

# Iran and Afghanistan

## Cross Border Security Challenges, Conflict Management, and Iran-U.S. Relations

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*Ekaterina Stepanova*

*Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI),*

*Institute of World Economy & International Relations (Moscow)*

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Political, security, and humanitarian developments at the intersection of the Middle East, Central Asia, and South Asia are interrelated to such an extent that one issue or country cannot be adequately addressed without looking at every other. In particular, there is growing international concern about the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan, the location of the most intensive armed conflict in the world in 2007 and the second most intensive one in 2008. Insufficient attention, however, has been paid to the negative spillover effects of the Afghan conflict on neighboring states, with the notable exception of Pakistan, and to their role in Afghanistan. Another of Afghanistan's major neighbours, Iran, has been no less heavily and dramatically affected by the mounting instability across the border. The burden placed on Iran by the consequences of the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan has been disproportionately high, compared to the impact on Western powers and stakeholders, and in many ways makes Iran's interest in Afghanistan more genuine and urgent.

At the same time, stalled and highly problematic relations between Iran and the United States have been a major stumbling block on the way to normalization for Afghanistan and the broader region. Ironically, Iran is perhaps the only regime in the region that, surrounded by destabilized and fragile states, unites internal stability, state functionality, and domestic legitimacy with a tradition of successful mediation in regional conflicts in its own neighborhood (from

Tajikistan to Iraq), as well as full respect for Afghanistan's sovereignty and borders. For its part, the United States has mainly focused in its relationship with Iran on the deadlock surrounding issues unrelated to Afghanistan, such as Iran's nuclear program and its policies toward the Middle East and Israel, as well as on Iran's role in the regional competition for influence in Afghanistan.

If the looming prospects for a certain shift in U.S.-Iranian relations begin to be realized, however, that shift will at first not be in relation to these more contentious issues but rather to those on which the parties share at least some common ground. Indeed, Iran's interests in stabilizing the situation in Afghanistan arise from major security challenges that are of concern not only to Iran and Afghanistan, but also to other major actors in the region as well as the United States, other Western actors and institutions, and the broader international community. These interests and challenges include, in order from the least contentious to the most controversial: 1) preventing drug trafficking of Afghan opiates, curbing the Afghan opium economy, and strengthening international counternarcotics efforts in the region; 2) addressing the large-scale Afghan refugee problem and labor migration; and 3) conflict management (including strategies for dealing with Islamist armed opposition groups), peace-building, state-building, and reconstruction in Afghanistan.

All these challenges need to be addressed if Afghanistan, and the region as a whole, is to become more peaceful and stable. All of them require multilateral solutions that will include Iran as a major stakeholder. Meeting them will also require substantive, not only rhetorical, shifts in policy, in particular with regard to Iranian-U.S. relations.

## **Human Security Challenges to Iran Stemming from Afghanistan**

### *Trafficking in Afghan Opiates*

Since the unprecedented effectiveness of the Taliban prohibition on opium cultivation in 2000, Afghanistan has again become the world's largest producer of opiates, with a 95 percent increase in cultivation from 2001 to its 2007 peak. Sixty percent of Afghan opiates are trafficked via Iran, the shortest route to main consumers in Europe and the Middle East. Facing one of the largest drug trafficking problems in the world, Tehran has long emphasized supply reduction and interdiction in its counternarcotics policy: Iran seizes more Afghan opiates and destroys more drug laboratories and cross-border networks working with Afghan opiates than any other state. In this context, the major difference between Afghanistan and Iran is not only the difference between a drug-producing and transit/consumer country, but also between overall degrees of law and order and drug-related corruption (in Iran, suppression dominates, while in Afghanistan, the drug business is heavily protected by various local warlords

and significant segments of the state).

As approximately thirty percent of illicit drugs that enter Iran remain there for domestic consumption, the country has also had to deal with growing drug, especially opiate, abuse, affecting between two and three percent of its population. Most convicts in Iran's prisons are individuals arrested for drug trafficking and trade (over 70,000, making for an internment rate similar to that of the United States) and/or drug abuse.

