

Continuity and Hiatus: Structural Patterns of Iran's Policy in Afghanistan

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Recently the Islamic Republic of Iran has been under attack, internationally and particularly in the Western media because of its nuclear program, which has triggered fears in Europe and America of Iran as a nuclear power. Beyond this focus of criticism, Iran's foreign policy is characterized by a great diversity of other aspects seldom mentioned in the Western media. Since the US invasion in neighboring Iraq, the country's regional importance has visibly increased. Politicians will have to take the position of Iran into consideration when thinking about future peace talks and perspectives for the entire region. There are, however, some significant features of Iranian foreign policy under the presidency of Mahmud Ahmadi-Nezhad, the first signs of which were outlined timidly in the time of his predecessor Khatami. These tendencies in the concept of Iran's foreign policy are mirrored by the growing interest in Central Asia and its eastern neighbors. Thereby the Iranian government accentuates a strategy aimed at embedding itself within a broad regional network. Afghanistan, its neighbor to the east and hitherto a rather marginal element within the overarching framework of Iran's foreign policy, due to its geostrategic position now plays a crucial role in the plans for the establishment of this regional network. From the Afghan point of view, Iran is one of Afghanistan's important neighbors; the two countries share a nine hundred kilometer-long border. In addition, since the outbreak of the Afghanistan conflict, millions of refugees have crossed this border, and there are currently more than 1.5 million Afghans living in Iran. However, the actual number of Afghan refugees and migrant workers could be much higher than this estimated figure despite repatriation efforts carried out by Iranian officials.

This essay aims at analyzing structural patterns inherent in the Iranian policy towards Afghanistan and the development of this policy during the last century. The main emphasis is on the following questions: How has the Iranian government conceptualized its new Afghanistan policy since the fall

of the Taliban regime? Is it a fundamentally new policy or rather a revision of well-known patterns? What priorities shaped the Iranian view of its eastern neighbor in the different phases of bilateral relations?

In order to answer these questions, I will recapitulate the bilateral relations between the two countries in the twentieth century beginning with a glance at the situation prior to the Afghan conflict. In describing distinct periods of Afghan-Iranian relations, I argue that a complex interplay between domestic and global factors determined the relationship between the two states. Depending on time, political circumstances and changing national interests, Iran adopted different strategies towards Afghanistan. These shifting patterns of Iranian policy mapping depended very much on external factors, e.g. relationships with the western world, especially the United States. Although there has been a certain ambivalence in Afghan-Iranian relations, we observe a continuity of friendly relations between Tehran and Kabul, at least during the first half of the twentieth century. However, the years 1978 and 1979 marked a radical shift in the bilateral relations in that Tehran developed a variety of new approaches to protect its national interests in Afghanistan. But it has never been the master of Afghan affairs. Moreover, Iran pursued a rather passive Afghanistan policy in comparison with Pakistan. The various shifts in Iran's strategies mirrored and still reflect reactions to changes first and foremost in global and regional affairs. For instance, September 11 and the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001 led to a further qualitative change in Afghan-Iranian relations. Paradoxically, the US-led invasion and the operation "Enduring Freedom" aimed at setting the course for a new political order in Kabul, smoothed the path for Iran's return to a policy characteristic of the first half of the twentieth century. Therefore, I argue that Iran's Afghanistan policy – in its continuity as well as in its hiatuses – is much more influenced by external factors than by the internal conditions in either country.

1. Afghan-Iranian relations until 1978

Focusing on the development of the bilateral relations between the two states in the twentieth century, the following part will emphasize the contrast which characterized Afghan-Iranian relations until the outbreak of the revolutions and conflicts in the region.

1.1 The Helmand water dispute

Although Naseruddin Shah (1848–1896) recognized the independence of Afghanistan in 1857 and dropped all claims regarding Herat,¹ the exact demarcation of the common border was still disputed between Kabul and Tehran until the 1930s. Whilst the border commissions set up by the British and the Russians at the end of the nineteenth century determined the borderlines in northern, eastern and southern Afghanistan, and therewith the status of the country as buffer state between British India and the Russian protectorates in Central Asia, the demarcation of its border to the west remained under question for a long time.²

Particularly the southern sections of this border located in Sistan were disputed between the neighbors. Although the border was drawn by a commission headed by Sir Frederic Goldsmid in 1872, neither side was satisfied with the result and the boundary remained un-demarcated.³ Thus Great Britain responded to an Iranian request in 1902 by establishing the so-called McMahon Boundary Commission with the approval of Kabul in order to settle the dispute and to draw a new border. When the new border was demarcated two years later – incidentally in accordance with the old line drawn by the Goldsmid commission – Iran and Afghanistan agreed to it in September 1904 despite continuing reservations. The fixation of the border was indeed difficult since it followed in large sections the lower course of the Helmand River that shifts its bed because of extraordinary soil conditions in Sistan. So the distribution of the Helmand water remained disputed and even the McMahon commission could not solve the conflict. Whereas the Afghan ruler Amir Habibullah (1901–1919) officially agreed to the settlement of the conflict, Iran has never accepted the course of the border. The Iranians informed the British government in 1906 about their disagreement.⁴ Although the border and water issue still remains disputed even today, this did not prevent the normalization of the bilateral relations.

1.2 Regional cooperation and economic assistance: Afghan-Iranian relations until 1978/79

During the twentieth century, the above-described conflict regarding the water distribution in Sistan caused Iran's attitude toward its neighbor to remain ambivalent. Iran's course ranged between direct interference beyond

¹ Iran tried to recapture Herat several times without success in the nineteenth century.

² For the boundary making see also Nölle-Karimi 2008: 343-412.

³ Nölle-Karimi 2008: 411-412.

⁴ Dupree 1973: 432

its eastern border in order to protect its national interests and the establishment of friendly mutual relations. The latter dominated the definition of a stringent Afghanistan policy in the first half of the twentieth century. Iran and Afghanistan signed a first contract of friendship in 1921 despite the unsolved water question. This agreement included new customs regulations and regularized the postal service between both states.⁵

After Afghanistan became a member of the League of Nations in 1927, both sides agreed upon a second contract and transferred the Helmand conflict to a mediator, Turkey. Tehran accepted the Turkish decision though it was not in favor of Iran. In 1937 both states signed the Saadabad Pact together with Iraq and Turkey. The signatory states agreed upon non-intervention and respect of all national borders as well as consultations in the event of international conflicts affecting their common interests. The Saadabad Pact earmarked the establishment of committees and annual meetings. Although the pact was limited in terms of effectiveness, it nevertheless embodied a first attempt to form a regional alliance against aggressive European foreign policy. It led furthermore to a temporary settlement of the Helmand conflict and marked the beginning of political cooperation and convergence between Afghanistan and Iran. In 1938 both states signed a further postal contract followed by a bilateral agreement on telephone and telegraph connections. In spite of the settlement of the water problem,⁶ the Helmand remained a latent disruptive element in bilateral relations. The dispute broke out again and again due to problematic soil conditions in the Sistan and Beluchistan region, which caused frequent changes of the river course, and in times of drought. The last bilateral agreement on the water issue before the beginning of the Afghanistan war dates back to 1973.⁷

