

“Understanding Iranian Strategy in Afghanistan”
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While stories of Iranian malfeasance in Iraq increasingly concern U.S. policymakers and permeate U.S. domestic media coverage, Afghanistan is almost as important for Iranian policymakers. While an Iraq free of Iranian influence would pose a challenge to the religious legitimacy of the Iranian leadership, to many Iranians, Afghanistan is even more important than Iraq in terms of Tehran’s historical claim. For Iranian nationalists regardless of religiosity, Afghanistan is Iran’s near-abroad, just as much as Russian nationalists believe they should have predominant influence among the territories of the former Soviet Union. The history of Iran and Afghanistan are intertwined. From an Iranian perspective, Afghan independence is the result only of British interference and an accident of history.

Historical Background

To understand current Iranian strategy in Afghanistan, it is essential to understand Iranian claims to influence. Iranian interest in Afghanistan dates back millennia. What is now Afghanistan was part of the ancient Persian Achaemenid Empire. While the Arab invasion of Iran ended Persian predominance on the Iranian plateau, the Persian Samanid dynasty (819-899) reincorporated Afghanistan as a Persian-ruled domain in the ninth century. The fifteenth century Qara Qoyunlu dynasty leader Jahan Shah (r. 837-872) briefly established Herat as the capital of his Iranian domains, albeit briefly. In the early sixteenth century, the Safavid Shah Tahmasp drove the Uzbeks from Herat for a short time but, by century’s end, Shah Abbas had re-asserted Iranian dominance over the city and all of western Afghanistan. Dominance went both ways. As Safavid power waned in the early eighteenth century, an Afghan commander operating from Herat conquered much of Iran, declared himself Shah, and again established the Afghan city as the capital of domains spread across both countries although again, squabbling among his sons and successors led to the city’s loss.

In the early nineteenth century, the Qajar dynasty ruler Muhammad Shah (r. 1834-1848) sought to reassert Iran’s claim to Herat. He marched on the city in 1837 but the international milieu had changed. British policymakers, believing India to be vulnerable to an overland invasion from Russia, were no longer indifferent to Afghan affairs. They worried that the Iranian Shah might welcome Russian transit and resolved to keep Afghanistan under informal British influence. Under British pressure, Muhammad Shah withdrew his army.

From an Iranian perspective, though, the Afghan issue had less to do with Great Game strategy and more to do with prestige and national security. Most residents of Herat did—and still do—speak Persian. Muhammad Shah had backed down, but both he and his successor Nasir al-Din Shah (r. 1848-1896) did not accept their claim to Herat had lapsed. While the British looked at Herat as the key to India, the Shah viewed the city as the key to Khurasan, Iran’s breadbasket. Without possession of the city and the natural boundaries of its mountains, it became more difficult for Iranian troops to defend

the shrine city of Mashhad and nearby towns from marauding Turkmen tribesmen whom, the Iranian ambassador in Paris claimed, had enslaved more than 150,000 Iranians.¹

The new shah took action. In October 1856, Iranian troops seized Herat. What came next was unprecedented and caught the Iranian government by surprise. Iranian wars had always been fought on land. A couple weeks after Iranian troops raised the Shah's pennant in Herat, British authorities in Bombay dispatched 45 ships carrying almost 6,000 troops. They seized the Iranian port of Bushehr and pushed inland. The Shah sued for peace. In the 1857 Treaty of Paris, the Shah relinquished all claim to Afghanistan and, in return, the British forces withdrew. One of the greatest "what-ifs" of Iranian history involves the timing of the march on Herat: A few months after hostilities ceased, India erupted into full-scale revolt. The British garrison in India had no forces to spare as they struggled to put down the Mutiny, going so far as to ship cannons seized in Iran back to India for use in battle against the Sepoy rebels. Iranian officials at the time quipped that had only Iranian forces invaded Herat a few months later, the British forces would have been too bogged down to respond.² Furthering the humiliation, it was British military engineers who demarcated the border two decades later, when a new dispute arose.³ Resentment and a sense of getting shortchanged by history pervades Iranian education to this day. Elementary school geography text books continue to list Herat (as well as Daghستان, similarly lost in war to a foreign power) as provinces of Iran.

While successive Iranian governments reconciled themselves to the loss of Afghanistan—they have not re-asserted a sovereign claim as they have with Bahrain⁴--Iranian leaders have not remained aloof from Afghan affairs. Throughout much of the twentieth century, common conservative interests muted disputes. Both monarchies faced common enemies and threats from the same social movements. In 1921, they concluded a Treaty of Friendship and, in 1934, they resolved through arbitration—in Afghanistan's favor—a border dispute. Three years later, both monarchies, along with Turkey and Iraq, signed the Saadabad Pact, in which they agreed to respect each other's territorial integrity and refrain from aggression against each other and, two years later, they resolved amicably a water sharing dispute.

