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Author(s): Zahra Rostami

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Invigorating Tehran-Kabul Relations

ZAHRA ROSTAMI¹

In 2001, Iran helped the U.S. unseat the Taliban from power.² In the wake of the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan, Iran remained supportive of the Afghan government and maintained a distance from the Taliban. But as the tensions between Iran and the U.S. grew over the former's nuclear program, Iran gradually distanced itself from cooperation with the U.S. in Afghanistan's security. For instance, it has provided safe havens for the Taliban's Mashhad Shura and had provided financial and military support to the group in recent years.³ More recently, Iran held direct talks with Taliban in December 2018.⁴

This paper delves into Iran's role in shaping peace and stability in Afghanistan and argues that Tehran's role has a lot to do with its concerns regarding its own security and the actors in Afghanistan, particularly the U.S., which have the potential to pose threats to it.

Iran's Concerns Regarding Security in Afghanistan

Two factors are responsible for Iran's concerns regarding insecurity in Afghanistan. First, a less stable and insecure Afghanistan will prevent Iran from developing strategic ties with Afghanistan for two reasons: if Afghanistan is not stable enough, Iran's priorities and concerns—such as those pertaining to

1. Zahra Rostami is a Senior Vulnerability to Corruption Assessment Officer at Afghanistan's Independent Joint Anti-Corruption Monitoring and Evaluation Committee.

2. Sadat, Mir H., and Hughes, James P. "U.S.-Iran Engagement Through Afghanistan." Middle East Policy Council. <https://www.mepc.org/us-iran-engagement-through-afghanistan>

3. Giustozzi, Dr. Antonio. "Afghanistan: Taliban's organization and structure." LandInfoCountry of Origin Information Centre, August 23, 2017. https://landinfo.no/asset/3589/1/3589_1.pdf

4. "Iran Hosts Taliban Peace Talks, Eying Opening after US Draw Down." The Telegraph, January 01, 2019. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/01/01/iran-hosts-taliban-peace-talks-eyeing-opening-us-drawdown/>

water sharing, illicit narcotics trade, and refugee issues-will not be addressed comprehensively. Resolving some of the cross-border social problems and crime such as trafficking of drugs and humans requires commitment and strong governance on both sides. A dependent, insecure and weak government in Afghanistan will find it difficult to maintain a robust relationship with its neighbors and resolve bilateral issues peacefully and sustainably. Besides, Iran has cultural and linguistic affiliations with some ethnic groups in Afghanistan such as the Tajiks and the Hazaras whose rights will be preserved in a secure and stable Afghanistan.⁵

Second, the presence of the U.S.-Iran's ideological adversary-in its eastern neighbor's territory is perceived as a threat by Iran.⁶ Tehran's assumption is that greater peace and stability in Afghanistan would result in a U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, and that it would reduce the latter's security concerns emanating from the U.S. presence that is deemed by Iran to be a threat to the Islamic Republic.⁷ Iran views the U.S.'s presence in Afghanistan as the latter's pretext to develop capabilities to mount a strategic attack on Iran and effect a regime change. If the U.S. pulls out of Afghanistan, Iran has a better chance of developing a more productive relationship with Afghanistan to resolve some mutual issues.⁸ Likewise, as long as Afghanistan remains under direct protection and support of the U.S. security wise, it will be extremely difficult for Iran to expand and strengthen its relations with Afghanistan. Thus, Iran's engagement in bilateral negotiations with Afghanistan remains tricky, even on matters where the two neighbors need to solve cross-border issues among themselves.⁹

Additionally, the presence of the Islamic State (IS/Daesh) is an additional threat that Iran senses along its eastern borders. Iran believes that the emergence of Daesh in Afghanistan is a Western plot similar to the case in Syria where

5. Jafari, Dr. Mossa, Lecturer at the Kateb University, interview by author, Kabul, Afghanistan. January 13, 2019.

6. Nader, Alireza; Scotten Ali G.; Rahmani, Ahmad Idrees; Stewart, Robert, and Mahnad, Leila. "Iran's Influence in Afghanistan." Rand Corporation, 2014. https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR600/RR616/RAND_RR616.pdf

7. Jafari, Dr. Mossa, Lecturer at the Kateb University, interview by author, Kabul, Afghanistan. January 13, 2019.

8. Khavati, Dr. Shafaq. lecturer at Avicenna University, interview by author. Kabul Afghanistan. January 10, 2019.

9. Ibid.

Iran worked closely with Russia to defeat the IS. Iran believes that Daesh is a phenomenon expandable to other states. There are many anti-Iranian government Baloch insurgent groups operating along Iran's eastern borders. According to Iran, Daesh's rise in Afghanistan combined with the existence of Baloch insurgent groups will exacerbate the security situation along its eastern borders and would eventually permeate into other parts of Iran. Thus, overall, Iran's primary concerns regarding insecurity in Afghanistan relates to the potential of the insecurity in Afghanistan for impacting Iranian security.¹⁰

