

## ISSUE BRIEF

# Iran's Bottom Line in Afghanistan

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*"Therefore, it can be said that one of the strategic goals of the U.S. in attacking Afghanistan [in 2001] and continuing its occupation was to prevent Iran's influence in Afghanistan."<sup>1</sup>*

In Iran, the above is a commonplace sentiment expressed by officials and the country's state-run media. What such statements convey is that the Iranian approach toward Afghanistan remains overwhelmingly security-centric and intrinsically a secondary consideration in Tehran's broader regional quest for influence.

In other words, it is a foreign policy issue viewed mainly in a zero-sum game framework involving a multitude of Iran's regional rivals or even partners. In that context, oscillating US-Iranian relations are an important factor that considerably influence how Tehran attempts to balance its geopolitical, security, and economic interests in Afghanistan.

While Tehran's approach to Afghanistan is security-centric, it can hardly be said to be immutable. In fact, since the US military intervention in Afghanistan in 2001, Tehran's Afghan policy has fluctuated a fair amount. In late 2001, during a policy dispute with hard-liners in the Iranian state over whether to assist the United States in its anti-Taliban campaign, the moderate government of President Mohammad Khatami prevailed in Tehran, and Iran ended up offering its cooperation to Washington in the military campaign against the Taliban. This turned out to be a short-lived moment of Iranian-American cooperation in Afghanistan.

Despite the ups and downs in US-Iran relations, a policy consensus of sorts has emerged in Tehran that is essentially rooted in the basic assumption that its relations with the United States are adversarial, and this factor will remain a constant in the foreseeable future. Accordingly, many Iranians increasingly and openly regard any decline in US influence in Afghanistan as a net win for Tehran.

This posture by Tehran is arguably unduly shortsighted when considered in a historical context. Given the long record of failure



**Pushback: Exposing and Countering Iran** is a project of the Middle East Peace and Security Initiative. This series of reports examines the drivers, prospects, and constraints underpinning Iran's efforts to undermine US policy in the Middle East and restructure the regional order to its liking. Drawing on new digital forensic evidence and expert analysis, this effort offers strategic and policy recommendations to address the growing challenge Iran poses to stability in the Middle East.

<sup>1</sup> Amir M. Haji-Yousefi, "Iran's Foreign policy in Afghanistan: The Current Situation and Future Prospects," *South Asian Studies* 27.1 (January-June 2012): 63-75.

among Afghanistan's immediate neighbors to agree on a workable blueprint to return a degree of normalcy to the country, the zero-sum calculation of US success in Afghanistan does not allow for consideration of the benefits that might accrue to Iran should Afghanistan achieve a measure of stability.

The view of US-Iran relations as adversarial is not unanimous; there is an even more robust consensus among national security practitioners in Tehran that events in Afghanistan have an immediate impact on the country's national interests, which in turn necessitate proactive Iranian policies on a list of fronts. These priorities include: buttressing the western Afghan provinces on the border with Iran to create an indisputable "zone of influence"; and absorbing Afghanistan into the Iranian sphere of economic power through pan-regional initiatives such as the Iran-Afghanistan-India agreement, in order to use Iran's Chabahar port as a conduit for trade among India, Iran, Afghanistan, and the landlocked countries of Central Asia.<sup>2</sup>

Iran has a range of interests in Afghanistan from bottom-line, security concerns to more short- and medium-term considerations and from the explicit to still-developing interests, such as:

- Relations with the Afghan Taliban
- Stance on what it perceives as a US-Pakistani-Saudi Arabian front in Afghanistan
- Preparations for projected socio-economic changes in Afghanistan, including possible radical demographic shifts
- The Afghan Shia population and how to work with them as potential proxies for Iranian interests in Afghanistan and elsewhere in the broader Middle East

One certainty is that Iran, and clearly the United States as well, are in Afghanistan for the long run; however, neither have yet to coherently quantify what an Iranian "win" in Afghanistan would look like.

While this is an open-ended question for now, the Iranians have, at the same time, shown a penchant

to reassess key previous policies, including the once much-publicized opposition to the Afghan Taliban. In fact, today Iranian officials freely admit that Tehran has made a policy U-turn on the future of the Taliban.

Put simply, Iran's bottom line in Afghanistan is to pursue a multi-pronged strategy of expanding its hard and soft power, while minimizing the clout of its most potent rivals. In doing so, Tehran is betting both on mainstream Afghan political groups and also increasingly on the Taliban movement.

