



ORF ISSUE BRIEF

NOVEMBER 2013

ISSUE BRIEF # 61

Iran's Kabul Gamble

Tehran courts the Taliban—and other players—to ensure its strategic interests in Afghanistan

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Introduction

Iran has been an active partner in the reconstruction of Afghanistan since 2001. With a contribution of about US\$ 1 billion, Iran is one of the largest bilateral donors to Afghanistan. Afghan President Hamid Karzai has acknowledged this contribution and called Iran “a helper and a solution”.¹ Iran's attempts at stabilising Afghanistan and its declared objective of integrating Afghanistan with a larger trading network are consistent with the goals of the international community. It is for this reason that countries like India, China, and Russia are keen to see Iran play a larger role in Afghanistan post-2014, and view the country as part of a 'regional solution' to the Afghan conflict.

Iran and Afghanistan share deep historical, cultural and civilisational ties. The modern day Afghanistan constitutes territory that was intermittently ruled by Iran for the last 2,000 years with Herat being a part of the Persian Empire till the mid-19th century.² Persian influence is still widely prevalent in Afghanistan, particularly western Afghanistan which Iran continues to view as its traditional sphere of influence.

Tehran's involvement in Afghanistan has, however, not been viewed positively by everyone. Within Afghanistan itself, Iran's influence is looked at with a degree of caution and apprehension. Specifically, Iran's intermittent support for the Taliban, its role in Afghanistan's internal affairs, and

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efforts to promote its cause through educational, religious and media institutions have raised questions and suspicions about its intentions in Afghanistan.

This Issue Brief seeks to assess Iran's policy towards Afghanistan. The Brief is divided into four sections: the first section examines Iran's objectives in Afghanistan. This is followed by a brief outline of Iran's development efforts in the country. The third section assesses Iran's involvement in Afghanistan as perceived within the country. The final section examines the contours and compulsions that have led Iran to pursue strategies that have created a perception, within Afghanistan and among Western countries, of Tehran being a threat to the stability of Afghanistan. Such strategies are neither conducive to the future stability of Afghanistan nor do they enhance Iran's image as a constructive regional player.

Tehran's Calculus

For Iran, a stable Afghanistan is extremely important. In 2005, Iran's then President Mohammad Khatami noted that, "Iran and Afghanistan would benefit from each other's stability so much so that Iran cannot be safe while there is instability in Afghanistan".³ Iran's interests in promoting a stable Afghanistan are broadly shaped by two compulsions—security and geopolitics.

Iran sees an unstable Afghanistan as a serious security threat. Iran has been adversely affected by the opium cultivation and trafficking that originates in Afghanistan. About half of Afghanistan's opium is reportedly trafficked through Iran; this amounted to about 1,000 to 1,100 tons in 2009.⁴ As a result, Iran is grappling with a huge drug addiction problem as the number of dependent drug users in 2011 was estimated to be 1.2 million.⁵ There are associated problems as well, such as organised crime and an increasing number of HIV patients. Iran contributes nearly \$50 million annually to the Afghan anti-narcotics effort and has also invested billions of dollars in the development of infrastructure along the Afghanistan-Iran border, including a 688 km canal, building 477 kms of embankments, erecting a 85-km concrete wall and putting up 120 km of barbed wire.⁶ Prolonged instability in Afghanistan will only result in more opium production with the consequent negative impact on Iran.

The instability of the last three decades has also led to the constant influx of Afghan refugees into Iran. There are about 2.5 million Afghan refugees whose upkeep costs Tehran US\$ 2 billion a year, a huge fiscal burden on the deteriorating Iranian economy.⁷ The rising unemployment among the Iranian youth has fuelled resentment towards the Afghan refugees, who are viewed as “unfair recipients” of state benefits and jobs, and are associated with crimes, gun culture, and drug peddling. There has also been a rise in the number of attacks on Afghan settlements in Iran. Although Iran has initiated a number of voluntary repatriation drives over the years, the prolonged instability in Afghanistan has discouraged Afghan refugees from going back, thereby rendering such measures largely ineffective.⁸

