

“SOURCES OF TENSION IN AFGHANISTAN AND PAKISTAN:
A REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE”

IRAN’S ROLE IN AFGHANISTAN

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In order to assess Iran's role in Afghanistan it is indispensable to start from a fundamental question: what, in general, is the foreign policy of the Iranian regime? More specifically, it is also necessary to identify its real priorities – a complicated endeavor given the ideological nature of the Islamic Republic and the thick layers of rhetoric and posturing that tend to overlay and disguise actual policy goals.

This approach is somewhat controversial, especially given the strength of the view held within Western political circles and in the media, that the Islamic Republic is bent on exporting and expanding its religious and revolutionary model - if not messianically attracted by a cleansing Armageddon as an introduction to the return of the Hidden Imam.

Analysis of actual Iranian behavior reveals, on the contrary, a rather "classical" set of priorities, with specificities that are linked to the non-democratic nature of the regime, rather than to its stated religious and revolutionary goals.

Iran's Priorities

Specifically, if security is, for Iran as for any other country, priority number one, for the Iranian regime, such priority is intertwined with "regime security", i.e. its survival. As Iranian behavior has repeatedly shown, in comparison with such core priorities, every other foreign policy goal – for instance regional policies - becomes subsidiary and often expendable.

Iran's Afghan policy represents one of the most significant concrete cases allowing us to test such hypothesis. In the first place, Afghanistan is singularly significant in relation to all categories of countries that are spelled out in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic in terms of foreign policy relevance : (i) Iran's neighbors; (ii) Muslim countries; (iii) Third World countries; (iv) countries that are seen as important in view of Iranian political, economic or security interests.

Only actual Iranian behavior, on the other hand, can allow us to assess the real order of priority within this list.

There seems to be little doubt that the most pressing, most troubling security concern of the Iranian regime has been the American military presence on both its Western and its Eastern borders, in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The elimination of such presence would therefore seem to constitute priority number one of Iranian foreign policy. If that were the case, however, it would be extremely difficult to explain behavior that is more bivalent than single-mindedly focused on the exclusive goal of eliminating the US presence from the area. Iranians are evidently focused on security goals that are not limited to the shorter-term horizon of a demise of a US military presence in Iran's immediate neighborhood, but, rather, are also concerned by longer-term issues of stability, resulting in a focus on the scenarios that might emerge after the eventual departure of US forces.

Iran's Stance towards Afghanistan

As far as Afghanistan is concerned, Iran's cooperation with the American attack on the Taliban, as well as Tehran's very significant positive role at the 2001 Bonn Conference (where the Iranians sponsored, if not actually delivered, the acceptance by the Northern Alliance of the post-war political settlement in Kabul) reveals that hostility to the US, and fear of a US attack, are by no means the only factors that determine Tehran's security priorities.

Teheran clearly recognizes that a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan was not then, and is not today, compatible with Iran's security interests. It is also aware that by eliminating Saddam Hussain and the Taliban, the US has alleviated two significant security threats to Iran from its immediate neighbors.

It is by now widely agreed that Iran's behavior towards (and especially within) Afghanistan is characterized by ambiguity. It provides political and economic support to the Karzai government but also gives under-cover military assistance to some components of the Taliban insurgency. Such ambiguity can be interpreted as an opportunistic attempt to hedge its bets, but there is more to it than that. Tehran is in favor of some destabilization of the US (and NATO) presence in Afghanistan, but it does not want to see a collapse of the Karzai government and the return of a Taliban emirate. It therefore wants an American withdrawal but not a precipitate, destabilizing, one that would create chaos on its Eastern border and a re-Talibanisation of Afghanistan.

This delicate balancing act is complicated by its concern for "regime security", a concern that is not totally coincident with the security of the Iranian state. The Iranian regime is aware of the fact that its survival will not be guaranteed until it achieves a recognition of its existence on the part of the US: i.e., until Washington abandons its more or less explicit, but permanent, goal of "regime change" that has been there since 1979.