In the 1950s and 1960s, Afghan-Iranian relations benefited from political tensions between Kabul and Islamabad regarding the Pashtunistan question. When the conflict escalated for the first time in 1950, Pakistan reduced the conduct of transit for Afghan exports. Afghan and American traders called for a transit route via Nimruz and Zahidan up to the Iranian sea port of Chahbahar as an alternative to the overloaded port of Karachi in Pakistan. The plan was not realized on this occasion because of technical problems and a lack of port facilities in Chahbahar. At the beginning of the 1960s, the Pashtunistan conflict increased the tensions between Kabul and Islamabad causing Pakistan to close its border for nineteen months. Afgha-

⁵ Gregorian 1969: 234

⁶ Gregorian 1969: 376-378

⁷ The entire region faced a severe drought at the beginning of the 1970s. It caused harvest deficits followed by an extreme famine in Afghanistan.

nistan thus needed an alternative transit route via Iran. In this delicate situation, the idea of the route via Zahidan was revived; the new route was frequented and functioned quite well in summer 1962 despite some difficulties. Since the port of Chahbahar could not be used for technical reasons, the export and import goods traveled a long distance by lorry from Kandahar to Herat and Mashhad, and by train from Mashhad via Tehran to the sea port of Khurramshahr in south-western Iran. The situation offered Iran the opportunity to make first steps as diplomatic mediator. Muhammad Reza Shah visited Kabul and Islamabad in summer 1962 to settle the conflict between Afghanistan and Pakistan. After a change of government in Afghanistan in 1963, the tensions between both states lessened. At the invitation of Muhammad Reza Shah, Islamabad and Kabul sent delegations to Tehran to find a solution to the conflict and agreed upon opening the border and the resumption of diplomatic relations.⁸ However, with the normalization of Afghan-Pakistani relations, the alternative transit route via Iranian territory became obsolete.

At the beginning of the 1970s, a massive capital outflow caused by a growing income from the oil exports after an increase in the oil price by the OPEC member states enabled the Iranian government to realize its political ambitions with the support of the United States.⁹ At the same time, the Pakistan government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was under pressure due to a secession war in East Pakistan and the proclamation of Bangladesh as an independent state backed by a successful Indian military intervention. Muhammad Reza Shah used Pakistan's temporary weakness to safeguard his regional interests once and for all. Iran pursued the long-term goal of establishing itself as a regional power in the Persian Gulf.¹⁰ Considering American and British interference in the nationalization of Iran's oil industry promoted by Mossadegh's government in 1952/53, such a position could have led to emancipation from foreign influence. By formulating the Nixon Doctrine aimed at establishing regional powers supporting the US in its efforts to contain Soviet power in the Cold War, Washington assisted Tehran to realize its claims to regional hegemony. The United States granted Iran the role as regional ally because of its strategic geopolitical position. Together with Pakistan and Turkey the country belonged to the so-called "Northern Tier" vis-à-vis the Soviet Union.¹¹ Through the increasing income generated from the export of oil and the American policy of establishing

⁸ Dupree 1973: 451; 565

⁹ Rubin 2002: 74-76

¹⁰ Dupree 1974: 11

¹¹ Rubin 1995: 26; See also Reissner 2008: 8.

regional hegemony, Iran was able to realize its political ambitions actively. Thus, Iran generously granted the Afghan government led by Muhammad Daud a financial credit of two billion dollars over a period of ten years, the idea being to construct a railway which was to connect Afghan cities to the Iranian port of Bandar-i Abbas. The fulfillment of this agreement could have freed Afghanistan from its dependence on the Pakistani sea port Karachi on the one hand, and from the influence of the Soviet Union on the other. Besides this, the plan fitted the foreign policy of Muhammad Daud to reduce at least to some extent the Soviet economic and political influence on Afghanistan. At the same time, Iran's intelligence service assisted Afghanistan in organizing its secret police.¹²

As we have seen, Afghan-Iranian relations developed positively despite the still existing Helmand problem. Both states embarked upon a fruitful and pragmatic cooperation based on a set of regional agreements. Favorable basic conditions smoothed the path for this policy: Washington's close alliance with Iran bolstered the country's claims to regional hegemony, and Iran could afford to grant Afghanistan financial assistance because of growing income from its oil exports. Pakistan's difficult internal situation after the secession of Bangladesh facilitated this cooperation, while the Afghan government tried to reduce the growing political and economic influence of the USSR and dependence on Pakistan as a transit country. Therefore, Kabul attempted to balance the influence and interests of its various partners, cautious to avoid one-sided preferences though the political influence of the Soviet Union still remained strong. In addition, Iran and Afghanistan were linked from the very beginning through the common medium of the Persian language. For instance, Afghanistan received numerous books and publications from its western neighbor, since Iran had superior technical capacity and a well-organized publishing sector. Moreover, the links to Iran and the common language played an essential role in the foundation of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) in the mid-1960s. Iran's Tudeh Party provided Afghan students in Kabul with translations of philosophical and ideological European literature.¹³

¹² Rubin 2002: 75

¹³ Dupree 1974: 81

2. Iran's Afghanistan policy during the Afghan war (1980–2001)

In the following chapter I describe the position of Iran during the Afghan wars in the 1980s and 1990s. Following Khalilzad's analysis of Iran's policy in Afghanistan including the influence of Iranian domestic affairs, I will attempt to divide this policy into different phases according to crucial domestic and global factors, e.g. the conflict with Iraq, the opposition to the United States and the political isolation in the 1980s that all influenced Tehran's foreign policy with regard to Afghanistan. A second focus will be on shifting constellations within the Iranian political system and predominant power configurations that resulted in political reorientation and the support of new Afghan actors.

2.1 Towards diversification: Iranian policy between 1980 and 1992

A general upheaval in the entire region marked the beginning of the new decade, the 1980s. In April 1978, a military coup occurred in Kabul ending the reign of the Muhammadzai dynasty once and for all. Soon after the coup the new DVPA government was confronted with growing resistance to its reform policy, triggering a wave of unrest and rebellions that finally forced the Soviet Union to intervene with troops in December 1979. At the same time, Afghanistan's neighbor Iran was shaken by the insurrection that took the form of the Islamic Revolution. In the end, the Pahlawis were ousted and Khomeini proclaimed Iran an Islamic Republic after a plebiscite in April 1980.

All these events, which today seem so far past, created completely new conditions requiring the deployment of alternative political strategies to enable Iran's survival in a region facing escalating conflicts. In the light of the new conditions – the emerging conflict with the United States and Iraq's attack on Iran in September 1980, coinciding with international diplomatic isolation – Iran's new government attempted to broaden its room for political maneuver through the financial and moral support of armed resistance groups known for outspoken Islamist attitudes in the Middle East. Many political considerations and strategies stemmed from the Islamic Revolution and the ideology of 'export of the revolution' that became central to Iranian regional and foreign policy in the 1980s.

