

Iran and the security of Afghanistan after NATO's pullout

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Abstract

Security is the main concern or *raison d'être* of any state. The Islamic Republic of Iran and the West have had common geopolitical concerns, with some convergence in Afghanistan. The first security priority of the U.S. in particular and Europe in general after the September 11 events has been coping with terrorism in its heartland, i.e. Afghanistan. This paper, after a short review of Iran's historical relations with Afghanistan as well as its geopolitical importance for Tehran, examines Iran's main security concerns stemming from Afghanistan and the consequent Iranian narration of those threats in the post-9/11 era. The article argues that Iranian policy and even ideals for Afghanistan's long-term security is similar to the Iraqi model: outright withdrawal of foreign troops and national self-reliance on security issues. Therefore, Iran welcomes NATO's drawback from Afghanistan in 2014 and implicitly cooperates with the West in Afghanistan for viable and indigenous security.

Keywords: Iran, Afghanistan, Security, the United States, Taliban, NATO

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Introduction

Afghanistan is a geopolitical fact for Iran, which Tehran never can or will be able to ignore. There are many commonalities in the two countries' history, politics, language, culture etc. In Afghanistan (and Tajikistan), a majority of people speak Persian. Almost all educated Afghans can speak Persian as their communication medium and consider it as a rich and civilized language. The two countries also have many commonalities from the historical perspective. Before 1747, when the first independent Afghan state was established, the two countries usually were considered as one political entity and their histories have been completely intertwined with each other. In the mid-14th to early 15th centuries, Herat - which now is Afghanistan's second important city - was considered as the Iranian capital in that era. At that time, as capital, it was considered as part of Greater Khorasan and boasted many fine and prestigious religious buildings with miniature paintings. The reign of Shahrokh in Herat was marked by this grandeur (Najimi, 1988: 29-34).

Until 1978, the two neighbors have had normal relations. After the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan and emergence of Islamic Revolution in Iran (1979), the two countries have experienced strains in their relations. Although Iran was undergoing a hard time in its post-revolution era and coping with war and political unrest, Tehran did not shy away from hosting millions of Afghan refugees and militarily-financially helping Afghan militias called Mujahidin. After the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88), Iran doubled its different assistances to the Mujahidin; hence, Iran was listed as number one in assisting the



Mujahidin in defeating the communist regime in Afghanistan (Millani, 2011).

Following the emergence of the Taliban and their brutal treatment of Afghanistan's people (1996), and especially the Shi'a minority, Iran retaliated by providing military and political backing to the counter-Taliban forces, which were named the "Northern Alliance". At that time, Iran was the only political shelter for Afghan Mujahidin led by late Burhaniddin Rabbani. This, as the U.S. was seeking to flirt with the Taliban and Pakistan had a strategic alliance with the Taliban. After the deterioration of Iran-Taliban relations after the massacre in Mazar-i-Sharif and merciless murders of Iranian consulate staff in that city, Iran almost went to war with the Taliban. However, for some strategic reasons, Tehran avoided waging conventional war with them. However, Iranian forces, and especially the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, launched a harsh missile and mortar attack against Taliban forces (Safavi Memoir, 2011).

After the September 11 events, and consequently the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, a new chapter has been opened in bilateral relations between Tehran and Kabul. However, unparallel and sometimes conflictive relations between Iran and the United States have overshadowed the two neighbors' relations. Iran has been a key factor in the overthrowing of the Taliban and has since then helped in reviving Afghanistan's economy and infrastructure. But unfortunately these positive aspects are often ignored. The bilateral ties have, however, become strained due to Iran's immigration policy and ups and downs in bilateral relations between Tehran and Washington (Roh Zende, 2005: 190-200).

Some U.S. politicians and military officials as well as some Afghani political elites believe that Iran is meddling negatively in Afghanistan by playing a double game in pretending to hold goodwill towards the Karzai government on the one hand and intangibly supporting Taliban on the other hand. Iran often denies these accusations, and the Afghan government under Hamid Karzai has



denied these accusations as well, calling Iran a “helpful brother and partner to Afghanistan” (Ashan, 2011). However, many high-level Iranian officials have not made their criticism of the foreign military presence in Afghanistan in past ten years secret.

