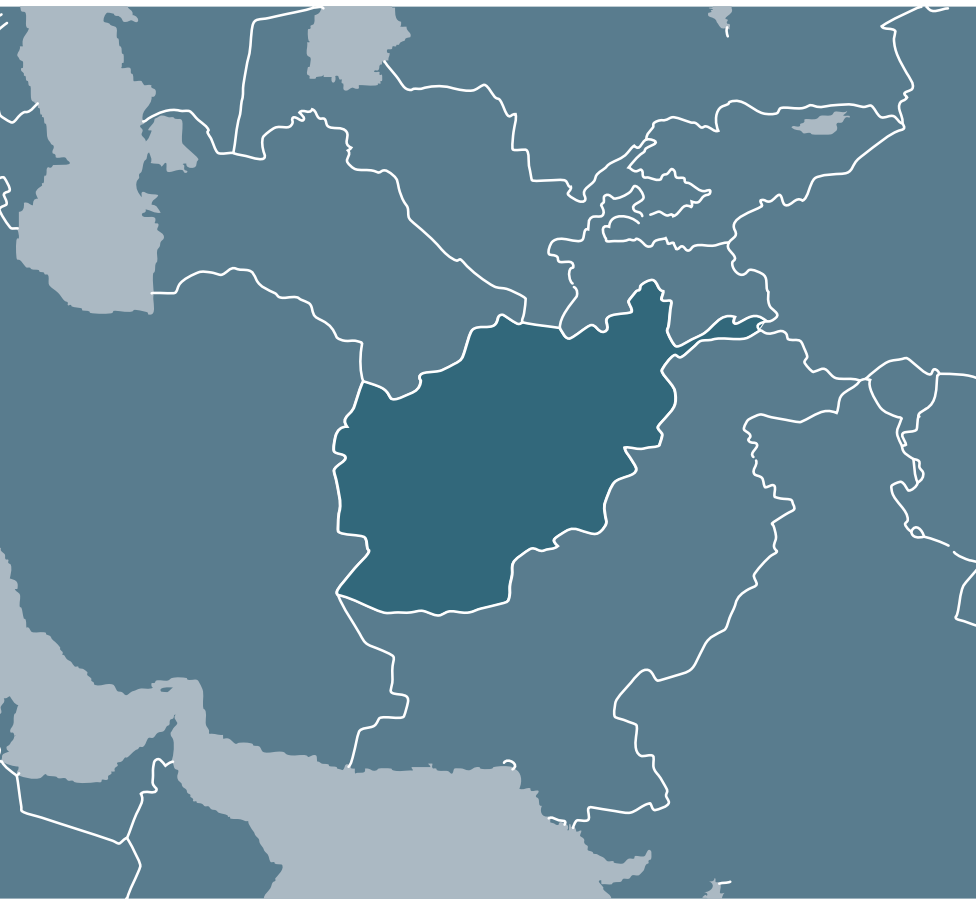


STIMSON

# Engaging Iran on Afghanistan

Ellen Laipson || March 2012



STIMSON

## **Engaging Iran on Afghanistan**

**Ellen Laipson**

**March 2012**

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## Preface

This report examines the importance of engaging Iran as one of the key neighbors of Afghanistan during the period of withdrawal of international forces through 2014. It looks at the US-Afghanistan-Iran triangle from the perspective of two distinct policy priorities: how to engage Afghanistan's neighbors constructively to maximize the chances for stability in that country after foreign troops withdraw, and how to create possibilities for US-Iran interaction on issues where there is at least some common or shared interest.

In early 2012, prospects for success in either of these policies are not assured, as policymakers, politicians, and pundits engage in passionate debate about the virtues and shortcomings of nearly any policy option. They face formidable obstacles due to unstable conditions inside Afghanistan, political turmoil inside Iran, the deterioration in US-Pakistan relations, and the tensions between Iran and the international community over its nuclear activities. Despite considerable diplomatic effort and the achievements of several international conferences on Afghanistan in late 2011, it has proven difficult to make progress in forming any bilateral understanding with Iran about the future of Afghanistan and its role there.

Nonetheless, this report is premised on the notion that think tanks can do more than monitor or evaluate ongoing crises or diplomatic initiatives. They can sustain analytic thinking about problems that are undeniably hard in the short run, but that still require attention and planning for a more promising moment of opportunity. The analysis about how to identify practical areas of common concern in Afghanistan, and how to see US-Iran cooperation over Afghanistan in its larger context, is offered with humility and a hope that readers can take the long view. The stalemate in US-Iran relations will eventually give way to a new reality, but any dramatic change is unlikely until after presidential elections in both countries. This report identifies one area in which cooperation is possible and can be mutually beneficial.

We are grateful to the Ploughshares Fund for support for this project. While Stimson's President, Ellen Laipson, is the author of the lead essay, much of the research and project support was provided by former Research Associate Andrew Houk, who is currently working in Afghanistan. We are grateful to Barry Blechman, Ali Nader, and Mohsen Milani for helpful comments on the paper.

March 2012





Source: UNODC





## Executive Summary

Engaging Iran on issues of mutual interest has been an elusive goal for the Obama Administration, and in early 2012, prospects of meaningful engagement appear remote at best until after presidential elections in both countries. Nonetheless, the evolution of US policy in Afghanistan over the next three years provides a compelling opportunity for practical engagement. Engaging Iran as one of Afghanistan's key neighbors as US and international forces withdraw would enhance prospects for a peaceful exit, and for productive Afghan-Iran relations once foreign forces are gone. Successful engagement with Iran – in multilateral or bilateral fora – would necessarily address Iran's legitimate security interests on its eastern frontier, as well as its broader economic and political interests in Afghan stability.

After Pakistan, Iran is the most important neighbor of Afghanistan and has the capacity to influence long-term stability there. The fact that Iran does not see itself as the major outside influence on Afghan politics, as it does in Iraq, could well facilitate prospects for finding areas of mutual interest. Its priorities are principally in the areas where its interests are most acute; on its border and in areas of northwest Afghanistan where the demographic ties of religion, language, and ethnicity are strongest. Iran also feels a gravitational pull to preventing dominance of Afghan national politics by the Pushtun plurality; its interests, therefore, do not align with Pakistan's and may create incentives for Iran to pursue strategies that weaken the central government.

The US and Iran have had, and will continue to have, some convergent interests in Afghanistan. Both have a stake in a stable country that is not under Taliban control. Afghanistan in chaos or a return of a draconian Taliban regime would be truly harmful to both Tehran and Washington. Both want to build capacity in Afghanistan that would prevent the flow of drugs and refugees across its borders; for Iran, that is a more acute concern than for the US. Both would like to see Afghanistan emerge from decades of conflict into a more reliable trading partner, transit route, and competent state that can prevent non-Afghan non-state actors from operating on its territory.

But the convergence of US-Iran interests that was clear in 2001 has been overshadowed by more recent priorities and perceptions. The past decade has sharpened Iran's thinking and fears about American engagement in the region. Iranian officials and independent experts characterize Iran's strategic concerns about a long-term US role in Afghanistan as an "existential threat" to the Islamic Republic, based on worries that the United States plans to use Afghanistan as a base from which to attack Iran, and to work for regime change in Tehran.<sup>1</sup>

On a more practical level, the mounting tensions over Iran's nuclear activities and increasingly harsh sanctions related to those activities have made it hard for Tehran to agree to engage directly on ideas for short-term cooperation, out of concern that such cooperation could be construed as

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<sup>1</sup> See Professor Amir Haji-Yousefi, "Iran's Foreign Policy in Afghanistan: The Current Situation and Future Prospects," presented May 2011 at an academic conference, and to be published in 2012 by the Journal of South Asian Studies, Punjab University, Lahore, Pakistan.

an Iranian concession in light of the larger impasse in relations. Iran participates in the multilateral meetings organized by the United States and Afghanistan, and endorses the broad guidelines developed at the recent meetings in Istanbul (November 2011) and Bonn (December 2011) for the future of Afghanistan, but declines to engage bilaterally with Washington at those venues or independently of multilateral events. In fact, Iran strongly supports the regionalization of efforts to help Afghanistan, and sees the regional approach as a stark alternative to an international approach that includes donors and security partners from western countries.

