ISAS Working Paper

No. 152 – 12 July 2012

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# Iran's diplomacy towards Afghanistan: A stabilising factor ?

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**Abstract**

*Iran is often seen only as a 'rogue state' by the United States (US) and its Western allies. But the idea that one of the oldest civilisations is now ruled by 'mullahs' with no rational vision of international affairs is rather simplistic. The fact is that, even if some in the Iranian political elite can be seen as 'hawks' or leaders of a nationalist 'neoconservative' movement, Tehran is rather pragmatic in international affairs. Of course, the Islamic Republic can be protectively aggressive if it is provoked or feels threatened, but its first goal is to protect itself as a regime and as a nation. The best example of this can be seen when one takes a close look at the Afghanistan-Iran relationship. What can be seen in the recent past as well as in the post-9/11 period is that the Iranian thinking towards its neighbour is dictated by a sense of realism. In that perspective, Iran can be a force for stability in Afghanistan immediately after 2014… if old wounds and Washington's tensions with Tehran do not come in the way.*

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## Introduction

Iran has reasonable credentials for being treated as a regional power. It has the necessary demography (population, 77.8 million), a pivotal geographic location (between the West Asia, Central Asia and South Asia), and a strong and ancient identity that makes an impact on Iran's environment more than likely.[2] This can only feed a sense of nationalistic pride in the country. But does pride mean an 'aggressive' or 'destructive' foreign policy? Its immediate regional environment could entice Iran to be assertive. Its neighbours can mostly be considered weaker at several levels.[3] And there is this point of view, especially in the West, that the Iranian regime is always guided by an ideological approach. Such a view, especially by American thinkers and policy-makers, would portray Iran as an 'aggressive' West Asian nation. This is what former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger expressed during a lunch organised by the *Financial Times*: Iran has to choose 'whether it is a nation or a cause'.[4] But Tehran is not necessarily tempted to act like the purveyor of a 'cause' overseas: certainly, not the way Iran was perceived in the West immediately after 1979. Admittedly, internally, the Iranian regime has certain ideological claims, as it defines itself as an 'Islamic Republic'. And indeed, this regime has had external ambitions. Ayatollah Khomeini's programme in diplomacy was called *Mashru al-Thawra al-Iraniyah*, the 'Project of the Iranian Revolution'.

In religious terms, the project was very ambitious: to make of Iran the centre of the Muslim World and to make the leader of the Iranian Revolution 'Commander of the Faithful'. But, when one does not get impressed by such religious language and focuses on the concrete consequences of the project, it looks like a very realist foreign policy of any ambitious power. The goal of this policy has been, first and foremost, to cultivate groups that would help project Iranian influence wherever it is in Tehran's interest.[5] Besides, after the Iraq-Iran war (1980-1988) and the death of Khomeini, Iran moved towards what has been called the 'second Republic'. From that time, the Iranians understood their political and military limits, and focused on protecting their interests rationally overseas. Tehran has continued to see Israel and the US as enemies or competitors in the Middle East, but stopped seeing terrorism as an efficient tool in foreign affairs and avoided antagonising its Arab neighbours.[6]

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2 Long-term history is part of everyday life for Iranians. In general discussions, references to great Persian/Iranian poets are not as rare as one might think. In some regard, one could argue that the pride of Iranians about their culture, history and their claim for influence in the regional environment is not dissimilar to American exceptionalism. See Michael Axworthy, *Iran, Empire of the Mind. A History from Zoroaster to the Present Day*, New York: Penguin, 2008, pp. xiii to xv.

3 On this subject, see Roland Dannreuther, 'Bridging the Gulf? Iran, Central Asia and the Persian Gulf', *The Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 2, Number 4, Summer 2003, pp.32-33.

4 Stephen Graubard, 'Lunch with the FT: Henry Kissinger', *Financial Times*, 24 May 2008, http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/6d4b5fb8-285a-11dd-8f1e-000077b07658.html#axzz1vJc5QutM. Accessed on 15 May 2012.

5 Hala Jaber, *Hezbollah. Born with a vengeance*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1997, p.109.

6 Robert BAER, *Iran : l'Irrésistible Ascension*, Paris : JC Lattès, 2008, pp.126-127. (French translation of the book *The Devil We Know: Dealing with the New Iran Superpower*).



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In fact, what has best defined the Iranian foreign policy, at least since the end of the 1980s, is the word *maslehat*, which in Farsi (Persian) means expediency. Pragmatism makes everything possible in Iranian diplomacy, as long as it is convenient for the regime and suited to the Iranian national interest, from the point of view of prominent specialists of the Islamic Republic.[7] And this word is what defines most accurately the Iranian relationship with Afghanistan, as this paper will show. Contrary to what some think, the Iranian regime is not eager to commit collective suicide by pursuing an imprudent foreign policy towards its neighbour. It is highly realistic, and focuses first on the interests of the Iranian nation. Does it mean that Iran could be a force for stability for its neighbour? In order to give a credible answer to such a question, one needs to focus on two aspects: first, on what the Afghan problems prior to 9/11 meant (and often still mean) for Iran, and how the latter reacted when it got a real chance to help fix its 'failed' neighbour; second, on Iranian foreign policy towards Afghanistan today, through the knowledge one can have, thanks to open/verified sources (above all), as much as possible.[8]

**What a Chaotic Afghanistan Meant for Iran before the 2001 American Campaign: (1): Drugs and Refugees**

The best way to understand what instability in Afghanistan means for Iran is to think about the pre-9/11 period, more precisely the 1990s. At that point in time, Afghanistan became more important than it used to be for Iranian diplomacy. It was a consequence of the Iran-Iraq war: the eastern part of Iran developed itself economically and demographically, as it was away from the frontlines. The northeast became strategically important, upgrading at the same time Iran's interest in post-Soviet Central Asia and Afghanistan.[9] But immediately after the Iran-Iraq war, Afghanistan became a source of constant problems for Iran. Its troubled neighbour has begun to be a source of many issues for the Iranians – from social, political and economic points of view from the 1990s. And most of those pre-9/11 problems are pretty much alive, with a sense of urgency that makes Iran a proponent of authentic stability in Afghanistan.

First, Afghanistan, immediately after the end of the Cold War (forgotten by the US and the rest of the world), became an important source of drugs. It has had dramatic consequences for Iran to this day. At the end of 2009, around one million Iranians were addicts. And the

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7 Such an approach is true even on difficult subjects like the relationship with Israel. See Mohsen M. Milani, 'Reflections on Iran's Policy towards Iraq' *in* Amin Tarzi (ed.), *The Iranian Puzzle. Understanding Iran in a Global Context*, Quantico: Marine Corps University Press, 2009, p.60.

8 Unfortunately, nowadays, scholarship associated with Iranian foreign policy is often based on guesswork and leaked sources that cannot be verified. In this paper priority is given to open sources and sources that can be verified or that have been proven by multiple other sources.

9 Erfan Efegil and Leonard Stone, 'Iran's interests in Central Asia: a contemporary assessment', *Central Asian Survey*, 2001, Vol.20, n.3, pp.353-354.



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Iranian police chief at the time,[10] Esmail Ahmadi-Moghaddam, explained during an interview that 130,000 more people were becoming addicts each year.[11] Because of this situation, the Islamic Republic of Iran has had to wage a real 'War on Drugs'. And the said 'war' should not be seen as a mere catch-phrase here: more than 3,700 security officers were killed during clashes with smugglers,[12] and walls were built at the Afghan-Iranian border as shootouts have been happening regularly in this area. The Iranians have spent at least US$600 million a year to deal with this threat. Ten per cent of its conscripts are mobilised to secure the border with this problematic neighbour.[13] Seen from a comfortable distance, the anti-drugs laws and actions of Tehran can look severe (death penalty for trade or possession of more than five kg of opium or 30g of heroin, for example).[14] But, with the numbers of addicts being so big, with the social and economic consequences of trafficking being real, and with the source of the problem (Afghanistan) being so close, Tehran's 'repressive' approach is somewhat understandable. However, Tehran can truly deal with this issue only if Afghanistan itself is stabilised by the establishment of a viable state – integrated again with the international community, and being strong enough to fight drug trafficking in collaboration with its neighbours. The situation is already slightly better in the post-Taliban period, of course.