It is impossible to overestimate the centrality of this goal for the Iranian regime – a goal that has been pursued in ways that are often contradictory, even counterproductive, swinging all the way from Khatami's tentative proposal for negotiations in 2003 (most probably a serious *ballon d'essai*) to Ahmadinejad's frequent provocations - a dysfunctional and to many, an absurd way of pursuing the same goal.

Recognition by the US

The Iranian regime, on the other hand, is not pursuing US recognition only in order to avert the possibility of attack, isolation and subversion. It is also quite aware of the fact that whoever can deliver such recognition – and the subsequent normalization of relations not only with the US but also on a global scale – will become politically unbeatable.

The fact is that most Iranians know that their country will not be “a normal country”, and indeed a major one, until and unless American hostility and denial of the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic is overcome. This is so true that attempts at normalizing relations with Washington carried out by anyone (be it Khatami or Ahmadinejad) are regularly boycotted by political opponents. This, incidentally, explains the failure of attempts at normalization, which cannot be attributed solely to US reluctance to abandon its very deep aversion to the Iranian regime, an attitude that – incidentally - can be considered peculiar, if compared to the recognition of regimes (such as the USSR or China) that were objectively much more threatening than the Iranian regime is today, or even as it was in the past.

The overriding goal of recognition, and in particular of “recognition through inclusion”, explains, well beyond the immediate desire to eliminate the Taliban threat, Iran's cooperation with the US in 2001. It also explains today's ambiguity and double-dealing (openly supporting Karzai while clandestinely, but by now notoriously, helping the Taliban). Iran's behavior in Afghanistan can be summarized by reversing a famous saying, and stating: “If you can't join them, beat them” (or at least keep them destabilized). In Afghanistan, but also on other fronts of international relations, Iranians want to impress upon their adversaries that the price of Iranian exclusion, and especially of non-recognition of the Iranian regime, is very high, possibly unsustainable.

Thus Iran is indeed a “spoiler” in Afghanistan, but one which, to quote a Brazilian saying, wants “to create difficulty in order to sell facility”.

The Value & the Costs of Afghanistan

However, its Afghan policy is not only a product of the priority it attaches to regime recognition and survival. Afghanistan also, holds its own substantial value for Iran in many different ways. These include:

The question of Afghan refugees in Iran. The burden on state and society of the millions of Afghan refugees who have sought refuge in Iran, to flee first the war that followed the Soviet invasion, then the civil war and finally the rule of the Taliban, has been a real one for Iran. Teheran

has tried to overcome the problem through forced expulsions (which have periodically created tensions with the Afghan government) and forms of discouragement and bureaucratic harassment, but these have yielded limited results.

As recognized by UNHCR, however, in essence Iran has behaved rather generously, in the sense that most Afghan refugees have not been interned in camps, but have been allowed to live and work within Iranian society (it is hard to tell whether by design or inability to control their presence and movements within the country). They are living as immigrants rather than as refugees, and perform some of the most humble and least well-paid functions within the Iranian economy. In this sense, they can be considered an asset for a country whose population, given its rather high level of education, tends to be less available for the most humble tasks required by the economy (from domestic service to construction work; from municipal garbage collection to farm labor).

The burden for Iran is however real in financial terms, since Afghan refugees tend to benefit, albeit marginally, from Iranian welfare, insofar as they succeed, as they often do, in *de facto* accessing the Iranian welfare system. It has been said, for instance, that one of the reasons behind the suggestion of the abolition of subsidies to a whole range of products in Iran has been the fact that Afghan refugees are also the beneficiaries, as consumers, of measures intended to benefit Iranian citizens, with consequently increased delivery costs to the state.