It is still worth considering where US and Iranian interests (and Afghanistan's as well) converge over basic issues such as improving border controls, controlling the flow of drugs and other illicit goods, stabilizing economic life in the cities and in vulnerable provinces, and training provincial level security forces. Leaders in all three countries may also agree and tacitly cooperate on helping moderate Taliban affiliates reintegrate into the national security forces, and on strengthening the central government's institutional capacities and its ability to represent the country's diverse political and ethnic groups. This level of engagement could occur when the withdrawal of NATO and the *International Security Assistance Force* (ISAF) is closer at hand, when the immediate realities on the ground drive cooperation in very concrete ways.

Even if cooperation on Afghanistan develops, it is difficult to see how it could directly or quickly affect the larger strategic blockage in US-Iran relations. While in theory such contact could build trust and contribute to both sides' willingness to engage on other issues, policymakers should have modest expectations and accept that cooperation on Afghanistan is worth doing for its own sake. Conversely, continued or increased tension over the nuclear issue could adversely affect Iran's willingness to engage on Afghanistan or other regional topics, even when it could be sacrificing short-term self-interest.

## Introduction

This report explores the opportunities and challenges facing US officials in engaging Iran as one of Afghanistan's key neighbors. It considers how Iran sees its vital interests in its eastern neighbor, and how the US and Iran might develop more productive communication and even coordination during the transitional period of the drawdown of international forces and the transfer of more responsibilities to the Afghan government and to regional powers.

A decade ago, US diplomats found common ground with Iranian counterparts during the campaign to oust the Taliban from Kabul and support a more representative government there. Iranian officials were actively engaged in the campaign to remove the Taliban from power, and supported the US approach.<sup>2</sup> (Iran, like Russia, was actually focused on mobilizing the northern forces in Afghanistan to oust the Taliban long before it became US policy after the terrorist attacks of 9/11). Today the challenge is indisputably more difficult. That brief opening in US-Iran relations suffered when Iran was included in the "axis of evil" formulation in President Bush's 2002 State of the Union address, and diplomats were not able to truly integrate Iran into the early state-building activities of that early post-Taliban period. Subsequently, US-Iranian relations have worsened over Iran's nuclear activities and US success in imposing multilateral economic penalties on it, as well as more recent tensions over deteriorating human rights conditions in Iran since the June 2009 elections, and even allegations of Iranian plotting to conduct an assassination of a diplomat in Washington, DC. By late 2011 and early 2012, the inflamed rhetoric in both capitals has led to war planning and a call by some in Congress to outlaw any diplomatic contact with Iran.

Over the past decade, Iran's leaders, particularly those with abiding revolutionary fervor, have found it irresistible to poke the United States in the eye in Afghanistan as they did in Iraq, to validate their strategic interest in the withdrawal of all US forces from the region. Some point to Iran's current support for the Taliban and other warring factions as evidence that Iran prefers the ongoing insurgency to real peace.<sup>3</sup> But these demonstrations of low-intensity, proxy warfare against foreign troops do not represent all of Iran's long-term interests, and strategic thinkers in Iran are well aware that chaos and instability or the return of a draconian Taliban government in Kabul are outcomes that would be truly harmful to Iran's interests.

It will take courage and creativity to redefine areas of common concern and possible cooperation as the US and allies begin a gradual drawdown of military forces from Afghanistan. The long political antagonisms between Washington and Tehran, and the current acute tensions over the nuclear file have hardened positions and make it an extra challenge for bureaucrats in either capital to take risks and probe for new opportunities. American and other western diplomats who work the Afghan account on the ground are disheartened by the Iranian diplomats' inability to discuss

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2 See James Dobbins, *After the Taliban: Nation-Building in Afghanistan* (Potomac Books, 2008) for the authoritative account of US engagement with Iran in 2001-2003.

3 Most experts, however, view Iran's paramilitary and covert engagement with various Afghan forces on a lesser scale and with less determinative effect, as Iran's relations with various insurgent forces in Iraq.

even modest practical cooperation. Tehran keeps tight reins on its diplomats in Kabul, and western overtures for more active coordination of development activities have come to naught.

But the realities of Afghanistan suggest that sooner or later, the larger states that are worried about instability in Afghanistan once foreign forces depart will want to share information and coordinate strategies to prevent a breakdown of civil order, and may reach some arrangements to support those provinces of the country closest to their borders. Some of this surely is occurring between Iran and others of Afghanistan's neighbors, including India, Pakistan and the Central Asian republics of Turkmenistan and Tajikistan. But most believe that such regional interaction always holds the potential to morph into competitive predatory behavior, for each state to focus particularly on its subnational clients and proxies in Afghanistan to promote each state's regional objectives, at the expense of the unity and territorial integrity of the state. Iran's activities in western and northern Afghanistan may look to some as trying to establish a sphere of influence. India engages Iran at least in part as a way of containing Pakistan's role in Afghanistan.

For the United States, Afghan policy enjoys the highest level of attention in Washington, and despite the divisive rhetoric of politicians, polling suggests that Americans largely support the President's policy for a withdrawal from Afghanistan by 2014.<sup>4</sup> In a presidential campaign year and in light of an apparent deterioration of security for NATO forces in February 2012, his policies may face criticism from the Republican candidates, sometimes backed by career military officers, for leaving Afghanistan before conditions warrant. Others argue that the apparent failure of ongoing efforts to produce meaningful and lasting improvements in governance in Kabul suggest an even earlier departure would be justified. But in any scenario, the need to engage Afghanistan's neighbors has become recognized as a core component of US policy during this transition.

The presence of Iran's Foreign Minister Ali Akhbar Salehi at the November 2 regional meeting in Istanbul and a month later in Bonn at a larger international conference was promising. But his remarks to the media in Istanbul demonstrated the conceptual dilemma for the Iranians: he deplored NATO and US presence in Afghanistan, linking that presence to terrorism and instability, and underscored Iran's commitment to stronger regional security cooperation, which for Iran, is an alternative, not a component of, the western strategy. Over the months ahead, engaging Iran will be one of many challenging aspects of plans for the security transition and an inter-Afghan political settlement.

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<sup>4</sup> Pew Research Center polling in early 2012 shows that 56 percent of Americans believe US troops should come out as fast as possible, and generally support the President's handling of the war and the decision to withdraw by 2014. Figures from mid-2011 were virtually the same as in January 2012.

