



STRAINED ALLIANCES

IRAN'S TROUBLED RELATIONS TO
AFGHANISTAN AND PAKISTAN

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Iran Interior Minister Mostafa Mohammad Najjar
(front L) attends a press conference with his Afghan
counterpart Basmillah Mohammadi (front R) in Kabul,
Afghanistan, March 8, 2011

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Abstract

This report offers a critical examination of Iran's influence in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Two points are made: that Iran's top priority is its own regime's survival and its regional policies are directed by its national security concerns. Secondly, that Iran's engagements in Afghanistan are clearly guided by the presence of the US. Iran's predominant interest is in stabilizing Afghanistan, but as long as Afghanistan is neither safe nor stable, Iran will play a double game and engage with its regional neighbours according to the US–Iran equation. Deterrence, counter-containment and competition are the keywords in these complex relations. The report outlines Iran's reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan, its political platform and 'soft power', and the bonds of mutual dependency in terms of water rights, refugees and drug trafficking. It examines Iran's alleged military interventions and the reasons for playing this double game. Lastly, the report discusses Iran's tense relationship with Pakistan with regard to both Afghanistan and the troubled region of Baluchistan.

I. Introduction

“I do not think this government can succeed unless Iran is at the table”, a key advisor to Afghanistan’s President Hamid Karzai told Iranian journalists in August 2010, admitting that Iran is “highly involved officially and unofficially”.¹

This report will discuss how to understand Iran as a regional player in regard to Afghanistan and Pakistan. It will critically examine Iran’s engagement and influence, particularly in Afghanistan, and will argue that Iran is playing a double game. Iran is promoting its own interests according to the security risk they perceive the US to manifest. Iran is supporting President Karzai as well as a number of development initiatives, but Iran also wants to minimize the long-term presence of the US and allegedly backs insurgents undermining the US effort. Deterrence, counter-containment and competition (with the other regional players) are the keywords in these complex relations.

The first part of the report analyzes Iran’s position in Afghanistan. It will cover Iran’s financial aid and reconstruction efforts, Iran’s political platform and ideological ‘soft power’, and the bonds of mutual dependency in terms of water rights, refugees and drug trafficking, which impel Iran to engage politically. Then it will move on to discuss Iran’s alleged military interventions and the reasons for playing this double game, which relate both to the presence of foreign troops and to Iran’s positioning vis-à-vis Pakistan.

The second part of the report focuses on Iran’s tense relationship with Pakistan and the two countries’ positions in regard to Afghanistan (where Iran, India and Pakistan compete for economic and geopolitical influence relating to energy resources and infrastructure) and also in regard to the troubled region of Baluchistan.

Iran’s first priority: survival

Two main points guide this report. First of all, that Iran’s main priority is its own regime’s survival. Whatever Iran does in regard to Afghanistan will always be, first and foremost, directed by its own national security concerns.

¹ Bagherpour & Farhad, ‘The Iranian Influence in Afghanistan’, *Tehran Bureau*, 9 August 2010, www.pbs.org.

The regime's focus on security and survival means that Iran is seeking and actively working on creating stability in Afghanistan, not least because for years Iran has suffered from the effects of Afghanistan's crises. The influx of 3–4 million refugees since the 1980s, large amounts of drug trafficking and an unstable supply of water from Afghanistan's Helmand River are some of the issues that Iran perceives as a threat to its national security.

Survival and security have been at the centre of Iran's policies since the end of Khatami's time as President (particularly after 2003), but these priorities have been even more strongly expressed since President Ahmadinezhad took power in 2005 and heavily promoted the Revolutionary Guards Corps both politically and financially. The change in Iran's domestic scene was forcefully manifested in June 2009 when President Ahmadinezhad was re-elected in a *de facto coup d'état* backed by the Revolutionary Guards Corps and the Supreme Leader, escalating into months of social unrest and the worst legitimacy crisis since the 1979 revolution.

A lot has been said about the effects of Ahmadinezhad's confrontational rhetoric in the realm of Iran's nuclear policy and foreign diplomacy, but the 'Ahmadinezhad effect' on Iran's policies towards Afghanistan and Pakistan is a much less discussed topic, partly because the power and political priorities of the Revolutionary Guards Corps in this respect are difficult to ascertain. Although President Karzai supported Ahmadinezhad's disputed re-election unequivocally, it is nevertheless fair to say that President Ahmadinezhad's radicalized stance has reinvigorated Kabul's ambivalence towards Iran's intentions.²

President Ahmadinezhad has enraged the international community on a number of occasions, most recently in September 2010 at the UN conference in New York when he claimed that it was the US and not Al-Qaeda who had masterminded 9/11. At the same time and despite this rhetoric it is important to stress that at least part of the Revolutionary Guard elite, which has ascended politically during the last five years, works to safeguard and promote Iran's regional position and stronghold. In contrast to the ideological foreign policy of the 1980s aimed at exporting the Islamic revolution, during the last decades Iran's foreign policy has been far more motivated by national security concerns.³

² 'Iranian Influence in Afghanistan, Recent Developments', www.irantracker.org, 21 August 2009; The Hollings Center for International Dialogue, *Afghanistan's other neighbors, Iran, Central Asia, and China*. Conference report, The American Institute of Afghanistan Studies, February 2009, p. 6.

³ Ray Takeyh, *Hidden Iran. Paradox and Power in the Islamic Republic*. New York, Holt Paperback, 2006, p. 123.

Also, as Ray Takeyh notes, by focusing exclusively on Iran's 'confrontational diplomacy' one risks overlooking the forces and people within the conservative factions of the 'second generation' of the Islamic Republic – people like Mohammad Qalibaf, Ali Larijani and Ali Shamkani – who argue for a more tempered approach in order to expand Iran's regional influence – not through an ideological bashing of the enemies, but by behaving in a "reasonable manner while increasing its power".⁴ Whereas Ahmadinezhad officially denies the need to seek cooperation with the US, the realist hardliners know that Iran's regional influence can only be safeguarded through a rational and pragmatic approach to the US.

The Iran–US equation

The second major point which runs through this report is that the presence and policies of the US are guiding most, if not all, of Iran's engagements in Afghanistan.

Whereas India and Pakistan have extended their mutual hostilities into a proxy war in Afghanistan, Iran's engagement in this proxy war is of a different nature. Iran's main foe – but also, conversely, a possible partner – in Afghanistan is neither Pakistan nor India, but the US. This does not necessarily only mean that Iran will seek to undermine the United States by fuelling attacks against the coalition forces, although they are continually accused of doing so, but also that Iran will prepare itself for possible attacks by the US and that Iran wants to show that they have the means to retaliate on Afghan soil. I would still maintain that Iran's predominant interest is in having a stable Afghanistan as its neighbour, but as long as Afghanistan is neither safe nor stable, Iran will continue to play a double game and engage with its regional neighbours according to the US–Iran equation.

Of course Iran engages with Afghanistan in its own right, from which Iran benefits in a number of ways. In 2009 Iran's exports to its eastern neighbour amounted to nearly \$1 billion, half of which was oil. But Iran's position vis-à-vis the Afghan government and Pakistan and India's interests in Afghanistan is clearly governed by their relations to the US. Afghanistan is in that sense a 'bargaining chip' in the strained relations with the US.⁵

⁴ Ray Takeyh, *Guardians of the Revolution. Iran and the world in the age of Ayatollahs*. Oxford, New York, Oxford Univ. Press, 2009, p. 239.

⁵ Bill Varner, 'Iran pours cash into Afghanistan, seeking leverage against U.S.', www.bloomberg.com, 16 July 2008.

There is no doubt that the issue of Afghanistan's future could be used to broker the nuclear impasse between Iran and the West, a point often made.⁶ However, at the moment it is hard to see Iran playing an unambiguously constructive role in Afghanistan as long as the relations to the US are enveloped in mutual mistrust. "We are facing a number of sanctions. Why do you expect us to solve your problems?" was how a representative of the Iranian parliament summed up the position in November 2010 while stressing that Iran 'genuinely believes' in the need for talks on Afghanistan.⁷

⁶ Karim Sadjadpour, *Iran: Is Productive Engagement Possible?* Policy brief, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 2008; David Ignatius, 'The U.S. should test Iran's resolve to stabilize Afghanistan', *The Washington Post*, 16 September 2010.

⁷ Representative from the parliament's national security committee, meeting at DIIS, 17 November 2010.

2. Background: Afghanistan as an avenue for US–Iran cooperation

Despite Iran's anti-American rhetoric, since the mid-1990s Iran has attempted to use the problems in Afghanistan as a means to facilitate cooperation with the US. As soon as he was elected president in 1997 Mohammad Khatami used the issue of drug trafficking as a way of establishing a neutral common ground for dialogue with the US and the EU. More profoundly, after 9/11 Iran perceived the war in Afghanistan as a way of mending relations with the US. "Afghanistan provides the two regimes with a perfect opportunity to improve relations", President Khatami noted at that time.⁸

Tehran was pleased to see the Taliban regime toppled. Iran was opposed to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, coinciding with the Iranian Revolution. During the civil war (1992–94) and the reign of the Taliban (1996–2001) Iran supported the Northern Alliance along with India and Russia. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei termed the Taliban 'a disgrace to Islam' when they took power, and Iran backed the anti-Taliban minorities, who were ethnically and religiously close, i.e. the Hazaras and Tajiks. Iran was even on the brink of war with Afghanistan in September 1998 after the Taliban kidnapped and killed ten Iranian diplomats, one journalist and 35 truck drivers and conducted a large-scale massacre of Afghan Shiites in Bamiyan and Mazar-e Sharif.⁹

Iran's 'active neutrality' in the US war on the Taliban even extended to cooperating with US troops. As Barnett Rubin notes, "According to Iranian diplomatic sources, members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC, Sipah-i Pasdaran) cooperated with the CIA and US Special Operations Forces in supplying and funding the commanders of the Northern Alliance".¹⁰

James Dobbins, the first American envoy to Afghanistan after 9/11, played a leading role in negotiating with the Iranians and, as he clearly recounts, Iran played a con-

⁸ Quoted in Ray Takeyh, *Hidden Iran. Paradox ad Power in the Islamic Republic*. New York, Holt Paperback, 2006, p. 123.

⁹ Bill Samii, 'Tehran and the Taliban', *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin*, vol. 3, no. 9, September 2001; Amin Saikal, 'Iran's Turbulent Neighbour: The Challenge of the Taliban', *Global Dialogue*, vol. 3, no. 2–3, Spring/Summer 2001.

¹⁰ Barnett R. Rubin, *The U.S. and Iran in Afghanistan: Policy Gone Awry*. MIT Center for International Studies, October 2008, p. 3.

structive role in the Bonn Conference in December 2001.¹¹ The Iranian delegation agreed with the Americans on all major points. It was the Iranian envoy, Javad Zarif, who insisted on inscribing democratic elections in the Afghan declaration as well as a commitment to counter terrorism, and who settled a critical negotiation with the Northern Alliance delegate Younis Qanooni.¹²

As part of the negotiations Iran also directly proposed to open up further dialogue with the US to soften their historically deadlocked positions. “We would like to work on these other issues with the appropriate people in your government”, an Iranian official told Dobbins in January 2002.¹³

However, the mutual softening of positions came to an abrupt halt with George W. Bush’s State of the Union Address on January 29, 2002, where he termed Iran a ‘terrorist state’ forming part of the ‘axis of evil’.¹⁴ In regard to Iran this was probably Bush’s gravest mistake as President of the United States, and it severely undermined the voice of the reformists in Iran who were seeking rapprochement with the West.

Despite Bush’s speech, Iran kept making propositions to the Americans, partly in order to engage more fully in Afghanistan, partly, and more prominently, Iran was seeking a ‘grand bargain’ with the arch enemy, which involved a settlement of Iran’s disputed nuclear programme, revealed by opposition forces in 2002.¹⁵

In spring 2003 Iran sent a ‘grand bargain’ proposal to the US through the Swiss Embassy. Iran offered to stop backing Hamas and Hezbollah, acknowledge the state of Israel, cooperate on Afghanistan and give IAEA full access to its nuclear programme. In return Iran asked for American security guaranties – a “recognition of Iran’s legitimate security interests in the region with according defense capacity” – lifting

¹¹ In his book, *After the Taliban. Nation-Building in Afghanistan* (Washington, Potomac Books, 2009), James Dobbins provides a revealing account of the nation building efforts right after the fall of the Taliban and the negotiations in Bonn. His specific encounters with the Iranian delegation are repeated and summed up in James Dobbins, ‘Negotiating with Iran: Reflections from Personal Experience’, *The Washington Quarterly*, January 2010.

¹² James Dobbins, ‘Negotiating with Iran: Reflections from Personal Experience’, *The Washington Quarterly*, January 2010, pp. 151–4.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

¹⁴ ‘State of the Union Address. 2002 George W. Bush’, State of the Union Address Library, <http://stateoftheunionaddress.org/2002-george-w-bush>.

¹⁵ James Dobbins, ‘Negotiating with Iran: Reflections from Personal Experience’, *The Washington Quarterly*, January 2010, pp. 156–7.

of sanctions and the right to a peaceful nuclear programme.¹⁶ However, neither of the Iranian suggestions was ever really considered in Washington and Iran did not receive any response.¹⁷

Instead, the US under the Bush administration allied itself strongly with Pakistan, naming Pakistan as its closest non-NATO ally, even though Pakistan continued to support the Taliban, has been a safe haven for al-Qaeda and a major source of nuclear proliferation.¹⁸ As Barnett Rubin drily remarks, “Pakistan’s actual nuclear weapons and proliferation activity were considered less threatening than Iran’s potential ones”.¹⁹

Also, emboldened by the easy 2003 victory over Saddam Hussein in Iraq (although that was far from marking the end of that war), the Bush administration pushed for regime change in Iran by all means and stressed Iran’s covert, dangerous intentions. The nuclear issue remained unresolved and Iran hardened their position, convinced that whatever they did to accommodate the outstanding issues, the EU and the US would keep on moving the goal posts.

In 2006 Washington declared in the National Security Strategy that the United States faces “no greater challenge from a single country than from Iran”,²⁰ and was on the brink of launching a military attack. In 2008 the State Department claimed Iran to be “the most active state sponsor of terrorism” and emphasized that Iran fails to control al-Qaeda members fleeing to Iran.²¹

The push for regime change from the Americans has had many repercussions, both in Iran and in Afghanistan. There were numerous reasons why Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad won a surprise victory in the 2005 presidential election, but when repeated efforts to engage the Americans remained unanswered, this severely weakened the reformist faction, and this may have contributed to the fact that the Supreme Leader

¹⁶ Gareth Porter, ‘Iran Proposal to U.S. offered peace with Israel’, *Inter Press Service*, 25 May 2006, <http://www.commondreams.org/headlines06/0525-05.htm>.

¹⁷ James Dobbins, ‘Negotiating with Iran: Reflections from Personal Experience’, *The Washington Quarterly*, January 2010, p. 157.

¹⁸ Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos. The world’s most unstable region and the threat to global security*. Penguin Books, 2008.