Drugs. Iran lies on the main transit route for opium, and especially heroin produced in Afghanistan, to Turkey and Western Europe. Transit countries, however, are also usually consumer countries. This is the case in Iran, where drug addiction, especially among the younger generation, has reached alarming and socially costly levels. According to UN data, 3 per cent of the population over the age of 15 is addicted to heroin. Iran likes to stress its effort in contrasting the influx of drugs from Afghan territory, pointing out that for several years it has been conducting a non-metaphorical “war on drugs” on its Eastern border, paying a heavy price in terms of resources and of hundreds of casualties among its border units.

This is all true, but only part of the story. The untold part of this narrative is that it is impossible to imagine that huge amounts of drugs can cross the vast Iranian territory from its Eastern to its Western border without some sort of complicity not only of Iranian criminals, but also of Iranian officials.

The issue may have another intriguing fallout. The credibility of the alleged Iranian plot in 2011 to kill the Saudi ambassador in Washington has been widely questioned. Yet as some analysts have pointed out, the possibility of a link between the IRGC (responsible for a large part of the anti-drug effort on the Afghan border, and in particular of huge drug seizures) and Mexican drug cartels should not be discounted. In any case, although some individuals may be benefiting from the drug trade, it is most unlikely that the Iranian regime would not try to keep the influx of narcotics within manageable limits. It has to be added that this issue is seen by Iran as an area for possible inclusion. Iran not only works with UNODC, but is also demanding, and in some case obtaining, bilat-

eral cooperation from European countries. Incidentally, the problem here is that Iranian requests tend to be focused on the supply of “hardware” (weapons and surveillance technology) that might be diverted to other uses, while foreign partners are willing, rather, to give their assistance in the area of “software” (know-how; demand reduction; best practices in the administrative and judicial areas).

Economic interests. Iran views Afghanistan as an interesting economic partner, whose value will rise greatly when the country attains some sort of stability. It is in the first place a natural market for Iranian goods, which are already now not only available, but dominant, in Herat. The same can be said about Iranian investment. In many ways the economic dimension of Iranian policy toward Afghanistan resembles Tehran’s view of economic relations with Iraq, also a natural consumer of Iranian goods and a very interesting destination for Iranian investments.

Energy is also an essential aspect of Iran’s economic interest in Afghanistan. In the first place, Afghanistan is an essential “energy hub” located at the center of a triangle of producers (Iran, Qatar, Turkmenistan) and in relation to consumers such as the EU, Turkey, India and China. In particular Afghanistan could provide Iran with a corridor to China, and reduce both countries’ dependence upon the choke point of the Strait of Hormuz. Iran is also clearly investing in the development of the port of Chabahar to provide Afghanistan with an alternative to the Pakistani port of Gwadar as a point of access to the sea

If these are the basic priorities and the basic ingredients of Iran’s Afghan policy, it is possible to ask what – beneath and beyond all the tactics, the ambiguities and the opportunism –for Tehran, would be “the best possible Afghanistan”?

Religion, Minorities & the Neighbors

The first answer would be that historically, Iran has seen Afghan minorities (Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks) as its natural allies. But if that is the case, only a secular Afghan government would exclude a potentially less friendly – and less open to Iranian influence – Pashtun predominance. Paradoxically, therefore, in Afghanistan, the Islamic Republic - being realistically aware of the fact that an Islamic Afghanistan would be Sunni, and not Shi’a - is not in fact in favor of an Islamic regime, but rather, would prefer a secular one.

Religion is thus clearly seen in terms of *realpolitik*, and Afghan Shi’a are considered only in the light of Iranian national interest, rather than religious affinity and solidarity.

By now, given the substantial failure of US and NATO presence, it is clear that the Taliban will not be defeated and will not disappear. On the contrary, they are likely to exert at least a partial share of the power within the Afghan political system. None the less, Tehran still hopes that they will not be able to re-establish a radical “Sunni emirate”, involving repression of minorities, the closing of the country to external influence and economic presence, and – from the point of view of foreign policy – a total alignment with Pakistan.

