

# Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs

<http://aia.sagepub.com/>

---

## Iran's Policy towards Afghanistan: In the Shadow of the United States

Shahram Akbarzadeh

*Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* 2014 1: 63

DOI: 10.1177/2347797013518402

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://aia.sagepub.com/content/1/1/63>

---

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* can be found at:

**Email Alerts:** <http://aia.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

**Subscriptions:** <http://aia.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

**Reprints:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

**Permissions:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

**Citations:** <http://aia.sagepub.com/content/1/1/63.refs.html>

>> [Version of Record](#) - Apr 1, 2014

[What is This?](#)

# Iran's Policy towards Afghanistan: In the Shadow of the United States

Journal of Asian Security  
and International Affairs  
1(1) 63–78  
© 2014 SAGE Publications India  
Private Limited  
SAGE Publications  
Los Angeles, London,  
New Delhi, Singapore,  
Washington DC  
DOI: 10.1177/2347797013518402  
<http://aia.sagepub.com>



**Shahram Akbarzadeh<sup>1</sup>**

## Abstract

The fall of the Taliban in 2001 presented Iran with a complex strategic situation. On the one hand, the removal of the Taliban promised to open up new opportunities for Iran to expand its influence, based on historical and cultural ties between Iran and Afghanistan. On the other hand, the 2001 operation brought the United States (US) to the region. The large scale entrenchment of US troops on the eastern borders of Iran presented tangible security risks, dominating Iran's strategic outlook. The closure of the US base in Uzbekistan and the planned withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan have offered an opportunity to policy makers in Iran to recalibrate bilateral relations with Afghanistan. But the Iranian leadership appears too slow in readjusting its strategic outlook, keeping Iran's policy towards Afghanistan hostage to its hostility towards the US.

## Keywords

Iranian foreign policy, Afghanistan, Constructivism, Realism, United States

## Introduction

The fall of the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2001 offered Iran an unexpected opportunity to repair its relations with its eastern neighbour and expand its influence. The Taliban had been vehemently anti-Shia and anti-Iran during its 5-year rule. In 1998, following the killing of eight Iranian diplomats in Mazer-e Sharif, Iran mobilized troops on the Iran-Afghan border, leading to nervous speculation about an impending war. The fall of the Taliban ended a tense phase in relations between Iran and Afghanistan. Yet it has not heralded a close bilateral partnership. Instead Iran is reported to pursue a contradictory, even confused, policy in Afghanistan,

---

**Shahram Akbarzadeh**, Centre for Citizenship and Globalisation, Deakin University, Burwood, Australia. Email: [shahram.akbarzadeh@deakin.edu.au](mailto:shahram.akbarzadeh@deakin.edu.au); Web: <http://www.deakin.edu.au/arts-ed/centre-for-citizenship-and-globalisation/research/research-projects/islam-in-irans-foreign-policy>

arming rival leaders and remnants of the Taliban while providing financial aid directly to the presidential office. How may this contradictory approach be understood? How does Iran view its interests in Afghanistan and how does it pursue them? The missing piece of this jigsaw is the United States (US). The fall of the Taliban was due to a massive US operation which brought US troops to Central Asia. This resulted in the stationing of US troops right next to Iran, as well as the establishment of military bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. This military presence has made a significant impact on Iran's risk assessment and adversely affected its ability to capitalize on new opportunities in Afghanistan.

This article examines Tehran's behaviour and attitude towards Afghanistan between 2001 and 2012. In this period Iran went through a change of government. The rise of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to the office of presidency in 2005 reflected the ascendancy of political conservatism among the elite and widespread disillusionment with the reformist President Mohammad Khatami. The demise of Khatami and his brainchild 'dialogue of civilizations', which was aimed at building bridges of trust and confidence between Iran and the US, may be attributed to the seismic implications of the September 11 attacks. The War on Terror, which led to regime changes on either side of Iran and Washington's hardened position on the Islamic regime in Iran made it impossible for Khatami to pursue his reform agenda. The government of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad adopted a much more aggressive posture towards the US, mirroring George W. Bush's Iran policy. Heightened concerns with US plans were the all-consuming feature of Ahmadinejad's presidency.

It is doubtful that the US ever intended to use Afghanistan as a springboard for regime change in Iran. But that impression weighed heavily on the minds of the Iranian leadership, as their repeated protests about the continued US presence in Afghanistan suggests. That strategic concern with the US provided the backdrop for relations between Iran and Afghanistan. Iran's position on Afghanistan did not experience change with the commencement of the Ahmadinejad government, a further indication of a shared view on the fundamental geostrategic assessments of the region.

This article examines the explanatory merits of two key International relations (IR) approaches to Iran's policy towards Afghanistan. After exploring fluctuations in Iran's position, the article concludes that while Realism and Constructivism both offer insights into Iran's foreign policy making dynamics, neither has the exclusive capacity to offer a coherent account of Iran's approach to Afghanistan. Instead Iran's policy appears to be influenced by a mix of both geostrategic and ideational priorities, each balancing and keeping the other in check.

## **Approaches to Iranian Foreign Policy**

The literature on Iranian foreign policy making is generally divided between Realism and Constructivism. The realist approach presents Iran as a rational and pragmatic actor in the international domain. Iran's foreign policy choices are

*Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, 1, 1 (2014): 63–78

accordingly based on a calculus of risk and opportunities. Anoush Ehteshami (2002, p. 284), a leading scholar of international relations and Iranian foreign policy argues, 'Revolutionary Iran has always been a "rational actor" in the classic Realist mold. Even some of its excesses can be seen as calculated risks or opportunity responses to difficult situations'.

