

# Iran-Afghanistan relations

# A dangerous balancing act



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Watching today's western media, it seems that Iran is not only a part of the so called 'Axis of Evil', it's the epicentre of it: being largely portrayed as a state that is an irrational actor, extremely guided by ideology, on track to acquire nuclear weapons by any means. In addition Iran is characterised as a state which is one of the prime supporters of terrorism worldwide, the 'invisible hand' behind all kinds of insurgencies, destabilising not only the Middle East but its South Asian neighbourhood as well. To call its image dubious is an understatement. Be it as it is, such categorisations do not help assess Iran's foreign policy in an objective manner, especially not with regards to Kabul. Furthermore, this depiction distracts from the important questions which should be asked: How far is Tehran willing and able to play either a constructive or destructive role in the stabilisation and reconciliation process in Afghanistan? And is Iran's Afghan policy an outcome of a coherent, comprehensive and rational concept or determined by short-term responses to certain developments? Does the foreign policy change from conciliation to confrontation under the current Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad affect Iran-Afghanistan relations?

## HOW FAR IS

TEHRAN WILLING AND ABLE TO PLAY EITHER A CONSTRUCTIVE OR DESTRUCTIVE ROLE IN THE STABILISATION AND RECONCILIATION PROCESS IN AFGHANISTAN?

Basically one must state, that Iran is increasingly gaining importance in the whole region. Some analysts even argue that Iran is the real beneficiary of the US/NATO military engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan. First, they brushed two major regional adversaries of Shia Teheran aside - the Iraqi Ba'ath and the Afghan Taliban - both Sunni - which were seen as threats to Iran's political and socio-cultural existence. Second, the subsequent power vacuums that were created due to the disastrous post-invasion periods in Afghanistan and Iraq, lead to tremendous difficulties for the US/NATO, thus paving the way for Iran to extend its activities and influence in the respective countries. Being shocked by the pace at which the regime of Saddam Hussein was ousted and Baghdad was captured, Iran's security circles were obviously pleased to observe the limitations of foreign (US) military operational capacities in its sphere of influence. This was only a boost for the self-confidence of Tehran's religious as well as political leaders and strategic thinkers but also for Iran's regional prominence.

Consequently, Iranians continue - despite increasing international pressure and isolation - to actively safeguard their interests in Afghanistan; a phenomenon, which is without doubt justified to a large extent. However, in spite the fact that Teheran's objectives have changed over time as the political landscapes beyond its eastern borders have been in turmoil it is difficult to identify immediate and concrete goals or a clearly defined agenda. Nevertheless a set of core matters determining the bilateral relations between Teheran and Kabul remain resilient. These



cover the respective goals such as stability at the Iranian-Afghan border, a Teheran-friendly government in Afghanistan, pushing back the strong influence of Pakistan and Saudi Arabia in order to prevent an encirclement of Iran by a potential "Sunni wall" (Iraq-Pakistan-Afghanistan) as well as avoiding dominance of its arch-rival, the USA in the region. Having this in mind, Iran is especially focused on ensuring national and regional security, fighting terrorism, preventing the production and trade of narcotics, economic cooperation, and finding a solution for the refugee problem. Most significant for Teheran is the issue of security confronting the country's leadership with a difficult ideational and strategic dilemma. On one side it seeks a stable Afghanistan, which is guaranteed at the moment by a strong presence of foreign troops, but on the other side, the presence of US-troops in its immediate neighbourhood is for obvious reasons a thorn in the sides of Teheran's decision-makers. The likelihood of a long term presence of US

troops and maintenance of bases in Afghanistan casts a shadow on the relations between Kabul and Teheran. Therefore, it is no surprise that on each occasion Iran demands the total withdraw of all foreign troops from Afghanistan. The Ahmadinejad administration is convinced that particularly the presence of US troops only complicates the Afghan scenario and that regional problems have to be solved by the regional countries themselves. Foreign presence would only aggravate the situation. Another area of concern is extremist militancy. Iran is con-

fronted with local and cross-border terrorism such as militant groups operating from bases in Afghanistan and Pakistan, supporting anti-government activities in the Iranian province of Sistan and Baluchestan. Nevertheless, like Pakistan, Iran also gets the blame by several analysts of being ambivalent in its 'war against terrorism'. Although no definite proof for these accusations is made public, there is no doubt that interaction between Tehran and militant outlets like Al-Qaida exist. Unambiguously Iran has its independent agenda when it comes to fighting terrorism. If the regime in Teheran feels threatened by terrorists they act cooperatively especially in regional frameworks. However, it seems that the Iranian strategic establishment is convinced it can gain a strategic advantage if it tries to instrumentalise terrorism, often in order to maintain a balance of power between the different factions in Afghanistan. In this context, combined with having a long history of exercising influence, one can also imagine that

there is periodical, low scale Iranian support for militant oppositional forces, even for the adversarial Taliban in order to show the US that Teheran is able to challenge them in the region at any time. Additionally, the fact that Afghanistan is one of the largest producers of opium and heroin, in other words after the production of narcotics were more or less eliminated, in the last years the country regained the label of being a 'drug economy'. This is creating serious problems for Iran, not only because Iran has the highest rate of opium con-

sumers but also because it suffers from the extensive drug trafficking which uses Iran as a gateway to Middle East and Europe. Security forces for example are permanently involved in violent clashes with drug traffickers, leading to the death of around 4000 officers in the last three decades. Furthermore, police and army are increasingly getting involved in narcotic related corruption.

Another burden of bilateral relations is the issue of Afghan refugees on Iranian territory. Since the beginning of the Soviet Invasion in 1979, Iran has been confronted with a massive influx of refugees. Hosting more than one million of them - some sources claim two million - Afghanistan has one of the greatest refugee populations worldwide without receiving any adequate recognition and support from the international community. In addition, Tehran has to deal with a tremendous amount of economic migrants offering cheap labour, creating domestic tensions between unemployed Iranians and

Afghans. Iran's policy of forced repatriation of the economic migrants leads to additional serious confrontations between Tehran and Kabul. An area of success is doubtless Teheran's economic assistance in western Afghanistan, building massive infrastructure in order to integrate the bordering Afghan provinces into the economic system of Iran. There is a general agreement among analysts that Teheran's primary goal of development activities for Afghanistan is to ensure its own political influence through economic interweaving and to weaken the ties between Kabul and the areas of its western territory. However, Iran is not trying to provoke Kabul too much and applies - at least temporarily - more tactical, conciliatory than confrontational, aggressive rhetoric in order to achieve its major goal, the establishment of establishing a stable Afghanistan which is strong enough to ensure peace and security but also weak enough to give in to Iranian influence.

To sum up, it seems that Iran's policy towards Kabul is rather incoherent and short term orientated, responding to certain political events and trends. Until now Iran did not develop a sustainable, cohesive overall strategy or fundamental doctrine regarding its eastern neighbour. Despite the fact that some Iranian interests conflict with each other, one can state that in general, the country shares numerous common interests with the international community in Afghanistan. A fact which is often overlooked in the light of the Iran-US deadlock created by the nuclear conflict as well as by antagonistic perceptions of liberal democracy and human rights. However, these bilateral tensions seriously hamper a cooperative and collective approach of all actors involved, including significant regional players such as Iran. Subsequently Iran only partly utilises its capacities in playing a constructive role in Afghanistan which would be beneficial for all. Therefore it is in the very own interest of all actors involved to intensify the dialogue with Teheran and include the country in developing a comprehensive regional solution for Afghanistan.

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