

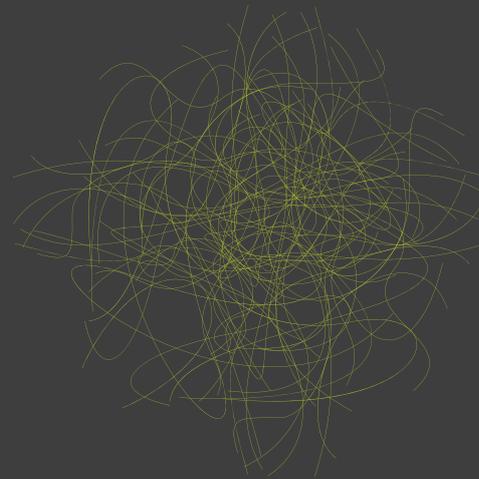
**Sources of Tension  
in Afghanistan and  
Pakistan: A Regional  
Perspective**

**Exploring Iran  
& Saudi Arabia's  
Interests in  
Afghanistan &  
Pakistan:  
Stakeholders or  
Spoilers - A Zero  
Sum Game?**

**PART 2: IRAN**

**Rouzbeh Parsi**

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# EXPLORING IRAN & SAUDI ARABIA'S INTERESTS IN AFGHANISTAN & PAKISTAN: STAKEHOLDERS OR SPOILERS - A ZERO SUM GAME? PART 2: IRAN

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## 1. Introduction

The paper will briefly describe, from the Iranian perspective, what kind of relationship Tehran has with Afghanistan, and how this in turn relates to its complicated relations with Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. These inter-relationships may at times be interpreted in terms of a larger Sunni-Shi'a ideological confrontation between Iran and Saudi Arabia, but as the paper will show the motivations and behaviour of the actors cannot be reduced to a 'simply' sectarian drive.

It is a basic premise of this paper that Iran's main objectives are not to be found in some ideological universe detached from reality, but are of the kind that can be situated and understood in terms of *realpolitik* and interests. The religious-ideological element is not irrelevant but it is neither determining, in short in itself insufficient to explain Iranian behaviour, nor is it that often necessary for explaining the actions of Tehran.

One of the over-arching goals that the Islamic republic shares with its predecessor is to be recognised as a regional major power, something that will entail making a stop in Tehran a *sine qua non* for solving any regional issue or problem. The flip side is that non-recognition incentivises Tehran to hark back to its revolutionary heritage of going against the grain of the status quo, in short to act as a spoiler. In relation to both Iraq and Afghanistan, Tehran has shown its capability and willingness to do both, and the destructive force of its capabilities has been painfully felt, in the apt Brazilian saying invoked by Ambassador Roberto Toscano: "to create difficulty in order to sell facility".<sup>1</sup>

It is, however, difficult to talk about Iranian foreign policy without getting bogged down in discussions about the country's nuclear programme. When examined, many policies pursued with regard to Iran only make sense from a cyclopic perspective where Tehran's ambitions, fears and capabilities are reduced to its nuclear programme. Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind when discussing Iran that it is a country, i.e. much more than a nuclear issue. Thus all too often the nuclear issue acts as the proverbial tree blanketing out the forest. The highly relevant question asked too seldom, especially in the case of Afghanistan, is how long can

1. For more on Iranian foreign policy with specific reference to Afghanistan see R. Toscano, 'Iran's role in Afghanistan', CIDOB STAP RP paper January 2012, p.4.

we afford to ignore Iran's relevance in other settings on account of the attempt to isolate it in order to force its hand on the nuclear issue?

The fundamental problem of politics in this region (though not limited to this region) is the perception that it is a zero-sum game. In short, anything advantageous for another actor necessarily entails a deduction, a disadvantage for one's own side. In this mindset, there is simply no way of enlarging the cake as it were, producing results that are positive for all actors involved. This approach is the lowest common denominator that amounts to a systemic and crude game of *cui bono*, allowing for an easy escape from difficult political decisions and realities. By taking the easy way out and refusing to take any political risks, and instead opting for the safety of short terms and short-sighted self-interest, this approach keeps producing policy paralysis and perpetuates the problems that beset the region. Thus, instead of creating stakeholders in a medium/long term collective security framework, it generates spoilers at every turn, making any attempts to actually solve the common problems and tensions of the region well-nigh impossible.