## Understanding Iran's Interests

It is too simple to suggest that Iran's paramount interest in Afghanistan is to get the United States out, in ways that weaken American power and prestige, though at least some of Iran's decision makers tend to see the issue in those terms. Iran has a long history of cultural and political ties, if not control, of Afghanistan.<sup>5</sup> Today, it harbors deep concerns about conditions in Afghanistan that have significant economic and social costs for Iran. It houses millions of Afghan refugees from successive cycles of war and upheaval; the transit of opium has created a tragic culture of addiction inside Iran and has had a corrupting effect on security forces responsible for monitoring cross-border trade; and sectarian and ethnic stresses in Afghanistan have their reverberations in Shia Iran and for Iranians serving in Afghanistan. Most importantly, Iran sees prospects for the return of the Taliban to power as destabilizing for the region, even while it hedges its bets and develops its own ambiguous ties to the Taliban. A process of engagement has to balance the immediate aspects of Iran's policy – to exploit the US desire to leave in a way that enhances Iran's prestige – with its more enduring “state” interests. These include<sup>6</sup>:

- ▶ **Border issues** – Iran has a 582-mile border with Afghanistan and has worked with Afghan security forces to control border crossings where billions of dollars worth of illicit drugs and smuggled goods cross each year. It has invested in surveillance equipment (including drones), and training customs and border police. Iran engages with Pakistan and Afghanistan on regional counter-narcotics efforts, including joint operations and Border Liaison Offices.
- ▶ **Narcotics** – Afghanistan produces nearly 90 percent of the world's opium. Half of that amount enters Iran, to be used by Iran's estimated 1–4 million drug addicts, or to transit Iran to reach other markets in Europe and the Middle East. Iran has worked effectively with the UN Office on Drugs and Crime to develop strategies to reduce demand and supply of Afghan drugs.
- ▶ **Water** – Iran's arid east relies heavily on waters that originate in the mountains of central Afghanistan. For more than a century, disputes over the water flow into Iran have colored the relationship, and a treaty signed in 1973 was not sufficient to regularize water management. Demographic pressures, drought, and ambitious development plans for Afghanistan have combined to make this a more acute issue in Iran-Afghan relations. Iran has to calibrate how its dependence on Afghan waters is balanced with its long-term interest in Afghanistan's economic development.<sup>7</sup> Some in Iran could see international efforts to build power-generating dams for Afghanistan as part of a strategy to weaken Iran.

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5 See Mohsen Milani, “Iran and Afghanistan,” in Wright, Robin, ed., *The Iran Primer* (United States Institute of Peace Press with Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2010), pp.155-158.

6 See appendix for more detailed analysis on borders, drugs, water, and minorities.

7 See Janne Bjerre Christensen, “Strained Alliances: Iran's Troubled Relations to Afghanistan and Pakistan,” Danish Institute for International Studies (2011), pp. 20-23.

- ▶ **Refugees** – Iran has hosted several million refugees from various cycles of Afghan instability. While some have been integrated into the Iranian economy and others leave marginal lives at the edge of Iranian society, others are still in camps and would be ready to be repatriated once circumstances permit. On occasion, Iran has used forced repatriation of Afghan refugees as leverage on the government, and some returnees report harsh treatment by Iranian security forces, thus damaging Iran’s image and creating cultural tensions between the two societies. While its historic record of providing refuge to those fleeing war and instability overall is a source of honor, Iran’s more enduring interest is in facilitating more normal conditions in its eastern neighbor so that Afghans can return home.
- ▶ **Minority Rights** – Iran has enduring interests in protecting the rights of the Hazara, a Shia group numbering 3–4 million in central Afghanistan (who are not ethnically Persian but Mongol), who have strong cultural and religious ties to Iran. Iran also has ethnic and linguistic ties to other Afghan minorities (the Persian/Dari speaking Tajiks, Ismailis, and other smaller groups). Iran’s investments in infrastructure and reconstruction projects have tended to be in the Hazara-populated areas, including in Herat, now considered Afghanistan’s most stable and prosperous city.
- ▶ **Baluch Insurgency** – Iran is suspicious of a US role in the Baluch insurgency that has plagued southeastern Iran for decades. (The Baluch reside principally in Pakistan, but an estimated 1–2 million live in Iran, and have been subjected to discrimination particularly under the current government of President Ahmadinejad). Cross-border activity from Pakistan by the insurgent group Jundullah has increased since 2009, leading Iran’s leaders to suspect a foreign hand. The Obama Administration has condemned Jundullah violence but, according to RAND scholars Alireza Nader and Joya Laha, the Baluch issue is one of three principal Iranian concerns that shape Iran’s policies towards Afghanistan and cooperation with the west.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> See Alireza Nader and Joya Laha, “Iran’s Balancing Act in Afghanistan,” RAND (2011), pp. 11-13. See also Mark Perry, “False Flag,” in *foreignpolicy.com*, January 12, 2012, for the alleged Israeli dimension to the recent Baluch violence directed at Iran.

## Prospects for Cooperation

As of early 2012, the US Administration is focused on regional engagement as a vital component of its plan to withdraw US military forces by 2014. Unlike in Iraq, however, it does not anticipate a total civilianization of the effort, and its current negotiations with the Government of Afghanistan for a Strategic Partnership agreement could well involve a continued, albeit reduced, US military presence in the country beyond 2014. Administration officials are working on many fronts to strengthen institutions inside the country, to promote reconciliation, to support economic development and growth, and to enhance the capabilities of the Afghan security forces.

The engagement of neighbors is not the sole preoccupation, and recent setbacks in US-Afghan relations (the February 2012 Koran burning incident and its violent repercussions) have shifted the focus to more immediate efforts to stabilize the situation. Debates within the executive branch about whether the military and diplomatic efforts are effective further reduce momentum for productive engagement with the neighbors, who view US policy through the lens of their own interests. Of Afghanistan's neighbors, various ones see both benefits and costs to the perception that the west is not able to achieve its core objectives in Afghanistan.

For Iran, the NATO commitment to withdraw combat forces is welcome; the discussion of a long-term strategic relationship between Washington and Kabul is not. This ambiguous condition – short-term versus long-term interests – has not been conducive to early engagement. Given the other stresses in US-Iran relations, it appears that the policy community in Iran is simply not interested in making practical accommodations, and may well believe that its strategic interest in preventing a long-term US presence in Afghanistan is paramount. It is possible, nonetheless, that as the US withdrawal looms closer, Iranian officials on the ground will see some benefit in engagement, but they would still need to persuade officials in Tehran to empower them to work directly with the US and NATO forces.

Some speculate that once presidential elections in the United States this year and in Iran next year are completed, prospects for engagement will improve because the domestic climate in both countries favors a tough-minded approach during electoral campaigns, but more pragmatic considerations can come into play later. But candidates can make promises that are hard to disavow, and without knowing who the winners of the two contests will be, it is difficult to make a judgment about the likely course of policies in either capital. Overall, a change in presidential leadership in Iran would not necessarily be an important factor; in Iran the Supreme Leader holds the cards on matters of vital national interest including Afghanistan, and President Ahmedinejad has not been the obstacle to engagement in recent years.<sup>9</sup>

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9 See Nader and Laha, *op.cit.*, pp. 9-10, for a discussion of the Revolutionary Guards' role in "devising and implementing" Iran's policy in Afghanistan. Other Iranian ministries and power centers also play roles in policy debates in Tehran, but many of the troubling aspects of Iran's security presence in the country can be linked to the Revolutionary Guards and their political alignment with the Supreme Leader.



Even before presidential transitions, there is a lively calendar of opportunities for engagement in multilateral settings. This approach appears to be a more realistic prospect for initial US-Iran encounters than attempting to conduct a purely bilateral encounter. So like the nuclear architecture, prospects for engagement can begin in a multilateral format, but allow for bilateral discussions when both parties are ready.

## **Istanbul, November 2011**

Foreign Minister Salehi's appearance at the "Security and Cooperation in the Heart of Asia" meeting was a positive development. Iran demonstrated by its participation that it was willing to be included in new regional consensus building and, after Pakistan, could be a key player in determining whether conditions degrade seriously or not when ISAF scales back. Rhetorical posturing aside, Iran's presence at a senior level was a useful signal of its desire to be recognized as a key player in Afghanistan's future, and its willingness to participate in a western-organized conference.

While Iran and others resisted some of the more ambitious ideas for a new "mechanism" for regional security, Tehran signed the final communiqué full of an ambitious set of goals and activities to help Afghanistan during the transition. The communiqué called for "sincere, result-oriented cooperation at all levels," and noted in particular the helpful roles to be played by the United Nations and various Asian and Islamic organizations. It cited specific goals in counterterrorism, border controls, counternarcotics, trade, energy, transportation infrastructure, agriculture, education, and law enforcement. Iran could have an important role to play in virtually all these fields.