### Tehran's Approach to the Afghan Question

Iran's ties with Afghanistan are firm. This is true in terms of geographic proximity, cultural ties, and even sectarian linkages given that some 15-20 percent of Afghans are Shia Muslims, the majority branch of Islam in Iran. All of Afghanistan, including its many ethnic and religious groups, falls within *Iran Zamin* (Land of Iran), the greater sphere of Iranian cultural reach rooted in the legacies of successive Persian Empires.

In official Iranian literature, there is a conventional belief that Tehran has been the predominant foreign power in Afghanistan since it emerged as an independent entity in 1747 under Ahmad Shah Durrani. In fact, western Afghanistan was part of the Persian Empire until it was ceded to Afghanistan in the mid-nineteenth century thanks to a British-concocted arrangement that was seeking to establish a buffer zone around its prized jewel, the British Raj.<sup>3</sup>

During the reign of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (the shah, 1941-1979), Iran was heavily vested in Afghanistan; the Iranian shah considered himself not only the guarantor of Afghan independence from the Soviet Union, but also an honest broker who could bring different Afghan political interests to the table. The shah's assessments of Afghanistan were entirely security-focused, something that would be passed on to the Islamist revolutionary regime that succeeded him in 1979.

Above all, the shah wanted to keep the country from falling under Soviet tutelage. When Afghan King Mohammad Zahir Shah was toppled in 1973 by his leftist cousin (Mohammad Daoud Khan)—who managed, to Tehran's horror, to end Afghanistan's monarchy—the

2 Arash Karami, "Rouhani praises 'historic' day for Iran, India, Afghanistan," *Al-Monitor*, May 23, 2016, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/05/iran-india-modi-chabahar-afghanistan-ghani.html>.

3 Alex Vatanka, *Iran and Pakistan: Security, Diplomacy and American Influence* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2015), 83-88.



Former President Hamid Karzai inspects soldiers at a military academy in Kabul, 2002. *Photo credit: Wikimedia.*

Iranian shah went to great lengths to explore ways to return Mohammad Zahir Shah back to power.<sup>4</sup>

At other times, the Iranian shah threatened to probe the return of western Afghanistan to Iran as a way of seeking to subdue Kabul when it was uncooperative. During this time, Tehran had a number of fundamental disputes with Kabul, all of which are still outstanding.

Among the disputes are the issue of the joint use of water from the Helmand River;<sup>5</sup> the issue of Kabul supporting Iranian ethnic Baluch militants in their campaign against Tehran; and the perennial Iranian fear of Afghanistan as a staging ground for third-party actors to conduct destabilization campaigns against Iran, such as after the communist revolution of 1978, when Afghanistan joined the so-called anti-imperialist

camp placing it into opposition to the policies of the shah's Iran.

At that time, the shah viewed the Soviet Union as the likely external aggressor. Today, the Islamic Republic of Iran sees the United States and its regional allies—particularly Saudi Arabia and to a lesser extent Pakistan—as the danger from without. In other words, the fear of Afghanistan as staging ground has been a constant factor in Iranian calculations irrespective of the type of government in Tehran.

The emergence of an Islamist ruling class in Tehran in 1979 further complicated relations between Iran and Afghanistan. Unlike the Iranian authorities today, there is no evidence that the shah ever sought to meddle directly in Afghanistan's affairs by carving out bespoke client groups among Afghans based on sectarian or ethnic calculations that could advance Iran's interests.

Iranian officials acknowledge that Tehran, since 1979, consistently has wooed those Afghan communities and political factions with the closest religious and linguistic

<sup>4</sup> Vatanka, *Iran and Pakistan*, 84-85.

<sup>5</sup> Fatemeh Aman, "Water Dispute Escalating between Iran and Afghanistan," Atlantic Council, September 7, 2016, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/publications/issue-briefs/water-dispute-escalating-between-iran-and-afghanistan>.

backgrounds. In particular, in terms of grass-roots centered activities, the ethnic Shia Hazara Afghans and ethnic Tajiks (mostly Sunni, but Persian speakers) have secured the bulk of Tehran's attention and support centered on educational and media operations. One prominent Afghan official, Daud Moradian, estimated that Tehran spends about \$100 million a year on Afghan "media, civil society projects and religious schools."<sup>6</sup>

"Iran's ultimate objective . . . is all aimed at securing [its] clout in the future of Afghan politics and throughout its governing bodies."