¹⁹ Barnett R. Rubin, *The U.S. and Iran in Afghanistan: Policy Gone Awry*. MIT Center for International Studies, October 2008, p. 3.

²⁰ Mohsen M. Milani, ‘Tehran’s Take’, *Foreign Policy*, July 2009.

²¹ Fred Lucas, ‘Good Relations Between Afghanistan and Iran Important, Karzai Says’, www.CNSnews.com, 12 May 2010.

Ayatollah Khamenei ended up backing the candidate with the most confrontational, anti-American posture.²²

The US–Iran hostility has also had plenty of consequences in Afghanistan. As the Hollings Center for International Dialogue points out, “The antagonistic relationship between Iran and the United States prevents Kabul from establishing mutually beneficial ties with Tehran, although Afghanistan is the one place where US and Iranian interests most closely coincide.”²³ A telling example of the animosity guiding day-to-day decision making in rebuilding Afghanistan is that the US prohibited “contractors paving the Kabul–Kandahar road from purchasing cheaper and more readily available asphalt from Iran”, which only contributed to increasing the costs of the construction.²⁴

Iran’s position on Afghanistan

However, due to the crisis over Iran’s nuclear programme, which has resulted in the imposition of a number of UN and US sanctions, Iran is pursuing a ‘counter-containment’ by seeking other partners in the region.²⁵ Most profoundly, in May 2010 Iran engaged with Turkey and Brazil in signing a nuclear fuel swap deal. In Afghanistan Iran is collaborating with India in construction projects, is holding dialogues with Pakistan, and is seeking new financial and political alliances with Russia, China and Japan.

Iran is still vehemently opposed to the presence of US troops in Afghanistan, but is willing to cooperate on counter-narcotic efforts, reconstruction and government building measures. In a July 2010 meeting in Kabul Iran’s then foreign minister, Manouchehr Mottaki, summed up Iran’s position.

Mottaki’s proposal to bring stability in Afghanistan included five issues: “The Afghan constitution is the greatest achievement and hence needs to set the criterion for any measures to be taken”; “The presence and increase of foreign forces will not help the situation in Afghanistan”; “A double standard policy on fighting terrorism has to be

²² Janne Bjerre Christensen, *Drugs, Deviancy and Democracy in Iran: The Interaction of State and Civil Society*. London, I.B. Tauris, forthcoming.

²³ The Hollings Center for International Dialogue, *Afghanistan’s other neighbors: Iran, Central Asia, and China*. Conference report, The American Institute of Afghanistan Studies, February 2009, p. 17.

²⁴ Ibid. p. 5; cf. Golnar Motevalli, ‘Iranian engineer brings roads, rail to Afghan west’, *Reuters*, 17 April 2010.

²⁵ Mohsen M. Milani, ‘Tehran’s Take’, *Foreign Policy*, July 2009.

avoided”; “Security and development are two inseparable factors; hence the reconstruction of Afghanistan and its infrastructures should become the focus of more attention.[..] Iran continues to contribute to the reconstruction”; and lastly “Regional cooperation needs to be supported as the proper approach to the issue.”²⁶

These issues are telling of Iran’s, in many ways balanced and pragmatic, position. In some respects it follows the advice of foreign experts who have noted the need for further development (the issue of nation-building has been under-prioritized and overshadowed by security and military concerns); the need for a regional solution (Obama has so far failed to deliver), and the negative effects of increasing the military forces. But Mottaki’s proposal also obviously emphasizes Iran’s strong disapproval of the US efforts when he criticizes the presence of foreign troops and the ‘double standard’ applied in the war on terror. The latter relates both to the US blind support to Pakistan, despite the country’s continued backing of the Taliban, and to the Americans’ potential support to opposition groups seeking to undermine the Iranian regime (I will return to these issues later).

Despite the heavy criticism of the US which Iran has often put forward (for e.g. at the Hague conference in March 2009 and London conference in January 2010), in October 2010 Iran attended the international contact group for the first time, a group formed by President Obama in April 2009 focusing on ‘transition’ in Afghanistan.²⁷ Even if opposed to the US, Iran wanted to ‘keep pace with Pakistan’, an Afghan analyst noted at the time.²⁸ Deterrence, counter-containment as well as competition with the other regional players are the keywords in these complex games.²⁹

²⁶ ‘Iran outlines solutions to Afghan crisis’, *Press TV*, 20 July 2010, <http://edition.presstv.ir/detail/135525.html>.

²⁷ Julian Borger, ‘Iran offers to help US rebuild Afghanistan’, *The Guardian*, 1 April 2009; ‘Iran: Islamic Republic shuns London conference on Afghanistan’, *Los Angeles Times*, 27 January 2010; Houman Dolati, ‘Rethink Before It’s Too Late’, *Iranian Diplomacy*, www.irdiplomacy.ir, 2 March 2010.

²⁸ Rod Nordland, ‘Iran Sends delegate to International Meeting in Afghanistan’, *The New York Times*, 18 October 2010.

²⁹ Mohsen M. Milani, ‘Tehran’s Take’, *Foreign Policy*, July 2009.

3. Iran's political and financial influence in Afghanistan

A number of questions arise when attempting to assess Iran's influence in Afghanistan. To what extent is Iran 'meddling' in Afghanistan, creating insecurity and supporting the insurgents against the US and NATO troops? What is the exact nature of Iran's economic and political backing to President Karzai and the government? How is Iran's development aid distributed and who do they seek to support? To what degree is the issue of repatriating Afghan refugees used as a bargaining tool vis-à-vis Afghanistan's government?

In this section I will focus on these issues by first discussing Iran's financial aid and reconstruction efforts, Iran's political platform and 'soft power' and the bonds of mutual dependency between Afghanistan and Iran in terms of water rights, refugees and drug trafficking, which push Iran to engage politically. Then I will move on to discuss Iran's alleged military interventions and reasons for playing a double game, which both relate to the presence of foreign forces and to Iran's positioning vis-à-vis Pakistan.

A bagful of cash

In October 2010, *The New York Times* announced the latest scandal from Afghanistan: Iran was providing Karzai's top aide, Mr. Daudzai, with 'cash by the bagful'. According to *The New York Times* a bag 'bulging' with euro notes was handed over by Iran's ambassador to Afghanistan, and was part of a 'secret, steady stream' intended to "promote Iran's interests in the presidential palace" and "drive a wedge between the Afghans and their American and NATO counterparts".³⁰

Mr. Daudzai was the ambassador to Iran in 2005–07 from which his 'intimate relationship' with the Iranians stems, but Iran's support to Afghanistan is hardly a new thing. What caught the headlines, however, was partly the unconventional, mafia-like procedure for transferring the money and partly the renewed allegations against Iran of meddling in Afghanistan's affairs, playing both sides in the conflict.

President Karzai was quick to dismiss the allegations, emphasizing that it was perfectly natural for Afghanistan to receive funding from their Iranian neighbour and that it

³⁰ Dexter Filkins, 'Iran is Said to Give Top Karzai Aide Cash by the Bagful', *The New York Times*, 23 October 2010.

formed part of a 'transparent' process. "The government of Iran has been assisting us with five or six or seven hundred thousand euros once or twice every year, that is an official aid", Karzai told reporters. "This is nothing hidden. We are grateful for the Iranian help in this regard. The United States is doing the same thing, they're providing cash to some of our offices".³¹ Thereby Karzai was reiterating his oft-stated point that Iran is a 'helpful neighbour', that the countries are tightly connected and mutually dependent, and that Afghanistan needs to be on good speaking terms with both the US and Iran.³²

However, although Karzai is certainly right in so far as Iran has provided the Afghan government with funding since the 2001 Bonn conference, the aim of and manner in which the funding was transferred did not come across as particularly transparent. Although hardly the scandal it was reported to be, the case pinpoints the grey areas of Iran's involvement; an engagement which is not just misty to Western spectators, but also to the Iranian and Afghan legislators. At first the Iranian embassy in Kabul flatly denied that the transfer had taken place.³³ Later, Iranian officials justified the transfer as 'business as usual'.

Defending the transfer, Iran's former ambassador to Afghanistan, Mr. Mohammad Ebrahim Taherian, emphasized that Iran's aid to Afghanistan "has a three-decade history" and that Iran's pledge at the 2002 Tokyo conference has resulted in 330 projects. "Unlike the other members of the international community who can hardly present a tenable record, Iran's aid to Afghanistan is transparent and measurable", Taherian stressed in a comment to *Iranian Diplomacy*.³⁴

Others were not so sure. Interestingly, even the Iranian legislators voiced criticism of the transfer, asking how the payments could be conducted "outside the normal accounting and auditing process", and accusing President Ahmadinezhad of going behind their backs. On 26 October 2010 seven legislators raised questions about the annual amounts, the legal basis and approving authority of the funding. "Is the Iranian

³¹ 'Karzai confirms report of cash payments from Iran', *BBC News*, 25 October 2010.

³² 'Karzai: Iran's help has contributed to Afghanistan development', *Payvand's Iran News*, 27 December 2005; Fred Lucas, 'Good Relations Between Afghanistan and Iran Important, Karzai Says', www.CNSnews.com, 12 May 2010; 'Larijani calls Iran-Afghanistan relations growing', www.islamidavet.com, 4 July 2010; Mark Sappenfield, 'Is Iran meddling in Afghanistan?' *The Christian Science Monitor*, 8 August 2007.

³³ Amin Mehrpour, 'Iranian legislators query cash for Karzai', *Asia Times Online*, www.atimes.com, 9 November 2010.

³⁴ Ebrahim Taherian, 'Iran's Record in Afghanistan Is Transparent', *Iranian Diplomacy*, www.irdiplomacy.ir, 11 November 2010.

government aware of the purpose and aims to which the President of Afghanistan puts this aid? Where, in the annual budget legislation, are the revenue sources of this aid shown?" the legislators asked foreign minister Mottaki.³⁵

On the Iranian political scene the bagful of cash re-emphasized the often-voiced concerns over the lack of transparency in Ahmadinezhad's administration and his tendency to disregard the parliament; concerns which reached an unprecedented peak in November 2010 when lawmakers openly demanded a hearing confronting the President.³⁶

To the Americans the bagful of cash just added to their accusations that Iran was interfering in the Kabul parliament and undermining US interests. According to Wikileaks cables revealed in November 2010, in March 2009 the US embassy claimed "Iranian government officials encourage Parliament to support anti-Coalition policies and to raise anti-American talking points during debates". Allegedly, some Afghan MPs have been bribed to promote Iran's political agenda and act as Tehran's 'puppets'.³⁷

Reconstruction aid and Iran's 'soft power'

These allegations are difficult to validate, but there is no doubt that Iran is seeking influence in Afghanistan by all means. At the same time, however, President Karzai is also right when he terms Iran a 'helpful neighbour'. Not only has Iran made the highest pledges in terms of the per capita income of donor countries, it is also the most effective donor in Afghanistan, delivering 93 per cent of the aid promised.³⁸ At the Tokyo conference in 2002 Iran pledged \$560 million for reconstruction, in 2006 in London another \$100 million, and in June 2008 in Paris Iran promised an additional \$50 million in aid and \$300 million in loans.³⁹

³⁵ Amin Mehrpour, 'Iranian legislators query cash for Karzai', *Asia Times Online*, www.atimes.com, 9 November 2010.

³⁶ Farnaz Fassihi, 'Assembly Pushes to Oust Iran President', *Wall Street Journal*, 23 November 2010.

³⁷ 'US embassy cables: Iranian influence at Afghanistan parliament', *The Guardian*, 2 December 2010; Simon Tisdall, 'Afghanistan war logs: Iran's covert operations in Afghanistan', *The Guardian*, 25 July 2010.

³⁸ Anand Gopal, 'US-Iran thaw could bolster Afghanistan rebuilding efforts', *The Christian Science Monitor*, 3 April 2009.

³⁹ Greg Bruno, 'Iran and the Future of Afghanistan', *Council on Foreign Relations*, 30 March 2009; David Ignatius, 'Afghanistan's future lies in trade partnerships', *The Washington Post*, 20 June 2010; The Hollings Center for International Dialogue, *Afghanistan's other neighbors: Iran, Central Asia, and China*. Conference report, The American Institute of Afghanistan Studies, February 2009, p. 8; Mohsen M. Milani, 'Tehran's Take', *Foreign Policy*, July 2009. Some of the figures differ according to the sources. James Dobbins claims that the 2002 pledge was \$540 million ('Negotiating with Iran: Reflections from Personal Experience', *The Washington Quarterly*, January 2010, p. 155).

Iran has built a 122 kilometre long highway connecting Herat with Iran, inaugurated in January 2005.⁴⁰ Iran is also (in conjunction with India) building a road and railway system to link Western Afghanistan with the Iranian port of Chah Bahar to compete with the Pakistani port in Gwadar.⁴¹ In May 2006 President Karzai visited Tehran and during his visit, “seven agreements and memoranda of understanding on exchange of prisoners, extradition of criminals, promotion of investment, and construction of the Khwaf–Herat railway as well as cooperation in cultural, judicial and economic fields were signed”, as Mr. Danesh Yazdi, the deputy permanent representative on Afghanistan affairs, later emphasized in his statement to the UN General Assembly.⁴²

In Herat in particular the Iranian inflow of funding and infrastructure makes a significant difference. Tehran opened a chamber of commerce in May 2009 in Herat. The region is connected to Iran’s electricity grid and enjoys a booming economy compared to the rest of the country. Iran’s financial investments show a long-term commitment, which stands in sharp contrast to the more fleeting, or at least less certain, engagements of NATO and the US.⁴³

Although Iran’s contributions to Herat province are received with gratitude, the support also raises suspicions locally. “What are they doing beneath it all?” the head of Herat’s provincial council asked a *Time Magazine* reporter in May 2009.⁴⁴ Commenting on the waving Iranian flags a Herati citizen said: “Look at the way they try to stand out, even compared to the government ministries here. They are not trying to hide their strength.”⁴⁵

This begs the question of the extent of Iran’s so-called ‘soft power’ and ideological impact in Afghanistan. Is Iran engaging in ‘cultural imperialism’ by promoting Shia Islam and using the resurrection of the Hazara ethnic group in their own favour?⁴⁶

⁴⁰ Golnaz Esfandiary, ‘Afghanistan/Iran: Relations Between Tehran, Kabul Growing Stronger’, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 26 January 2005.

⁴¹ Marvin G. Weinbaum, *Afghanistan and Its Neighbors*. Special Report 162, United States Institute of Peace, June 2006, p. 13; Barnett R. Rubin, *The U.S. and Iran in Afghanistan: Policy Gone Awry*. MIT Center for International Studies, October 2008, p. 5.

⁴² Statement by H.E. Mr. Danesh Yazdi, *United Nations General Assembly Statements*, 28 November 2006, New York.

⁴³ Zarif & Majidiyar, ‘Iranian Influence in Afghanistan: Recent Developments’, www.irantracker.org, 21 August 2009.

⁴⁴ Jason Motlagh, ‘Iran’s Spending Spree in Afghanistan’, *Time Magazine*, 22 May 2009.