From Tehran's perspective, a stable Afghanistan also helps facilitate its strategic interests. Iran is keen to break out of the isolation imposed by the international sanctions and a stable Afghanistan provides such an opportunity. For instance, Afghanistan is a vast market for Iranian goods, helping in easing some of the economic pressure of the sanctions. Afghan markets are flooded with Iranian goods—oil products, cement, pharmaceuticals, and iron and steel products—with Iran exporting close to US\$ 2 billion worth of products to Afghanistan in 2012⁹ and supplying about half of Afghanistan's oil imports. As this bilateral trade tends to complicate American efforts to cripple the Iranian economy to an extent, stability in Afghanistan to further boost the bilateral trade has become important for Iran. In order to promote trade ties, Iran has helped start a Chamber of Commerce in Herat, constructed an international terminal at Milak along the Iran-Afghan border and ratified a treaty with Afghanistan in 2012 giving preferential treatment to Afghan goods entering via the Chabahar Port.

A stable Afghanistan would also ensure that it can be used as a bridge to Central Asia, thereby enhancing the transit potential of Iran and enabling it to emerge as the main trade and transit hub connecting Central Asia, South Asia, and the Persian Gulf. Its efforts to develop the required infrastructure and engagement with various countries for this purpose, as examined in the following section, to promote regional cooperation should be seen in this context. Iran's aim to emerge as the main transit hub is consistent with its broader objective of wanting to be seen as a significant regional player. This overarching goal of being recognised as a regional power player with a major say on all regional issues, is not unique to the current dispensation in Tehran but a historical reality.¹⁰

Similarly, the substantial aid provided by Iran should be seen as an attempt to maintain and strengthen its position in its perceived sphere of influence in western Afghanistan. The funding of the various religious, educational, and media institutions in Afghanistan is meant to broaden this influence. The head of Herat's provincial council, Nazir Ahmad Haidar, has noted, "Iran has influence in every sphere: economic, social, political and daily life. When someone gives so much money, people fall into their way of thinking".¹¹ US officials have also admitted that most of Iran's influence in Afghanistan is channelled through soft power—business, aid and diplomacy.¹²

This constructive role is complemented by Iran's attempts to broaden its support base within Afghanistan. Although traditionally Iran's main support base lies with ethnic groups like Hazaras and Persian-speaking non-Pashtuns in Western Afghanistan, Tehran has made overtures to a wide spectrum of political players, including prominent Pashtuns like Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, some factions of the Taliban, and the Karzai-led government in Kabul.

The Constructive Partner

Iran has played a constructive role in Afghanistan in order to achieve its objectives of stabilising Afghanistan and strengthening its support base within the country. This was visible during the 2001 Bonn Conference itself when Iran played an important role in ensuring a smooth political transition in Afghanistan. Iran had then reportedly cajoled its allies in the Northern Alliance to accept Hamid Karzai as the interim President.¹³ Iran also supported, initially, the US intervention in Afghanistan. Tehran offered the use of its airbases near the Iran-Afghanistan border to NATO forces, provided search and rescue for downed US aircrew, gave intelligence regarding the Taliban and is even said to have captured and deported Al Qaeda and Taliban operatives who had crossed into Iran.¹⁴

Iran's reconstruction investments—the majority of which lie in western Afghanistan—have focused on infrastructure development, education, agriculture, business and economic development, and the media. For instance, Iran has connected Herat to its own electric grid, commissioned the construction of roads that would connect it to Afghanistan's northern provinces and create a ring road connection between the roads of Afghanistan.¹⁵ Iran has also won rights to build a cement factory and extract copper from the Pahlawanan mine—an investment reportedly worth \$150 million, which would also include the construction of residential houses, health clinics, schools, and mosques.¹⁶ Iran is also constructing the Afghan portion of the Khvaf-Herat railway connecting Afghanistan to eastern Iran. Iran has played a significant role in the construction and running of educational and media institutions. Western donors in Kabul acknowledge that Iran has been one of the more effective donors; it has demonstrated more output in terms of infrastructure, energy and construction projects than many western donors.¹⁷

Simultaneously, Iran has been actively pushing Afghanistan into a larger trading network. For instance, it has signed a memorandum of understanding with Afghanistan and Tajikistan on the construction of railway lines, along with water pipelines and energy transmission lines¹⁸ and is keen to connect the Khvaf-Herat rail line with the railways of Central Asia, Turkey and Europe. Iran has also agreed to finance the Kyrgyz portion of the Iran-Afghanistan-Tajikistan-Kyrgyzstan-China road project and funded the Anzob tunnel in Tajikistan, which is reportedly a part of Iran's envisioned road route to Tajikistan and China via western and northern Afghanistan.

