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Iran's Balancing Act in Afghanistan

Alireza Nader, Joya Laha

Prepared for the Marine Corps Intelligence Activity

Approved for public release; distribution unlimited



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The research described in this report was prepared for the Marine Corps Intelligence Activity. The research was conducted within the RAND National Defense Research Institute, a federally funded research and development center sponsored by the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Staff, the Unified Combatant Commands, the Navy, the Marine Corps, the defense agencies, and the defense Intelligence Community under Contract W74V8H-06-C-0002.

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Published 2011 by the RAND Corporation
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Preface

U.S. forces in Afghanistan could increasingly be confronted by hostile Iranian actions, including stepped-up support for Taliban groups battling coalition forces, as tensions continue to rise between Iran and the United States, especially over the Iranian nuclear program. This paper examines Iran's objectives and interests in Afghanistan and the consequent Iranian policies affecting U.S. forces in Afghanistan.

This research was sponsored by the Marine Corps Intelligence Activity and conducted within the Intelligence Policy Center of the RAND National Defense Research Institute, a federally funded research and development center sponsored by the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Staff, the Unified Combatant Commands, the Navy, the Marine Corps, the defense agencies, and the defense Intelligence Community.

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Summary

The Islamic Republic of Iran continues to provide measured support to Taliban insurgents battling U.S. and coalition forces in Afghanistan. However, Iran also maintains close and constructive relations with the same Afghan central government that is battling Taliban forces. Iran's complex and, at times, contradictory set of cultural, religious, political, and security interests shapes its behavior in Afghanistan, to the benefit and detriment of U.S. objectives. This paper examines Iran's objectives and interests in Afghanistan and the consequent Iranian policies affecting U.S. forces in Afghanistan.

Key Findings

Iran Appears to Be Pursuing Contradictory Objectives in Afghanistan

Although Iran has traditionally backed Tajik and Shi'a groups opposed to the Taliban, its enmity with the United States and tensions over the nuclear program have led it to provide measured support to the Taliban, which espouses an avowedly anti-Shi'a and anti-Iranian ideology.

The Baluchi Insurgency in Iran Is an Important Factor in Determining Iran's Behavior in Afghanistan

The Iranian government perceives the United States to be aiding the Baluchi insurgent group Jundullah, which has been responsible for killing several senior Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps officers. The continuation of the Baluchi insurgency will most likely result in further Iranian actions that undermine U.S. goals in Afghanistan.

Increasing Tensions with the United States Could Lead to More-Significant Iranian Aid to the Taliban

Iran currently provides measured support to the Taliban, perhaps as a way to signal to the United States that it can increase its support in the event of hostilities. Potential U.S. or Israeli military actions against Iran's nuclear facilities could result in more-significant Iranian aid to the Taliban, including the provision of advanced explosively formed projectiles and surface-to-air missiles.

Introduction

Iran's support for the Taliban belies its close cultural and historical ties to Afghanistan and its legacy of support for the Afghan central government led by President Hamid Karzai. Indeed, Iran's national interests in Afghanistan often coincide with U.S. objectives of defeating the Taliban and establishing a viable Afghan government. Nevertheless, hostile relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United States, currently framed by Iran's pursuit of a potential nuclear weapon capability, have prevented closer cooperation in Afghanistan. Iran's strategy of balancing U.S. and allied (Saudi Arabia, Pakistan) power in the region and deterring a U.S. attack on its nuclear facilities have instead facilitated measured Iranian support for the Taliban.¹

Much of Iran's behavior in Afghanistan is shaped by its traditional and historical ties to Afghanistan. Iran has historically supported Tajik and Shi'a Hazara groups that now dominate the Afghan government and are battling the Taliban for control of the country. However, Iran's national security concerns, especially its perception of the threat posed by the United States and regional allies, such as Saudi Arabia, have led it to provide measured military assistance to Taliban insurgents. Tensions over Iran's nuclear program and the possibility of U.S. and Israeli strikes against Iran's nuclear facilities have further raised Afghanistan's importance in Iran's national security calculations. Hence, Iran's policies toward Afghanistan range from overt, peaceful cooperation with the national government in Kabul to covert support to Taliban insurgents.