## 2. The Islamic Republic of Iran: Continuity & Change

The Iranian view on region, especially on countries like Afghanistan, consists of two perspectives. The first perspective is very much a continuation from the previous Pahlavi monarchy, while the second perspective springs directly from the 1979 revolution and its particularities. The former perspective focuses on the geopolitical weight and position of Iran, in essence using metrics that are beyond dispute to stress the inevitability of Iranian importance and dominance in the region. This is a self-perception, a narrative, that emanates from an appreciation of the sheer size of the country, geographically as well as in terms of population, and leads, inevitably, to the invoking of culture and history. Thus it marries 'objective' observations (numbers) to historical and cultural elements of identity (affinity of language and cultural traditions) creating a story of continuous interaction and co-existence that stretches beyond institutional boundaries and structures (states and their borders). The nationalist element in such a narrative is, for all its cultural inclusiveness, unmistakable. In this regard this perspective is above ideology, it does not belong to any particular religious or political camp.

In contrast the second perspective is very much bound to a specific polity, the Islamic Republic, with its heritage of revolutionary zeal and need to export its newfound panacea to universal problems. While the revolution had its distinctly Iranian and Shi'a characteristics, it was touted as an Islamic solution to the world's problems - in short it was meant to be understood as pan-Islamic, overcoming sectarian boundaries and rifts. Thus, while the revolutionary zeal was part of the identity of the new republic and its captains, touting the distinctly Shi'a identity of the revolutionaries and the state they were building would only have limited its appeal abroad and thus been counter-productive. Khomeini wanted the country and himself to serve as an example to, and be a leader of, the whole Islamic world.

What can be seen as a specifically religious aspect of Iranian foreign policy is the propensity to invoke moral and theological principles for the shaping of actual policy, particularly in order to justify radical departures from

the policies of the Pahlavi monarchy. The case in point is the anti-imperialist and anti-monarchical revolutionary ethos turning the Islamic Republic against both the United States (US) and its Arab allies in the region. However, it is doubtful whether many of the actual policies were in the end influenced by religion, rather it was the revolutionary ethos dressed in theological discourse that weighed in on critical decisions and positions adopted, at least in the early days. Yet the dividends of this addition to conventional forms of foreign policy shaping are highly questionable. In Iran, realism is by far the most adhered-to school of international relations, and inevitably the logical conclusion of such a perspective is that ideological and theological interpretations are expressions of idealism in an highly non-ideal(istic) international system and hence a source of instability in the process of shaping foreign policy.<sup>2</sup>

As mentioned above, part of the pre/post revolution continuities is the belief in Iran's eminent position in the region. While this would have been more directly expressed in nationalist terms under the Shah, it is exactly because it is part and parcel of a century-old project of nationalism that such sentiments now can be expressed under the guise of all kinds of ideological banners. In a sense the project has been so successful that it is no longer viewed as particularly nationalist, but rather as 'natural'.

Thus the recognition craved by the Islamic Republic as an important and unavoidable actor in the region is a variation on the ideological need to be seen as strong and revolutionary, as well as a discursively hegemonic nationalist narrative internalised by all, regardless of ideological view point.

### 3. Background

Afghanistan is a country with a diverse ethnic and religious population. It has many different elements in common with different neighbours in varying degrees. The lingua franca of the country is a dialect of Persian, Dari, which thus makes the connection to Iran convenient. While the data is sketchy, the official estimate is that 50% of the population speak Dari as their first language and 35% Pashto. The Pashtuns are the single largest ethnic group constituting 42% of the population, followed by the Tajiks at 27%. The Sunni population is estimated at 80% and the Shi'a at 19%.<sup>3</sup> There is thus overlap across the border in terms of ethnic, religious, and linguistic affinities, as well as diversity within the country itself.