Afghanistan is not a totally 'failed' or 'rogue' state any more, and there has been better cooperation in the fight against trafficking between Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan. An example of this relative improvement is the cooperation resulting in simultaneous operations in 2009 and 2010. Seventy-four drug dealers and a few tons of hashish, opium and heroin were seized.[15]

But all this does not change the fact that Iran's pre-9/11 problem, traceable to drugs from Afghanistan, is still an important concern for Teheran today. As long as the Afghan territory is not truly stabilised under the control of one internationally recognised authority, these anti-drug-menace victories will be of little consequence, even in the short term. The Afghan areas that are not under the control of NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) forces produce the bulk of the poppy farm yields. And the Taliban has profited from this situation, to say the least, collecting at least US$125 million a year in opium production in 2009, at a time when

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[10] Still, with the same responsibilities, as of May 2012.

[11] Hashem Kalantari, Fredrik Dahl, 'Iran has 130,000 more addicts each year: report', *Reuters*, 15 November 2009, http://www.reuters.com/article/2009/11/15/us-iran-drugs-idUSTRE5AE0Z020091115, accessed 18 March 2012.

[12] This number is from the end of 2009.

[13] George Gravilis, 'Harnessing Iran's Role in Afghanistan', *Expert Brief – Council on Foreign Relations*, 5 July 2009, http://www.cfr.org/iran/harnessing-irans-role-afghanistan/p19562, accessed 29 April 2012.

[14] On this subject see Faraz Sanei, 'Don't Praise Iran's War on Drugs', *The Guardian*, 5 August 2011, http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/aug/05/iran-war-on-drugs-international-law, accessed on 2 May 2012.

[15] UNODC, 'Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan strengthen anti-drug trafficking initiative', 25 November 2010, http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/frontpage/2010/November/afghanistan-iran-and-pakistan-strengthen-unodc-brokered-anti-drug-trafficking-initiative.html, accessed on 3 May 2012.



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its involvement in the high-end value aspects of the heroin industry was still in its infancy.[16] Besides, the foreign forces in Afghanistan have focused mainly on their fight against the Taliban, explaining why drug trafficking flourished again in 2011 despite having suffered from a plant infection in 2010.[17] Nowadays, Afghanistan accounts for 85 per cent of the world's heroin. It provides an income to half a million families. The smugglers and criminals offer an 'alternative welfare system' to Afghans who do not have the chance to ask for any support from their state. And yet, the drug menace was not part of the formal agenda of the 20 May 2012 NATO Summit in Chicago.[18] Tehran, like other regional victims of Afghan drug trafficking,[19] seems to be part of a minority in the international community that understands the need to deal with a problem which looks like a plague from an Iranian perspective.

Moreover, Afghanistan has been also a source of refugees, an important problem for Tehran. Along with Pakistan, Iran has been the country having the most to deal with the consequences of the Afghan issue from this point of view. In the two cases, it has been a consequence of the Afghan instability since the 1980s. At this period the Iranians found themselves to deal with around two million refugees.[20] In 1991-92 there were nearly three million. But the two countries have had different policies towards the Afghan refugees: Islamabad confined them to refugee camps. It gave the Pakistanis a better political control over those foreigners but made the latter totally dependent on international aid. The refugees in Iran found themselves in a better situation to some extent, especially during the first years of their exile, despite the fact that the Islamic Republic of Iran received little external help.[21] The Iranians were focusing on their war against Iraq and were not able to control the Afghan refugees politically. The Iranians limited their attention to organising the Hazara refugees, unifying those Shiites around the group *Hizb-I Wahdat.*[22] But as the Iranian authorities needed more manpower to do this, they let the Afghan refugees work anywhere in Iran. Such a situation turned those refugees into economic competitors in Iran after the end of its war with Iraq. As for the Afghans who settled in Iran or who saw in this country a chance for better life, they

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[16] Joshua Partlow, 'UN Report Cites Drop in Opium Cultivation in Afghanistan', *Washington Post*, 2 September 2009, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/09/01/AR2009090103223.html

[17] Pamela Constable, 'As opium prices soar and allies focus on Taliban, Afghan drug war stumbles', *Washington Post*, 14 January 2011.,http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2011/01/13/AR2011011306738.html, accessed on 3 May 2012.

[18] Nigel Inkster, 'Drugs: A war lost in Afghanistan', *AfPak Channel - Foreign Policy*, 29 May 2012, http://afpak.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/05/29/drugs_a_war_lost_in_afghanistan. Accessed on 30 May 2012.

[19] Like Tajikistan.

[20] Number given by Human Rights Watch, *Crisis of Impunity. The Role of Pakistan, Russia and Iran in fueling the civil war*, July 2001, http://www.hrw.org/reports/2001/07/01/crisis-impunity-role-pakistan-russia-and-iran-fueling-civil-war-afghanistan, accessed on 1 May 2012

[21] To understand the difficulty of the task the Iranians had to deal with in the last three decades, one needs to have in mind the fact that Iran has been hosting one of the most important refugee populations in the world.

[22] 'Party of Unity'



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did not perceive themselves as refugees and were not necessarily eager to go back to Afghanistan once the Taliban fell.[23]

Hence, this pre-9/11 problem is still pretty burdensome for Iran. The numbers given by the UN are proof: In 2009, as many as 954,000 Afghans were in the Islamic Republic of Iran legally, about 1.5 million illegally. From the Iranian point of view, it had a social and economic impact that made the presence of those refugees difficult to deal with. Xenophobia has been on the rise against them, an unfortunate but all-too-predictable situation. The term 'Afghani' has become pejorative in Iran. And the state had to take into account that section of the Iranian population which was most unhappy with the presence of the Afghans, even though Tehran had first done quite much to help them since the 1980s. For example, in the last few years, the children of recent illegal immigrants have no access to public schools anymore.[24] And during the 13th day of the celebration of *Nowruz* (Persian New Year)[25], the city of Isfahan banned the Afghans from entering the city's park, in order to protect Iranian citizens against 'insecurities'.[26] If Iran has been and continues to be a source of opportunities and education for Afghans, the pressure of migration on the country is also a source of tensions between the two nations. And those tensions have been a social issue difficult for Iran, even if the Afghan refugees have become part of the Iranian society, the most intellectual circles included, and even if numerous Iranians have also been sympathetic to Afghan sufferings.[27] Besides, Iranian economy is weak enough as it is, and life is difficult for the average Iranian, making the burden represented by the refugees even more difficult to accept.[28] It has been evaluated that an Afghan worker is costing the Iranian government two US dollars a day, regardless of whether the refugee is residing in Iran legally or illegally. And deportations cannot change the situation. In 2009, 937 illegal migrants a day were deported.

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[23] It is important to keep in mind that after three decades in Iran, more than half of the Afghan refugees are in fact those born in Iran itself. See Bruce Koepke, 'The Situation of Afghans in the Islamic Republic of Iran Nine Years After the Overthrow of the Taliban Regime in Afghanistan', *MEI*-FRS, February 2011, p.3. Downloaded through http://www.refugeecooperation.org/publications/afghanistan/pdf/03_koepke.pdf. Accessed 5 May 2012.

[24] Underground schools have been created to take care of those kids. See Hamid Sadeghi, 'Photos: Underground School for Afghan Children in Kerman, Iran', *Payvand Iran News*, 13 November 2011, http://www.payvand.com/news/11/nov/1129.html. Accessed 6 May 2012.

[25] The time usually spent outdoors

[26] A decision that was not accepted by all Iranians, some being very critical of this choice to cave in to pressures coming from the xenophobic part of the electorate. See Dan Geist and Ali Chenar, 'News: Efforts to Shield Essential Imports from Feeble Rial; "I Am Also an Afghan"', 3 April 2012 http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2012/04/news-efforts-to-shield-essential-imports-from-enfeebled-rial-i-am-also-an-afghan.html . Accessed 6 May 2012.

