a stable Afghan Government, given that any further deterioration in security increases the probability of the

⁹⁴ Abi-Habib, M., 'Iranians build up Afghan clout', *Wall Street Journal*, 26 Oct. 2012; and Dareini, A. A., 'Iran threatens attack on US bases in event of war with Israel', *Christian Science Monitor*, 24 Sep. 2012.

⁹⁵ Erdbrink, T., 'Once an outcast, Iranian Minister carries hope of easing tensions', *New York Times*, 26 Aug. 2013, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/27/world/middleeast/irans-pick-for-nuclear-talks-carries-hope-of-eased-tensions.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>>.

⁹⁶ Taherian, M. E., 'Who gave Islamabad the green light?', *Iranian Diplomacy*, 10 May 2013, <<http://www.irdiplomacy.ir/en/page/1915964/Who+Gave+Islamabad+the+Green+Light.html>>.

⁹⁷ 'Leader not optimistic about talks with US', *Press TV*, 21 July 2013, <<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/07/21/314933/leader-not-optimistic-about-us-talks/>>; and Erdbrink, T., 'President-elect stirs optimism in Iran and West', *New York Times*, 26 July 2013.

return of radicalized insurgents. Iran fears that such groups could potentially align themselves with Iranian-based terrorist groups, act against its national interests and exacerbate cross-border drugs trafficking.

Any future role for the Taliban in Afghan politics will remain a principal concern for the Iranian Government, which remains sceptical about the Taliban's ambitions and is worried that they will demand more political influence as ISAF withdraws. However, no clear consensus exists among Iranian policymakers: some officials view the contemporary Taliban as a different group from that of the late 1990s and as no longer affiliated with al-Qaeda, while others firmly believe that the 'ideological' Taliban are unwilling to compromise and that any form of reconciliation is futile.⁹⁸

Having had high-level contact with the Taliban since at least 1998, Iran will support its 'preferred' Taliban group to ensure it has some influence if they were to return to political power. The Iranian Government seems to now be significantly more confident in dealing with the Taliban, having established its own direct contacts with the Quetta Shura and apparently hosted several delegations of Taliban since 2011, possibly indicating its increasing desire to assume a mediating role.⁹⁹ Whether such contact would extend to the establishment of a Taliban office in Iran, as alleged in a 2012 media report, seems extremely doubtful and has been strongly denied by the Iranian MFA.¹⁰⁰

While the potential return of the ideologically hard-line, supposedly anti-Shia Taliban remains a critical concern, the Iranian Government is now somewhat more hopeful that direct engagement with the Taliban—especially those moderates who are less ideologically driven—without the involvement of Pakistan may allow the Afghan Government to realize some kind of rapprochement, although this is unlikely before the end of the transition period.

For this reason, Iran will insist on being actively included in any peace talks and will therefore keep supporting the activities of the HPC, lobbying for the inclusion of former United Front leaders on the basis that they fought and defeated the Taliban. Having tried unsuccessfully to host a regional conference on Afghanistan since 2009, Iran may again initiate convening such a meeting and hold its own peace talks with Afghan groups if current discussions do not succeed, thereby ensuring that it increases its leverage after transition. However, if reconciliation efforts were to fail and in the event of the return to power of uncompromising Taliban or other radical Sunni militants, Iran is likely to again support the revival of the United Front as a military entity.

Iran as a donor, supporter of counternarcotic activities and host of refugees

Iran's aid for Afghanistan's reconstruction is unlikely to change in coming years and can be expected to remain at least initially at a similar level to the current

⁹⁸ Iranian officials, Discussions with author, 2010.

⁹⁹ Arian, A. W., 'Taliban delegation visits Iran', Tolonews, 3 June 2013, <<http://tolonews.com/en/afghanistan/10715-taliban-delegation-visits-iran>>.

¹⁰⁰ See Farmer, B., 'Taliban opens office in Iran', *Daily Telegraph*, 1 Aug. 2012; and 'The Taliban's carrot and stick policy', Iranian Diplomacy, 22 Aug. 2012, <<http://irdiplomacy.ir/en/page/1905780/The+Taliban's+Carrot+and+Stick+Policy.html>>.