Let us now discuss the important external factors that affected the coordinates of the Iranian position in Afghanistan, setting the framework within which Iran's foreign policy was shaped. First, the Iranian government was always against the presence of foreign troops in Afghanistan and consequently demanded the withdrawal of the Red Army. At the same time, Iran was bound on its southern and south-western flank by its own struggle

against the Iraqi aggressor. Additionally, Iran required arms from the Soviet Union to successfully resist Iraq's efforts to occupy its strategically important province Khuzistan. Furthermore, both states shared common economic interests: after the break-off of diplomatic relations with the United States and the embargo imposed upon Iran by the US, Tehran needed the USSR as a trading partner.¹⁴ All these external threats and constraints clearly prevented the Iranian government from providing extensive support for the Afghan Mujahiddin. Even later, the Iranian assistance remained at a comparatively low level and never reached Pakistani dimensions. Iran's involvement in the Afghan conflict was low-key in terms of financial and material expenditure.¹⁵ One may thus question to what extent Iran was really interested in Afghanistan¹⁶ in view of the fact that the Iranian leadership considered the Middle East, especially Palestine and Lebanon, more relevant than Afghan issues. In the 1980s and even in the 1990s, Afghanistan rather resembled a backyard of Iranian interests. Instead, Tehran tended to look westwards, trying to assume a key position in Lebanon. But nevertheless, Iran could not afford to ignore Afghanistan completely and leave its neighbor in the east to Pakistan's influence, since Islamabad was increasingly perceived as Washington's right-hand man in the region.

Besides these external factors, domestic aspects analyzed by Zalmay Khalilzad played a crucial role in the development of policy towards Afghanistan. At the beginning of the conflict, the Afghan resistance was supported by moderate persons who had participated in the Islamic Revolution, e.g. Mehdi Bazargan, Sadeq Qutbzade and Ayatollah Shariat Madari.¹⁷ However, no clear-cut preferences for a particular group can be discerned in this early phase of the Afghan conflict. The political support of the resistance movement depended on contacts with Iran's government held by single Mujahiddin parties. One of the Afghan groups favored by Teheran was the Sunni-dominated Hizb-i Islami. Although basically allied with Pakistan, the Hizb-i

¹⁴ Khalilzad 1990: 235

¹⁵ Sreedhar 1997: 89-99; Monsutti 2005: 129

¹⁶ Milani 2006: 237

¹⁷ Khalilzad 1990: 237-239. Mehdi Bazargan (1907-1995) became the first prime minister of Iran after the revolution. He was seen as one of the key figures of the democratic and liberal forces of the revolution and came increasingly into conflict with the clerics including Ayatollah Khomeini. He resigned together with his cabinet following the occupation of the US-Embassy by militant revolutionaries in 1980. Sadeq Qutbzade (1936-1982) was Iranian foreign minister (1979-1980). He was executed in 1982 for plotting the assassination of Khomeini and the overthrow of the revolution order. Grand Ayatollah Husein Shariat-Madari (1905-1986) was considered the most influential Iranian cleric before the revolution. He opposed Ayatollah Khomeini after the revolution and was put under house arrest in 1982.

Islami maintained relations with Iran in later years. Iran's ambassador in Pakistan, Naseri, was seen as one of the most active coordinators of the fundamentalist Afghan resistance parties in Pakistan at the beginning of the 1980s. Other forces enjoying Iranian support were small groups around the Shiit Ulama in Herat.¹⁸

With the rise of Bani Sadr¹⁹ and the disempowerment of Bazargan and Shariat Madari, Iran's policy towards Afghanistan entered a new phase. From 1982 onward the ministry of foreign affairs and the Pasdaran, the Revolution Guards, began to play a crucial role in the coordination of the Afghanistan strategy,²⁰ which was now formulated by Ayatollah Montazeri²¹ and the Islamic Freedom Movement led by Mehdi Hashemi.²² Both favored Afghan groups that were politically and ideologically committed to the principles of the Islamic Revolution. This shift in its Afghanistan policy affected the activities of groups which had been dependent on Iranian support during the first two years of the Afghan war. Iran abandoned the support of some of its former allies;²³ only the Hizb-i Islami and the Jamiat-i Islami maintained their offices and branches in Iran.²⁴

This qualitative shift in Iran's Afghanistan policy was due to serious concerns about the increasing influence of Saudi Arabia and the United States on the Afghan Mujahiddin.²⁵ In order to express its criticism of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, Tehran favored Shiite resistance groups that became a tool in setting up a counterbalance to seven Sunni Mujahiddin groups which had enjoyed Pakistani support. At the same time, Iran was indirectly involved in the negotiations organized by the United Nations, though Ayatollah Khomeini strictly refused to participate in the official

¹⁸ Pohly 1992: 58-60

¹⁹ Abulhasan Bani Sadr (born in 1933) was a member of the resistance movement against Muhammad Reza Shah, and the first Iranian President (1980-1981) after the Islamic Revolution. However, he was soon impeached by Khomeini and fled Iran. Bani Sadr now lives in exile in France.

²⁰ Pohly 1992: 58

²¹ Ayatollah Hosein Ali Montazeri (born in 1922) was one of the leaders of the Islamic revolution and designated successor of Ayatollah Khomeini as revolution leader. In 1988 he lost his position after demanding an assessment of mistakes made during the revolution and a conflict with Khomeini over this issue. In 1997 Ayatollah Montazeri was put under house arrest in his residence in Qom.

²² Mehdi Hashemi held the rank of a Hojatolislam and the position of a senior official of the Revolutionary Guards. He was executed for treason in 1987.

²³ Khalilzad 1990: 237-239

²⁴ Pohly 1992: 58

²⁵ Sreedhar 1997: 92; Milani 2006: 238

peace talks without the involvement of the Afghan resistance.²⁶ In the middle of the 1980s, the Iranian Afghanistan strategy unfolded within the framework of exporting the revolution and thus influenced the Hazara inhabiting central Afghanistan, where a Shura established a regional government after pushing out the central government troops in winter 1978/79. Although the leader of the Hazarajat government, Sheykh Ali Beheshti, a follower of Ayatollah Khuy in Iraq, was regarded as politically weak, his movement was able to establish an independent administration including an army and a bureaucracy.²⁷ Since the followers of the political Shia represented a small minority, Tehran confined its assistance to Shiite parties close to Iran and the revolutionary establishment from 1982 onward. Thus, the Sazman-i Nasr (Organization of the Victory) that had been founded among young Shiite Afghans in 1978 was now patronized by the Iranian government. Later, the Sepah-i Pasdaran (Revolutionary Guards) were founded according to the Iranian model and became Iran's second protégé in Afghanistan. At first, this organization pursued its activities as an Afghan branch of the Iranian original,²⁸ which maintained a military program for the education and arming of Shiite Mujahiddin, especially in east Iran. Though other Shiite factions like the Afghan Hizbollah carried out military operations in the borderlands between Iran and Afghanistan, Nasr and Sepah remained the main guarantors of Iran's ideological influence among Afghanistan's Shiite population. Both used military facilities and camps provided by the government in eastern Iran near the Afghan-Iranian border.²⁹ However, Iran's attempt to bring the Afghan Shiites under its control was not without consequences: the competition between the above-mentioned Shura and the resistance parties backed by Iran resulted in a dominance of pro-Iranian groups. By 1986 the entire Hazarajat was more or less controlled by Nasr and Sepah.³⁰ Thus, the Hazarajat is commonly perceived as the second successful example of 'export of the revolution'.³¹

In 1987 seven Shiite parties formed an alliance in Iranian exile to overcome the political marginalization of the Shiite factions. Although Tehran's role in organizing this Shiite platform is still disputed, the opinion

²⁶ Rubin 1995: 42; For the Shia Sunni frictions and Saudi Arabia's influence in Afghanistan see also Rashid 2000: 196-206.