Tehran had an ambivalent stance on Afghanistan in the early days of the Soviet invasion, as it simply could not afford to alienate Moscow to the same extent that it had Washington. Over time, however, it came to support the *mujahideen* with more than just words, and this support was initially given to the Shi'as of Afghanistan. There was a certain symmetry in Tehran's willingness to limit its support to fellow Shi'as in the Hazarjat region where the Soviet forces were least visible.<sup>4</sup> Tehran did not associate itself with the emerging alliance of the US, Pakistan and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). Undoubtedly, the Saudis and to some extent the Americans thought of the *mujahideen* as a group not only capable of keeping the Soviet Communists busy, but also of potentially keeping the revolutionary Shi'as in Tehran in check. While Iran wanted a sphere of influence in Afghanistan, Pakistan aimed (and still does) for strategic depth

2. For a critical discussion see Shahroud Amir Entekhabi 'Role of Religious Texts in Shaping the Foreign Policy of Islamic Republic of Iran' *Discourse: An Iranian Quarterly*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Fall 2004): 61-76. <http://en.merc.ir/default.aspx?tabid=73&ArticleId=186>

3. Data from CIA World Factbook, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/af.html>. For more on the ethnic landscape see Abubakar Siddique, 'Afghanistan's ethnic divides' CIDOB Report 01/2012

4. M. Milani, 'Iran's policy towards Afghanistan', *Middle East Journal* 2006, v.60 n.2 pp.237-238.

in its obsessive struggle with India, and KSA wanted to spread its own version of Islam countering the Khomeinist Shi'ism of Iran. These have remained the salient strategic goals of the three regional actors throughout the years, though specific events have re-cast the dynamics of the drama.

After the withdrawal of Soviet forces and the demise of the Najibullah government, the many structural flaws and tensions within the conglomerate referred to as the *mujahideen* came to the fore. Like in many other cases, what seemed like a straightforward cause of 'simple' resistance to occupying forces that could be enthusiastically supported from afar turned out to be as much a case of internal power politics. The cause had become a profession and the curse of Afghanistan was that for quite some time none of the 'professional' resistance fighters cum warlords had the wherewithal of creating enough unity to forge a peace, nor were they strong enough to vanquish the competition and silence the guns that way.

Iran expanded its influence by trying to bring together the Dari-speaking sections of the Afghan population, but like their Pakistani competitors, they foundered in their attempts to create stable coalitions that could act as a government not just in name but in reality, and maintain some kind of armistice if not peace.. The unbridgeable fault lines stemmed as much from what outside actors would countenance, as from the fact that the modern Afghan state had never managed to establish a system for power sharing and thus ameliorate the regional tensions of the country. Hence liberation turned into a regular civil war, which in turn helped propel a new force, spawned with the keen help of Pakistan's Directorate of Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) in the *madrastas* of the Deobandi school, now increasingly influenced by Wahhabi teaching – that of the *talibs* - students with a more severe and puritanical streak.<sup>5</sup> They became the weapon of choice for the ISI in its attempt to create something out of the vacuum that followed the Soviet withdrawal and the subsequent disinterest of Washington. To be fair many, including Washington and Tehran, were rather clueless as to what the advent of the Taliban meant for Afghanistan. In the Iranian case, it underestimated the strength of the Taliban and the level of ambition Pakistan had for its new junior partner. Washington in turn, neither recognised (as it took control of Kabul and proclaimed a new government) nor resisted this new actor. In fact to some degree the policy, or rather the lack thereof, was driven by energy company interests. They were keen to do business with the Taliban, who were seen as a stabilising force that could help make Afghanistan the energy transit corridor needed for connecting Central Asia to the Indian Ocean. The American oil company Unocal tried to pursue the oil pipeline project when there was hope that unification of Afghanistan under Taliban rule would make this feasible and profitable. In Unocal employment at the time was Zalmay Khalilzad, who advocated the pipeline and engaging the Taliban. Unocal and Khalilzad changed tack after the Al-Qaeda attacks on the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998 and the Taliban were now considered beyond the pale. In 2001 Khalilzad was part of the Bush presidency transition team and later that same year was appointed to the National Security Council.<sup>6</sup>To circumvent Iran was even more of a relevant objective, as Iran had to be avoided at all costs due to the dual containment policy the Clinton administration maintained against Baghdad and Tehran.