The Trajectory of Iran's Engagement with Peace and Security Issues in Afghanistan

The friction between Iran and the U.S. over the latter's nuclear activities and the former's rivalry with Saudi Arabia and Pakistan has, to an extent, served as factor discouraging Iran from security cooperation with Afghanistan. This has manifested itself partly in Iran's attitude towards the peace process in Afghanistan. Although Iran has participated in several frameworks and platforms aimed at peace and stability in Afghanistan, it has never been the key actor running the process.¹¹

U.S.-Iran tensions have contributed to shaping Tehran's relations with the Taliban. Iran has always been in favor of a stable government in Afghanistan, at least after 2001. It assisted the U.S. in overthrowing the Taliban despite the fact that it was not an ally of the U.S., and in the early years of the post-2001 period, Iran maintained a distance from the Taliban. However, this has not continued in the recent years. Although it is unclear as to precisely when Iran's rapprochement with the Taliban began, Tehran has been sanctioned by the U.S. and its Gulf allies over accusations of providing financial and military support to the terrorist group at least from October 2018.¹² Moreover, Iran provides safe havens for the Taliban's Mashhad Shura, which, according to some estimates, commands over 10% of the Taliban manpower, and is based in Mashhad, Iran.¹³

At present, the latest phase of the attempt to negotiate peace with the Taliban, led

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

12. Ramani, Samuel. "Managed Instability: Iran, the Taliban, and Afghanistan." *The Diplomat*, November 14, 2018. <https://thediplomat.com/2018/11/managed-instability-iran-the-taliban-and-afghanistan/>

13. Kaura, Vinay. "Understanding the complexities of the Afghan peace process." *Observer Research Foundation*, April 26, 2018. <https://www.orfonline.org/research/understanding-the-complexities-of-the-afghan-peace-process/>

by the U.S., is becoming increasingly complex because multiple regional countries—all of whom have different perspectives and calculations regarding peace and the implications of the Taliban coming to power, and want their concerns addressed—are getting involved in the process.¹⁴ For obvious reasons, Iran is undoubtedly one of those countries.

In this regard, Tehran has consistently participated in the Moscow format talks on Afghanistan.¹⁵ Moreover, in December, 2018 it hosted Taliban representatives in Tehran for discussions concerning Afghan peace talks.¹⁶ These actions demonstrate that Iran remains open to, and interested in, engaging with the Taliban. It is worth mentioning that Iran's engagement with the Taliban sends two messages: firstly, it is attempting to secure good relations with Afghanistan in a potential future scenario where the Taliban plays a key role in a future government in Afghanistan; and secondly, it is trying to demonstrate to the U.S. that it has an open hand in the negotiations with the group and plays a role in the peace process. Eventually Iranian officials want the U.S. to realize Iran's significance and power in Afghanistan and the region.¹⁷

Harnessing Iran's Priorities for Ensuring Security and Peace in Afghanistan

As Iran seeks to ensure that there is no direct threat to it from the Afghan government, Tehran maintains good relations with Afghanistan notwithstanding the fact that Afghanistan enjoys good relations with Iran's opponents like the U.S. Therefore, Afghanistan should seek Iran's support in this regard by formulating policies in such a way that nothing in its foreign policy endeavors threatens Iran's national security or is perceived as a danger to Iran's existence.¹⁸ As Kateb University's Professor Musa Jafari argued during an interview for this essay, it is vital for Afghanistan to “make a

14. Khavati, Dr. Shafaq. Lecturer at Avicenna University, interview by author. Kabul Afghanistan, January 10, 2019.

15. Ramani, Samuel “Managed Instability: Iran, the Taliban, and Afghanistan.” *The Diplomat*, November 14, 2018. <https://thediplomat.com/2018/11/managed-instability-iran-the-taliban-and-afghanistan/>

16. “Iran says Afghan Taliban arrived in Tehran, held peace talks.” *Reuters*, December 31, 2018. <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-iran-afghanistan-taliban/iran-says-afghan-taliban-arrived-in-tehran-held-peace-talks-idUKKCNI0U0B6>

17. Rahimi, Sardar Mohammad. Deputy Minister of Literacy, Ministry of Education, interview by author, Kabul Afghanistan. December 30, 2018.

18. *Ibid.*

strategic deal with its neighbors in accepting Afghanistan's sovereignty and independence in a way that the countries in the region, including Iran, avoid their rivalries to affect Afghanistan."¹⁹ Nonetheless, given the complex nature of security in Afghanistan, and the relations between the actors involved, it remains extremely difficult-if not impossible-for Afghanistan to navigate this.