Iran has engaged with other neighbouring countries to integrate Afghanistan with the region. For instance, it is collaborating with India on the Chabahar port and on the development of additional infrastructure that would connect Afghanistan with Iran. Iran is also involved in a trilateral dialogue involving Afghanistan and Pakistan to enhance cooperation for socio-economic development, increase three-way trade, and improve the connectivity between the three countries. Iran has

similarly engaged with Afghanistan and Tajikistan, as stated above, to promote regional integration and has sought to play a leading role in this regard through the Economic Cooperation Organisation.

Afghan Suspicions

Iran's efforts to safeguard and expand its influence in Afghanistan, however, have raised eyebrows in Afghanistan where the fiercely independent Afghan tribes have historically resisted Persian encroachment.¹⁹ Iran's activities are increasingly being seen as a serious threat to Afghanistan. The interference in the country's internal political, social, and cultural affairs is being perceived as Iran's attempt to impose its own culture and ideology on Afghanistan.

For instance, the numerous media, religious and educational institutions in Afghanistan funded and supported by Iran are alleged to be bases from where Tehran carries out its espionage and propaganda activities. The Khatam-al Nabyeen Islamic University in Kabul is said to be one such example, where the curriculum and books are almost indistinguishable from those of madrassas in Iran.²⁰ Similarly, the staff of the Academy of Sciences of Afghanistan has also been accused of being representatives of the Iranian regime.²¹ Iran has also provided financial and technical assistance to media outlets like Tamadon, a private television and radio channel, and *Ensaf*, a newspaper, which provide excessive coverage to the Israel-Palestine conflict. These media services openly praise Iran-backed groups like Hamas and Hezbollah and are critical of the US policies in the region.²²

Iran has also sought to gain influence in Afghanistan by co-opting religious clerics and policymakers to ensure favourable policies. It is speculated that as many as 44 of the 249 members of the Afghan parliament are on Tehran's payroll.²³ The revelations in 2010 that Hamid Karzai's office received millions of dollars from Iran have only strengthened speculation of Iran's attempts to buy the loyalty of influential people in Afghanistan. Media reports alleged that Iran attempted to subvert the US-Afghan Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) by setting aside US\$ 25 million to bribe Afghan parliamentarians into voting against the pact.²⁴ What has riled the Afghans even more is the crude attempts by Iran to arm-twist them by harassing the in diplomatic staff in Tehran and threatening to push back Afghan refugees living in Iran. An Afghan lawmaker described Iran as “a cancer”, which has permeated all Afghan institutions.²⁵ Even the Afghan government, despite hailing Iran's role in Afghanistan, has been ambivalent about Iran's ties with Persian-speaking non-Pashtun groups as it feels that a pro-active stance could weaken the influence of the central government over these groups.²⁶ President Karzai has reportedly conveyed to US officials that he views Iranian meddling in Afghanistan's internal affairs to be increasingly dangerous.²⁷

Some Afghans fear that their autonomy could be jeopardised if they don't limit the spread of Iranian cultural influence through books, fashion and Iran-based educational institutions.²⁸ An Afghan

official said that Iran's influence in Afghanistan is "much more dangerous than the suicide bombers coming from Pakistan...you can't as easily see and fight Iran's political and cultural influence".²⁹ One instance of such a threat was visible in the textbooks sent by Iran that were found offensive by the Sunni population and could have fuelled sectarian tensions. The Governor of Nimruz province called the texts, "dangerous to the unity of Afghanistan" and "more dangerous than Taliban bullets".³⁰ Resentment towards Iran's cultural "encroachment" has also resulted in mass protests. For instance, in June 2012 mass protests broke out in Kabul with students tearing down posters and billboards meant to commemorate the birth of Ayatollah Khomeini as they were considered to be a direct attack against Afghan culture and Afghanistan's own national heroes.³¹ More recently, in June 2013, protestors burnt Iranian flags to protest against Iran's alleged espionage activities in Afghanistan.³²

Iran's support for the Hazara community has also caused a great degree of resentment, particularly among the Pashtuns. They feel that the empowerment of the Hazaras post-2001, at their expense, has mostly been possible because of Iranian support to specific educational and religious institutions. Iran has also been accused of interfering in favour of the Hazaras during the 2010 parliamentary elections.³³