⁴⁵ Institute for War and Peace Reporting, ‘Tehran Accused of Complicity in Growing Weapons Trade’, ARR No. 319, 20 April 2009.

The American Enterprise Institute has conducted a thorough analysis of Iran's 'soft power' focusing on the aid delivered by the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee. They conclude that "with about thirty-five thousand Afghans on its payroll and tens of thousands of indirect beneficiaries, Iran's largest charity aims to advance Tehran's ideological and political ends in Afghanistan, promote Shiism, and incite anti-American sentiment".⁴⁷

Although the work of the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee – like many of the Iranian *bonyâds* (Islamic foundations) – is indeed ideologically charged, supporting what is perceived as the main constituency of the Islamic revolution,⁴⁸ the AEI analysis does not really back its claim that the committee's humanitarian assistance 'undermine US interests in Afghanistan'. Neither does it substantiate how Iran's ideological influence is more dangerous or harmful to the local community than the ideological impact of development projects carried out by Western donors.

However, there have been cases raising concerns as to Iran's endeavours. In 2009 a controversy erupted because of a massive inflow of Iranian textbooks, which allegedly were an attempt at a 'religious outreach' and openly praised "Iranian-backed militant groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas". According to the governor in Nimroz province, Gholam Dastagir Azad, "the books were provoking, defamatory and would create religious conflict".⁴⁹ They were "more dangerous than Taliban bullets".⁵⁰ In May 2009 the Kabul government ended the dispute by dumping more than 1000 Shiite texts and books emanating from Iran in the river. Not surprisingly Afghan Shiites found this solution to be deeply humiliating and saw it as a sign of ethnic and religious prejudice.⁵¹

⁴⁶ The Hollings Center for International Dialogue, *Afghanistan's other neighbors: Iran, Central Asia, and China*. Conference report, The American Institute of Afghanistan Studies, February 2009, p. 7; Ooppel & Wafa, 'Hazaras Hustle to Head of Class in Afghanistan', *The New York Times*, 4 January 2010.

⁴⁷ Alfoneh & Majidiyar, 'Iranian influence in Afghanistan. Imam Khomeini Relief Committee', *American Enterprise Institute Online*, 27 July 2010.

⁴⁸ Maloney, Suzanne, 'Agents or Obstacles? Parastatal Foundations and Challenges for Iranian Development', in Alizadeh (ed), *The Economy of Iran. Dilemmas of an Islamic State*. London, New York, I.B.Tauris, 2000; Messkoub, Mahmood, 'Social Policy in Iran in the Twentieth Century', *Iranian Studies*, 39(2), June 2006; Saecidi, A, 'The Accountability of Para-Governmental Organizations (*bonyads*): The Case of Iranian Foundations', *Iranian Studies*, 37(3), September 2004.

⁴⁹ Zarif & Majidiyar, 'Iranian Influence in Afghanistan: Recent Developments', www.irantracker.org, 21 August 2009.

⁵⁰ 'Afghan government destroys Shiite texts', *Associated Press*, www.msnbc.com, 27 May 2009.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

Although this case exemplifies Iran's promotion of Shia Islam in Afghanistan, it first and foremost shows the deep ethnic and religious divisions within Afghanistan, and the government's continuous difficulties in appeasing the conflicting parties.

Another case points to Iran's alleged influence on the Islamic University in Kabul, Khatam-al Nabyeen, headed by the controversial Ayatollah Asif Mohseni who has close links to and has studied in Iran.⁵² Although not exactly 'Iran's direct arm in Afghanistan', according to its critics the university is a "vehicle for spreading Iran's influence" among the Shiites.⁵³ Other reports however emphasize that Iran's influence is 'grossly exaggerated',⁵⁴ and that Iran has also reached out to the Sunni leaders of Afghanistan, stressing the importance of religious unity between the Shiites and Sunnis, and to the Sunni Pashtuns.⁵⁵ Although Iran supports the Shiite Hazaras, they also back the Persian-speaking Sunnis.⁵⁶

My argument is that we should not underestimate the ideological soft power of Iran, but there is no need to exaggerate it either. Stability, security and survival (of the Iranian regime) are far more important than an ideological expansion of 'Khomeinism' or the Islamic revolution, a priority that faded in the 1980s. I would caution against reading an all too simplified Sunni-Shia rivalry into Iran's foreign policy priorities. Although the Sunni-Shia divide is important in some cases – at the moment most notably in Baluchistan, to which I will return later – I would argue that Iran's relations to both Pakistan and Afghanistan are based more on a grander scheme of national security concerns and regional independence than on an ideological promotion of Shia Islam.

As Barnett Rubin says about Iran's involvement since the mid 1990s, "Iran moved beyond its ideological support for Shi'a parties to a strategic policy of supporting all anti-Taliban forces".⁵⁷ Also, as Marvin Weinbaum points put, "While Tehran's rela-

⁵² Nushin Arbabzadah, 'Afghanistan's Turbulent Cleric', *The Guardian*, 18 April 2009.

⁵³ Nazar & Recknagel, 'Controversial Madrasah Builds Iran's Influence in Kabul', *Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty*, November 2010.

⁵⁴ Philip Smucker, 'In Afghanistan, crackdown hurts Iran's once-sterling image', *McClatchy Newspapers*, 29 June 2009.

⁵⁵ Zarif & Majidiyar, 'Iranian Influence in Afghanistan: Recent Developments', www.irantracker.org, 21 August 2009; Alfonch & Majidiyar, 'Iranian influence in Afghanistan. Imam Khomeini Relief Committee', *American Enterprise Institute Online*, 27 July 2010.

⁵⁶ The Hollings Center for International Dialogue, *Afghanistan's other neighbors: Iran, Central Asia, and China*. Conference report, The American Institute of Afghanistan Studies, February 2009, p. 5.

⁵⁷ Barnett R. Rubin, *The U.S. and Iran in Afghanistan: Policy Gone Awry*. MIT Center for International Studies, October 2008.

tionship with Afghan Shiite political parties and militias has not always been close, it has consistently favored a multiethnic Afghan government”; and one which is strong enough “to act independently of Islamabad, Riyadh, and Washington”.⁵⁸

Basically, Iran’s overriding aim is to look after and protect its own interests. By contributing strongly to the reconstruction of the Herat region Iran is creating an ‘autonomous buffer zone’, which will help Iran protect itself if Afghanistan erupts into another civil war. At the same time Iran’s investments are paving the way for its own financial influence in a possibly stable future Afghanistan. In that sense Iran’s engagement in Afghanistan can be perceived as a maximum–minimum strategy, “first, minimizing the cost of conflict and, second, maximizing the chances for success”, Bagherpour and Farhad point out.⁵⁹ As the Hollings Center wisely emphasizes: “Afghanistan, however, is not central to Iran’s future economic development. [...] Unlike the Central Asian neighbors [...], Iranian interests in Afghanistan are more political than economic.”⁶⁰

The bonds of mutual dependency: water

Politically, Iran is strongly engaged and they do interfere in Kabul’s affairs. The extent to which Iran actually backs President Karzai has been debated, since Tehran has voiced support for the presidential opposition candidates Yunus Qanuni and Abdullah Abdullah,⁶¹ but Iran intervenes in particular when it comes to issues which have tangible spillover effects in Iran, namely access to water and the influx of refugees and drugs.

As is well known, Afghanistan and Iran are deeply interlinked historically, culturally and linguistically. They share a history dating back to the Persian Empire and, more concretely, they also share a flow of water, which makes Iran very vulnerable to Afghan policies. In that sense the reconstruction of Afghanistan is a double-edged sword for Iran, at least when it comes to construction of dams, which potentially pose a security risk to Iran.

⁵⁸ Marvin G. Weinbaum, *Afghanistan and Its Neighbors*. Special Report 162, United States Institute of Peace, June 2006, p. 12.

⁵⁹ Bagherpour & Farhad, ‘The Iranian Influence in Afghanistan’, *Tebran Bureau*, 9 August 2010, www.pbs.org.

⁶⁰ The Hollings Center for International Dialogue, *Afghanistan’s other neighbors: Iran, Central Asia, and China*. Conference report, The American Institute of Afghanistan Studies, February 2009, p. 8.

⁶¹ ‘The Illusion of Ringing Bells’, *Iranian Diplomacy*, www.iriplomacy.ir, 9 September 2009; Arezoo Dilmaghani, ‘The Forced Democracy of Afghanistan’, *Iranian Diplomacy*, www.iriplomacy.ir, 24 June 2009.

Water has been a disputed topic between Afghanistan and Iran since the 1870s, and numerous political conflicts have erupted over the access to water. Iran's southeast provinces are deeply dependent on receiving water mainly from the Helmand River, which emanates from the Hindu Kush Mountains northwest of Kabul and stretches 1,188 km into Iran's Sistan-Baluchistan province. Although Afghanistan and Iran signed an agreement in 1973 designating 26 cubic metres of water per second to Iran, the treaty was never fully implemented and the issue is still far from being resolved. In Afghanistan the Kayaki dam, the Arghandab dam and extensive irrigation in the Helmand province direct the flow of the Helmand River.⁶²

Both countries were clearly affected by the drought which racked Afghanistan in 1999–2001 but, adding insult to injury, in 1999 the Taliban simply cut off the water flow to Iran which resulted in an enormous environmental disaster in and around the Lake Hamun region, on a par with the desertification of the Aral Sea but receiving far less international attention. This was an area of 2–4,000 square kilometres and linking three interconnected lakes stretching on both sides of the border, but by 2002 the destruction of the environment was almost complete according to a report from Lake Hamun. The rapid desertification destroyed the ecological diversity, put an end to an annual production of 3,500 tons of fish and the pasture and water for 1.7 million cattle, goats and sheep. The local population of fishermen and farmers was displaced, and the environmental disaster thereby added to the refugee crisis.⁶³

Even after the fall of the Taliban the water issue remained controversial. In 2002 the UNDP in Tehran emphasized that the conflict was also part of an 'ethno-political statement' from the Pashtuns residing in the areas of the big dams, controlling the water flow of the Helmand River. "They are not letting any water downstream because they don't like the people down there – many of whom are Baluchs as well as Tajiks".⁶⁴ However, when in August 2002 President Khatami visited Kabul he reached a short-term solution with the new Afghan government and the taps were

⁶² Italian Research and Study Centre for the Fishery, *Aquaculture Development in Sistan-Baluchistan 2005–2008. Technical Report*. Rome, October 2006; Bill Samii, 'Iran/Afghanistan: Still No Resolution For Century-Old Water Dispute', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 7 September 2005; Pirouz Mojtahed-Zadeh, 'Lake Hamun, a Disaster in the Making', *UNEP Newsletter and Technical Publications*, <http://www.unep.or.jp/ietc/Publications/techpublications/TechPub-4/lake1-7.asp>.

⁶³ 'Iran: The Hamun lake crisis', www.irinnews.org, 25 September 2002; John Weier, 'From Wetland to Wasteland. The Destruction of the Hamoun Oasis', *Earth Observatory*, 13 December 2002.

⁶⁴ 'Iran: The Hamun lake crisis', www.irinnews.org, 25 September 2002.

turned on; not enough to revive the agriculture but sufficient to ensure drinking water.⁶⁵ The water disputes did not end there though.

In a March 2003 visit to Sistan-Baluchistan, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini emphasized that he expected Afghanistan to fulfil its commitments. “We expect Afghanistan to respect the rights of Iran and of the residents of Sistan va Baluchistan Province to Hirmand [Helmand] River water, and the issue will be followed up seriously by the Islamic Republic of Iran”.⁶⁶ This comment was not taken lightly in Kabul. Abdul Hosayn Hashemi, leader of the Peace Council of the People of Afghanistan, said that Khomeini’s comments were an “interference in Afghanistan’s internal affairs” and that “Iranian theologians should realize the fact that the Helmand River is the property of Afghans only”. Hashemi also accused Iran of violating international agreements by building canals on their side of the river.⁶⁷

Signs of recovery were reported from the Lake Hamun region after a flood in 2005, but the long-term result is still uncertain. Also, despite the fact that Iran and Afghanistan have cooperated with UNEP, UNDP and GEF (Global Environment Facility) since 2003 on rehabilitating Lake Hamun, it is clear that the reconstruction of Afghanistan, which includes widespread agricultural development and dam construction, is met with an ambiguous reaction in Iran as these projects potentially undermine the water flow to Iran’s poorest region, Sistan-Baluchistan.⁶⁸

The water vulnerability has led Iran to intervene politically. An India-funded project outside Herat, the \$150 million reconstruction of the Salma Dam, was halted after heavy pressure from the Iranian embassy.⁶⁹ In another instance Iran’s plans to disrupt a planned dam construction did not only involve political pressure. In March 2009 Iranian-made explosives were discovered close to the Bakhshabad Dam in Farah province, and engineers working on the \$2.2 million project were attacked. According to the local deputy governor, the Iranian government would

⁶⁵ ‘Iran welcomes return of river water from Afghanistan but says flow is insufficient’, *U.S. Water News Online*, www.uswaternews.com, November 2002.

⁶⁶ Bill Samii, ‘Supreme Leader concludes visit to Sistan va Baluchistan’, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Iran Report*, vol. 6, no. 10, 10 March 2003.

⁶⁷ Amin Tarzi, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Afghanistan Report*, 27 March 2003, Vol. 2, No. 11.

⁶⁸ King & Sturtewagen, *Making the Most of Afghanistan’s River Basins. Opportunities for Regional Cooperation*. New York, The EastWest Institute, February 2010, pp. 7–8.

⁶⁹ Bagherpour & Farhad, ‘The Iranian Influence in Afghanistan’, *Tehran Bureau*, 9 August 2010, www.pbs.org.

‘do whatever is necessary’ to prevent the project, because the dam would diminish the flow of water into Iran.⁷⁰

These interventions do not go unnoticed in Afghanistan. In October 2009 hundreds of Afghans demonstrated in Kabul against Iran’s alleged ‘theft’ of water from the Helmand River. “We want to stop the water flowing into Iran and Pakistan”, MP Najeebullah Kabuli told the demonstrators. “They are benefiting from our water. We give them drinking water and they give us suicide bombers”. Another demonstrator living close to the Helmand River claimed that “Iran has made too many canals to the Helmand River in the border area and is stealing water”.⁷¹ To the Iranians, however, the lack of water is perceived as a security threat.

Forced repatriation: refugees as a bargaining chip?

Similar to the unresolved issue of water rights, the large numbers of Afghan refugees are another cause for contestation and mutual dependency between the two countries. Iran has housed millions of Afghan refugees and migrant workers, but has initiated massive deportation campaigns within the last few years. Iran’s policies put pressure on Kabul and they raise fears that the returning refugees have become a bargaining chip in the negotiations between Iran, Afghanistan and the US.

In the 1980s, after the Soviet invasion, millions of refugees fled Afghanistan, of whom some three million settled in Iran. The first emigration wave was met with great hospitality. Unlike Pakistan, Iran did not place the Afghan refugees in camps but allowed them to settle in and around the big cities and become part of the (mainly unskilled) work force. They were granted ‘blue cards’ as refugees exiled for religious reasons, were permitted to stay indefinitely and could obtain government subsidies, free education and health care.

