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EXERCISE NEW HORIZONS/EXERCICE NOUVEAUX HORIZONS

The role of Iran for the stability of Afghanistan

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ABSTRACT

Since the Islamic revolution of 1979, the role of Iran has been widely discussed. This is done traditionally vis-à-vis Iran's policy towards Israel and the United States (US) and Iran's role as a potential sponsor of terrorism. Most prominently discussed is the struggle over Iran's nuclear capability. These topics overshadow the role of Iran concerning Afghanistan and when Iran is recognized as a factor for Afghan security it is not naturally seen as a potential partner for stability. Nevertheless, Iran is using a variety of instruments to influence its eastern neighbour.

This essay evaluates Iran's policy towards Afghanistan in a global, regional, and a domestic dimension under consideration of historic and religious roots. The recent developments in the US-Iranian relationship permit a cautiously optimistic view on Iran's future role. The antagonism with the United States and the nuclear issue might continue to have a negative impact. Yet, practical measures that make a difference for Afghanistan's stability can potentially establish a pattern of co-operation and trust. This paper shows that Iran is a partner for the stability of Afghanistan and that Western countries should exploit coincidences of national interest. This could contribute to a more positive relationship with Iran that is a decisive factor for the establishment of a safe and secure environment in Afghanistan.

INTRODUCTION

Since the Islamic revolution of 1979, the role of Iran has been widely discussed.¹ This is done traditionally vis-à-vis Iran's policy towards Israel and the United States (US) and Iran's role as a potential sponsor of terrorism. Furthermore, Iran's influence in Iraq has drawn growing attention since 2003 and most prominently discussed is the struggle over Iran's nuclear capability.² All these topics overshadow the role of Iran concerning Afghanistan and when Iran is recognized as a factor for Afghan security it is not naturally seen as a potential partner for stability. With regard to security policy Iran is evaluated predominantly from a western perspective. The eastern dimension, the Iran-Afghanistan relationship, is not attracting broad attention. This is reinforced by the fact that Afghanistan security policy discussions focus on Pakistan. Nevertheless, Iran is using a variety of instruments to influence its eastern neighbour.

This essay will evaluate Iran's policy towards Afghanistan in two parts. First, the historic and religious ties between the two countries and an understanding of the sources of Iranian foreign policy will be established. This will permit an understanding of Iran's view on Afghanistan and will provide an insight into the motives behind practical measures. The second and main part will define Iran's national interest and policy regarding Afghanistan. A threefold approach will use a global, regional, and a domestic dimension in order to identify, categorize and evaluate the areas of concern. These

¹ This essay uses the term "Iran". "Persia" refers to the area of Fars, to Farsi people that make up today 51 % of Iranians and to the Farsi language. Compare Reese Erlich, *The Iran Agenda: The real Story of U.S. Policy and the Middle East Crisis* (Sausalito, CA: PoliPointPress, 2007), 126. Axworthy points out that the people continuously referred to themselves as Iranians, living in Iran. Michael Axworthy, *Empire of the mind. A history of Iran* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), xiii-xiv. Yet, Axworthy and Khanna mostly use "Persia" as the historic term, and "Iran" as the modern term. Parag Khanna, *The second world: empires and influence in the new global order* (New York: Random House, 2008), 227.

² The nuclear question influences the willingness of the international community to cooperate with Iran. Yet, due to space constraints this essay will not elaborate in detail on the nuclear question.

findings will facilitate the assessment of the chances for co-operation with Iran regarding Afghanistan.

This paper will demonstrate that Iran is a potential partner for the stability of Afghanistan and that Western countries should address the pragmatic and realistic strand of Iran's foreign policy in order to exploit coincidences of national interest. This could contribute to a more positive overall relationship with Iran.

PART I –IRAN AND AFGHANISTAN

In order to comprehend Iranian policy towards Afghanistan it is necessary to explain the Iranian self-conception that drives political action. This part begins with a historic section, followed by the evaluation of religion as a factor for the Iranian-Afghan relationship. The third section explains the sources of Iranian foreign policy.

Historic ties

For most of the last 2,500 years today's geographical areas of Iran and Afghanistan belonged to the same sphere of influence.³ Most parts of the Afghan region were for a long time part of Iranian Empires.⁴ These periods provided Afghan lands with

³ For the common history see Michael Rubin, „Understanding Iranian Strategy in Afghanistan,” in *Afghanistan: State and Society, Great Power Politics, and the Way Ahead. Findings from an International Conference* (Copenhagen, Denmark: RAND Corporation, Center for Middle East Public Policy, 2007), 11.

⁴ This was the case during the rule of the Achaemenid (553-330 B.C.), Parthian (247-224 B.C.), Sassanid (224-642), and Safavid (1501-1722) empires and found an end for the time being under Nader Shah (1738-1747). See: Axworthy, *Empire of the mind ...*, the maps on pages 11, 35, 156 and the historic overview in Glenn E. Curtis, *Iran: A country study* (Washington, DC : Library of Congress, Federal Research Division, 2008), xv-xvi. Actually, an Afghan commander once loyal to Nader Shah founded the Afghan Durrani dynasty, so “Afghanistan was founded in the muster lists” of a Persian Shah. *Ibid.*, 166.

Iranian bureaucracy, language and culture, especially in the western region. Moreover, both Iran and Afghanistan were conquered several times by the same invaders.⁵ In these cases Iranian bureaucracy, language and culture proved to be strong enough to survive.

The foreign conquerors adopted elements of Iranian culture and the invaders were slowly assimilated by the Iranians.⁶ Thus, when Iranian dynasties re-conquered Afghan areas, they could build on existing ties.⁷ Furthermore, some periods saw Iran and Afghanistan under the rule of independent regional kingdoms.⁸ Here again, Iranian culture and language was the prevailing and connecting element, and trade and fine arts benefitted. In the middle of the nineteenth century the Iranian attempts to rule over parts of Afghanistan came to an end for the time being. This was caused by the interference of Russia and the British Empire in the 19th century. Both countries successfully extended their sphere of influence at Iran's cost.

⁵ Iran and Afghanistan were under the rule of Alexander the Great and after his death of the Seleucids (323-247), became part of Arab empires (642 until the 8th century), were ruled by Seljuk Turks in the 11th century and were conquered by the Mongols and Timurids in the 13th and 14th century. See: Axworthy, *Empire of the mind* ..., the maps on pages 73, 89, 101, and the historic overview in Curtis, *Iran: A country study* ..., xv-xvi.

⁶ For the continuity of language and culture see: Axworthy, *Empire of the mind* ..., 68. Axworthy emphasizes the "resilience and intellectual power of a small class of Persian scholar-bureaucrats" that were able to "bounce back from crisis after crisis, accommodated to their conquerors, made themselves indispensable again, and eventually reasserted something like control over them." *Ibid.*, 120.

⁷ Iran's ability to reestablish its control over Afghanistan several times is reinforced by the ethnic fragmentation of the country. Khanna describes Afghanistan as a "microcosm of the entire region" where none of the ethnic groups "constitute a majority of the population." This made Afghanistan continuously receptive for cultural, economical, political and military influence by outside powers like Iran especially in the border regions. Khanna, *The second world* ..., 108.

⁸ Examples are the Taherids (821-873), the Saffarids (861-1003), the Samanids (875-999) and the Turkic Ghaznavids in the 10th century. See: Axworthy, *Empire of the mind* ..., 84, the map on page 89 and the historic overview in Curtis, *Iran: A country study* ..., xv.

Finally, Britain forced Iran to limit its rule to lands west of Herat.⁹ Since then, the Iranian eastern border exists basically in the contemporary form. The British actions are seen in Iran by many still as humiliation and the idea of ‘Greater Iran’ – at least in a cultural sense – is an important theme in national thinking.¹⁰

Beneath examples of Iranian architecture and art, the Iranian legacy in modern Afghanistan is primarily the linguistic heritage. The Iranian Dari dialect is spoken today by 60% of the Afghan population, predominantly in the Western and North western provinces.¹¹ As a whole, Iran had significant influence on Afghanistan with the biggest impact being the Afghan western region, where Iranian empires ruled longer and more intensively and consequently could leave a stronger footprint with respect to language, architecture and artistic culture than in other Afghan regions.