[27] One only needs to turn to poetry to get proof of such a fact. One of the most well-known poems in modern Persian literature, '*Bazghast*', 'The Return', has been written by an Afghan poet, Kazem Kazemi, talking about the sufferings of Afghan refugees in Iran going back to his country. The verses of this poem are widely known, in Iran as in Afghanistan. See Aria Fani 'One Tongue, No Tongue: "Return" and 'Afghan-Iranian Dialogue', *Tehran Bureau*, 13 May 2012, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2012/05/poetry-one-tongue-no-tongue-return-and-its-story-of-cultural-dialogue.html. Accessed 14 May 2012.

[28] See on this subject, for example, Hussain Askari, 'Ahmedinejad shuns a brighter future', *Asia Times*, 16 September 2010, http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/LI16Ak02.html. Accessed 11 May 2012.



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In 2010, the figure was 785 a day. But each day, nearly as many Afghans have been trying to cross the border illegally in order to work in Iran.[29] The economic difficulties in their country, as well as security-related issues, explain their desire to migrate. Such a situation will prevail, unless the potential refugees have actually a chance to have the better life, which they seek, in their own country. And it will be possible, to paraphrase Seyyed Mohammad Reza Sajjadi, the Iranian Permanent Representative at the United Nations Office in Geneva, the potential Afghan refugees will remain in their homes only if there are 'secure and decent' conditions in the country.[30] Again here, this burden, several decades old, makes of Tehran a political entity that cannot satisfy itself with wishy-washy declarations about Afghan stabilisation. For Iran, the instability of its neighbour has true economic and social consequences that could have a political impact, if a sizable part of the Iranian citizenry is unsatisfied with the way the authorities deal with this issue.

**What a Chaotic Afghanistan has Meant for Iran before the 2001 American Campaign: (2) The Taliban or Afghanistan as a 'Rogue State'**

For Iran, Afghanistan has been a source of troubles in terms of security issues since the Taliban came to power. At this period, from an Iranian point of view, the 'failed' Afghan state became a 'rogue' entity. At least, some leaders of the Taliban, particularly the ones influenced by an anti-Shia sentiment, were planning for a direct conflict with the Iran if their internal enemies could first be dealt with.[31] From 1996, the new Afghan 'Emirate' made its intentions clear when it gave asylum to the Sunni Baluch and Turkmen activists from Iran, who were in violent opposition to Tehran.[32] The Iranian concerns were kindled by such open hostility from the Taliban, so much so that Robert Baer[33] reports that Iran was ready to go to war at one time to take control of Western Afghanistan. Tehran's aim was to prevent Taliban's control of the Afghan-Iranian border.[34] Still, despite their anxieties, the Iranians seem to have thought that a deal could be made with Pakistan in order to stabilise Afghanistan in a way acceptable to all the countries in the region, Iran included, and without

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[29] Bruce Koepke, *op.cit*, p.5.

[30] Press TV, 'Iran urges global support for return of Afghan refugees', 5 May 2012, http://www.presstv.ir/detail/239667.html, accessed 11 May 2012.

[31] The desire to have a hostile, aggressive policy towards Iran, including the use of brute force, was definitely in the mind of the ideological 'hawks' around Mullah Omar. See on this subject Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars*, New York: Penguin, 2004, p.340.

[32] John Parker, *Persian Dreams. Moscow and Tehran since the Fall of the Shah*, Washington D.C.: Potomac Books, 2009, p.178.

[33] Robert Baer is a former CIA case officer, specialised in the Middle East, and now an author, writing on US foreign policy, especially in the Muslim world.

[34] And on this matter the Islamic Republic of Iran is following a policy that was already active under the Shah: to make sure that Western Afghanistan would never be in the hands of its enemies. See Mir H Sadat, James P. Hugues, 'US-Iran Engagement Through Afghanistan', *Middle East Policy Council*, Spring 2010, Vol. XVII, Number 1, http://www.mepc.org/journal/middle-east-policy-archives/us-iran-engagement-through-afghanistan?print. Accessed 12 May 2012.



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unnecessary violence. After the fall of Kabul to the Taliban, it appears that the Iranians tried to negotiate with Islamabad a peace deal that could be in their mutual interests. Iran's idea was to recognise the Pashtun political predominance in exchange for the safety of Afghan Shiites and recognition of their political stake and influence.[35] The reasoning was to recognise that the ones closest to the Pakistanis in Afghanistan won and to obtain in exchange an acknowledgement of Iranian interests in that country. But the proposed deal was off before it could reach the Taliban. Indeed the hostility of the latter towards Iran was confirmed in August 1998, after the conquest of Mazar-e Sharif by the Taliban. Following this victory the Pashtun radicals killed nine Iranian diplomats living in the city. During the same period, they killed thousands of Hazaras.[36] It was a clear insult to the Iranian state, as well as a veiled declaration of war on the Muslim sect it was supposed to represent. Those two events made the excuse given by the Taliban (i.e. the killing of the diplomats by 'renegade forces' who did not listen to the orders coming from the leadership) sound very unlikely.[37] This last provocation brought Iran and Afghanistan very close to war. At that time, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of Iran, had put the army on alert and pressured Islamabad to stop supporting the Taliban; as for the 'Emirate', it threatened to strike at Iranian cities if the Iranian troops would dare to penetrate the Afghan territory.[38] It was only the decisive action of Lakhdar Brahimi (the Special Representative of the UN Secretary General) that helped avoid a war that the Afghan 'hawks' clearly wanted. After these tensions, the more moderate or pragmatic Taliban wanted to improve the bilateral relationship. The idea found supporters among some foreign militants, like an important leader in the community of the Arab mujahedeen, Abu Walid al Masri. But Al Qaeda blocked their efforts, in spite of the inherent geopolitical rationality. The influence of the terrorist organisation was quite important if al Masri is to be trusted. He indeed said that he was able to convince Mullah Omar to improve relations with its main neighbours, Iran and Pakistan.[39] The opposition of course was ideological in nature (the hatred against Shia Islam), but it was also linked to the mainstream

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[35] Asma Shakir Khawaja, 'Afghanistan: A Factor in Pak-Iran Relations', *Turkish Review of Middle East Studies*, 2004 – 15, p.203.

[36] Who are Shia Muslims.

[37] Even if the pragmatic or more moderate faction inside the Taliban appeared clearly afraid that the situation could evolve into a conventional war, it could not gain the upper hand. It explains why the Afghan Foreign Ministry asked the Pakistanis and the UN 'to intercede' with Iran and to send representatives to Mazar-I-Sharif in order to understand better, by themselves, the cause of what was presented as an incident. See on this subject, for example, Douglas Jehl, 'Iran Holds Taliban Responsible for nine Diplomats' Death', *New York Times*, 11 September 1998,http://www.nytimes.com/1998/09/11/world/iran-holds-taliban-responsible-for-9-diplomats-deaths.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm. Accessed 21 May 2012.

[38] Another proof that indeed the Taliban were in touch with Sunni extremists inside Iran. CNN World, 'Taliban threatens Retaliation if Iran Strikes', 15 September 1998. http://articles.cnn.com/1998-09-15/world/9809_15_iran.afghan.tensions.02_1_iran-attacks-iranian-diplomats-akil-ahmed?_s=PM:WORLD. Accessed 20 May 2012.

[39] The idea of Pakistan totally controlling, or imposing its views on, the Taliban is indeed a gross misrepresentation of Afghan-Pakistani relations in the 1990s. If Islamabad had some level of influence, it did not mean a lack of freedom for the 'Afghan Emirate' at the time. And Afghans and Pakistanis, at this time as also after the fall of the Taliban, could not see eye to eye on important matters like the question of the Durand Line.



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Al Qaeda's own vision of the Iranian neighbour. Al Qaeda opposed any official relations with Tehran, an 'enemy' to be opposed all the time. The goal of Osama bin Laden's organisation was to have its own routes out of Afghanistan, independent of the Iranian authorities' influence.[40] At the end of 1990s, Tehran had more than enough proof that the 'Afghan Emirate', whatever the circumstances, would never be a safe neighbour for Iran.