Iran has been hosting the largest number of refugees in the world, despite the fact that Iran only received a very little help from UNHCR and the international community to manage the refugee crisis. From 1979 to 1997 Iran received \$150 million from UNHCR compared to Pakistan, which received more than \$1 billion in the same

⁷⁰ Institute for War and Peace Reporting, ‘Tehran Accused of Complicity in Growing Weapons Trade’, ARR No. 319, 20 April 2009.

⁷¹ Zabair Babakarkhail, ‘Afghan Iran Water War’, www.asiacalling.com, 31 October 2009.

period.⁷² This was partly because Iran restricted the foreign interference of UNHCR, partly because Iran was too isolated internationally to receive aid.⁷³

But in the 1990s the government attitude to refugees changed and the Afghans' rights to work, residency, education and mixed marriages became contested. In 1992 Iran instigated its first 'forced voluntary repatriation' programme, despite the fact that the civil war and the 1996–2001 rule of the Taliban made returning to Afghanistan extremely dangerous. In fact, the Taliban regime actually created another wave of Afghan refugees into Iran.⁷⁴

After the fall of the Taliban in October 2001 most Afghans were prevented from seeking asylum in Iran, but in spite of attempts to seal the border 700–1000 Afghans entered Iran every day, according to the UNHCR.⁷⁵ In April 2002 Iran began another 'forced voluntary repatriation' of Afghan refugees, and Iran signed a 'Tripartite Agreement' with Afghanistan and UNHCR, which was subsequently renewed till 2006. Repatriation centres were set up around the country, urging refugees with registration cards to seek repatriation.⁷⁶

To further increase the incentives to return, the Iranian government passed a number of regulations which made registration mandatory and "outlawed employment, administrative services, banking, participation in civil society, and accommodation for Afghans without valid residence permits".⁷⁷ As part of these regulations, in June 2004, UNHCR cut the educational funding for Afghans and reduced their health care assistance. School fees became compulsory from September 2004 and a number of bureaucratic measures were also introduced. Afghans seeking repatriation had to be

⁷² Zuzanna Olszewska, 'Afghanistan xiv. Afghan Refugees in Iran', *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, Online edition, www.iranica.com, 15 December 2008; Shirin Hakimzadeh, 'Iran: A Vast Diaspora Abroad and Millions of Refugees at Home', *Migration Information Source*, September 2006.

⁷³ Alessandro Monsutti, *War and Migration. Social Networks and Economic Strategies of the Hazaras of Afghanistan*. New York, London, Routledge, 2005, p. 127.

⁷⁴ Zuzanna Olszewska, "'Hey Afghani!' Identity Contentions among Iranians and Afghan refugees', in Chatty & Finlayson (eds), *Dispossession and Displacement. Forced Migration in the Middle East and North Africa*. The British Academy, Oxford Univ. Press, 2010, p. 198f; Homa Hoodfar, 'The Long Road Home: Adolescent Afghan Refugees in Iran Contemplate "Return"', in Jason Hart (ed), *Years of Conflict. Adolescence, Political violence and Displacement*. Studies in Forced Migration, vol. 25. New York, Oxford, Berghahn Books, 2008, p. 165.

⁷⁵ Human Rights Watch, 'Closed Door Policy: Afghan Refugees in Pakistan and Iran', *Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan*, vol. 14, no 2(G), February 2002, p. 5, 16.

⁷⁶ UNHCR, 'Iran, Afghanistan sign new agreement on Afghan returns', *News Stories*, 17 July 2003, www.unhcr.org; 'Iran: Special on Afghan Refugees', www.irinnews.org, 29 June 2004.

⁷⁷ Sarah Kamal, 'Repatriation and Reconstruction: Afghan Youth as a "Burnt Generation" in Post-conflict Return', in Chatty & Finlayson (eds), *Dispossession and Displacement. Forced Migration in the Middle East and North Africa*. The British Academy, Oxford Univ. Press, 2010, p. 150.

de-registered, so that they could not re-enter Iran (although quite a number of them do so anyway), and Afghans wanting to stay had to re-register every six months.⁷⁸

Despite great ambivalence about returning – not least among women who have enjoyed a better status and access to education and work in Iran – and the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan, from 2002 to the beginning of 2007 nearly 850,000 Afghans returned as part of the repatriation programme, and just as many again left without any assistance.⁷⁹

The Iranian government was still not satisfied however and in 2007 they launched a massive deportation campaign, officially in an attempt to reduce the numbers of ‘illegal immigrants’. Some say that 350,000 Afghans were expelled, others that by June 2008, 490,000 had been deported.⁸⁰ This campaign was enforced harshly. As Human Rights Watch and UNHCR emphasized at the time, many people were beaten when apprehended and held in detention centres before being sent to the border. Six Afghans were killed due to police brutality and in the course of the action more than 40 per cent, most of them children, were separated from their families. Many of the expelled Afghans were not even illegal immigrants; they possessed proper registration cards.⁸¹

This tough campaign reflected the increasingly aggressive domestic policies of the Ahmadinezhad government, who wanted to show their hardline position by targeting and ‘rounding up’ marginalized social groups also including those such as drug users and prostitutes in order to uproot the causes of social and moral ‘corruption’.⁸²

The ‘illegal immigrant’ campaign also formed part of Iran’s more confrontational stance on the international political scene. As Mark Sappenfield says, “the abrupt-

⁷⁸ ‘Iran: Special on Afghan Refugees’, www.irinnews.org, 29 June 2004; ‘Afghanistan–Iran: UNHCR concerned over wave of refugee arrests’, www.irinnews.org, 12 January 2005.

⁷⁹ Zuzanna Olszewska, ‘Afghanistan xiv. Afghan Refugees in Iran’, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, Online edition, www.iranica.com, 15 December 2008.

⁸⁰ The Hollings Center for International Dialogue, *Afghanistan’s other neighbors: Iran, Central Asia, and China*. Conference report, The American Institute of Afghanistan Studies, February 2009, p. 7; Zuzanna Olszewska, “Hey Afghani!” Identity Contentions among Iranians and Afghan refugees’, in Chatty & Finlayson (eds), *Dispossession and Displacement. Forced Migration in the Middle East and North Africa*. The British Academy, Oxford Univ. Press, 2010, p. 200.

⁸¹ Human Rights Watch, ‘Iran: Halt Mass Deportation of Afghans’, www.hrw.org, 19 June 2007; ‘Afghanistan–Iran: UN, Afghan gov’t call for human deportations from Iran’, www.irinnews.org, 14 May 2007.

⁸² Janne Bjerre Christensen, *Drugs, Deviancy and Democracy in Iran: The Interaction of State and Civil Society*. London, I.B. Tauris, forthcoming.

ness of the decision, combined with the sheer number of deportees and the fact that many of them had legal documents to remain in Iran, pointed to a motive beyond expedience or impatience”.⁸³ According to Ronald E. Neumann who was the US ambassador to Afghanistan at the time, the 2007 deportations formed part of Iran’s pressure on Karzai, which increased after Ahmadinezhad took over, and was directly related to Iran’s fears of a US military attack from Afghanistan. “Karzai continued to feel threatened by Iran. This pressure became worse when Iran began expelling Afghan refugees in Iran. Afghanistan had no ability to absorb the refugees in employment”, Neumann says.⁸⁴

The Afghans, not surprisingly, perceived the forced repatriation as a hostile act and the campaign, which created a humanitarian crisis, stressed that Iran could easily make life more difficult for Afghanistan. The massive deportations have tripled the size of Kabul – from 1.5 million inhabitants in 2001 to 4.5 million in 2008 – and although the well-educated returnees contribute to the Afghan economy, the sheer number of them have also added to the unemployment and instability and put tremendous pressure on the Afghan government to deliver.⁸⁵ In the Afghan parliament the campaign even led to violent confrontations and two ministers who had been unable to halt the deportations, received no-confidence votes.⁸⁶

Whether or not the Iranian move in 2007 was directed against the US forces is up for debate. Zuzanna Olszewska, who has worked intensively on Afghan refugees in Iran, is not entirely convinced: “The mass deportations might have been a signal to the US to show that Iran has the power to destabilise Afghanistan at will, but on the other hand there have been many deportation campaigns even before 2001, and often they are for domestic political reasons. I’m not sure that policies towards refugees are guided by relations with the US very much at all, actually. They are too inconsistent for that!”⁸⁷

⁸³ Mark Sappenfield, ‘Is Iran meddling in Afghanistan?’ *The Christian Science Monitor*, 8 August 2007.

⁸⁴ Email correspondence, October 2010.

⁸⁵ The Hollings Center for International Dialogue, *Afghanistan’s other neighbors: Iran, Central Asia, and China*. Conference report, The American Institute of Afghanistan Studies, February 2009, p. 7; International Crisis Group, ‘Afghanistan: What Now for Refugees?’ *Crisis Group Asia Report* No. 175, 31 August 2009, p. 9f, 16; ‘Afghanistan–Iran: UN, Afghan gov’t call for human deportations from Iran’, www.irinnews.org, 14 May 2007; Anand Gopal, ‘Afghanistan Unable to cope with returning refugees’, *Inter Press Service*, www.ipsnews.net, 4 March 2008.

⁸⁶ George Gavrillis, ‘Harnessing Iran’s Role in Afghanistan’, *Council on Foreign Relations*, 5 June 2009; David Montero, ‘Afghan refugee crisis brewing’, *The Christian Science Monitor*, 17 May 2007.

⁸⁷ Email correspondence, October 2010.

Regardless of the campaigns, quite large numbers of Afghans remain in Iran. According to UNHCR, in June 2009 Iran was officially hosting 976,500 refugees, of whom 933,500 were from Afghanistan.⁸⁸ On top of that as many as 1 million Afghans live in Iran illegally.

As the flow of repatriated Afghans has ceased during the last few years, the Iranian government has agreed to issue temporary work visas to lessen the uncertainty of those Afghans remaining (but these visas cost \$350–500 to renew every six months).⁸⁹ Most of these Afghans engage in construction work, farming, gardening, and other unskilled manual labour that few Iranians want to conduct. In that sense the Afghan workers form an important part of the Iranian economy.

Afghanistan also benefits enormously from the working migrants in Iran. The remittances sent home by Afghan workers are estimated at \$500 million annually. However, the whole issue of returning refugees raises an anxiety in the Kabul government about succumbing to Iran's cultural influence. One consequence is that refugees returning with Iranian educations face discrimination, and they are faced with difficulties in getting their degrees acknowledged both in ministries and at the universities, even though they are often much better educated.⁹⁰

As in a number of other respects, the relations of mutual dependency stemming from the refugees are complicated and deeply ingrained in both Afghanistan's wider political context and in Iran's complex domestic agenda.

Drug trafficking: an avenue for dialogue?

The flow of opium from Afghanistan is another issue which deeply affects Iran and which provides another avenue for political intervention and cooperation between the two countries. Among several good reasons for Iran to seek stability with Afghanistan, the drug problem is the most commanding. Also, in spite of the increasing nuclear conflict, drug trafficking has been a relatively 'de-politicized' arena for dialogue with the West and could become a basis for further collaboration.

⁸⁸ UNHCR, '2010 country operations profile – Islamic Republic of Iran'. <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/page?page=49e486f96>.

⁸⁹ UNHCR, *UNHCR Global Report 2009*, <http://www.unhcr.org/4c08f2639.pdf>, p. 195.

⁹⁰ The Hollings Center for International Dialogue, *Afghanistan's other neighbors: Iran, Central Asia, and China*. Conference report, The American Institute of Afghanistan Studies, February 2009, pp. 6–7.

Afghanistan produces 90 per cent of the world's opiates, which in 2007–2009 amounted to a yearly opium production of 6,900–8,200 metric tons.⁹¹ Iran has for decades been engaged in a low-scale drug war on the difficult terrain of its eastern border, 936 km of which is with Afghanistan and 520 km with Pakistan. The intensity of the drug war, which has claimed the lives of some 3,500 Iranian police officers since 1979, and the imagination of the drug smugglers continue to be astounding. In February 2009 Iranian officers discovered 282.5 kg of opium hidden in the stomachs of seventeen camels.⁹² Although Iran seizes more than two thirds of the opium captured worldwide and very large amounts of heroin too (in 2008, 561 metric tons of opium, 9 tons of morphine and 23.1 tons of heroin), the country is still left with a huge internal drug problem.⁹³

The Iranian population consumes 42 per cent of the opium and 5 per cent of the heroin used globally.⁹⁴ The numbers of drug users in Iran are hard to verify, but estimates claim that out of a population of 70 million as many as 3.5–4 million people are using drugs – mainly opium and heroin, but also synthetic drugs and refined heroin in the form of crack or crystal. Of those, 1.2–2.5 million people are officially recognized as 'full time' drug users (i.e. addicted), and 2–300,000 people are injecting drug users.⁹⁵ According to the national Drug Control Headquarters in Iran, in 2008 nearly 600,000 received treatment for their addiction, of whom 60 per cent were 20–34 years old.⁹⁶ Although Iran has a long history of opium smoking, particular among elderly men, the pattern has shifted to mainly include the young population.⁹⁷

There are numerous social and political reasons for the rise in drug use after the 1979 revolution – unemployment, poverty, depression, domestic violence, a rising number of divorces and growth in prostitution, a very young disenchanted population seek-

⁹¹ UNODC, *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2010*, September 2010.

⁹² Robert Tait, 'Toads the latest enemy in Iran's war on drugs', *The Guardian*, 16 February 2009.

⁹³ UNODC, *World Drug Report 2010*, p. 142; Janne Bjerre Christensen, *Drugs, Deviancy and Democracy in Iran: The Interaction of State and Civil Society*. London, I.B. Tauris, forthcoming.

⁹⁴ UNODC, *World Drug Report 2010*, http://www.unodc.org/documents/wdr/WDR_2010/World_Drug_Report_2010_lo-res.pdf, p. 41.

⁹⁵ UNODC, 'Epidemiology of drug use in Iran', *Drug and Crime Situation in Iran*, factsheet, <http://www.unodc.org/iran/en/epidemiology.html>; Razzaghi et al., 'Profiles of risk: a qualitative study of injecting drug users in Tehran, Iran', *Harm Reduction Journal*, 3(12), 2006; UNODC, *2008 World Drug Report*, UNODC, *2009 World Drug Report*.

⁹⁶ Drug Control Headquarter, 'Treatment and Harm Reduction', <http://dchq.ir/html/images/dchq-1/Treatment%20and%20Harm%20Reduction/Treatment%20and%20Harm%20Reduction.pdf>.