⁹ For a detailed description of the “Great Game” and of Iran’s struggle with Russia and Britain in the 19th and 20th century see Axworthy, *Empire of the mind* ..., 187-234 and the historic overview in Curtis, *Iran: A country study* ..., xvi-xviii. Iran’s last attempt to extend its rule to Herat in Western Afghanistan and beyond failed in 1857. Rubin points out, that “from an Iranian perspective, Afghan independence is the result only of British interference and an accident of history. This belief underlies Iranian strategy in Afghanistan.” Rubin, *Understanding Iranian Strategy* ..., 11.

¹⁰ Evidence that Greater Iran is still alive in Iranian minds is provided by Christoph Marcinkowski, *Between Greater Iran and Shi’ite Crescent: Some thoughts on the nature of Iran’s ambitions in the Middle East* (Singapore: S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, 2007), 3. Rubin suggests that Iranians perceive that “Tehran has a legitimate historical claim to Afghanistan. Regardless of religiosity, Iranian nationalists see Afghanistan as part of Iran’s near-abroad.” Rubin, *Understanding Iranian Strategy* ..., 11. This has to be understood in a long term historical context. Iran has currently not “re-asserted a sovereign claim”. Ibid., 12. As the author and Ex CIA operative Baer puts it, “the Iranians are patient. They think in centuries, eras.” Robert Baer, *The devil we know: Dealing with the new Iranian superpower* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2008), 30. Bertram quotes the Professor of Iranian Studies Hamid Dabishi saying that “the manufacture of a solitary national and nationalistic historiography for Iran has been a principal product of a colonial and colonized imagination, falsely resting the pride of a people’s place exclusively in the fabricated idea of a prolonged, uninterrupted, consistent and above all monarchical nation state.” This theme is linked to a sense of inferiority due to Russian, British and American treatment of Iran in the 19th and 20th century. Christoph Bertram, *Rethinking Iran: From confrontation to cooperation* (Paris: European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2008), 17-18.

¹¹ See Axworthy, *Empire of the mind* ..., xiv. The Dari dialect is a variation of Farsi, spoken not only in Afghanistan, but also in Tajikistan. Moreover, the Pakistani/North-Indian dialect Urdu is strongly influenced by Farsi.

Islam and the Shia factor

Iran is among the few Muslim countries where Shiites are in a majority and it is the most populous Shiite dominated country.¹² Iran's self-perception as an important non-Arab Muslim power and as the leading Shiite power draws its legitimacy from history, from the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979 and from the support of 'oppressed' Shiites abroad, in this case this is the Hazara minority in central Afghanistan and Shiites along the Afghan/Iranian border. The Shiite element of foreign policy offers options for Iranian influence, but also areas of conflict with Sunni dominated Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The antagonism between Shiite and Sunni Muslims, as well as Persian and Arab influence, prevents Iran from becoming even more influential in the Islamic world. However, Iran has demonstrated that its position towards the US and Israel offers of a great potential for mobilization among the global Muslim populations. The support of Sunni movements like Hamas has demonstrated flexibility towards the Shiite-Sunni question, when other strategic imperatives override the religious schism. Whereas Iran favoured the export of the Islamic revolution in the early years after 1979, Iran is today using Islam and the Shia factor in the context of a pragmatic national agenda.¹³

¹² The global Shiites are in a minority position of 10 % among a 90 % Sunni majority. Iran has a 89 % Shia/ 9 % Sunni population. See CIA Worldfactbook and Curtis, *Iran: A country study* ...,118-128.

¹³ Amin Saikal argues that the US policy in the region has created "favorable strategic opportunities for the Iranian regime and Shiite Islam to become more assertive than ever before." He mentions an "Iran-led Shiite strategic entity" that includes parts of Afghanistan. Jerrold D. Green, *Understanding Iran* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2009), 103. Nasr sees the opportunity for Shi'ism to "once again become a regional force" Vali Nasr, "Regional Implications of Shi'a Revival in Iraq", The Center for Strategic and International Studies and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, *The Washington Quarterly*, (Summer 2004), 18. Nasr points out that a stable balance between Sunni and Shia is key to regional stability. *Ibid.*, 21. However, Rubin points out that Iran is a flexible actor and "does not limit itself to a single coreligionist or ethnic proxy." Rubin, *Understanding Iranian Strategy* ..., 14. For an Iranian perspective see Dr. Kayhan Barzegar, *The Shia Factor in Iran's Foreign Policy*. Iran Foreign Policy Department/ Middle East and Persian Gulf Studies Group, November 2008.

Sources of Iranian foreign policy

The term ‘Islamic Republic of Iran’ symbolizes the self-image that inspires Iranian political concepts regarding Afghanistan. The element ‘Iran’ refers to a statehood that draws legitimacy from history. This theme points to Iranian nationalism that relies on cultural heritage. The element ‘Islamic’ adds the legacy of the Islamic revolution and emphasises a government system with theocratic elements. Moreover, the ‘Republican’ element creates a political duality that causes semi-free elected leaders and bodies to compete in security and foreign policy issues with unelected theocratic figures and entities.¹⁴

It would be simplistic to argue that nationalistic, theocratic and republican elements with competing agendas struggle to influence Afghanistan. Instead, it is more precise to argue that conservatives, pragmatists and reformers compete within a common political and social framework that calls for the consideration of national and religious feelings and the interests of domestic voters. Consequently, the following evaluation is based on the idea that the Iranian national agenda is influenced by history, religion and domestic social and economic interests.¹⁵ This causes a high degree of complexity concerning Iranian foreign policy towards Afghanistan, but at the same time it opens areas of cooperation with Western nations.

¹⁴ Khanna speaks of a “parallel system of dual government”, designed to “reconcile Islamic theocracy and republican statehood.” Khanna, *The second world ...*, 229.

¹⁵ The idea of a “transformation of Iranian foreign policy to one that is driven by national interest calculation” is emphasized by Alidad Mafinezam, *Iran and its place among nations* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2008), 127. Mafinezam sees a “modern foreign policy apparatus” and changes in the international environment towards multipolarity that give a regional power Iran “a chance to create a balance of power” in its sphere of influence. Baer describes Iran “as a rational actor, coldly and methodically pursuing its national interest.” Baer, *The devil we know ...*, 4. More complex, Green characterizes Iranian political processes as “collective action and consensus in a multipolar decision making structure”, influenced by “factionalism”, and a mixture of “dogmatism and opportunism”. Green, *Understanding Iran ...*, 5.

PART II – IRAN’S INTERESTS AND AREAS FOR COOPERATION

Based on the background provided in the first part, Iran’s policies towards Afghanistan are laid out in order to identify areas for co-operation. This is done by using a global and a regional dimension in the first two sections. A detailed third section will assess Iranian domestic issues linked to Afghanistan.

The global dimension

Iran’s Afghanistan policy is strongly influenced by its relationship with the US. This section will evaluate this factor first and link it to potential Iranian support for Afghan insurgents. Moreover, recent international developments concerning the US/Iran/Afghanistan complex will be dealt with.

The Iran-US history is dominated by a series of painful experiences. The US support for the coup against Iranian Prime Minister Mossadeq in 1953, the hostage crisis in the US embassy in Teheran in 1979/1980, the US support for Iraq in the war with Iran and Iranian support for movements like Hezbollah and its position towards Israel has created a legacy of antagonism and mistrust.¹⁶ Whereas Iran feels surrounded by US forces in the region, the US is suspicious about possible Iranian support for the

¹⁶ In 2000 Secretary of State Albright apologized for US support of the 1953 coup and for support of Iraq in the war against Iran. Because current problems in US-Iranian relationships were not addressed and Teheran reacted indifferently, a further dialogue did not start. Baer, *The devil we know ...*, 238-239.

insurgencies in Afghanistan and, until recently, in Iraq.¹⁷ Iran seeks to cooperate with Russia, China and India in order to balance US influence in the region.¹⁸

US President Obama stated after his inauguration that he is ready for talks with Iran on a broad variety of issues and in his recent video message he appealed to Iran's national feelings by mentioning its historic and cultural background.¹⁹ In doing so he indicated the readiness to start consultations on a level that respects Iran as a nation among equals.²⁰ Obama's initiative parallels a development in which the US shift resources from Iraq towards Afghanistan. The US issued its new Afghanistan strategy in March 2009, and the international community has reviewed its approach towards the region, too.²¹ The future development in the US/Iranian relationship will decisively impact options for cooperation with Iran on the Afghanistan issue.

