

Iran and Afghanistan

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- Like the United States, Iran seeks a stable Afghanistan free of the Taliban and al Qaeda, which it considers a strategic menace. It also supports the government of President Hamid Karzai, contributes to Afghanistan's reconstruction and fights against its narcotics trafficking.
- Yet Iran's policies toward Afghanistan are linked to its fierce strategic competition with the United States for a dominant role in the Islamic world.
- Having gained strategic depth in Afghanistan, Iran has developed asymmetrical capability to disrupt U.S. operations or retaliate against American troops, should Iran's nuclear facilities be attacked.
- Iran has called on foreign forces to leave Afghanistan, and has reportedly provided limited military support to anti-American forces as the Taliban.
- Iran has created a sphere of influence and a security buffer zone in the Herat region, the industrial heart of Afghanistan and its most secure region. Most of Iran's pledged reconstruction assistance, estimated at \$660 million, is in Herat.
- Iran is now among the top five exporters and importers of goods to and from Afghanistan.

Overview

Iran has been an influential force in Afghanistan. Dari, the Afghan dialect of Persian, is one of Afghanistan's two official languages and is used by intellectuals and the elite. Until 1857, Herat was part of Iran, and only after Iran and Britain signed the Paris Treaty of 1857 did Iran abandon its claim – although it reserved the right to send forces to Afghanistan “if its frontier is violated.”

From Afghan independence in 1919 until 1979, Iran's relations with Afghanistan were friendly. After the 1979 revolution, Iranian policy on Afghanistan went through four phases. In the first phase, which coincided with the 1979-1989 Soviet occupation, Iran called for a Soviet withdrawal and aided Afghan Shiites. In the second phase, after the Soviet Army withdrew, Iran helped the non-Pushtun ethnic groups form a united front. During the Afghan civil war, Iran, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia supported different warlords. In the third phase, when the Taliban seized power in 1996, Iran refused to

recognize the government and instead provided military support to the Northern Alliance opposition.

In the fourth and current phase, since the U.S.-backed Northern Alliance ended Taliban rule, Iran has developed friendly relations with the Karzai government. It has engaged in reconstruction of Afghanistan, continued supporting its traditional allies and pressed for the withdrawal of all foreign troops from the country.

Historic ties

In 1979, the destinies of Iran and Afghanistan were irrevocably altered. A revolution overthrew the monarchy in Iran, and the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. Iran condemned the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and demanded its withdrawal, but Tehran was cautious not to antagonize Moscow. Iran refused to become a frontline state against the Soviet occupation, and refused to participate in the “Washington-Islamabad-Riyadh” axis that financed and managed the Afghan resistance. Iran saw the Soviet Union as a counterweight to U.S. influence in the region.

Iran was also concerned about the spread of Saudi “Wahhabism,” which Ayatollah Khomeini called, “America’s Islam.” In the beginning, Iran’s Afghan policy was Shiite-centric. Tehran generously supported the oppressed Hazara Shiites, who constituted about 20 percent of the population, and more than 1.5 million Afghan refugees who fled to Iran – many of them Hazaras.

After the 1989 Soviet pullout, Washington and Moscow pledged not to interfere in Afghanistan. That decision turned the war-ravaged country into a battleground for a proxy war among Iran, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. The Saudis wanted to use Afghanistan as a springboard to spread its version of Islam throughout Central Asia and to neutralize Iran’s revolutionary message. Pakistan sought to install a Pushtun-dominated government and gain “strategic depth” against India, its nemesis. Iran, having ended its eight-year war with Iraq, sought to establish a friendly government in Kabul that reflected Afghanistan’s rich ethnic diversity. Tehran encouraged all Dari-speakers and non-Pushtuns to form a united front.

In 1992, an alliance that included the Tajiks, Uzbeks and Shiites, under the leadership of legendary Tajik commander Ahmad Shah Massoud, overthrew the caretaker government left behind by the Soviets. This was the first time non-Pushtuns had dominated the government – a victory for Iran. Iran’s role in the putsch is unclear, but Massoud’s victory without Iran’s support would have been difficult.