5. See Chapter 4 (i) '*The Haqqani network as an autonomous entity*' by Thomas Ruttig, esp. pp.57-58, and (ii) '*Roots of the insurgency in the southeast*' by Sébastien Trives, esp. pp.89-100, in *Decoding the New Taliban: Insights from the Afghan Field*, Columbia University press 2012, ed. Antonio Guistozi
6. '*New US Envoy to Kabul Lobbied for Taliban Oil Rights*', *The Independent* 10/1/2002. See also Rashid, A., '*Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia. Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*', Yale University Press 2010, chapters 12 & 13.

With the US invasion of Iraq the equation changed yet again. On the one hand, the US quickly destroyed the only enemy the Islamic Republic actually fought a conventional war with and which had occupied part of its territory. On the other hand, the rapid victory established yet another foothold for the 'Great Satan' in Iran's immediate neighbourhood. Thus Tehran both applauded the demise of Saddam Hussein and maintained one of its basic positions from the days of the revolution: rejection of the presence of all outside powers in the region, especially the US. As it became clear that the Bush administration had no real plans or ideas regarding the governing of Iraq, the situation quickly deteriorated and allowed Iran to turn what initially seemed to be an overwhelming threat of an American attack on the country into a position of strength. It became a sort of replay of Afghanistan after 2001 but with even fewer competitors - Tehran had been the most steadfast supporter of the opposition to Saddam Hussein and had quite a few chips to cash in now. It also established contact with some of the Sunni groups, ensuring that it would have a channel to whoever would come out on top in the chaos that engulfed Iraq.<sup>7</sup> And in this game of building on your strengths and expertly exploiting the structural weakness of your most formidable foe, Tehran also made sure that the US paid in blood and money. Thus ensuring a strong position in Iraq served several important objectives: it guaranteed that there would be no new territorial threat against Iran from that country, it kept the US bogged down and weakened its position in Iraq and the region, again reducing the risk of outright war with the US. And concomitantly it enhanced Iran's position in the region and signalled to the region and the US that Iran was a player one ignored at a very high cost and to one's own detriment.

The most important game changer in this regard was the September 11 terrorist attacks on the US. The Taliban made a number of mistakes: the killing of Iranian diplomats guaranteed Iranian hostility and harbouring al-Qaeda incurred the wrath of the world's sole super power. In fact, the 'Emirate of Afghanistan' was to some degree a veritable hostel for all kinds of armed Muslim groups, which made the neighbouring countries, with the exception of Pakistan, quite worried.

Thus, the terrorist attacks presented one of those rare moments when important actors are compelled to look beyond their own rhetoric and the broad tar brush they use against their foes. The US and Iran found themselves on the same side as the battle lines were re-drawn, or rather made very clear, while Pakistan had to quickly distance itself from its own ally, the Taliban. The Northern Alliance that Iran, Russia, and India had sustained, now became the most important vehicle in the American attempt to quash al-Qaeda and the Taliban that hosted and aided it.

Iran and the US managed to co-operate quite well; in tactical terms on the ground, where Tehran provided bombing target information to the US thus also diminishing the risk that US forces would accidentally target Northern Alliance forces. On the political level, Iran was instrumental in making the Bonn conference happen and achieve a successful result. Tehran was at first promoting Rabbani to head the interim government, but acquiesced to the US choice, Hamid Karzai.<sup>8</sup>

7. Raghavan, Sudarsan 'Iran Giving Arms To Iraq's Sunnis, U.S. Military Says', *Washington Post* 12/04/2007. The report was later corrected: the accusation is that Iran had given intelligence to Sunni insurgents.

8. Milani, 2006, p.248.

## 4. Iran & Afghanistan Today

In general, the Iranian approach has been the political equivalent of guerilla tactics: to gain and wield influence but not to hold territory i.e. to bear responsibility for the politics and the policies of the government of Iraq or Afghanistan. Part of this approach is also to have the means and the kind of presence to deny the enemy control of territory. In this respect, Iran has been trying to both make sure the US does not have a comfortable writ in Afghanistan and simultaneously sway the Karzai government its own way. In short, Iran wants to be a player and recognised as such, but one step removed from the kind of control that entails responsibility. Put more starkly, Iran's long-term objective of stable neighbours with whom it has mutually profitable exchange is in conflict with its short-term aim of ejecting the US presence from those very neighbours.<sup>9</sup>

In essence, Tehran believes it can do without Afghanistan but that Afghanistan will not survive without Iran. For Iran the trade and economic relationship is interesting but not vital, while for the Afghan government it much more important.<sup>10</sup>

There are several reasons for this assessment. The geopolitical relationship between the countries is very stable: there are no border disputes between them and they share a common history, as well as culture and language. This organic linkage is seen as an important fundamental that will survive the exigencies of the present. It also serves as a springboard for extending Iran's soft power in the country.