⁹⁷ For an excellent account of Iran's history of drug use see Rudi Matthee, *The Pursuit of Pleasure. Drugs and Stimulants in Iranian History, 1500–1900*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2005.

ing adventure and entertainment, social trauma as a consequence of the Iran–Iraq war in the 1980s, etc. – which I will not dwell on here. But importantly, Iran’s drug problems have had political consequences on two levels. One regards Iran’s treatment policy. Since 1998 drug users seeking treatment have been recognized as patients and exempted from prosecution. Although the treatment policies are still ambiguous, Iran has been at the forefront in the Middle East in the fight against HIV/AIDS and has instigated progressive treatment facilities, even allowing harm reduction to take place in prisons.⁹⁸

On another level, Iran has been forcefully engaged in curbing the drug smuggling from Afghanistan, heavily punishing people involved in drug trafficking. These supply reduction endeavours have led to many conflicts with Afghanistan. Iran has blamed both the Taliban and later the US forces and Karzai’s government for allowing the drug trafficking to continue, and Iran has repeatedly complained about the limited resources they receive from the West to fight off what they see as a shared problem.⁹⁹

In 1998 Iranian newspapers accused the Taliban of ‘legalizing’ and making drug cultivation ‘obligatory’, enforcing a ‘vast cultural and social offensive’ against Iran through pervasive drug trafficking.¹⁰⁰ In the prolonged crisis between Afghanistan and Iran in autumn 1998 which nearly led to war, the drugs issue became one way of arguing for an entrenchment of the border. In October 1998 Mohammad Amirkhizi, Iran’s representative to the United Nations in Vienna, announced that it was of ‘vital importance’ to create a ‘security belt around Afghanistan’. This notion has been frequently repeated ever since.¹⁰¹ When in 2000 the Taliban finally banned poppy cultivation it was positively recognized by Iran, and Iran’s drug seizures dropped remarkably in 2001.

⁹⁸ Janne Bjerre Christensen, *Drugs, Deviancy and Democracy in Iran: The Interaction of State and Civil Society*. London, NY, I.B. Tauris, forthcoming.

⁹⁹ ‘Iran urges West to help it fight drug smugglers’, *Reuters*, 1 July 1999; Untitled article, *Islamic Republic of Iran’s New Agency*, 10 June 1998; Michael Theodoulou, ‘Iran slows tide of drugs to the West’, *The Christian Science Monitor*, 10 March 1999; Samii & Tarzi, ‘Afghanistan and Iran confront their drug problem’, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Iran Report*, 7(21), 28 June 2004; Untitled article, *Islamic Republic of Iran’s News Agency website*, 16 December 2006.

¹⁰⁰ Untitled summary, *Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran Network 1*, 1 July 1998; Untitled summary, *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, 9 November 1998; ‘UN drugs Experts Check Smuggling Routes in Iran’, *Reuters*, 28 September 1998; Barry May, ‘U.N. experts say Taleban authorize drug smuggling’, *Reuters*, 3 October 1998.

¹⁰¹ Untitled article, *Islamic Republic of Iran’s News Agency*, 14 October 1998; ‘Iran steps up war on drugs’, *Agence France Presse*, 25 June 2000; Samii and Ridolfo, ‘Drugs continue to bedevil Iranian authorities’, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Iran Report*, 7(28), 23 August 2004.

After the overthrow of the Taliban in 2001, however, the production of opium has again skyrocketed. In Iran it has been a trend since the revolution to blame drug use on the moral depravation of the West, but for obvious reasons the accusations against the US have become even more pronounced with their failed counter-narcotic efforts in Afghanistan. Often Iranian officials imply a 'hidden plot' by the 'foreign enemy', to deliberately flood Iran with drugs in order to endanger the country's 'national security'. The drug trafficking from Afghanistan is a "ploy by Iran's enemies", said a representative from the law enforcement agencies in 2001.¹⁰² In June 2006 an MP from the *majles*' Social Committee said, "there are hidden hands from the West and America which are directing this affair and adding fuel to it".¹⁰³

The more the Bush administration pushed for regime change, the more strongly were these allegations expressed. The American 75 million dollar proposal in 2006, attempting to 'reach out to the people of Iran' and mobilize Iran's civil society, only reinforced the accusations of forced regime change.¹⁰⁴ "I think that America's 75m dollars to destroy Iran is in reality 750m dollars with which to destroy Iran and its youth", the member of the *majles*' Social Committee stated with reference to the distribution of narcotics "directed by international organizations".¹⁰⁵ Blaming the American 'colonialism', in an April 2006 Friday prayer, Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani said, "They [the US] can find the people who oppose them in caves but how come they can't find the smugglers [...]? You see, they can easily find and destroy heroin making factories but they don't want to do so".¹⁰⁶

There is no doubt that the American and British opium eradication attempts have failed badly and that the rising insurgencies are paid for by and contribute to Afghanistan's opium production, the so-called 'insurgent-narcotic nexus'.¹⁰⁷ As Ronald E. Neumann, former US ambassador to Afghanistan says, "In early 2006 we had analyzed the problem and realized that almost every element of the strategy had

¹⁰² Bill Samii, 'Opiates remain the biggest danger to Iranians', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Iran Report*, 6(34), 18 August 2003.

¹⁰³ Untitled article, *Iranian Labour News Agency* website, 27 June 2006.

¹⁰⁴ US Department of State, 'Reaching Out to the People of Iran', *U.S. Department of State Fact Sheets*, 15 February 2006, <http://www.state.gov/t/pa/prs/ps/2006/61268.htm>.

¹⁰⁵ Untitled article, *Iranian Labour News Agency* website, 27 June 2006; cf. Ali Yusef-pur, 'Press, enemies' moles', *Siyasat-e ruz*, 27 May 2006.

¹⁰⁶ Friday prayer, Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, 28 April 2006.

¹⁰⁷ Micheal Erwin, 'The Insurgent-Narcotic Nexus in Helmand Province', *CTC Sentinel*, September 2009, vol. 2, no. 9, pp. 5-7.

failed”.¹⁰⁸ The repercussions of these failed counter-narcotics attempts have been enormous. As Ahmed Rashid puts it, “In short, one of the major reasons for the failure of nation building in Afghanistan and Pakistan was the failure to deal with the issue of drugs”.¹⁰⁹

To the US the counter-narcotics efforts were entirely unrelated to the war on terror, and in the beginning they completely denied that there was a drug problem. The British attempts to pay off farmers for eradicating their crops proved just as disastrous, leading to massive corruption while the opium production continued unabated.¹¹⁰ Also, as Ahmed Rashid emphasizes, “Karzai and the Kabul government shared the blame for failing to tackle the major drug traffickers”. Karzai often turned a blind eye to the traffickers because they had ties to high-ranking people in the government.¹¹¹

In 2004 the drug economy was estimated to be worth \$2.8 billion, equal to 60 per cent of Afghanistan’s legal economy, and in 2006 it accounted for nearly half of the national budget, some \$6.7 billion.¹¹² In 2009 narcotics revenues totalled half of Afghanistan’s GDP and 2.5 million people directly depended on opium production and trafficking. The Taliban is supported with at least \$80 million in annual revenue from the drugs trade – in some accounts up to \$400 million – and in Helmand, which is the most opium-affected area in Afghanistan, 65,000 drug cultivators operate to the benefit of some 1,500 drug traffickers.¹¹³ This is despite the fact that in 2010 the US was spending \$700 million on counter-narcotics measures.¹¹⁴

Small wonder if Iran believes that the Afghan government and the foreign forces are exporting a problem onto their borders. However, although Iran blames the West,

¹⁰⁸ Ronald E. Neumann, *The Other War. Winning and Losing in Afghanistan*. Washington, Potomac Books, 2009, p. 59.

¹⁰⁹ Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos. The world’s most unstable region and the threat to global security*. Penguin Books, 2008, p. 318.

¹¹⁰ Ibid. p. 320–324; Ronald E. Neumann, *The Other War. Winning and Losing in Afghanistan*. Washington, Potomac Books, 2009.

¹¹¹ Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos. The world’s most unstable region and the threat to global security*. Penguin Books, 2008, pp. 326–8, 332–335; Andrew Oxford, ‘Afghanistan’s soft-spoken rebel’, *Le Monde diplomatique*, 12 January 2010.

¹¹² Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos. The world’s most unstable region and the threat to global security*. Penguin Books, 2008, p. 325, 329.

¹¹³ Alexander Neill (ed), ‘Afghanistan/Iran/Pakistan Cross-Border Security Symposium, executive summary’. *Royal United Services Institute*, www.rusi.org, March 2009; Eric Schmitt, ‘Many Sources Feed Taliban’, *The New York Times*, 19 October 2009.

¹¹⁴ Dan Murphy, ‘Afghanistan: Send less money for drug war, give us more control’, *Christian Science Monitor*, 19 July 2010.

the issue of supply reduction has also been one of the most constructive arenas for cooperation between Iran and the UN, and the US and the EU.

The fight against drugs was one of the ways in which President Khatami enabled his 'dialogue among civilizations' when he took power in 1997. The issue came up in most of the then-groundbreaking meetings he held with European, regional, and American counterparts. Although Khatami held the perception that addiction in Iran had increased "because of the corrupt ringleaders of former regimes", i.e. the West, when sensitive issues were raised such as whether Iran would still execute the *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie? – the fight against drugs established a neutral common ground for increasing dialogue.¹¹⁵

Iran had long been observing UN conventions on drugs, but President Khatami's renewed focus on dialogue further emphasized Iran's willingness to cooperate with the UN, and it paved the way for establishing a Tehran office for UNODC (then UNDCP United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime) in 1999.¹¹⁶ As Mohammad Khatami stated in a meeting with UNDCP in March 1998, "Based on dialogue as the new axis of the Islamic Republic of Iran's international policy, constructive results could be attained on the drug campaign, exchanging views with international agencies...[This] dialogue [is] based on one of the most humanitarian issues".¹¹⁷

Despite the UN sanctions imposed on Iran in regard to its nuclear programme and the threats of a military attack, substantial dialogue with the EU, the UN, the US and regional partners in regard to drug trafficking continued well into 2008.¹¹⁸ However, with the sanctions enforced in June 2008 the US stopped their financial support to Iran's supply reduction efforts, disregarding the objections of the UNODC in Tehran.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁵ Untitled summary, *Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran Network 1*, 28 September 1997; 'UN official says Iran's experience in fighting drugs "outstanding"', *Islamic Republic of Iran's News Agency*, 4 April 1998; Guy Dinmore, 'UK to sign drugs pact with Iran', *Financial Times*, 26 February 2001; 'Khatami gets message from Tony Blair on drugs fight', *Agence France Presse*, 27 February 2001; Bill Samii, 'State department lauds Iran's war on drugs', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Iran Report*, 4(12), 26 March 2001.

¹¹⁶ Iran is a party to the 1961 UN Single Convention on Narcotics drugs, and in 1992 Iran ratified the 1988 UN Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (Bill Samii, 'Iran's Narcotics Problem', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Iran Report*, 3(10), 6 March 2000).

¹¹⁷ 'UN official says Iran's experience in fighting drugs "outstanding"', *Islamic Republic of Iran's News Agency*, 4 April 1998.

¹¹⁸ Julian Borger, 'Failed Afghan drug policy harming us, says Iran', *The Guardian*, 11 September 2008.

¹¹⁹ Abbott and Karimi, 'West links drug war aid to Iranian nuclear impasse', *Associated Press*, 24 June 2008.

In order to continue the counter-narcotics cooperation (circumventing the sanctions), in February 2009 the European Commission signed a MoU with Iran through the Economic Cooperation Organization dedicated to the “fight against illicit drug trafficking from/to Afghanistan”. The EC agreed to spend €9.5 million on the “financing of technical assistance, training activities, seminars and equipment for the benefit of the ECO Member States including countries along the Western Heroin Trafficking Route”, i.e. Iran.¹²⁰

The cooperation with the EU therefore continues, but it has proved very difficult for the US to start a proper collaboration with Iran on the issue, despite overtures by President Obama and mutual incentives to do so. Although Iran and the US did engage in a counter-narcotics meeting on 8 March 2010 in Geneva, this evident avenue for cooperation is overshadowed both by the nuclear crisis and by US allegations that Iran is ‘meddling’ in Afghanistan.¹²¹

Supporting the insurgents? Iran’s military involvement

For several years the US has accused Iran of meddling in Afghanistan, blaming them for supplying the Taliban forces with military equipment and training. But how consistent is this support? How verifiable are the allegations? And to what extent can the Iranian-made weapons discovered on the battlefield be linked with a consistent, official policy? Does the purchase of weapons happen with or without the acceptance of the Revolutionary Guards Corps and the government?

These questions are notoriously difficult to answer, but what seems to be supported is that, although not reflecting the level of Iran’s engagement in Iraq and surely in no way comparable to the Pakistani backing of the Taliban, the amount of intercepted Iranian military equipment has increased since Ahmadinezhad took power in 2005, particularly since 2007, and clearly in 2010 as a response to the American surge in Afghanistan.

The reasons for Iran’s clandestine support to insurgents – at the same time as Iran officially opposes any negotiations with the Taliban – are complexly embedded in

¹²⁰ ‘Memorandum of Understanding between The Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) and The European Commission (EC) on Implementation of EC-financed project under the Instrument For Stability on “Fight Against Illicit Drug Trafficking from/to Afghanistan” with ECO Member States’, Tehran, 3 February 2009, www.ecosecretariat.org.

¹²¹ Kenneth Katzman, ‘Iran: U.S. Concerns and Policy Responses’, *CRS Report for Congress*, 20 August 2010, p. 60.

Iran's strained relations with the US. What triggered the change in Iran's policy in 2005 could be seen as an effect of Ahmadinezhad's more confrontational course against the US in general, but it was also interlinked with the concrete perspective of a US–Afghanistan 'strategic partnership' in May 2005, which Iran feared would allow for permanent military bases. The military bases were never on the table though. According to Ronald E. Neumann, the declaration was merely a symbol of America's intention not to abandon Afghanistan.¹²²

However, as Barnett Rubin says: "Tehran responded [to the US–Afghan strategic partnership] by asking President Karzai to sign a declaration of strategic partnership with Iran that, among its provisions, committed Afghanistan not to permit its territory to be used for military or intelligence operations against Iran. The message was clear: Iran would accept Afghanistan's strategic partnership with the United States, but only if it is not directed against Iran".¹²³

Although Karzai emphasized that he would like to, he was not in a position to prevent the American manoeuvres. The US even forbade Karzai to sign such a declaration, just as they in January 2006 prevented him from signing financial agreements with Tehran. These moves by the US, along with the drumbeating for regime change and war, led Iran to adopt a more complex double strategy in Afghanistan and to use support to insurgents against the US. "Iran clearly did not want the Taliban to win, but it did not want the U.S. to feel secure in Afghanistan either", Barnett Rubin emphasizes.¹²⁴

Although still difficult to validate, a number of reports point to Iranian interference.¹²⁵ In Helmand the British forces discovered two shipments of arms from Iran in mid 2007. They also claimed to have found Russian-made, portable, low-altitude, surface-to-air missiles, believed to originate from Iran. Missiles, detonators, explosively-formed penetrators (EFP), mortars, C4 plastic explosives and anti-tank mines uncovered in the field are believed to stem from Iran.¹²⁶ Particularly the EFP landmines, locally

¹²² Ronald E. Neumann, *The Other War. Winning and Losing in Afghanistan*. Washington, Potomac Books, 2009, pp. 89–92.