Contrary to the issues presented above, on this matter, the Iranians had a chance to have a critical impact before 9/11. And they did so, as a rational actor eager to protect its interest and its security. Such a positive influence was possible because, between the end of 1990s and 2001, the US and Iran were converging politically on their respective analyses of the Afghan situation. At first, American and Iranian diplomats were working together through the six-plus-two talks, the forum dedicated to find a regional solution to the Afghan issue. And in fact, Tehran was much more implacable than Washington in opposing Mullah Omar's regime. Before 2001, however worrisome the situation in Afghanistan was, the US did not see Afghanistan as a top priority. As for Iran, already by the end of the 1990s, its goal was clearly to make sure that this neighbour would be neither a 'rogue' state nor a 'failed' entity. Tehran aimed at making sure that the chaos in Afghanistan and its harmful consequences for the region would be eradicated once and for all. Of course, after 1998, the Americans already began to understand the Iranian approach. After all, summer1998 witnessed not just the massacre at Mazar-e Sharif. For the Americans, it was precisely the period when Al Qaeda became a serious issue, after the bombings of the US Embassies in Dar es-Salaam and Nairobi. After having been ambivalent towards the 'Afghan Emirate', the Americans began to understand that Afghanistan was becoming a threat for its own interests. After 9/11, the US and Iran grew 'closer', reducing the six-plus-two talks to *de facto* bilateral consultations via what has been called the 'Geneva Contact Group'.

The Iranians were particularly important for the Americans then. And in that sense, they were for a quick victory that could have meant a better future for Afghanistan, especially if the idea of stabilising that country had been the primary goal of the US from the beginning of the 'War on Terror'.

For the US, the Iranians were, at first, the main bridge with the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan. For sure, Teheran was then the only external actor to have had true influence over this anti-Taliban coalition inside Afghanistan. After all, Iran had been the main backer of this anti-Taliban organisation after the events of 1998. Already, during the winter of 1999, Tehran was said to have given millions of US dollars worth of weapons to warlord Ahmad Shah Masud. Iran also helped to keep together a group that was highly divided. The Iranians

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[40] Leah Farrall, 'Interview with a Taliban Insider: Iran's Game in Afghanistan', *The Atlantic* (14 November 2011), http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/11/interview-with-a-taliban-insider-irans-game-in-afghanistan/248294/?single_page=true. Accessed 8 May 2012.



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went beyond the simple forms of support extended to Masud, with whom it had a complex relationship. Iran's support encompassed all the actors of this coalition. And this support was essential, as at the time divisions ran deep inside the group. The Iranians made sure that the Shiites in the Northern Alliance would always be strong enough to defend their interests.[41] Iran also supported the Uzbek groups in the Alliance, at a time where they were divided between Rashid Dostum and Abdullah Malik.[42] Indeed, Russia and India were also helping the anti-Taliban coalition, and the Russians seemed to have persuaded the Americans, after 9/11, to ally with Masud to better destroy the Taliban's regime. But the Iranians were by far the most active[43] players and were the ones who were 'closer' to the US policy, without any particular 'secret' agenda at the time.[44] These strong links were essential to persuade the Northern Alliance that the Americans could be trusted allies. After all, Washington had, before 9/11, criticised Tehran for its support of the Northern Alliance. The Iranians were also of great help to the White House, when the Northern Alliance had to be convinced that it should work with those Pashtuns who were equally opposed to the Taliban.[45] With such information, it seems clear that, without Iran, the initial US campaign against the Taliban could have run into many more obstacles, and Afghanistan could have been much more destabilised by the post-9/11 foreign intervention from the start.

What confirms this line of argument is the fact that, during the American campaign against the Taliban, the Iranians have been very active in helping in the fight against the common enemy. For example they opened the Chah Bahar port to facilitate humanitarian help for the Afghans. They gave critical and very reliable intelligence to the Americans, offered access to Iranian airfields near the Afghan borders, and arrested numerous Taliban and Al Qaeda fighters who were trying to escape through Iran. These actions were proof of an Iranian foreign policy focus on regional stability above anything else, as Tehran did not make this support conditional on America changing its long-term policy towards the Islamic Republic of Iran. In fact the Iranian elites were thinking, at the time, that such a responsible choice would dissipate the American preconceptions about Iran.[46] This responsible attitude, focusing on regional stability, explains Iran's positive policy towards Afghanistan at the very

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41 On the weapons given and the work done by the Iranians to make sure the Hizb-i-Wahdat received its 'fair amount' of arms, see Human Rights Watch, *Afghanistan: Crisis of Impunity. The Role of Pakistan, Russia and Iran in fueling the civil war*, July 2001, pp.35 to 39, http://www.hrw.org/reports/2001/afghan2/Afghan0701.pdf. Accessed 7 May 2012

42 Ahmed Rashid, 'Iran in Afghanistan: the Mission to Undermine Pakistan', *CACI Analyst*, 29 March 2000, http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/348. Accessed the 9th May 2012.

43 Barbara Slavin, 'Iran helped overthrow Taliban, candidate says', *USA Today*, 9 June 2005, http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2005-06-09-iran-taliban_x.htm. Accessed 9 May 2012.

44 Something that the Russians seem to have done. See S. Frederick Starr, 'Russia's Afghan Gambit', *The Wall Street Journal*, 11 December 2001. http://www.cacianalyst.org/Publications/Russia's%20Ominous%20Afghan%20Gambit.htm. Accessed 10 May 2012.

45 See Kenneth Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle. The Conflict Between America and the US*, New York: Random House, 2005, pp.345 to 347.

46 See Barbara Slavin, 'A Broken Engagement', *The National Interest*, November-December 2007. http://www.nationalinterest.org/General.aspx?id=92&id2=16016



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beginning of the 'War on Terror', at least as far as support to Kabul was concerned. In order to achieve some sort of stability in Afghanistan as quickly as possible, the Iranians did not hesitate to put some pressure on the Northern Alliance during the Bonn Conference. They made sure that their Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara allies would accept the leadership of Hamid Karzai, with whom they did not want to share power at first. On this issue again, the US and Iran were having the same vision: a more centralised Afghanistan in order to give the stabilisation of the country a better chance.[47] Moreover, during the 2002 Tokyo conference, Iran was one of the most generous developing nations, as it pledged US$560million towards Afghan reconstruction.[48]

Hence, recent history tells us that chaos in Afghanistan has always meant direct or indirect problems for Tehran. It also shows that the Iranians do act rationally to ensure their neighbour's stability. Of course, it is possible to imagine that Iran would want to have some influence on a country that has been such a source of problems. But it can hardly be called 'Iranian imperialism'[49], rather a realist measure of self-preservation and preservation of its interests. This explains why Iran appeared to be part of the solution, and not part of the problem, when the Bush administration wanted to get rid of the 'Afghan Emirate'. At worst, Iran can be described, after the fall of the Taliban, as a realist state, eager to protect its national interest, and its national interest required stability in its neighbourhood.

**Iran Today: Good or Bad Neighbour?**
**A General View**

With such recent history as the background, how can one define the Iranian policy towards Afghanistan after those promising beginnings?

As already seen, it is difficult to imagine that Iran would have had the desire to create any problems for its neighbour, once it got rid of the Taliban. Probably more than any other nation, Iran wanted a stabilised neighbour that would be neither 'rogue' nor 'failed' in scope, i.e. a state that could be a source of opportunities rather than a curse. It explains why (former US President) George W. Bush's labelling of Iran as part of the 'Axis of Evil' (29 January 2002), shocked the Iranians who saw that as an unnecessary humiliation. Especially because of the company they found themselves in. They had no love for (former Iraq President)

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[47] Alizera Nader, Joya Laha, "Iran's Balancing Act in Afghanistan", *RAND's Occasional Papers*, 2011, p.7.
[48] Shahram Akbarzadeh, 'Where the Islamic Republic of Iran heading', *Australian Journal for International Affairs*, Vol.19, Number 1, March 2005, p.34
[49] The idea of the Islamic Republic is nevertheless promoted by some Western scholars and analysts, in particular those who have been close to the former Bush Administration. This is the case of Bernard Lewis, for example. See Gholamani Khoshroo, 'The Great Threat and Bernard Lewis' Nightmare', *Iran Review*, 7 March 2011, http://www.iranreview.org/content/Documents/The_Great_Threat_and_Bernard_Lewis%E2%80%99_Nightmare.htm , accessed 10 May 2012



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Saddam Hussein's regime, something that is understandable. But they also felt uncomfortable being associated with North Korea. Indeed at that time, Iran was more than slightly uneasy with Pyongyang's actions. Some in Iran even feared that, in a foreseeable future, hostile Middle Eastern countries could have access to North Korean nuclear weapons that could be used against Tehran.[50] So, from an Iranian point of view, Bush's State of the Union speech, during which this notion of an 'Axis of Evil' was introduced, was seen as a break from the very encouraging evolution of the US-Iranian relations between 1998 and 2001.