Given the brief outline above, this paper seeks to answer the question: what is Iran’s vision of sustainable security in Afghanistan? In order to answer this question, we need an introductory clarification which is followed by two minor questions: 1) Why is Afghanistan important in Iranian foreign policy? 2) What are the main Iranian security concerns emanating from Afghanistan? The methodology of this article is based on an analytic-descriptive method.

I- Conceptual Framework

The theoretical framework of this article is geopolitics. In theory, geopolitics usually indicates the links and causal relationships between political power and geographic space (Mojtahed Zadeh, 2002: 128). It is often seen as a body of thought assaying specific strategic prescriptions based on the relative importance of land for regional and great powers. It is multidisciplinary in its scope, and includes all aspects of the social sciences with particular emphasis on political geography, international relations, the territorial aspects of political science and international law. The study of geopolitics includes the study of the ensemble of relations between the interests of international political actors, interests focused on an area, space, geographical element or ways, relations which create a geopolitical system. So, just being a neighbor to a broken state, it will bring about much security, political, economic, demographic and cultural repercussions to the neighboring countries.

As an Iranian political scholar aptly put, Afghanistan is important for Iran from 4 geo- perspectives: geopolitics, geo-culture, geo-economics and geo-strategy (Haji-Yousefi, 2011: 1-4). First, Afghanistan has a geopolitical importance for Iran and other intra and extra regional powers. The geographical facts require that Iran follow



its developments closely and considers its security as its own. During the Cold War, Afghanistan played a role as a political battleground between the two superpowers. However, after the end of the Cold War, Afghanistan's geopolitics has been more negative than positive (Saghafi-Ameri, 2011: 1-3). Hence, geopolitically, Afghanistan is relevant to the security and economies of Iran, Russia, China, Pakistan, and India as regional countries and the U.S. and Europe as extra-regional powers. The West views Afghanistan in terms of negative geopolitics, because it is currently the home of international terrorism, i.e. al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Most of its population is traditionalist and their anti-modern living, as a lifestyle, has not changed so much. Part of its economy is currently based on opium agriculture or foreign aid, though a recent geological survey has identified huge heavy metal and fossil fuel deposits that could transform Afghanistan into a country with the richest mines in central Asia. Furthermore, Afghanistan can be host to one of potential routes of energy from Central Asia to the international waters through Pakistan, which is unlikely to be operational in the near future due to security reasons and lack of infrastructure. Afghanistan also borders the homeland of an Iranian ethnic group named the Baluch. Iran, for its territorial integrity, keeps developments in Afghanistan under close watch. For these reasons, it has been viewed that Afghanistan is the neighbor of Iran and apart from the nature of politics and government in this country, Iran has to come to terms with its ongoing governing state (Haji-Yousefi, 2011: 1-4).

Geo-culturally, Afghanistan is also of great importance to Iran. It has many commonalities in terms of culture, civilization, language and ideology. Therefore, Iran has always been trying to benefit from geo-cultural potentialities to advance its goals and interests in Afghanistan. It is believed that culture will pave the way for political influence and Iran is well aware of this potential. For this reason, Iran is trying to bolster its cultural relations with Kabul in many ways. Afghanistan has a geo-strategic significance for Iran as well. The



influence and presence of great powers in Afghanistan has brought about serious perceived threats to Iran's national security. Iran has always intended to prevent the penetration and influence of great powers which are considered as an enemy in Afghanistan. Meanwhile, Iran hopes that by developing the scope of Iranian influence in Afghanistan, the axis of a Persian civilization zone as a strategic axis would be realized (Pishgahi-Fard, & Rahimi, 2008: 101-102).

Finally, Afghanistan has a geo-economic importance for Iran. It is a considerable economic opportunity for Iran and the scope of Iranian presence and influence in Afghanistan may provide the ground to achieve its economic interests there. Given Iran's flourishing capabilities in the auto industry, engineering, dam making etc, Afghanistan is a good place to make use of these capabilities. In 2009, Iran was the fourth largest investor in Afghanistan and this trend is continuing. Iranian investments have been made in construction of roads and bridges, energy, agriculture and healthcare. According to the Iranian Minister of Industry and Trade, Tehran-Kabul total trade is \$2 billion of which Iran's exports to Afghanistan amounted to \$1.5 billion in 2011 (Iran's Government Website, 2012). Although this figure is not huge, for the Iranian economy it is important. Iran exports oil products, cement, construction material, carpets, home appliances, and detergents. Afghanistan imports 90 percent of its needs, except agricultural products, from abroad and Iran. Hence, it can play the role of a special trade partner for Tehran in this regard. On the other hand, Iran is going to be the crossroad of West Asia, including central Asia, Caucasia, Russia and the Indian sub-continent, so Afghanistan can play an important ingredient in achieving this goal. Some part of highways and railways in the grand North-South Corridor is crossing through Iran and Afghanistan (Fair, 2010: 5); hence geo-economically, Afghanistan has a potential place in Iran's long-term plans.