This is also clear in that Tehran has shown little appetite for trying to gain influence all over Afghanistan. On the contrary, it has primarily acted on its latent links (Shi'a and Dari- speakers) and tried to create spheres of influence in its own border areas. The best example of this is Herat, which is now economically and communications-wise well connected to Iran, something that again is a return to a historical reality that came to an end through the British-Persian war in 1856. Where the boundary between aid and trade, intelligence and soft power lies is of course debatable, yet is abundantly clear that with the withdrawal of International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and US forces in 2014 Iran's importance in Afghan politics will automatically increase.<sup>11</sup> The departure of the US will in essence reset the clock back to 2001 with regional powers, local actors including the Taliban and the very wobbly central power with preciously little remit outside the capital.

The debate in Tehran consists, like in so many debates everywhere, of a spectrum with two poles. In brief it can be said that there are two principal views, one stresses the danger of a resurgent Taliban, while the other believes in Iran's ability to contain them.

The first perspective is not necessarily - or indeed at all - ideologically motivated, but fears the destabilisation a resurgent Taliban will cause and that this may also yield a stronger position for Pakistan, the principal backers of the Taliban. Here Iran's own relative strength in Afghanistan is seen as being much more precarious, and thus there is a greater need to be mindful of the Taliban and their activities. The inherent tension with Pakistan comes much more to the fore in this perspective, build-

9. This latter perspective can be found in Frederick W. Kagan, Ahmad K. Majidyar, Danielle Pletka, Marisa Cochran Sullivan, 'Iranian influence in the Levant, Egypt, Iraq, and Afghanistan', American Enterprise Institute & the Institute for the Study of War, 05/2012, p.86.
10. For details on the Iran-Afghanistan relationship in terms of trade volume etc., see Frederick W. Kagan et.al., 'Iranian influence in the Levant, Egypt, Iraq, and Afghanistan', American Enterprise Institute & the Institute for the Study of War, 05/2012, pp.79-82.
11. For an American take on 'nefarious' Iranian influence in Herat and elsewhere see Wall Street Journal 'Iranians Build Up Afghan Clout', 26/10/2012 <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970204076204578078564022815472.html>. See also J.B. Christensen, 'Strained alliances. Iran's troubled relations to Afghanistan and Pakistan.' DIIS Report 2011:03, pp.14-19.

ing on previous bitter experience of the difference in strategy, forward thinking, and criteria for what constitutes success between Tehran and Islamabad.<sup>12</sup>

The latter perspective believes that Tehran can draw on its previous experience of dealing and 'handling' its Taliban neighbour and that its own geopolitical position and capabilities inside Afghanistan are sufficiently strong to manage a return of the Taliban and a possibly emboldened Pakistan. Thus there is *modus vivendi* (not necessarily peaceful or always smooth) to be had with whoever fills the post-American vacuum in Afghanistan.<sup>13</sup>

A greater influence for Iran and the absence of US troops does not, however, mean that Afghanistan is a country Tehran can safely ignore: in fact, the relationship is in some ways much more symbiotic than Tehran would want to acknowledge. A volatile Afghanistan can and will cause trouble for Iran, and this is already in evidence. The Helmand river is a case in point: the two countries have a treaty dating back to 1973 regulating the amount of water Iran is to receive from the river that originates in Afghanistan. Yet the actual practice is less clear-cut and in 1999 when the Taliban were in control they simply cut the flow, creating a social and environmental disaster in the Iranian province of Sistan-Balochistan. The issue has yet to be fully resolved as Afghanistan needs the water and the energy produced with it for its reconstruction, while this reduction in water flows will have grave consequences for Iranians on the other side of the border.<sup>14</sup>

Further instability in Afghanistan would be detrimental for Iran, and in a sense the core issue, the lack of an effective central power in Kabul, has come at a cost for Iran from the very beginning of the Afghan crisis: refugees and the heroin trade. The Afghan refugee issue has been a source of problems within and between the countries. There are today officially roughly 1 million Afghans in Iran, unofficially the number is closer to 2 million. Economically speaking, Afghan labourers are underpaid menial workers in Iran performing jobs many Iranians would not take. In turn their meagre incomes serve, as remittances, to economically sustain a substantial section of Afghan society.