¹²³ Barnett R. Rubin, *The U.S. and Iran in Afghanistan: Policy Gone Awry*. MIT Center for International Studies, October 2008, p. 3.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4; Email correspondence with Ronald E. Neumann, October 2010.

¹²⁵ Glenn Kessler, 'U.S. names officials, companies in bid to raise pressure on Iran', *The Washington Post*, 4 August 2010; 'Pakistan and Iran "backing Afghan attacks on British troops"', *The Telegraph*, 1 July 2010.

¹²⁶ Chris Zambelis, 'Is Iran Supporting the Insurgency in Afghanistan?' *Terrorism Monitor*, vol. 7, issue 33, 6 November 2009; Lara Logan, 'Cooperation rises between Iran and Taliban', *CBS News*, 7 October 2009; The Jamestown Foundation, *Is Iran Supporting the Insurgency in Afghanistan?* 7 November 2009.

nicknamed the ‘Dragon’ for their devastating effect, allegedly stem from Iran. According to a local Taliban commander the Iranian EFPs (originally supplied by the US to the Mujahedin in the 1980s to fight the Soviet Union) have “revolutionised the Taliban’s ability to target NATO soldiers.”¹²⁷

Some reports assert that Iran is providing batteries to the Taliban’s shoulder-fired SA-7 missiles and American Stinger missiles which the US provided to the Mujahedin in the 1980s, half of which were left in the battlefield and have now come back to haunt the ISAF/US troops.¹²⁸ According to the Wikileaks war logs Iran has also been housing and providing for wounded Taliban soldiers, and Iranian officers have been accused of exchanging drugs for weapons.¹²⁹

One of the problems with these allegations is that it is extremely difficult to verify on which levels the support to insurgents is carried out. Although several reports imply the involvement of the Quds Force (part of the Revolutionary Guards Corps) or ‘groups within the Iranian state’, the direct link to the Supreme Leader or government are hard to establish.¹³⁰ “We don’t know exactly who is doing this and why but we know that these are Iranian-origin weapons that have shown up in the hands of the Taliban”, Richard Boucher, assistant Secretary of State for South Asia admitted in April 2010.¹³¹

As many observers point out, since drugs traffickers penetrate the border region between Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan on a daily basis, smuggling weapons from Iran would be equally easy without necessarily implicating government officials. Others note that Iranian weapons have been floating around on the black market since the Iranian support to the Northern Alliance in the 1990s. As a western official told *The Guardian* in April 2010, “Out of every ten Kalashnikovs, one is Iranian. This [the allegations against Iran] is all a war of words. It has very little basis in reality.”¹³² One might also say that if Iran wants the troops to leave, keeping the forces bogged down in counter-insurgency may not be the most constructive way forward.

¹²⁷ Kate Clark, ‘Taliban claim weapons supplied by Iran’, *The Telegraph*, 14 September 2008.

¹²⁸ Jeff Stein, ‘New intelligence on Iran antiaircraft missiles in Afghanistan’, SpyTalk, *The Washington Post*, 12 August 2010.

¹²⁹ Simon Tisdall, ‘Afghanistan war logs: Iran’s covert operations in Afghanistan’, *The Guardian*, 25 July 2010; Institute for War and Peace Reporting, ‘Tehran Accused of Complicity in Growing Weapons Trade’, ARR No. 319, 20 April 2009.

¹³⁰ Kate Clark, ‘Taliban claim weapons supplied by Iran’, *The Telegraph*, 14 September 2008.

¹³¹ Declan Walsh, ‘US accuses Iran of supplying arms to Taliban insurgents’, *The Guardian*, 19 April 2010.

¹³² *Ibid.*

Iran, for its part, views these allegations as a pretext for war, providing fuel for the push for military intervention against Iran's nuclear facilities. Even if not a justification for war, the allegations are used as an excuse for not engaging Iran in a number of other realms where it might prove useful – like drug trafficking and reconstruction efforts – by keeping up the image of Iran as a 'terror state'. This view could be backed by the comments of General Petraeus. In October 2010 he said that "Iran's assistance to the Taliban overrides the common interests that Iran and the US share on Afghanistan", including the joint counter-narcotic efforts.¹³³

However, Ahmed Rashid, the Pakistani journalist who has worked on the Taliban and Afghanistan for years, has no doubts that Iran is backing the Taliban. In a telephone interview from Lahore he said, "I think they have been backing Taliban [...] for several years now. [...] But it is mainly [...] Taliban commanders who operate in the west of Afghanistan, in the provinces bordering Iran, and certainly I don't think there are any significant leaders of the Taliban movements from the Quetta *shura* in Iran, but commanders and operators in western Afghanistan have got support, shelter, sanctuary, probably some kind of aid from Iran".¹³⁴

According to Rashid, the overt and covert policies are both part of the government policy. "I think the gap that existed between the Revolutionary Guards and the government is much reduced compared to what it was before, or what we thought it was before, and certainly this policy is operating with the full permission of the Iranian government." He says this double game was reinforced when President Ahmadinezhad took power in 2005: "On the one hand I think the covert policy of making friends with the Taliban and keeping the Taliban as some kind of proxy force has probably been increased, and at the same time I think he [Ahmadinezhad] has tried to step up friendly relations with Karzai to offset that".¹³⁵

Iran's backing of the Taliban has been intensified within the last year due to the American policies, Ahmed Rashid continues. "We don't know the details, but [...] the indications are that it's certainly stepped up since the beginning of the year [2010], in fact since the American surge began and [Obama announced] this date of the American withdrawal. So Iran felt threatened by the surge, because the surge could easily be extended into some kind of attack on Iran because of the nuclear issue, and

¹³³ Petraeus: Iranian Payments to Afghan Government "Disingenuous", *Voice of America*, 29 October 2010.

¹³⁴ Telephone interview, 26 November 2010.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

also they felt that they had better position themselves somehow because of this potential American withdrawal July next year [2011]. So I think they are playing both ends of the stick [...] and taking care of both risks.”

The fact that an exit date has been put on the table adds fuel to all the regional players’ involvement. “All the countries in the region are gearing up for a pull out. Clearly the NATO summit [in November 2010] has put a damper on that to some extent by saying that they will transition until 2014, but I think all the regional countries are positioning themselves for an eventual pull out”, Ahmed Rashid says.¹³⁶

The main message Iran wants to convey by its double game is that it has the capability to pressurize or threaten the US/ISAF mission. In an August 2009 report Gen. Stanley McChrystal stressed exactly this point. “Iran plays an ambiguous role in Afghanistan, providing developmental assistance and political support to GIRoA [the government of Afghanistan] while the Iranian Quds Force is reportedly training fighters for certain Taliban groups and providing other forms of military assistance to insurgents. Iran’s current policies and actions do not pose a short-term threat to the mission, but Iran has the capability to threaten the mission in the future”, McChrystal said.¹³⁷

At the same time it is important to stress that compared to Pakistan’s backing of the Taliban Iran’s support is minor, and although resenting the US presence Iran definitely does not want to see a fully-fledged Taliban-headed and Pakistani-backed government re-emerge in Kabul. More than anyone, Iran has been vehemently opposed to including the Taliban in any peace negotiations.

In several comments to *Iranian Diplomacy* two former Iranian ambassadors to Kabul pinpoint Iran’s concerns, namely that: there are no moderate Taliban (or the moderate voices are marginalized); the Taliban does not want to share power, and reconciliation with insurgents should not be linked with a military withdrawal. In December 2009 Mohammad-Reza Bahrani said, “simultaneous withdrawal of foreign troops and transference of responsibility to Afghan forces should not be tied to reconciliation with insurgents. These cannot be put in one package”.¹³⁸

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Quoted in Sajjan M. Gohel, ‘Iran’s Ambiguous Role in Afghanistan’, *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 3, issue 3, March 2010, p. 13.

¹³⁸ Mohammad Reza Bahrani, ‘The Last Hopes of Afghanistan’, *Iranian Diplomacy*, www.irdiplomacy.ir, 14 December 2009.

In October 2010, commenting on the possibilities of a Peace Council which would include the Taliban, Mohammad Ebrahim Taherian said, “what is the goal of these talks? Is Karzai going to cede power to the Taliban or going to give them a share of power? It is clear that the Taliban is a totalitarian movement with its unique doctrine aspiring to establish an Islamic Emirate. In the Taliban’s doctrine, there is no room for sharing power with other groups”.¹³⁹

In November 2010, Mohammad-Reza Bahrami stated: “The major problem is that the general political circumstances in Afghanistan and the Taliban’s foreign supporters have suppressed the emergence of moderates from the Taliban’s political dynamics. The Taliban has now actually turned into a card manipulated by its supporters in regional games”.¹⁴⁰

This last comment was clearly a hint about Pakistan’s close engagement with the Taliban, a good reason why the relations between Iran and Pakistan are just as complicated as the Iran–Afghanistan alliances. I will now move on to discuss some of the issues pertaining to Iran’s relations to Pakistan, partly in regard to the Taliban and partly to the troubled Baluchistan region.

¹³⁹ Mohammad Ebrahim Taherian, ‘In Afghanistan, History Repeats Itself’, *Iranian Diplomacy*, www.irdiplomacy.ir, 11 October 2010.

¹⁴⁰ Mohammad-Reza Bahrami, ‘Moderate Taliban: Reality or Illusion?’, *Iranian Diplomacy*, www.irdiplomacy.ir, 11 November 2010.

4. Iran and Pakistan: a ‘dysfunctional’ relationship?

The relations between Pakistan and Iran have been called ‘dysfunctional’ and, although they have improved recently, they are still ingrained with years of rivalry and distrust.¹⁴¹ Historically, Pakistan and Iran have supported opposite sides in the regional conflicts. Whereas Iran joined India, Turkey, Central Asia and the West in backing the anti-Taliban forces after the Soviet withdrawal and still, primarily, continues to do so, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have openly supported the Taliban.

Iran’s Islamic Revolution in 1979 added to Iran and Pakistan’s ambiguous relationship. The fact that Pakistan was seen as US friendly, receiving huge loans and development aid from the Americans, added to the mutual mistrust. First and foremost the Iranian revolution fuelled the fierce Sunni–Shia conflicts in Pakistan, which turned into extreme sectarian violence in the 1980s and 1990s, and where Iran actively supported the Shia minorities.

As Zahid Hussain points out in his book on Pakistani sectarianism, “The spillover effect of the Shia revolution worried many Arab rulers, as well as the Pakistani military regime, which was trying to establish an Islamic system of a different kind. [...] Pakistan became the battlefield in an intra Islam proxy war. Iran and Saudi Arabia supported their respected allies. The Saudi government had consistently backed and funded the Deobandi school of thought in Pakistan which had many similarities to the Wahabi version of Islam. [...] The rise of foreign-backed sectarian militancy set in motion a seemingly unending cycle of violence.”¹⁴²

Although not to the same degree as in the 1980s, the sectarian violence in Pakistan still continues and it is still contributing to the suspicions between Iran and Pakistan, Ahmed Rashid says. “Iran has been very involved in the Shia–Wahabi conflict in Pakistan since the 1980s and I see no reason why Iran should stop being involved. Now I don’t think it’s involved the way it was in the 1980s when there was very fierce competition between Wahabism and Shiism in Pakistan but, generally speaking, there is competition and the Iranians are certainly not going to abandon their Shia protégées in Pakistan.”¹⁴³

¹⁴¹ Harsh V. Pant, ‘Pakistan and Iran’s Dysfunctional Relationship’, *Middle East Quarterly*, Spring 2009.

¹⁴² Zahid Hussain, *Frontline Pakistan. The Struggle with Militant Islam*. Columbia Univ. Press, 2007, p. 93.

¹⁴³ Telephone interview, 26 November 2010; cf. Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS), *Balochistan: Conflicts and Players*. Islamabad, PIPS, 2009, p. 145f.

Shared problems and trilateral dialogues

At the same time, however, Iran and Pakistan also share a number of concerns. Pakistan depends on Iran's gas and oil reserves, and although the two countries deal with the troubled Baluchistan region in quite different ways, they both face the problems of drug smuggling and nationalist resistance groups emanating from the region.

Within the last ten years several attempts have been made to reconcile and normalize relations – a Pakistan–Iran Joint Ministerial Commission on Security was set up 2001, a Kabul declaration on Good Neighbourly Relations was signed in 2002, a Preferential Trade Agreement was instigated in 2004, and trilateral dialogues on Afghanistan have been conducted the last few years.¹⁴⁴

It remains to be seen to what degree these initiatives can pave the way for a regional solution to Afghanistan's situation. But as sceptical observers note, despite the official goodwill transmitted in the 'trilateral dialogues,' Pakistan and Iran still have very different strategic aims. "Their joint commitment to 'eradicating extremism, terrorism and drugs' is therefore deliberately bland, with no detail of the talks or hints of any change in policy", as Michael Binyon noted in May 2009.¹⁴⁵ And, as Iran's former ambassador to Kabul Mohammad Reza Bahrami, stressed in December 2009, "Pakistan is replete with dormant crises. In fact, it seems to be part of the problem itself, not the solution".¹⁴⁶

Ahmed Rashid puts it very bluntly: "Whatever their official line might be, beneath the surface the intelligence agencies of both these countries are extreme rivals. Iran will never allow a full Pakistan backed Taliban government in Afghanistan, and likewise Pakistan. Underlying everything there is a lot of tension between the two countries on this issue, [...] which is why Iran is also now competing for the hearts and minds of the Taliban."¹⁴⁷

However, Iran is still officially supporting a regional solution to the Afghanistan crisis involving Pakistan, and in a gesture of goodwill pledged \$100 million to Pakistani flood victims in 2010. As Meir Javedanfar emphasizes, "Pakistan is set to have con-

¹⁴⁴ Harsh V. Pant, 'Pakistan and Iran: A Troubled Relationships', in Zetterlund (ed), *Pakistan – Consequences of Deteriorating Security in Afghanistan*. Stockholm, FOI, Swedish Defense Research Agency, 2009, pp. 151–154, 159–160; 'Iran leader hosts regional summit', *BBC News*, 24 May 2009.

¹⁴⁵ Michael Binyon, 'Tehran summit could be a turning point', *Times Online*, 27 May 2009.

¹⁴⁶ Mohammad Reza Bahrami, 'The Last Hopes of Afghanistan', *Iranian Diplomacy*, www.irdiplomacy.ir, 14 December 2009.