II- Iran's security concerns

As noted above, Afghanistan is very important for Iran from the geopolitical and geostrategic perspective. There are several security concerns which Iran has been suffering from its eastern neighbor for three decades. All of them are important in themselves, but if we prioritize, they are as follows:

Anarchy in Afghanistan: Iran understands and already has sensed very well the disastrous consequences of a lack of a strong central government in Afghanistan. Many other security concerns stem from anarchy and lack of centralized and efficient government. For this reason, Iran above all prefers a central state to be strengthened in Afghanistan, even if it would not be fully along with Iranian ideology and political criteria. Hence, Iran has strong reasons to support the Karzai government, regardless of its political attitudes. So, some allegations indicating that Tehran seeks to weaken the ongoing fragile state in Afghanistan does not stand to reason and logic; unless it is believed that Iran engage in illogical and unreasonable behaviors. As Karim Sajjadpour put it rightly, Tehran has a strong national interest in a stable Afghanistan for a number of reasons: First, hosting more than three millions Afghan refugees over the last three decades, Iran is reluctant to welcome more as a result of continued instability and civil war in Afghanistan. Given Iran's already high rates of unemployment and intolerable burdens resulting from the hosting of Afghan immigrants, Iran is not in a position to host another influx of new ones. Second, Iran faces increasing rates of drug problems such as smuggling and addiction. Hence, it is imperative for Tehran to try to control the production and distribution of narcotics from Afghanistan toward Iran. This is not feasible if a responsible state does not exist in Afghanistan.

Lastly, a return to power of the inherently anti-Shi'a Taliban in Kabul is a threat to Iran. Thus, Iran strongly avoids actions that would lead to a return to anarchy in Afghanistan (Sajjadpour, 2008: 5-



9).

Ethnicity and secessionism: Afghanistan is a multi-ethnic society. Iran's policies toward ethnic politics in Afghanistan have largely been led by historical and cultural factors, including close ties to Tajik and Hazara groups opposed to the Taliban with radical chauvinist attitudes. Many Iranians continue to view western Afghanistan as part of Iran's historical Greater Khorasan region and it is viewed as a natural sphere of cultural, religious, and political influence for Tehran (Shojaee, 2008).

Although Iran's cultural and religious ties with Afghanistan have expedited Iran's political and military support to some Afghan groups, it has not been ethnic-oriented. For example, the Islamic Republic of Iran provided significant support to Afghan Mujahidin during their fight against the Soviet Union and Najibullah era, irrespective of which ethnic background they had. However, groups that were culturally close to Iran were welcome by the Iranian state. Moreover, Iranian military support to the Tajik-dominated Northern Alliance in its fight against the Taliban was based more on ideology than culture (Nazari, 2005: 12-14).

However, Iran's grand policy toward Afghanistan demonstrates that its approach toward it has not been shaped only by cultural, religious, or even ideological considerations. Iran has been pragmatic enough to understand that Afghanistan is a multi-ethnic society and a sustainable peace needs all its ethnicities to be included in the political structure of Afghanistan. So Iran defends implicit consociationalism, which now is implemented in Afghanistan's post-Taliban era. Iran wants to avoid an Afghanistan ruled monopolistically by those Pashtuns who have chauvinistic and fundamentalist orientations such as the Taliban. Iran is also realist enough to accept the Pashtuns' political supremacy in occupying the positions such as the presidency, as history of infighting among the Mujahidin in the 1990's has proved that the Pashtun cannot bear an Afghanistan which is dominated by other ethnicities such as Tajiks. Therefore, in Iran's view, the implicit



consociationalism which now is applied in Afghanistan is acceptable, so long as the Dari-speaking peoples as well as Shia Muslims have their voices heard in the grand decision-making machinery of the state (Shafiee, 2001: 827-51).