In this perspective, Iran's foreign policies promote Iranian national interests in a rather harsh international setting. And survival is the primary goal. Foreign policy choices in Tehran, therefore, may be seen as a record of a nervous state 'jockeying for position' within a system of power imbalance (Rose, 1998, p. 149). The realist perspective gives little scope for internal divisions or discord within the state to affect foreign policy. Instead the state is viewed as a cohesive unit that responds to external pressures and opportunities. The application of Realism to Iran challenges the notion of the 'ideological state' used to explain Iran's behaviour in the international domain. The latter approach was favoured by the neo-cons, most prominently during the administration of George W. Bush, which in turn led to a flurry of publications to point to the 'ordinariness' of the Iranian state.

Emphasizing the rational thinking process behind Iran's choices, Kayhan Barzegar (2008, p. 149) argues that 'the roots and aims of Iran's foreign policy are defensive, mainly pragmatic and based on state oriented and strategic issues'. Brenda Shaffer (2006, p. 219) makes that point even more poignantly: 'the material interests of the state and, specifically, of the ruling regime serve as the overwhelming determinants of Iran's foreign policy choices; cultural and ideological goals are rarely promoted at significant expense to those material interests'. Other scholars do not share this categorical rejection of culture and ideology as a factor in the Iranian foreign policy thinking. Suzanne Maloney (2002, p. 89), a long time scholar of the Middle East and Iranian foreign policy warns of the 'hazards of exaggerating or ignoring the religious component of Iranian identity'.

Indeed the alternative Constructivist interpretation of state interactions is a response to the realist presentation of states as unitary, calculating and identity-less entities. Constructivism draws attention to the role of culture and identity in informing each state's self-identification and its behaviour in international relations. This approach does not dismiss the realist concern with structural factors in international relations, but argues that such systemic factors are interpreted and understood through the normative social, cultural and historical context of each state (Nia, 2010, p. 152). Constructivism is gaining favour among scholars on Iran's external relations. Suzanne Maloney may be noted as a foremost scholar of Iran who applies Constructivism to make sense of Iran's behaviour in the international domain. She argues that Iran's identity is based on a number of pillars: Persian Nationalism, Islamism and Anti-Imperialism. All are present and influence foreign policy making, but to varying degrees (Maloney, 2002). Maloney (2002, p. 90) explains shifts in Iran's external behaviour, most dramatically the shift away from its close alliance with the US since the 1979 revolution, by pointing to the ascendancy of one aspect of state identity at the expense of others: 'The shift toward an Islamic conceptualization of the state [from the earlier Persian

Nationalist conception] and the use of an ostensibly religious rationale in institution building informed Iran's approach to its neighbours and its interpretation of particular threats and opportunities.' In the same vein, S.J. Dehghani Firouz Abadi (2008, p. 15) identifies Iran's identity as incorporating a 'fraternal commitment towards all Muslims, and unsparing support to the oppressed of the world'. This identification is believed to govern Iran's relationship with its neighbours, and its antagonism towards the US.

Despite the obvious advantages of this conceptual approach over Realism in explaining behaviours, which at times may seem irrational and counter-productive, Constructivism alone cannot take account of the many contradictions in Iranian foreign policy. Indeed, at times, Iran has pursued policies, which seem to vindicate Realism. For example, during the territorial conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia, Iran sided with Armenia, a Christian state, against Muslims in Azerbaijan. This choice was clearly informed by concerns about the impact of an Azeri victory on Azeri pride among the nearly-13 million Azeris in Iran and the potential for the growth of an Azeri separatist movement that would jeopardize Iranian territorial integrity. In the same vein, Iran remained conspicuously silent on Russia's war in Chechnya (1994–1996), whilst it may have been expected to protest the obvious injustice of the Russian warfare against Muslim Chechens. But such a protest would have risked undermining bilateral relations between Tehran and Moscow at a time when Iran was desperate to recover from the devastation of the Iran–Iraq war and had very few friends outside its borders. Similarly, Iran's commitment to the peace process in Tajikistan which brought the 5-year civil war to an end in partnership with Russia, the European Union and the United Nations sent a signal to Russia and its neighbours that Iran did not wish to redraw the region and challenge power relations in Russia's backyard.

## Post-Taliban Afghanistan

Given the above contradictions and the difficulties in adopting a unique conceptual framework to make sense of Iranian foreign policy thinking and behaviour, how illuminating are Iran's relations with Afghanistan? Eastern parts of Iran and western parts of Afghanistan share a common pre-modern history. Both countries share the Persian language, albeit with parochial variations (Farsi and Dari), and the religion of Islam, but different sects (Shia and Sunni), and common cultural traits. Of all its lateral neighbours, Afghanistan is the only state that comes so close to Iran's sense of Islamo-Persian identity. Yet, Afghanistan has been little more than a peripheral distraction for Tehran. Afghanistan only gained significance in the mind of Iranian policy makers due to the intervention of superpowers in that state and its consequent implications for Iran. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan sent between 1 and 1.5 million Afghan refugees to Iran while the American-led toppling of the Taliban put up to 101,000 US troops on Iranian doorsteps (*BBC News*, 18 June 2013).

*Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, 1, 1 (2014): 63–78

The fall of the Taliban in December 2001 offered Iran significant opportunities to expand its reach and soft power in Afghanistan on the basis of shared culture and history, as well as a rapprochement with the US. Iran's initial response to the reconstruction of post-Taliban Afghanistan was very positive. In 2002, Iran pledged US\$570 million to Afghanistan's reconstruction. This significant gesture was not lost to the US or the Afghans. President Hamid Karzai publicly thanked Iran for its 'boundless assistance in helping bring peace and stability to Afghanistan' (*BBC News*, 25 February 2002). Expectations were raised that Afghanistan could prove a catalyst for improvements in US–Iran relations.

However, the possibility of an about-turn in US–Iran relations was soon lost. The George W. Bush depiction of Iran in January 2002 as a key player in an axis of evil was greeted with disdain in Iran. It ultimately derailed President Mohammad Khatami's efforts to use the diplomatic opening provided by the toppling of the Taliban and the shared interest of the US and Iran in stability for Afghanistan as a catalyst for some form of rapprochement (Sadat & Hughes, 2010). This experience threw doubts on Iran's continued commitments to Afghanistan's recovery from decades of conflict. But it did not stop it.

Iran has become a major economic partner for Afghanistan. In 2006 Iran offered a further US\$100 million aid to Afghanistan, making it a major donor to Afghanistan's recovery. At the present time, more than 2000 Iranian companies operate in Afghanistan in different sectors. Infrastructure projects are especially important due to their long-term impact and capacity to connect Afghan economy with that of Iran. This is an important prospect for the landlocked Afghanistan. A new road construction project connects Afghanistan to the Iranian port of Chahbahar, offering an important international trade route (*Press TV*, 13 July 2013). Economic integration is also evident in the field of energy. Iran provides half of Afghanistan's oil consumption. According to an Afghan official, trade with Iran represents about half of Afghanistan's trade (Hersh, 2012). Although, this trade tends to be one-directional, with Iran flooding the Afghan market with its own products (Nader & Laha, 2011). It is important to note, however, that international sanctions on Iran have adversely affected Afghanistan. This is most notable in the financial sector. The falling value of the Iranian currency (Rial) and the contraction of the Iranian economy have put pressure on Afghan refugees whose remittance is integral to the Afghan economy. According to *The Wall Street Journal*, the Afghan Deputy Minister of Trade and Commerce Muzammil Shinwari has drawn attention to the devastating impact of sanctions: 'we are hugely concerned over the Rial's drop ... many Afghans are living and working there and will likely be the first to lose their jobs' (Abi-Habib, 2012).

Iran has established good, even friendly, relations with the government of Hamid Karzai. President Karzai is of Pashtun background and came to office with the backing of the US. The Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki articulated the Iranian position in terms which tend to support the Constructivist approach. He emphasized the shared history of Iran and Afghanistan, declaring that Iran would continue to cooperate 'with Afghanistan in line with our religious beliefs, good neighbourliness and common interests' (Islamic Republic News

Agency, 2007). The incumbent President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad echoed this approach when he insisted that Iran and Afghanistan 'stood next to each other as brothers and friends' (*Al Jazeera*, 14 August 2007). The notion of brotherly ties and neighbourly relations has been conspicuous in Iran's official declarations in relations to Afghanistan. In 2011 Mohammad Hoseyni, Iran's Culture and Islamic Guidance Minister said that 'Iranians consider Afghans their brothers', and pointed to the countries' history of standing beside one another over the centuries (Islamic Republic News Agency, 2011). President Karzai has reciprocated these sentiments (Islamic Republic News Agency, 2003).

Iranian support for the Karzai administration has been an important political stabilizer. In its early formative years, Tehran encouraged Shia and non-Pashtun ethnic groups to recognize and join the Karzai government. Tehran's appeal to Tajik and Uzbek leaders in the Northern Alliance was an important factor for political stability of the Karzai government. It is also reported that Iran sends bags of cash to Afghan political leaders, including the Karzai presidential office (up to €500,000) to cover administrative expenses (Najafizada & McQuillen, 2010). Western media viewed this as a corrupt practice, but Afghan officials have argued that such cash donations are necessary for the daily running of the Afghan administration, including buying the loyalty of regional warlords and tribal elders. However, according to *The New York Times*, some Afghan and Western officials have accused Iran of using this economic influence 'to help drive a wedge between the Afghans and their American and NATO benefactors...[and to] poison relations between Mr. Karzai and the US' (Filkins, 2010). Karzai has acknowledged that these sums of cash are given in return for 'good relations' with Iran (Abi-Habib, 2012).

Iran has a major stake in a stable Afghanistan. According to a Senior Iranian diplomat, 'Iran has to try to create a stable Afghanistan. The more insecure this country is, the more harm Iran would face from Afghanistan' (*Etemad Supplement*, 13 November 2009). Indeed the danger of a Taliban comeback appears to be taken seriously in Tehran, which explains Iranian efforts to shore-up anti-Taliban forces. In addition to bolstering the Karzai government, Iran supports Shi'a and Tajik groups throughout Afghanistan as a counter-weight to the Taliban (Nader & Laha, 2011; Rhode, 2006).

Iran has specially focused on central and western parts of Afghanistan, home to Shia Hazara and Persian speaking Tajik communities, developing economic and trade ties. Western Afghanistan has duly enjoyed considerable stability and economic growth. Iran provides 24-h power supply to parts of Herat, and invested in infrastructure development projects (Abi-Habib, 2012). This has been of obvious benefit to local communities. Commercial contracts between Iran and local companies ensure that funds remain in the region and improve the local economy. Investing in Herat, the Iranian officials purport, is very natural. According to former-Iranian President Hashemi Rafsanjani, Herat was once an 'integral part' of Iran (Cited in Milani, 2006, p. 252).