But Tehran's involvement is also aimed at influencing the highest level of Afghan's political elite irrespective of background. The case of Iranian sponsorship of the former Afghan president, the ethnic Pashtun and Sunni, Hamid Karzai, is a prime example. In 2010, Karzai had to publicly admit that Iran regularly provided bags of cash to his presidential palace, which he characterized as "routine aid."<sup>7</sup>

Meanwhile, many Western reports claim that Iran has about one-fifth of the 249 members of the Afghan parliament under its patronage.<sup>8</sup> While such claims are empirically uncorroborated, a simple sampling of the broadcast and print material produced in Afghanistan and statements by officials in Kabul showcases the extent of the perception of Iranian influence in Afghanistan, and therefore the extent of Tehran's soft-power reach.

Iran's ultimate objective, whether it is a grassroots-based operation aimed at accumulating soft-power "credit" among the Afghan population or cultivating

prominent political figures, is all aimed at securing Iran's clout in the future of Afghan politics and throughout its governing bodies. In that sense, the mechanism that the Iranians use is often similar to its nearest rivals here. For example, officials in the government of the United States also admitted to having provided bags of cash to Karzai's presidential palace as a way of maintaining a working relationship.<sup>9</sup>

And yet, aspects of Iranian outreach among Afghans are unique. A common complaint from Afghan officials, including Moradian, is that the Islamic Republic of Iran has essentially squandered many opportunities to constructively attract ordinary Afghans by failing to appeal to the common cultural values shared between the populations of the two countries as historic members of the *Iran Zamin*.

Instead, Tehran has been either overly selective in its approach by focusing on just the Afghan Shia or the ethnic Tajik, or opting to use controversial ideological or sectarian (and often anti-US) messaging that is aimed at only a minority of Afghans, while making the majority anxious about ultimate Iranian intentions.

Typically, the Iranian authorities would portray their activities as purely defensive and in response to US efforts to contain Tehran's influence in Afghanistan. Increasingly, however, Iran views Saudi Arabia with greater concern and so is more likely to cite Saudi efforts in Afghanistan as necessitating a robust counter policy.

In 2016, Riyadh announced that it would build a \$500 million Islamic University in Nangarhar in eastern Afghanistan, and Tehran became considerably alarmed. In 2012, the Saudis had agreed to build another Islamic university in Kabul.<sup>10</sup> Tehran's concern involves the language of instruction: both planned Saudi-funded universities are to use Arabic in all classes, whereas Persian has been the undisputed lingua franca in Afghanistan for centuries.<sup>11</sup> Also, Saudi

6 Amie Ferris-Rotman, "Insight: Iran's 'Great Game' in Afghanistan," Reuters, May 24, 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-iran-media-idUSBRE84NOCB20120524>.

7 Ernesto Londoño, "Iran intensifies efforts to influence policy in Afghanistan," *Washington Post*, January 4, 2012, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/iran-strives-to-play-spoiler-in-afghanistan/2012/01/01/gIQAZ6gCbP\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/iran-strives-to-play-spoiler-in-afghanistan/2012/01/01/gIQAZ6gCbP_story.html).

8 Alireza Nader et al., "Iran's Influence in Afghanistan: Implications for the U.S. Drawdown," RAND Corporation, June 11, 2014, [http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR600/RR616/RAND\\_RR616.pdf](http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR600/RR616/RAND_RR616.pdf), 7.

9 Matthew Rosenberg, "With Bags of Cash, C.I.A. Seeks Influence in Afghanistan," *New York Times*, April 28, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/29/world/asia/cia-delivers-cash-to-afghan-leaders-office.html>.

10 "Saudi Arabia builds the largest Islamic center in Afghanistan," BBC, October 28, 2012, [http://www.bbc.com/persian/afghanistan/2012/10/121028\\_zs\\_saudi\\_islamic\\_centre\\_kabul.shtml](http://www.bbc.com/persian/afghanistan/2012/10/121028_zs_saudi_islamic_centre_kabul.shtml).

11 "Saudi Arabia To Build University Worth \$500 Million In Nangarhar," *Middle East Press*, October 15, 2016, <http://middleeastpress.com/english/saudi-arabia-to-build-university-worth-500-million-in-nangarhar>.

money was suddenly coming into Afghanistan in significant volumes. This alarms Tehran, because with Saudi money come attempts by Riyadh to propagate its anti-Iran message.