Tensions increased markedly with the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini criticized the Afghan government even prior to his return to Tehran. He increased his vitriol as the Soviet-sponsored government consolidated control.⁵ Iran was a full player by proxy in the Afghan civil war, assisting a loose coalition of Persian, Shi'a, and Turkic factions against the Pakistan and Saudi-supported Pushtuns. Tensions between Iran and Afghanistan climaxed after the Taliban take-over and consolidation of much of the country. In 1998, after the Taliban massacred nine Iranian diplomats and intelligence officials, the two countries almost went to war. Nevertheless, Tehran and

¹ "Respecting wishes of the Persian government." Farrukh Khan. Paris, December 26, 1857. FO 60/221.

² 'Abd Allah Mustawfi. *Shahr-i zindigani-yi man ya tarikh-i ijtimai' va idari-yi dawreh-yi qajariyeh (The Town of My Life or the History of Society and Administration of the Qajar Era)*. (Tehran: Kitabfurushi-yi Zavvab, 1964), pp. 85-86.

³ Sir Frederic John Goldsmid and Sir Oliver St. John, *Eastern Persia: An Account of the Journeys of the Persian Boundary Commission, 1870-71-72*. London: Macmillan and Co., 1876.

⁴ Husayn Shariatmadari. "Ahvaz-i Kucheh-i Baghi ("Street Garden Song"), *Kayhan* (Tehran), July 9, 2007, pg. 2.

⁵ Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (Hamid Algar, trans.). *Islam and Revolution*. (London: Keegan Paul International, 1985), pg. 301, 323.

Kabul maintained discreet ties. The 9/11 Commission found the Iranian authorities granted al-Qaeda operatives training in Taliban-controlled territory free passage, including between eight and ten of the 9/11 hijackers.⁶

Iranian Strategy

For Iran, influence in Afghanistan appears to be a zero sum game. While the Iranian government welcomed the Taliban's fall, they were less than sanguine about the actions of Washington to precipitate it. While Iranian and American diplomats cooperated to form a post-Taliban political order,⁷ many Iranian actions run counter to their own commitments and declarations of cooperation. Iranian security services did not adhere to the promises of Iranian diplomats engaging their Western counterparts.

Iranian strategy differs across regions. In Western Afghanistan and Herat, the Iranian government is implementing its Hezbollah, supporting proxies while seeking to monopolize the social service net. After the fall of the Taliban, Tehran dispatched Hasan Kazemi Qomi, a Revolutionary Guards commander who served as the Iranian regime's chief liaison to Hezbollah in Lebanon, as its chief "diplomat" in Herat.⁸ He oversaw distribution of aid and projects ranging from road construction to power generation in the province.⁹

As U.S. forces consolidated control in Afghanistan, Iranian authorities worked to solidify their predominant influence, at least in Western Afghanistan. While the Iranian government contributed personnel to the reconstruction effort, for example, sending Persian-speaking school teachers to Herat, they used the dispatch of such volunteers to provide cover for Revolutionary Guardsmen and intelligence operatives. On March 8, 2002, Afghan commanders intercepted twelve Iranian agents and proxies who were organizing armed resistance among Afghan commanders.¹⁰ Around the same time, the Iranian government's Dari-language radio broadcasting into Afghanistan grew sharply more anti-American,¹¹ and Iranian support for former warlord patron and Herat governor Ismail Khan's resistance to the central government increased.¹² In March 2004, the Afghan National Army had to deploy its forces to Herat to rein in Ismail Khan; more than 100 people died in the ensuing battle. As a consolation, President Hamid Karzai appointed him Minister of Energy.

The Iranian leadership is pragmatic. It does not limit itself to a single coreligionist or ethnic proxy. While it used established clients like Ismail Khan to further its predominance in Western Afghanistan, its outreach extends throughout Afghanistan. That Iranian policymakers now also provide support to their former Taliban enemies should not surprise.

⁶ *9-11 Commission Report* (Washington: The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, July 22, 2004), pp. 169, 240-241.

⁷ James Dobbins. "How to Talk to Iran," *The Washington Post*, July 22, 2007. Pg. B7.

⁸ Ali Nourizadeh. "Iran makes last minute delegation change before US meeting." *Asharq al-Awsat* (London), May 29, 2007.

⁹ "Iran envoy lists Iranian infrastructure projects in Afghan Herat Province." Islamic Republic News Agency, October 27, 2003.

¹⁰ Douglas Jehl. "A Nation Challenged: Outside Influences," *New York Times*, March 9, 2002. Pg. 10.

¹¹ Bill Samii. "Mashhad Broadcasting Changes its Tune." *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) Iran Report*. Vol. 5, No. 21, June 10, 2002.

¹² Bill Samii. "Herat and Iran Strengthen Ties." *RFE/RL Iran Report*, July 8, 2002.