Iran's aid to the Taliban could also stem from Iranian perceptions that the United States is attempting to infringe on its territorial integrity through support for anti-Iranian Baluchi insurgents. The Baluchi insurgency, along with traditional sources of tension between Iran and Afghanistan, such as water disputes, narcotics trafficking, and the question of Afghan refugees, have motivated the Iranian government, especially the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, to provide military assistance to the Taliban;² it does so despite Iran's significant economic development activities and strong support for the Karzai government.

¹ Iran's support for Shi'a Iraqi insurgents (extensive training, funding, and provision of advanced weapons) has been much greater than its support for the Taliban—hence the use of the term *measured* in describing Iran's level of support to the Taliban.

² This is in line with the Islamic Republic of Iran's policy of supporting proxy groups in order to pursue its interests vis-à-vis regional states, such as Afghanistan, Iraq, and Lebanon.

Historically, Iran Has Supported Tajik and Shi'a Afghan Groups Fighting the Taliban

The Islamic Republic of Iran's policies in Afghanistan have largely been defined by historical and cultural factors, including close ties to Tajik and Hazara groups opposed to the Taliban. What today is known as Afghanistan has intermittently been ruled by Iran for the past 2,000 years. Iran historically considered western Afghanistan, including Herat, which is currently the second-largest city in Afghanistan, to be an integral part of its territory. Iran was forced to relinquish a direct claim to Herat after its defeat by British forces in the Anglo-Persian War (1856–1857) (John Carl Nelson, 1976). Many Iranians continue to view western Afghanistan as part of Iran's natural sphere of cultural, religious, and political influence.

A significant number of Afghans follow Persian cultural traditions; for example, Norouz, the Persian New Year, is celebrated throughout Afghanistan. Iran's official language, Farsi, also is widely spoken in Afghanistan, where it is known as Dari. Many Afghans consider Dari to be the language of high culture and scholarship. Dari/Farsi predominates in western, northern, and central Afghanistan, where it is spoken by ethnic Tajiks and the Hazaras, respectively. As Figure 2.1 illustrates, the provinces of Herat, Nimruz, and Farah are inhabited by Tajiks and Hazaras, many of them former refugees in Iran, although significant populations of non-Dari speakers, such as Pashtuns and Baluchis, also inhabit the border regions.

Religion also links Iran with many of its Afghan neighbors. The Hazaras, who make up 10–20 percent of Afghanistan's population, are predominantly Shi'a and have close ties with the Iranian religious establishment (Soraya Sarhaddi Nelson, 2007). Whereas 90 percent of Iranians observe Shi'a Islam, most Afghans, including Tajiks and Pashtuns, are Sunni Muslims. These religious differences were a major source of bilateral tensions during the Taliban's reign. While the Tajiks follow a more-tolerant form of Sunni Islam, the Taliban believe in a more-radical and intolerant version of the Deobandi school originating from India. The Taliban's religious and ideological viewpoint has been heavily influenced by Saudi Wahhabism, which maintains that Shi'a Muslims are apostates and therefore not true Muslims. This has led the Taliban, and much of Afghan society, to discriminate against the Hazaras.

Iran's political and military support to Afghan groups has historically been shaped by Iran's cultural and religious ties to the Afghan population. For example, the Islamic Republic of Iran provided significant support to Tajik and Afghan mujahideen commanders during their fight against the Soviet Union, though Iran's view of the Afghan resistance was hardly straightforward.¹ Additionally, Iran provided military support to the Tajik-dominated Northern Alliance in its fight against the Taliban. Many of the same pro-Iranian mujahideen com-

¹ Iran was quite suspicious of mujahideen forces supported by the United States, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia and, at times, provided mere rhetorical support. See Milani, 2006.

Figure 2.1
Ethnolinguistic Groups in Afghanistan



SOURCE: Central Intelligence Agency, 1997.
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manders who fought the Soviets and then the Taliban subsequently occupied senior leadership positions in the Karzai government (Kitchen, 2004). However, Iran's support for the Taliban demonstrates that Iran's activities in Afghanistan are not shaped only by cultural, religious, or even ideological considerations. From the reign of the last Shah to the present day, cost and benefit calculations based on perceived national interests have also factored in Iranian decisionmaking.