And this break was not inevitable. First it was justified, from an American point of view, by the *Karine A* scandal: A boat full of weapons was intercepted by Israeli forces, and Jerusalem said the cargo, coming from Iran, was destined for the Palestinian authorities. The only problem with this version was that it did not take into account the whole story that one could know from open sources – a section of the Israeli media, as well as, to some extent, the foreign journalists, who at least took the time to investigate the matter they had to report. Through their analysis, it appears that this shipment of Iranian weapons was not really approved by the Iranian central government; at best it was the work of a group of *Pasdaran*[51] or a rich religious foundation, an institution that could act outside of Tehran's control. And it seems that the despatch of those weapons by *Karine A* could have been a lucrative operation, organised by a group of smugglers eager to make money rather than to give any kind of political support.[52] Hence, it could have been argued that, even if the incident was worrisome to the West, it should not have been an excuse for a rupture of relations between the US and Iran. After all, from 2003, the Afghan policy of Islamabad had been criticised, in the harshest terms, by Kabul and by Washington. But it did not translate into a breaking off of diplomatic relations or the designation of Pakistan as the principal enemy of the US.[53] And such moderation on the part of the US could only be understood in terms of *realpolitik*, as the help rendered by Islamabad at that time was considered important enough for the Americans to overlook some uncomfortable issues.[54] When one has in mind the criticism from the White

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[50] See Mark N. Katz, 'Iran and America: Is Rapprochement Finally Possible?', *Middle East Policy*, Volume 12, Number 4, Winter 2005, p.49

[51] Also known as the Revolutionary Guards, they are the military backbone of the regime, and more and more over time, its real masters. But it would be a mistake to think that all the Pasdaran officials think alike. They are indeed becoming for Iran what the army is for the Pakistani state, but there are also strong divisions inside the corps.

[52] The leading Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* made clear that the idea of Tehran being the mastermind behind the Karine A story sounded rather difficult to believe. Indeed, it is known that the shipment was obtained at night, from another ship near the Kish Island. A real Iranian governmental backing would have meant an easier loading of the cargo, from a port like Bandar Abbas. See Brian Whitaker, 'The strange affair of Karine A', *The Guardian*, 21 January 2002, http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2002/jan/21/israel1. Accessed 12 May 2012.

[53] Despite some pretty harsh comments sometimes.

[54] Such a situation seems to be changing. See Shamila N. Chaudhary, 'The Patience Runs Out', *Foreign Policy*, 12 June 2012, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/06/12/the_patience_runs_out. Accessed 12 June 2012.



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House against the Pakistanis today, the *Karine A* scandal looks like an issue that could have been overlooked for the greater good of Afghan stability.

The second event that provoked the inclusion of Iran in the 'Axis of Evil' was more serious, as it was about the Iranian nuclear ambitions. But again, in a post-9/11 world, even if a regime in Tehran is often criticised in the West, the Iranians have shown that they could be trustworthy allies in the 'War on Terror', a struggle that was, after all, against the Sunni-supremacist, anti-Shia organisation called Al Qaeda. In the name of this 'War on Terror', Washington associated itself with unsavoury dictators, in the name of *realpolitik*, and also, at another level, with countries which became nuclear powers despite American disapproval (Pakistan, India)[55]. If the US had really focused on the limited but obvious need to see this 'War' as a fight against Osama bin Laden's organisation, its Taliban protectors, and more broadly speaking against what gave Al Qaeda a safe haven, i.e. chaos in Afghanistan, then even this revelation about the Palestine-bound consignment of weapons would not have put an end to the convergence of interests between the two states. Unfortunately at that time, Afghanistan was becoming less important, for the Bush administration, than Iraq. Middle Eastern geopolitics was already more important to deal with than the Afghan issue, which seemed to have been dealt with successfully, at least from an American point of view at that time. It was the time when Bush asked Jay Garner, the first proconsul in Baghdad, if he wanted to do Iran after Iraq.[56]

Did this development mean that Afghanistan became a collateral victim of US opposition to Iran? With the past and the present in mind, it would be a gross misinterpretation to think so. Iran is, in a sense, doomed by geography: To use Afghanistan as a tool to put real pressure on the Americans could easily backfire on Iran. It explains why there was no real discontinuity in the Iranian foreign policy in the period 2001-2002. In December 2002, with this logic in mind, Iranians and Afghans signed a 'Good Neighbour Declaration'. It appeased the latter as the former made it clear that it was eager to respect Afghan territorial integrity. Between 2001 and 2009, the humanitarian help coming into Afghanistan from Iran was also very important. No less than US $600 million, a generous amount for a country with its own financial difficulties.[57] Economically, broadly speaking, Iran is an important factor in Afghan reconstruction. The Iranian government itself is funding useful projects like the building of

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[55] From the beginning of the 'War on Terror', it seems that the US made the choice to prioritise their desire to stop Iran on the nuclear issue rather than to see Afghan stability. From the point of view of numerous specialists, to this day, this choice made things more difficult for Afghanistan. See for example Viola Gienger, 'Afghanistan Needs Leeway on Iran Sanctions, Minister Says', *Business Week*, 3 April 2012, http://www.businessweek.com/news/2012-04-03/afghanistan-needs-leeway-on-iran-sanctions-minister-says. Accessed 7 May 2012.

[56] Bob Woodward, *State of Denial*, London: Simon & Schuster, 2006, p.224.

[57] Muhammad Tahir, 'Iranian Involvement in Afghanistan', *Terrorism Monitor – Jamestown Foundation*, Vol.5, issue 1, http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=1004&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=118&no_cache=1. Accessed 15 May 2012.



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roads or schools. There are no less than 2,000 Iranian firms in Afghanistan.[58] Now, trade between the two countries represents US$1 billion annually. It makes Iran the second-largest trade partner of Kabul after Pakistan[59]. The Iranians have made investments in Herat, Nimruz, and Farah in particular. So they are indeed investing heavily in Western Afghanistan, where they have strategic interests to do so. Until 2008, no less than US$500 million were invested in this area alone. Tehran helped pave the roads in Herat, give electricity to 350,000 Afghan citizens in this area, as well as build hospitals and schools. Even when the positive impact of Tehran is recognised, such a policy in the Afghan West makes the American analysts talk about 'imperialism'[60].

But Iranian influence on Western Afghanistan is not particularly surprising. As argued above, Tehran's standard policy has been one of preventing enemy control of this part of its neighbour's territory. And, links between Tehran and this Afghan territory are not only strategically essential for the Iranians, they are also historically understandable. Herat was, after all, an important city under the Safavid dynasty. It was even the centre of Persian power in the beginning of the 15th century. And even as a part of the Afghan territory nowadays, this area could become a strategic buffer zone in case Afghanistan becomes a 'failed state' again. Besides, given the stronger links between Central Asian nations and the US, the Pakistani-US relationship based on the 'War on Terror' (even if it is quite a shaky one nowadays), an Iraq more or less under US influence after the American invasion, and given the traditional links the Americans enjoy in the Arabic Peninsula, Iran feels surrounded by pro-American or American forces. Hence Iranian desire for influence on Western Afghanistan makes even more sense. Besides the idea of a buffer zone, Iran wants the Afghans to understand that it cannot be bullied without consequences. But such an Iranian position does not necessarily reflect a desire for the destabilisation of Afghanistan based on the Iran-US tensions. The best example is probably the recent scandal related to the burning of copies of Quran by some American soldiers. If American journalists are to be believed, Iranian agents were active 'just hours' after the events, in order to stir trouble. They were reported to have been active particularly in Herat. But as explained by the senior allied commander in Afghanistan, General John R. Allen, Iran could do more but it decided not to do so.[61]

So it is difficult to talk about a sinister imperialist agenda by the Iranians in Afghanistan. And it would also be an exaggeration to see any ideological compulsions behind the Iranian

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[58] Brandon Fite, Varun Vira, Erin Fitzgerald, 'Competition in Afghanistan, Central Asia, and Pakistan', *CSIS*, 13 March 2012, p.6.