budget. Economic relations with Afghanistan are likely to assume an even more important role after 2014, given the continued imposition of sanctions on Iran and the poor state of its domestic economy. Iran's current \$2 billion trade exchange with Afghanistan secures sought-after hard currency for the Iranian Government, while the imbalance of trade in Iran's favour provides it with leverage to signal its dissatisfaction about a particular issue or to demand political or economic concessions. Iran employed just this method in late 2010 when it prohibited the transit of fuel trucks through Iran into Afghanistan. Although the ban was largely directed at ISAF, which had allegedly procured the fuel for military purposes, probably through an Afghan contractor, the impact was mostly felt by the Afghan civilian population as it led to an immediate increase in the price of fuel.¹⁰¹

Having made significant financial and political investments in Afghanistan over the past three decades, Iran will seek to maintain if not increase its strategic influence via soft power projects, especially in its existing spheres of influence, not only with co-religionists but with communities that share cultural and linguistic affinities. In terms of support to Afghanistan's ongoing reconstruction, given the dire state of its own economy, it may be difficult for Iran to fund large-scale projects after 2014.

Afghanistan's escalating drug trade, which Iran alleges is interconnected with the insurgency and is smuggling drugs to Europe via Iran, will remain an important concern, not least because of the impact of the flood of cheap drugs into Iran. Iran will also continue to host a large population of Afghans, a vulnerable group whose repatriation may be accelerated if Iran's economy is further weakened by sanctions. Similarly, Iran will support security mechanisms in Afghanistan and the region to minimize the likelihood of any new population movements that may arise from an escalation in insecurity.

The impact of Iran's nuclear programme on its foreign policy

Under Rouhani, Iran will almost certainly proceed with its nuclear programme and consequently be prepared to endure the persistence of sanctions. However, it is also now more likely to acknowledge international concerns about its nuclear programme and address measures of confidence and transparency in exchange for an easing of sanctions and recognition of its right to pursue the peaceful development of nuclear energy.

The nuclear programme will undoubtedly remain the Iranian Government's top priority with an impact on all political issues, including its policy on Afghanistan after 2014. Negotiations to lift or reduce some sanctions may be a meaningful opening for Iran's further constructive engagement in Afghanistan and for its more substantial cooperation to support the establishment of a viable security mechanism in the region. Likewise, any recognition of its contributions thus far may encourage Iran to continue its positive engagement after the

¹⁰¹ Lutz, M., 'Afghanistan, Iran: Pressure mounts in row over fuel shipments', *Los Angeles Times*, 12 Jan. 2011, <<http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/babylonbeyond/2011/01/iran-afghanistan-fuel-politics-fallout-.html>>.

transition and perhaps even tacitly, albeit not publicly, support a prolonged but clearly defined foreign security presence in Afghanistan.

Alternatively, if Iran were to come under even stronger sanctions, then it would not be surprising to see hardliners favouring an intensification of Iran's capacity to act as a spoiler in Afghanistan via its network of well-established proxies that cross ethnic, sectarian and political lines. Similarly, if the international community is non-transparent about its own continuing activities in Afghanistan, Iran may decide to support Afghanistan's peace process and reconstruction efforts no more than superficially while simultaneously pursuing a more subversive and disruptive strategy.

Strengthening regional cooperation

President Rouhani will certainly have to deal with a range of serious security concerns in the broader region: in Afghanistan, the fragile security system; in Syria, a civil war between Sunni Islamist opposition groups and the Iranian-backed regime of President Bashar al-Assad; in Iraq, the outbreak of renewed sectarian violence; in Egypt, growing civil unrest, with the army's dismissal of democratically elected Islamist President Mohamed Morsy; in Bahrain, the suppression of Shia opposition groups by the Sunni government; and Iran's ongoing rivalry with Saudi Arabia.¹⁰²

The Iranian Government is expected to continue to support regional cooperation under the current framework of the Istanbul Process and the Heart of Asia meetings. It may use this nascent initiative to monitor the strategies of other countries in the region, many of which are also its competitors. Ideally, Iran would like to assume the lead in regional processes and certainly has the potential to do so given its expertise in the fields of education, disaster management, health and construction.

In one of his first public statements after his election victory, Rouhani emphasized that the expansion of 'ties with neighbouring countries and the strengthening of regional cooperation' will be a key foreign policy priority of his presidency.¹⁰³ Iran's long-standing, in-depth knowledge of Afghanistan could allow it to engage constructively on a regional security mechanism. It is also able to support regional initiatives addressing Afghanistan's security, economy and development. While it remains to be seen whether President Rouhani will be willing to involve countries beyond the region, hard-line elements in Iran's political system will undoubtedly want to limit their engagement.

