

# IRAN AND AFGHANISTAN: A COMPLEX RELATIONSHIP

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Iran has been a predominant political factor and a noteworthy cultural force in the history of Afghanistan. From sharing a long border and an even longer history with Afghanistan, Iran emerges as the front-runner when compared with Afghanistan's other immediate neighbours in these aspects. In contrast to Pakistan, Iran has a well-defined border with Afghanistan; yet, like Pakistan, it is also host to a huge number of Afghan refugees. The role and contribution of Iran in the Afghan discord have been noticeably perplexing and multi-layered, induced by the regular ebb and flow of events in the region. Iran's deep-rooted civilisational legacy is the foundation for its easy connect with different countries in its neighbourhood. On the other hand, Iran's articulated Shi'a identity, with a confrontationist political inheritance of an Islamic upheaval, constrains its capacity in terms of redefining its connections, both regionally and internationally.

There is a wide array of reasons which makes Kabul important for Tehran, and the recent wheat shipment reaching Afghanistan from India via Chabahar port in Iran explains the importance of Iran for Afghanistan. These reasons range from the Sunni Taliban regime ruling Afghanistan territories to countering the drug menace which finds a way into Iran through Afghanistan. Another reason for Iran's increased engagement with Afghanistan has also been related to Tehran hiring Afghan Shi'a militias

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to fight in the Syrian war. All these factors prove that Iran has substantial political, economic, cultural and religious leverages in Afghanistan. From Kabul's perspective, the US and Iran have much common ground vis-à-vis Afghanistan and neither country wants Al Qaeda to reestablish a safe haven there. On the other hand, Afghanistan's relations with this important regional neighbour have been overshadowed by the regional proxy rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the Western sanctions on Iran, Tehran's ideologically

driven foreign policy, and some anti-Persian Afghan elite.

Geography plays an important role in the political and foreign policy calculations of the actors involved. Geographically, towards the east, Iran shares almost 900 km (536 miles) of porous borders with Afghanistan. Apart from sharing common historical linkages, Iran and Afghanistan at times share a common enemy: terrorism.

Economics also plays an important role in Iran-Afghanistan relations. Iran views Afghanistan as an upcoming market that will benefit Iran, and believes that the situation will change after the US' withdrawal from the region. Afghanistan, over the past decade, has been an importer of Iranian goods. In this context, Iran's exports to Afghanistan in the year 2016-17 were worth \$3 billion. This has shown an upward trend since 2006-07 when it was around \$497 million. Contrary to that, Afghanistan's exports to Iran have been as little as a dozen million dollars on an average over the years, which peaked at \$32 million in the fiscal year 2013-14.<sup>1</sup> However, this trade relationship is not without its barriers. Many government officials in Afghanistan believe that cutting the red tape and costs should certainly become a priority for the Iranian and Afghan authorities before they can

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1. Ali Sherdelian, "Iran-Afghan Economies Tied by One-Way Trade", *Financial Tribune*, August 22, 2017, <https://financialtribune.com/articles/economy-business-and-markets/70824/iran-afghan-economies-tied-by-one-way-trade>. Accessed on December 18, 2017.

improve and ease bilateral trade. They also believe that Iran should not view Afghanistan only as a consumer market if the two countries' economic ties are to be strengthened.<sup>2</sup> It is also believed that one of the most effective ways for Iran to expand and sustain long-term economic ties with its eastern neighbour is to provide aid to Afghanistan for its development. There are chances that joint investment in Afghanistan will eventually lead to job creation, higher revenues, transfer of knowledge/technology and sustainable security, among others, which, in turn, will benefit Iran in the long term in creating effective footprints in Afghanistan. For a landlocked and multi-ethnic Afghanistan, Iran holds immense strategic value and is viewed, on the whole, as a key factor in the nation's security and economic development.

### RECENT HISTORY

The Iranian revolution led by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979 coincided with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. This was the time when Iran was entangled in its own domestic problems (a nation witnessing regime change based on ideology), trouble with the US due to the hostage crisis, and the subsequent Iran-Iraq War (1980-88). Even if the Soviet invasion caused a conundrum for Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini, the new regime—even though it criticised the Soviets for the invasion and demanded the withdrawal of their forces—was careful not to allow its policy to damage its otherwise amicable relations with Moscow. This made Iran maintain relations with the Soviet (puppet) regime in Afghanistan. Iran had refused to be the frontline nation opposing the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan as it wanted to counter balance the Soviet Union against the increasing US influence in the region. During this time, Iran supported the Persian-speaking Shi'a groups, mainly among the Hazaras. The Hazaras constituted 20 percent of

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2. Ibid.

the population, and more than 1.5 million Afghan refugees who fled to Iran, comprised mainly Hazaras.<sup>3</sup>