## **Bonn, December 2011**

US diplomats were pleased that Iran again sent its foreign minister to a larger international meeting in Bonn in early December 2011. The meeting, cohosted by Afghanistan and Germany, was attended by 85 countries and 15 international organizations. It produced a broad communiqué that endorsed international goals for a stable and democratic Afghanistan, and endorsed the constitution and the transition plan that would lead to full Afghan control of security by the end of 2014, with a pledge for continued international assistance and support.

In 2012, the series of regional and international consultations on Afghanistan will continue, with meetings scheduled for Dushanbe in March 2012, the NATO summit in Chicago in May, and an international meeting in Kabul in June 2012. Throughout this process, US diplomats will be empowered to do business with their Iranian counterparts, in multilateral or bilateral fora, but are not optimistic that the Iranian side intends to respond to such overtures.

Should conditions prove more favorable, perhaps in a year or two, it is possible to imagine a practical agenda for discussion. It is unlikely that there will be a deep and complete agreement on goals for Afghanistan, but both countries could do more to find areas of overlapping interest, and could

decide to manage the risk of divergent strategies in a more effective way. For the United States, this would mean accepting Iran as a legitimate player in many aspects of Afghan life, working to mitigate and protect against Iran's damaging activities against foreign forces, and accepting that the US will not be able to prevent Iran from having influence and leverage over various Afghan actors. For Iran, this would mean working pragmatically with international forces on issues of shared concern, such as border controls, without abandoning the long-term goal of seeing Afghanistan free of foreign (i.e. western) forces.

Getting the process started, as experienced US diplomats in Kabul and Washington have been trying for several years, entails a number of practical issues. The first hurdle would be representation: Who speaks for Iran? The power struggle between the Supreme Leader and his power base in the Revolutionary Guards versus the more technocratic experts in the ministries could result in a decision to send a technocrat with no authority to engage. The US is left to speculate whether a decision to attend a meeting constitutes a shift in policy or just a holding pattern. Genuine willingness to engage for some concrete outcomes would require an interlocutor who represents the interests of key power centers, and a "whole of government" decision to engage. On the US side, the Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan is a more authoritative spokesman for US policy, but engagement will generate some harsh reactions in parts of the US political system that could tie the hands of the US representative in some fashion.

## **Economic Development and Reconstruction**

Iran has a stake in Afghanistan's economic stability, as a market for Iranian goods and a transit route to larger markets in Central and South Asia. Iran also has been an important aid donor with a focus on reconstruction assistance for the central part of the country around Herat; western donors in Kabul acknowledge that Iran has been one of the more effective donors, and can demonstrate more output in terms of infrastructure, energy and construction projects than many western donors. Iran-Afghan trade is on the rise, to an estimated \$1.3 billion for the first half of 2011. Iran's reconstruction activities and trade investments could be integrated into national planning, and coordinated more efficiently with the plans of other donors. Sharing the burden for foreign assistance from heavy reliance on western donors to a more balanced mix of aid partners would be compatible with Iran's desire to see more regionalization of effort.

## **Security Assistance**

Iran would like to increase its involvement in training and coordinating with Afghan security forces; it has been critical of NATO/ISAF efforts because it believes the regional powers should be the key security partners for Kabul. The Afghan government may not like to give Iran a large role in post-ISAF security assistance, but will need to diversify its partners as part of the ISAF drawdown, and as a way of managing its independence from neighbors who may overplay their hands.

## Intra-Afghan Reconciliation

Iran has been most effective in engaging northern Afghan groups, and has defended the importance of having them well represented in Kabul, to avoid Pashtun domination of the country. But it has been increasingly active on the part of reconciliation that is most critical to the US strategy for withdrawal: to defuse the insurgency and enable at least moderate Taliban to be reintegrated into the national institutions and political life.

Meetings in Tehran in 2011 became an impromptu effort at track two diplomacy, with Tehran facilitating contact between former President (and now deceased) Rabbani and some Taliban figures. There is a concern in western capitals that Iran seeks to set up a competitive engagement with the Taliban, separate and parallel to the new US-Taliban negotiations process based in Qatar. Yet Iran and the US hold many similar views about how to manage the Taliban challenge: to work for integration of Taliban who can accept the Afghan constitution and disavow armed struggle, but to guard against the prospect of Taliban domination of the national political system. An ability to coordinate, or even just to share information, about the evolving situation with the Taliban and their intentions would be useful to all parties.

## Silk Road

The Administration's long-term vision for Afghanistan includes the ambitious Silk Road initiative, aimed at promoting regional trade and transit routes that will strengthen the positive and mutually beneficial ties between Afghanistan and its neighbors.<sup>10</sup> In Afghanistan, officials express concern that this US initiative will be an expensive, complex operation that will exceed regional capacities. Afghans prefer to expand trade and trade routes on a more modest, incremental basis, working bilaterally where opportunities present themselves, such as on the Central Asian borders. An issue for American policymakers will be to de-conflict US Iran policy and Afghan policy. US sanctions policy is premised on the economic isolation and weakening of Iran's ability to trade as a form of leverage or incentive on the nuclear question; the Afghan policy is premised on facilitating trade and transportation through new roads, pipelines, and economic zones. Engaging Iran over Afghanistan would allow both countries to think through what is possible to strengthen Afghanistan's economy and to explore how US policymakers might need to weigh the relative importance of competing goals vis-à-vis Iran and Afghanistan.

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10 See Thomas Nides, "The Silk Road through Afghanistan," *Foreign Affairs*, December 5, 2011, <<http://www.foreignaffairs.com>>.

## India and Pakistan as Factors

The other major neighbors of Afghanistan – in particular India and Pakistan – will also help shape Iran's attitudes and activities for the post-2014 period.

- ▶ Of these, **India** may emerge as particularly important, and may have the strongest<sup>11</sup> strategic alignment with Iran's interests. Iran and India have a historically important relationship, including disputes over centuries for control of Afghan territory. More recently, they have enjoyed close trade and energy relations. Since oil and banking sanctions were beefed up in late 2011, India surpassed China, at least temporarily, as the number-one customer of Iranian oil, putting India in a squeeze between Tehran and Washington. Most Indian foreign policy experts believe that the government feels obliged to accommodate Washington on Iran's nuclear program, but trade and energy relations are hard for New Delhi to give up. Leftist political forces in India want a more pro-Iran policy, precisely because it would create some distance with Washington and demonstrate more independence in Indian foreign policy.
- ▶ India and Iran share a tendency to view Western interest in the region – including a long-term US-security presence in Afghanistan – with suspicion, and a commitment to strengthening the non-Pashtun forces in northern Afghanistan to avoid Taliban or Pashtun dominance of Afghan politics. They share a concern about Sunni Islamic extremism, whether Afghan or Pakistani in origin. While India today is more confident, open to the west, and invested in a strategic partnership with Washington, it may share Iran's inclination to be preparing for a post-Karzai era and to groom non-Pashtun political forces as potential allies or agents of influence.
- ▶ But Iran and **Pakistan** can also do business despite the fact that they are not natural allies. There is deep distrust between the two states about their respective responsibility for Baluch separatism, and they represent two opposite poles regarding Saudi Arabia's role in the region. Nonetheless, they may find common ground related to suppressing the drug trade (and the need to deal with their own corrupt border guards and security officials who are part of the illicit trade). Iran will also want to avoid giving Islamabad the impression that it has any kind of formal pact with New Delhi at Pakistan's expense; Iran would more likely want to maintain normal relations with Pakistan despite their many substantive differences over Afghanistan, Baluchistan, Shia-Sunni tensions, and relations with the United States.

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11 See Seema Sirohi, "Iran Looms Large on Indo-US Relations," *Gateway House*, Indian Council on Global Relations, February 10, 2012; and Harsh V. Pant, "India's Iran Challenge," *Gateway House*, Indian Council on Global Relations, February 17, 2012. See also <<http://www.gatewayhouse.in>>.