Elsewhere and more recently, Tehran watched with much interest and perhaps even some anxiety when the Saudis lavishly hosted the Afghan Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah, a long-time close ally of Iran, when he visited Riyadh in October 2016.<sup>12</sup> Afghan media were quick to point out that this was the first time in some thirty years that an ethnic Tajik Afghan official and someone close to Tehran had been invited by the Saudis to visit Riyadh.<sup>13</sup>

A few months earlier, in January 2016, Abdullah had chosen to visit Iran days after Riyadh broke off diplomatic relations with Tehran. Due to the timing, that visit by Abdullah was portrayed by Iranian officials as a sign of Kabul's loyalty to Tehran.

Nonetheless, Iranian trepidation about Abdullah's visit to Riyadh can only be seen in the context of its zero-sum game competition with the United States and its allies in Afghanistan. Iran has had to re-adjust some of its entrenched policies accordingly, including its historic attitude toward the Taliban.

### Evolving View on the Taliban

For a long time, Tehran's public position on the Taliban was to dismiss having any ties to the group while attacking it as a "terrorist" entity. But this position has, over the years, changed significantly. In a notable case from 2009, Alaeddin Boroujerdi, a prominent Iranian parliamentarian and a seasoned operative in Tehran's Afghan-related policy making, deemed the idea of negotiations with the Taliban as unacceptable. He said a "group that is terrorist" and shows a "false image of Islam" cannot be a partner for peace in Afghanistan.<sup>14</sup>

By this time, the Iranian leadership had already been unnerved by what was seen to be the potential rehabilitation of the Taliban at the hands of Iran's regional rivals. In October 2008, the Saudis had hosted peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government.<sup>15</sup> As it watched from the sidelines and lamented the Saudi mediation effort, Tehran moved fast to stop the decline of its role as one of the principal kingmakers in Kabul. For Tehran, any successful Saudi initiative in Afghanistan meant a corresponding decrease in Iranian influence in that country.

Soon after, in 2011, Iran began to test the waters, inviting a Taliban delegation to attend a pan-Islamic conference in Tehran.<sup>16</sup> This Iranian caution was understandable. The Iranians, after all, had nearly declared war on the Taliban after the group killed a number of Iranian diplomats and operatives when it overran the city of Mazari Sharif in 1998. Sensitive to Iranian public opinion, Tehran moved ahead on the question of working relations with the Taliban, but only gently.

Fearing a loss of influence unless it could bolster its credentials as a versatile broker and taking account of the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) in Afghanistan from 2014, Tehran altered its view of the Taliban. Iran began to view the Taliban as a counter to the rise of ISIS, which is far more anti-Iran and anti-Shia than the Taliban ever was; Afghan officials cite this reexamination as the rationale partially behind the flow of arms from Iran to elements in the Taliban movement.<sup>17</sup>

On a separate level, Tehran's shift on the Taliban was likely a signal to Washington, given the then intensifying US efforts to isolate and sanction Tehran due to its nuclear activities.

In Tehran, this Iranian revisionism on the question of the Taliban is justified on the grounds that it reflects realities on the ground in Afghanistan. In other words, it is said that to continue to ignore the potential of the

12 Aaron Njfyzadh, "Afghanistan, another battleground for Iran and Saudi Arabia?," BBC, November 21, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/persian/afghanistan-38043483>.

13 "Abdullah's Important Trip to Saudi Arabia," *Mandegar Daily News*, October 16, 2016, <http://bit.ly/2oNasjl>.

14 سیدلنگن و الکیپرماً تارکادام: سننارف یناملر اپ سئییه سئییر اب رادی رد یدرچورب بتسرا ناتسن اغفا رد تسکش یانعم دب نابلاط اب accessed August 14, 2017, <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=870720145>; «Boroujerdi during the French delegation's visit: Negotiations between the West and the Taliban exacerbates terrorism,» Mehr News Agency, accessed August 14, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2hXBmIP>.

15 Nic Robertson, "Source: Saudi hosts Afghan peace talks with Taliban reps," CNN, October 5, 2008, <http://www.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/asiapcf/10/05/afghan.saudi.talks>.

16 Ernesto Londoño, "Iran's hosting of Taliban reflects desire for greater role," *Washington Post*, September 29, 2011, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia-pacific/irans-hosting-of-taliban-reflects-desire-for-greater-role/2011/09/28/gIQAkwmwO7K\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia-pacific/irans-hosting-of-taliban-reflects-desire-for-greater-role/2011/09/28/gIQAkwmwO7K_story.html).