After the pullout of the US and the Soviet troops from Afghanistan in 1989, the Afghan territory became the battleground for the proxy war among Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Pakistan. Saudi Arabia wanted to utilise Afghanistan as a springboard to Central Asia to increase its version of Islamic influence and to neutralise Iran's revolutionary message. Pakistan sought to install a Pashtun-dominated government and gain "strategic depth" against India, its nemesis.<sup>4</sup> The consequent withdrawal of the Soviet Red Army by mid-1989 had prompted a quick abandonment of Afghanistan by both the US and the Soviet Union, pushing Afghanistan into chaos. The Russians and the Americans had little interest in Afghanistan by the time the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. This led to a ten-year civil war in which the Islamist leaders became dominant and proved to be ruthless in every way. A long struggle followed against the Communist regime of President Najibullah soon after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989. It continued until Najibullah was overthrown in 1992 by the Mujahideen who later set off to capture Kabul. An alliance of non-Pashtun Parchami officials with the Tajik leader Ahmad Shah Masoud ensured the demise of his regime, which was considerably weakened by the defection of Pashtun military officers after the Soviet Army withdrew in early 1989.

The subsequent civil wars in Afghanistan were based on the fact that Kabul fell under the control of the better organised and much more united Tajik forces of Burhanuddin Rabbani and his military commander Ahmad Shah Masoud, and to the Uzbek forces from the north under Gen Abdul Rashid Dostum.<sup>5</sup> The fall of Najibullah was marked as a victory for Iran as non-Pashtuns became the dominating government in Afghanistan. The Iranian clerical leadership supported Burhanuddin Rabbani of the Jamaat-e-Islami against the Shi'a Hizb-e-Wahdat and provided Rabbani's government

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3. Mohsen Milani, "Iran and Afghanistan", <http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/iran-and-afghanistan>. Accessed on November 28, 2016.

4. Ibid.

5. ZalmayKhalilzad, "Afghanistan in 1995: Civil War and a Mini-Great Game", *Asian Survey*, vol 36, no. 2, February 1996, p. 194.

with food and resources. The reason for this can be that in order to consolidate his power base, Rabbani, an ethnic Tajik, resorted to pitting one ethnic group against the other, including the Shi'a political faction, Hizb-e-Wahdat, led by Abdul Ali Mazari.<sup>6</sup> Tehran's apparent logic was that by supporting Rabbani, its strategic interests in the newly independent Central Asian states would be protected by a Tajik-dominated government in Kabul. The extent of the Iranian involvement is still unclear, but Ahmad Shah Masoud's victory would have been difficult without the Iranian support.<sup>7</sup>

With this, the Iranian involvement in Afghanistan increased. However, this victory was shortlived for Afghanistan because it plunged into a civil war. In this period, the Pashtuns lost influence and suffered perhaps the sharpest decline in their influence in Afghanistan. Apparently, this civil war was fuelled by the Afghan warlords who rose to prominence when they fought against the Soviets. At the same time, all the efforts by Iran to bring about a peaceful resolution to the civil unrest in Afghanistan were stalled by these warlords. This was also the time when Kabul conflicted with the Iranian policies and practices in order to appease Riyadh and Islamabad.<sup>8</sup> The state of affairs in Afghanistan was devastating and the country was in a state of virtual disintegration. In the Afghan history of the last 300 years, it was for the first time that the Pashtuns had lost control of Kabul. This inflicted a severe psychological blow to the Pashtun ethnic group. As a result, an internal civil war was triggered as Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, at the same time, tried to bring together the Pashtuns in an attempt to take control of Kabul. The country was divided into warlord fiefdoms and the warlords switched sides and fought again in the bewildering array of alliances and bloodshed.<sup>9</sup> This was also the period when those Mujahideen who had fought the Najibullah regime either returned to their homes or went to Quetta and Kandahar to continue their studies in *madrassas*. The nadir of this period gave

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6. Sajjan M. Gohel, "Iran's Ambiguous Role in Afghanistan", *CTC Sentinel*, vol 3, issue 3, March 2010, <https://ctc.usma.edu/irans-ambiguous-role-in-afghanistan/>. Accessed on February 15, 2019.

7. Barry Bearek, "As the Taliban Finish Off Foes, Iran Is Looming", *New York Times*, October 3, 1998, <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/10/03/world/as-the-taliban-finish-off-foes-iran-is-looming.html>. Accessed on January 19, 2019.

8.. Milani, n. 3.

9. Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: The Story of the Afghan Warlords* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2001), p. 21.

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rise to the Taliban in the early 1990s. The factional contention for political supremacy kept on annihilating Afghanistan as the civil war entered another stage with the arrival of the hitherto unknown Taliban in the latter half of the 1990s.