Geopolitical Calculations Shape Iranian Policies in Afghanistan

The Islamic Republic of Iran, although a revolutionary and ideological entity, nevertheless attempts to pursue pragmatic and calculated foreign policies based on national interests. Thus, although the Iranian regime is ideologically and religiously opposed to the Taliban, it nevertheless views the group as a useful counterweight to the United States.

The Islamic Revolution of 1979 and the overthrow of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi removed Iran from the pro–United States camp and led to a three-decade-long rivalry for regional supremacy between the two countries. Iran’s foreign policy after 1979 was initially defined by its revolutionary ideology. The Iranian government, for example, attempted to export its revolution to surrounding countries, and there were some attempts to introduce the Islamic revolution to Afghanistan, specifically targeting the Afghan Shi’a population (Emadi, 1995). Regardless, the Islamic Republic of Iran’s policy toward Afghanistan soon became less ideological.

In the late 1970s, Iran’s primary concern was the spread of communism and the Soviet influence in Afghanistan. The Shah viewed developments in Afghanistan with great alarm when the overthrow of the Afghan King Zahir Shah by his cousin, Mohammad Da’ud Khan, and the ascension of a communist-influenced and pro-Soviet Afghan regime in 1978 endangered his objective of keeping communism out of the region. The new Islamic government under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini had similar trepidations after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and viewed a communist Afghanistan as a threat to Iran’s stability and influence in the Muslim world. However, the struggle to establish the new Islamic Republic and the war with Iraq (1980–1988) prevented Iran from initially offering much aid to the anti-Soviet mujahideen (Emadi, 1995). Pakistan, supported by the United States and Saudi Arabia, became the primary benefactor of the mujahideen armies. The Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989 led to a civil war between the various mujahideen factions, which finally came to an end with the rise of the Taliban and its subsequent conquest of much of Afghanistan. Pakistan’s support for the Taliban made the Taliban the predominant regional power in Afghanistan. Taliban control also led to the expansion of Saudi government influence, despite the Taliban’s hosting of the Saudi fugitive Osama bin Laden.

The Taliban victory posed not only an ideological but also a geopolitical challenge to the Islamic Republic of Iran by threatening Iran’s interests not only in South Asia but in Central Asia as well. Iran sought to expand its political, cultural, and commercial interests in those regions after the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991. In many ways, Iran is well positioned to become a key player in Central Asia. It shares a border with Turkmenistan and has direct access to Central Asian markets, unlike Pakistan, which must go through Afghanistan to reach Central Asia. Iran also shares common cultural characteristics with many Central

Asian states. Farsi is the official language of Tajikistan and is widely spoken in Uzbekistan. However, the Taliban's control of Afghanistan allowed greater Pakistani and Saudi access to Afghanistan and Central Asia at Iran's expense.

The Taliban also threatened the fragile ethnic balance in Iran's eastern provinces. Populated by Sunni Baluchis, Iran's province of Sistan va Baluchistan has, for many years, been the hotbed of a violent insurgency against the Islamic Republic. The anti-Shi'a Taliban further provoked Iranian Sunni sentiment against Iran's Shi'a theocracy after the Taliban's conquest of much of Afghanistan.

The Taliban's massacre of Shi'a Hazaras along with Iranian diplomats in the northern Afghan city of Mazar-e Sharif in 1998 brought Iran and Afghanistan to the brink of war (Jehl, 1998). However, Iran did not become directly involved in the Afghan conflict and continued to pursue its traditional policy of providing indirect support to the Northern Alliance, which played a crucial role in the 2001 U.S. overthrow of the Taliban regime.

The Iranian regime continues to provide measured support to the Taliban despite its historical enmity toward the group. This behavior is motivated by the state of hostility between Iran and the United States, which could potentially turn into an armed conflict in the future. The Islamic Republic appears to have weighed the price of supporting the Taliban, which contradicts Iran's traditional support for the Karzai government, against the benefits of deterring and countering a U.S. attack on Iran's nuclear facilities. The Taliban, though anti-Shi'a and anti-Iranian by nature, has benefited from the U.S.-Iranian rivalry.