17 "Fear of Iranian support for the Taliban in the Afghan West," *Deutsche Welle*, January 13, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2nx3QQT>.



US Vice President Mike Pence shakes hands with President of Afghanistan Ashraf Ghani prior to their bilateral meeting, February 18, 2017. *Photo credit: Wikimedia.*

Taliban as a lasting political force in Afghanistan is to weaken Iran's hand in the policy-making process in Kabul.<sup>18</sup>

It appears that Iran has reconsidered its total rejection of the Taliban. In May 2016, when a US attack killed Taliban leader Mullah Mukhtar Mansour, who was on his way to Pakistan after a stay in Iran, Tehran's denials about having any links to the group were half-hearted and hardly convincing, unlike previous denials. Many in the international community recognized this as a shift in Iranian policy.<sup>19</sup>

Today, Iranian officials openly admit to having ties with the Taliban. In January 2017, in an interview that was unusually frank, a top Iranian diplomat and former ambassador to Kabul, Rasoul Mousavi, gave some clear indications that Tehran's warming attitude toward the Taliban will continue. Mousavi, in an assertion

that appears to be illustrative of the consensus view in Tehran, said that Iran's policy is to augment its influence in Afghanistan "in order to preserve security for Iran." In such pursuit, Tehran will evidently work with any Afghan faction, including its former nemesis, the Taliban. Mousavi qualified his remarks by saying that Iran is "facing a different Taliban today than was the case during the period of Mullah Omar." The "Taliban is not uniform," Mousavi claimed. The need for Iran to find leverage in the situation was Mousavi's simple message.

In making the prediction that the United States has no real long-term plans for Afghanistan and that its investment in that country is coming to an end, Mousavi predicted that the Afghans would be confronted with severe challenges. This is said, therefore, to be the reason why Iran needs to remain intimately involved in Afghan affairs. Another Afghan civil war will hugely impact Iran, he said, in an assessment that has been

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Seyed Rasoul Mousavi, *Iranian Students' News Agency*, January 6, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2oWmbll>.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

repeatedly made by successive Iranian governments since the early 1970s.<sup>20</sup>

Mousavi was also open about the value of a “marriage of convenience” with the Taliban as a useful counter to the rise of ISIS in Afghanistan. “The Taliban believes Afghanistan is for the Afghans and is against foreign military presence.” From Tehran’s perspective, the Afghan Taliban can be mobilized against the Pakistani Taliban, which, in Tehran’s assessment, is the same as ISIS found in Iraq, Syria, and elsewhere and overwhelmingly recruits among Pakistanis and Central Asians but not Afghans.

“No one can expect Iran to sit still in the face of the emergence of Daesh [Islamic State].” Above all, Mousavi lambasted the idea that Iran’s newfound ties with what he calls the “neo-Taliban” are disturbing. “If the Afghan government pursues peace with the Taliban and the Chinese, the Pakistani and the Americans are all involved, then why not Iran?” he asked.<sup>21</sup>

In another telling reference, Mousavi was dismissive of the Afghan political elite. “No one among the Afghans [politicians] operates transparently. Iran and other states face uncertainty in Afghanistan and the immaturity of some of the country’s elite makes everything worse.” Based on the statements of this veteran Iranian diplomat, Iran will keep its options open, including negotiations and even compromises with the Taliban.<sup>22</sup>

Meanwhile, it is not only Iran that has had a change of heart in regard to the Taliban. As with the Iranians, the Russians too are increasingly open in their support of the Taliban’s basic demand that foreign military forces withdraw from Afghanistan,<sup>23</sup> a not-so-subtle jab at the United States. In March 2017, Washington decided to decline Moscow’s invitation to attend a conference on the future of Afghanistan due to a dispute about the list of participants that were slated to attend. But this was

more than merely a question of failure to coordinate the event and had much more to do with Washington’s instinctive concerns about the real objectives the Russians had in mind.<sup>24</sup>

At other junctures, the US position has been far more explicit. In February 2017, the top US commander in Afghanistan, General John Nicholson, publicly stated that Russia and Iran were supporting the Taliban, in part, to undercut the US and NATO mission in Afghanistan.<sup>25</sup> This Iranian-Russian tactical alliance in Afghanistan echoes the past and demonstrates that the zero-sum game mentality of the 1990s that fueled the Afghan civil war—where Iran and Russia were on the same side—has not disappeared but rather is making a dangerous comeback.