Stephen Carter argues that Iran views 'western Afghanistan as an extension of its traditional sphere of economic and political influence...[and as] an integral

buffer zone for its national security' (Carter, 2010, p. 980). This perspective sheds new light on Iran's investments in Herat. It also gives some credence that Iran is trying to establish a Shia buffer on its eastern borders by working with the Hazara Governor of Herat Seyyed Hussein Anwari, to accommodate returning Hazara refugees from Iran (Schmidle, 2008).

## Culture as Unifier or Divider

Iran has consistently reminded its Afghan interlocutors and international observers that the two countries share the same Persian–Islamic heritage. With the addition of Tajikistan, the three states represent the modern incarnation of Persian culture and civilization. Following the 2006 trilateral summit of Persian speaking states, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad declared that the three people 'are united by a common language, culture and religion. It's impossible to divide us by borders or talk about our differences' (*Seattle Times*, 27 July 2006). He also pointed to the shared Persian New Year Nouroz festivities as a symbol of Persian solidarity (Yuldoshev, 2011).

It is in Iran's interest to down-play sectarian differences, as it has done more broadly in its policy statements in relation to the rest of the Muslim world. Tehran is keenly aware that promoting its Shi'a sect would result in its isolation and ostracization in the largely Sunni Muslim world. Instead the official line has been the promotion of common Muslim solidarity to overcome its sectarian isolation. In the case of Afghanistan, this is even more urgent as the sectarian fault line runs not only between the two states but also within Afghanistan, with devastating implications for the Shia Hazara community who were targeted by the Taliban. Noting the history of sectarian tension, President Ahmadinejad warned that internal divisions damage all Muslims, declaring that 'we should not kill each other as we are Muslims and believe in one God. We should act and think like true Muslims' (As reported by Yosufzai, 2012).

Iran's public preference for Islamic identity as a unifying factor, however, does not come at the expense of its patronage of the Shia Hazara or the Tajik community (whose Persian ethnic lineage is shared with Iranians). Links with local Shia and Tajik chiefs date back to the era of Afghan resistance against Soviet occupation and survived the staunchly anti-Iran rule of the Taliban. In 1998, following the Taliban capture of Mazer Sharif and the killing of Iranian diplomats, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei issued a warning to the Taliban. In that message, he highlighted the plight of the Hazara under the Taliban yoke. The Supreme Leader of Iran openly identified with the Hazara community:

I say to the courageous Hazara youths and innocents and other innocent Afghan tribes: My dear ones, with a bleeding heart and tearful eye, I am carefully monitoring the bitter incidents and the difficult tests which you are undergoing at this time, and feel your sufferings with all my being. Rely on God Almighty and seek His help; bravely stand



against the savages and have faith in divine promises. For, after hard times, easy times come ... God willing, with God's help, you will be triumphant over your enemies and, with the steadfastness and courage which are well known to all, you will rub the noses of the God-forsaken enemy in the dirt. May God alleviate your hardship and ours, as well as that of Muhammad and his family (*Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran Network*, 14 September 1998).

In another case, Iran offered refuge to Ismail Khan, the Tajik governor of Herat, after the Taliban pushed his forces back in 1995. Ismail Khan later regained the governorship of Herat after the Taliban's demise and subsequently moved to Kabul, and served as the Minister for Water and Energy. Ismail Khan's returning fortune is reported to be largely due to Iranian backing. According to Iranian media reports, four truckloads of cash to Khan in Herat after the fall of the Taliban allowed him to buy the loyalty of his forces (Johnson, 2004). Afghan Intelligence sources further claim that Iran has provided arms, cars, trucks and cash to the Uzbek General Abdul Rashid Dostam, who controls the northern Afghan city of Mazar-i-Sharif (Engel & Whitaker, 2002). The level of Iranian support for different individuals is difficult to ascertain. In 2010 an Afghan MP accused the Second Vice President Mohammad Karim Khalili, a Hazara and former leader of the Hazara party of Hizb-e Wahdat, of receiving funds from Iran (Sarwary, 2010). Similar accusations have been levelled against Vice President General Mohammed Fahim, a former Northern Alliance chief (Milani, 2006, p. 250). Although Iran has denied these allegations, the history of patronage and the precedent of cash payment to the presidential office make such claims plausible.

## Challenges

Iran's policy towards Afghanistan has been made complicated by two inter-related factors. The first and foremost is the presence of US troops and the security risk that they pose, and the second is the predominance of Pashtun politicians in Afghanistan's central government. Iran views the US as its enemy number one and has been deeply concerned with the stationing of US troops in what it regards to be its neighbourhood. President Ahmadinejad put that point of view bluntly: 'your country is located on the other side of the world, so what are you doing here?' (*BBC News*, 10 March 2010). This view is shared across the political spectrum in Iran. For example Hashemi Rafsanjani, a former president who has been critical of Ahmadinejad's presidency and most recently backed the reformist candidacy of Hassan Rouhani, has echoed the above assessment. He has accused the US of attempting to 'make a nest for themselves here' in Central Asia (Cited in Milani, 2006, p. 248).