On the other side, three Iranian provinces border Afghanistan: Khorasan Razavi, Southern Khorasan, and Sistan & Baluchistan. The people of the first two ones are mostly from the Iranian mainstream ethnicity and completely loyal to the central government. But the last one is home to two groups; the Sunni Baluch and others (mainly Zaboli). A few Baluchi activists believe that non-Baluchis are over-represented in Baluchistan, while they are deprived of their religious and political rights. This impression has been shaped historically and since a long time ago has caused tensions over the allocation of resources between a few Baluchi terrorists and the central government. Some Baluchi activists have demanded the creation of their own separate state or at least autonomy, which has been resisted severely by the central government. Some of them have been seeking a united and independent Baluchistan covering Pakistani Baluchistan as well. For these reasons, some Baluchi activists have resorted to secessionist movements, which have brought about significant consequential violence (Ahmadi, 2004: 110-120).

In recent years, Iran has charged that the U.S. resorts to any means covertly and overtly to undermine Iranian national security in a bid to topple the Islamic Republic. Iran's main charge is that the U.S. supports the terrorist Jundullah group, led by Abdolmalek Rigi, who was arrested and later executed by Iranian authorities in June 2011. This group, which Tehran named as a terrorist gang, is a little-known group of Baluchi terrorists based along Pakistan's border with Iran. The group has carried out deadly and horrible bombings and barbaric attacks that have killed hundreds of Iranian soldiers and civilians (Christensen, 2011: 42-49).

Abdolmalek Rigi, in his confessions on Iranian state TV, claimed that the U.S. offered to give his group money and munitions



to help in their efforts to undermine the government of Iran. U.S. officials opined that Rigi made up those stories. But even some declassified U.S. sources have indicated that several years ago, the group had contact with American intelligence officers. In this regard, a former U.S. intelligence official said that a top Jundullah operative claiming to be acting on Rigi's authority approached CIA representatives in Pakistan and told them the group would help the U.S. against Iran by kidnaping leaders of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard and turning them over to the Americans" (Newsweek, 2011). Rigi, in his TV confession, also claimed that U.S. officers promised him unlimited military aid and funding for an insurgency against the Islamic Republic: "after Obama was elected, the Americans contacted us and they met me in Pakistan...they said they would cooperate with us and will give me military equipment, arms and machine guns. They also promised to give us a base along the border with Afghanistan next to Iran" (Truth is Treason, 2011). According to Newsweek, Jundullah had been secretly encouraged and advised by U.S. officials over a two-year period since 2007. But the U.S. officials denied the Newsweek report before congressional committees (Newsweek, 2011). In his confession, Rigi also commented that when his plane was intercepted by Iran, he was on his way to a meeting at a U.S. airbase in Kyrgyzstan with a senior U.S. official, identified in some Iranian news reports as Richard Holbrooke (Youtube, 2010). Although the U.S. officially called all of this "complete nonsense", there is no doubt that Rigi was heading toward Kyrgyzstan and there is no doubt that Kyrgyzstan's government and the Russian state did not invite him to go there. The big question is: who invited Rigi to go to Kyrgyzstan? To be sure, they were not Russian or Kyrgyz authorities. Therefore, anarchy and insecurity in Afghanistan creates an opportunity for strategic depth and shelter for such secessionist groups, which the Iranian government strongly tries to avoid (Christensen, 2011: 42-49).

Extraregional military presence: Iran considers the U.S.



military presence in its vicinity as hostile and NATO hostile as well. Iran wants the U.S. and its NATO allies to pull their troops out from Afghanistan outright. Given the U.S. and NATO's huge military build-up in Afghanistan, Tehran has a cynical view on this development and considers it inappropriate and disproportionate with the domestic threats in Afghanistan. Iran's fear of the U.S. military presence near its borders was bolded with the nearby new-built military bases such as the airbase being built by the U.S. in the desert area of Holang in Ghorian district of Herat province, just 45 kilometers from the Iranian frontier (Pak Aeen, 1 July 2012). Military estimations indicate that this base can put Iran's entire air space under American domination. Moreover, the Shindand Airbase in the same Herat province has been expanded and renovated, so it is considered as the second largest military airbase in Afghanistan after Bagram. Iran believes that the U.S., by resorting to the pretext of its "War on Terror", seeks to bolster its military build-up to contain Iran or, if possible, overthrow the Islamic Republic (Pak Aeen, 1 July 2012).