Iran engages in all types of international counternarcotics cooperation. It engages Afghanistan bilaterally and has already spent approximately one billion dollars on improving physical security at its border with Afghanistan (and Pakistan), building and equipping border posts on both sides of the border, and training Afghan border guards and counternarcotics personnel. The Iranian government is very active in promoting counternarcotics cooperation at the regional level, both through United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime initiatives (such as the first trilateral joint counternarcotics operations along Iran's borders with Afghanistan and Pakistan in March 2009) and through regional mechanisms, including the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) that includes Central Asian states, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Azerbaijan, and Turkey; the Caspian Sea Initiative; and a 2006 agreement with Afghanistan, Pakistan, and China on improving border security and reducing smuggling. Iran also fully participates in multilateral drug control initiatives, such as the Dublin group (a coordination body that includes, among others, the European Union and the United States), the Mini-Dublin group for Southwest Asia, the Paris Pact (an initiative to coordinate border controls and law enforcement along main trafficking routes), and the Nomak project on collection and analysis of information on heroin trafficking in Southwest Asia.

However, given the sheer scale of security, law enforcement, and social problems that Iran has faced as a result of the massive inflow of Afghan opiates, international counternarcotics support to Iran has been very limited and inadequate. Iran has received little support even from the European states that have relations with Iran and where a good deal of opiates trafficked through Iran eventually end up (France, Spain, and the United Kingdom engage in some bilateral cooperation, while the EU provides limited support to the ECO's Drug Control Coordination Unit). Apart from border control, addressing drug abuse is another critical area where multilateral assistance could contribute to more effective – and more comprehensive – approaches, including better integration of treatment and related health and social rehabilitation issues.

### *Refugees and Labor Migration*

While estimates of the drug trafficking and drug abuse situation in the Iran-Afghanistan context are complicated, even less data is available on Afghan refugees and migrants in Iran. While Iran is home to almost 1 million registered

refugees (over 900,000 Afghans and about 55,000 Iraqis), estimates of unregistered refugees range from 1 million to 1.5 million and sometimes higher. While international focus has increasingly shifted towards the growing global totals of the internally displaced, Iran in fact had the second largest number of “international” refugees in the world in 2007. Most Afghan refugees that came to Iran during the civil war and anti-Soviet jihad of the 1980s and Afghanistan’s subsequent internal conflict have either registered or returned. However, Iran is now struggling to cope with new waves of unregistered refugees that have arrived in the past several years. In contrast to Pakistan, where most refugees live in camps, Afghans are dispersed throughout Iran and are relatively integrated into socioeconomic life, mostly as cheap labor. In fact, the borderline between a “refugee” and “labor migrant” in the Afghanistan-Iran context is extremely blurred. Many Afghans migrate repeatedly, moving back and forth between the two countries, depending on economic survival opportunities.

While the influx of cheap Afghan labor provides a significant labor force in sectors such as construction and agriculture, and also has a certain positive effect on the Afghan economy and society via remittances, Iran faces many social problems associated with displacement and migration on such a massive scale. Another dimension of the population displacement between Afghanistan and Iran is the link between mass cross-border population movement and smuggling activities, including the growing *bar dush* (“on the shoulders”) trafficking of illicit drugs through the Northern (Khorasan) route from Afghanistan.

The trilateral UN High Commissioner for Refugees–Iran–Afghanistan voluntary repatriation programme, ongoing since 2001, has only affected registered refugees. Iran’s recently intensified actions to repatriate large numbers of unregistered Afghan refugees have been strongly criticized by international humanitarian organizations and nongovernmental organizations. To date, however, alternative solutions, such as (a) expanding and improving international aid to Iran for dealing with large numbers of refugees and establishing adequate control and regulation of labor migration and (b) finding better ways to address the problem on the Afghan side of the border, by both UN agencies and Afghan authorities, have not received adequate attention.