By 1996-97, the Taliban had risen as another notable actor in the troubled political phase of Afghanistan. At first viewed as an answer for the faction-ridden Afghan politics—particularly in the south—they later transformed into outsiders for some; and were frequently regarded as a potentially destabilising factor by the neighbouring

nations, concerned about their radical belief system and factional strife inside Afghanistan impinging onto their territories.<sup>10</sup>

In 1996, the Taliban eventually overthrew the Rabbani government. This enabled the Taliban to gain a foothold within central Afghanistan, which they would not relinquish until the US-led invasion in 2001. The alienism of the Taliban identity further augmented other social groups to develop—the Tajik-led Northern Alliance and the Dostum-led Uzbek forces—to get back at the Taliban.<sup>11</sup> The Taliban regime in Afghanistan was highly antagonistic to Iran, and Tehran viewed it as a security threat. Iran, along with Russia, provided arms and ammunition to the Northern Alliance throughout the civil war, whereas Pakistan and Saudi Arabia supported the Taliban.<sup>12</sup> In 1998, the Taliban regime captured Mazar-e-Sharif in northern Afghanistan, launched new offensives and massacred 600 Uzbek troops in Faryab and later in the same year, the Taliban captured the headquarters of the warlord Dostum in Sheberghan. Subsequently, the Taliban slaughtered all the Hazara

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10. Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (USA: Yale University Press, 2001), p.131.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 38.

12. Ahmed Rashid, "The Taliban: Exporting Extremism", *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 1999, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/1999-11-01/taliban-exporting-extremism>. Accessed on January 20, 2019.

Army troops except hundreds of Hazara civilians. Along with this dreadful massacre, the Taliban also killed nine Iranian diplomats. This led to an extended confrontation with Tehran.<sup>13</sup>

In the wake of the September 2001 attacks on the US, Iran provided extensive—indirect—political, intelligence and logistical cooperation to the US in an effort to oust the Taliban.<sup>14</sup> The United States and allied forces were first deployed to Afghanistan as part of Operation Enduring Freedom in October 2001, with Iran offering considerable assistance “to allow American transport aircraft to stage from airfields in eastern Iran [,] ... to perform search-and-rescue missions for downed American airmen ... [and to allow] an American freighter packed with humanitarian supplies to offload its cargo” at an Iranian port.<sup>15</sup> Two months later, with the approval of the UN Security Council, additional foreign soldiers were deployed to support the establishment of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Kabul in order to ensure sufficient security to help jump-start post-civil war reconstruction.<sup>16</sup> By the end of 2001, Iran had clearly shown its willingness to cooperate with the international community and its genuine interest in supporting durable peace in Afghanistan.

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13. Douglas Jehl, “Iran Holds Taliban Responsible for 9 Diplomats’ Deaths”, *The New York Times*, September 11, 1998, <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/09/11/world/iran-holds-taliban-responsible-for-9-diplomats-deaths.html>. Accessed on January 24, 2019.

14. James Dobbins, “Negotiating with Iran: Reality, Options and Consequences,” Hearing before the Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs of the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, US House of Representatives, November 7, 2007 (US Government Printing Office: Washington, DC, 2009); and Kayhan Barzegar, “Role at Odds: The Roots of Increased Iran–U.S. Tension in the Post-9/11 Middle East”, *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs*, vol. 1, no. 3, 2010, pp. 85–114, [https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/files/publication/5-Dr\\_Barzegar.pdf](https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/files/publication/5-Dr_Barzegar.pdf). Accessed on December 19, 2017.

15. K. M. Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle: The Conflict Between Iran and America* (New York: Random House, 2004), p. 346; D. Gerleman, Jennifer E. Stevens and Steven A. Hildreth, “Operation Enduring Freedom: Foreign Pledges of Military and Intelligence Support”, Congressional Research Service, Report to Congress RL31152, <http://www.iwar.org.uk/news-archive/crs/6207.pdf>. Accessed on December 19, 2017.

16. “Security Council Authorizes International Security Force for Afghanistan; Welcomes United Kingdom’s Offer to be Initial Lead Nation”, Security Council Resolution 1386, December 20, 2001, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2001/sc7248.doc.htm>. Accessed on December 19, 2017.

## IRAN'S INTERESTS IN AFGHANISTAN

In the wake of political developments since the 2003 Iraq invasion by the US, Iran desired to define a new role for itself, aimed at integrating into the regional political-security system, building a coalition of friendly states to preempt future security challenges and establishing mutual economic cooperation with its neighbours commensurate with its sources of power and geopolitical posture. Tehran clearly recognised that a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan was not compatible with Iran's security interests. Ever since the collapse of the Taliban regime in 2001, Iran has followed a two-pronged policy in Afghanistan: firstly, to preserve and uphold stability in Afghanistan and support the Afghan central government; and, secondly, to oppose the presence of foreign forces in Afghanistan.