Talibanism: Any ideology needs a suitable atmosphere to flourish. This is also true for Talibanism. It is a kind of conservative, totalitarian and fascist narration of Islam, which could arise in the war-inflicted and Pashtun ultra-traditional lifestyle in Afghanistan. Although the Taliban, dominated by people with Pashtun identity, controlled Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001, they have arisen again, spreading terrorism inside Afghanistan and Pakistan. The origin of both the Taliban and al-Qaeda can be traced to the writings of Sayyid Qutb, an Islamic anti-Western thinker, and Deobandism. Their basic ideology is to establish a pure Islamic state, with focus on special and radical interpretation of Islam. They don't accept secular ideologies such as democracy, socialism and nationalism, which they consider as non-Islamic. The Taliban could combine their extremist ideology with Pashtun tribal codes, Deobandi School and Salafism (or Wahabism). This latter ideology is opposed to Shi'a Islam, which it regards as heretical. They see their role as a movement to restore Islam from



what they perceive to be innovations, superstitions, deviances, heresies and idolatries such as Shia Islam (Rashid, 2000: 80-90). So, they completely reject the religious and political doctrine of political and religious Shia Islam, especially the one that is applied in Iran. This approach explains why at the time of the Taliban's capture of Mazar-i-Sharif, the epicenter of Afghan Shia Muslims, local inhabitants began to be massacred. This also explains why Iran cannot tolerate entities such as the Taliban, let alone bolster them or make political overtures towards them (Sajjadi, 2007).

Hence, Iran believes that the U.S. charges of likely Iranian help to the Taliban are part of the stereotyped U.S. and British claims and their feverish psychological war. Iranians also argue that the U.S. and Britain's aim in indulging in such allegations are to insinuate that Iran is a threat to peace and stability; whereas in the Iranian view, the main threats are the American and British forces. Iran believes that the accusers are going to belittle Iran's humanitarian and constructive aid to Afghanistan, while many Afghan officials have acknowledged Iran's key role in Afghanistan's reconstruction and security. In Iran, it is also believed that the U.S. and Britain with these charges intend to cover up their failures in Afghanistan. In Iranian opinion, It is now over ten years that Afghanistan has been occupied by the U.S. and its allies, who in late 2001 decided to ditch their clients - the Taliban - but not only has security not improved, but violence and terrorism have actually escalated in Afghanistan (Sadat and Hughes, 2010: 31-51). Iran also rejects the reasoning of those charges. If anybody has just a little reflection of the historical and ideological animosity between Iran and the Taliban, it would be clear that the American charges are fully irrational and illogical.

Afghan Immigrants: Around three million legal and illegal Afghan immigrants (former refugees and asylum seekers) live in Iran and this long stay has caused lots of problems for them and their host during the last 30 years (Pak-Aeen, June2012). According to UNHCR statistics, around one million (1,019,700) legal registered Afghan



refugees lived in Iran in 2011 (UNHCR, 2012). According to the Iranian government's latest census, approximately one million legal and two million illegal Afghan immigrants reside in Iran. Many Afghan immigrants do not have an ID card and consequently cannot benefit from the facilities, which the registered ones do (Pak Aeen, June 2012). According to UNHCR statistics, more than 90 percent of Afghan immigrants live outside registered camps. Since 2002, nearly 886,000 Afghan immigrants have gone back to their country with the help of the Iranian government and UNHCR; however, a lot of the illegal immigrants have entered again and prefer to stay in Iran despite some unpleasant conditions (UNHCR, 2012).

Iran believes that the size of the Afghan population of around 90 countries in the world is less than 3 million. This is while Iran alone has been hosting around 3 million Afghan immigrants for more than 30 years. It has caused many social, economic and political problems for Iran; a burden which has been brought about by the superpowers in the Cold War and has lasted till now while Iran itself have had no role in the making and lasting of this crisis. So, if security is defined in broad terms, Iran feels a threat from this huge number of illegal immigrants and is eager for a viable and sustainable peace in Afghanistan. Iran officially considers the Afghan immigrants in Iran as "collective refugees", but practically does not recognize them as refugees on the basis of the 1951 Convention on Refugees because there is no threat or fear of persecution in Afghanistan anymore. Therefore, Iran expects that it should not be criticized for its treatment of Afghans because the 1951 convention does not apply to them anymore. Iran believes that the West and international organizations' criticism against Iran over its treatment of Afghans means that they want to do charity through Iranian pockets (Tahori, 2012).