## Current Realities and Barriers to Engagement

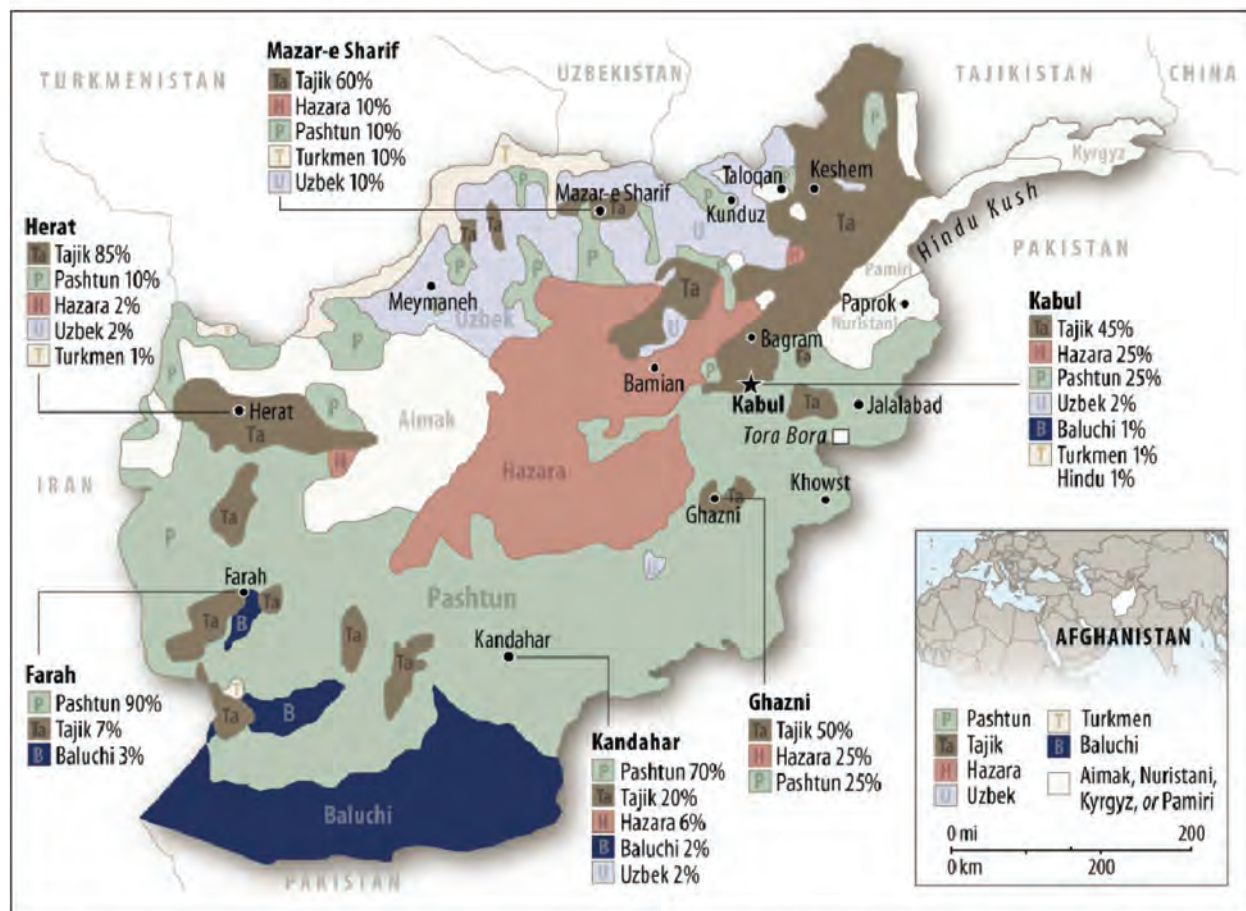
It is foolhardy to think that the compelling logic of engaging Iran over Afghanistan will overcome many formidable barriers to success any time soon. As of early 2012, the prospects for a productive US-Iran dialogue on any topic are remote. Many see a profound strategic rivalry for the future of the Middle East emerging between the United States and Iran, and therefore, any tactical cooperation is seen as of secondary importance. Strategic thinkers who believe blocking Iran's hegemonic ambitions in southwest Asia is an important US national security interest would likely assign a low value to cooperation over border controls or drug trafficking. Their counterparts in Tehran are more focused on the reality of US withdrawal, rather than ensuring that it is done in a way that does the least harm to Iran's interests in a stable Afghanistan. It will remain an uphill struggle to shift the logic to view such tactical cooperation as an end in and of itself, and possibly as a means to an opening for the larger purposes of a bilateral relationship.

Any initial engagement with Iran, on regional security or other areas for international cooperation, such as health issues or environmental challenges, will not be sufficient to transform this long and tragic estrangement. The nuclear issue will remain paramount for some in the national security community. Iran's leaders consistently reveal that they are motivated to defend the revolutionary character of their system in ways that simply do not conform to the more conventional norms and rules of inter-state behavior. Iran believes in its exceptionalism and its often able diplomats do their best to participate professionally in international bodies, despite the underlying mistrust of their leaders in international organizations and protocols, which they see as under US influence and control. The US and the other UN members engaged in nuclear talks find it hard to provide incentives that are meaningful to Iran's decisionmakers or sufficient to overcome that mistrust. Perhaps Afghanistan represents a more practical, less existential case where Iran's short-term and long-term interests can be engaged.

The door is already open; US diplomats are authorized to engage on this topic. Like the nuclear issue, the existing multilateral architecture can be used to facilitate contact but best would be to develop a reliable bilateral channel, not the fleeting encounters that, to date, have proven insufficient to achieve progress on the specifics of Afghanistan for its own sake, or for the larger purpose of changing the dynamics in the relationship overall.



## Map of Afghan Ethnicities



**Source:** 2003 National Geographic Society, <http://www.afghan-network.net/maps/Afghanistan-Map.pdf>. Adapted by Amber Wilhelm, CRS.

**Notes:** This map is intended to be illustrative of the approximate demographic distribution by region of Afghanistan. CRS has no way to confirm exact population distributions.





## Appendix

The following items first appeared as Spotlights on the Stimson website ([www.stimson.org](http://www.stimson.org)).



### 1. The Shia Factor for the Stabilization of Afghanistan

By Andrew Houk

September 27, 2010

As the United States assesses its Afghan strategy and planned beginning of withdrawal of forces in 2011, a close look at the policies of Afghanistan's neighbors is a useful piece of the puzzle.

As Afghanistan's only substantial Shia population, the Hazara share a strong connection to Iran that stretches back centuries. Ethnically, they represent Afghanistan's third largest minority, comprising 10-15 percent of a population of 28 million; they are neither Persian, Pashtun, nor Turkic, but are believed to be Mongol in origin. Their traditional homeland, referred to as the Hazarajat, lies in the Hindu Kush mountains of central Afghanistan. There are also enclaves in West Kabul, as well as in refugee communities in Iran and Pakistan.

For centuries the Hazara were renowned for their fierce independence, preserved by their mountainous homeland. However, following their defeat in 1883 by a British-backed Pashtun king, they were persecuted, enslaved, and forcefully urbanized; many fled to Iran and Pakistan. In 1929 this subjugation was followed by intense Pashtunization campaigns, further eroding Hazara identity. Afghanistan's wars since 1979 have realigned the ethnic power balance and been a source of social and political empowerment for Afghan minorities, particularly at the expense of the Pashtuns.

As violence continues in Afghanistan, and war weariness besets Western capitals, the new buzz prescribes a regional and political solution. However, such a solution will demand cooperation with an internationally isolated Iran.