Sectarian issues

The potential rise of a new type of conflict in Afghanistan, dominated not by ethnic tensions but by sectarian issues, is a major concern for Iran. A number of

¹⁰² On the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia see Tadjbakhsh, S., *The Persian Gulf and Afghanistan: Iran and Saudi Arabia's Rivalry Projected*, Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) Paper (PRIO: Oslo, Mar. 2013).

¹⁰³ 'President-elect Rohani says Iran to expand neighborly relations', Press TV, 2 July 2013, <<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/07/02/311833/iran-to-expand-neighborly-ties-rohani/>>.

incidents have been reflective of this trend. In December 2011, for the first time, suicide attackers targeted Shia celebrations of Ashura in Kabul and Mazar i Sharif. The public commemoration of the anniversary of Ayatollah Khomeini's death likewise saw clashes between Sunni and Shia religious groups at universities in 2012.¹⁰⁴ Radical Sunni nationalist groups seem to have been provoked by the construction of large Shia mosques in Kabul and Saripul as well as the Afghan Shia's assertion of power via their increasingly visible rituals.¹⁰⁵ These attacks, which appear to represent local Sunni opposition to the public expansion of Shiism, have not been directed from Pakistan nor associated with the Taliban or Haqqani network. It is possible that Iran's growing economic and cultural influence over Shia activities in Afghanistan may have contributed to this unrest.¹⁰⁶

These emerging sectarian tensions co-exist with growing competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran for regional dominance as well as about the type of religious education deemed suitable for Afghans. The 2006 opening of Afghanistan's largest Shia mosque, which houses the Khatam-al Nabyeen Islamic University, in Kabul at a cost of \$17 million and financed by Ayatollah Asif Mohseni, Afghanistan's most senior Shia cleric—a follower of Ayatollah Khu'i's ideology and leader of Harakat—seems to have contributed to the announcement of the construction of a new Saudi-funded mosque at a cost of \$100 million.¹⁰⁷ This proposed building will be the largest Sunni mosque in Afghanistan and is expected to be heavily influenced by Wahhabism. In the light of sectarian strife in Bahrain, Iraq, Pakistan, Syria and Yemen, the Iranian Government would doubtless have no desire to see any escalation in sectarian tensions in Afghanistan and would prefer to maintain the status quo.

¹⁰⁴ Daiyar, A., 'The growth of neo-radicalism: neo-Salafism and sectarianism', Afghanistan Analysts Network, 25 Jan. 2013, <<http://www.aan-afghanistan.org/print.asp?id=3224>>; and Abi-Habib (note 94).

¹⁰⁵ Former Afghan official, Personal communication with author, Dec. 2012; and Semple, M., 'The rise of the Hazaras and the challenge of pluralism in Afghanistan 1978-2011', Carr Center for Human Rights Policy, ICIS Workshop Policy Papers, 27–29 Oct. 2011, <<http://cmes.hmdc.harvard.edu/files/semplepolicysummary.pdf>>.

¹⁰⁶ Daiyar (note 104).

¹⁰⁷ 'Saudi Arabia to construct major Islamic center in Afghanistan', Press TV, 29 Oct. 2012, <<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/10/29/269396/saudis-to-build-islamic-center-in-kabul/>>.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

Looking back at Iran's Afghanistan policy over the past 34 years, it is clear that the Iranian Government has at times been quite visionary. With the inauguration as president of Hassan Rouhani there is no doubt that Khomeinist ideology, an early driver of Iran's policy in Afghanistan, will remain central to Iran's current strategy of pragmatic support for a democratic and multi-ethnic Afghanistan founded on moderate Islamic values. In view of Iran's political isolation, Afghanistan may even provide the Rouhani regime with a political springboard to engage with the international community on converging interests.

From mid-1995, Iran's strategy began to develop in a direction that in many ways still remains valid. In its goal to be included in international and regional efforts to avoid renewed civil war in Afghanistan, the Iranian Government opted for moderation and cooperation. It effectively engaged with the international community to defeat the Taliban, to the extent of reaching out to the USA in late 2001. It has consistently called for a political solution to Afghanistan's protracted conflict, advocated that Afghanistan remains a single political entity, and promoted intra-Afghan talks as well as the withdrawal of foreign troops, believing that the Afghan Government should be given the opportunity to rule its own country. Concerned about the growing Pashtun insurgency and its potential impact on Iran's national security, drug trafficking and population movements, the Iranian Government also understood that the inclusion in the Afghan Government of Islamist Sunni Pashtuns was necessary to achieve durable peace in Afghanistan.