### Legitimate security concerns versus adventurism among Afghans

On the bilateral front, over the last thirty-eight years, one of the thorniest issues in relations between Tehran and Kabul has been about the treatment of Afghans living in Iran. Successive Afghan governments have complained about discriminatory policies targeting its citizens in Iran, and further that Tehran often resorts to threats of expulsion of Afghans as a way of pressuring Kabul on specific policy decisions.

For example, a number of Afghan officials complained in 2012 that the Iranian ambassador in Kabul had warned that Iran would “expel Afghan refugees” in the event the Afghan government signed a strategic partnership with Washington, which Kabul finally did in May 2012.<sup>26</sup> Tehran, while admitting that some discrimination against Afghans in Iran does take place, is highly sensitive to such charges of discrimination as it negatively impacts any soft-power inroads it makes inside Afghanistan.

20 Interview with Seyed Rasoul Mousavi, *Iranian Students’ News Agency*, January 6, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2oWmbll>.

21 Ibid; For some more background see Fatemeh Aman, “Peace with Taliban Could Stem ISIS Growth in Afghanistan,” *Middle East Institute*, March 2, 2016, <http://www.mei.edu/content/article/peace-taliban-could-stem-isis-growth-afghanistan>.

22 Interview with Seyed Rasoul Mousavi, *Iranian Students’ News Agency*.

23 Henry Meyer, “Russia Backs Afghan Taliban Demand to Withdraw Foreign Troops,” *Bloomberg*, March 31, 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-03-31/russia-backs-afghan-taliban-demand-to-withdraw-foreign-troops>.

24 “AP: U.S. Turns Down Invitation to Afghanistan Peace Conference in Russia,” *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, March 24, 2017, <http://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-u-s-turn-down-russia-conference/28388664.html>.

25 Phil Stewart and Idrees Ali, “Russia may be helping supply Taliban insurgents: U.S. general,” *Reuters*, March 23, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-afghanistan-russia-idUSKB-N16U234>.

26 Ben Farmer, “Iran threatens to expel Afghan refugees if Kabul ratifies US strategic partnership,” *Telegraph*, May 10, 2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/afghanistan/9256602/Iran-threatens-to-expel-Afghan-refugees-if-Kabul-ratifies-US-strategic-partnership.html>.

At the same time, the Iranians do have genuine concerns about Afghan population flows; the numbers are quite high. Today, some three million Afghans live in Iran (no exact figures are available).<sup>27</sup> The initial large-scale exodus of Afghans to Iran began with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Thanks to constant warring among Afghan political factions, neither the Soviet withdrawal in 1989 nor the American-led toppling of the Taliban regime in 2001 brought an end to the flow of Afghans moving to Iran for reasons of security or economic and educational opportunities.

The flow is also likely to continue and possibly accelerate significantly. Between 2001—when the United States militarily intervened in Afghanistan—and 2016, Afghanistan's population expanded from 20.5 million to 32.5 million.<sup>28</sup> Based on some projections, Afghanistan will have a population of about 65 million by 2050<sup>29</sup> and 111 million by 2100.<sup>30</sup> From Tehran's perspective, an accelerated flow of Afghans can have significant ramifications on Iran's domestic stability.

Overall, three key factors have shaped Tehran's attitude toward Afghans in Iran: the need to fulfill Iran's United Nations (UN) obligations as a signatory to UN High Commissioner on Refugees' Refugee Convention; the benefit of cheap labor provided by Afghans working in the Iranian economy; and an interest in catering to segments of the Afghan population that can be cultivated as natural political allies of Tehran.

It is attempts to fulfill the last factor that are proving controversial and contentious in Iranian-Afghan relations.<sup>31</sup> Iran's Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) has in the last six years mobilized, trained, equipped, and transferred thousands of Shia Afghans to the battle fields of Syria and Iraq. By some accounts, the number of Afghans fighting in Syria is about

“... [T]here is ample evidence of ongoing recruitment and transfer of Afghans to Syria and Iraq via the Iranian authorities.”

18,000.<sup>32</sup> Although such numbers are most likely purposefully inflated, there is ample evidence of ongoing recruitment and transfer of Afghans to Syria and Iraq via the Iranian authorities. Mostly organized in the Fatemiyoun Brigade, hundreds of these Afghans have died in Syria and in Iraq.<sup>33</sup>

Such Iranian actions—including the promises of economic benefits or residency permits to Afghan volunteers that travel to Syria—have proven highly irritating for the Afghan government in Kabul.<sup>34</sup> As some Afghan officials have warned, this Iranian mobilization of Afghans, through what amounts to a sectarian message, is potentially extremely destabilizing for Afghanistan's own future security given the country's Shia-Sunni split and simmering sectarian tensions of recent years.