It has to be said here that Tehran is clearly nostalgic for the times when it was associated with Russia and India in the support of the Northern Alliance. Though the Alliance itself cannot be revived as a main player within the Afghan political system, Iran still hopes to participate in a regional framework capable of guaranteeing at the same time inclusion, for Iran -- always a goal in itself as mentioned above -- and the pursuit of geopolitical and economic Iranian interests. Tehran's hope is that it will be possible to prevent the return of a hard-core, radical, Taliban regime (though the Taliban will have to be in some way accommodated within the configuration of power), and the subsequent closure and isolation of the country or its exclusive placement within a Pakistani sphere of influence.

Iran has always avoided entering into open conflict with Pakistan, in particular due to the need to count on Islamabad's cooperation on the Balochistan question. Facing the threat of violent separatism operating across the border, Tehran cannot afford alienating the Pakistani government whose cooperation it badly needs. Yet, objectively, the competition and the rivalry are there, and it is quite likely that they will become more explicit in the phase that will open after the departure of US/NATO forces. Not only does Iran, in fact, oppose Pakistani hegemony which would lead to its own exclusion from Afghanistan, but it is also aware of the fact that the only hope of keeping Taliban power from becoming overwhelming is counteracting traditional Pakistani support of Pashtun radicalism.

Iranian-Saudi Rivalry: an Afghan Battleground?

Having mentioned the importance of addressing the conflicting goals of Iran and Pakistan in relation to Afghanistan, we should also address the fact that Afghanistan is emerging as the battleground in a growing struggle for influence between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

It is true that Pakistan is not a Saudi puppet, but is pursuing its own goals in Afghanistan, in particular that of ensuring "strategic depth" in its confrontation with India, as well as building a global alliance with Muslim radicalism as a most valuable ally against India, both over the Kashmir issue and as, more widely, as an asymmetrical strategic asset. Yet it is not a secret that Saudi money and Saudi strategic calculations have underpinned Pakistan's support of radical Sunnis in Afghanistan, ever since the years of anti-Soviet *mujahiddin* resistance. The recent radicalization of the hostility and mutual suspicions between Tehran and Riyadh justifies the forecast that, whatever the internal political dynamics in Kabul, Afghanistan will continue to be a battlefield in the not-totally-cold war between the two countries.

Security, economic influence, a regional role: these - rather than Shi'a self-affirmation and solidarity - or the by now totally utopian dreams of expansion of the model of the Iranian Islamic revolution - are therefore the drivers of Iran's Afghan policy.

"Soft Power": The Herat Model?

It is not so difficult to assess what for Iran would be the best possible Afghan "end game" and the tools that it is likely to use to achieve its

goals. It is enough to look at Herat: An overwhelming economic presence, both in trade and investment; the growth of important routes of trans-frontier communication; political influence over local authorities; the active presence of Iranian intelligence.

Last but not least, there is Iranian “soft power” – a phenomenon which, though more visible in Herat, is also significant in Kabul.

Iranian culture is present not only in Dari-speaking areas of Afghanistan, but also in other parts of the country. Many Afghan intellectuals, especially professionals in journalism and publishing, have spent time in Iran as students or more often as refugees, and were educated there. They are not necessarily Shi’a, nor belonging to Dari-speaking minorities, but are now Persian-speaking and thus inevitably open to Iranian influence. Incidentally, it is interesting to note that, as far as popular culture is concerned, today the main influence in Afghanistan is not exerted by neighboring Pakistan but rather by India, whose TV soap operas are the rage in Afghanistan. It has to be seen, of course, to what extent Iranian and Indian cultural influence will survive a return of the Taliban, whether total or partial.

Conclusions

We can thus conclude that Iran’s Afghan policy is not ideological. Nor is it inspired by religious priorities, but aims more at guaranteeing security, increasing political influence, and seizing economic advantage.

It is, in sum, a rather “classical” foreign policy.

Afghanistan offers Iran, and more specifically the Iranian regime, an opportunity for breaking out of its isolation by becoming a part of a regional and global arrangement for its management after ISAF’s pullout.