In addressing these and other human security challenges emanating from and aggravated by the situation in Afghanistan, Iran has become well integrated as a full and active member in relevant international institutions at regional and broader multilateral levels, including international mechanisms involving both EU and U.S. partners. A greater issue has been the inadequacy of international assistance to Iran for addressing problems that are largely not of Iran’s creation and which have negative implications that go beyond it. Another issue is to promote more efficient efforts to reduce the opium economy in Afghanistan and better integrate returning Afghan refugees and migrants in their home country.

## Iran, the United States, and Conflict Management in Afghanistan

Iran is surrounded by areas of active and “frozen” armed conflict, including two of the world’s largest and most deadly armed conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. International media and analysts have paid much attention to Iran’s “meddling” in post-2003 Iraq, while Iranian perspectives on conflict management, peace-building, and reconstruction in Afghanistan are largely overlooked, as is Iran’s past involvement in conflict management and mediation efforts in Central Asia and the Caucasus (Tajikistan, Nagorno-Karabakh) and its recent effective mediation in Iraq (achieving a truce between the Sadrists and the Iraqi government).

Two recent developments that may help bring positive change within the Iran–United States–Afghanistan context are: (a) indications that the new U.S. administration is ready to consider improving relations with Iran and engage it in seeking a peaceful solution for Afghanistan and (b) a gradual shift in the Western focus on Afghanistan from a more ambitious goal of democracy-building to one of maintaining stability and improving the functionality of the state.

A third factor that has been a source of at least tacit understanding between Iran and the United States since the U.S.-led 2001 intervention – (c) their close positions on the Taliban – is more problematic as a basis for potential rapprochement than it might seem. The principal vector of violence and instability in Afghanistan continues to be the armed confrontation between increasingly resurgent Islamist groups, with the largest movement still known as “the Taliban,” and the Afghan Government, U.S. forces, and the NATO International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). The United States and Iran have shared a dislike for the Taliban, but mostly for different reasons, with very few common interests and motivations (such as the desire to counter an extreme version of violent Sunni Islamism).

Iran has been more consistent in its stand against the Taliban than the United States. By the late 1990s, Tehran was increasingly concerned about the consolidation of a regime in a neighbouring state that (a) was *de facto* dominated by one of the most radical brands of Sunni Islamism, (b) was backed by a major regional rival and U.S. ally, Pakistan, and (c) displayed a degree of Pashtu nationalism opposed by Iran’s natural allies in Afghanistan (the Afghan Shia, such as the Hazara people, and the Persian [Dari]-speaking Sunnis, such as the Afghan Tajiks). Iran has gone some way toward upgrading its more narrow policy of the 1980s, which was focused more selectively on the Afghan Shia (especially in Hazarajat), to supporting the establishment of a broad-based government in post-Taliban Afghanistan. Tehran supported the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance even before the U.S.-led intervention, helped secure the

Alliance's support for the intervention, and was one of the first to recognize the Afghan Transitional Government after the fall of the Taliban and to help restart the political process. Unsurprisingly, Iran was irritated by the gradual marginalization of the Northern Alliance leaders and non-Pashtuns in the new Afghan government. Tehran is also suspicious of the idea of talks with the Taliban and sceptical about viewing a piecemeal deal with the Taliban as a panacea for solving Afghanistan's security problems.

By contrast, the United States has shifted its position toward the Taliban several times over the past decade and a half: from seemingly tacit acceptance, or at least benign neglect, of the early expansion of the Pakistan-backed movement (in the hopes that it might be the only force to stabilize Afghanistan), to the gradually tougher policy of the late 1990s, to the post-9/11 military intervention. Given the chronic failure to secure stability in Afghanistan and prevent the resurgence of Taliban-style groups since the mid-2000s, the new U.S. administration has re-emphasized al-Qaeda as the primary target in Afghanistan and Pakistan and has expressed readiness to consider reaching out to all the Taliban with the exception of, in Vice President Joseph Biden's words, the "incurable" five percent. Notwithstanding significant differences between the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, the new "reach-out" policy in Afghanistan appears to be influenced by the U.S. counterinsurgency strategy in Iraq that since 2007 has combined a military surge with a growing reliance on local proxies.