The Balancing Act

Dispute over water

The negative perceptions have been further intensified by some of Iran's activities that undermine Afghanistan's stability. Such "acts of sabotage" are driven by Iran's security concerns vis-à-vis Afghanistan. For instance, Iran has been accused of derailing work through repeated attacks on the Bakshabad Dam on the Farah River, the Kajaki Dam on Helmand River, and the Salma Dam on Hari (or Harirud) River.³⁴

Iran and Afghanistan have been in dispute over the access of water since the 19th century. The construction of dams on these rivers tends to reduce the flow of water into Iran. It has been estimated that the Salma Dam could cut the flow of Iran's Harirud River water by almost 73 per cent. This is a considerable amount, given that almost three times the number of Iranians are dependent on this water than the number of Afghans.³⁵ From Iran's perspective, the inadequate access to water is viewed as a threat as it could offset a major socio-economic problem. This was evident in 1999 when the Taliban stopped the Helmand River from flowing into Iran, causing a major crisis in the already volatile Sistan-Baluchistan province.

Iran's efforts to derail such projects, which are extremely crucial for the Afghan economy since they could generate local energy and water supplies, have naturally undermined its image among the Afghans. Iran has been seen as an “enemy” that is disrupting attempts to put the Afghan economy on the path of self-reliance. In 2009, hundreds of people took to the streets to protest against Iran's attempts to “steal” water from Afghanistan and demanded that the government completely stop the flow of water into Iran.³⁶

Tehran-Taliban Ties

Iran's support for the Taliban, to achieve its short-term goal of frustrating the US mission in Afghanistan, is another example of Iran's balancing act in Afghanistan. This objective is based on Iran's threat perception of the US military presence in its neighbourhood. American access to military facilities in Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, Bahrain, Turkey, besides Afghanistan, is viewed by Iran as a deliberate American strategy to encircle and contain it. Iran fears that such a strategic positioning could enhance American ability to monitor its nuclear programme and launch attacks against it. Iranian concerns were validated with the capture of the American drone RQ-170 Sentinel in December 2011, which was part of a fleet of stealth aircrafts that had been used to spy on Iran for years. Revelations by American officials that airbases in Afghanistan were built with the intention of launching surveillance missions and even special operations into Iran have further fuelled Iran's suspicions.³⁷ Iran, in the past, has accused the US of extending covert support to the Sunni Baluch insurgents in Iran, such as the Jundullah group.

Iran's support to the Taliban is meant to balance this perceived threat. Tehran has been accused of providing weapons and training to the Taliban as well as operating space within Iran. Taliban sources have also revealed that the Iranians are paying them bounties of US \$1,000 and US \$6,000, respectively, to kill American soldiers and destroy their vehicles.³⁸

Although Iran is opposed to the possibility of a Taliban-dominated Afghanistan in the future given their past acrimonious relations,³⁹ Tehran, at present, considers the US to pose a far greater threat to it. Thus, in the short-term the support to the Taliban helps in facilitating Iran's interests in Afghanistan vis-à-vis the US. A Taliban commander also described the relationship with Iran as a “marriage of convenience” based on mutual hatred of the US.⁴⁰

This tactical alliance enables Iran to escalate the costs for the Americans in Afghanistan without actually engaging in a direct military confrontation with it. It is hoped that this would keep the US tied down in Afghanistan and distracted from launching any attack against Iran. Moreover, it also tends to give Iran an asymmetrical capability to disrupt US operations or retaliate against American troops, should Iran's nuclear facilities be attacked.⁴¹

However, Iran is careful to provide only limited support to the insurgents, which is sufficient to frustrate the US goals but just not enough to seize power in Kabul. Tehran's support for the Taliban is fraught with risk for the stability of Afghanistan and counterproductive to Iran's own goal of projecting an image of a responsible regional player. Its support to the Taliban neither removes the negative image that it has acquired due to its past clandestine—actual or perceived—behaviour, nor does it endear it to the Afghan population, which has increasingly begun to view Iran through the same prism that it views Pakistan.