In 2011 a US spy drone crashed nearly 160 km deep inside Iranian territory. The drone was reportedly launched from the US airbase in Shindand in Heart

(Farmer, 2012). This incident highlighted, once again, the tangible security risk posed by US troops in Afghanistan and vindicated an earlier assessment by Commander in Chief of Iran's Law-Enforcement Police, Brigadier-General Esma'il Ahmadi-Moqaddam when he stated that the US was Iran's greatest threat in Afghanistan (Iranian Fars News Agency Website, 2006).

As a result, Iran has taken steps to undermine the US in Afghanistan (Shelala, Kasting & Cordesman, 2013) generally by providing arms and support to Taliban fighters. In 2011, a captured Taliban commander claimed to have received US\$50,000 from Iran to destroy the Kamal Khan Dam in Afghanistan (Aman, 2013). This was one claim in a string of reports and accusations by US officials about Iran's sponsorship of the Taliban. The Iranian authorities vehemently deny such accusations. The state-controlled daily newspaper, *Keyhan* called such claims a 'political joke' (Karimi, 2008). The paper referred to the history of the Taliban's attack on Shia communities, proclaiming that Iran could not possibly support the Taliban because they are 'the flag bearers of anti-Shia thought and the symbol of a backward interpretation of religion' (Karimi, 2008). Such protests of innocence, however, have not dispelled serious charges about Iran's behaviour in Afghanistan.

Most observers argue that Iran pursues a contradictory policy in Afghanistan. George Tenet, Director of the CIA, captured the essence of that assessment when he said 'While Iran's officials express a shared interest in a stable government in Afghanistan, its security forces appear bent on countering the US presence. This seeming contradiction in behaviour reflects deep-seated suspicions among Tehran's clerics that the US is committed to encircling and overthrowing them' (Cited in Milani, 2006, p. 248).

Furthermore, growing predominance of the Pashtun ethnic group in Afghanistan poses an uncomfortable challenge for Iran and undermines references to a common cultural/linguistic heritage. Although Pashtun leaders have historically ruled Afghanistan, Persian culture (in the form of language and poetry) enjoyed significant standing. Persian was the language of instruction at schools and Kabul University, with the political elite and intelligentsia well versed in Persian culture. Subsequent to the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, Iran established links with Mujahideen leaders, some of whom were Tajik and played a key role in the establishment of Post-Soviet government in 1992. For example, Burhanuddin Rabbani served as president until the Taliban removed him in 1996, while Ahmad Shah Masoud, the celebrated Mujahideen commander, served as Defence Minister. Both men were courted by Iran. Both fell victim to suicide bombers at different occasions, depriving Iran of important allies.

The public standing of Persian culture in Afghanistan was adversely affected with the rise of the Taliban. The Taliban came from the Pashtun community in the south and in the process of eliminating their opponents effectively pushed other ethnic groups to the margin. While this trend was somewhat reversed when the Northern Alliance, which drew its support from Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazara,

helped the US operation to remove the Taliban, the rise of Hamid Karzai, himself a Pashtun, to the position of the presidency has ensured that Pashtuns retain their significant role at the top. The US preference for a Pashtun to lead the post-Taliban Afghanistan may not have been consciously directed at forestalling Iranian influence. But it has had a tangible impact that is keenly felt in Tehran (Milani, 2006, p. 250). Indeed, many Pashtuns are suspicious of Tajiks and Shi'a minority groups in Afghanistan and their links with Iran, a by-product of the incomplete nature of Afghan state-building, which has failed to unify the diverse Afghan population and create a common national culture and bond (Clark, 2012; Rubin, 1992). As a result, religious and ethnic resentment has never been too far beneath the surface.

The literature on Afghanistan is increasingly referring to a *Pashtunisation* process. Hafizullah Emadi has pointed out that the central government has over-emphasized the weight of Pashtuns and Pashtun culture in public life, at the expense of other ethnic groups in Afghanistan (Emadi, 1997, p. 363). One example was the official move to use the Pashtun word for university in reference to Kabul University, which had been widely known by its Persian name. An important question here is the ethnic composition in Afghanistan. There is no accurate demographic statistics as the current census does not ask about linguistic or ethnic characteristics. Some critics see this as a deliberate choice by the Karzai government to exaggerate the weight of Pashtuns (Karimi, 2011). In 2007 *Oxford Analytica Daily Brief Service* (12 January 2007) reported:

Northern leaders still fear the 'Pashtunisation' of the country—a Pashtun domination of public offices and political power. For example, in November, northern leaders were outraged by Karzai's proposal to hold a cross-border assembly for Pashtuns on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistan border to discuss the prospects for peace in the south. Tajik, Uzbek, and Turkmen leaders interpreted the proposal as a call for the expansion of Pashtun power. They demanded that similar meetings be hosted with their ethnic counterparts in neighbouring countries.

Iran is concerned about the *Pashtunisation* of the Afghan polity. This process reached its peak under the Taliban rule, when anti-Shia and anti-Persian propaganda was routine (Roy, 1998). And the Iranian authorities remained concerned about the marginalization of their traditional allies in the post-Taliban era. These tensions came to the fore during the 2004 presidential election, as Iran launched an anti-Karzai campaign. The Dari programme of the state-run Mash'had Radio, which is broadcast to northwest Afghanistan, maintained an unambiguous anti-Karzai line. It accused Karzai of leveraging the US support to marginalize his opponents, an illicit reference to the Tajik presidential candidate Yunus Qanuni. Radio Mash'had told its Dari-speaking listeners: Karzai has 'imposed an unfair contest on other candidates by taking advantage of government resources and enjoying the support of the US and other Western countries' (Cited in Samii, 2004). This was a low period in Iran-Afghan relations. But relations gradually

improved, partly due to growing disagreements between Karzai and the US (*Javan*, 18 August 2010). In the 2009 Afghan presidential elections, Iran maintained a much less biased position. Subsequent reports about the Iranian supply of cash to Karzai suggest that Iran is no longer working openly to discredit the Afghan government and sees value in mending fences (Boone, 2010, p. 4).