A rational US and Western policy in general towards Iran so far could be summed up in the following terms: “Iranian *hegemony is not acceptable/ Iranian exclusion is not possible*”. This is also applicable to Afghanistan. Iran could be accepted and accommodated within definite limits and upon certain conditions through a combination of incentives and disincentives, of dialogue and deterrence designed to curb excessive and unacceptable ambitions. This would be a “classical” response based on sound realism.

This apparently simple, almost obvious scenario is however complicated by two elements that are very peculiar and pursuing such policy turns out to be very problematic for Iran’s would-be interlocutors.

(i) Who is “the Regime”?

In the first place, it is extremely difficult – today more than ever – to talk about the foreign policy of the Iranian regime in the presence of deep internal divisions, especially on the very central issue of relations with the US.

If it is true that the goal of normalization with relations with the US (leading to recognition of the regime and thus to achieving the yearned status of “normal country”) is shared by most Iranians and by a significant part of the regime itself, it is also true that part of the regime, in particular the “clerical wing” of which Khamenei is the Supreme Leader (not only in constitutional terms), also fears that normalization with the US and the re-entry of Iran as an accepted member of the international community, would entail not only a loss of identity for the Islamic Republic, but a loss of power for themselves.

The present running feud between Khamenei’s clericalism and Ahmadinejad’s messianic populism is therefore not about theology, but rather about power, and it is evident that normalization with the US would have a huge impact on the configuration of power in Iran. This explains why the Iranian regime today seems to be incapable – to be honest, as incapable as the US was during the Khatami years – to take “yes”, or, to be more precise, “maybe”, as an answer.

(ii) Normalisation through Provocation?

The other peculiar characteristic is that, after the demise of Khatami’s reformist experiment, even those within the regime who are apparently seeking normalization with the Americans go about it in a provocative, counterproductive way.

It seems quite possible that the present tensions between the President and the Rahbar are also due to divergences on foreign policy, with Ahmadinejad and his government more ready to move in the direction of dialogue. The choice by Ahmadinejad of Ali Akbar Salehi as Foreign Minister can hardly be interpreted in a different way: Salehi’s background, his style and his statements unequivocally point in the direction of an attempt to pursue Iran’s national interest by avoiding confrontation and accepting dialogue and compromise. The proof lies in his behavior when he was involved in the nuclear negotiation; in his apologies for the invasion of the British embassy in Tehran last November - (apologies that were bitterly denounced by the radical wing of the regime); and in his attempts to stop the deterioration of relations with Arab countries.

At the same time, the Iranian government pre se – in total and devastating contradiction – does not seem capable of abandoning the rhetoric and the posturing that make dialogue impossible.

From the outrageous Holocaust denial to grotesque UN appearances, Ahmadinejad appears to be bent on supplying arguments to all those who, starting with Israel, are maintaining that there is no possible dialogue with Iran, and that Tehran has to be coerced into giving up its ambitions, both nuclear and in terms of regional power.

Both these aspects, the internal division and the disconnection between possible moderate goals and explicit provocative language, cannot help but impact negatively on the possibility of pursuing a policy of “conditional inclusion” toward Iran. A possibility that, on the other hand, does not seem to have many alternatives, since the idea of regime change is

unrealistic (and the possibility of achieving it through military means is nothing short of wildly irresponsible).

One might have to wait for internal developments, such as the next presidential elections in 2013 or, more hypothetically, the demise of Khamenei and its very problematic replacement.

Change could come with a new President (and other formulas for guaranteeing the survival of the regime), or with the abolition – hinted at by the Supreme Leader – of the Presidency and his replacement with a Prime Minister. Or it could come by the opposite change, i.e. the replacement of the Rahbar (a possibility foreseen by the Constitution) by a collegiate body. Right now the system seems to be stuck, incapable of exiting from a web of mutual vetoes and or of conducting a coherent foreign policy, even in the interest of its own survival.