¹⁷ In May 2007 the US and Iran held official negotiations over Iraq. This was a diplomatic breakthrough after 27 years of frozen relationship. The two sides agreed to work for "the emergence of a stable, democratic and federal Iraq". Mafinezam: *Iran and its place ...*, 128. See also Baer, *The devil we know ...*, 234. The agreement that recognized Iran's role for the stability of Iraq could serve as a model for US-Iranian talks on Afghanistan. Reese Ehrlich quotes a former CIA official saying that "among the parallel interest are overall stability in their neck of the woods." Erlich, *The Iran Agenda ...*, 96.

¹⁸ For a detailed description of "Iran's eastward drift" see Mafinezam: *Iran and its place ...*, 49-54. Mafinezam illustrates how Iran is increasingly oriented to China, India and Russia in order to balance the lack of western demand for its export goods and the lack of western investment. China is listed as Iran's largest trading partner whereas Russia provides arms and technology. Referring to the "Great Game", the struggle between Russia and Britain for influence and dominance over central Asia in the 19th and 20th century, Khanna puts the trend of Iran's growing Eastern connectedness into the context of a "new Great Game" in order to control "crucial east-west and north-south crossroads of the new Silk Road". Khanna, *The second world ...*, 109. Khanna sees China as the power that is "winning the new Great game", what makes it a partner of key importance for Iran *Ibid.*, 115.

¹⁹ See: Alan Cowell, *In a Video Appeal to Iran, Obama offers a 'New Day'*, *New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/21/world/middleeast/21iran.html?hp>, March 20, 2009.

²⁰ Official reactions might be influenced by the upcoming presidential elections in Iran in June.

²¹ The revised US strategy includes additional financial and military resources and increasing efforts to train the Afghan police. The new strategy understands the Afghanistan/Pakistan complex as a interrelated challenge. See US Whitehouse, *White Paper of the Interagency Policy Group's Report on U.S. Policy toward Afghanistan and Pakistan*, http://www.whitehouse.gov/assets/documents/Afghanistan-Pakistan_White_Paper.pdf, Published March 2009.

A sensitive issue with respect to Iran's role in Afghanistan is the question whether Iran supports the Taliban or Al-Qaida. Until 2001, Iran backed the Northern Alliance and almost went to war against the Taliban.²² The 2001/2002 period can be seen as evidence that Iran does not favour a radical Sunni regime in its neighborhood.²³ Nevertheless, Iran is still suspected to serve as a safe haven for insurgents and to ship weapons to Afghan militants.²⁴ This could serve Iran to weaken the international coalition, especially the US, in return for pressure regarding Iran's nuclear ambitions. Consequently, progress with respect to the nuclear question would certainly minimize Iranian motivation to support insurgents in Afghanistan. Iran could even use its influence to promote talks between the

²² Main reasons were the atrocities against Shiites in Mazar-i Sharif and the killing of Iranian diplomats. Bamiyan see Nasr, *Regional Implications* ..., 12. A 250.000 strong Iranian force that was mobilized at the border to Afghanistan in 1998. Baer reports, that Iran's National Security council had already decided to capture Herat in Western Afghanistan. Baer, *The devil we know* ..., 131. In its support of the Northern Alliance Iran found itself allied with Russia and India. Baer calls the Northern Alliance "an Iranian proxy." *Ibid.*, 258. As the former US representative to the Afghan opposition James F. Dobbins mentions, the US joined "an existing coalition that had been trying to overthrow the Taliban for much of a decade". Green, *Understanding Iran* ..., 66.

²³ The short period in 2001/2002 until the "axis of evil" State of the Union address of US president Bush in January 2002 offered the opportunity for cooperation with Iran on Afghanistan. See Axworthy, *Empire of the mind* ..., 284. The then US representative at the 2001 Afghanistan conference in Bonn Dobbins recalls that Iran played a constructive role. It was Iran that proposed to include the term "democracy" as well as an Afghan commitment to the fight against terrorism in the Bonn declaration. Moreover, Iran convinced the Northern Alliance to agree to a broad and fair representation of all Afghan regions in the government. According to Dobbins, Iran was even proposing a joint US/Iranian effort to train Afghan forces, a proposal overtaken by events and never responded by the US under the impression of the "axis of evil" speech. Green, *Understanding Iran* ..., 67-69. Reese Erlich also mentions the prospect of a broad US-Iranian cooperation in 2001/2002 based on Iran's constructive role in the Bonn talks, a possibility "closed off" by the Bush Administration. Erlich, *The Iran Agenda* ..., 72.

²⁴ According to Rubin, "the 9/11 Commission found that the Iranian authorities granted free passage to al Qaeda operatives training in Taliban-controlled territory, including between eight and ten of the 9/11 hijackers." Moreover, "on March 8, 2002, Afghan commanders intercepted 12 Iranian agents and proxies who were organizing armed resistance among Afghan commanders." Rubin, *Understanding Iranian Strategy* ..., 13. Rubin further reports "intercepted Iranian arms shipments to the Taliban." *Ibid.*, 15. Bennett reports "mortars, plastic explosives and explosively formed penetrators." Brian Bennett, *Iran Raises the Heat in Afghanistan*. Time, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1716579,00.html>, Feb. 22, 2008.

US and its partners with ‘moderate’ Taliban.²⁵ Iranian support for radical Sunnis would compete with other issues on Iran’s national agenda as the regional and domestic sections will reveal. Yet, as long as the US-Iranian relationship is tense, Iran will keep all options to counter US influence.²⁶

The year 2009 could start a broader and more sustained collaboration between Iran and the international community than in the short cooperative period of 2001/2002. A variety of initiatives and statements indicate a shift towards an inclusion of Iran in all Afghan matters. In February the NATO Secretary General mentioned Iran as a potential partner concerning Afghanistan. In March, the Presidents of Afghanistan and Pakistan travelled to Teheran in order to seek Iran’s support with respect to a variety of common challenges.²⁷ The summit of the regional Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) in Dubai on March 13 saw further initiatives with respect to Afghanistan.²⁸

A series of Afghanistan initiatives started with the conference of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) the 27th of March, Iran took part as an observer.²⁹ This meeting was followed by an UN-sponsored Afghanistan conference in The Hague on

²⁵ Yet, this is currently not favored by Iran. Interesting enough Iran promotes at least publicly a strategy of no compromise with respect to the Taliban. Erlich emphasizes that Iran “strongly opposes Sunni groups such as Al Qaeda and the Taliban.” Erlich, *The Iran Agenda* ..., 96.

²⁶ Rubin warns, Iran could always fall back to a cooperation with the Taliban: “Pragmatism can go both ways: Tehran might also strike deals with other historic adversaries to stymie Washington.” Rubin, *Understanding Iranian Strategy* ..., 15.

²⁷ President Karzai repeatedly welcomed Iran’s supportive role.

²⁸ Here, Iran took over the ECO presidency.

²⁹ Iran seeks full membership status of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, a regional grouping set up in 1996 as an alternative to NATO that would allow Russia and China to counter US influence in Asia. Reportedly, Iran will not be offered full membership in 2009. US Deputy Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs Patrick Moon attended the SCO conference in Moscow as an observer. See Mafinezam: *Iran and its place* ..., 49-52, for an evaluation of the SCO as a tool for Iran to escape international isolation. The readiness of nations like China and India to accept Iran as a partner among equals is linked to the strategic importance of Iran as oil and gas supplier. Khanna sees the SCO as element of the “new Great Game”. Khanna, *The second world* ..., 109.

March 31 with Iranian participation. A NATO-conference in March has discussed Afghanistan and the NATO-summit in April served to further adapt the alliances approach to the region. After the Iranian Presidential election in June, a delegation from Teheran has been invited to Trieste to attend the G-8 meeting on Afghanistan. Finally, the Presidential elections in Afghanistan in August will once more direct the international focus towards the stability of the region.

As a whole, the evaluation of the global dimension shows that the current development offers a variety of opportunities for fruitful consultation. The chances for collaboration are significantly influenced by the future US-Iranian relationship. The latter has a significant impact on the likelihood of potential Iranian support for the Taliban. Economic and regional security initiatives might open doors to practical partnership. The need for mutual assistance will become even more evident through the following assessment of the regional and the domestic dimension.

The regional dimension

Afghanistan shares a 900 km common border with Iran and is located in a central position between Iran, Pakistan and Central Asia. Consequently, Iran, as a self-perceived leading power in the region, is naturally interested in an influential position regarding Afghanistan. To this end, Iran follows several interrelated strands of engagement. It seeks to tie western Afghanistan closer to Iran, it supports the Shia minority in central Afghanistan, it tries to influence the Afghan government and it aims at a containment of Sunni Pakistan and of Sunni radical elements in the region.