¹⁴⁷ Telephone interview, 26 November 2010.

siderable influence over Afghan affairs. Although Iran and Pakistan have traditionally been seen as competitors in the country, increased cooperation and an apparent rapprochement offers them the chance to split the spoils of NATO's departure in a more cooperative and less violent manner".¹⁴⁸

Iran's balancing act

Iran plays an important role in the regional power game and proxy war between India and Pakistan in Afghanistan. In this deep-rooted conflict Iran may be able to serve as a balancing power. "Of all Afghanistan's neighbors, Iran is [...] the only state that has the ability to balance Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan with a comparable presence", The Hollings Center for International Dialogue stresses.¹⁴⁹

Even if the US is still reluctant to fully acknowledge Iran as a stabilizing force, India is actively seeking to engage Iran on their side – to the dismay of Pakistan. The defence ties between India and Iran have been continuously expanded during the last ten years, and they have engaged in several construction projects in Afghanistan. India has contributed to building the Chah Bahar port in south Iran and has been the main contributor to completing the 218 km Zaranj–Delaram highway between Afghanistan and Iran, thereby connecting India to Iran's ports and establishing a corridor to Central Asia. By engaging in these projects India actively seeks to reduce Pakistan's influence and logistical leverage.¹⁵⁰

However, Iran's subtle balancing act vis-à-vis India and Pakistan is both intertwined with energy issues and with Iran's nuclear programme. "Tehran cannot risk appearing as a pro-Pakistan player in Afghanistan because India is a major source of gasoline imports. By the same token, however, if India commits to playing a role in US-led sanctions against Iran, then New Delhi must expect some backlash from the region", *Asia Times Online* has pointed out.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁸ Meir Javedanfar, 'Iran Eyes Closer Pakistan Ties', *The Diplomat*, 4 October 2010.

¹⁴⁹ The Hollings Center for International Dialogue, *Afghanistan's other neighbors: Iran, Central Asia, and China*. Conference report, The American Institute of Afghanistan Studies, February 2009, p. 5.

¹⁵⁰ Harsh V. Pant, 'Pakistan and Iran: A Troubled Relationships', in Zetterlund (ed), *Pakistan – Consequences of Deteriorating Security in Afghanistan*. Stockholm, FOI, Swedish Defense Research Agency, 2009, pp. 157–158; Robert Wirsing, *Baloch Nationalism and the Geopolitics of energy resources: The changing context of separatism in Pakistan*, Strategic Studies Institute, April 2008, <http://www.StrategicStudiesInstitute.army.mil/>; Amin Saikal, 'Iran's Turbulent Neighbour: The Challenge of the Taliban', *Global Dialogue*, vol. 3, no. 2–3, Spring/Summer 2001.

¹⁵¹ Kaveh L. Afrasiabi, 'Ahmadinejad hunkers down with Karzai', *Asia Times Online*, www.atimes.com, 9 March 2010.

Neither Pakistan nor India want to violate the UN sanctions imposed on Iran, the fourth round of which were implemented on 9 June 2010, but they feel less obliged to join the unilateral US sanctions (the last ones were imposed in August 2010), although the sanctions create a 'huge headache' for Pakistan.¹⁵²

Because of the renewed sanctions Iran is all the more inclined to seek regional partnerships with India and Pakistan. The natural gas pipeline to Pakistan is an important such cooperation. Due to security issues and discrepancies over the price, India withdrew from the pipeline, which was supposed to connect all of the three countries. However, in May–June 2010 Pakistan and Iran agreed on the pipeline, disregarding the American warnings that Pakistan was obstructing the US sanctions on Iran. In March 2007 US Energy Secretary Samuel Bodman directly told India that the pipeline would “contribute to the development of [Iran’s] nuclear weapons”.¹⁵³ Constructing the so-called ‘peace pipeline’ will cost some \$7 billion, and it will grant Pakistan annual royalties of \$5–600 million. By 2014 or 2015 Iran will export 760 cubic feet of gas per day to Pakistan (according to Iran’s state television the export will be one million cubic meters per day).¹⁵⁴

Apart from defying the US sanctions and marking a renewed collaboration between Pakistan and Iran, the pipeline also emphasizes the vulnerability and instability existing in the border region between the two countries. Despite being named a ‘peace pipeline’ it will cover 760 km of ‘sensitive distance’ through Baluchistan, where the pipeline could easily be subjected to attacks from nationalist separatists, who are operating on both sides of the Iranian–Pakistani border. Pakistan’s energy insecurity therefore serves to magnify Baluchistan’s strategic importance, and the fight over energy resources is a key issue in the decades-long separatist movement in Pakistan.¹⁵⁵

Baluchistan: instability and strategic significance

An area stretching over southern Afghanistan, south-eastern Iran and south-western Pakistan, Baluchistan is home to the Baluch and Pashtun tribal groups. It is the most

¹⁵² Irfan Husain, ‘Pakistan’s dilemma in UN sanctions on Iran’, www.bitterlemons-international.org, *Middle East Roundtable*, edition 43, vol. 7, 3 December 2009.

¹⁵³ Robert Wirsing, *Baloch Nationalism and the Geopolitics of energy resources: The changing context of separatism in Pakistan*, Strategic Studies Institute, April 2008, p. 12, <http://www.StrategicStudiesInstitute.army.mil/>; ‘Pakistan ignores US warning on Iran gas’, *Arab News*, 22 June 2010; Sachin Parashar, ‘India seeks Iran help for stabilizing Afghanistan’, *The Times of India*, 13 May 2010; Raja Karthikeya, ‘India’s Iran calculus’, *The Middle East Channel*, 24 September 2010; Pepe Escobar, ‘The Roving Eye. The shadow war in Balochistan’, *Asia Times Online*, 6 June 2009.

deserted and deprived region – both by Iranian and Pakistani standards – wrecked by drugs and arms smuggling, and it was severely affected by the 1999–2001 drought. Both the presence of the Taliban and ethnic Baluchi separatists complicate the security in the region, which holds a geo-strategic significance, because it links landlocked Afghanistan to Pakistani ports.

Particularly since the 2001 fall of the Taliban, the city of Quetta on the border of Afghanistan has served – and continues to serve – as a Taliban stronghold. Since the winter of 2002 Mullah Omar has established his influential Quetta *shura* in the city and used it, and the rest of Pakistani Baluchistan, as a safe haven against the US/ISAF attacks in Afghanistan.¹⁵⁶ The Quetta *shura* is basically the government-in-exile of the Taliban and it is considered “the intellectual and ideological underpinning of the Taliban insurgency”.¹⁵⁷ Although some members of the Taliban have been arrested, Pakistan has consistently ignored several requests from President Karzai to apprehend the Taliban leaders residing in Quetta. Instead, the Taliban has been actively recruiting new members in the thirteen Afghan refugee camps and 1,300 *madrasas* in Baluchistan.¹⁵⁸

Pakistan’s unwillingness to terminate the refuge of the Taliban in Baluchistan has not only constrained Karzai’s relations with Pakistan and the US (which has refrained from pushing Pakistan to oust the Taliban); it has also complicated the relations between Iran and Pakistan. Pakistan’s stance has convinced Iran that the two countries are still supporting opposite forces in Afghanistan, and they are both suspicious of each other’s motives.

For centuries numerous nationalist factions in Pakistan’s Baluchistan province have fought the central government and demanded independence. The current uprising

¹⁵⁴ ‘Pakistan ignores US warning on Iran gas’, *Arab News*, 22 June 2010; ‘Iran and Pakistan in Pipeline Deal’, *Reuters*, 13 June 2010; Harsh V. Pant, ‘Pakistan and Iran: A Troubled Relationships’, in Zetterlund (ed), *Pakistan – Consequences of Deteriorating Security in Afghanistan*. Stockholm, FOI, Swedish Defense Research Agency, 2009, p. 153.

¹⁵⁵ Robert Wirsing, *Baloch Nationalism and the Geopolitics of energy resources: The changing context of separatism in Pakistan*, Strategic Studies Institute, April 2008, p. vi, 12, <http://www.StrategicStudiesInstitute.army.mil/>

¹⁵⁶ Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS), *Balochistan: Conflicts and Players*. Islamabad, PIPS, 2009; Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos. The world’s most unstable region and the threat to global security*. Penguin Books, 2008.

¹⁵⁷ Mokhtar A. Khan, ‘Quetta: The Headquarters of the Afghan Taliban’, *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 2, no. 5, May 2009, p. 5.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid. p. 5–6; Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos. The world’s most unstable region and the threat to global security*. Penguin Books, 2008, p. 246;

of Baluchi separatists, which began five years ago, is the fifth insurgency since 1947 when six million Baluchs were forcibly included in Pakistan.¹⁵⁹ According to the Pak Institute for Peace Studies, between 2003 and 2007 Baluchi nationalists conducted 1,700 attacks, killing 300 people in Pakistan.¹⁶⁰

The reasons for the separatist violence are complex, but related to the discrimination which the Baluchi tribes face economically, when it comes to employment, in regard to political representation and not least to Pakistan's energy resources. The Baluchis have been deprived of the large energy resources in Baluchistan, which are exploited by the central government. As a telling example, Baluchistan receives only one fifth of the royalties on natural gas in the region, compared to Pakistan's other resource-rich provinces.¹⁶¹ This is one reason why a number of attacks have been carried out on Pakistan's energy infrastructure, and why the Pakistani–Iranian 'peace pipeline' might become a target too.¹⁶²

The Jundallah militia: Iran's ethno-religious uprising

As already mentioned, Iran and Pakistan's cooperation has been contaminated by the Pakistani support to the Taliban. Just as importantly, Iran is fighting its own Baluch ethno-political uprising, epitomized by the sectarian Sunni Jundallah militia ('Soldiers of God'), also known as the Iranian Peoples' Resistance Movement (*Jonbesh-e Moqavemat-e Mardom-e Iran*). Despite the countries' agreed agenda on fighting drug smuggling and 'terrorism', Iran is accusing Pakistan of hosting Jundallah and has on occasions attempted to seal the border to Pakistan in an act of retaliation.¹⁶³

In Iran the ethnic and religious divisions have been profound since the revolution, and the 1.2–1.5 million Sunni Baluchis living in Iran have had localized tribal and

¹⁵⁹ Selig S. Harrison, 'Pakistan's Baluch Insurgency', *Le Monde diplomatique*, English edition, 5 October 2006, <http://mondediplo.com/2006/10/05baluchistan>. For an account of the insurgencies in 1948, 1956–60, 1962–69 and 1973–77 see Selig S. Harrison, *In Afghanistan's Shadow, Baluch Nationalism and Soviet Temptations*. Washington, New York, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1981.

¹⁶⁰ Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS), *Balochistan: Conflicts and Players*. Islamabad, PIPS, 2009, p. 151.

¹⁶¹ Robert Wirsing, *Baloch Nationalism and the Geopolitics of energy resources: The changing context of separatism in Pakistan*. Strategic Studies Institute, April 2008, pp. 3–9, <http://www.StrategicStudiesInstitute.army.mil/>; Selig S. Harrison, 'Pakistan's Baluch Insurgency', *Le Monde diplomatique*, English edition, 5 October 2006, <http://mondediplo.com/2006/10/05baluchistan>; Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS), *Balochistan: Conflicts and Players*. Islamabad, PIPS, 2009, p. 10.

¹⁶² Cf. Wikileaks, cable, '09BAKU478 2009-06-12 12:12 SECRET Embassy Baku', 12 June 2009.

¹⁶³ Pepe Escobar, 'The Roving Eye. The shadow war in Balochistan', *Asia Times Online*, 6 June 2009; 'Iran Reopens Pakistan Border for Trade after Blast', *Reuters*, 1 March 2010.

religious conflicts with the central government for decades, on occasions engaging with foreigners in their resistance.

As Selig Harrison describes in depth in his history of Baluchistan in the 20th century, the tribal resistance groups in Iranian Baluchistan – who were subject to immense repression by the Pahlavi Shahs in 1928–1979, both militarily and in regard to education and development – teamed up with Iraq in the 1969–73 insurgency, had strong connections to Dubai, Syria, Palestine and Egypt in the 1960s and perceived themselves to be part of the greater Arab nation. To Iraqi leaders the Baluchis were natural allies in their feud against the Shah, who had been supporting Kurdish groups opposed to Baghdad.¹⁶⁴ Although for a short while centralized government control ceased with the 1979 revolution, it was rapidly replaced by a constitution making Shi'ism the state religion, greatly worrying the Sunni minorities, who soon began to long back to the secularism of the Shah.¹⁶⁵

The Baluchis have been subjected to a wide range of ethnic and religious discrimination by the Islamic Republic – military and police repression, forced internal displacement, land confiscation, lack of cultural rights, trafficking of girls and women.¹⁶⁶ “They treat us like the Untouchables in India [...] We are Iranians by passport and by nation, and so we want our rights as Iranians. We want our rights in Baluchistan”, a frustrated Baluchi cleric told *Amnesty International* in 1997.¹⁶⁷

The advent of President Ahmadinezhad and his ideological promotion of the Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) has only further added to the government's “provocative anti-Sunni practices (including harassment of Sunni clergy and congregations and raids on Sunni mosques) and other ‘arrogant’ crackdowns over the last few years”, according to a Wikileaks cable.¹⁶⁸

Within the last five–seven years Baluchi nationalists revolting against the Iranian government have reappeared. Jundallah, deriving from the extremist Sunni Deobandi

¹⁶⁴ Selig S. Harrison, *In Afghanistan's Shadow: Baluch Nationalism and Soviet Temptations*. Washington, New York, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1981, pp. 96–100, 106–107.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 112–120.

¹⁶⁶ Amnesty International, *Iran: Human Rights Abuses Against Baluchi Minority*, September 2007; Selig S. Harrison, ‘Pakistan's Baluch Insurgency’, *Le Monde diplomatique*, English edition, 5 October 2006, <http://mondediplo.com/2006/10/05baluchistan>.

¹⁶⁷ Amnesty International, *Iran: Human Rights Abuses Against Baluchi Minority*, September 2007, p. 7.

¹⁶⁸ Wikileaks, cable, ‘09BAKU478 2009-06-12 12:12 SECRET Embassy Baku’, 12 June 2009.

movement, emerged in 2003 and has conducted a series of violent attacks. Jundallah, which is financed by drugs and arms smuggling, epitomizes an increasingly sectarian conflict. Jundallah is closely linked to the Baluchi nationalism in Pakistan, but unlike the Pakistani Baluchis claiming territorial separation, Jundallah does not seek secession or union with Pakistani Baluchistan.¹⁶⁹

The aim of Jundallah according to the former leader Abdolmalek Rigi, who was captured and executed in 2010, is to “protect the national and religious rights of the Baluchis and Sunnis in Baluchistan province”. In a May 2006 interview he stated: “Hundreds of Sunni clerics, activists and combatants have lost their lives [...] Many have been subjected to all kinds of torture. [...] They have committed genocide in our province. They kill people simply because they are Baluchis or Sunnis. What other posture can we adopt against them [than armed struggle]? They have not left any democratic solution for us. They have crushed our national and religious identity, and then they call us secessionists! We are not secessionists”.¹⁷⁰

Although claiming to be observing international human rights and being submitted to the same repression as the reformist political opposition, Jundallah should not be perceived as a mouthpiece or part of the Green Movement. Unlike Jundallah the Green Movement, which emerged at the 2009 presidential election and has been strongly suppressed since, explicitly denounces the use of violence as a political means. By contrast, the attacks of Jundallah have been increasingly vile, partly targeting the Revolutionary Guards Corps, *sepah-e pasdaran*, and partly specific Shia congregations.