The trade between the two countries is estimated at US \$ 2 billion, mostly Iranian exports to Afghanistan. This imbalanced trade and economic relationship also means that the pressure on the Iranian economy due to Western sanctions will affect Afghanistan: an impoverished Iranian economy will inevitably bring down the amount of remittances sent by Afghan labourers in Iran to their families back home, and the Iranian trading that cannot be conducted from Iran will go elsewhere with the risk of distorting and upending smaller local markets like the Afghan one.<sup>15</sup>

Iran has also been the involuntary (to a large extent, at least) transport hub for the biggest heroin producer in the world, Afghanistan, and the effects of the trade are also visible in Iran's own social landscape with a steadily increasing rate of addicts.<sup>16</sup> Iran has also consistently been the country in the Middle East with the largest drug seizures, steadily outpacing their neighbours including the number 2 and 3, Afghanistan and Pakistan. For 2009 the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)

12. See for instance Iran's former ambassador to Pakistan Mohammad Ebrahim Taherian, 'The transformation of Iran from influential actor to passive element', IRDiplomacy 2/4/2013.

13. An aspect of this can be gleaned from this article by Iran's former ambassador to Afghanistan, Mohammad-Reza Bahrami, 'Moderate Taliban: Reality or Illusion?', IRDiplomacy 8/11/2010. <http://irdiplomacy.ir/en/page/9268/Moderate+Taliban+Reality+or+Illusion.html>

14. B. Samii, 'Still No Resolution For Century-Old Water Dispute', Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 7/9/2005 <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1061209.html>, and A. Dehgan & L.J. Palmer-Moloney 'Water Security and Scarcity: Potential Destabilization in Western Afghanistan', Joint White Paper by SMA and USACE, January 2010.

15. Voice of America 'Afghanistan Also Pinched by Iran Sanctions', 22/11/2013, <http://www.voanews.com/content/afghanistan-also-pinched-by-iran-sanctions/1550925.html>

16. Iran and Afghanistan have by far the highest rates estimated by UNODC of opiate drug addiction in the region. Estimation of population age 15-64: Iran 2.26% (2010), Afghanistan 2.65% (2009). <http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/WDR2011/StatAnnex-consumption.pdf>. These estimations are most likely quite conservative.



concern in Tehran. Nevertheless, like with all its other neighbours, Iran has avoided an open confrontation with Pakistan, whether out of sheer necessity as during the war with Iraq, or later on when it could more openly and freely devise a policy regarding Afghanistan. The low point of the relationship came when the Taliban gained control of Mazar-e Sharif in 1998 killing thousands of Shi'as, and then attacked the Iranian consulate in the city. Six Iranian diplomats and several other nationals were killed. The reaction in Tehran was immediate and furious, Iranian armed forces were amassed on the border with Afghanistan and war seemed imminent. Many in Tehran blame the ISI as much as the Taliban for the crime, and the mending of fences was primarily done in Islamabad.

Tehran has also been trying to forge better ties with Islamabad, especially under president Khatami who went on a state visit to Pakistan in 2002. Though Islamabad is by definition worried about improvements of relations between any of its neighbours and India, Tehran has been trying to bring India, with which it has had a more even and stable relationship,, into the equation. Thus the Iran-Pakistan-India pipeline for distributing Iranian energy has the advantage of being of mutual benefit for all three parties. Obviously for Iran it has the added bonus of showing its defiance vis-à-vis the Western sanctions regime and proving that it is not as isolated as the US and European Union (EU) claim. Though moving forward in fits and starts, including Indian hesitation and backtracking due to US pressure, the building phase of the IPI was initiated in Pakistan in March 2013.<sup>23</sup> Leaving aside the yet-to-be-fulfilled promise of this pipeline, trade between the two countries is not very impressive.