[59] Viola Gienger, *op.cit*.

[60] See for accurate information but also this accusation of 'imperialism', Bill Varner, 'Iran Pours Cash Into Afghanistan, Seeking Leverage Against US', Bloomberg, 16 July 2008, http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=newsarchive&sid=aNaIqaODpvrU. Accessed 15 May 2012.

[61] Thom Shanker, Eric Schmitt, Alissa J. Rubin, 'US Sees Iran in Bids to Stir Unrest in Afghanistan', *New York Times*, 4 April 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/05/world/asia/irans-efforts-to-stir-afghan-violence-provoke-concern.html?_r=1. Accessed 24 May 2012.



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actions in Afghanistan. The last 30 years have shown that so far, realism prevails in Tehran's Afghan policy. Maybe, one of the best examples showing that Iran has no ideological agenda but a very pragmatic one is Tehran's relationship with Shia Muslims inside Afghanistan. Ideology would require of this Islamic Republic of Iran to focus on sectarian allies first and foremost. And of course, as elsewhere in the Muslim world, Tehran supports Shia communities and organisations[62]. But such support is seen only as a vehicle for influence in foreign countries for a very pragmatic foreign policy standpoint, and it is just one method amongst others. It means that Tehran wants to ensure that Afghan Shiites are well-treated. This community is clearly in a better economic situation, thanks to Iranian financial support. And support for the education of the Shiites in Afghanistan, especially the Hazaras, is designed to make sure that, in one or two generations, the intellectual elites of Afghanistan will come from this community, which will then owe a moral debt towards Tehran[63]. But what matters more in the short-term for Iran is its influence on Afghanistan as a whole, especially in the western part of the country, in order to protect its territory, rather than for any religious/sectarian concerns. Indeed the Iranians have not been in a bind, when they have had to harness other assets in Afghanistan, even among non-Shia/anti-Shia groups. It explains why for a long period of time the Islamic regime in Tehran had supported Ismail Khan, the warlord of Herat, even if he had an anti-Shia Islam policy, opposing any Shiite to have a significant administrative or political responsibility. He crossed the line when he banned *Hizb-I Wahdat*, a party representing the Shia Muslims but more importantly a client of the Iranian state. But when Khan lost the Iranian protection, he did not lose power just because he made Tehran angry. Actually the only way the Iranians punished him was by doing nothing for him from 2004. Thereafter he was politically targeted by Kabul and other warlords during the same year, and this explains why he lost power in Herat.[64]

Iran is indeed a player in the political game in Afghanistan but no more and no less than the US, Pakistan, or any other external actor having a stake in that country. So it means that when necessary Tehran can put pressure on Kabul to protect what is important for the Islamic Republic of Iran. It explains why, for example, the Iranian regime blocked shipments of fuel at the beginning of 2011. It was worried that this fuel was used by American forces. As Iran sees these forces as a source of problems for Afghanistan and the region, it wanted to make clear that the Iranian fuel could not be used by actors other than the Afghans themselves. But here again, the goal was to make Iran's 'enemies' uncomfortable, not to destabilise its neighbour.[65]

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[62] As it is better known in West Asia, with Hezbollah. See for example Augustus Richard Norton, *Hezbollah. A Short Story*, Princeton University Press, 2007, pp.72 and 110.

[63] Mir H Sadat, James P. Hugues, *op.cit.*

[64] On this subject, see Antonio Giustozzi, *Empires of Mud*, Colombia University Press, 2009, p.264, and Greg Bruno, 'Iran and the future of Afghanistan', *Expert's Brief – CFR*, 30 March 2009, http://www.cfr.org/iran/iran-future-afghanistan/p13578. Accessed 16 May 2012

[65] The Economist, 'Edgy Neighbours', 27 January 2011, http://www.economist.com/node/18014604. Accessed 27 May 2012.



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**Iran Today and the Taliban: A Prudent and Realistic Neighbour**

Hence the Iranian approach towards Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban is neither good nor bad, but rather dominated by a pragmatic approach. The goal of Tehran is to make sure this neighbour does not become a source of security-related issues, even more so after 2014. So it also means being in touch with all the political actors in Afghanistan. It explains Tehran's relationship with different factions of Taliban after 2001.

Of course, such relationship appeared at a significant level only when Iran was labelled a part of the 'Axis of Evil'. But one should avoid any exaggeration of such links. When one focuses on the post-2002 Iranian policy towards the Afghan rebels, one can see how prudent Iran actually has been. Indeed, in a direct answer to the 'Axis of Evil' speech, Iran let veteran Afghan warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar go back to Afghanistan (in February 2002). Once back in his homeland, he took an anti-American stance, and has become one of the main forces against the US presence in the country. But in 2002, Afghanistan appeared 'secured' by the Americans, and actually it was the time when the idea of a stabilised country did not seem like a far-fetched dream. In such a situation, letting Hekmatyar go -- even encouraging him to take up arms against the US-led coalition -- did not seem like a disproportionate answer to US enmity towards Iran. Besides, at this point of time, Iranian security seemed more important to Tehran than Afghan stability: so letting Hekmatyar go was seen as a reactive move towards American attitude rather than a desire to make Afghanistan fall into chaos again. As far as one can know by following open and verified sources, Tehran did not arm or help Hekmatyar become one of the main neo-Taliban leaders. In fact he was easily able to finance himself independently, reportedly thanks to drug trafficking[66]. Broadly speaking, it seems that relations were established between the Afghan Taliban and Tehran over the years. Despite the difficult past with the 'Afghan Emirate', the Iranians seem to have accepted the idea that the Taliban represents a part of Afghan society and cannot just be pushed aside permanently.

Such a pragmatic approach appeared clearly as the official Iranian policy during the first conference on the 'Islamic Reawakening', organised by Tehran on 17 September, 2011. It brought 700 participants from 80 countries together to talk about the Arab Spring and its consequences. And the Islamic Republic of Tehran invited two delegations from Afghanistan. One was representing the government of Hamid Karzai, led by Burhanuddin Rabbani, the former Head of the Council in charge of peace talks with the Taliban. The other was led by Nik Muhammad, a Taliban leader very influential in the *Quetta Shura*, the organisation

[66] See for example Shahin Eghraghi, 'Hekmatyar: The wild card in Afghanistan', *Asia Times*, 7 January 2004,



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directly under the control of Mullah Omar.[67] Of course such a scenario does not mean that chaos is now the destiny that the Iranians have in mind for Afghanistan. If they wanted such a result, there was no need to make difficult alliances with people who are, at heart, Sunni supremacists. In fact, as Afghan trade is now very dependent on Iran, to close the Iran-Afghanistan border would be enough to put great pressure on Karzai[68]. By talking to the neo-Taliban, the Iranians are doing no more than what the Americans, the Pakistanis, and even the Russians[69] are already doing, in trying to be in touch with all the different Afghan political players. Indeed, for now, the Taliban is a useful enemy, accepted as it poses a challenge to a stronger enemy, i.e. the US. To talk about reconciliation would be to go too far. But clearly, the White House has made a *tour de force* by creating a situation for those two opposite actors to share the same interests, i.e. opposing any long-term American presence in Afghanistan[70].