²⁷ Bindemann 1987: 61

²⁸ Rubin 2002: 222-224

²⁹ Pohly 1992: 58

³⁰ Bindemann 1987: 62-67

³¹ Khalilzad 1990: 238-240; Regarding the Hazaras and their role in the Afghan conflict see also Musawi 2000.

that this step was first and foremost an Iranian initiative dominated the debate among political observers. According to Rubin, this alliance was intended to foster the concentration of the military forces and increase the influence of the Afghan Shiite parties in future peace talks.³² In the light of later events reflecting Iran's very limited ability to exercise effective influence upon the Shiites of Afghanistan, one doubts the key role of Tehran in establishing this alliance. However, internal changes in the power configurations within the Islamic Republic at the end of the 1980s caused the next qualitative shift in the Afghanistan policy. After Ayatollah Montazeri, hitherto in charge of formulating strategies regarding the Afghan resistance, was ruled out as Khomeini's successor, the foreign ministry and the later president Rafsanjani played the decisive role in adjusting its future policy towards Afghanistan. Diversification of the Afghan partners has since become the characteristic of Iran's approach. The foreign ministry invited Burhanuddin Rabbani, one of the most influential figures of the Sunni resistance in 1987, to visit Iran and contacted other Sunni dignitaries, although the main focus still remained on Nasr and Sepah.³³

At the end of the 1980s Iran's strategy towards Afghanistan changed yet again. However, the new adjustment was caused not merely by changes in domestic affairs, but by altered external circumstances. Firstly, the withdrawal of the Soviet army from Afghanistan was completed in February 1989. Secondly, the end of the war against Iraq in 1988 freed Iran from considerable pressure so that Tehran was able to turn its attention to Afghanistan. Furthermore, Ayatollah Khomeini's death in 1988 and the election of Rafsanjani as new president went hand in hand with a consolidation of moderate elites in Iran, whose Afghanistan policy was however still determined by the fear that Pakistan and Saudi Arabia could dominate the Afghan Mujahiddin. For this reason, the Iranian president suggested suspending the Jihad and seeking an arrangement between the government of Muhammad Najibullah and Iran's Shiite protégés, who merged together into one single Shiite party, the Hizb-i Wahdat (Unity Party).³⁴ This unification of eight quarrelling Shiite factions probably took place under Iranian mediation. The Hizb-i Wahdat remained the most important political force among the Afghan Shiites and to this day controls the plateau of central Afghanistan. Although there can be no doubt of Iran's initiative in bringing all Shiite groups together under one umbrella, its real influence on this alliance was subject to debate among observers and political scientists in view of the continuing

³² Rubin 2002: 248–250

³³ Khalilzad 1990: 238–240

³⁴ For the history and structure of the Hizb-i Wahdat see Musawi 2000: 251–255.

rivalries between Nasr and Sepah within the Hizb-i Wahdat. Nevertheless, there is no dispute about Iran's support for this party which became a tool to limit the influence of Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, both of which were perceived as Washington's henchmen in the region.

In 1991 Iran, Tajikistan, the Jamiat-i Islami representing the majority of Afghanistan's Persian-speaking population, and the Hizb-i Wahdat signed a cultural agreement on the common Persian language.³⁵ Hereby, Tehran used the adherence to the Persian language as a tool to unify non-Pashtun minorities.³⁶ Years ago Iran had established closer contacts with Rabbani's Jamiat to diversify its contacts with the Afghan Mujahiddin.

After the Soviet withdrawal, Iran came closer to the regime of Najibullah. Remarkably, Iranian officials coordinated humanitarian and economic programs in Afghanistan. Both states agreed on a general cooperation as regards fuel supply to local garrisons in the western provinces. Additionally, the Hizb-i Wahdat and Kabul agreed upon a ceasefire. The Afghan government permitted flights to supply Bamian with humanitarian goods as a countermove.³⁷ Iran thus favored a limited cooperation with the regime in Kabul rather than a seizure of power by Sunni groups supported by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia.

2.2 Tehran's role in the Afghan civil war

This chapter aims at giving an overview of the circumstances in the region after the break-up of the Soviet Union and the fall of Najibullah's government in spring 1992. In a second step, I try to shed light on Iran's position in the confusing situation of the Afghan civil war, and to locate it within the new regional framework emerging after the fall of the Soviet Union.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 led to the emergence of five independent Central Asian republics. The governments of the new states – all of them landlocked countries – attempted to stabilize their regimes in the transition phase and looked on the one hand for reliable regional partners, and on the other for access to sea ports. Confronted with unfavorable geographic conditions, their major priority was to shake off the Russian dominance resulting from the internal conditions of the Soviet Union. Now

³⁵ Rubin 2002: 252

³⁶ Milani 2006: 240

³⁷ Rubin 2002: 252; 264. – Located in central Afghanistan, Bamian was cut off from the major supply routes and due to its geographical position was extremely isolated during the war. Provision of supplies was only possible by using smuggling paths and remote mountain routes. The ceasefire made Iranian supply flights and direct humanitarian aid possible for the first time in ten years.

there was the prospect of competition for economic and political cooperation with the Central Asian republics and access to a market of more than fifty million people. A comparison of the basic conditions and interests of Iran and Pakistan shows that both were much in the same situation. Tehran and Islamabad shared a common interest and ambition to gain access to Central Asia by offering sea ports and transit routes in an extended regional context in the long term. Geopolitically, Iran had the better chance to achieve this goal because it borders on Turkmenistan and is a direct neighbor of the Central Asian republics and does not necessarily need Afghanistan as a corridor, whereas Pakistan, being separated from the region by Afghanistan, lacks strategic depth.³⁸

From the Iranian perspective at the beginning of the 1990s, a transit corridor via Afghanistan represented an alternative to the linkage provided by Turkmenistan, whilst a stable and pacified Afghanistan was more essential for Islamabad. Due to this constellation of similar interests in Afghanistan, both wanted to see an Afghan government that was favorably disposed towards Tehran and Islamabad, as Iran and Pakistan were regarded as antagonists in Afghanistan and the wider region. In pushing their strategic interests, both states favored their traditional allies. According to Rubin, Tehran pursued the strategy of establishing a non-Pashtun corridor in northern Afghanistan connecting Iran with Central Asia after the fall of Najibullah's regime in 1992.³⁹ Whether such concrete plans existed in Iran's foreign ministry is indeed doubtful and cannot be confirmed with certainty since Tehran could design its strategies, as described above, from more favorable basic conditions and in this phase did not depend on such a corridor. However, in this situation Tehran and Islamabad backed different groups and alliances in Afghanistan to realize their interests and goals, a fact that contributed greatly to the escalation of the Afghan civil war.

Let us glance at the internal conditions in Afghanistan characterized by confusing political and military configurations and Iran's influence on the various conflicts. After the fall of the Afghan president Najibullah in spring 1992, Iran claimed a Shiite participation in any future transition government. According to Rubin, the Iranian embassy opened the capital

³⁸ Up to 1991 the political course of the Turkmen government had not been predictable. However, during the 1990s president Niyazow isolated his country from its Central Asian neighbors and ceased to play a role as connecting bridgehead between Iran and the other states north of the Amu Darya.

³⁹ Rubin 1995: 130; 172 – According to Rubin, informants in the Iranian foreign ministry always denied such plans. Najibullah and the United Nations shared the opinion that Iran was planning to establish such a link with the Central Asian states. See *ibid*: 172; Milani (2006: 240) also supports the view that Iran favored an alliance of non-Pashtun groups particularly in northern Afghanistan.