Iran, like any other state, has legitimate security concerns which are impacted by the situation in its neighbourhood, especially in the vicinity of its immediate border areas; enjoys a natural domain of cultural, political and economic influence in the region; pursues independent national security strategies to protect and preserve itself and tackle foreign threats; and advances in its own way of political and socio-economic development. In this context, Afghanistan plays a significant role in preserving stability in Iran's foreign policy vis-à-vis the neighbouring states. Following this principle, Iran has played an important role in the reconstruction and development efforts in fields such as financial aid, transportation and energy trade, and the refugee issue. Indeed, any instability in Afghanistan poses a direct threat to Iran and is related to the spread of extremism in the region. Various terrorist organisations like the Taliban, Al Qaeda and other Islamist factions have tried to increase the instability at the eastern border of Iran. Additionally, due to the ethnic and tribal connectivity within the borders of Iran and Afghanistan, any instability in Afghanistan may lead to the creation and continuation of ethnic conflicts. This can result in exacerbating the refugee situation by creating migration issues along Iran's eastern borders.<sup>17</sup>

Another important and concerning aspect of this relationship is related to the production of drugs and their transit into Iran. Due to this issue, it is

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17. Sherdelian, n. 1, pp. 123-125.



an impending challenge for Iran to preserve its security along the borders with Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Taliban insurgency was largely funded by this narcotics trafficking, of which Iran is the most favoured destination.<sup>18</sup> This illicit drug trade currently fuels the acute drug crisis that Iran is facing. At the same time, the revenues from this narcotics trade have financed much of the anti-American insurgency in Afghanistan. Iran also serves as the major corridor for shipping narcotics to the European and other Persian Gulf nations.<sup>19</sup> Thus, addressing narco-trafficking in Afghanistan will serve as an effective point of collaboration among the US, Iran and Afghanistan.

Secondly, Iran takes a strong stand against the presence of foreign forces—especially of the US—in Afghanistan. This is because it sees the US as a direct threat to Iranian security and stability. However, it cannot be denied that the US forces have been responsible for the removal of Iran's two most dreaded enemies in the region—the Taliban and Saddam Hussein. However, Iran still remains sceptical of the challenges it is facing related to Sunni and Salafi extremism, ethnic geopolitical rivalry and instability and insecurity throughout the region.<sup>20</sup> Iran firmly believes that the presence of foreign forces in Afghanistan fosters extremism. This happened in retaliation to the foreign forces which considered that the Taliban and Al Qaeda were endangering their ideology and beliefs. The second reason why Iran opposes foreign troops in Afghanistan is to contain the US threat in the region. From Iran's perspective, the presence of US troops in the region is in line with the US policy to strengthen its position in the broader Central Asia and South Asia as well as in the Persian Gulf, at the expense of Iran's national and security interests.<sup>21</sup> Thirdly, Iran is in disagreement with the fact that the neighbours form political security agreements with trans-regional actors in order to counter foreign forces. It believes that such a state of affairs will

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18. Michael Kugelman, "The Iran Factor in Afghanistan", *Foreign Policy*, July 10, 2014, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/07/10/the-iran-factor-in-afghanistan>. Accessed on November 30, 2016.

19. Sarah Lohschelder and Amanda Zeidan, "Time for Convergence: Iran-Afghanistan Relations after the Nuclear Deal", *The Diplomat*, June 1, 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/06/time-for-convergence-iran-afghanistan-relations-after-the-nuclear-deal/>. Accessed on December 1, 2016.

20. Sherdelian, n. 1, pp. 124-125.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 125.

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eventually lead to distrust among the regional states, consequently weakening regional political security and economic cooperation.<sup>22</sup> Thus, supporting Afghanistan's neutrality in the regional equations of South and Central Asia represents an important component of Iran's regional policy.

## **CHALLENGES TO IRAN-AFGHANISTAN TIES**

### *Politics of Water Security*

The disagreements between Iran and Afghanistan over the sharing of the Helmand river have been brewing since the 19th century. However, at that time, the problem was two-fold: one, related to the demarcation, and the second to the respective sharing of the water of the Helmand river by the two nations. However, currently, this problem pertains to the trans-boundary<sup>23</sup> water management that rankles beneath the otherwise cordial relations between Iran and Afghanistan. The Helmand river is the longest running river in Afghanistan; it constitutes over 40 percent of Afghanistan's surface water. With 95 percent of the Helmand river located in Afghanistan, it is a critical source of livelihood for the country's southern and southwestern provinces. This has made the disagreement related to the Helmand river a national issue that seems to have become increasingly difficult for any Afghan government to resolve. For Iran, the Helmand's water is also becoming a national issue. In fact, all of Iran's post-1979 governments have maintained the same basic position on the dispute with Afghanistan over water.<sup>24</sup> Afghanistan is home to five river basins<sup>25</sup> that also sustain large

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22. Ibid., p. 126.

23. A trans-boundary river is a river that crosses at least one political border, either a border within a nation or an international boundary. Bangladesh has the greatest number of these rivers in South Asia, almost all of which cross international boundaries.