The U.S. Presence in Afghanistan Has Become a Major Factor in Iranian Behavior Toward Afghanistan

Iran currently views its interests in Afghanistan through the prism of U.S.-Iranian enmity. Hence, Iran currently provides support to the Taliban despite the convergence of U.S. and Iranian interests in Afghanistan, including both nations' backing of the Karzai government. Iran, although fundamentally opposed to a complete Taliban victory in Afghanistan, nevertheless uses the group as leverage against U.S. influence in Afghanistan and South Asia.

Initially, the United States and Iran cooperated in the overthrow of the Taliban and the establishment of a new Afghan government. The U.S. military relied heavily on Northern Alliance foot soldiers to defeat the Taliban, and Iran's military, elements of which were embedded with Northern Alliance units, could have even assisted the U.S. military effort (Slavin, 2005). Both Iran and the United States were eager to create a centralized Afghan government that would prevent the Taliban's resurgence.

Iran's influence was instrumental in the establishment of the Karzai government. The Northern Alliance, dominated by Tajik commanders with close ties to Iran, was reluctant to share power with Hamid Karzai, a prominent Pashtun tribal leader. Iranian political pressure on Northern Alliance leaders during negotiations in Bonn, Germany, persuaded them to reach a compromise and agree to the formation of the new government (Dobbins, 2007; see also Dobbins, 2009).¹

Iran has also played an active role in Afghanistan's reconstruction since 2001; it initially pledged \$570 million in 2002. At the Conference on Afghan Reconstruction held in February 2006, Iran pledged an additional \$100 million in aid, making it one of the largest donor states since 2001 (Farrar-Wellman, 2010; see also "Karzai: Iran's Help Has Contributed to Afghanistan Development," 2005). According to Danesh Yazdi, former Iranian representative to the United Nations, as of March 2007, Iran had spent more than \$270 million of its pledge on "mutually agreed projects in the areas of infrastructure, technical and educational services and financial and in-kind assistance" (Yazdi, date unknown). Furthermore, Iran has substantially increased trade and investment between the two nations. Current annual bilateral trade stands at approximately \$1.5 billion (Sheikholeslami, 2010). Iran's major investments in Afghanistan include infrastructure and education. One of Iran's many development projects included a \$100 million university (see Gopal, 2009).

According to the Afghanistan International Chamber of Commerce, an estimated 2,000 Iranian private firms, many financed by the Iranian government, operate in Afghanistan (Gardesh, 2006). Many of these businesses are located in Herat and aided the city's economic

¹ It should be noted that Iran and the Northern Alliance initially supported Burhanuddin Rabbani as president but instead supported Karzai as a compromise and goodwill gesture.

revitalization after the fall of the Taliban. The Iranian government also directly funded the development of Herat's transportation and energy infrastructure. A planned railroad will link Herat to the northeastern city of Mashhad, facilitating much-needed commerce and providing revenue to the Afghan central government through import duties. As a result of ties to Iran, Herat is arguably Afghanistan's most developed and prosperous city. Iran's role in stabilizing Herat province could partially explain the potential 2011 transfer of several districts near the Iranian border to Afghan security forces (Mulrine, 2010).

On the whole, it appears that Iran could play an even more positive and constructive role in Afghanistan from the U.S. perspective.² Iran's efforts at economic reconstruction, which are in line with the U.S. counterinsurgency campaign, outweigh the negative effects of its aid to the Taliban. Hence, Iran could serve as a natural partner for U.S. and NATO efforts to defeat the insurgency in Afghanistan, especially in the Dari-speaking regions.

However, the poor state of U.S.-Iranian relations has thwarted such cooperation. The U.S. inclusion of Iran in the "axis of evil" in 2002, the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, and ongoing tensions over Iran's nuclear aspirations have been major obstacles to leveraging Iranian influence in Afghanistan. Iranian internal political dynamics also complicated efforts at collaboration.

Iran was flexible on its approach toward the United States due to the more-moderate domestic and foreign policies of President Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005). However, the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005–) and the political ascent of the Revolutionary Guards have led to increasingly strident Iranian foreign policies, ranging from the development of Iran's nuclear program to its involvement in Afghanistan.

Iran's perception of declining U.S. influence in the region has also contributed to more-aggressive policies. The disputed reelection of Ahmadinejad in 2009 and the consolidation of power by hard-line elements within the Revolutionary Guards could make U.S.-Iranian cooperation in Afghanistan even more difficult than in previous years.