The shared territory of Balochistan further complicates the relationship between the two countries.<sup>24</sup> In Pakistani Balochistan there has been a kind of deobandisation, whereby the strict Deoband school of Hanafi Sunnism has grown in importance and there are some connections between their institutions and Baloch Sunni religious institutions in Iran.<sup>25</sup> The Baloch feel, and are, among the most neglected parts of both countries and segments of society. This leaves an opening for meddling from outside powers and both states have accused each other of doing so, and Pakistan is particularly sensitive to signs of Indian involvement. The most serious recent case is the *Jundallah* (founded in 2002), a local Baloch insurgent group fighting Tehran, partly from Pakistani territory. The group increased its attacks, killing security officials and high ranking Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) commanders (October 2009) as well as civilians in suicide attacks in the Sistan-Balochistan province. It also became more openly Sunni radical in its rhetoric and Tehran accused the US<sup>26</sup> and Pakistan of emboldening and supporting the group as part of a destabilisation of the eastern border of the country. Eventually the leader of the group Abdel Malek Rigi was caught (most likely through co-operation with Pakistan) and executed.<sup>27</sup>

What the resolution of the *Jundallah* case shows is that while the rivalry between the countries continues in some theatres and on some levels, they also have institutional means (such as the Joint Ministerial Commission on Security<sup>28</sup> established in 2001) of communication and practices of co-operation on both the political level and between security organisations. This hopefully indicates that there are many hurdles that must be overcome, a positive inertia of calculated response, before a security incident in the context of political conflagration can spiral out of control

23. P. Molazehi 'The Pipeline that Bypassed Sanctions' IRDiplomacy 19/03/2013 <http://www.irdiplomacy.ir/en/page/1914111/The+Pipeline+that+Bypassed+Sanctions.html>. On US pressure see 'Pakistan will trigger US sanctions if it goes ahead with IP pipeline project: Nuland', ANI News 12/3/2013 <http://www.aninews.in/newsdetail4/story102992/pakistan-will-trigger-us-sanctions-if-it-goes-ahead-with-ip-pipeline-project-nuland.html>. For an analysis of the rationale for India to participate in terms of business and energy security see S. KumaVerma, 'Energy geopolitics and Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline', Energy Policy, 2007 v.35, pp.3280-3301.
24. On the organic links between the two Balochistans see Zahid Ali Khan, 'Balochistan Factor in Pak-Iran Relations: Opportunities and Constraints', South Asian Studies, v. 27, no. 1, January-June 2012, pp. 121-140.
25. A. Kolstad Wiig, 2009, pp.18 and 22-23.
26. Another interpretation is that Israeli Mossad conducted the support operation under disguise of being from the CIA, a so-called false flag operation. See M. Perry 'False flag', Foreign Policy 13/01/2012. [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/01/13/false\\_flag](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/01/13/false_flag)
27. A. Siddique, 'Jundallah: Profile Of A Sunni Extremist Group', Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 20/10/2009 [http://www.rferl.org/content/Jundallah\\_Profile\\_Of\\_A\\_Sunni\\_Extremist\\_Group/1856699.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Jundallah_Profile_Of_A_Sunni_Extremist_Group/1856699.html)
28. H. V. Pant, 'Pakistan and Iran's Dysfunctional Relationship', Middle East Quarterly, 2009, Vol. 16, Issue 2

.An entirely different matter, but still of great concern is, of course, the stability of Pakistan itself and the dynamics of political strife, partly cast in sectarian terms, as well as the war on the border with Afghanistan.<sup>29</sup>

## 7. Assessing Saudi Arabia's Role in Afghanistan

In an article by an Iranian career diplomat and an academic the complicated relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia is described as a "limited contest", i.e. so far the contestation has been, in their words, about "second order interests". This means that there is a fluidity between a state of conflict and one of co-operation, because the issues at hand do not immediately affect the core position of either actor.