Kabul to non-Pashtun members and the rebels of the Hizb-i Wahdat by distributing weapons among them.⁴⁰ Simultaneously, Tehran attempted to form an alliance between the united forces of the northern provinces comprising the troops of General Dostum and Ahmad Shah Masud on the one hand, and the Hizb-i Wahdat on the other. This alliance was supposed to form a counterweight to the groups dominated by the Pakistani intelligence service ISI and Saudi Arabia.

The question whether successful Iranian mediation played a crucial role in forming such a union can be doubted and need not concern us, since the alliance between the factions and parties in northern Afghanistan was a short-lived enterprise. When Iran opened a consulate in Mazar-i Sharif, which was by this time under the control of Dostum's militias, a conflict with Ahmad Shah Masud evolved over this issue. Furthermore, the differences between these two key figures regarding a balanced power-sharing in Kabul caused a series of armed combats in autumn 1993, with Kabul and the north as their battleground. At the same time, Rabbani's government refused to share power in Kabul with the Shiites as Iran persistently demanded.⁴¹ Instead, Iran exercised growing influence in west Afghanistan which became incorporated into the Iranian economy because of its geographical proximity.⁴² Whilst the civil war was centered in Kabul, Herat benefited from peace and stability under the shadow of Iran. It was last but not least this stability that has led to a remarkable economic boom in recent years. Since the confusing tangle of quickly shifting alliances in Kabul was extremely complex and depended on the short-term interests of the conflict parties, no generalizing statements can be made regarding the involvement of Iran in the Afghan conflict during the first half of the 1990s. Although the Hizb-i Wahdat seemed to be the guarantor of Iranian interests in Afghanistan, this did not prevent it from forming an alliance with Hekmatyar's Hizb-i Islami, which was itself the main addressee of American and Pakistani arms supply especially in the 1980s. At the same time, Iran at least to some extent supported the government of Burhanuddin Rabbani, whose ally Ettehad-i Islami (Islamic Union), financed by Saudi Arabia, was the main enemy of the Wahdat forces in Kabul.⁴³

⁴⁰ Rubin 1995: 129

⁴¹ Milani 2006: 241

⁴² Schetter 2002: 123

⁴³ Rieck 1999: 114–116.

2.3 Iran and the Taliban between 1994 and 2001

At first, the Iranian government was – like many other observers – surprised by the appearance of the Taliban in Qandahar in autumn 1994. In this early stage of the Taliban movement an Iranian position concerning the Taliban cannot be identified. But after the assassination of the Hizb-i Wahdat leader Abdul Ali Mazari in March 1995, Iran and the Taliban became opposed to one another. Tehran perceived the Taliban not merely as a threat to its strategic interests, they seemed to be an instrument utilized by Washington to weaken Iran's regional position with the assistance of regional actors like Pakistan and Saudi Arabia.⁴⁴ In addition, the Sunni fundamentalist attitudes caused serious ideological opposition to Iran. Increasingly the Iranian government thus began to support the weak Mujahiddin government and the factions which were to become 'reunited' in the later Northern Alliance. In face of the fast military advance facilitated by Pakistan's intelligence service ISI, Iran was under pressure not only to assist all opponents of the Taliban,⁴⁵ but to force them into one powerful alliance.

In general, Iran was viewed as the main supporter of the anti-Taliban forces despite the numerous difficulties involved, e.g. Tehran was unable to form an alliance between Dostum, Hekmatyar, Hizb-i Wahdat and the government of Burhanuddin Rabbani. In summer 1996, when Taliban troops approached Kabul, Iranian mediators played a significant role in building a new interim government,⁴⁶ an initiative that proved abortive because strong military groups like Dostum's Uzbeks and the Shiites of the Hazarajat were not part of this government, which led to the final conquest of Kabul by the Taliban in September 1996. Subsequently, Tehran became the most important supporter of the Northern Alliance because it was concerned about the growing influence of Pakistan, the fundamentalist Sunni version of Islam and the United States, which Tehran perceived as the main force behind the Taliban.⁴⁷ In addition, American oil companies like Unocal planned a pipeline from Turkmenistan to the port of Gwadar in Pakistan, a project pre-

⁴⁴ See also Rashid 2000: 177; 196–206;

⁴⁵ Rubin 1995: 142

⁴⁶ Sreedhar 1997: 98; Ahmed Rashid does not confirm Iranian attempts at conciliation between Hekmatyar and Rabbani.

⁴⁷ Ahmed Rashid reports that Iran established an air bridge from Mashhad to Bagram, where it flew in arms. According to Pakistani reports, 13 Iranian flights landed in Bagram daily. In addition, Iran organized the training of 5000 fighters led by Ismail Khan even prior to the Taliban take-over in Kabul in September 1996. Rashid 2000: 44–45; 53

judicing the eminent regional interests of the Iranian government in the long term, implying Iran's exclusion from future pipeline projects.⁴⁸

Another conflict between Iran and the Taliban arose over the distribution of the Helmand water; both sides revived the old dispute during a severe drought in 1998. Nevertheless, there was a limited cooperation on the local level, e.g. in the border areas where Iranian district and province officials had to come to some arrangements with the Taliban regarding water issues and the Baluch minority living on both sides of the Afghan-Iranian border in Nimruz, Sistan and Beluchistan. Iranian delegations frequently visited the border areas in order to settle conflicts over irrigation and border problems.⁴⁹ The Taliban partly satisfied their need for fuel (for their tanks) in Iran.⁵⁰ Furthermore, the Ostan-i Qods, which is connected to the holy shrine of Emam Reza in Mashhad, made investments in the transit trade running via Afghanistan and therefore got in indirect touch with the Taliban. Nonetheless, both sides were opposed to each other due to unbridgeable political and ideological differences which were decisive for Tehran's engagement in favor of the Northern Alliance until 2001.

In spite of all efforts to unify the anti-Taliban forces, Iran failed to do so. Even the Hizb-i Wahdat split up into two wings: the faction behind Karim Khalili on the one hand, and the Akbari group on the other. This significant split resembled more a collapse of the Hizb-i Wahdat and reflected the old division into Sepah and Nasr in the 1980s.

In summer 1998 the strained relationship between Iran and the Taliban escalated after the latter conquered the northern town of Mazar-i Sharif and killed eight Iranian diplomats and journalists, accusing them of supplying the opposition with weapons. This and the subsequent massacre of the Hazaras in Mazar as well as air strikes against Bamian brought Afghanistan and Iran close to war. The Iranian government moved troops to the eastern province near the Afghan border, and the subsequent maneuver was the largest military exercise in Iranian history.⁵¹ International observers thought an intervention by Iran or at least the occupation of Herat possible, since the Iranian public and the media called for revenge and a military solution to the Taliban problem. But pragmatism and willingness to compromise calmed down the calls for war in Iran. Finally, Tehran refrained from a military intervention due to the risk of a long conflict with Afghanistan, and even the actual number of soldiers participating in the maneuver near the border was

⁴⁸ Rubin and Ashraf Ghani 2000: 22; Rashid 2000: 5;

⁴⁹ Rzehak 2004: 41–43

⁵⁰ Ibid: 101

⁵¹ Ibid: 81–83; Rashid 2000: 75–76;

probably lower than the official announcements according to which approximately 250,000 soldiers were taking part in the operation. Moreover, the Taliban threatened to attack Iranian cities with Scud missiles from former Soviet stores. Indeed, a war against Afghanistan would have been an incalculable risk, and even air strikes against Taliban positions were regarded as ineffective and useless among Iranian generals and military strategists.⁵²

All these developments show Iran's extremely limited scope of action and strategic design in this phase of the Afghan conflict. Until the Taliban captured Mazar-i Sharif, Iran was unable to build a powerful and robust alliance between the various groups and parties which were facing strong military pressure after a series of defeats, and were therefore highly dependent on Iranian support. This and the dissolution of the Hizb-i Wahdat into two branches, one of which allied with the Taliban, mirrors not only the limits of Iran's influence even on its closest partners in Afghanistan, it furthermore documents the failure of the Iranian Afghanistan policy in the second half of the 1990s.