² The January 2011 Iranian blockage of fuel shipments to Afghanistan contradicts Iran's general policies in Afghanistan. The Iranian government claimed that it was blocking shipments because they were being used by North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces; the real reason for the blockage, however, is not clear (Shalizi, 2011).

The Revolutionary Guards Directs Iran's Support for the Taliban

Several factors explain Iran's support for the Taliban, including the important role played by the Revolutionary Guards in developing Iran's strategy toward Afghanistan. The Revolutionary Guards provides some aid to Afghan insurgents, in part due to Iran's continued rivalry with the United States and in response to the threat of sanctions and military action against its nuclear program. In addition, the Baluchi insurgency in Iran's southeastern province of Sistan va Baluchistan (discussed below) and Iran's perception that the United States is supporting these anti-Iranian insurgents appears to be shaping the Revolutionary Guards' behavior in western Afghanistan. Iran could also be arming the Taliban in order to gain leverage in its own dealings with the Afghan government regarding various bilateral disputes.

The Revolutionary Guards plays a key role in devising and implementing Iran's policies in Afghanistan, especially since the 2001 U.S. invasion.¹ Created in 1979, the Guards functions as the "guardians" of the Islamic revolution and the ruling theocracy. The Guards serves as a counterweight to the regular Iranian military, or the Artesh, which the Islamic Republic of Iran viewed as being too closely tied to the Shah's regime. The Guards operates its own ground, naval, and air forces in addition to commanding Iran's missile forces. Furthermore, it is believed to have control over Iran's clandestine nuclear weapon program.

In recent years, the Revolutionary Guards has emphasized an asymmetric military strategy in the face of U.S. military superiority (Sabetian, 2007). Its doctrine calls for mobile and decentralized forces capable of conducting hit-and-run attacks on enemy forces. In addition, the Revolutionary Guards relies on foreign proxies to engage enemy forces, especially in the absence of a declared and open conflict.

The Guards' covert Qods (Jerusalem) Force is tasked with training foreign proxy groups, such as Hizballah, Hamas, and the Jaish al-Mahdi. A specialized and relatively small unit within the Revolutionary Guards, the Qods Force was originally created to aid the liberation of Muslims fighting Western, specifically U.S., colonialism. The Qods Force, however, has evolved into a less-ideological and more-professional elite unit spearheading Iran's asymmetric military doctrine. Trusted by Iran's ruling elite, including Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, the Qods Force is also believed to be driving Iran's overall policies in Iraq and Afghanistan. GEN David Petraeus, commander of U.S. Central Command, is quoted as stating that Iran's former consul general in Herat and former ambassador to Iraq, Hassan Kazemi Qomi, is a Qods Force officer (Roggio, 2007).

The United States has accused the Qods Force of providing Iraqi Shi'a insurgents with sophisticated explosively formed penetrators (EFPs) used against U.S. and coalition forces.

¹ For more information on the domestic roles of the Revolutionary Guards, please see Wehrey et al., 2009.

Similar EFPs, along with other Iranian weapons, could have found their way into Taliban hands in the past few years. According to one report, UK special forces operating on the Iran-Afghan border have “documented proof that Iran is supplying the Taliban with devastating roadside bomb-making equipment” (Townsend, 2008). Iran could also be supplying the Taliban with anti-aircraft missile components (Stein, 2010; Roggio, 2010; U.S. Department of State, 2010, p. 192).

Some analysts speculate that the provision of Iranian weapons could be due to operations by rogue Revolutionary Guards commanders or arms smugglers rather than being a product of Iranian government policy (Bruno and Beehner, 2009). This is a possibility, especially given the vast flow of narcotics from Afghanistan to Iran and the existing corruption within Iran's law enforcement and military forces. The Guards is deeply involved in Iran's underground or illicit economy (Wehrey, 2009; Alfoneh, 2007); consequently, individual Guards commanders could be supplying the Taliban with arms in exchange for narcotics.

However, the Revolutionary Guards has a relatively strict command-and-control protocol and answers directly to the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. It is unlikely that Revolutionary Guards actions in Afghanistan would escape the scrutiny of the Guards' top echelon or even Khamenei's office (Ignatius, 2008), especially given the scale of Iranian support to the Taliban. Thus, Iranian support for the Taliban is more likely state driven than being the result of purely rogue actions.