## Making Sense of Iran's Policy

Karim Sadjadpour argues that Iran has shown a tendency to sacrifice its national interests in order to pursue an obsessive anti-US policy. Arming Taliban forces to sabotage the Afghan state and challenge US troops clearly undermines stability on Iran's eastern borders. But Iran is also noted as a sponsor of the Afghan government. Indeed President Hamid Karzai was among very few heads of state that attended the inauguration ceremony of Iran's new president in September 2013 (Deghan, 2013). This has led Sadjadpour (2008, p. 5) to describe the Iranian behaviour towards Afghanistan as 'schizophrenic'. How could one account for Iran's simultaneous support for the central government and the Taliban fighters?

Two inter-related factors may explain Iran's behaviour: the limited significance of Afghanistan as an international partner in the eyes of Iranian policy makers, coupled with their hyper-sensitivity towards the US. Although it may be difficult to grasp the reasons for under-estimating the significance of Afghanistan, the recent history of Iran-US relations provides plenty of reasons for Iran's obsessive attitude. A series of clash points that start with the role of the CIA in deposing the popularly elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq in 1953, to the US patronage of an unpopular monarchy that was overthrown in the 1979 revolution, to US support for Iraq during the 8-year Iran-Iraq war, to the George W. Bush depiction of Iran as part of the 'Axis of Evil', to the stationing of US troops on states bordering Iran and the repeated threat of 'regime change' are the highlights. Ongoing tension around Iran's nuclear programme and the sanctions regime that has crippled Iran's economy are constant reminders for Iranian statesmen that the US presents a formidable, if not existential, threat.

Iran's history of confrontation with the US casts a long shadow on Iran-Afghan relations. George Tenet captured the complexity of the Iran position, noted above. While Tenet draws attention to the existence of multiple players within the Iranian polity, which do not always work in unison, other observers are less forgiving (Cited in Milani, 2006). Shelala et al. (2013, p. 4) argue that Iran sees the US commitment to Afghanistan as a weakling: 'Afghanistan is important to Iran in that Afghan territory provides a venue for low-cost sabotage of US interests.' In a recent study, Posch (2013, p. 21) makes a similar assessment; in his view, rather than focusing on the merits of Iran-Afghan bilateral relations, Iranian policy makers see Afghanistan as a medium for 'sending political signals to the Americans'. This assessment echoes earlier warnings by the US Ambassador to Afghanistan Zalmay Mamozy Khalilzad who accused Iran of

using Afghanistan as a 'bargaining chip'. He noted Iran is signalling the US that it can 'make life difficult' for the US in Afghanistan, should Washington move against Iran (Cited in Varner, 2008).

It is clear that no one conceptual approach can explain this behaviour. From the Constructivist point of view, Iran's anti-imperialist revolutionary identity overrides other considerations. The pursuit of its anti-US agenda is regarded to be a pillar of identity for the Islamic regime. Anti-Americanism has been a staple of political discourse in Iran for three decades and has been woven into the fabric of the ruling regime. As a result, Iranian foreign policy towards its neighbours is channelled through this prism, resulting in seemingly contradictory measures. The all-consuming fire of revolutionary zeal overshadows brotherly love for Afghanistan and a sense of cultural affinity. This approach holds important explanatory power, but it is not clear why Iran is continuing to pursue contradictory measures in the face of the imminent departure of the US from Afghanistan, risking good relations with its neighbour.

On the other hand, the Realist approach also offers relevant insights. From a geostrategic point of view Iran is justified to feel threatened by the presence of the US troops on its doorsteps. The history of antagonism between the two countries and the record of the US in affecting regime change are tangible evidence for the Iranian leadership that the American threat is real and present. Continued sanctions on Iran serve as a reminder that the Obama administration is no less hostile to Iran than George W. Bush. As a result, Iran's support for local chiefs and remnant of the Taliban bands in Afghanistan is aimed at undermining the central government and the US in Afghanistan. The Realist interpretation of Iran's strategic position, however, is less robust in explaining why Iran is courting Hamid Karzai.

## Conclusion

The Realist and Constructivist approaches to international relations offer useful insights into Iran's behaviour, although neither appears to tell the whole story. Iran's record in relation to Afghanistan suggests that policy makers in Tehran navigate between ideational and pragmatic agendas. On the ideational plain, Iran sees significant justifications for close bilateral relations. The shared cultural history and the weight of Persian civilization offers Iran a natural gravitational pull to draw in Afghanistan (and Tajikistan). Iranian politicians make frequent references to their shared Persian heritage and portray relations with Afghanistan as nothing but close and brotherly. This ideational approach has some inherent limitations in relation to the ethnic make-up of Afghanistan. The assertive political ascendancy of Pashtuns challenges the cultural status of Persian. To address this challenge, Tehran also promotes the sense of Muslim unity between Iran and Afghanistan, although that is also not free of complications due to the sectarian divide. The shared Islamic identity, promoted by Iranian authorities, is presented as a solid bond for the two countries' friendship. Iran's repeated references to the

combination of Persian and Islamic identities point to certain assumptions about Tehran's ability to draw and maintain Afghanistan in its orbit.