But such situation does not mean supporting terrorism in the region, or wanting to destabilise Afghanistan. Besides, the rise of the Taliban has already created problems for the Islamic Republic of Iran. Indeed the 'War on Drugs' seems more and more difficult as the Taliban is becoming more prominent inside the Afghan territory[71]. A long-term solution will depend on the struggle for influence inside the Taliban movement itself. Mullah Omar was interested in having a better relationship with Iran in the past, and the same could happen in the future. But what about the Haqqani network? This organisation has been supporting foreign jihadists and appears to be much more radical ideologically. What about the TTP (Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan), if it stays a force to reckon with? It already allied itself with anti-Shia militants in its war against Islamabad. After all, the Pakistani Taliban has been important as a force for the fight in Afghanistan. The role TTP could play after 2014 would not necessarily be in Iran's interest. Even if Mullah Omar takes control of the country after 2014, the foreign policy of the new regime will strongly depend on the power of these different players in Kabul. If the more extreme groups are able to take over, Iran will have no choice but to oppose the Taliban again. This could also convert the post-2014 Afghanistan into a 'failed state' again, and a renewed source of the same issues (significant number of refugees, drug

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67 Ernesto Londono, 'Iran's hosting of Taliban reflects desire for greater role', *Washington Post*, 29 August 2011, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia-pacific/irans-hosting-of-taliban-reflects-desire-for-greater-role/2011/09/28/gIQAkmwO7K_story.html. Accessed 14 May 2012.

68 Muhammad Tahir, *op.cit.*

69 Antonio Giustozzi, among others, thinks that indeed the neo-Taliban has established links to the Russians, among others. See F. Bobin, 'Les nouveaux talibans afghans mènent une vraie guerre de guérilla' [The Afghan neo-Taliban are waging a true guerilla war], *Le Monde*, 7 May 2009, http://www.lemonde.fr/asie-pacifique/article/2009/05/06/les-nouveaux-talibans-afghans-menent-une-vraie-guerre-de-guerilla_1189554_3216.html#ens_id=1147352, accessed 15 May 2009 (cannot be accessed on *Le Monde* website without subscription any longer).

70 AFP, 'Taliban dismiss US-Afghan pact, announce "spring offensive"', *Dawn*, 2 May 2012, http://dawn.com/2012/05/02/taliban-dismiss-us-afghan-pact-as-illegitimate/. Accessed 21 May 2012.

71 See Martin McCauley, 'Is Iran Supporting the Taliban?', *Stirring Trouble Internationally*, 8 November 2009, http://www.stirringtroubleinternationally.com/2009/11/08/iran-afghanistan/, accessed 10 April 2012.



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trafficking, security-related issues). Hence, even if Tehran talks to the Taliban, the latter may still be a long-term headache for Iran rather than a real ally against the West.

## Iran Today and the US-Afghan Partnership Agreement: A Fearful Neighbour

Broadly speaking, the Islamic regime in Tehran may have to reckon with Afghanistan as a problem for the foreseeable future. Indeed, there is still the risk of bilateral tensions, even without a triumph of the Taliban, especially in case of an attack by Americans or Israelis on Iran. Tehran has made it clear that any country that might serve as a base for such a US or Israeli operation would be targeted by the Pasdaran[72]. And if military manoeuvres are any indication, it appears that Tehran already sees its border with Afghanistan as a potential source of threats[73] for the foreseeable future. The Iranian-Afghan relations will depend, overall, on the American policy towards Kabul after 2014. And the 'Strategic Partnership Agreement', signed on 2 May, 2012, is definitely the sign of a situation that cannot be seen favourably by Tehran. Iranian Foreign Minister Ramin Mehmanparast made it clear that that such a bilateral relationship will be a source of instability for Afghanistan, and would put in danger the links with Iran[74]. Indeed he has some reason to be worried. The ratification by the Afghan Parliament on 26 May 2012 guaranteed an American military presence in Afghanistan after 2014, in particular Special Forces. There is no talk of permanent bases, but the agreement looks like a warning to neighbouring countries. It was expressed very clearly by Shukria Barikzai, the head of the Parliamentarian Defence Committee, when he said that 'the document will rescue Afghanistan from the yoke of its neighbours'[75]. Of course, Afghan Foreign Minister Zalmai Rassoul said that Afghanistan 'will not be used against any country in the region' after 2014[76]. The answer was particularly targeting the Pakistani fears of drone strikes. But obviously, the fear of Afghanistan becoming a safe haven for enemies planning attacks is also an Iranian concern. And the fact is that the US Ambassador Ryan Crocker quickly contradicted Rassoul, when he said: 'There is nothing in this agreement that precludes the right of self-defence for either party and if there are attacks from the territory of

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[72] Ali Akbar Dareini, 'Iran vows to retaliate in event of attack', *Military Times*, 5 February 2012, http://www.militarytimes.com/news/2012/02/ap-iran-vows-to-retaliate-020512/, accessed on 16 April 2012.

[73] Mitra Amiri, 'Iran holds military exercise near border', *Reuters*, 7 January 2012, http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/01/07/us-iran-idUSTRE8041RA20120107, accessed on 30 April 2012.

[74] Kevin Govern, 'What Lies Beyond the US-Afghan Strategic Partnership Arrangement', *JURIST - Forum*, 22 May 2012, http://jurist.org/forum/2012/05/kevin-govern-us-afghan-spa.php. Accessed 24 May 2012.

[75] RFE/RL, 'Afghan Parliament Approves US-Afghan Security Pact', 26 May 2012, http://www.rferl.org/content/afghan-parliament-approves-us-afghan-security-pact/24593669.html. Accessed 28 May 2012. This quote is typical of a situation that portrays Afghanistan as a victim of its neighbours. Its internal problems and contradictions, some of them coming from history, are definitely not taken into account to explain the sad situation of the country.

[76] AFP, 'Drone strikes: No attacks from Kabul after 2014', *The Express Tribune*, 7 April 2012, http://tribune.com.pk/story/361026/drone-strikes-no-attacks-from-kabul-after-2014/. Accessed 12 May 2012.



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any state aimed at us, we have the inherent right of self-defence and will employ it'. The Ambassador has insisted on this notion of self-defence, hoping that 'the region takes notice'. Again, it sounds like a veiled threat to Pakistan, but that could also be a message for Iran[77].

Proof that Pakistan was not the only state targeted in this discourse appeared soon enough after 2 May, 2012. The timing of events in the month of May 2012 is, in fact, very enlightening on the Afghan position towards Iran[78]. Each of those events looks like an exaggeration of Iranian intent to influence Afghanistan. And it clearly illustrates how the Afghan-Iran relationship could become hostage to American-Iranian tensions.

Three days after the signature of the agreement, Abdulvahed Hakimi, Kabul bureau chief for the Iranian Fars news agency[79], was arrested, and accused of passing classified documents to Tehran. Of course, as far as one can know, this is just a claim, impossible to verify independently for the time being[80]. Very quickly after this event, two other persons were arrested, Afghan nationals this time. *Radio Free Europe* has been able to obtain a video where the two Afghans (who were allegedly trained to organise terrorist actions) confessed. But as explained in the article describing this video, 'RFE/RL cannot independently verify the claims made in the video or the circumstances under which the video was recorded'[81]. The Afghans on tape talk about a rather extraordinary story that they were trained to be spies and terrorists working for the Revolutionary Guards, with training in Iran with Lebanese, Iraqis and other Afghans by the Pasdaran. The latter organisation wants to rejuvenate Hekmatyar's group[82]. The weapons shown in the video, as well as the claims of the two Afghans "confessing", as in the video, give the impression that Iran is really active in destabilising Afghanistan through terror. But it does not make sense, if one keeps in mind the long-term foreign policy of Tehran towards Kabul. Accessing only on open sources, and with the timing of this 'episode' in mind, the information can at least be seen with some

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[77] AFP, 'US-Afghan pact does not rule out drone strikes', *The Express Tribune*, 2 May 2012, http://tribune.com.pk/story/373066/us-afghan-pact-does-not-rule-out-drone-strikes/. Accessed 16 May 2012.

[78] See M.K. Bhadrakumar, 'Iran queries Obama's pact with Karzai', *Asia Times*, 11 May 2012, http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/NE11Df01.html. Accessed 28 May 2012.