3. Investment and Reconstruction: Iran's policy in Afghanistan after the Taliban

When observing the relations between the two neighbors, it is apparent that Iran's government appreciated the removal of the Taliban from power in Afghanistan. Indeed, Iran can even be seen as a winner of the conflict in 2001 since it had supported the victorious Northern Alliance for years in its resistance against the Taliban. In addition, the so-called Cyprus Group⁵³ favored by the Iranian government participated in the negotiations in Bonn St. Petersburg to initiate a peace process in the war-torn country. Since the United States partly depended on Tehran's good will for stabilising and establishing a new order in Afghanistan, both sides entered into a tacit agreement on limited cooperation, first and foremost because of similar inter-

⁵² Jalali 2000: 154–156; See also Rashid 2000: 197

⁵³ Four groups participated in the first Afghanistan Conference in Bonn in 2001. Whereas the Rome Group represented the faction of ex-king Zahir Shah, the small Peshawar group led by Ahmad Gilani was favored by Pakistan. The Northern Alliance dominated by non-Pashtuns had invaded Kabul after the withdrawal of the Taliban and was led by Yunus Qanooni. The fourth, so-called Cyprus Group, named after its first meeting place, participated in the conference with three delegates. The Cyprus Group led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's son-in-law Humayun Jarir was dominated by exile politicians close to Iran and advocated a peacekeeping force under the command of Germany, Austria and the Scandinavian countries.

ests.⁵⁴ Both Washington and Tehran had an interest in peace and stability after decades of war in Afghanistan, though motivated by different factors. For Washington, the major priority was speedy success in the war against terrorism, whilst the Iranian government was driven by the prospect of pursuing its plans for regional cooperation facilitated by more stability on its eastern border and a new Afghan government favorably disposed to Iran. However, like many other international actors in Afghanistan, Iran is still suffering a blow to its image because of its assistance for various armed factions in the Afghan civil war. This is viewed by the majority of the population in Afghanistan as interference in internal affairs, despite the fact that this interference did not occur as directly as Pakistan's engagement with the Taliban in the 1990s. But beyond these animosities, both countries are linked with each other in manifold ways; for instance, west and northwest Afghanistan became incorporated into Iran's economy during the civil war.⁵⁵ For years Iranian companies have found a market there for their industrial products, whilst Iran's labor market is affected by a massive flow of migrants from Afghanistan.

Moreover, Iran is one of the most generous donors in Afghanistan and contributed more than 650 million dollars to the reconstruction process.⁵⁶ Six years ago, Iranian road building companies rebuilt the highway connecting Herat with the border town of Taybad over a distance of 120 kilometers. The highway was inaugurated in 2005.⁵⁷ The ever increasing volume of traffic visible to every visitor crossing the Afghan-Iranian border west of Herat, and the many Iranian traders applying for a visa in the Afghan consulate, was quite unthinkable in the recent past. Now, Iranian firms are not merely finding a market for their products, they are also investing in smaller companies and factories, establishing branches in Herat and Kabul, and building contacts to local traders and firms even in the provinces. Iran's government supports these increasing economic activities by contributing to the reconstruction of Afghanistan's infrastructure. For example, Iran and Turkmenistan guarantee a steady supply of electricity to Herat and parts of the northwestern provinces.⁵⁸ In addition, the establishment of a new transit route between Afghanistan and the Iranian harbor of Bandar-i Abbas is be-

⁵⁴ Reißner 2007: 17–19

⁵⁵ Schetter 2002: 123

⁵⁶ *Komak-i chehel-o panj milyārd tomānī-yi Īrān ba Afghānestān*. in http://bbc.co.uk/persian/afghanistan/story/2007/06/070609_kamian-afghanistan.shtml

⁵⁷ Wilde 2006: 20–21; Milani 2006: 251

⁵⁸ Milani 2006: 252

ing negotiated, and in summer 2006 the construction of a railway connecting Herat with Mashhad and Tehran started on both sides of the border.⁵⁹

The efforts undertaken to expand Afghanistan's infrastructure – especially the reconstruction of highways – is closely linked to a policy aiming at economic and political cooperation with the Central Asian republics and the setting up of a larger regional network, which embodies a new dimension in Iran's regional and foreign policy. Iran is abandoning its former one sided strategic considerations and focus on the Middle East and now lays more emphasis on closer relations with its neighbors to the east. This does not imply a decreasing interest in recent developments in Palestine, Lebanon and Iraq. The new approach of Iranian foreign policy is based on suitable alternatives to the former concentration on the Middle East and resembles a more balanced policy. In August 2006, Mahmud Ahmadi-Nezhad visited Tajikistan where he participated in a summit conference on regional issues together with his colleagues from Tajikistan and Afghanistan, stressing the partnership between the three Persian-speaking countries. On this occasion, he opened the tunnel constructed by Iranian engineers between Dushanbe and Khojand in the Tajik part of the Ferghana valley. Additionally, Iran and Tajikistan plan a joint dam project for the production of hydroelectric power which could free Afghanistan from its notorious energy crisis.

The new policy in regard to Afghanistan focuses on economic and political advantages. On the one hand, new markets for export products, transit routes, industrial and irrigation projects as well as the exploitation of natural resources (oil, gas, coal, uranium etc.) prompt Tehran to adopt this foreign policy approach. Iran's efforts to improve the infrastructure of Afghanistan are part of this strategy aiming at the establishment of a trans-regional cooperation with Central Asia and a sustainable regional integration within a common market. Besides, the role as generous donor in Afghanistan reflects Iran's own vision of freeing itself from the image as third world country, setting new standards as an industrial power and a development model for the entire region.⁶⁰ On the other hand, Iran's new strategy has to be interpreted as an attempt to establish a political counterbalance against the increasing influence of the United States. In this respect, the targets of the Iranian government have not changed fundamentally. Yet the means employed by Tehran have shifted from military support of armed factions to financial assistance.

⁵⁹ *Tamdīd-i khaṭ-i āhan dar Afghānestān. Kār-i doṣhwār wa por hazīna.* In http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/afghanistan/story/2007/04/070417_k-ra m-af-railway.shtml

⁶⁰ Reissner 2008: 6

From the Iranian point of view, the commercial engagement reflects the fact that Afghanistan is viewed as an integral part of Iran's sphere of interest and influence. According to Reissner, Abbas Maleki, the vice foreign minister until 1997, outlined so-called "Sub-Regions of Iran", amongst which Afghanistan ranked as a medium priority reflecting Iran's mapping of the entire region.⁶¹ Thus, Iranian policy-makers map their country as the geographical heart and potential regional power in a multi-angular world interlinking Central Asia, China and the Indian Subcontinent with the Middle East, the Persian Gulf, the Caspian and the Mediterranean region.