24. Fatehmeh Aman, "Water Dispute Escalating Between Iran and Afghanistan", Issue Brief, Atlantic Council, August 2016, <https://www.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/resources/docs/Atlantic%20Council-Water%20Dispute.pdf>. Accessed on December 5, 2016.

25. The five river basins of Afghanistan are Amu Darya, Harirud-Murghab, Hilmand, Kabul-Indus river basin and northern river basin.

populations in Iran, Pakistan and Central Asia, but the country lacks water-sharing agreements with its neighbours.

The dispute resulted in the Helmand river water treaty on March 13, 1973. In 1973, a document was signed based on which Iran would receive 26 cubic metres per second or 850 million cubic metres annually.<sup>26</sup> As against the normal cordial bilateral relations that have existed between Iran and Afghanistan, the former had accused Afghanistan of making the

Helmand river into a political tool. There had been a view in Afghanistan that Iran is using the issue of Afghan refugees in Iran as a counter-measure to put pressure on Afghanistan. The view suggests that Afghanistan could use the water issue as leverage to pressurise Iran to improve the conditions of the Afghan refugees. This issue has become the major focus of bilateral relations between the two nations. However, the ongoing discussions regarding this issue have not resulted in a breakthrough yet.<sup>27</sup> It is pertinent to mention here that water is a regional issue with international implications as it directly relates to regional security. An Iran-Afghanistan memorandum regarding this issue was signed in January 2016 which called for the complete implementation of the 1973 treaty and “regular meetings” of the Helmand water commissioners.<sup>28</sup>

While improving water management in both countries is most important, the opportunities to do so in Afghanistan were lost during the peak of the flow of international funds into the country. Without outside assistance and greater local cooperation, the region will be faced with deeper and potentially irresolvable challenges that could have a significant negative impact on the economy and security situation in both countries. It should be kept in mind that Afghanistan is a nation with a predominantly rural and agricultural society which makes its dependence on its river very high. This makes the

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26. n. 23.

27. Dobbins, n. 14.

28. Pollack, n. 15.

issue of water sharing a little tricky for Afghanistan with its neighbours. Coupled with this is the lack of technical and diplomatic expertise which might weaken Afghanistan's position at the negotiating table. It is certainly not in the interest of Kabul to have poor relations with Pakistan as well as Iran, the two countries that provide landlocked Afghanistan with access to the sea.<sup>29</sup>

### *Iran's Alleged Communiqué with the Taliban*

Iran's unequivocal association with the Taliban is a key factor of conflict with Kabul. Where, on the one hand, Tehran denies having any contact and discussion with the Taliban; on the other, there have been a few media reports<sup>30</sup> which reveal Iran's rising contacts with the Taliban. These reports indicate that Iran is facilitating, ensuring, preparing, and equipping the Taliban against the ruling government in Afghanistan. Despite the old disdain, exemplified in 1998 after the Taliban's massacre of Iranian diplomats in Mazar-e-Sharif, Iran appears to have associated with the Taliban. In fact, Iran had provided clandestine support to the Taliban as Tehran viewed it as an instrument for propelling the US forces out of the nation. Specifically, Kabul considers Tehran at fault for the ongoing conflicts in Afghanistan's western province of Farah, where Iran would have worked with the Taliban in order to take charge of the nearby assets, especially water.

Afghanistan's Farah province has been under steady danger of assault by the Taliban. In May 2018, the Taliban propelled a major offensive on the capital of Farah, which prompted the Afghan security forces to withdraw from the capital on a temporary basis.<sup>31</sup> After the endeavour to take control of Kunduz in 2016, this was the second time that Taliban extremists endeavoured to capture a province. It is imperative to comprehend why the Taliban raised

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29. Sudha Ramachandran, "Afghanistan Risks Water Conflict with Iran", July 30, 2016, <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13379-afghanistan-risks-water-conflict-with-iran.html>. Accessed on December 6, 2016.

30. Annalisa Perteghella, "Kabul and Tehran: A Complex Relationship", Italian Institute for International Political Studies, October 18, 2018, see: <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publicazione/kabul-and-tehran-complex-relationship-21461>

31. Jawad Sukhanyar and Rod Nordland, "Taliban Claim They've Taken Control of Western Afghan City, Farah", *New York Times*, May 15, 2018, see: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/15/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban-farah.html>

their rebellions and assaults in Farah province in 2018. Farah comes under the southwestern part of Afghanistan that shares borders with Iran. The commencement of the construction of the trans-Afghanistan pipeline—a part of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline—is also mapped to pass through Farah. This scheme enables the province to be counted among some of the more strategically important provinces of Afghanistan. However, if Farah falls into the hands of the Taliban, the results will have a direct impact on major regional economic projects, and at the same time, challenge the security of Kandahar, Helmand, and other adjacent provinces.<sup>32</sup>