On the other hand, as Avicenna University's Professor Sardar Mohammad Rahimi stated during an interview for this essay, that "Iran does not have much potential to steer regional consensus for peace and stability in Afghanistan."²⁰ However, Rahimi added that "it is likely that Iran would remain involved and relevant to influence regional sentiments about security and peace in Afghanistan through other countries like Russia."²¹ This line of thought was also reiterated by Avicenna University's Professor Shafaq Khawati during an interview for this essay, who argued that "the rivalries Iran has with other countries make it difficult for Iran to be able to play a proactive role that in a way that would reduce tensions."²²

Despite the limitations in the scope and ability of Iran's facilitation of security and peace in Afghanistan, there do exist opportunities for such cooperation via multilateral frameworks in which Iran is involved. One such framework is the Kabul Process for Peace and Security Cooperation. The declaration of the second meeting of the Kabul Process, which was released in February 2018, focuses primarily on cooperation among its participating members in areas of security, counter-terrorism and peace.²³ Another such platform is the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process, in which Iran is a participating country. The main goals of the Process is "to build regional consensus on how we can achieve our shared goals," mainly through political consultation and confidence building measures.²⁴ This provides a cooperation framework for Iran and Afghanistan

19. Jafari, Dr. Mossa, Lecturer at the Kateb University, interview by author, Kabul, Afghanistan. January 13, 2019.

20. Rahimi, Sardar Mohammad. Deputy Minister of Literacy, Ministry of Education, interview by author, Kabul Afghanistan. December 30, 2018.

21. Ibid.

22. Khavati, Dr. Shafaq. lecturer at Avicenna University, interview by author. Kabul Afghanistan, January 10, 2019.

23. "The Kabul Process for Peace & Security Cooperation in Afghanistan Declaration." U.S. Embassy Kabul, March 01, 2018. <https://af.usembassy.gov/kabul-process-peace-security-cooperation-afghanistan-declaration/>

24. Hear of Asia-Istanbul Process official website. <http://hoa.gov.af/293/pillars>

to take advantage of, despite the fact that it would be difficult to bring Iran on the same page.

A third platform is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), where both Iran and Afghanistan are observer members. “Making joint efforts to maintain, and ensure peace, security and stability in the region,” and “strengthening mutual trust and neighborliness among member states” are among the main goals of the SCO, providing a common and suitable platform for Iran and Afghanistan to strive to achieve a consensus in the broader region on security and peace in Afghanistan.

Conclusion

Iran’s concerns regarding threats to its national security emanating from Afghanistan are rooted mainly in the presence of the U.S. and its Gulf allies in Afghanistan, given how Tehran shares tense relations with those countries. Additionally, Iran has voiced concerns regarding terrorism in Afghanistan as far as the overall security of the region and cross-border crimes, including drug trafficking, is concerned.

However, Iran’s role in Afghanistan remains dubious as it has undertaken measures to provide financial and military training to the Taliban in recent years, and more recently, has engaged in direct talks with the Taliban on the issue of peace in Afghanistan. Moreover, its frictions with the U.S. and its Gulf allies, and its close ties with Russia and China, has put Iran on the opposite bloc of the current direct peace talks with the Taliban led by the U.S.

In this backdrop, securing Iran’s cooperation for security and peace in Afghanistan remains extremely difficult given the prevailing complexities with regard to security and peace in Afghanistan and the ambitions and interests of all actors involved. Nonetheless, existing multilateral platforms in which Iran is a participant provide possibilities for exploring and expanding Iran-Afghanistan cooperation. These platforms include the Kabul Process, the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process and the SCO.

Policy Recommendations

- For Iran to contribute more constructively towards peace and stability in Afghanistan, Tehran can take more active part and engage existing

multilateral frameworks.

- For Iran to enjoy greater security via Afghanistan and to feel less threatened by the presence and influence of the U.S., Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia in Afghanistan, Tehran should meet the others and discuss ways to foster a kind of peace in Afghanistan that benefits all. Since it might be difficult for Iran to even begin negotiations with its adversaries/rivals, a third-party representative whom all sides trust could be tapped.
- Afghanistan should be extremely clear about its foreign policy towards neighboring countries. The Afghan government should make it clear to its neighbors that in order to bring peace and stability in Afghanistan and in the region, countries should set their rivalries and hostilities aside.
- Iran should be clear about its strategy, i.e. either aim for peace in Afghanistan or support the Taliban. If Iran truly seeks security and peace in Afghanistan, it should cease its support to the Taliban rather continue negotiating with them.