Conclusion

It is felt that the more moderate Hassan Rouhani, the new President of Iran, would move Tehran away from the confrontational policies of his predecessor, Ahmadinejad, and be willing to cooperate more with the international community. It is hoped that Rouhani would encourage more constructive engagement with Afghanistan in the future with the aim to promote stability of Afghanistan, especially in wake of the security vacuum created by the drawdown of foreign troops in 2014. The signing of the strategic cooperation document between the two countries in August 2013 clearly indicates Iran's intention to enhance its role in Afghanistan post-2014. This document entails enhanced cooperation between the two in military training, fighting terrorism and organised crime, conducting joint military exercises, and intelligence sharing. The document also emphasises cooperation in the field of trade and commerce, education and tourism. The signing of this document also highlights Iran's desire to find a 'regional solution' to the conflict in Afghanistan by diversifying Kabul's relations and cooperation away from the western countries.⁴²

It would be wrong to assume that Iran would not continue its policy of co-opting influential players within Afghanistan that could help it in safeguarding its interests and expanding its influence within Afghanistan. Such a policy is likely to be pursued with even greater vigour if the outcome of the 2014 Afghan presidential elections is not in the interest of Iran.⁴³

There are, however, going to be major restraints on Iran to expand its role in Afghanistan. For one, there is likely to be much resistance within Afghanistan against Iran's enhanced role just as there would be resistance to Pakistan playing a similar role vis-à-vis Afghanistan. Secondly, the international sanctions imposed on Iran may prevent it from playing that envisioned leading role. The sanctions have severely curtailed Iran's economy and it is likely that it may be forced to scale-back its spending in Afghanistan, preventing it from completing a number of infrastructure projects. In fact, some of these projects have been unable to get funding from international organisations because of the sanctions on Iran, thereby increasing the burden on the partner countries.

Finally, it is important to consider the nature of Iran's engagement with the Taliban post-2014. As mentioned above, Iran is wary about the possibility of a Taliban-dominated Afghanistan in the

future. Iran's strategy of maintaining its allies within Afghanistan and support to the Afghan government should be seen in the light of its attempts to strengthen the opposition to the Taliban. However, at the same time, Iran could possibly also be preparing itself for a scenario where it would have to deal with the Taliban as the dominant force in South and East Afghanistan. There is a growing belief within Iran that the Taliban is an integral part of the Afghan society and polity and, thus, cannot be ignored. Consequently, for Iran to be able to continue playing a large role in Afghanistan it would have to engage with all political players in Afghanistan including the Taliban. The meeting that took place between Iran and representatives of the Quetta Shura in June 2013 could, thus, be seen as an attempt to formulate ways of overcoming the differences that have existed between the two sides keeping in mind the 2014 deadline for the drawdown of NATO troops. The Taliban reportedly reassured Iran of a more accommodating attitude towards all factions post-2014, and, in turn, requested Iran to stop their support for the Northern Alliance.⁴⁴ These could, possibly, be just some of the prerequisites needed to establish working relations between the two sides.

Iran's approach to the Taliban is also likely to be determined by its relations with the US. The presence of the US forces in Afghanistan post-2014 is likely to maintain the threat perception in Iran, especially among the hardliners, thereby possibly reducing the maneuvering space for Rouhani to engage with the international community. Moreover, if the nuclear standoff between Iran and the US continues or intensifies further, Iran is likely to maintain its support for the Taliban, while continuing to engage with the other political actors in Afghanistan.

Endnotes:

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39. In the 1990s, Iran and the Taliban were seen as belonging to two opposing ideological and political camps. While the Sunni-Wahhabi Taliban movement rejected Shi’ite Islam, the dominant Islamic sect in Iran as apostates, Iran considered the Taliban to be a “disgrace to Islam”. Iran also considered the Taliban to be a Saudi and US attempt to contain and resist it in the region and accused the Taliban of supporting Iranian Sunni and Baluch groups opposed to the Iranian regime. Taliban, in turn, resented Iran's support for the Northern Alliance, the main opposition force to the Taliban. The two countries nearly went to war against each other in 1998 when the Taliban killed 8 Iranian diplomats and one Iranian journalist in Mazar-e-Sharif forcing Iran to mobilise 270,000 soldiers along the Iran-Afghanistan border. Despite these acrimonious relations, both countries attempted to mend their differences and establish a working relationship with each other. There have also been suggestions that Iran's overtures post-1998 were appreciated by the moderate factions within the Taliban movement, but it were the more radical and extremist elements within the Taliban and the foreign militants in Afghanistan at that time, which prevented an improvement in Iran-Afghanistan relations.
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