Illegal Narcotics: Iran lies on a major drug crossroad between Afghanistan and Europe as well as the Persian Gulf states. Since 1979, campaigning against illegal narcotics has cost Iran dearly and



claimed the lives of around 4,000 Iranian security personnel (Rahimi, 2012). Iran's harsh campaign against drugs has put it as a leading country in combating narcotics smuggling; 89 percent of the world's total opium seizures happen in Iran (Mohammad Najjar, 2012). According to the UN Drug Control Program (UNDCP), despite the U.S. military presence, Afghanistan had 92% of the world opium market share by 2006 and this trend is continuing with some small fluctuations. UNODC report estimates that the Afghan opiate trade kills 100,000 people each year and has generated one million Iranian opiate addicts and has caused an HIV epidemic in Central Asia. So, these reports suggest that the Afghan opium trade is a serious threat to nations, especially to neighboring countries. Iran believes that the U.S. campaign in Afghanistan is not serious on drug issues. On the contrary, the production and trade of those drugs is increasing (World Drug Report, 2008).

Hirmand River: One of the contentious issues that once in a while gets escalated in Iran-Afghanistan relations is the Hirmand, or as Afghanistan calls it, Helmand River. The dispute between Iran and Afghanistan in this regard can be traced to the time when Iran was defeated by the British army in Afghanistan in 1857. At that time, Afghan rulers believed they could use the waters of the Hirmand River as they wish (Hafeznia, 2007: 31-40). In the 1940's, an era of amity appeared in the two countries' bilateral relation. This friendly atmosphere resulted in a treaty on the river's water in 1939. Yet once in a while, disputes reappeared because the Afghans refused to implement the treaty with goodwill. So, the two countries signed a new accord in 1973 that determined the specific amount of water that should flow into Iran: 26 cubic meters of water per second. Yet this agreement was not implemented with goodwill either. The political crisis from the late 1970's exacerbated this issue till the Taliban era. The Taliban categorically rejected any right of Iran to the Hirmand River. The overthrowing of the Taliban in 2001 and emerging friendly relations between the governments of presidents Hamid Karzai and



Mohammad Khatami brought this hope that two countries will overcome the problem at last. However, good relations between Kabul-Tehran did not culminate into improved water flows for Iran. “The least we expect is implementation of the accord signed between Iran and Afghanistan before the Islamic Revolution in Iran”, Iranian MP, Alaedin Borujerdi, opined on 1 September 2002 (Aghai -Diba, 11-Sep-2011).

A small amount of water from the Hirmand River reached Iran on 25 October 2002, but Iranian officials complained that it was not the amount agreed in documents. So, even in the post-Taliban era, the Hirmand River’s flow towards Iran has gotten turned on and off arbitrarily. Iranian officials on several occasions have noted that Afghanistan should honor the existing agreements regarding the river. Sometimes, the Afghan officials blamed drought for the lack of water, adding that they are waiting for seasonal rainfall so the water will resume flowing. In September 2004, Iranian and Afghan officials met in Tehran for a joint meeting within the framework of the 1973 Hirmand River treaty and drafted a protocol for implementation of the 1973 Accord. Iran believes that under normal circumstances, Iran's annual share is 820 million cubic meters from the Hirmand River. But this protocol has also not been implemented and the two countries’ contest on this issue is continuing. Iran believes that exacerbation of insecurity in Afghanistan negatively impair Iranian rights to the Hirmand River. In Tehran’s view, some Afghan political figures are using the Hirmand River as a bargaining chip and have misperceptions about its legal ownership. This is while according to international law, shared international rivers have special rules under which the upstream country cannot manipulate its water as she wants (Dabiri, 2011).

III- Long-term security in Afghanistan

In Iranian opinion, there are three competing alternatives for Afghanistan’s long-term security: Status quo, regional arrangement



and leaving Afghanistan's affairs to the Afghan people.

Iran has not put forward a specified and detailed initiative on Afghanistan's long-term security, but by content analysis of speeches of high-ranking Iranian officials, it is possible to draw the general vision and direction of it. First of all, it has to be taken into account that the Supreme Leader delineates the main Iranian foreign policy directions. So, if the Supreme Leader has a specific idea about an issue in foreign policy, it is imperative for Iran's executive branch and other operatives to follow and execute it. Iran's top officials have strongly opposed the U.S. and NATO military presence in Afghanistan and believe more in a domestic- regional solution to Afghanistan's woes.