Yet, Iran's relations with Afghanistan have been complicated, even contradictory. The ideational trend in policy making is constantly checked by a realist risk-assessment that gives significant attention to the US. As a result, Iran has been forced to pursue a double policy. On the one hand, it pursues an ideationally based policy that promotes stability in Afghanistan through greater integration. On the other, it remains hypersensitive towards the US and the presumed Washington intent on regime change. This security-infused framework is a major inhibiting factor and undermines Tehran's ability to engage with Kabul much more positively than it has.

The rise of Hassan Rouhani to the office of the president may help streamline Iran's position and remove some of the past contradictory behaviours. Rouhani took office in July 2013 with a popular mandate to end crippling sanctions and has made history by talking with the US president. Although it is too early to offer an assessment on Iran–Afghan relations under Rouhani's leadership, all indications suggest that Iran would favour more business-like relations with its eastern neighbour. This would mean less interference in the domestic affairs of Afghanistan and consolidation of official ties with Kabul.

### Acknowledgements

This article was made possible with the support of the Australian Research Council (Project ID: FT120100032), and the resourceful research assistance of Dara Conduit.

### Note

1. Shahram Akbarzadeh is Research Professor of Middle East and Central Asian Politics at the Centre for Citizenship and Globalisation, Deakin University, Australia. He currently holds an Australian Research Council Future Fellowship, examining Iran's foreign policy making. Professor Akbarzadeh has published extensively in refereed and popular outlets and is a regular public commentator on Central Asia, Iran and Islam in the West. He can be contacted at: shahram@deakin.edu.au

### References

- Abadi, S.J.D.F. (2008). Emancipating foreign policy: Critical theory and Islamic Republic of Iran's foreign policy. *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs*, 20(3), 1–26.
- Abi-Habib, M. (2012, 22 July). Iran sanctions take toll on Afghans. *The Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved 2 October 2013 from <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10000872396390444330904577539000025751884>
- Al Jazeera*. (2007, 14 August). Iranian leader in Kabul for talks. Retrieved 2 October 2013 from <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/asia/2007/08/2008525123011202788.html>
- Aman, F. (2013, 7 January). Afghan water infrastructure threatens Iran, regional stability. *Al-Monitor*. Retrieved 2 October 2013 from <http://www.almonitor.com/pulse/tr/contents/articles/opinion/2013/01/afghanwatershortageiranpakistan.html#ixzz2aPC2HZ5I>

- Barzegar, K. (2008). Iran's foreign policy in post-invasion Iraq. *Middle East Policy*, 15(4), 47–58.
- BBC News. (2002, 25 February). Afghan leader thanks Iran. Retrieved 2 October 2013 from [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle\\_east/1838368.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/1838368.stm)
- . (2010, 10 March). Mahmoud Ahmadinejad attacks US for Afghan 'Double Game'. Retrieved from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8559084.stm>
- . (2013, 18 June). Q&A: Foreign forces in Afghanistan. Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-11371138>
- Boone, J. (2010, 3 December). WikiLeaks: Afghan MPs and religious scholars 'on Iran payroll'. *The Guardian*. Retrieved 23 September 2013 from <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/dec/02/afghan-mps-scholars-iran-payroll>
- Carter, S. (2010). Iran's interests in Afghanistan and their implications for NATO. *International Journal*, 65(4), 977–993.
- Clark, B. (2012). Iranian foreign policy towards Tajikistan and Afghanistan during Ahmadinejad's presidency: The rising salience of Persian national identity. *OAKA*, 7(13), 75–105.
- Deghan, S.K. (2013, 5 August). Hassan Rouhani sworn in as President of Iran, urging moderation and respect. *The Guardian*. Retrieved 23 September 2013 from <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/aug/04/hassan-rouhani-sworn-in-president-iran>
- Ehteshami, A. (2002). The foreign policy of Iran. In Hinnebusch, R., & Ehteshami, A. (eds), *The foreign policies of Middle East states* (pp. 283–310). Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner.
- Emadi, H. (1997). The Hazaras and their role in the process of political transformation in Afghanistan. *Central Asian Survey*, 16(3), 363–387.
- Engel, M., & Whitaker, B. (2002, 8 February). US and Iran accused of bribing rival warlords. *The Guardian*. Retrieved 23 September 2013 from <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/feb/08/iran.afghanistan>
- Etamad Supplement*. (2009, 13 November). Afghanistan security and stability in Iran's interest—Senior Diplomat.
- Farmer, B. (2012, 10 May). Iran threatens to expel Afghan refugees if Kabul ratifies US strategic partnership. *The Telegraph*. Retrieved 29 September 2013 from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/afghanistan/9256602/Iran-threatens-to-expel-Afghan-refugees-if-Kabul-ratifies-US-strategic-partnership.html>
- Filkins, D. (2010, 23 October). Iran is said to give top Karzai aide cash by the Bagful. *The New York Times*. Retrieved 29 September 2013 from [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/24/world/asia/24afghan.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/24/world/asia/24afghan.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0)
- Hersh, J. (2012, 5 September). Afghanistan's trade deal with Iran complicates U.S. aims. *Huffington Post*. Retrieved 29 September 2013 from [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/05/09/afghanistan-trade-deal-iran\\_n\\_1504062.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/05/09/afghanistan-trade-deal-iran_n_1504062.html)
- Iranian Fars News Agency Website. (2006, 11 May). US troops in Afghanistan biggest threat in Iran's Eastern border—Commander.
- Islamic Republic News Agency. (2003, 18 October). Karzai: Iran, Afghanistan would remain good friends.
- . (2007, 5 November). Iran supports Karzai government.
- . (2011, 13 March). Insecurity of Afghanistan to affect other states, Iran Culture Minister.
- Javan*. (2010, 18 August). Iran's harvest season in Afghanistan.
- Johnson, T.H. (2004). Ismail Khan, Herat, and Iranian influence. *Strategic Insights*, 3(7), 1–10.