The reported presence of Iranian weapon technology in Afghanistan could be best explained by Iran's overarching regional strategy. Iranian leaders view the U.S. and coalition presence in Afghanistan with great anxiety, especially in light of the U.S. military threats against Iran's nuclear facilities. As it has reportedly been employed in Iraq, Iran's asymmetric strategy would use proxy insurgent forces to tie down and distract the United States from focusing on Iran and its nuclear program, and provides a retaliatory capability in the event of U.S. military action.

The Baluchi Insurgency Shapes Iran's Approach Toward U.S. Forces

The Iranian government's policies toward Afghanistan and U.S. forces in that country are strongly shaped by its battle against Iranian Baluchi insurgents. The Baluchis, who are predominantly Sunni Muslims, are a distinct ethnic group divided between Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. A seminomadic people, they historically have resisted central state authority, whether in Iran or Pakistan. Out of an estimated population of 7 million to 8 million Baluchis, probably more than 6 million live in Pakistan, while 1 million to 2 million inhabit Iran's province of Sistan va Baluchistan ("Pakistan," 2010). An estimated 500,000 Baluchis also inhabit Afghanistan.

Nationalist and secessionist tendencies are strong among the region's Baluchi population, and some appear to embrace the concept of a single Baluchistan encompassing Iranian and Pakistani territory. Some Pakistani Baluchis, for example, refer to Iran's Baluch-inhabited areas as "West Baluchistan."

Iran's province of Sistan va Baluchistan is the most economically backward and neglected of its provinces. Bordering Afghanistan's southwest province of Nimruz and Pakistan's southwest province of Baluchistan, Sistan va Baluchistan has emerged as a source of instability for Iran's ruling elite (Ross and Isham, 2007). The Islamic Republic of Iran, a Shi'a theocracy, subjected the Baluchis to systematic discrimination for the past 30 years. The Ahmadinejad administration pursued even more-repressive policies toward the Baluchis than his predecessors, including closing down Baluchi Sunni mosques and religious institutions (Aryan, 2010). The Baluchis' lack of political, social, and economic rights¹ has led to widespread resentment and the rise of an insurgency centered on the terrorist group Jundullah (Army of God) (Bozorgmehr, 2010; Bradley, 2006–2007, p. 186).

Jundullah dramatically intensified its attacks against Iranian government forces, especially the Revolutionary Guards, since the start of 2009. In January, Jundullah ambushed and killed a group of police officers in Saravan (Sahimi, 2009). Jundullah reportedly was responsible for the suicide bombing of a Shi'a mosque in Zahedan, the capital of Sistan va Baluchistan in May 2009, as well as the October 2009 bombing of a meeting of senior Revolutionary Guards officers in the city of Pishin, near the Pakistan border ("Iran: Dual Attacks in Sistan-Balochistan," 2009).

The Iranian government accuses the United States, the United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan of providing direct aid to Jundullah. In reaction to the Pishin bombing, Ali

¹ It remains to be seen how the "peace pipeline" that is supposed to supply natural gas from Iran to Pakistan and possibly India through "Baluchistan" will shape the Baluchi insurgency in Iran. The Iranian government's failure to share the proceeds with Iranian Baluchis will likely engender greater hostility toward Tehran, however (Maleki, 2007).

Larijani, Iran's Speaker of Parliament, stated that Iran considers the attack "to be the result of US action. . . . [T]his is a sign of America's animosity against our country. Mr. Obama has said he will extend his hand towards Iran, but with this terrorist action he has burned his hand" (Spencer, 2009).

The recent intensification of Baluchi violence only increased the Iranian government's suspicions of foreign support for Jundullah, and its determination to defeat the terrorist group. Jundullah's tactic of suicide bombings appears to have convinced the Iranian government that it receives significant external support and could have ties to other radical Sunni groups, such as al Qaeda and the Taliban, in addition to Sunni states, such as Saudi Arabia (Gannon, 2009).² The February 2010 arrest of Jundullah's leader, Abdolmalek Rigi, by Iranian forces provided another opportunity for the Iranian government to claim U.S. support for the outlawed group. Rigi was executed after he "confessed" to U.S. support on Iranian television. It is not clear whether the U.S. designation of Jundullah as a terrorist group in November 2010 will reshape Iran's perception of U.S. support for the group (Richter, 2010).