Iran understands the western part of Afghanistan, especially the Afghan provinces of Herat and Farah, as within its sphere of influence. The Farsi dialect and a Shia minority makes the border region receptive for Iranian influence.³⁰ While the region is not well connected to Kabul, Teheran seeks continuously to strengthen its links to western Afghanistan. Most prominently, regional stakeholders like the West Afghan leader Ismael Khan in Herat were backed by Iran in the fight against the Soviet occupation and the Taliban and were further supported after 2001.³¹

Iranian economic projects promote cross border trade. The Herat region is the most prosperous area in Afghanistan. The business with Iran causes significant tax revenues that allow the provincial government to act financially independent from Kabul.³² This is reinforced by the fact that a significant share of Iranian support for

³⁰ For the historic relevance of Herat as “the key to Khurasan, Iran’s breadbasket” and as important position for the defence “of the shrine city of Mashhad and nearby towns” see Rubin, *Understanding Iranian Strategy* ..., 11. Herat and Farah are home to a significant Shia minority of 40% A big part of this group are Hazara that fled from other parts of Afghanistan. The Farsi dialect is the regional language. Differently, the south western Afghan province of Nimruz is linked to Iran through the Baluchis of Sunni religion that are ethnically linked to the Baluchi tribes across the border in Iran and Pakistan. See for example Baer, who mentions a 40% Shia minority in the Herat province. Baer, *The devil we know* ..., 131.

³¹ Khan, who escaped across the border to Iran if under pressure in Afghanistan, is the best known example of Iranian links to Afghan leaders. For a detailed background see Thomas H. Johnson, *Ismael Khan, Herat, and Iranian Influence*. Center for Contemporary Conflict, Strategic Insights, Volume III, Issue 7 (July 2004). US diplomat Dobbin reports that Iran ensured that Khan supported the 2001 Bonn agreement on the composition of the new Afghan government. The Iranian foreign minister “brought him to Kabul just to make sure no one doubted that he was going to support the conclusion.” Green, *Understanding Iran* ..., 67. In 2004, when NATO “engineered the removal of Herat’s longtime governor because of its ties to Iran” (Baer, *The devil we know* ..., 131), this was aimed at strengthening Kabul’s link to the western province. The removal was accompanied by fighting between forces loyal to Khan and units that followed Karzai’s orders and caused the death of Khan’s son, the then Afghan civil aviation minister. For this episode see Rubin, *Understanding Iranian Strategy* ..., 14, and Amin Tarzi, *Karzai turns warlord into potential ally*. <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1056955.html>, January 19, 2005.

³² Revenues from customs form the biggest part of the provincial government’s income. This money stays in the region, “unless Kabul requests that funds be transferred”. Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit and the World Bank. *A Guide to Government in Afghanistan. Case Study: Herat Province*, <http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/APCITY/UNPAN018203.pdf>, March 2004, 1-2.

Afghan development is invested in the Herat province.³³ Moreover, Iran backed groups support the local education and health care systems.³⁴ NATO and its allies certainly have an interest in economic development in western Afghanistan, as long as it does not come at the cost of disconnecting the region from Kabul.³⁵

Infrastructure initiatives foster the connection to Iran, too. Herat as the second largest city in Afghanistan is an important regional transport hub.³⁶ Rail and highway projects attempts to link the area to the Iranian transport network, the same is envisioned with respect to electricity and communication.³⁷ Furthermore, Iran offers Afghanistan access to sea trade through Iranian ports. Especially the Iranian transport initiatives are of interest for NATO. The instability in Pakistan and the dependency on cooperation with

³³ At the Tokyo donor conference for Afghanistan in January 2002, Iran emerged as a major donor with \$500 million assistance compared to \$290 million from the US. This was according to US diplomat Dobbins “a staggering amount for a non-first-world country and was by far the largest of any of the non-OECD countries”. Green, *Understanding Iran ...*, 68. See also Erlich, *The Iran Agenda ...*, 72. Erlich points out “the largest amount offered from a third world country”.

³⁴ This is a pattern that is criticized by some sources as comparable to the strategy of Hezbollah in Lebanon. Rubin reports, that beneath sending Farsi speaking teachers, “the Iranian government is implementing its Hezbollah, supporting proxies while seeking to monopolize the social service net.” Rubin, *Understanding Iranian Strategy ...*, 13. For example, Tehran dispatched a Revolutionary Guard commander with Hezbollah experience to Herat. He was responsible for the “distribution of aid and projects ranging from road construction to power generation.” *Ibid.* For the role of the Revolutionary Guard in politics and economy see Green, *Understanding Iran ...*, 10-15.

³⁵ Baer speaks of a vacuum in West Afghanistan that occurred after the 2001 destruction of the Taliban regime. This allows Iran “to annex it economically”. Baer, *The devil we know ...*, 131. Baer further describes a city of Herat where “the stores are filled with Iranian goods, the gasoline is from Iran, and the preferred currency is the Iranian rial.”

³⁶ Herat is at the crossroads of connections to Iran, Turkmenistan, Mazar-i-Sharif, Kabul and Kandahar. An example of the strategic significance of road projects in the region is given by Khanna. He mentions Chinese efforts to “take a free ride on NATO’s military presence to underbid on sensitive road projects and large construction contracts along the resurrected routes from Kabul to Herat”. He sees behind that the Chinese aim of “safe overland routes across the ‘Tajik belt’ to Iran” that is met halfway through Iranian “investment in infrastructure projects.” Khanna, *The second world ...*, 110.

³⁷ According to Rubin, Western Afghanistan has become an “extension of Iran’s electrical grid rather than a cohesive part of the Afghanistan national grid. Likewise, Iranian transportation assistance favors road and even railroad projects that link Herat to the major cities of eastern Iran rather than major Afghan centers.” Rubin, *Understanding Iranian Strategy ...*, 14. For the Iranian view on linking Afghanistan to Iranian infrastructure see Ameri Saghafi Nasser, *America needs Iran in Afghanistan*, Iran Foreign Policy Department, February 2009.

Russia and Central Asian nations have recently increased difficulties to resupply forces in Afghanistan. Routes through Iran into West Afghanistan could offer an alternative for NATO's strategic transport.³⁸

In the energy sector, Iran seeks to foster gas and oil pipeline projects in the region. Whereas one pipeline project favoured by Teheran would connect Iran directly with Pakistan, there is the threat of being bypassed by a pipeline from Central Asia via Afghanistan to Pakistan. This would supply Pakistan directly without Iranian involvement. Yet, the potential routing of such a pipeline through Herat still enables Iran to influence the project.³⁹ Whatever pipeline becomes reality, Iranian involvement would balance the Russian monopoly on energy resource distribution in Central Asia and give Iran a bargaining chip regarding Pakistan. Yet, Iranian interest in pipelines to the East are an incentive for Iran to contribute to a stable environment in the region.⁴⁰

³⁸ Actually, first talks to facilitate supply through Iran are already under way. Yet, this is facilitated by private contractors that look for reliable and cost effective transport routes. Regarding recent initiatives see Stephan Löwenstein, *Private Versorger verhandeln mit Iran über Transit. Auch Partner der Bundeswehr für den Afghanistan-Einsatz / "Zur Entlastung vorhandener Strecken"*, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, March 30, 2009. For Russia's role in transport networks see Elke Windisch, *An Russland scheint nun kein Weg mehr vorbeizuführen*, Stuttgarter Zeitung, February 13, 2008.

³⁹ "Whatever route Pakistan chooses, Iran intends to control it. Iran believes it must." Baer, *The devil we know ...*, 132. Interestingly, the former governor of Herat, Ismail Khan, was appointed energy minister in Kabul after being removed by Karzai from his provincial position. This deal potentially enables Iranian influence in this important portfolio, as Baer points out. *Ibid.*, 131. Compare also Rubin, *Understanding Iranian Strategy ...*, 14.