### *Cross-Cultural Problem*

In view of sharing a porous border, Iran's interests in Afghanistan are more related to securing its eastern border; preserving the flow of water from Afghanistan; countering the narcotics trade; the large Afghan refugee population on its soil; and limiting the US' influence in the region. The Iranian-Afghan border crosses through several deserts and marshlands. The Afghan provinces of Herat, Farah and Nimrouz border Iran.<sup>33</sup> Iran has been the most influential regional actor in Afghanistan and was poised to play a significant role in Afghanistan after the 2015 nuclear deal between Iran and the Western powers and the US declaration of drawdown of troops in 2012. At the same time, the removal of sanctions from Iran had opened new avenues for Iran in Afghanistan. Afghanistan is located in the region referred to as "*Greater Ariana*", a wide area running north-south from Tajikistan to Maldives, and east-west from Myanmar to Iran. In this context, Afghanistan serves as an important gateway to this region and, thus, plays an important role in Iran's grand strategy of "Look to the East."<sup>34</sup> Afghanistan's

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32. Aziz Amin Ahmadzai, "Iran's Support for the Taliban Brings it to a Crossroads with Afghanistan", *The Diplomat*, May 21, 2018, see: <https://thediplomat.com/2018/05/irans-support-for-the-taliban-brings-it-to-a-crossroads-with-afghanistan/>

33. Elena Ambrosetti et al., *Migration in the Mediterranean: Socio-Economic Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2016).

34. Kayhan Barzegar, "Iran's Foreign Policy in post-Taliban Afghanistan", *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 37, no. 2, 2014, pp. 119-137.

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landlocked geography has been compounded by its political isolation in the region.<sup>35</sup> Among Afghanistan's seven neighbours, only its borders with Tajikistan remain relatively free of political tension. Furthermore, living in an unstable neighbourhood has been costly for Iran. There persists a generalised condition of instability. There is also sectarian conflict on Iran's western borders (Iraq). In addition, there are failed and fragile states on Iran's eastern frontier (Afghanistan and Pakistan).

This makes Iran more insecure as far as its eastern borders are concerned, thereby leading it to invest heavily in its ground forces to protect its borders.

In a neighbouring country like Afghanistan, where Iran has a strategic interest, it had discarded its sphere of influence since 2002. However, the changing dynamics and President Trump's proposed slashing of US troops from Afghanistan will leverage Iran to further its influence—economic, political and sectarian.<sup>36</sup> The presence of American troops near Iran's eastern borders has been quite alarming for Tehran; as such, the likely pullout of US troops from Afghanistan will lead Iran to fill the void in its neighbourhood. As it is, there are existing cultural and religious differences between Iran and Afghanistan. Demographically, Iran and Afghanistan share several religious, linguistic, and ethnic groups that create cultural overlaps between the two countries. Out of the 34.9 million Afghan populace, up to 20 percent are Shi'a, mostly from the Hazara clan. They are predominantly settled in the western region of Afghanistan—Herat – alongside the Iran-Afghan border, known colloquially as Little Iran. Although Afghanistan is predominantly Sunni dominated (80 percent, roughly 27 million people), it does have a sizeable Shi'as minority. The Hazara, a Persian-speaking ethnic group which

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35. Davood Moradian, "Iran Deal: A Possible Game-Changer for Afghanistan", *Al-Jazeera*, July 22, 2015, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2015/07/iran-deal-game-changer-afghanistan-150722075109925.html>. Accessed on December 18, 2017.

36. Dr. Mohammed Al-Sulami, "Nature May Abhor a Vacuum, but Iran Loves One", *Arab News*, December 24, 2018, at <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1425256>

is concentrated mainly in central Afghanistan, with major communities present in western Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan, constitute a large portion of Afghanistan's Shi'a community. Although the exact number is not available, the Hazaras make up roughly 9 percent of Afghanistan's population, or 2.9 million people.<sup>37</sup>

Additionally, Iran and Afghanistan also share common languages. Half of all Afghans, or 16.3 million, speak one of the several dialects of Persian (Dari); 11 percent of Afghans, or 3.6 million, speak Turkic languages such as the Uzbek or Turkmen, as do 26 percent of Iranians or 21.06 million people. The Turkmen comprise an ethnic group that lives in Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, and Iran. The Baluch are another ethnic group that lives in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran. The Baluch constitute 2 percent of the Iranian population, or roughly 1.62 million people. In neighbouring Afghanistan, the Baluch account for 2 percent of the population.<sup>38</sup> Afghanistan's Baluch population lives mainly in the southwest of the country, along its borders with Iran and Pakistan. Both Afghanistan and Iran have a remarkably young population. Over 60 percent of Afghans are under the age of 25. In Iran, more than half of the population is under the age of 25.<sup>39</sup>

Due to discrimination, targeted violence and displacement, the Hazara group has lost quite a bit of its social importance in Afghanistan. Conceivably as an outcome of this, the Hazaras have been moderately detached from other social impacts, and their ethnic identity has remained generally static. Consequently, the Hazaras are majorly concerned about the resurgence of the Taliban who have committed mass atrocities on the Hazara community.