[79] Which has ties with the Iranian government. The *Wall Street Journal* goes as far as to say that it is affiliated to the Pasdaran or Revolutionary Guards, an affirmation quite difficult to verify independently. See Farnaz Fassihi, 'Iran Says Amiri Spied on US', *The Wall Street Journal*, 21 July 2010, http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703954804575381310919702740.html. Accessed 1 May 2012.

[80] The fact that journalists, academic researchers, or travelling entrepreneurs, are used for information gathering is not new or surprising. But the accusation made by the Afghans against Hakimi is much more serious.

[81] RFE/RL, 'Video Purportedly Shows Afghans Confessing To Spying For Iran', 8 May 2012, http://www.rferl.org/content/afghans_arrested_for_spying_for_iran_video/24574547.html. Accessed 23 May 2012.

[82] A claim that does not go well with what has been narrated earlier in this paper: Hekmatyar has not been financed by the Iranians to revive his group. In same way the Taliban cannot be seen as a creation of the Pakistanis alone, it is rather simplistic to imagine that Hezb-i-Islami is just a tool of the Iranians.



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suspicion. Even more so, when one knows that the sudden discovery of this 'spy ring' has not been the only accusation, without strong proof, thrown at Tehran by the Karzai government.

Indeed, immediately after this already strong accusation, the Speaker of the Afghan Senate, Fazel Hadi Muslimyar, said that the Iranian Ambassador threatened to expel Afghan refugees if the Parliamentarians would ratify the pact wanted by the Americans. It is worth mentioning that again, in this story, there is a lack of solid proof of an 'aggressive' policy that would be reflective of Iranian foreign policy. Often it was said that Abolfazi Zohrehvand, a newly-appointed Iranian Ambassador, tried to influence Afghan legislators. But Zohrehvand is the only one quoted most of the time[83]. It is interesting to keep in mind that the Iranians are also accused of regularly paying some MPs, at least 44[84] of them, if the (unfortunately) anonymous Afghan source of this information is to be trusted.[85] Those two pieces of information appear contradictory: Why openly threaten parliamentarians if Tehran can so easily 'buy' them? The threat could have been made, of course, by this new Ambassador. If so, it sounds rather peculiar to have the same ambassador denying it[86]. At best, on this subject, one could see tensions inside the Iranian establishment about how to better react towards the US-Afghan Partnership. But this diplomatic 'mini-scandal' could be also a matter of statements by the Ambassador alone, without the consent or previous knowledge of the government in Tehran, or indeed a matter of misunderstanding or an exaggerated interpretation from the Afghan side. Whatever the truth is, what is clear is that the Afghan government lost no time to answer forcefully, and, from an Iranian point of view, aggressively, to criticism of the pact. Indeed, the Karzai government sent National Security Adviser Rangin Dadfar Spanta from Herat to talk about this issue. And what he said could only feed the fears of the Islamic Republic of Iran, if the pact becomes a reality after 2014. To send such an official was very significant, as he negotiated the pact with Washington. And in Herat, he told *The Asia Times*: "Iranian officials told Afghan senators not to approve the pact or else Afghanistan will face problems. We replied that it is for this very reason that we signed the agreement...what I see in Iran is nationalism and radicalism, which tries to influence the region from a religious point of view. [Iran's] politics have never been recognised globally...Afghans should guarantee their children's future with peace and think only about their national interest". Kabul could not be clearer: The government in power now

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[83] See for example Ben Farmer, 'Iran threatens to expel Afghan refugees if Kabul ratifies US strategic partnership', *The Telegraph*, 10 May 2012, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/afghanistan/9256602/Iran-threatens-to-expel-Afghan-refugees-if-Kabul-ratifies-US-strategic-partnership.html. Accessed 22 May 2012. Or Nathan Hodge and Habib Khan Totakhil, 'Iran Seeks to Scuttle US Pact With Kabul', *Wall Street Journal*, 8 May 2012, http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702303630404577391913416976058.html?mod=googlenews_wsj. Accessed the 22 May 2012.

[84] There are 249 members of the Afghan Parliament.

[85] Amie Ferris-Rotman, 'Iran's "Great Game" in Afghanistan', *Reuters*, 24 May 2012, http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/05/24/afghanistan-iran-media-idUSL4E8GL3KU20120524. Accessed 27 May 2012.

[86] FarsNews, 'Envoy Cautions against Media Campaign to Undermine Tehran-Kabul Ties', 9 May 2012, http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9102111339. Accessed 17 May 2012



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claims to have a vision of Iranian foreign policy that is extremely similar to the Americans[87]. Such a situation was confirmed when the NDS (National Directorate Security[88]), claimed that the Iranians had some Machiavellian plan to use soft power to influence Afghans through the media. On this issue, there is some compatibility with the general attitude of Tehran: To promote pro-Iranian and anti-American ideas is, of course, in the interest of the Islamic Republic of Iran. For Daud Moradian, from the American University in Kabul, the Iranians would be spending US$100 million a year on projects related to soft power projection. They do not only influence the media, they also build religious schools, support the development of civil societies, etc[89]. The weakness of the argument here is that these projects are not necessarily bad. They are in fact helping to stabilise Afghanistan. Quite a few Western NGOs or states have had the same policy of helping the civil society as also the media, and of using soft power to have some sort of influence in Afghanistan. To see it as 'imperialism' when it is an Iranian policy would imply that every action by Tehran is harmful. It would mean falling into the trap of seeing the Iranians as a non-rational regime of 'mullahs', something that is far away from the truth, as seen above.

**Conclusion**

It is possible to say that, generally speaking, Iran has been a decent neighbour for Kabul, as much as such a thing is possible in an international arena still dominated by a realist vision. Of course, all choices were made in Tehran in order to protect its national interest. The memories and the contemporary reality of a chaotic Afghanistan cannot be forgotten by the Islamic Republic of Iran. The idea that Iran could wish to totally destabilise this already troubled neighbour, in order to oppose the US, does not make much sense. Indeed, for the Iranians, Kabul is not a secondary issue. Of course, if the Iranians are not prone to putting Afghanistan back in its previous chaotic state, they will also not put Afghan stability above the protection of Iran itself. Tehran, for now and because of its national interest, is rather a force of stability insofar as Afghanistan is concerned. But this could change, if the regime in Tehran feels that it is in danger because of external forces, or if it is attacked militarily by the US or Israel in the foreseeable future over the issue of Iran's nuclear programme.

When thinking about the Iranian 'issue', the Americans and their allies have had the tendency to be obsessed with one subject (the concern about Iran becoming a nuclear-armed state) and with one geographical area (Iran as part of West Asia and hence as a rival for Saudi Arabia and Israel, two important allies of the US). Of course, Western concerns are understandable. And the international community has, in common, the desire to avoid, as much as possible, seeing more Middle East countries armed to the teeth with nuclear weapons or any other kind

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87 M.K. Bhadrakumar, 'Iran queries Obama's pact with Karzai'.
88 Afghan internal secret services
89 Amie Ferris-Rotman, *op.cit.*



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of WMDs (Weapons of Mass Destruction). Regardless, because of its unique geographical location, Iran is a force to be reckoned with in Central/South Asian affairs. Afghan stability, and, more broadly Central/South Asian stability, is in the interest of Americans and Europeans. But it is even more so for Pakistan and India. Ironically, these two countries found themselves on the same side on the issue because of a geographic quirk. It means that if Europeans and Americans can have the luxury to be amateurish enough not to think about the regional consequences of a crisis with Iran, Pakistanis and Indians need to raise this issue forcefully at the international stage[90]. Indeed, a wounded Iran and a destabilised Afghanistan will have a very concrete, immediate, and long-lasting impact on their security. For New Delhi, as for Islamabad, the risk is too great to be discounted in their regional and in international diplomacy.

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[90] They would find natural allies in the Central Asian states, which fear, for good reasons, the possibilities in Afghanistan after 2014. Diplomatic consultation between the South Asians and post-Soviet states will give India and Pakistan a better chance to be heard, at least by the Europeans. Indeed, there is a strong European interest in Central Asia, inspired in particular by German foreign policy. If Afghanistan is a distant issue for some European elites, it is not the case in respect of oil and gas that could flow from this 'New Silk Road'.



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