⁴⁰ With respect to the pipeline project see Mafinezam: *Iran and its place ...*, 53 and 78-79. The readiness of China and India to accept Iran as a partner is linked to the strategic importance of Iran as oil and gas supplier. A 2.600 km gas pipeline to the East to Pakistan and further to India is a high priority for Iran and would feed the Pakistani and Indian need for energy. Moreover, it would be a significant push forward for Iran's regional ambitions, if Teheran could broker the "estimated \$7 billion project" of a "peace pipeline" with an unprecedented common Iranian/Indian/Pakistan funding. Compare: Mafinezam: *Iran and its place ...*, 53, 79. Furthermore, China has significantly invested in Pakistani Baluchistan, with a "deepwater port and oil refinery under construction" that turns Gwadar at the Arabian sea into "a world class energy hub". Khanna, *The second world ...*, 113. This highlights that Iran is competing with Pakistan for Chinese investments and needs stable conditions in the Iran/Afghan/Pakistan triangle to attract further investment. For Russia's role in energy distribution networks see Windisch, *An Russland ...*.

Whereas the western region of Afghanistan is linked to Iran through geography, culture and a Shia minority, central Afghanistan also has ties to Teheran. The Hazara in central Afghanistan are predominantly Shia and form the biggest part of Afghan Shiites. The Hazara people have experienced a history of atrocities and eviction. Especially the 19th century campaigns against the Hazara caused their deportation from several Afghan regions and reduced the Hazara to a minority in the Hazarat in central Afghanistan.⁴¹ As a matter of international and domestic credibility, Iran backs the Hazara people in order to underline its role as a protector of Shiites.

After the Soviet intervention in 1979 Iran initially supported the effort of a broad Hazara coalition against the Soviet backed regime in Kabul.⁴² After this was established, Teheran encouraged Islamic Hazara factions to eliminate all Hazara elements that did not favour an Islamic revolution.⁴³ After the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, Teheran supported a Tadjik and Sunni dominated Kabul government, even when Hazara factions were in opposition to it. Later Iran welcomed the revival and re-unification of the Hazara resistance, this time against the Taliban regime.⁴⁴ In 1998 the atrocities of Talib forces against Shiite Hazara lead to the Iranian show of force along the border. Today, Teheran is continuously supportive of Hazara concerns.

⁴¹ In 2008 there were about 2.8 million Dari speaking Hazaras in Afghanistan. They were “once the largest Afghan ethnic group”. Minority Rights Group International, *World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples - Afghanistan: Hazaras*, 2008. Online. UNHCR Refworld, <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/49749d693d.html> [accessed 19 March 2009]. Half were killed in 1893. Many fled to Iran or to the border region.

⁴² The Soviet intervention happened simultaneously with the Revolution in Iran. The actions in support of the Hazara paralleled patterns that of the Islamic revolution in Iran itself. See Hafizullah Emadi, *Hazaras during the National Liberation War/ Political Transformation of the Shiite Movement, 1990s*, Hazara House, <http://boozers.fortunecity.com/jerusalem/47/index.html> [accessed 19 March 2009].

⁴³ This mirrors tactics in Teheran after 1979 against groupings that were initially allies against the Shah. *Ibid.* For Iranian/ Shia strategy in the 1960's, 70's and 80's see Nasr, *Regional Implications* ..., 9.

⁴⁴ See: See Hafizullah, *Hazaras*

As a whole, the Iranian Hazara policy shows a non-dogmatic approach. Hazara concerns are weighed with other Iranian national interests like the periodical support for a central government in Kabul.⁴⁵ The international coalition in Afghanistan has certainly an interest in the protection of ethnical and religious minorities like the Hazara and in regional development in central Afghanistan. As long as the Iranian Hazara policy does not weaken the central government in Kabul and does not support radical Shiite factions, there is room for productive consultation with Teheran on the Hazara question.

With respect to the government in Kabul, Teheran is not unhappy with the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan that includes important religious elements. Shia groups and other Iran friendly elements guarantee Iranian influence in Kabul. This is illustrated by Shia or Iranian friendly Cabinet Ministers. Yet, influencing western Afghanistan and the Hazara population in central Afghanistan are not per se in harmony with a strategy that strengthens Kabul. If Teheran favors a functioning government in Kabul over a weak state, it has to carefully balance its engagement. Yet, a NATO strategy of strong regional development combined with a central government that owns the security monopoly faces the same challenge. Thus, cooperation with Teheran could help controlling centrifugal forces that threaten the cohesion of Afghan statehood.

Another regional challenge for Iran is the fragile nuclear power Pakistan. An extremist Sunni regime as a neighbor is not in Iran's interest, be it in Kabul or in Islamabad itself. Iran shares with NATO the common interest that neither Pakistan nor Afghanistan falls into the hands of radical Islamists.⁴⁶ The relationship between Teheran

⁴⁵ There is no unconditional support for the Hazara at any cost. Yet, Iran aimed since the Bonn talks in 2001 at a fair representation of Hazara interests in Kabul within the new Afghan government.

⁴⁶ Consequently, the new US regional strategy clearly links Afghanistan's fate to Pakistan. See US Whitehouse, *White Paper*

and Kabul was recently more harmonious than between Kabul and Islamabad.⁴⁷ Iran cannot replace Pakistan as a partner for stability in Afghanistan, but it is indispensable for a more coherent regional security strategy including a balance of power between Shiites and Sunni in the region.⁴⁸

Iran pursues a regional strategy that strengthens its influence in western Afghanistan, enables economic development, maintains support for the Shia/ Hazara minority, contains the influence of Pakistan and Sunni Islam and influences politics in Kabul. In the long run, and if not obstructed by the relationship with the US, Iran can follow a pragmatic policy in order to become an indispensable factor in Afghan affairs. If addressed by NATO in a flexible manner, the Iranian policy with respect to Afghanistan could be channeled in a direction that enhances regional stability.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ See for example: Aneja Atul, *Zardari, Karzai for Iran role in Afghanistan*, The Hindu, Online edition of India's National Newspaper, <http://www.hindu.com/2009/03/11/stories/2009031154551500.htm>, March 11, 2009.

⁴⁸ Only with Iran a Shiite-Sunni balance can be achieved. Pakistan and India have a Shiite population of over 30 million each. For a description of the deadly Sunni-Shia clashes in Pakistan in the 1980's and 90's see Nasr, *Regional Implications ...*, 11-12. Nasr links these events to Pakistani support for "Sunni militancy as a part of its regional policy in Afghanistan and Kashmir." *Ibid.*, 12. Baer points out, that Pakistan fears Iranian influence on its Shiites and Iranian cooperation with India. Pakistan supported over decades Sunni extremists to block Iranian as well as Indian influence and in return is now domestically threatened by Sunni radicals. Baer, *The devil we know ...*, 123.

⁴⁹ Bertram states that "Iran has for a while now ceased to be an ideological trouble maker and established itself as a *status quo* power, not a rogue state." Bertram, *Rethinking Iran ...*, 9. Against Iran, as pointed out by Bertram, "it will be difficult, if not impossible to establish law and order on a robust footing should Iran wish to prevent that". *Ibid.*, 37

The domestic dimension

Afghanistan is listed high on the Failed States Index and is among the 10 weakest nations worldwide.⁵⁰ Iran's stability is challenged by the import of problems from its weaker neighbor Afghanistan. The most relevant examples are refugees and migration, the drug issue and Iran's internal minority situation.

Population movements between Afghanistan and Iran have a long history.⁵¹ Not only were people forced by violent conflicts to flee, they were attracted by better economic conditions in Iran, too. In the 1960's and 70's hundreds of thousands migrated to Iran to find employment.⁵² In the 1980's, it was the insurgency against the Soviets and in the early 90's, the Afghan civil war that drove up to 2 million people across the border. The next wave fled under the Taliban from 1994 to 2001. The differentiation between economic migrants and refugees often gets blurred and is sometimes only a matter of the current criteria set by Iranian agencies.⁵³ According to the most recent estimates about one million Afghan refugees and another million or so migrants live in Iran.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ For the Failed State Index see: http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story_id=4350. Afghanistan ranks number 7, Pakistan 9 and Iran itself 49.

⁵¹ For example, there are reports that 30.000 Hazara families fled Afghanistan or were evicted to Iran in the 19th century. They went to Mashhad in Northeastern Iran. See Hafizullah, *Hazaras ...*

⁵² This migration "has mostly been officially regulated and legal". Arne Strand, Astri Suhrke, Kristian Berg Harpviken, *Afghan refugees in Iran: From Refugee Emergency to Migration Management* (Oslo/Bergen: International Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) and Chr. Michelsen Institute for Development Studies and Human Rights (CMI), 16 June 2004), 2.