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37. "Iran and Afghanistan", <http://www.understandingwar.org/iran-and-afghanistan>. Accessed on December 18, 2017.

38. Alireza Nader et al., "Iran's Influence in Afghanistan: Implications for the US Drawdown", *RAND Report*, 2014, [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR600/RR616/RAND\\_RR616.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR600/RR616/RAND_RR616.pdf). December 18, 2017; <http://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/afghanistan-population/>. Accessed on February 16, 2019.

39. n. 37.

## IRAN-AFGHANISTAN: RECENT SITUATION

Specifically, there were chances that the Iran nuclear deal would have impacted Iran-Afghanistan bilateral relations in two key areas: economy and security. However, the Iranian interests in Afghanistan are more strategic than economic. Afghanistan stands to gain with the Chabahar port opening for business—the wheat shipment reaching Afghanistan through Chabahar is a success story. It has the prospects of developing into a transport hub for regional trade. Bilateral economic relations are already growing between the two nations, thriving on Iranian investments.

At the same time, this regional economic integration between Iran and Afghanistan can provide the latter with an opportunity to diversify trading partners and generate billions of dollars in trade revenue. To boost trade and economic ties, Afghanistan and Iran need to build on previous reconstruction projects to expand railway and road connectivity between the two countries and beyond. Iran's annual bilateral trade in Afghanistan was around \$3 billion in 2015.<sup>40</sup> In the security realm, Iran could prove to be a vital ally of Afghanistan in combating narco-trafficking originating in Afghanistan. The regional economic integration also provides an opportunity for the countries to come together and pursue security interests. As Iran seeks to improve its image on the international front, the only opportunity for it is to pursue joint security efforts in the region that benefit all the parties.

In 2013, Iran and Afghanistan signed a strategic cooperation agreement aimed to favour Iran by counterweighing the US influence there. The pact comprised important economic and security measures. These included boosting bilateral cooperation on transit, investment, commercial and educational exchanges, expanding tourism, fighting terrorism and cross-border drug trafficking, sharing intelligence, and conducting joint military exercises.<sup>41</sup>

Iran is a nation on the economic rebound and is reshaping the geopolitical context of its neighbours, particularly Afghanistan. With this renewed

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40. Javid Ahmed, "The Enemy of Iran's Enemy in Afghanistan", *Foreign Affairs*, June 21, 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2015-06-21/enemy-irans-enemy-afghanistan>. Accessed on December 2, 2016.

41. Ibid.



engagement, there are possibilities of greater cooperation along the shared trade and security interests, which could have positive implications for the whole South Asian region. At the same time, Iran's rise in the region can be viewed as an opportunity to bolster regional security.<sup>42</sup>

However, currently, multiple challenges face Iran-Afghanistan relations; chief among them are security and resource issues. Tehran seeks a stable government in Kabul, a government that doesn't rely on the US for its security and stability. Ironically, this led Tehran to make common cause with the Taliban so that it could deprive the US of the ability to negotiate a settlement between the Taliban and Kabul. However, Iran has no long-term desire to see the Taliban replace the Kabul government. Tehran does not want a hostile Sunni Islamist government on its border allied with Saudi Arabia and a recipient of Gulf Arab generosity that will endanger Iran and persecute the Shi'a communities inside Afghanistan.

In fact, one of the drivers of Tehran's difficult relations with Kabul in recent times is Tehran's own water policies which have created a resource crisis for Iran. Afghanistan has been in the process of constructing dams because dams help Afghan farmers to increase productivity that aids economic growth and reconstruction. However, this has received antagonistic reviews from Iran.

Most alarming of all may be what Iran intends to do with its Afghan Shi'a proxies in Syria once the fighting is over. Iran has sent a large number of Afghans to fight in its Fatemiyoun Division<sup>43</sup> for the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria. However, there are chances that Iran may encourage large numbers to return to places like Herat province—which has a large Shi'a community—where they could serve as a militia providing leverage over the government in Kabul.<sup>44</sup>

Iran is one of the neighbouring countries that has had favourable relations with Afghanistan. Iran has had lasting political, economic, religious, social, ethnic and cultural assets in Afghanistan since ancient times. In the present

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42. Rashid, n. 9.

43. The Fatemiyoun Division is an Afghan Shi'a militia formed in 2014 to fight in Syria on the side of the government.

44. John Nixon, "What's Next for Afghanistan and Iran? Water Wars", *The Cipher Brief*, September 27, 2017, <https://www.thecipherbrief.com/whats-next-afghanistan-iran-water-wars>. Accessed on December 20, 2017.