Iran's aid to Afghan insurgents can be viewed as countering the perceived U.S. support of Jundullah, and increasing evidence of Iran's support to various Afghan insurgent groups could be directly tied to the ongoing insurgency in Iran's Baluchistan territory. Indeed, heightened Iranian concern over the Baluchi insurgency could result in even more-sophisticated Iranian aid to Afghan insurgent groups fighting U.S. forces. This aid could come despite Iran's traditional enmity with the Taliban. Recent reporting indicates that Iran increasingly is supplying surface-to-air missiles (SAMs), mortars, rockets, and EFPs to insurgent groups, especially those active in border provinces, such as Herat (although far fewer Iranian-linked EFPs have appeared in Afghanistan than in Iraq) (Zambelis, 2009; Farmer, 2009). The deceased renegade Tajik commander and former mayor of Herat, Ghulam Yahya (Trofimov, 2009), appears to have been a key beneficiary of Iranian support, despite Iran's otherwise pro-United States activities in that city.

The killing of senior Revolutionary Guards commanders in Pishin led Iran to directly blame Pakistan for harboring Jundullah militants. Pakistani territory could have been used by Jundullah, according to Gen. Aslam Beg, Pakistan's former army chief of staff (Tait and Tran, 2009). But Pakistan is battling its own Baluchi insurgency and appears to have minimal control over some of the Baluchi-inhabited border areas. The intensification of the Baluchi insurgency in Iran could also lead to greater instability in Pakistan's own Baluchistan province, where the Afghan Taliban's Shura Council is reportedly based.

² It should be noted that the root of external support to the Baluchis can be traced back to Saddam Hussein's support for the so-called Baluchistan Liberation Movement.

Iran Uses Proxies to Pressure the Afghan Government

Iran also uses its ties to the Taliban to pressure Afghanistan on bilateral disputes that have resisted a diplomatic resolution. Afghanistan's failure to address Iranian interests could potentially lead to increased Iranian support for the Taliban, thus increasing the Iranian regime's leverage over the Karzai government. Perhaps the most-serious issue bedeviling the Iranian-Afghan relationship is the water dispute centered on the Helmand River, which rises in the Hindu Kush mountains and empties in the Seistan marshes around Zabul at the Afghan-Iranian border. According to one report, Iran's support of the Taliban is directly linked to the water dispute over the Helmand River; Afghan police in Farah province have stated that Iran is supporting insurgents in order to prevent the building of the Bakhsh Abad dam over the river ("Iran Said Supporting Rebels in Afghan West to Prevent Building of Dam," 2008).

The Helmand water dispute dates back to the 1870s and has been the subject of bilateral tensions since that time. The 1973 accord between Iranian Prime Minister Amir Abbas Hoveida and Afghan Prime Minister Mohammad Musa Shafiq determined the specific amount of water that should flow into Iran: 26 cubic meters of water per second (Samii, 2005). However, the Soviet invasion, the subsequent Afghan civil war, and the current insurgency have prevented the implementation of that agreement. The Iranian government claims that Afghanistan has intentionally restricted the flow of water from the river, while the Afghan government claims that water is not reaching Iran due to natural causes ("Afghanistan Says River Water Not Reaching Iran Due to Natural Causes," 2009).

Another source of tension that Iran and Afghanistan face along their 600-mile border is the issue of narcotics. Afghanistan is currently the world's leading producer of opium; a 2009 report from the UN Office on Drug and Crime (UNODC) estimated that 40 percent of Afghanistan's opium is trafficked across Iran's borders (UNODC, 2009). Narcotics has been a serious issue in Iran; according to Esmail Ahmadi-Moghaddam, the head of Iran's antinarcotics agency, close to 1 million people out of a population of 70 million are addicted to heroin and opium. He also estimated that approximately 130,000 people in Iran become addicted to drugs each year (Kalantari and Dahl, 2009).