The disconnection between national security (and national interest) and “regime security” is very deep - so deep, that one might wonder about its political sustainability. How can a regime that is ostensibly responsible for the isolation of the country and is exposing it to serious risks of military confrontation avoid totally losing the consensus of public opinion and that of political, economic and intellectual elites?

The answer is basically twofold. On one hand, the regime can still appeal to the national pride of Iranians, who (whatever their feelings about the regime) deeply resent an isolation that objectively cannot be exclusively attributed to the provocative policy of the Iranian government, but is also the product of an irreconcilable hostility on the part of the United States - as proved in particular by the rebuff of the 2003 Iranian opening.

The ideological dimensions of Iranian foreign policy – in particular the support for radical Arab causes – are hardly popular domestically, and are rather aimed at external consumption.

The nuclear question, on the contrary, is widely perceived as a national, and not a regime issue. In this regard, it is significant to note that the “Green Movement” has come out with a rather intransigent posture on the inalienable right of Iran to a peaceful nuclear industry, including the right to uranium enrichment. It would be a very serious mistake to think that an attack on Iranian nuclear facility would contribute to the internal weakening of the regime. On the contrary, it seems that its most extreme wings might actually be tempted to provoke such an event in the hope that the internal political repercussions would be not dissimilar to the cohesive effect of Saddam Hussain’s attack on Iran in 1980, at a moment of high division and regime fragility.

The second reason is the lack of alternative political proposals.

The “Green Movement”, which was able to mobilize hundreds of thousands of protesters in the streets of Tehran in 2009, has shown itself unable to move beyond a mere rejection of the present regime, towards articulation of a serious political platform, including concrete foreign policy stands and proposals. What can be said, in any case, is that both Iranian anti-regime democrats and the now weakened but still relevant regime reformists agree on the defense of national interest (which they

consider is being harmed by the present regime); and on the pursuit of the recognition of Iran as a country to be reckoned with; and one that cannot/should not be excluded nor isolated.

This underlying consensus, which should be kept in mind when we try to envisage future trends in Iranian foreign policy, is relevant also as far as Iran's Afghan policy is concerned.

In relation to Afghanistan, however, it is possible to say that Iranian inclusion is not for anyone to "allow" or to "deny", but is rather an undeniable fact that, barring the return of a radical Taliban emirate, will be hardly reversible. In the case of Afghanistan, the real alternative, therefore, will not be between inclusion and exclusion, but rather between Iranian conditional inclusion as a "test case" and as a first instance of Iran's normalization of relations with the US and the West (as had seemed possible in the aftermath of the US attack on the Taliban); or whether simply as the continuation of the Herat model; or, at most, a "Herat plus", significant only with reference to Afghanistan and, at best, regionally.

In conclusion, Iran's policy toward Afghanistan - and Iran's role in Afghanistan - should not necessarily be seen by the US and Europe as a complicating factor ("Iran as a spoiler").

Rather, it should be viewed as a possible ground for the search of compromise on the basis of converging interests: preventing a return to a radical Taliban emirate; curbing production and export of drugs; stopping and reversing the flow of refugees; developing the Afghan economy and turning Afghanistan into as an important hub for energy routes and communications.

Certainly, Iranian hegemonic ambitions should be curtailed and contained, and the legitimate concern of Iran's neighbors (all historically afraid of Persian imperial ambitions) should be addressed.

Yet containment does not mean isolation and exclusion, let alone military confrontation. On the contrary, a hard-nosed dialogue with Iran, necessarily implying the recognition of its legitimate interests, could identify significant and mutually beneficial points of compromise and even cooperation.

None the less, given the present political tensions, in particular over the nuclear issue and the January 2012 confrontation over the potential closure of the Strait of Hormuz, right now this does not seem to be a realistic possibility. Yet it is both possible, and indeed necessary, to look ahead and to work on different perspectives, different scenarios and, most important, different policies.