Iran's ambitions in Afghanistan seem thus far to be realistic and modest. It does not envisage a Shia-dominated Afghanistan but a country where moderate Shia and Sunni Islamists, ideally with United Front credentials, share power with moderate Islamic technocrats. Iran currently favours a moderate Sunni Pashtun leader for Pashtun-dominated Afghanistan but will continue to support Afghan leaders and communities with whom it has cultural, religious and linguistic affinity. The Iranian Government's strategy has simultaneously and predominantly incorporated overt support for the political and economic reconstruction of Afghanistan and diplomacy through bilateral and multilateral forums linked to its other regional and international policies. Iran understands that if Afghanistan were to be ruled solely by Islamists, it could easily become dominated by radicalized Sunnis. It therefore favours an environment in Afghanistan that is open to economic development and cultural diversity, as in Herat with which Iran has particular affinity. The worst scenario for Iran would be the domination of Afghanistan's political system by the Taliban, with the subsequent marginalization of non-Pashtun communities.

At times, however, Iran has also used other, more duplicitous methods aimed at rattling the USA and its allies in Afghanistan in order to ensure its regional aspirations, balance the influence of the USA in Afghanistan, address perceived threats to its national security or guarantee that it is not sidelined from important

political, security and economical considerations. While Iran is expected to pursue its overriding constructive strategy, some elements in the Iranian Government nevertheless could be reluctant to relinquish their dual strategy. At the very least, therefore, Iran's current Afghanistan strategy can be expected to continue. Based on his background and connections, Rouhani seems to be in a stronger position than Ahmadinejad to engage more constructively on Afghanistan. He has experience in successful dialogue and is in a position to reinvigorate diplomatic relations and to build confidence with the international community. His apparent support for engagement with the USA and the West may create a meaningful opening for Iran to more substantially cooperate on the establishment of a viable security mechanism in the region.

Recommendations

Given the convergence of their interests in a stable and secure Afghanistan, the Iranian and US governments have the opportunity for cooperation during the forthcoming transformation period. Engagement with Iran on Afghanistan is perhaps more important now than it was in 2001 as Iran has since successfully consolidated its strategic depth and secured considerable political, economic and social influence in a significant portion of Afghanistan. It no longer requires the assistance of the USA to strengthen its position in Afghanistan nor for that matter within the region as a whole.

The USA's preoccupation with involving Pakistan in Afghanistan's long-term security is short-sighted. The US needs to broaden its strategy to acknowledge that sustainable peace can only be realized via a security mechanism involving all Afghanistan's neighbours, including Iran. Greater transparency about its post-2014 military plans and reassurance that the small contingent of foreign soldiers remaining in Afghanistan will not pose a threat to Iran's national security would be constructive confidence-building measures that the USA could undertake.

Iran's cooperation on a number of pivotal political, security and economic issues is a real possibility. For example, Iran as an Islamic republic could play a key role in supporting the Afghan Government's reconciliation efforts with insurgents, working towards a regional security mechanism to support the stabilization of Afghanistan and other countries in the region experiencing conflict, and strengthening Afghanistan's transport corridor, thereby allowing the expansion of trade with Central Asia, China, Iran and South Asia.

Dialogue with Iran on how Afghanistan can be realistically stabilized has the potential to have a far-reaching impact on other issues of concern to the international community, including Iran's nuclear programme. Concerted incentives, however, are required to secure Iran's constructive interest—for example, public recognition of its positive contributions thus far, acknowledgment of the critical role that it could play in stabilizing Afghanistan, and some compromise such as the softening of some sanctions. An exploration of the option of using Iran's Chabahar port to transport military equipment out of Afghanistan more economically could also help advance diplomatic relations.

The Iranian Government, in turn, could demonstrate that, as a regional power, it is able to act responsibly and constructively in congruence with the interests of Afghanistan as a sovereign state. Its willingness to provide technical and expert support to Afghanistan after 2014 (in areas such as mediation, border management, education, drug control, construction and industrialization) and assurances that it has no vested interest in being disruptive may in due course facilitate genuine opportunities to become more engaged in dialogue on international issues—including the conflicts and upheavals in Bahrain, Egypt, Palestine and Syria—about which it has particular pressing security concerns.

Previously, President Rouhani noted that Iran, as a regional power, has shown an ability to assist with the resolution of conflicts in wider Central Asia, the Caucasus and the Middle East, especially in countries with which Iran has religious and cultural affinities. Given its breadth of experience in Afghanistan and long support for peace talks, Iran could actually play a central role in mediation and help to resolve Afghanistan's protracted armed conflict.

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