Afghan civil war

The victory was short-lived, as Afghanistan descended into a devastating civil war. The Pushtuns, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia all rejected the new realignment of power and undermined the government which they believed was close to Tehran. The government itself was paralyzed by lingering in-fighting among its supporters, and its

stubborn refusal to share power with the Pushtuns and Shiites. In addition, the Afghan warlords, who rose to prominence as they fought against the Soviets, fueled the civil war. Having created their own fiefdoms, they formed fleeting alliances of convenience with the highest bidder, including regional powers.

Independently, and through work with the United Nations, Iran called for peaceful resolution of the conflict. It appealed to the government to share power with Pushtuns and Shiites. But Tehran had neither the diplomatic skills nor the resources to bring peace to Afghanistan. Kabul also had serious tensions with Tehran, as it tried to appease Pakistan and Saudi Arabia.

During the civil war, Iran pursued inconsistent policies. It supported the Kabul government, but also covered its bets by supporting Shiites who worked both for and against the regime. It also backed rival warlords, including Ismail Khan from Herat, a Tajik; General Abdul Rashid Dostom, an Uzbek; and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a Pushtun.

Iran and the Taliban

Amid the chaos, the Taliban, an obscure group of young Pushtun religious students, rose to power. Their ideology was a strange combination of Wahhabism and Deobandism. Iran was astonishingly slow to recognize the Taliban's dazzling rise and the pivotal support provided by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. In 1995, Herat fell to the Taliban, and a year later, they overthrew President Rabbani—a major defeat for Iran and a clear victory for Saudi Arabia and Pakistan.

Iran, unlike Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, refused to recognize the Taliban, and sought to return Rabbani to power. It participated in the U.N. "Six Plus Two" talks on Afghanistan's future, but Iran's strategic investment was to generously support the Northern Alliance made up of Tajiks, Uzbeks and Shiite fighters. India and Russia supported the alliance, but Iran was its principle source of military assistance.

Broken relations

Iranian support for the Northern Alliance, the Taliban's most formidable rival, created serious animosity between Tehran and Kabul. They severed diplomatic relations in 1997. Iran accused the Taliban of being "narco-terrorists," whose antediluvian ideology and draconian laws made Afghanistan a huge prison. Iran's relations with Pakistan and Saudi Arabia also deteriorated.

Iran provided key support for the Northern Alliance when the Taliban tried to capture its interim capital at Mazar-e Sharif. The Taliban initially was pushed back. But with Pakistani support, the Taliban ultimately prevailed, killing more than 2,000 people. They also kidnapped and killed eight Iranian diplomats and one journalist, which led Iran and Afghanistan dangerously close to war. Tehran massed some 200,000 troops on its eastern border, but the threat only made the Taliban more belligerent. They raided Iran's cultural center in Mazar-e Sharif and set its library ablaze. Thereafter, Tehran

increased support for the Northern Alliance while the Taliban ruled most of Afghanistan.

Washington's gift

After al Qaeda's 9/11 attacks, Iran was the recipient of an unintended strategic gift from Washington. The Taliban, who had developed a symbiotic relationship with al Qaeda, were forcefully removed from power after the United States provided air power and intelligence for the Northern Alliance, Iran's ally. Iranian military advisors rubbed shoulders with U.S. military personnel in the Northern Alliance areas. Tehran even said it would give sanctuary for distressed U.S. military personnel inside its territory. It also allowed the United States to transport humanitarian goods to Afghanistan through Iranian land. Iran reportedly suggested the best targets for U.S. bombers.

Iran also participated in the U.S.-sponsored Bonn Conference in December 2001. U.S. and Iranian envoys worked together at the conference – the most fruitful encounter between the two since the 1979 revolution. Both wanted Afghanistan free of the Taliban and al Qaeda. Iran favored the return of President Rabbani, but it agreed to support U.S.-backed Hamid Karzai. The tactical cooperation between the United States and Iran continued, even as they were competing for greater influence in a new Afghanistan. Iranian cooperation with the United States ended in 2002, after President George Bush cited Iran as a member of the "axis of evil."

Iran and the new Afghanistan

Iran has four major goals in Afghanistan:

- To collaborate with Karzai without abandoning supports for other Afghan allies
- To invest in Afghan reconstruction to create a "sphere of influence" and a security zone in the Herat region
- To avoid direct confrontation with the United States, while pressuring Kabul to distance itself from the United States and insure that Afghanistan is not used to attack Iran
- To reduce and, if possible, control the flow of narcotics to Iran.