Pragmatism in Practice: Outreach to the Taliban

The Iranian leadership seems to be applying strategies developed in Lebanon and Iraq to Afghanistan. Iranian aggression and support for the Afghan insurgency appear correlated to its success in Iraq. Whereas Iranian officials once were cautious in the face of the proximity of so many American troops, repeated declarations from a bipartisan array of U.S. congressmen and senators has transformed what had been America's greatest strategic asset into a liability. The more U.S. policymakers reflect a desire to withdraw troops, the greater advantage the Islamic Republic can draw from keeping them occupied. Not only does low or medium-level insurgency erode domestic U.S. support for its political leadership, but it also drains resources and constrains future military options. On July 30, 2007, for example, Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki commented that the United States "is not in a position to get into a new military conflict."¹³

The similarities between Iranian policy toward Iraq and Afghanistan are evident in Iranian rhetoric. Mohammad-Ebrahim Taherian, Afghanistan coordinator in the Iranian foreign ministry, cited over 300 development projects—a chief component of the Hezbollah strategy—but then cited a theme common in Iranian pronouncements about Iraq. "While Iran contributes to development plans and security in Afghanistan," he said, "the presence of certain countries in this country has caused insecurity for the Afghan people,"¹⁴ alluding to the allegedly destabilizing impact of the U.S. presence. The rhetoric of former President 'Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani in his statements about Afghanistan also holds eerie parallels to themes of U.S. weakness and loss that Iranian officials earlier projected with regard to the U.S. presence in Iraq. "The U.S. forces have no security in Afghanistan and have failed to materialize their declared objectives in that country," he said in an official weekly sermon, adding, "In Lebanon they had to accept a disgraceful defeat but still try to harm the oppressed movement of Hezbollah."¹⁵

Iraq has become a laboratory. Iranian-supported militias and terrorist groups exploit vulnerabilities in Afghanistan that corollary militias or insurgent groups identify in their attacks on U.S. forces in Iraq. Whereas the Iraqi insurgency was once limited to the periphery of that country, terrorist groups and militias made a conscious decision to take the fight to Baghdad where, arguably, the U.S. presence was strongest. The Taliban now replicate that decision, seeking to move their fight from the mountains along the Pakistani border to Kabul itself.¹⁶

That the Taliban insurgency is gaining ground is undisputed. Whereas in Iraq, Iranian-backed militias exploited different rules-of-engagement between Coalition forces, in Afghanistan, the Taliban are quick to direct attacks on those NATO members like the Swedes and Germans, whose presence is more for political show than military effectiveness. But Taliban resurgence and imitation of successful tactics elsewhere is not proof of Iranian support.

¹³ "Iran rules out US attack." Fars News Agency (Tehran), July 30, 2007.

¹⁴ "Iran for development, security in Afghanistan." IRNA, May 28, 2007.

¹⁵ "Rafsanjani: World should admire Iran's nuclear achievements." IRNA, July 13, 2007.

¹⁶ "Taliban 'shifting focus to Kabul,' BBC News, June 21, 2007. http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/south_asia/6224900.stm

Evidence of active Iranian involvement derives from intercepted Iranian arms shipments to the Taliban,¹⁷ as well as exploitation of captured documents and interrogation of middlemen. Assumptions that such aid and assistance is impossible given the sectarian divide and historical animosity between Iran and the Taliban are misplaced. While U.S. officials like to cite Islamic Republic pragmatism as a reason why Iranian officials could overcome their animosity to the United States and strike a deal, pragmatism can go both ways: Tehran might also strike deals with other historic adversaries to stymie Washington.

The Iranian leadership does not subject its allies to a sectarian litmus test. The Islamic Republic backs Christian Armenia against Shi'a Azerbaijan. The first foreign official whom Khomeini received after the Revolution was Palestinian Liberation Organization chairman Yasir Arafat, at the time a Sunni Marxist. Iranian officials support both Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, both militantly Sunni. Indeed, they founded the latter group. To reach out to the Taliban should not stretch credibility, especially if the goal of such Iranian assistance is more to bog the United States and NATO down and less to see the Taliban reassert dominance over Afghanistan.

Conclusion

Many U.S. diplomats assume that when a state teeters on failure, its neighbors will automatically seek its stability. The Baker-Hamilton Commission, for example, based its policy recommendation to engage Iran over the future of Iraq upon such a supposition. Such assumptions are wrong, though, and suggest a misreading of Iranian strategy that applies not only to Iraq, but to Afghanistan as well. The Iranian regime will accept stability in both Iraq and Afghanistan, but only under its terms. Barring that, Tehran believes controlled instability to be its next best option. Low- and mid-level insurgency not only neutralizes American strength and blocks the consolidation of liberal ideologies which might spread to threaten Iran theocracy, but also provides Iran with greater space to maneuver. For Iran, such a strategy requires not only exploiting historical links to Western Afghanistan, but also forming broader alliances against the U.S. interests and allies in the region, even if this means outreach to the Taliban. It is ironic that, as Iranian authorities prove their pragmatism and replicate strategies in Afghanistan that have worked in Iraq and Lebanon, rigid thinking in the West blinds many policymakers to the extent of possible Iranian subterfuge.

¹⁷ "US: 'Irrefutable' Proof Iran Arms Taliban." CBS News. June 13, 2007.
<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2007/06/13/world/main2921708.shtml>