As the epicenter of Shia Islam and its only Shia neighbor, Iran's religious influence among the Hazara is naturally robust. Historically, the Hazara often fought in Iran's armies and visited the shrines of Shia Imams in Iran and Iraq. Today, Iran funds mosques, universities, and charities in Afghanistan. Many prominent Hazara political leaders spent time in Iran for education, political refuge, or military support. The Hazara Ayatollah Asif Mohseni runs a seminary and television studio to broadcast Shia Islam in Kabul.

Cultural interaction between Iran and the Hazara also is strong. Iranian Farsi is very similar to Dari, which is spoken by half of Afghans and is the accepted lingua franca. Through television, radio, and the printed media, Dari enables Iran to pump its culture throughout Afghanistan. For better or for worse, Iran also invests in educational services, including curricula.

Iran also has hosted many Afghan refugees who fled to Iran in three waves since 1979 (peaking at 2.9 million in 1989). Currently, there are one million refugees in Iran, 43 percent of whom are Hazaras. A third of these refugees have spent more than half their life in Iran and face increasing pressure to repatriate.

Wading only waist deep into the regional and ethnic dynamics of Afghanistan, it is easy to assume that these religious and linguistic commonalities yield Iran influence. However, a deeper exploration of this relationship suggests that other factors may overshadow Iran's religious and cultural connection with the Hazara.

Hazara are far from a monolithic demographic. They comprise dozens of tribes in parts of six provinces. Urban Hazaras, such as those of Kabul, have very different experiences than those from the rural and conservative districts of the Hazarajat.

Politically, the Hazara are divided by nationalism, theology, foreign influence, and competing personalities. The current Hazara political establishment now faces new challenges from the intellectual elite. In 2009, an independent, western-educated, Hazara presidential candidate captured 80 percent of Hazara votes. Ranking high in national education scores, this class of educated elite (including women) is likely to grow.

As a religious and ethnic minority, the Hazaras will be best served by success of the American mission to leave a functioning constitutional democracy in Afghanistan. After two centuries of oppression, their electoral votes will yield small, yet influential, political power. Hazara women have also entered the political sphere, most famously, Habiba Sarabi, Afghanistan's first woman provincial governor. Both socially liberal and religiously conservative, Hazaras have everything to lose if the constitution in Afghanistan fails.

Like many Muslims, the Hazaras hold diverse religious and political views, ranging from Islamic fundamentalism to liberalism. This ongoing tension was manifested in 2009, as Hazarai women protestors clashed with Shia religious students over the Shia Personal Status Law, which effectively legislated the frequency of conjugal relations in Shia marriages.

The Hazara also are aware that Iranian patronage is not always in their interest. Throughout the years of conflict, Iran sustained Hazara militias, but also fought against them. Most notable, was Tehran's support for the Tajik government in Kabul in 1993, which attacked rebellious Hazara communities and fought against a revered Hazara icon, affectionately dubbed "Bab (father) Mazari." Mounting evidence of Iranian arms being found in the hands of the Taliban will only further erode trust, as the Taliban continues to attack southern Hazara communities and blockade supply routes into the mountains.

Hazaras living in underdeveloped regions may also resent Iran's heavy investment in the trade infrastructure of Afghanistan's western and northern provinces.

In sum, The Hazara are neither immune to Iran's influence, nor a pawn for the Islamic republic. As the US seeks a regional and political solution in Afghanistan, the Hazara may prove to be a valuable interlocutor with Iran.

Current efforts to negotiate with Taliban-associated Pashtuns would be complicated by giving all Afghanistan's minorities and neighbors a seat at the table, but ultimately yield stronger agreements. Should the south and east of Afghanistan fall under Taliban control, Kabul's survival will depend on the cohesiveness of the Afghan national army and police forces. In both cases, Iran and the Hazara have the potential to be constructive forces or spoilers.



## 2. Iran's Response to Drugs from Afghanistan

By Andrew Houk

January 28, 2011

Lying between Afghanistan and its major drug markets to the West, Iran has become a key player in global counternarcotic efforts.

The source of Iran's drug problem remains beyond its control. Afghanistan alone produces 89 percent of the world's opium. The sap extract

from poppy bulbs can be consumed at multiple levels of processing: raw, refined, or in chemically altered forms, such as morphine and heroin. Afghanistan is also the world's leading producer of cannabis resin and is reportedly beginning to produce synthetic drugs such as Methamphetamine.

Iran faces a constant stream of smugglers from Afghanistan and its contiguous neighbors. Almost half of Afghanistan's opiates cross into Iran; about 15 percent of which is absorbed by Iranian abusers, ranging in numbers from 1 - 4 million. With a population of 76 million, Iran follows only Russia in heroin consumption per capita. However, when considering Iran's consumption of nearly half the world's raw opium, it is the global leader in opiate abuse.

The National Drug Control Headquarters of Iran (DCHQ) has declared drug addiction to be the "largest social harm and a major threat for the national health and security" as well as the main "hurdle" for development.<sup>12</sup> For drug abusers, opiates are highly addictive and overdose-prone, especially for heroin. Producers, traffickers, and corrupted officials also become dependent on the trade's lucrative profits. Society also must sustain the effects of related contagions such as HIV and Tuberculosis as well as poor governance, organized crime, and sustained insurgencies. These trends are poised to worsen as amphetamine-group drugs gain traction in the region.

Drug abuse facilitates behaviors that spread communicable diseases, especially between intravenous drug abusers. The number of individuals infected with HIV in Iran has doubled since 2001 to about

<sup>12</sup> Performance of the DCHQ in the Fourth Development Plan: 2004-2009.

91,000 according to UNAID estimates. Of reported cases of HIV in Iran, 70 percent are believed to be transmitted by dirty syringes. Without intervention, there is a significant public health risk as drug abusers interact with society, especially family, sex workers, or inmates; drug related offenses account for half of Iran's prison sentences.

Since 2005, lowering the supply and demand of illicit drugs in Iran has been a concentrated national effort.

To reduce the supply of drugs seeping from its eastern borders, Iran has deployed 50,000 Revolutionary Guard border agents and invested about \$1 billion in land barriers. Securing its borders will remain difficult; its Afghanistan-Pakistan border spans 1,845 km and another 1,892 km when including Turkmenistan and the Caspian Sea. Often using motorized or animal caravans, smugglers can be heavily armed and dangerous. Iran reports that since 1979, 3,700 Iranian border agents have been killed and 12,000 wounded in the line of duty.

Captured drug smugglers are dealt with harshly. In 2010 Iran reportedly hanged 179 smugglers and another 65 in the first month of 2011, according to an AFP count from media reports.

On the demand side of the problem, Iran has gone beyond incarceration to include prevention and treatment programs. In the last five years, Iran has doubled the number of public awareness and addiction prevention campaigns implemented in schools, workplaces, and homes.

For existing addicts, Iran has gradually adopted "Harm Reduction" programs in its prison systems and some cities. There are now about 850 clinics in Iran (150 government-run). Currently, about a quarter of Iran's known intravenous drug abusers receive methadone treatments. To respond to the spread of blood-borne and sexually transmitted infections, clinics also provide clean syringes, razors, condoms, and counseling.<sup>13</sup>

Iran's counternarcotic strategy has demonstrated some effectiveness, yet the challenges remain daunting. In 2009 the UN Office on Drugs and Crimes (UNODC), credited Iran with "holding back a flood of heroin." Iran alone is responsible for nearly a quarter of global heroin seizures and 60 percent of all opiates. In 2010, UNAIDS praised Iran's prison Harm Reduction programs as an "evidence-based approach marked by tolerance, pragmatism and compassion."