**Iran looks to Afghanistan as a gateway akin to the Silk Road, as a pathway toward Greater Central Asia. Stability in Afghanistan would bode well for Iran's interests in establishing future pipelines linking Iran to the Central Asian Republics.**

age, Tehran has provided Afghanistan with millions in aid as assistance in development projects and for reconstruction. At the same time, Afghanistan holds strategic importance for Iran. However, there remain issues that the two countries need to resolve for increased economic cooperation between Kabul and Tehran. Iran's proximity gives Afghanistan advantage to increase the ongoing economic relationship. However, in order to boost trade and economic ties, Afghanistan and Iran need to build on previous reconstruction projects to expand the railway and road connectivity

between the two countries and beyond.<sup>45</sup>

Iran looks to Afghanistan as a gateway akin to the Silk Road, as a pathway toward Greater Central Asia. Stability in Afghanistan would bode well for Iran's interests in establishing future pipelines linking Iran to the Central Asian Republics. In the near term, however, Iran's security and foreign policy dilemmas will continue to drive Tehran's policies vis-à-vis Afghanistan. In addition to the lingering Baluch insurgency, other transnational issues—such as the Afghan refugee question, water disputes and narcotics trafficking—will continue to play a major role in Iran's calculations vis-à-vis Afghanistan.

## CONCLUSION

Against the backdrop of intensified Afghan peace talks, Iran is interested in being a part of the peace arrangements which are taking differing shapes in Afghanistan. The interest stems out of Iran's sensitive border that has a direct bearing on Iran's future security scenario. Iran has actively taken behind-the-scene responsibility in the form of carrying out bilateral talks by hosting the Afghan Taliban for the promotion of peace. Therefore, it is likely that the road to peace in Afghanistan shall consider Iranian interests

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45. Abdul Ahad Bahrami, "Afghanistan-Iran Relations: The Needs and Challenges", April 26, 2015, <http://www.outlookafghanistan.net/topics>. Accessed on December 5, 2016.

as well. Among the primary Iranian concerns is the presence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in Afghanistan and the threat of the resurgence of other activist groups.

Iran has long publicly supported the Afghan government. After the Taliban were ousted from power, Iran's trade with its neighbour expanded considerably. This happened despite its derision for American influence in the country and which becomes a stronger reason for Iranian support to the Afghan national government. At the same time, Iran has full faith that in its absence, the result of the mediation of its conspicuous adversaries—the US, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Turkey—will not fetch the desired results for the issues of cross-border terrorism and drug trade that surround Iran. This, additionally, forms the basis for Tehran to proceed with its strategy to support the Taliban against the Afghan government and Western powers working in Afghanistan, simultaneously portraying itself as a mediator between the Taliban and the Afghan administration.

Iran is also an important economic actor in Afghanistan and is one of Afghanistan's largest trading partners and investors. Iranian economic activity, which has included partnering with other powers such as India for development projects, has been largely positive for Afghan stability. Iran can also exercise significant political influence not just with the Tajik- and Hazara-dominated political groups but with the central government in Kabul as well. Iran wants stability next door. So, it is trying to primarily build influence by investing in proxies, ranging from Hazara Mujahideen politicians and warlords to the Northern Alliance groups. Cooperation with the Taliban may be part of this multi-pronged strategy. Pakistan is Iran's main competitor for influence in Afghanistan considering that Pakistan has invested largely in Sunni proxies, followed by the US.

**Iran is also an important economic actor in Afghanistan and is one of Afghanistan's largest trading partners and investors. Iranian economic activity, which has included partnering with other powers such as India for development projects, has been largely positive for Afghan stability.**

As Bruce Koepke clearly assesses, “Iran as an Islamic republic could play a key role in supporting the Afghan government’s reconciliation efforts with insurgents, working towards a regional security mechanism to support the stabilisation of Afghanistan and other countries in the region experiencing conflict, and strengthening Afghanistan’s transport corridor, thereby allowing the expansion of trade with Central Asia, China, Iran and South Asia.”<sup>46</sup> Many nations in the region, including Iran, believe that peace in Afghanistan is more likely to be realised through a regional approach. This has been the mainstay of the Iranian foreign policy vis-à-vis Afghanistan. However, with the extent of aid and reconstruction being done from the Iranian side in Afghanistan, it can be safely said that Iran will continue to be an influential player in Afghanistan. With the declined Western military presence in Afghanistan, it has become more tangible for Iran to have its say in Afghanistan’s internal political affairs. There are chances that in the future there could be a reduction of bilateral tensions between Iran and Afghanistan, as both countries seek to benefit from economic interdependence, and the completion of India’s Chabahar port project. These common economic objectives could eventually spill over to the security sphere as the Afghan government aims to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table. If Iran and Afghanistan capitalise on their common interests, there is a probability that the Tehran-Kabul relationship could improve significantly in the near future.

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46. Bruce Koepke, “Iran’s Policy on Afghanistan: The Evolution of Strategic Pragmatism”, SIPRI, September 2013, <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/170144/SIPRI13WCABK.pdf>. Accessed on December 21, 2017.