Narcotics have not only created a serious social problem in Iran; they also threaten the country's stability. Iran's eastern border regions are known for constant clashes between security forces and well-armed drug traffickers. The volatile Sistan va Baluchistan, described in the previous section, has presented Iran with one of its most-daunting domestic security problems. One of Jundallah's sources of funding has been the drug trade; the Revolutionary Guards has increased its presence in the region's capital of Zahedan to control the drug trade and to monitor the border between Iran and Afghanistan (Cummins, 2009).

The Iranian government has taken a number of other measures to stem the flow of narcotics. According to the deputy director of the Iranian Drug Control Headquarters, Iran spends \$600 million annually to run campaigns against drugs along its eastern borders ("Iran Backs Paris Pact Initiative," 2009). Since 2006, it reportedly has spent nearly \$1 billion beyond this amount to erect more than 1,000 km of canals, trenches, and embankments along the eastern border ("UNODC Director Praises Iran's Drug Control Efforts, Calls for Greater International Support," 2009). Iran plans to construct a wall running along the border with Afghanistan aimed at drug trafficking ("Iran to Build Huge Wall Along Afghan Border," 2009). This border wall might lead to further tensions because the two countries have yet to resolve several outstanding border-demarkation disputes.

A third source of friction between Iran and Afghanistan is the presence of Afghan refugees in Iran. The Iranian government's support for the Taliban could in part be motivated by a need to push Afghanistan to repatriate the refugees, who are perceived to be a drain on the Iranian economy. Approximately 1 million illegal Afghan refugees currently reside in Iran ("Iran Urges More Aid for Afghan Refugees," 2011). According to Afghan authorities, Iran has expelled more than 160,000 Afghan refugees since March 2010 (Quraishi, 2011). In addition, the governor of Nimruz claims that Iran forced around 800 Afghan refugees back into Nimruz province in Afghanistan, despite the fact that many of the refugees possessed a legal permit to live in Iran. These expulsions in early 2009 occurred in spite of an oral agreement between the two countries in December 2008 that signaled that Iran would halt its expulsion of refugees until March 2009 (Zarif and Majidiyar, 2009). Iran's attempts to return Afghans back to their homeland will cause growing friction between the two nations and could lead Iran to gain further leverage over the Karzai government.

Conclusion

Iran's myriad interests in and ties to Afghanistan have led it to pursue seemingly contradictory policies in Afghanistan. On one hand, Iran has supported the Karzai government; on the other hand, it has provided measured support to the Taliban. Iran's balancing act in Afghanistan is shaped by a need to maintain a close alliance with that strategic country while countering U.S. hostility toward Iran. For these reasons, Iranian support for insurgent groups battling coalition forces will continue despite Iran's otherwise-positive economic efforts and political influence in Afghanistan. Increased tensions over Iran's nuclear program, the Baluchi insurgency, and disputes between Iran and Afghanistan could translate into even greater Iranian support for various Taliban groups in the coming months. Barring a political rapprochement, U.S. forces can expect more-sophisticated Iranian assistance to the insurgents. Iran's Revolutionary Guards will play a key role in coordinating anti-U.S. activities in western Afghanistan, and perhaps other areas of the country. However, the Revolutionary Guards' level of activity will largely depend on the overall state of hostility between Iran and the United States. The failure to resolve Iran's nuclear crisis could very well lead to more-assertive behavior in Afghanistan in the near and distant future.

Nevertheless, Iran could still play a role in stabilizing the Afghan government, and even containing the Taliban as U.S. troops begin to draw down. The U.S. focus on the Iranian nuclear program has, to some extent, hindered the pursuit of other U.S. interests vis-à-vis Iran. U.S.-Iranian cooperation in Afghanistan can serve as a first step in reducing tensions between the two nations. U.S. efforts to solve issues of concern to the Iranian government, such as the Baluchi insurgency, the narcotics trade, and border disputes between Iran and Afghanistan, could lead to reduced Iranian support for the Taliban, and perhaps even Iranian help in countering a group that is ideologically and religiously opposed to the Islamic Republic of Iran. This could be a tall order, given the current state of hostility between Iran and the United States; yet, history has shown that events can conspire to bring even the bitterest of enemies together, as demonstrated by U.S.-Iranian cooperation in establishing the Karzai government. After all, a Taliban victory in Afghanistan would be a defeat not only for the United States but for Iran as well.

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