Greater international cooperation is a priority for Iran's strategy in 2011. In recent years, Iran has regularly attended and hosted international seminars and workshops such as the Paris Pact Initiative, a UNODC South Asia coalition. Since 2009, the UN-sponsored and Tehran-coordinated "Triangular Initiative" conducted six joint operations between Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, seizing 2,500 kg of illicit drugs and arresting 74 traffickers. Overall success may depend on many factors, not the least of which is its ability to work with its neighbors and solicit more support from the international community.<sup>14</sup>

Iran's response to illicit drug trafficking and abuse underscores two enduring facts. First, the production and abuse of illicit drugs in Afghanistan are likely to continue to haunt the region and hinder development. Second, Iran can be expected to be a key player in any sustainable solution, as both a victim and an innovative contributor in regional and international counter narcotic efforts.

13 UNAIDS Iran Progress Report, 2010.

14 Drug Control Report 2009, DCHQ.



### 3. Transboundary Water Sharing: Iran and Afghanistan

By Andrew Houk

March 22, 2011

The ability to harness Afghanistan's rivers for hydropower and agriculture is a critical element of its economic development, but it also risks reducing flows for its downstream neighbors.

For millennia, the rivers formed in the mountains of central Afghanistan have sustained life in its

western territories. In an otherwise arid region, the control of water has been a point of tension since the modern borders were established in the mid-nineteenth century. Five rivers comprise this relationship:

- ▶ The Helmand, Farah, Khash, and Ardaskan (Harut) rivers run south-west and meet on the border to form the Hamun Lakes in the Sistan Basin near Zabol, Iran.
- ▶ The Harirud (Tejen) river flows westward before bending north to define the Iran-Afghan border, eventually emptying into Turkmenistan.

Afghanistan lacks the ability to fully exploit its rivers. After 30 years of war, the existing water infrastructure has eroded. This deficit in water management capacity exacts a heavy toll, exacerbating unemployment, food insecurity, water disputes, and the production of crops that can compete with illicit drugs. Without the means to store and divert water, existing infrastructure is vulnerable to devastating seasonal floods and droughts. Afghanistan also needs electricity, which only reaches six percent of its rural communities and 15 percent of its urban population.

Infrastructure and water management are thus a key part of the Afghan National Development Strategy. At least five major projects promise to transform the economies in their surrounding areas; all have been delayed due to Taliban attacks.

At the same time, Afghanistan's development has consequences for Iran's eastern provinces.

On Iran's southeast border, Afghanistan's rivers replenish the Hamun lakes, which provide nearly one million Iranians with water for drinking, crops, and protein (fish and animal fodder) as well as flushing accumulated salt from the lakebeds and moderating the climate. When an extended drought completely evaporated the lakes in 2001, the ecosystem collapsed, unemployment rose, and 124 villages were abandoned as sandstorms blasted the region.

In northeast Iran, 3.4 million Iranians rely on the Harirud river basin for water. This includes the population of Mashhad (2.4 million), who depend on water pumped 182 km from the reservoir of the Doosti dam to supplement their declining ground water levels strained by a tenfold growth in population.

Already managing the challenges of refugees, drug trafficking, and restive minority populations, additional food and water scarcity, unemployment, and human migration would further destabilize Iran's eastern provinces.

Historically, cooperation and trust between Iran and Afghanistan on the issue of water has been limited. With the exception of an unbinding 1973 water accord that defined an acceptable rate of discharge from the Helmand, there are no formal water-sharing agreements. Trust was further eroded when the accord was breached by Afghanistan during a drought from 1998 and 2002. The development of more water infrastructure in Afghanistan, unbounded by agreements, will increase Iran's vulnerability.

To secure its water interests, Iran appears to have adopted a paradoxical strategy similar those observed in Lebanon and Iraq. While pursuing its interests through legal channels, it has employed less legitimate operations to serve as reminders in Kabul and Washington not to disappoint Tehran.

Iran's official policy is to reach formal agreements and to pursue the benefits of cooperation, such as flood and drought control, political stability, and regional economic development. Since 2003, Iran has entered into a UN partnership to protect the Hamun lakes and established an Iran-Afghan commission to negotiate the discharge flow of the Helmand River. In late 2010 energy ministers from Iran, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan agreed to establish a tripartite "supreme water council" that will reconvene in Tehran in April 2011.

At the same time, there are reports that Iran may be using the Taliban as proxies to disrupt Afghanistan's water projects. Many local Afghans believe that attacks on construction sites are enabled by Iran. Both the provincial governor and police chief of Farah publically have claimed to have intelligence implicating Iran, and caches of Iranian manufactured arms and explosives have been found in the vicinity of the dams. These speculations also are consistent with US reports that Iran's Qods Forces have provided select Taliban with limited training, arms, and plastic explosives since 2006.

Iran's collaboration with the Taliban, despite the political risks, is indicative of its urgency to enter into binding water sharing agreements while Afghanistan's water management capacity is low. At a time when Iran is weakened by international isolation, Tehran not only jeopardizes relations with India (the funder and contractor for the Salma dam), but also its endeavors to export electricity and hydropower stations to Afghanistan.

Despite Tehran's surreptitious approach, its water security concerns are legitimate and deserve serious consideration. Moving forward, intentional steps to address Iran's concerns would be a productive start toward an optimal regional solution, the development of equitable water management regulated by legal cooperation agreements.



## 4. Pakistan and Afghanistan: Turbulence and Transitions

By Ellen Laipson

October 21, 2011

The anticipated drawdown of international forces in Afghanistan is adding to the turmoil in the domestic and foreign policies of Afghanistan and its key neighbor, Pakistan. Few expect the “reconciliation” of the various combatants in the war in time for the planned withdrawal of

ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) by 2014. Despite the uncertainties of the security environment, efforts to improve government effectiveness, in part by strengthening subnational institutions, are producing results.

A recent trip to Pakistan and Afghanistan demonstrated the complexity of the current moment: not all trends are moving in the same direction or at the same pace. From afar, security conditions trump all other factors, and each violent incident dampens optimism about a stable transition in Afghanistan and further strains US-Pakistan relations. Close up, there are other interesting and important developments in the national lives of these two critical countries.

Pakistan is much more than the neighbor of Afghanistan. It has some of the attributes of the middle powers that are the dynamic new players in international politics. It is a country of 180 million, with an impressive, educated elite, a sophisticated civil society, and an expanding middle class. The elite have embraced new technologies and are using the natural resources of the country to generate economic growth. Ambitious moves to devolve more power to the five provinces suggest a state with some capacity to address its national challenges with vigor and boldness.

At the same time, the maldistribution of income, opportunity, and access has created many social deficits, and Pakistan does not live up to its potential. Deep identity issues dating from its partition from India more than 60 years ago, and a stalled democratization process that has enabled the privileged armed forces to remain the dominant power center keep Pakistan from joining the ranks of the rising middle powers, and from satisfying the demands of its citizenry.

Pakistan’s view of its threat environment compels its leaders to place its security concerns above other public policy priorities. India’s rise is deeply worrying to Islamabad, and profoundly shapes Pakistan’s sense of urgency about its role in Afghanistan. Pakistan invokes its vital interests in Afghanistan, and insists that India does not have comparable stakes and should limit itself to development activities. So Pakistan believes it has a higher claim to influence in Kabul; the recent strategic partnership agreement between Kabul and New Delhi is a severe blow to Pakistan’s interests. It suggests that Islamabad only will be more, not less, attached to its non-state client/partners, such as the Haqqani group and various Taliban elements. Opinions varied among Pakistanis as to whether a post-ISAF government in Kabul should or would be entirely under Taliban control or in a power-sharing arrangement with other political forces.



On the Afghan side, the reconciliation plans of the international community do not seem to be gaining traction. The assassination of former President Rabbani was a severe blow, and there was much *cui bono* talk in Kabul – did the attack represent a split in Taliban ranks, or his own Tajik adversaries, or was it unnamed powers in government that did not want him to succeed in reconciliation talks? While Secretary Clinton presses for renewed efforts at reconciliation during her visit this week, some key constituencies – including women – are not sure it's a desirable goal. Others say it may be desirable but not achievable, so best to focus on government effectiveness and the basic security requirements of the population.