⁵³ The chaotic situation in Afghanistan in the last tree decades and the information policy of Iran made an effective measurement difficult. On the difficulties to differentiate between migrants and refugees see Strand, *Afghan refugees in Iran ...*, 1-2.

⁵⁴ Ray Takeyh mentions two million refugees in the 80's Ray Takeyh, *Hidden Iran: Paradox and power in the Islamic Republic* (New York: Times Books, 2006), 80. Strand provides the numbers of 2.3 million Afghans in Iran in 2004 (1 million refugees and 1.3 million labor migrants). Strand, *Afghan refugees in Iran ...*, 3. According to UNHCR the numbers of Afghan refugees in Iran came down from 1.482.000 in 2000 to 906.071 in 2007. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), UNHCR Statistical Online Population Database, <http://www.unhcr.org/statistics/49a2c7ff2.html>. Najibullah reports 1.5 million Afghans without "legal registration" and 900.000 with registration in Iran in 2008. Farangis Najibullah, *Kabul pleads with Tehran to delay refugee expulsions*. <http://www.rferl.org/content/>

Notwithstanding the fact that Iran was praised for accepting and integrating the Afghan refugees generally without forcing them into camps, Afghans have traditionally been looked upon by Iranians as less educated and connected to smuggling, crime and narcotics.⁵⁵ Furthermore, they are a burden on the social system. In times of growing unemployment they are seen as unwelcome competitors for jobs. On the other hand, Afghans are a cheap work force that was valued in the construction business.⁵⁶

After first repatriation efforts by the Red Cross/ Red Crescent in 1992/93, the Taliban regime made refugee return almost impossible until 2002. Then, a tri-party agreement between Iran, Afghanistan and the UN facilitated a gradual and co-coordinated return until 2005.⁵⁷ Addressing economic difficulties and popular sentiments, the Ahmadinejad administration started in 2006 to tighten the conditions for Afghans in Iran, introducing new registration procedures, fewer subsidies and reduced work permits aimed at increasing the pressure on Afghans. In early 2007, Iran declared its intention to deport one million Afghans within a year. Thousands were unilaterally forced across the

[Article/1079328.html](http://www.radiofreedom.net/Article/1079328.html), Radio Free Europe, January 08, 2008. The CIA WorldFactbook lists 914.268 refugees in 2009, the UN 1 million refugees and an “unknown number of labor migrants”. United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs - Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN), *Afghanistan: Limited scope to absorb more refugees*. <http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/db900sid/RMOI-7Q6JSV?OpenDocument>, 15 Mar 2009. Assuming that there are still more than 1 million Afghan labor migrants in Iran the number of Afghans in Iran totals more than 2 millions in 2009.

⁵⁵ Johnson mentions that unlike Pakistan Iran “integrated the refugees into Iranian society.” Johnson, *Ismail Khan ...*. According to Strand Iran initially “patiently hosted” the refugees before preparing to “adjust its refugee policy”. Strand, *Afghan refugees in Iran ...*, 3. Recently, they were more and more seen as a social and security burden. Networks of the “impoverished cousins” were seen as basis for organized crime. Iran has reportedly “ordered all Afghan refugees to leave the Sistan/Baluchistan province in 2008, apparently for “security reasons”. Pakistan declared the same intent for its Baluchistan province. IRIN, *Afghanistan: Limited scope to absorb ...*.

⁵⁶ The unemployment rate was according to the Iranian government at 12.5 % in 2008 (CIA Factbook). However, the rate among the critical cohort of the 15 to 29 years old was at 34 % in 2004 and might well be over 40 % in 2009. According to the Iran Country Study in the early 2000’s 7 % of the workers in Iran were Afghan refugees. They were concentrated in “unskilled jobs, especially in construction”. Curtis, *Iran: A country study ...*, 107.

border, before President Karzai asked Teheran to return to a policy of consultation. It is uncertain whether Iran intended to relieve pressure from the domestic job market or if Teheran aimed at a demonstration of power towards Kabul, NATO and the US. In either case, the remaining two millions Afghans in Iran are a bargaining chip that could be used by Teheran to influence stabilization efforts in Afghanistan.⁵⁸

The international community and the Afghan government rely on a gradual and coordinated repatriation. Afghanistan has already absorbed 5 million returnees within the last 7 years.⁵⁹ The ongoing insurgency excludes whole provinces from return programs. Thus, a growing community of jobless and rootless returnees assembles in and around Kabul and could lead to an explosive social situation. Additional uncoordinated returns could endanger Afghan development efforts. Moreover the international community is interested in keeping Afghan refugees in the region. Pressure on the Afghan community in Iran increases the number of those who seek asylum in developed countries.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ For the 92/93 repatriation see Curtis, *Iran: A country study* ..., 91 and Strand, *Afghan refugees in Iran* ..., 2. See as well Strand for the renewed repatriation starting 2002. *Ibid.*, 2-3.

⁵⁸ For the 2007/2008 deportations see Ron Synowitz, *Repatriations Spark Debate On Tehran's Aims*, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1076391.html>, Radio Free Europe, May 10, 2007, and Najibullah, *Kabul pleads...* . Najibullah mentions 360.000 returnees from April to December 2007. A number of 130.000 was reported by Bennett in February 2008. Bennett, *Iran Raises the Heat...* . Sappenfield argues the deportations point to a motive "beyond expedience or impatience". He suspects that the measures were "designed to remind Kabul of Iran's ability to make live difficult for Afghanistan". Mark Sappenfield, *Is Iran meddling in Afghanistan?*, The Christian Science Monitor, <http://www.csmonitor.com/2007/0808/p06s01-wosc.html>, August 8, 2007. Khanna names this policy a "manipulation of Afghan refugee flows." Khanna, *The second world* ..., 110. Bennett quotes an US official saying that the repatriation was "clearly designed to send a message to the Afghans of displeasure of their relationship with the US". Bennett, *Iran Raises the Heat...* . Synowitz quotes Afghan sources who voice the concern that Iran might seek to destabilize western Afghanistan in order to "complicate the situation for US forces". See Synowitz, *Repatriations Spark Debate*

⁵⁹ There are still 1.7 million Afghan refugees in Pakistan. This makes a trilateral co-ordination between Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan paramount. IRIN, *Afghanistan: Limited scope to absorb* Until the end of 2009 another 220.000 people are expected to return from Pakistan alone.

⁶⁰ Strand, *Afghan refugees in Iran* ..., 5.

There is a need for close partnership with Iran with respect to a gradual repatriation in order to avoid negative impacts on the stability of Afghanistan. In return, Iran could benefit from international support for the Afghans in Iran. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Iran and the international community share a common interest in avoiding future waves of refugees from Afghanistan. Whatever improves stability in Afghanistan serves to reduce refugee and migration pressure on Iran.⁶¹

Another key issue for Iran's domestic affairs is a serious drug problem due to heroin and opium from Afghanistan.⁶² With an estimated 70% of the population under the age of thirty, approximately 20% of males using drugs and 2 - 3 million addicts there is a huge market for incoming narcotics.⁶³ Moreover, the drugs are relatively cheap because Iranians are closer to the source than Europeans.

⁶¹ Already in the 80's the regime in Teheran "understood that it could not afford a failed state next door". See Takeyh, *Hidden Iran* ..., 80. Cristiani points out that "this instability could also lead to future waves of refugees in Iran and Teheran perceives it as a key threat for its social stability and economic tenure." Dario Cristiani, *Afghanistan's Role in Iranian Foreign Policy*, Power and Interest News Report (PINR), 26 April 2007, http://www.pinr.com/report.php?ac=view_report&report_id=644&language_id=1.

⁶² Curtis, *Iran: A country study* ..., xxxvii. 20% of drugs produced in Afghanistan are transported through the west (Herat) to Iran. 70% are transported through Pakistan and 10% through Tajikistan. The Afghan south western provinces Farah and Helmand are among the top four provinces cultivating opium. *Ibid.*, 79. The former British Foreign Secretary Beckett stated in 2006 that "almost all the heroin from Afghanistan goes through Iran." Great Britain. Parliament. House of Commons. Foreign Affairs Committee. *Foreign policy aspects of the war against terrorism: fourth report of Session 2005-06* (London: Stationery Office, 2006), 127. Beehner refers to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and mentions an estimated 60% of Afghan opium going through Iran. Lionel Beehner, *Afghanistan's role in Iran's Drug problem*, Council on Foreign Relations, <http://www.cfr.org/publication/11457/>, September 14, 2006. Khanna sees Iran as the transit route for much of the \$65 billion annual trade in heroin and refined opium" from Afghanistan. Khanna, *The second world* ..., 232.