3.1 Tehran's refugee policy

Millions of people have taken refuge in Iran in the course of the Afghan conflict. The influx of refugees reached a first peak during the time of the Soviet occupation in the 1980s, while a second peak could be observed in the time of the Taliban. There are, however, no accurate figures on the Afghan refugees living in Iran. The UNHCR estimates their number of approximately one and a half to two million until 1992.⁶² These figures represent rough estimates, deviating considerably from the real number of Afghan refugees in Iran, because many people crossed the border illegally and were not included in any statistical survey. In addition, Iranian authorities always restricted the activities of the UN and NGOs. The Iranian administration did not permit the refugees to settle in large camps like in Pakistan. Instead, Afghan refugees were incorporated in the Iranian labor market where they became subject to many forms of restrictions which caused their marginalization in economic terms. Many refugees were forced to accept hard, unskilled and extreme poorly paid jobs.⁶³

The majority of Afghan refugees in Iran was and is made up of the inhabitants of the city of Herat and the Hazara.⁶⁴ Within Iran the province of Khorasan and the capital Tehran took the major burden,⁶⁵ hosting about one and a half million refugees living mainly in Mashhad and Tehran. Generally speaking, Afghan refugees were exposed to difficult circumstances and re-

⁶¹ Ibid: 8

⁶² Pohly 1992: 414–415

⁶³ Monsutti 2005: 123; In 1995–96 alone Afghan migrant workers contributed 4.4 % of Iran's GNP, i.e. \$ 7 billion of \$ 161 billion. Ibid: 128

⁶⁴ For the whole problem of migration of Hazara families to Iran see *ibid*: 136–142. For statistics regarding the ethnic composition of the refugee community in Iran see Abbasi-Shavazi and Glazebrook 2005a: 11

⁶⁵ Pohly 1992: 391; 415; Abbasi-Shavazi and Glazebrook et al. 2005a: 12

strictions that increased considerably over time.⁶⁶ Repatriation efforts carried out by the Iranian government led to an ever increasing feeling of insecurity on the part of the refugees.

As Monsutti puts it, Iran's policy towards Afghan refugees is not directly related to the political relations between Iran and Afghanistan but it aims at avoiding integration and long-term residence. Likewise, this refugee policy was not static but oscillated between tolerance and restriction.⁶⁷

Astonishingly, the number of Afghan migrants in Iran was much more stable than in Pakistan, where large refugee camps were set up at the beginning of the conflict. In 1990 more than 3 million Afghan refugees lived in Pakistan, whilst Iran hosted about 2.9 million Afghans. However, UNHCR figures for 1996 show more Afghan refugees (1.4 million) in Iran than in Pakistan. According to Monsutti, these figures are to a certain extent distorted for the migration of Afghans to Iran shows signs of a labor migration. The majority of Afghans lives scattered throughout the country; many of them work in small teams and groups of workers that move around from one building site to another. People who entered Iran before 1992 are still recognized as refugees and permitted to use the Iranian health and education system. Since the collapse of the Najibullah government in 1992, Afghans are not longer considered refugees.⁶⁸ However, recent research has shown the result that many migrants move constantly between Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan and many of them remit large portions of their income to relatives in Afghanistan.⁶⁹ Due to the political disturbances in Afghanistan, most of the refugees came several times in Iran to settle.⁷⁰ For others, especially the Shiite Hazara, living close to the tomb of the eighth Imam Reza in Mashhad seems to be another factor for a decision to stay in Iran.⁷¹

In the past, Iran undertook several attempts to organize a large-scale repatriation of Afghans living on its territory, but outbreaks of new fighting hampered those efforts.⁷² For example, a major attempt at repatriation was planned in 1995 but the Iranian government closed the border to Taliban-controlled Afghan areas in the western and southern parts of the country.

⁶⁶ Interviews in Herat on 02.03.06/09.03.06/13.03.06/15.03.06/25.03.06

⁶⁷ Monsutti 2005: 129; Stigter 2005: 15–17; 27–28

⁶⁸ Monsutti 2005: 126–127; Regarding the number of Afghan refugees in Iran see also Abbasi-Shavazi and Glazebrook et al. 2005a: 3.

⁶⁹ Monsutti 2005: 247; Abbasi-Shavazi and Glazebrook et al. 2005a: 5

⁷⁰ Stigter 2005: 10; 15

⁷¹ Abbasi-Shavazi and Glazebrook et al. 2005a: 48–50

⁷² Monsutti 2005: 130

Sealing the border put an end to the repatriation campaign.⁷³ The UNHCR estimated the expenditure of the Iranian state for the provision of health service, education, transport and basic goods to the refugees at \$ 352 million up to 2001. This expenditure increased domestic social and economic concerns, leading to a forced repatriation policy in the 1990s.⁷⁴ Since April 2007, more than half a million people have been sent back to Afghanistan, partly by force. At the same time, new migrants seeking job opportunities cross the Iranian border every day. In Afghanistan, however, the repatriation campaign did not remain without consequences, even triggering a political earthquake in Kabul where the parliament passed a vote of no confidence in the ministers for refugee and foreign affairs, Akbar Akbar and Rangin Dadfar Spanta. The members of the Wulesi Jirga justified this step by reproaching both ministers for having intensified the refugee crisis due to their lack of negotiation skills when bargaining with the Iranians over the solution of the refugee problem. Whereas the former resigned immediately, President Karzai decided to keep Mr. Spanta in office against the resistance of the Wulesi Jirga. Whether the repatriation that destabilized the Afghan government was intended as a tactical sting by the Iranian government cannot be assessed. However, the public in Iran has been calling for an expulsion of the Afghans for years and the government of president Ahmadi-Nezhad realized a need for action in the face of an acute economic crisis going hand in hand with unemployment and inflation.⁷⁵

3.2 Iran backing the Taliban? An attempt at a situational analysis

The Iranian political leadership was obviously confronted with a dilemma regarding Afghanistan as well as Iraq. On the one hand, the American-led invasions in both countries in 2001 and 2003 swept away two regimes with negative attitudes towards Iran, its arch enemies in fact. But on the other hand, the Iranian government sees itself surrounded by the US military and consequently demands a quick withdrawal of the US army from the region.⁷⁶ One may thus interpret attempts to strengthen Ismail Khan in west Afghanistan as a strategy for the establishment of a buffer zone between the Afghan-Iranian border and regions where American and NATO troops are still trying to defeat the Taliban and their al-Qaida allies. With Ismail Khan's

⁷³ Abbasi-Shavazi and Glazebrook et al. 2005a: 17

⁷⁴ Ibid: iii

⁷⁵ For the problems of Afghan refugees in Iran see also Abbasi-Shavazi and Glazebrook et al. 2005b; Stigter 2005; Sigter and Monsutti 2005

⁷⁶ Reissner 2007: 17

loss of power in 2004 and his appointment to the office of minister for water and energy, this strategy obviously failed, although the former governor of Herat still has considerable influence in his home region.