The Afghan government is making headway in improving the delivery of basic services to its people. Access to public education has expanded, for girls and boys, and the Ministry of Education aims to move from 8 million kids in school to 14 million over the next few years (from a 2001 base of one million). Public health services have improved. Strengthening the capacity of the provincial and district level governance structures is a key way donors and international non-governmental organizations are helping. Planning for economic growth and weaning the country of foreign aid dependency is underway, but is a decades-long process and will require technical support from the international community even when the foreign forces have left.

There is brave talk of protecting Afghanistan from the predatory behavior of its neighbors, through non-aggression or non-interference clauses in various agreements, but the reality is that Afghanistan will remain the weaker party in several of its bilateral relationships. Outside powers, such as the ISAF contributing countries, will not likely be able to insulate Afghanistan from outside manipulation, but strategies to engage the neighbors – who at some level all have a stake in a stable Afghanistan – are critical during the period of withdrawal.

It may well be that Pakistan is the most important neighbor now, with its nominal control of the territory from which many insurgents operate, but other trade and investment partners including India, Turkmenistan, and Iran have roles to play in helping Afghanistan develop a post-war economy. In this regard, the Obama Administration's Silk Road initiative offers an ambitious vision of regional trade and interaction. It will require Afghanistan to have robust enough transport routes, and trade regulatory rules. It may also require the US and other international players to address the likely conflict between ongoing sanctions to isolate Iran, and the equally compelling requirement to build a more stable future for Afghanistan.



## 5. Iran-Afghan Security Cooperation

By Andrew Houk

November 17, 2011

At the regional meeting of Afghanistan's neighbors in Istanbul in November 2011, Iranian Foreign Minister Salehi reiterated his opposition to a strategic agreement between the US and Afghanistan, calling instead for increased security assistance from neighboring countries. Iran's

security interests in Afghanistan suggest a complicated web of considerations that could lead to some modest cooperation or convergence of goals between Iran and the United States.

Iran has genuine strategic interests in assisting Afghanistan to become a functioning and responsible state, and is perhaps Afghanistan's second most important neighbor, after Pakistan.

The 582-mile border is one key manifestation of how Afghanistan affects stability in Iran. Since 1979, waves of refugees have fled to Iran, currently estimated at more than 3 million.<sup>15</sup> In 2009, Iran intercepted 41 percent of global opiates, yet 145 metric tons of heroin still crossed the border for consumption and trafficking.<sup>16</sup> The bulk of the drugs enter through the porous and unmanned southeast border with Nimroz Province, where Iranian and Afghan border police reportedly have engaged in several skirmishes in recent months. Securing its border has also been costly. Iran has spent more than \$1 billion in land barriers, 3,700 border agents have been killed, and 12,000 have been wounded since 1979. Domestically, intravenous drug abuse causes 70 percent of Iran's HIV cases, estimated to have doubled since 2001, according to UNAID estimates

Iran's restive eastern provinces also gain economic opportunities with stabilization. Though a small percentage of Iranian trade, exports to Afghanistan have reportedly grown by more than 40 percent in 2011 according to Iran's ambassador to Kabul, and are estimated to reach \$2 billion by the end of the year. In November 2011, Iran announced that it has spent more than \$600 million on Afghan infrastructure. Arid and impoverished, Iran's eastern provinces also depend heavily on water from Afghanistan's seasonal rivers to sustain settlements and fragile ecosystems.

Western Afghanistan, once part of Iran, provides it with strategic depth, but its ethnic, lingual, and religious ties connect Iran to broader Afghan demographics. Linguistically, nearly half of Afghans speak Dari (a dialect similar to Iranian Persian), creating cultural bonds amplified by Afghanistan's burgeoning media and education sectors. Iran reports that more than 300,000 Afghan students study in Iranian schools and 7,000 continue higher education in Iran.<sup>17</sup> Iran also shares ethnic ties

15 UNHCR, "Voluntary Returns to Afghanistan – Over 60,000 this Year," October 28, 2011, <<http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/search?page=search&docid=4eaa8ad99&query=iran>>.

16 UNODC, "World Drug Report 2011," (United Nations Publication, Sales No. E.11.XI.10), <[http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/WDR2011/World\\_Drug\\_Report\\_2011\\_ebook.pdf](http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/WDR2011/World_Drug_Report_2011_ebook.pdf)>

17 "FM: Iran's Investments in Afghan Infrastructures Surpass \$600 mln," *Fars News Agency*, November 13, 2011, <<http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9007273167>>.

with Tajiks (27 percent) and Aimaks (4 percent). Religiously, Iran shares a connection with Shia minorities (20 percent) living in Afghanistan's central Hazara region and in larger cities.

The most substantive existing security cooperation between and Iran and Afghanistan exists through the UN sponsored Triangular Initiative, which coordinates counter-narcotic operations between Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran. Since late 2009, the members have conducted 11 joint operations and established Border Liaison Offices to facilitate communication and the exchange of intelligence.<sup>18</sup> In July 2011, the Executive Director of the UNODC observed: "Iran has put in place one of the world's strongest counter-narcotics responses... These joint operations demonstrate the Triangular Initiative's success in building mutual trust and confidence among its partners."

Iran and Afghanistan are working to expand bilateral security cooperation in anticipation of the withdrawal of NATO forces by 2014. In December 2010, while hosting Afghan President Karzai in Tehran, the Iranian Defense Minister told of Iran's willingness to help strengthen the Afghan army, describing Tehran-Kabul relations as "strategic." In March 2011, the Iranian Interior Minister promised to "spare no expense" in providing facilities and training to help Afghanistan develop counternarcotic capabilities.

In June 2011, both countries hosted high level meetings, inked agreements, and announced plans to expand security cooperation. Marking an historic visit by an Iranian Defense Minister in Kabul on June 18, plans were announced to conduct joint operations against smuggling and to prepare security arrangements for the withdrawal of NATO forces. Only days later, Iran's Deputy Interior Minister and his Afghan counterpart met in Tehran to reveal plans to expand intelligence sharing, joint counter operations, police training, and annual security cooperation meetings.

Iran is also attempting to coordinate the efforts of other players in Afghanistan. On the sidelines of Tehran's terrorism conference in June 2011, the Iranian Press reported that the Presidents of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq met with President Ahmadinejad to discuss the security implications of the withdrawal of NATO forces. Additionally, Ahmadinejad met with the Afghan and Pakistani presidents to announce plans for increased political, security, economic, and cultural cooperation, including joint efforts against militants and narcotics trafficking; they agreed to hold a third trilateral meeting in November 2011.

At the Islamic Awakening conference in Tehran in September 2011, the Washington Post reports that Iran tried to encourage dialogue between the Afghan delegation and several known Taliban affiliates in attendance. However, there is also growing evidence that Iran is providing limited support to armed militias, including elements of the Taliban, to attack NATO forces or discourage construction of water management infrastructure.

Iran is participating in international meetings on Afghanistan. On November 2, 2011, Iranian Foreign Minister Salehi decided to attend the "Security and Cooperation in the Heart of Asia" conference in Istanbul. Though US and Iranian officials did not engage one another, a US Department of State official described Iran's decision to attend and to sign the meeting's declared confidence-building measures as "evidence of a good step forward." Iran is expected to attend the much larger international conference in Germany in December 2011.

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18 UNODC, "Triangular Initiative," <<http://www.unodc.org/islamicrepublicofiran/en/triangular-initiative.html>>.

Iranian cooperation is only one element of establishing stability in Afghanistan, but a prerequisite nonetheless. Iran's tough rhetoric against the US role in Afghanistan, even its covert operations with armed Afghan elements, clearly works at cross purposes to US policy efforts. Nonetheless, a measured assessment of Iran's actions and interests reveals areas of shared strategic interests and space to work in tandem, if not together.