⁶³ See Takeyh, *Hidden Iran* ..., 39, and Curtis, *Iran: A country study* ..., 138. Whereas opium is traditionally the drug that is most frequently used in Iran, it is more and more replaced by heroin. *Ibid.*, 138. Peter Reuter, a drug expert at the University of Maryland is quoted saying that Iran has "the worlds worst heroin problem". Beehner. *Afghanistan's role* The sources vary in their estimates on the number of addicts. Khanna, *The second world* ..., 232, list "one million Iranian adults" as addicted, Takeyh, *Hidden Iran* ..., 80, mentions 2 million and the Iran Country Study three million. Curtis, *Iran: A country study*, 138.

The drug issue is a challenge for Teheran because it contradicts the credibility of a high moralistic profile of the Islamic society.⁶⁴ Moreover, the youth might use drugs in order to escape the tight social control. In addition to this, the judiciary apparatus and the health care system have to allocate significant resources to address the issue, not counting that drug injection causes two thirds of new HIV infections in Iran.⁶⁵ Furthermore narcotic trafficking potentially corrupts the security apparatus.⁶⁶ All together, the drug issue constitutes a strong motivation for Iranian participation in a counter-narcotics strategy.

Iran addresses the issue through measures that are familiar to European countries or to the US. Depending on the current government policy, these measures alternate between punishment and moral appeals on the one hand to rehabilitation and education on the other hand.⁶⁷ There is evidence that in 2001 about 100,000 Iranians were imprisoned for drug crimes and thousands where executed.⁶⁸ Moreover, Iran was forced to invest significantly in border security in order to cope with heavily armed drug gangs.⁶⁹

⁶⁴ “The Shia clergy have tried to discourage opium use by declaring it religiously prohibited”. Curtis, *Iran: A country study*, 138. Beehner sees “rifts along the population’s main fault lines” further strained through drug use and smuggling. Beehner. *Afghanistan’s role ...* .

⁶⁵ Curtis, *Iran: A country study ...*, 138. Beehner mentions a 25 % infection rate among Iranian heroin users. Beehner. *Afghanistan’s role ...* .

⁶⁶ The Iran Country Study mentions corruption of the border police as a major factor in smuggling activities in general. Curtis, *Iran: A country study ...*, xxxvii. The smuggling of narcotics is estimated to be by far the most lucrative of all smuggling activities. Elements of the border police might get their share in order to let pass through the drugs.

⁶⁷ Curtis, *Iran: A country study ...*, 138. The Study mentions “a network of free drug rehabilitation centres”.

⁶⁸ Beehner points out, that with a total number of 170.000 imprisoned Iranians the drug problem caused by far the greatest amount of people in jail. Beehner. *Afghanistan’s role ...* .

⁶⁹ Beehner reports that “a few hundred Iranian drug police die each year in battles with smugglers.” These smugglers are obviously often identical with insurgents and therefore ready to fight if encountered by Iranian border units. Beehner. *Afghanistan’s role ...* .

Linked to narcotics trafficking is also the discussion whether Iran supports the Taliban or not. In the late 1990s the drug issue was controversial in the tense relationship with the Taliban regime that benefited from drug trade despite its puritanical appeal.⁷⁰ Having Iran as a partner in the effort against the drug trade would establish a co-operation against the financial sources of the Taliban. If suspected arms shipments to the Taliban from Iran are not organized Iranian governmental support for the insurgency, but simply drug payments as presumed by some sources, Iran should have an interest to stop them.⁷¹

There is a clear interest for NATO and its allies to co-operate closely with Iran with respect to narcotics.⁷² The cash flow from drug trafficking serves to finance the insurgency in Afghanistan. Moreover, the nature of a drug economy is not compatible with the concept of solid development.⁷³ Furthermore, the flow of drug money negatively influences the societies and the security sectors in all neighbouring states. Finally, Iran is a major corridor for drugs that are designated for Europe.

There is already a basis for co-operation with Iran on the drug issue. In 2002, after the fall of the Taliban regime, Iran proposed to help Afghan farmers reduce their poppy

⁷⁰ Takeyh, *Hidden Iran* ..., 80. The Taliban almost stopped the drug production for a small period, but then obviously preferred to benefit from the revenues of narcotics trafficking. The pattern of “part drug smuggler, part Taliban, part Sunni activist” is also described by Ehrlich, in this case linked to a Baluchi resistance group. Erlich, *The Iran Agenda* ..., 121.

⁷¹ Peter Lehr suggests that drugs are paid partly with weapons and that “there is not even circumstantial evidence that the Iranian state, itself, is involved with that. That is organized-crime groups.” Synowitz, *Repatriations Spark Debate*

⁷² For example, the former British Foreign Secretary Becket stated in 2006 that there is “an identity of interest with western Europe and with the United Kingdom over the issue of drugs.” Great Britain. *Foreign policy aspects* ..., 127. Ghosh mentions the drug issue as a matter of shared concern. Bobby Ghosh, *Talking to Iran: What are Washington’s options?* <http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1879086,00.html?iid=sphere-inline-bottom>, Feb. 13, 2009.

⁷³ Khanna describes Herat as characterized by “narcotecture”. Khanna, *The second world* ..., 110.

cultivation.⁷⁴ Iran works with several European and Asian States on the narcotic problem, participates in drug related multinational agencies and receives financial and equipment support.⁷⁵ In March 2009 a first “ground-breaking counter-narcotics operation” with Pakistan and Afghanistan was reported.⁷⁶ Yet, coordination problem within NATO itself and between NATO and the UN complicate the matter. Whereas Britain is the lead nation for opium eradication according to the Bonn agreement of 2001, there is no common international understanding concerning practical measures. Whereas UNODOC favors military action by NATO to reduce poppy cultivation, this is not agreed policy within NATO.⁷⁷ Last, but not least, the narcotic strategy needs to be supported by the Afghan government.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Compare: Peopledaily. *Roundup: Iran recognized for role in Afghanistan amid U.S. Concerns*. http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200202/28/eng20020228_91177.shtml, last updated at: March 01, 2002.

⁷⁵ European countries like France, Spain and Britain have provided equipment and financial support. Iran would like to see this increasing to sustain the fight “on the forefront of the battle on narcotic traffickers.” Beehner. *Afghanistan’s role ...*. Moreover, ECO serves as a platform for co-operation with respect to drug-trafficking. Kaveh L Afrasiabi, *Iran ready to aid Afghanistan*, *Asia Times*, http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/KC13Ak03.html, March 13, 2009.

⁷⁶ Abbas Djayad, *Afghanistan as catalyst for U.S.-Iran cooperation*, http://www.rferl.org/content/Afghanistan_As_Catalyst_For_US_Iran_Cooperation/1509447.html, Radio Free Europe, March 13, 2009.

⁷⁷ Beehner. *Afghanistan’s role ...*. The US efforts to eradicate poppy was criticized within and outside NATO to lack the provision of farming alternatives. In addition to this, there has recently been a heated debate among high ranking NATO commanders over the measures against drug producers and dealers. Whereas NATO SACEUR (US) is said to have given the guidance to use deadly force against those involved in drug production and trafficking without compelling evidence that they are linked to the Taliban, this guidance was reportedly rejected by both the Commander of JFC North in Brunssum (GE, responsible for ISAF) and COM ISAF in Kabul (US). See Judy Dempsey, *General says shoot Dealers in Afghanistan*, *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/31/world/asia/31nato.html>, January 30, 2009.

⁷⁸ Afghan president Karzai recently criticized the US/NATO approach but praised Iran/Afghan co-operation on the drug issue. Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA), *Karzai: Afghan people real victims of terrorism*, Payvand News, <http://www5.irna.ir/En/View/FullStory/?NewsId=393482&idLanguage=3>, March 11 2009. Karzai calls on Iran to play a more important role in the effort to fight poppy cultivation. *Iran Daily*, *Iran ready for bigger role in Afghanistan*, <http://www.iran-daily.com/1387/3346/html/index.htm>, February 21, 2009.