Ayatollah Khamenei in his meeting with Afghan President Hamid Karzai opined that withdrawal of foreign military forces from Afghanistan is the wish of the Islamic Republic of Iran. He stressed that the people of Afghanistan deserve to take their destiny into their own hands. He also opined that the people of Afghanistan put up a brave fight whenever they were faced with foreigners who wanted to occupy their country. Here, he compared the U.S. military presence with the Soviet Union's military operations. He then opined: "The people of Afghanistan are suffering from the presence of American troops in their country because this presence will bring about suffering for the Afghan people and the entire region" (The Office of Supreme Leader, 2011). The Supreme Leader also referred to the U.S. president's promise to withdraw American troops from Afghanistan and stressed: "The Americans are after permanent bases in Afghanistan which is dangerous because as long as American forces are present in Afghanistan, genuine security will not be established" (The Office of Supreme Leader, 2011).

Along with the direction of the Supreme Leader, the Iranian president during his visit to Afghanistan opined that the U.S.-led military presence will not resolve any of the problems in Iran's eastern neighbor: "They are not successful in their fight against terrorists



because they are playing a double game. They themselves created terrorists, and now they say they are fighting them. It's not possible; we can see that. Billions of dollars spent [with] casualties on both sides" (The Christian Science Monitor, 2011).

Ahmadinejad said that Iran's recent bloodless capture of the man at the top of its most wanted list (i.e. A. Rigi) should serve as an example: "Iran captured one terrorist, and didn't kill anyone, it's possible. The fight against terrorism is not a military one; it requires the work of intelligence...we do not see the presence of foreign military forces in Afghanistan as a solution for peace in Afghanistan" (The Christian Science Monitor, 2011).

On another occasion, Iran's former Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki more tangibly outlined Iranian policy toward Afghanistan: "The solution to Afghanistan should not be sought in military confrontation and any action in Afghanistan should be based on realities". He also opined: "Iran believes that despite ten years of foreign military presence in Afghanistan, the security situation has deteriorated in the country" (Press TV, 2010). Hence, Tehran maintains that its proposal to bring back stability to Afghanistan is to recognize "vulnerabilities" and review and rectify policies adopted over the past ten years.

In Iranian opinion, it has been proved that the Western military presence has not brought about a viable peace and taking into account that the challenges for the ISAF and the U.S. is escalating, dovetailed with domestic pressure in the U.S. and the ISAF countries; it is imperative for all interested parties that Afghanistan's security system be revised. Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi clearly expressed the Iranian position that a long-term U.S. military presence in Afghanistan would fan regional insecurity and could plunge the war-torn country back into further turmoil. Salehi opined that the Kabul-Washington strategic partnership deal added to security concerns among Afghanistan's neighbors: "In regard to the Americans' long history of military intervention in other countries we



do not consider their intentions honest and this is a source of worry for us” (Mehrnews Agency, 2012). Therefore, in Iranian opinion, the status quo policy for maintaining security in Afghanistan, namely the military presence of the U.S. and NATO, is not applicable anymore.

Furthermore, the U.S. and many major European countries alike are in severe financial crisis, and cannot bear the further burdens of military engagement in different parts of the world, even though they want to. According to the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) the estimated cost for the U.S. war engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan together could reach \$2.4 trillion by 2017 (Capitol Hill Blue, 2007) . If this amount would be added to (as of September 9, 2011) the \$14.71 trillion dollars of the US gross debt, it delineates a terrible financial problem for America. This is at the same time as well-known institutes such as standard and poor’s already downgraded the credit rating of the U.S. and rate of economic crises such as unemployment has not shown any downward trends. With a critical financial condition and a fragile security situation in Afghanistan, it will be difficult for the U.S. government to garner domestic political support for its long- term and further military involvement (Tripathi, 2011).

Discontent with the European military presence in Afghanistan is increasing as well. According to one of the studies conducted by Strategic Studies Institute of the United States Army War College, in France support for the war has fallen to 34 % from 67%, in Germany it is 27%, and in the United Kingdom it is just above 30% and this rate is decreasing with the passage of time (Tripathi, 2011). The last blow was the French presidential elections after which the president-elect promised to the French people that he will draw back French soldiers from Afghanistan this year (2012).