At present, Iran's overall policy on Afghanistan appears to be aimed at a) securing in the long run the withdrawal of U.S. forces; b) keeping the Taliban out of the political process, while otherwise keeping that process broad and inclusive; and c) retaining and strengthening its influence in the west of Afghanistan. However, given Taliban resurgence and its *de facto* control in parts of the country, a deteriorating security situation, and a shift in the U.S. military presence's regional center of gravity from Iraq to Afghanistan, Tehran's first two priorities not only both suffer a setback, but are also increasingly in conflict with one another.

In the short term, Iran appears to have chosen a cautious "wait and see" approach to the combination of the U.S./NATO counterinsurgency campaign against the Islamist insurgents and Washington's gamble with the "moderate" Taliban. At the same time, it will quietly, but persistently, work to compromise the idea of including core Taliban leaders, groups, and networks into the political process and will push for a broader coalition government where its allies from the Western and Northern parts of Afghanistan are less marginalized. This policy would, of course, still rely on the reality of a U.S./NATO military presence and the continuation of counterinsurgency operations against the Taliban in the short- to mid-term. In practical terms, it may even lead Iran to cooperate more efficiently on the ground – if not yet directly with the United States or with NATO, then with individual NATO countries on a bilateral basis (for instance,

by considering additional logistics routes for supplies through Iranian territory).

Iran's more fundamental and longer-term interests, however, may be contradicted by a short-term approach that *de facto* prioritizes counterinsurgency. In the end, Tehran does not want a permanent American security presence or bases in Afghanistan, especially in conjunction with a long-term, if reduced, U.S. military presence in Iraq, in what would likely be perceived in Iran as part of Washington's "encirclement" strategy. This imperative is ultimately more important for Tehran than the domestic situation in Afghanistan and the exact nature of any power-sharing arrangement. A gradual U.S./NATO withdrawal is, of course, unlikely to materialize as long as an Islamist insurgency continues that is impossible to crush by military means and which goes beyond Afghanistan's borders. Indeed, a withdrawal is likely only in the event that a broad peace process firmly takes root. Such a settlement, however, will only be sustainable if it includes not just the key regional and international stakeholders and the Afghan government they back, but all the "veto players" on the ground, including the key Islamist groups.

It may be too early to predict which of these strategic rationales will prevail as the main driver for Iran's approach to the conflict in Afghanistan. Iran has a problem either way: continuing Taliban insurgency means a continuing – and long-term – U.S. and NATO military presence, while fading insurgency and major progress in the peace process may lead to a downscaling of the U.S. presence, but it may also mean the recognition of Taliban elements or affiliated leaders and networks in parts of Afghanistan. Hypothetically, this Afghanistan dilemma can only be avoided in the event of a major improvement in Tehran's relations with the United States, which so far seems unlikely but which would make a U.S. long-term presence in Afghanistan less problematic or even beneficial.

In any case, Tehran's policy will be cautious, multidimensional, and flexible enough to be tailored to any scenario. However, there are grounds to suggest that the second, long-term, imperative, may ultimately be decisive for Iran. Tehran's Afghanistan policy has in part been driven by bilateral and regional security, as well as the sociopolitical implications of conflict and instability on Iran itself. Iran-Afghanistan ties have remained close despite Iran's complicated relations with the United States. In terms of strategic importance, however, Tehran's policy on Afghanistan is overwhelmed by its relations with Washington, the stakes of which are much higher. Ironically, this may make the imperative of genuinely contributing to the stabilization of the country, at a level that would make a large-scale U.S. military presence unnecessary in the long term, a more important priority for Tehran than an uncompromising political stance against the Taliban.

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