### Unhelpful Zero-Sum Mentality

As a neighboring state, Iran has every right to be concerned about developments in Afghanistan. That is true for all of Afghanistan's neighbors from Pakistan to China to the Central Asian states to the north. There is, after all, a well-documented history of internal Afghan instability in recent decades directly impacting neighboring countries.

And yet, Tehran's present-day policies appear to be driven mostly by a desire to limit the influence of its rivals. While Iranian officials publicly talk about a

27 Majale Afghanistan, “ناتسناغفا و نارېا طب اور - ناتسناغفا له لجم” *Youtube* video, June 14, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5W1C-p9elZrl>.

28 World Bank, Data: Afghanistan, accessed August 11, 2017, <http://data.worldbank.org/country/Afghanistan>.

29 Population Reference Bureau, Population Projections, accessed August 11, 2017, <http://www.prb.org/DataFinder/Topic/Rankings.aspx?ind=15>.

30 “Growing Pains,” *Economist*, May 5, 2011, [http://www.economist.com/blogs/dailychart/2011/05/world\\_population\\_projections](http://www.economist.com/blogs/dailychart/2011/05/world_population_projections).

31 Farnaz Fassihi and Ehsanullah Amiri, “Afghans Condemn Iran Over Recruiting Refugees to Fight in Syria,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 22, 2014, [www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702303749904579576132289729204](http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702303749904579576132289729204).

32 Ahmad Majidiyar, “Iran Recruits and Trains Large Numbers of Afghan and Pakistani Shiites,” Middle East Institute, January 18, 2017, <http://www.mei.edu/content/article/io/iran-s-recruitment-afghan-pakistani-shiites-further-destabilizes-south-asia>.

33 According to IRGC-affiliated Tasnim News Agency, the Fatemiyoun was founded by leaders of two Afghan Shiite militant groups: Sepah-e Muhammad (Muhammad Army), an Iran-backed group that operated against the Taliban in Afghanistan in the 1990s, and the Abuzar Brigade, which fought alongside Iranian military forces against Iraq in the 1980s.

34 Ahmad Majidiyar, “Afghan Daily Urges Kabul to Stop Tehran from Deploying Refugees to Syria Front Lines,” Middle East Institute, March 9, 2017, <http://www.mei.edu/content/io/afghan-daily-urges-afghan-daily-urges-kabul-stop-tehran-deploying-refugees-syria-front-lines>.



“regional solution” as the only way forward; in practice, Tehran has shown very little appetite to seek common ground with the Americans, the Pakistanis, or the Saudis on the Afghan question.

Iran's stated “regional solution” formula for Afghanistan is, at the moment, merely a pipedream, or at worst, a deliberate distraction. It is certainly devoid of visible partners other than perhaps Russia, which is increasingly inclined to collaborate with Tehran over short-term common regional objectives, perhaps best demonstrated in their joint efforts to keep the regime of Bashar al-Assad afloat.

For its part, Tehran will point to the past and to ill-fated attempts to foster cooperation over the future of Afghanistan to justify its present zero-sum approach. It argues that every other state with a stake in Afghanistan is pursuing a winner-take-all game plan. To signal a desire for multilateralism might be interpreted by its rivals as an indication of weakness. That is not the message Tehran wants to transmit.

Still, another sincere attempt at a multilateral strategy to bring about stability to Afghanistan—or at a minimum to avoid dragging Afghans into conflicts elsewhere in the Islamic world such as in Syria—might just be worthwhile for the Iranian authorities to consider.

In this context, another imperative issue is that of Iran's posture toward the future role the United States will play in Afghanistan. For it not to fall behind the curve, Tehran must publicly come to terms with the fact that the US presence in Afghanistan likely will continue in the foreseeable future. This US presence might even be expedient for Tehran's immediate policy interests such as the fight against ISIS or for regional economic integration efforts.

Realities on the ground alone should encourage an Iranian reassessment. In 2014, when Ashraf Ghani won the presidential elections in Kabul against the Tehran-backed Abdullah Abdullah, Iranians were disappointed. Ghani was perceived as Western-centric, having spent decades abroad including many years in the United States. He was vocal about his desire to see the United States play a critical role in Afghanistan's future. But this was not to be at the expense of Kabul's ties Tehran.