On the regional level, although all regional countries have had security stakes in Afghanistan, for India, Russia and Iran in particular, the Taliban and Talibanism are a threat, especially given their linkage to terrorist organizations and totalitarian nature. Nevertheless, forming a regional group on Afghanistan is not an easy job. There are



historical and conflictive relations between India and Pakistan, the U.S. and Iran, and Russia and Afghanistan. So, it is unlikely that any regional arrangement will be formed and there is no willingness in this regard whatsoever. Therefore, a regional arrangement can play more of a role in the political areas.

So, the only remaining option is an indigenous security formula. Tehran believes that Afghanistan's security challenges cannot be solved merely through the presence of foreign forces. The local, regional, and global aspects of the conflict are intertwined and require an integrated strategy. But, the main focus should be on indigenous forces, if viable security is sought in this war-stricken country. The lack of such a vision has led many in Tehran to question whether the U.S.-led operation is aimed at securing Afghanistan or reshaping the whole of South-West Asia for the U.S. strategic long-term goals. In Tehran's opinion, the key to future success is the building of indigenous capacity to achieve a relative peace in Afghanistan. Building a democratic and independent government in Afghanistan with an Islamic configuration that can control its territory and win the trust of its people is the prerequisite for achieving peace. A stable government is a prerequisite for the eradication of violence and terrorism. To achieve peace, national reconciliation and the development of good governance is necessary. These efforts are especially necessary to facilitate the handover of security responsibilities from foreign to Afghan forces. However, the success of such a strategy depends on resources which foreign powers contribute. Here, the Western powers can play a role by contributing in the building-up of the infrastructure of Afghanistan and uproot the roots of violence in this state.

Therefore, “organizing indigenous capacity for efficient, effective service delivery and economic development is the only viable long-term strategy to ensure stability” (Jalali, 2010: 57-66). However, constructing a strong Afghan National Army (ANA) and an efficient Afghan National Police (ANP) have faced problems such



as the process of recruitment, illiteracy of recruits, poor professional leadership, a low-quality officer corps, desertions, drug addiction, competing factional and ethnic loyalties, corruption, retention, and long-term sustainability where the West can play a positive role.

So, Iran believes that the immediate focus must be on training the ANP to a high enough standard of professionalism and discipline that they are able to defend themselves against insurgent attacks and protect the population. The inadequate training of police forces, and the resultant high casualty rates they sustain in battle, contributes to a poor retention rate of officers in a force that will need to expand significantly in size and capability in order to meet its challenges. Meanwhile, attracting the cooperation of local communities in fighting insurgency and facilitating local security is very important. Given the traditional structure of Afghanistan, the co-opting of local communities will complement the formal forces for enhancing security. However, such collaboration will be possible only if the central government adopts inclusive policies (Jalali, 2010: 57-66). Iran maintains that Afghanistan's transition from conflict to a viable peace demands the creation of a set of institutions, military and enforcement capacities, resources, and provisions for the rule of law; not foreign combat military forces which have led to fatalities for both occupiers and innocent Afghans.

Conclusion

Iran is one of the main stakeholders in Afghanistan's security and more than any other country, closely follows its developments. Given a set of geo-cultural, geo-political, geostrategic and geopolitical interests which influence Tehran's behavior in Afghanistan, a stable and anti-terror state is in line with Iranian national interests which ironically and naturally coincide with the Western security objectives. However, these stakeholders' formula for coping with the security challenges in this country is different.

The author believes that given the mutual constructed U.S.-Iran



animus, history has overshadowed any overt cooperation between these two states in Afghanistan; in other words, the West cannot expect things from Iran selectively where its interests are at stake. On the contrary, Iran has its special vision of viable security in Afghanistan that is mostly based on domestic and intra-regional mechanisms excluding the extra-regional powers, and especially the United States. However, this vision has some commonalities with Washington's grand strategy. Nevertheless, the failure of any explicit Tehran-Washington cooperation on Afghanistan does not indicate that Iran is a troublemaker in the way of the NATO troops, so long as they suppress insurgency over there and do not commit adversary actions against Iran. Tehran, for its perceived national interests and given the definition of its political identity, is unlikely to engage overtly or directly with the U.S. on Afghanistan or do a grand bargain. So long as Iran does not consider NATO and the American military presence in Afghanistan as impending security threats, it looks like Iran will not support any insurgency in Afghanistan whatsoever because it will suffer from anarchy in Afghanistan more than any other country. Iran's formula for indigenous security in Afghanistan is based on such sensitivity.

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