In 2007 several reports appeared according to which Tehran supports insurgents with weapons in Afghanistan against the US army as it does in Iraq, in order to increase the military pressure and bind the Americans to the fronts. In Iraq, this Iranian strategy has already been proven, but in Afghanistan? Iranian diplomats rejected these accusations, stating that Iran is highly interested in peace and stability in Afghanistan. Active support of the rebels in Afghanistan, whether through civil or paramilitary organizations close to the revolution leader Ayatollah Khamenei or the revolution guards, would contrast with all the goals pursued by Tehran and hamper and contradict the repatriation of the Afghan refugees. Muhammad Reza Bahramani, Iran's ambassador in Afghanistan, clearly denied these accusations, referring to the old cultural bonds between Iran and the western provinces of Afghanistan.⁷⁷

Although assistance and active support for the Taliban in terms of arms supply are not beyond the bounds of possibility, such double-dealing does not seem very likely, particularly considering that Tehran has basically no interest in creating instability on its eastern border and a comeback of the Taliban resulting in their seizure of power again,⁷⁸ because it would contradict Iran's strategy of envisaged embeddedness within a larger regional network, within which Afghanistan is supposed to play the role of a strategically important bridgehead. Yet, no blank statements can be made with regard to Iran's perceptions and attitudes. As long as Washington is engaged with the ongoing war in Afghanistan, Iran is hardly likely to become a next target on any military agenda. In a sense, the government in Tehran is not completely uncomfortable with the current situation beyond its eastern border, though active support of the Taliban seems not to be part of the Iranian strategy.

⁷⁷ *Meydān-i bāzī-yi qodrathā: nufūz-i Īrān dar Afghānestān*. in http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/afghanistan/story/2007/06/070615_s-herat-iran.html; *Rawābet-i Īrān wa Afghānestān panj sāl pas az soqūt-i Ṭālebān*. in http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/afghanistan/story/2006/08/060815_si-iran-afghanistan.html

⁷⁸ *Wokonesh-i mottakkī ba etehām-i hemāyat az Ṭālebān*. in http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/story/2007/05/070510_mf_reaction_uk.shtml; *Rawābet-i Īrān wa Afghānestān panj sāl pas az soqūt-i Ṭālebān*. in http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/afghanistan/story/2006/08/060815_si-iran-afghanistan.html

4. Conclusion

From the Iranian perspective, the development of bilateral relations with Afghanistan depended, as we have seen, on a complex interplay between home affairs and global factors. At first glance, the latter were often more decisive than the former. Indeed, Iran's regional policy, in which Afghanistan represents a comparably small element, depends greatly on international conditions. Furthermore, Iran's role in Afghanistan and its entire regional policy is inextricably linked to its strained relations with the United States.⁷⁹

During the last thirty years, several external aspects influencing Tehran's attitudes towards its neighbor could be discerned such as the war against Iraq, or the presence of NATO troops in Afghanistan since 2001. These have been and still are decisive for Tehran's political coordinates and benchmarks in Afghanistan. Developments in the internal affairs of both states depended on their role within the system of international politics and the policy of the superpowers. Iran adjusted its Afghanistan strategy repeatedly according to its present interests and conditions on the global level. A detailed analysis of Tehran's Afghanistan policies leads to the conclusion that Iran acted less actively than one might assume at first glance. Instead, it reacted according to current needs or threats to national interests in the short and medium term. It is remarkable that Iranian politicians were mostly guided by pragmatism and efforts to avoid a deep and active involvement in Afghan affairs.

When observing the developments against the background of the conflicts in the 1980s and 1990s, comparison with Iran's current Afghanistan policy suggests that it represents a more or less smooth continuance of strategies designed in former times – the 1960s and 1970s. Iran and Afghanistan are likely to slip into their traditional roles as bridgeheads between the Middle East and Mediterranean on the one side, and the Central Asian republics, the Indian subcontinent and the Far East on the other. To this extent Iran pursues its general strategic interests in Afghanistan. The orientation towards the Middle East and Iraq still remains important in Tehran's considerations, but it also looks in an eastern direction by adopting a more balanced regional policy than ever before. In contrast to these recent developments, Iran's interest in Afghanistan was rather marginal in the 1980s and 1990s. Tehran was diverted due to its conflict with Baghdad and the problems in the Middle East. Accordingly, Afghanistan played rather the role of Iran's backyard that could not be ignored completely by the government. Ignoring Afghanistan could have led to a total dominance of Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, both closely allied with Washington. And of course, Iran

⁷⁹ Reissner 2008: 5

could not afford to leave its neighbor to American and Pakistani influence. Iran's engagement was guided by considerations that led to the support of Shiite organizations devoted to the principles of the Islamic Revolution. Thus, Iran became a competitor of Pakistan and other Sunni players, which created an area of tension resulting in an escalation and extension of the Afghanistan war. In that phase, the design of the various strategies towards Afghanistan was affected by domestic affairs and global policy. Firstly, Iran continued to claim regional hegemony even after the Revolution in 1979. Iran supports its claims with its size, the high number of Iranians and the demographic development, its central geographical location from the geo-strategic perspective, and the energy resources to be found on its territory.⁸⁰ The subsequent efforts to influence the situation in Afghanistan, however modest, can be attributed to these claims and the fear of becoming confronted with increasing political power of US allies on the regional level.

Iran's means and opportunities to influence the situation and ongoing events in Afghanistan were always limited. It has never been able to play such an essential role as Pakistan, and one might speculate whether Tehran wanted to adopt a key position or not. However, its policy often resembled a painful split between the ideological principles of the Islamic Revolution and political realism – for instance in the 1980s, when the Iran-Iraq war bound military forces and created the need for at least economic assistance provided by Moscow. Two motives can be identified behind all shifts and changes of policy on Afghanistan: first, the desire to make its mark as major advocate for Shiite affairs, and second, the consideration of national interests. Indeed, Tehran strongly patronized the Afghan Shiites who were pushed under Iran's ideological umbrella and promoted as representatives of Iranian interests. But the Iranians failed to develop a coherent strategy that could have saved Iran's interests in the long term. This resulted in the recent distrust on the Afghan side, where some actors and politicians assume that Iran has political goals other than its usual announcements would suggest. As for Iran's role in the Afghan civil war, particularly in the 1990s, it is remarkable how limited Tehran's influence was, due to the power struggle among its Afghan clients. For this reason, Iran has never been master of the situation. Tehran attempted to pull all the strings at the same time, but got tangled up in doing so. It supported different organizations which eventually fought each other in opposing alliances. Here Iranian policy stands in contrast to Pakistan's actions. Islamabad focused more or less on support of one faction (in the 1980s and at the beginning of the 1990s it supported Hekmatyar's Hizb-i Islami and afterwards the Taliban) and, in comparison

⁸⁰ Reissner 2008: 5

to Iran, pursued an active forward policy. In spite of all advantages of multiple support for various Afghan actors, this weakened Iran's position considerably. Neither was it able to exercise significant influence on its Afghan partners, nor could it contribute to a pacification of the country. This was reflected in the inability to build reliable alliances among its clients even when they faced severe pressure in the civil war.

After the break caused by upheavals both at the domestic as well as the international level, Iran returned to a practical policy in Afghanistan characterized by a revival of former plans and scenarios. But the dilemma remains on both sides of the Afghan-Iranian border: in defining their foreign policy goals, both states will be considerably influenced by other international actors, which makes the future of their bilateral relations hardly predictable. The political performance and plans of the United States and Europe, e.g. the Iran-strategy of Barack Obama, as well as the negotiations on Iran's nuclear program and the developments in Pakistan will indirectly determine the Afghan-Iranian relations.

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