As Ghani told Iranian media early on in his presidency, there is “no border dispute between the two countries.” “We have a very extensive strategic economic agenda, as far as Iran is concerned,” Ghani stated; he has since

proceeded to push this agenda ahead. He has also pointed out that Iran is a major importer of food and this is an opportunity for Afghan farmers to produce for the 80 million-person Iranian market.

Ghani pointed out that landlocked Afghanistan sees Iran as a top transit option for Afghan trade to reach the rest of the world. He pointedly encouraged Tehran to complete Chabahar, the Iranian port on the Gulf of Oman that is projected to become a key gateway for regional trade. “Chabahar is critical for Afghanistan,” Ghani said. As early as 2012, Washington had given its consent to India and Afghanistan to go ahead in discussions with Iran to develop the port despite the fact that US policy at the time was to isolate Iran internationally due to its nuclear activities.<sup>35</sup> By the time, in May 2016, when the leaders from India, Iran, and Afghanistan signed the so-called “Chabahar agreement,” the United States was still unopposed.

As late as March 2017, Iranian state media reported that Washington was supportive of the Chabahar project, as it enhances Afghan economic security. US Army General John Nicholson, the commander of US forces in Afghanistan, told a US Senate hearing that the Chabahar project was a positive step “because it would offer Afghanistan a viable and economic alternative to shipping all its goods via Pakistan.”<sup>36</sup> This position belies Tehran's long-standing viewpoint that an essential US objective in Afghanistan is to keep Iranian influence out of the country.

It is true that Ghani has said all along that the US-Afghan Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA)—which will keep the US military in Afghanistan—is not a threat to Iran. According to Ghani, the Iranians should not fear a long-term US commitment to his country but welcome it, as improved Afghan security is tantamount to an enhancement of Iranian security. And to assure his Iranian neighbor, Ghani has pledged that Afghanistan will never become a staging ground for any intervention against Iran. The message has been clear: Iran would be wise not to expect Kabul to walk away from its partnership with Washington.

35 Aparna Pande and Alex Vatanka, “U.S.-India-Iran Ties,” Hudson Institute, June 15, 2012, <https://hudson.org/research/8994-u-s-india-iran-ties>.

36 “US welcomes India's Chabahar port plan,” *PressTV*, March 16, 2017, <http://www.presstv.ir/Detail/2017/03/16/514569/US-welcomes-Indias-Chabahar-port-plan>.

To be sure, the available space for Iran to jockey for power in Afghanistan is dictated by the actions of the Afghans. Some fifteen years after the fall of the Taliban and billions of dollars in foreign aid later, the country continues to face a list of shattering challenges. As long as various Afghan political interest groups continue to look for external benefactors, Iran—along with other regional actors—will be at hand to offer their support and to advance their own interests in the process.

From frequent political gridlock and petty-minded competition for power among the country's small elite, to widespread corruption and a deep sense of hopelessness within the general population, Afghanistan sits in a hard place. In the midst of all its domestic struggles, Afghanistan also needs to contend with the rivaling agendas of foreign powers, including those states—such as the United States—that are still engaged in stabilization efforts in the country, as well as neighboring states—such as Iran and Pakistan, as well as Saudi Arabia farther afield—that continue to view Afghan soil as a battleground for geopolitical rivalry through support for local proxies.<sup>37</sup>

Thanks to a host of factors, Iran will remain a key player in Afghanistan. While some of its interests are fully legitimate and even mutually beneficial—such as economic integration efforts that will serve both Tehran's and Kabul's interests—other Iranian policies—such as mobilization of Afghan Shia as witnessed in the conflict in Syria—undermine Afghan stability in the long term.

Put simply, due to its deep reach in Afghan society and in the ranks of the political class in Kabul, Tehran's policies can go a long way as a shaping factor in Afghanistan's future. But Tehran's tendency to consider relations with the country as a winner-take-all proposition—or to openly pursue a “no-winner” policy in Afghanistan as some Iranian analysts have argued—is highly unhelpful.

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<sup>37</sup> Alex Vatanka, “USA vs. Pakistan vs. Iran: The Three-Way Battle for Afghanistan,” *The National Interest*, June 15, 2016, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/usa-vs-pakistan-vs-iran-the-three-way-battle-afghanistan-16599?page=show>.

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