Jundallah attacks

Since 2005 Jundallah has claimed responsibility for numerous fatal attacks. In the 16 March 2006 ‘Tasuki incident’ Jundallah attacked a convoy of vehicles with Iranian officials. Twenty-five people were assassinated, among them two IRGC officers. On 13 May 2006 twelve civilians were killed in Kerman Province. On 14 February 2007

¹⁶⁹ Audun Kolstad Wiig, *Islamist opposition in the Islamic Republic. Jundallah and the spread of extremist Deobandism in Iran*. Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (FFI), July 2009; Selig S. Harrison, ‘Pakistan’s Baluch Insurgency’, *Le Monde diplomatique*, English edition, 5 October 2006, <http://mondediplo.com/2006/10/05baluchistan>.

¹⁷⁰ Maryam Kashani, ‘Interview with the Commander of Jundallah and his Hostage: Pass Our Message!’, *Roaz Online*, 14 May 2006, www.radiobalochi.org/Jundallah/interviewWithRoz1.html.

a bus carrying Revolutionary guardsmen and others was blown to pieces in Zahedan, leaving at least fourteen people dead.¹⁷¹

In June 2008 sixteen police officers were taken hostage until they were executed in December 2008. And in a 28 December 2008 suicide attack on the police and anti-narcotics headquarters in Saravan four police officers were killed. On 28 May 2009 a suicide bomber hit the Ali Ibn Abu Taleb Shia mosque in Zahedan, killing at least twenty-five worshippers, who were commemorating the death of Fatima Zahra, the Prophet's daughter. Carried out only two weeks before the presidential election, when the world was following Iran closely, the Jundallah was attempting to maximize their impact.¹⁷²

Just as strategically and symbolically significant, on 18 October 2009 two bombs, one hitting a Sunni-Shia reconciliation meeting, another a group of IRGC officers, killed forty-two people. Of these nine were members of the IRGC and six were senior commanders. Apart from being one of the most severe assaults on the military elite, exploiting the post-election political turmoil and public anger at the IRGC, it struck Iran only one day before an important IAEA meeting over Iran's nuclear programme.¹⁷³

Jundallah conducted their latest attack on 15 December 2010 in the port city of Chah Bahar, specifically directed at a Shia commemoration of Imam Hussein during the most sacred Shia rituals of *Ashura*. The attack which claimed the lives of at least thirty-nine people was in retaliation for the Iranian government's execution of Abdolmelak Rigi, Jundallah said.¹⁷⁴

Due to these attacks, the Iranian regime has stepped up its low-scale war on Jundallah. In April 2009 the IRGC took over security responsibility for Sistan-Baluchistan province, and in 2009 fourteen people accused of being members of Jundallah were executed.¹⁷⁵ The proclaimed leader of Jundallah, Abdolmelek Rigi, was apprehended

¹⁷¹ Amnesty International, *Iran: Human Rights Abuses Against Baluchi Minority*, September 2007, pp. 17–18.

¹⁷² Chris Zambelis, 'A New Phase of Resistance and Insurgency in Iranian Beluchistan', *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 2, no. 7, July 2009, p. 16.

¹⁷³ Michael Slackman, 'Iran says U.S., Britain Behind Attack', *The New York Times*, 20 October 2009; Tait & Tran, 'Iran blames Pakistan and West for deadly suicide bombing', *The Guardian*, 19 October 2009.

¹⁷⁴ Scott Peterson, 'Iran, still haunted by Jundallah attacks, blames West', *Christian Science Monitor*, 15 December 2010.

¹⁷⁵ Audun Kolstad Wiig, *Islamist opposition in the Islamic Republic. Jundallah and the spread of extremist Deobandism in Iran*. Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (FFI), July 2009, p. 16.

in February 2010 – some confusion exists as to the exact circumstances. On Iranian TV he subsequently ‘confessed’ to receiving American support and was hanged on 20 June 2010.¹⁷⁶

Blaming the US, the UK and Pakistan

Tehran blames the US and the UK for interfering in Iranian affairs both by allowing the massive drug trafficking to carry on and by backing the Jundallah militia. Iran perceives the Jundallah attacks to be part of the US’s attempts to instigate regime change in Iran by proxy, using the ethnic minorities along the borders to Afghanistan and Iraq to create what the Iranians term a ‘soft war’ or ‘velvet revolution’ against the regime. “We consider the recent terrorist attack to be the result of US action. This is the sign of America’s animosity against our country”, Ali Larijani said after the October 2009 Jundallah attacks.¹⁷⁷ Iran also blames Pakistan for hosting Jundallah. Although reflecting the prevailing conspiracy thinking within the Iranian regime, these allegations may not be completely unfounded.¹⁷⁸

Jundallah’s actions have been a sore spot in Pakistani–Iranian relations, just as Pakistan’s support to the Taliban continues to be. As Ahmed Rashid says, “Pakistan was hosting [...] Jundallah [...] for some years during the Bush administration and during the Musharraf term here, and I think there were very big tensions because of that. This group was finally handed over to the Iranians and their leader [Abdolmalek Rigi] was [...] executed by the Iranians, but since then I don’t think Pakistan has been harbouring anti-Iranian militant groups. But I think there is still a lot of mistrust between Iran and Pakistan on exactly what the Pakistanis are doing, because the Iranians are convinced that Pakistan is a conduit for American policy, so they remain nervous”.¹⁷⁹

Ahmed Rashid has “no confirmation” as to whether the US was also funding Jundallah, but he states, “I can imagine that it would be very logical for the Americans to

¹⁷⁶ ‘Iran Jundallah leader claims US military support’, *BBC News*, 25 February 2010; Thomas Erdbrink, ‘Iran arrests Sunni rebel accused of links with U.S.’, *The Washington Post*, 23 February 2010. Iran has a long history of airing the forced confessions of detainees, who have been submitted to torture, and Rigi’s confession has to be viewed in this light.

¹⁷⁷ Fleishman & Mostaghim, ‘Dozens killed in suicide attack on Iran’s Revolutionary Guard’, *Los Angeles Times*, 19 October 2009; cf. Scott Peterson, ‘Iran, still haunted by Jundallah attacks, blames West’, *Christian Science Monitor*, 15 December 2010; ‘Iran official accuses US over mosque bombing’, *Agence France Press*, 30 May 2009.

¹⁷⁸ Selig S. Harrison, ‘Tehran’s Biggest Fear’, *The New York Times*, 28 December 2009.

¹⁷⁹ Telephone interview, 26 November 2010.

do something like that [...] and that could have been why we, Pakistan, harboured them for so long. Perhaps the military was being paid to do that too”.¹⁸⁰

In July 2008 Seymour Hersh could reveal that the Bush administration’s policy towards Iran did include secret operations into Iran, conducted by the CIA and the Joint Special Operations Command, and financial backing to opposition groups: Jundallah in Baluchistan, Mujahedin-e Khalgh (MEK) based in Iraq, and the Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan, PJAK, which was operating in Khuzestan on the border with Iraq. The operations costing \$400 million were designed to destabilize the regime and undermine Iran’s nuclear programme.¹⁸¹

A year later, in September 2009, General David Petraeus authorized an expansion of covert military actions in, among other countries, Iran. According to *The New York Times* Petraeus’ secret directive appeared “to authorize specific operations in Iran, most likely to gather intelligence about the country’s nuclear program or identify dissident groups that might be useful for a future military offensive”.¹⁸²

However, attempting to counter the allegations from Iran, in November 2010 the US State Department finally designated Jundallah as a ‘terrorist organization’, a gesture of goodwill attempting to prove their good intentions towards Iran. Although an important step in building confidence, many Iranian officials believe it to be insignificant – too little, too late – particularly when set alongside the ‘proof’ the Iranian government is convinced they have.¹⁸³ Indeed, as Ray Takeyh says, “They [the Iranian government] may see this as a conspiracy within a conspiracy”.¹⁸⁴

A regional solution?

Some observers have noted that the arrest of Jundallah leader Rigi would have been impossible without the help of Pakistani intelligence and that it is a sign of further collaboration with Pakistan. As Kaveh Afrasiabi notes, “Pakistan has

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Seymour Hersh, ‘Preparing the Battlefield’, *The New Yorker*, 7 July 2008, http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2008/07/07/080707fa_fact_hersh; on the US support to MEK see also James Dobbins, ‘Negotiating with Iran: Reflections from Personal Experience’, *The Washington Quarterly*, January 2010, p. 157.

¹⁸² Mark Mazzetti, ‘U.S. Is Said to Expand Secret Actions in Mideast’, *The New York Times*, 24 May 2010.

¹⁸³ Interview, Iranian officials, November 2010.

¹⁸⁴ Paul Richter, ‘U.S. designates anti-government Iran militant group as terrorist’, *Los Angeles Times*, 4 November 2010.

shifted strategy to make cooperation with Iran an arm of its anti-India policy in Afghanistan”.¹⁸⁵

To Ahmed Rashid, however, this seems highly unlikely. Asked whether Pakistan has changed recently, wanting to include Iran as part of their anti-India policy, he swiftly responded: “On the contrary! Well, I don’t think that’s possible because India is very close to Iran, and in fact what we see in the region is a line-up like in the 90s where you have Pakistan on the one side and Iran, India, Russia and the central Asian states on the other. So I don’t think we are seeing Iran and Pakistan coming together. Iran is very, very close [with India and] has cooperated for the last nine years with India in Afghanistan. They have built all the roads and railway links to facilitate Indian goods coming into Iranian ports and up to Afghanistan. They are not going to dump India now”.¹⁸⁶

The internal competition, the strongly opposed positions on the Taliban and the mutual distrust penetrating the Baluchistan region make the prospects of the Pakistan–Iran dialogue and a regional solution to the Afghanistan crisis slim. The fact remains, as Harsh V. Pant puts it, that “There is little common ground between Iran and Pakistan on a solution to the Afghan crisis”.¹⁸⁷

Although many actors and observers are calling for the engagement of the regional players, this would require further initiatives from the international community.¹⁸⁸ As Ahmed Rashid emphasizes: “In the last year we’ve seen the tensions between Iran and Pakistan and in the region escalate, because there is a much greater desire from all the parties to play a major role. So I don’t think that we are going to see any major breakthrough in this regional dialogue until the international community, the Americans and NATO, become more involved and become more aggressive. [...] Obama promised it when he came into power two years ago. Very little has happened”.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁵ Kaveh L. Afrasiabi, ‘Ahmadinejad hunkers down with Karzai’, *Asia Times Online*, www.atimes.com, 9 March 2010.

¹⁸⁶ Telephone interview, 26 November 2010.

¹⁸⁷ Harsh V. Pant, ‘Pakistan and Iran’s Dysfunctional Relationship’, *Middle East Quarterly*, Spring 2009.

¹⁸⁸ Afghanistan Study Group, *A New Way Forward: Rethinking U.S. Strategy in Afghanistan*. www.afghanistanstudygroup.com, 2010; Shiza Shahid, *Engaging Regional Players in Afghanistan. Threats and Opportunities*. Center for Strategic and International Studies. November 2009.

¹⁸⁹ Telephone interview, 26 November 2010.

5. Conclusions

“It’s not only Iran, it is all our neighbors, and the West as well. Everyone wants to use Afghanistan to further their own aims”, Naziar Ahmad Haidai, head of Herat’s provincial council said in November 2010.¹⁹⁰

Since the 2001 fall of the Taliban Afghanistan has been home to a range of misplaced policies. The ISAF/US support to warlords, the lack of political will to implement nation-building and place peacekeeping forces outside Kabul, and inefficient attempts to eradicate opium have all been portrayed in some detail.¹⁹¹ Also, the disproportionate interest in Iraq has led to under-funded and under-prioritized efforts in Afghanistan. All the aforementioned have facilitated Iran’s ability to operate and seek influence in Afghanistan.

In this report I have described the complex and ambiguous ways in which Iran is involved in Afghanistan, and how Iran’s policies are deeply intertwined with the security risks Iran perceives the US presence to represent. Deterrence, counter-containment and competition with the neighbours are the keywords in Iran’s multifaceted regional policies.

Three conclusions can be drawn from Iran’s complex manoeuvrings. First, Iran’s main priority is to contribute to stability in Afghanistan. This is partly because for the last 30 years Iran has been suffering the consequences of Afghanistan’s wars and conflicts. The influx of Afghan refugees and the intense drug trafficking have severely affected Iran, as have the unresolved disputes with Afghanistan over rights to water. Although not always to the benefit of Afghanistan, Iran intervenes politically when it comes to these issues, which have tangible spillover effects in Iran. On top of that, however, Iran directly contributes to Afghanistan’s stability by channelling large sums of development aid into the country.

Secondly, whatever the Iranians do, their own survival and national security concerns are their main priorities. Although the Sunni–Shia rivalries are still important in

¹⁹⁰ Laura King, ‘In western Afghan city, Iran makes itself felt’, *Los Angeles Times*, 13 November 2010.

¹⁹¹ Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos. The world’s most unstable region and the threat to global security*. Penguin Books, 2008; James Dobbins, *After the Taliban. Nation-building in Afghanistan*. Washington, Potomac Books, 2008; Ronald E. Neumann, *The Other War. Winning and Losing in Afghanistan*. Washington, Potomac Books, 2009; Rory Stewart, ‘Afghanistan: What Could Work’, *NY Review of Books*, vol. 57, no. 1, 14 January 2010.

regard to Baluchistan and Pakistan, stability in and survival of the Islamic Republic as a regime is far more important than an ideological expansion of revolutionary Shia Islam. This means, among other things, that although we should not underestimate the 'soft power' of Iran's aid to and political interventions in Afghanistan, there is no need to exaggerate them either.

Thirdly, due to the Iranian regime's security obsessions, which have only been aggravated by President Ahmadinezhad, in particular since his 2009 re-election which created the worst legitimacy crisis in the Islamic Republic's history, Iran's policies towards Afghanistan and Pakistan are to a large extent guided by the US presence in the region. Due to the unresolved nuclear conflict and the American threats of a pre-emptive strike, Iran is playing a complex double game in Afghanistan. They want to show that Iran holds the capacity to retaliate on Afghan soil in case of an American military attack on Iran's nuclear facilities.

As a result, although Iran hugely contributes to the development and reconstruction of Afghanistan, supports President Karzai and is passionately opposed to any reconciliation with the Taliban, it is quite likely that Iran also covertly backs the insurgents in order to pressurize the US and ISAF troops. As an Iranian diplomat said in August 2007, "Afghanistan is our friend, but when your life is at stake you may have to sacrifice even your friends".¹⁹² Just as importantly the US policies also set the agenda for the degree to which Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran can cooperate on other, more benign, issues such as drug trafficking, repatriation of refugees, energy investments and construction of infrastructure.

Looking at Iran's relations with Pakistan, a likelihood of finding successful regional solutions to the Afghan crisis does exist but is problematic. In any case, although Pakistan and Iran are in many ways deeply opposed competitors, it will be very hard to find answers to Afghanistan's complex situation without further engagement of the regional partners.

¹⁹² Barnett R. Rubin, *The U.S. and Iran in Afghanistan: Policy Gone Awry*. MIT Center for International Studies, October 2008, p. 4.

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