- Karimi, M. (2011). *The West side story: Urban communication and the social exclusion of the Hazara people in West Kabul*. MA Thesis, University of Ottawa, Canada.
- Karimi, P. (2008, 7 May). Washington and empty hands. *Keyhan*.
- Rose, G. (1998). Neoclassical realism and theories of foreign policy. *World Politics*, 51(1), 144–172.
- Maloney, S. (2002). Identity and change in Iran's foreign policy. In Telhami, S., & Barnett, M. (eds), *Identity and foreign policy in the Middle East* (pp. 88–116). London: Cornell University Press.
- Milani, M.M. (2006). Iran's policy towards Afghanistan. *The Middle East Journal*, 60(2), 235–256.
- Nader, A., & Laha, J. (2011). *Iran's balancing act in Afghanistan*. Santa Monica: RAND National Defense Research Institute.
- Najafizada, E., & McQuillen, W. (2010, 25 October). Karzai says Iran provides 'Transparent' financial aid in Euros or Dollars. *Bloomberg*. Retrieved 7 January 2014 from <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2010-10-25/karzai-says-iran-provides-transparent-financial-aid-in-euros-or-dollars.html>
- Nia, M.M. (2010). Understanding Iran's foreign policy: An application of holistic constructivism. *Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations*, 9(1), 148–180.
- Oxford Analytica Daily Brief Service*. (2007, 12 January). Afghanistan: North–south split blights state power. Retrieved 7 January 2014 from <https://www.oxan.com/display.aspx?ItemID=DB131603>
- Posch, W. (2013). *The third world, global Islam and pragmatism: The making of Iranian foreign Policy*. Berlin: German Institute for International and Security Affairs.
- Press TV*. (2013, 13 July). India says Iran's Chabahar Port best for transit of goods to Afghanistan. Retrieved 29 September 2013 from <http://www.presstv.com/detail/2013/07/18/314416/irans-chabahar-indias-top-transit-choice>
- Rhode, D. (2006, 27 December). Iran is seeking more influence in Afghanistan. *The New York Times*. Retrieved 31 August 2013 from <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/27/world/asia/27afghan.ready.html?pagewanted=all>
- Roy, O. (1998, October). Fundamentalists without a common cause. *Le Monde Diplomatique*. Retrieved 31 August 2013 from <http://mondediplo.com/1998/10/04afghan>
- Rubin, B.R. (1992). Political elites in Afghanistan: Rentier state building, rentier state wrecking. *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 24(1), 77–99.
- Sadat, M.H., & Hughes, J.P. (2010). U.S.–Iran engagement through Afghanistan. *Middle East Policy*, 17(1), 31–51.
- Sadjadpour, K. (2008). *Iran: Is productive engagement possible?* Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
- Samii, B. (2004). Tehran talks out of both sides of mouth on Afghan election. *EurasiaNet*. Retrieved 2 October 2013 from <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/civilsociety/articles/pp101704.shtml>
- Sarwary, B. (2010, 27 July). Afghan TV station is closed down after Iran protests. *BBC News*. Retrieved 3 October 2013 from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-10776654>
- Schmidle, N. (2008, Winter). Democracy is not a postcard. *Virginia Quarterly Review*.
- Seattle Times*. (2006, 27 July). Iranian volunteers set off to fight Israel. Retrieved 1 August 2013 from [http://seattletimes.com/html/nationworld/2003155070\\_lebiran27.html](http://seattletimes.com/html/nationworld/2003155070_lebiran27.html)
- Shaffer, B. (2006). The Islamic Republic of Iran: Is it really? In Shaffer, B. (ed.), *The limits of culture: Islam and foreign policy* (pp. 219–239). Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.



- Shelala II, R.M., Kasting, N., & Cordesman, A.H. (2013). *US and Iranian strategic competition: The impact of Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and Central Asia*. Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies.
- Varner, B. (2008, 16 July). Iran pours cash into Afghanistan, seeking leverage against U.S. *Bloomberg*. Retrieved 1 August 2013 from <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=newsarchive&sid=aNaIqaODpvrU>
- Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran Network*. (1998, 14 September). Iran: Khamene'i warns of major regional conflict over situation in Afghanistan.
- Yosufzai, Q. (2012, 22 November). Ahmadinejad wary of US presence in Afghanistan. *Pajhwok Afghan News*. Retrieved 1 August 2013 from <http://www.pajhwok.com/en/2012/11/22/ahmadinejad-wary-us-presence-afghanistan>
- Yuldoshev, A. (2011, 28 March). *Emomali Rahmon meets with Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Tehran*. Tajikistan: Asia-Plus Media Group. Retrieved 3 October 2013 from <http://news.tj/en/news/emomali-rahmon-meets-mahmoud-ahmadinejad-tehran>