Karzai has been in a precarious position, as an ally of the United States also seeking friendly relations with Iran. On many occasions, he has paid tribute to Iran's "unforgettable support," and for behaving "like the brother of the Afghan people." He has visited Tehran many times and has signed economic, cultural and security agreements with Iran. He was one of the first leaders to congratulate Ahmadinejad after the disputed 2009 presidential election.

There are a few sources of tension between the two countries:

- Iran has called for the withdrawal of foreign troops, who back Karzai.
- The issue of an Iranian pipeline going through Afghanistan is not settled.

- Iran has expressed concern about Karzai's policy of Pushtun-ization, which has somewhat marginalized the Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras.
- Iran is home to 1.5 million Afghan refugees, whose treatment is disputed.
- Narcotics trafficking from Afghanistan has created a chronic drug problem in Iran.

On drug trafficking, Iran blames the Karzai government and the United States for failing to curb opium production. Iran is one of the major consumers of Afghan opium, and a favorite corridor for shipping narcotics to Europe and the Persian Gulf. While addiction to opium has increased alarmingly in Iran, revenues from narcotics have financed much of the anti-American insurgency in Afghanistan. Hundreds of Iranian security agents have been killed in clashes with traffickers. Iran claims that Jundallah, a terrorist group responsible for killing scores of Iran's Revolutionary Guards, is closely tied to trafficking.

Sphere of influence

One of Iran's main objectives is to create an economic sphere of influence in Herat and turn it into a security buffer zone. Iran ultimately wants to become the hub for transit of goods and service between the Persian Gulf, Afghanistan, Central Asia, China and India. At the International Pledging Conference in Tokyo in 2002, Iran committed \$560 million to Afghan reconstruction, making Iran one of the leading contributors. At the London Conference on the reconstruction of Afghanistan in 2006, Iran pledged an additional \$100 million.

The bulk of Iran's reconstruction investments lie in the Herat region, and involve infrastructure projects, road and bridge construction, education, agriculture, power generation and telecommunication projects. Iran has been working on building a 176-kilometer railroad from Iran to the city of Herat. It has upgraded a tax-free trade route linking the Iranian port of Chabahar, located at the southern end of the Sistan va Balochstan province, near the Oman Sea, to the southwestern border post of Malik in Afghanistan, and to Kandahar and Kabul. The road would shorten the distance from the Persian Gulf to Afghanistan by 700 kilometers, and would significantly diminish the importance of the Karachi-Kandahar road, which is Afghanistan's traditional roadway to international waters.

Iran and the Taliban – again

Iran and the Taliban are ideological enemies, and restoring power to the Taliban in Afghanistan would pose a grave national security threat to Iran. Yet in 2007, NATO claimed that it had intercepted a shipment of explosively formed projectiles from Iran, destined for Afghan insurgents. (It is possible that rogue elements were responsible for the flow of the arms, as there is a huge black market in arms dealing. For example, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the Afghan warlord, claims that an antimissile can be bought for \$100.) If the Taliban is getting support from Iran, both parties know that is not

because Iran likes the Taliban or vice versa. It is because, as the saying goes, the enemy of my enemy is sometimes my friend.

Iran is clearly concerned about reports that the United States and NATO have reached out to some Taliban. Many in Tehran believe Washington would have established ties with the Taliban had it not been for the Taliban providing sanctuary for al Qaeda. Iran is also concerned that successful negotiations between the Taliban and the United States would involve Pakistan and Saudi Arabia – and once again empower them in Afghanistan. Iran wants America to bleed, but its reported support for the Taliban appears to be tactical and limited, as Iran is determined to avoid any direct military confrontation with the United States.

The future

- Iran will continue to be an influential player in Afghanistan. As Iran's role in reconstruction of Afghanistan is likely to increase, and as more Iranian-educated Afghan refugees return to Afghanistan, Iran's influence is likely to increase in the coming years.
- Peace in Afghanistan is more likely to be realized through a regional approach, in which the strategic and economic interests of Iran, as well as Pakistan, are not ignored.
- Compared to other aspects of its foreign policy, Iran's policy toward Afghanistan has been relatively moderate. That policy is likely to change, however, if there is a discernable increase in the level of animosity between Iran and the United States.

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