As a whole, the drug problem is an area for practical co-operation on an issue that directly affects Iran's interests. Significant challenges are situated among NATO and its allies, where a coherent strategy has yet to be agreed upon. Clarification here would counter Iranian criticism that the US and NATO are "failing to stop terrorism and drug trafficking in Afghanistan."⁷⁹ Richard Holbrooke, the US envoy for the region, is reported to "favor enlisting Teheran's help in the war against drug lords and their supply routes."⁸⁰ Thus, the drug issue could be also a door-opener for a wider dialogue between the US and Iran.⁸¹

Another concern on Iran's domestic agenda is the maintenance of internal stability with respect to minorities. Especially related to border regions like Baluchistan there is a latent fear of separatism combined with suspicion that minority unrest is initiated by the US.⁸² The Baluchi tribes live in the Southeast of Iran (Province of Sistan & Baluchistan), in Afghanistan (Province of Nimruz) and in Pakistan (Province of

⁷⁹ For example, this criticism was voiced recently by Iranian Vice-president Davoudi. See Payvand's Iran News. *Iran ready for greater role in Afghanistan*. <http://www.payvand.com/news/09/feb/1230.html>, February 19, 2009. In the same direction argues Nasser: "Young Iranians are paying the price for NATO's failure to curb opium production in neighboring Afghanistan". Nasser, *America needs Iran ...*. Iranian Foreign Minister Mottaki points out that with respect to drugs from Afghanistan "the conditions have deteriorated sharply" and calls for "a new orientation" to correct "incorrect" policies. Hashem Kalantari, Fredrik Dahl, *Iran says U.S. failing in Afghanistan*, Reuters, <http://www.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idUSTRE5282VN20090309>, March 9, 2009.

⁸⁰ Ghosh, *Talking to Iran ...*

⁸¹ *Ibid.* Karim Sajadpour of the Carnegie Endowment for International peace is quoted saying that Afghanistan in general "is the perfect [issue on which] to commence the dialogue" and that the co-operation on the drug issue could enable to "gradually expand the scope [of talks] . . ."

⁸² Erlich mentions as an example a deadly attack against "a bus carrying revolutionary Guards in the Iranian southwest province of Balouchistan." Erlich, *The Iran Agenda ...*, 121. The Balouchi opposition group Jundallah claimed responsibility and Ehrlich establishes a link to US support for such activities in order to "use Iran's ethnic minorities to destabilize the Iranian government." *Ibid.*, 145. There is evidence that Jundallah is linked to al Qaeda and maintains at the same time contact to US intelligence. Baer, *The devil we know ...*, 245.

Baluchistan).⁸³ The recent decision of Iranian officials that all Afghan refugees have to leave Iranian Baluchistan indicates the sensitivity in Teheran with respect to its south eastern province. Furthermore, the plan to construct a gas pipeline from Iran to Pakistan relies on stability in this region.

Most sources agree that Baluchi opposition in Iran is up to now predominantly of a nationalistic nature. Yet, the Baluchis are not only an ethnic minority, they are among the few Sunni population elements in Iran. Iran is latently suspicious of any possible spill-over of Sunni extremism from Afghanistan or Pakistan. As a matter of fact, the Baluchi diaspora complains about ethnic discrimination with respect to regional economic development, education and administration. The grievances include also the feeling of being oppressed for religious reasons by a Shia majority.⁸⁴

NATO and its allies could encourage and support a trilateral co-operation of Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan with the aim of regional development within their remote and neglected Baluchi provinces.⁸⁵ Such projects along with local security collaboration

⁸³ Baluchistan is “the Kurdistan of Central Asia”. Khanna, *The second world ...*, 113. “The Baluchis have been one of the most difficult tribal groups for the central government to control, in large part because of poor communications between Teheran and the province.” Curtis, *Iran: A country study ...*, 96.

⁸⁴ See Reza Hossein Borr, *Shia equality or Shia supremacy?* 24 DECEMBER 2006. <http://balochistanpeoplesfront.blogspot.com/2006/12/shia-equality-or-shia-supremacy.html>. Borr, member of the Baluchi Diaspora, questions Iran’s credibility that calls for equal rights for Shia in other countries but does not guarantee the same to the Sunni Baluchis.

⁸⁵ The three provinces belong generally to the less developed areas of the respective countries. Yet, Pakistani Baluchistan has gas reserves that provide “over a third of Pakistan’s energy needs.” Khanna, *The second world ...*, 113. Combined with the Chinese investment in Gwadar there is according to Khanna a strong motivation for Pakistan to divert military resources to southwest Baluchistan to protect critical energy and transport infrastructure and “to quash Baluch separatism”. *Ibid.*, 113. Consequently, a stable situation in Baluchistan would free Pakistani resources for the fight against the Taliban elsewhere.

would enhance regional stability. This calls for a NATO/Afghan security presence in the province of Nimruz that has not yet been established.⁸⁶

Iran clearly has a national interest to reduce destabilizing impacts of refugees and narcotics from Afghanistan. Moreover, it is eager to avoid any unrest in the Baluchistan region and to minimize the influence of Sunni extremism on its Sunni population. From a domestic point of view, Iran is interested in a stable Afghanistan that cooperates in addressing the above described challenges.⁸⁷

At first sight sometimes contradictory, Iranian policy within the global, regional and domestic dimension actually follows a long term and pragmatic approach. Iran tries to neutralize US influence in the region and fosters its position as a regional power that has a decisive say in Afghanistan. At the same time, Iran blocks effects from the East that might reduce its stability.⁸⁸ Religious matters are less influential in Iranian politics towards Afghanistan than a traditional national agenda. This makes Iran a more predictable actor than often perceived and opens options for co-operation. Finally, beyond the antagonism with the US there is no added value for Iran to support Taliban or El-Qaida elements. This reinforces the importance of a US-Iranian dialogue.

⁸⁶ The Afghan province of Nimruz is currently not under control of the Afghan central government or of NATO forces. One reason for this might be that the presence of NATO forces in the Nimruz provincial capital right at the border with Iran was seen as too sensitive in nature. Once a solid partnership with Iran is established, there is no reason to continue leaving a power vacuum in place in South West Afghanistan that is filled by Taliban elements.

⁸⁷ Cristiani emphasizes Iran's interest for a stable Afghanistan due to the threats for social and economic development – especially for Iran's eastern provinces – caused by instability, refugees and drug trafficking. Cristiani, *Afghanistan's Role ...* .

⁸⁸ As de Vasconcelos puts it in his preface to Bertram, *Rethinking Iran ...*, 5: "Iran wields a great deal of regional influence, and its stakes in resolving crisis in two war raged bordering neighbors, Iraq and Afghanistan, are high." Axworthy points out that "the Iranian regime, as pragmatism would suggest, has always insisted on its desire for stability in both Iraq and Afghanistan." Axworthy, *Empire of the mind ...*, 289. Rubin argues more cautious stating that "the Iranian regime will accept stability in both its war-torn neighbors, but only under its terms. Barring that, Tehran believes controlled instability to be its next best option." Rubin, *Understanding Iranian Strategy ...*, 16.

CONCLUSION

The recent developments in the US-Iranian relationship and the various initiatives in 2009 with Iranian participation permit a cautiously optimistic view on Iran's future role for the stability of Afghanistan and the surrounding region. Yet, the antagonism with the United States and the nuclear issue might continue to have a negative impact. It can be controversially discussed whether the right strategy towards Iran is to start with small and seemingly less complicated issues and later extend the process to a wider array of more contentious topics. The other extreme end would be to wait for a breakthrough in US-Iranian relations, following the logic that Iran would only be interested in a 'grand solution' that addresses all its perceived grievances from the history of confrontation with the US.

The 2009 initiatives, talks and conferences show that both paths can be followed simultaneously. Practical measures on all levels related to matters that make a difference for Afghanistan's stability can establish a pattern of co-operation that promotes mutual trust and serves Iran's and NATO interest at the same time. Once Iran's domestic and regional security concerns are addressed, a parallel process that benefits from these limited initiatives might help issues like the nuclear question and Iran's role in the Middle East to come slightly closer to a solution.⁸⁹ Whatever approach is going to be chosen by the West, Iran is a decisive factor and an important partner for the establishment of a safe and secure environment in Afghanistan.

⁸⁹ Bertram suggests that "the turnaround from a policy of threats to one of cooperation will therefore also, albeit in the opposite way, influence the form and intensity of Iranian nuclear activities." Bertram, *Rethinking Iran ...*, 48. He evaluates further that "progress can only be made if the West ceases to focus on the nuclear problem alone." Bertram proposes instead to "consider possible overlapping interests with Iran and to offer cooperation, détente and even partnership as the basis on which to address the nuclear concerns." *Ibid.*, 60.

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