The authors then go on to identify 5 areas of contestation: Religious-sectarian rivalry, relations with the US and the West, supremacy in the Persian Gulf region, expansion of regional influence, and finally rivalry in the Organisation of the Petrol Exporting Countries (OPEC).<sup>30</sup> While the authors identify the first two as the primary elements in the countries relationship with one another, they do not seem to consider them sufficiently vital to change the calculus of Riyadh and Tehran vis-à-vis one another. In short, while the Sunni-Shi'a divide plays a role, as does the starkly different approach to relationships with the West, these differences have so far not engendered a primary contest conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The underlying logic is that neither actor wants these issues to be raised to a level where the contestation could get out of hand, nor does the historical record indicate that they believe that the other party can be cancelled out. In a sense then, they believe themselves to be stuck with one another and neither has the capacity to radically change this situation, nor are they willing to venture into the territory of the unknown which such a radical departure would inevitably entail.

This is also born out by the fact that their contestations have never taken the form of direct confrontations and that they have had periods of tentative co-operation and détente, during the presidencies of Hashemi Rafsanjani and Khatami.

This being said, the tensions in this relationship clearly precede the Islamic Republic and if not always seen in sectarian terms then can be cast in ethnic terms, a product of the nationalism that has swept the Middle East since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As stated by a Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) leader in 2007: "...Sunni-Shi'a tensions in Iraq had little to do with religion. You don't understand, the Iranians have only been Shia for five hundred years. They have been Persians for millennia."<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, in the period following the fall of Saddam Hussein and especially after the election of President Ahmadinejad, there has been an almost continuous streak of contestation and skirmishes. While the authors acknowledge this, their assessment is that the most pessimistic outlook entails more of the same, i.e. a confined contestation, while the optimists would hope for a "diffusion of tension and promotion of co-operation". But as they themselves point out, the Iranians and Saudis don't even agree in their narratives on *when* they had a détente and with regards to *what!*<sup>32</sup> Thus there is unfortunately room for a more thoroughly pessimistic trajectory, where in the wake of the Arab awakening and the civil war in Syria the limits to the contesta-

29. For more on these Iranian concerns regarding Afghanistan and Pakistan see CIDOB report 'Mapping the Sources of Tension and the Interests of Regional Powers in Afghanistan and Pakistan', December 2012, p.12.

30. Sadeghi, Hossein & Ahmadian, Hassan, 'Iran- Saudi Relations: Past Pattern, Future Outlook', Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs, Vol. 1, No. 4, Winter 2011, pp.117-119.

31. Jon B. Alterman, 'The Gulf Cooperation Council States' in J. B. Alterman (ed.) Gulf Kaleidoscope. Reflections on the Iranian challenge. CSIS report May 2012, p.63.

32. Sadeghi, Hossein & Ahmadian, Hassan, 2011, pp. 140-141.

tion will be loosened, and mindful of the importance of Iraq in Iranian regional policy and its potential as the next new-old battleground, the skirmishes between the two actors risk becoming more direct and elevated to the level of primary importance.

In the case of Afghanistan as one of the arenas of contestation there are, from Tehran's perspective, some clear limits to the potential of Saudi Arabian influence regardless of its ambitions. The religious-ideological affinity between Saudis and Afghans is not as great as it is often portrayed; the former are Wahhabis and predominantly follow the Hanbali school of jurisprudence, while the latter follow the Hanafi school. Wahhabi interpretations are thus not immediately culturally translatable to the Afghan way of understanding and practising Islam, but the Taliban's theological outlook is closer to that of Saudi Hanbali reading.

Saudi Arabia can at best bankroll politics in Afghanistan. It shares no physical border with the country and relies heavily on Pakistan for its actual access, literally and metaphorically, to Afghanistan. In so far as there is synchronisation of Saudi and Pakistan policies on Afghanistan, it privileges the latter. While Saudi Arabia wanted, as much as Pakistan, the Taliban to take over Afghanistan, they did not expect them to actually govern. The idea was that the Taliban would disarm and dissolve all political-military groups. But the Taliban would not be content with this and, encouraged by Pakistan, established their own emirate instead. This and the fact that they decided to host Osama bin Laden created tension between Riyadh and Islamabad.

Yet despite all that has befallen their country, the Afghans are fiercely independent, a characteristic that in the end always re-asserts itself: thus any attempt to lock in a particular politician or group, in the belief that they will be beholden to a 'sponsor' is a mistake. The expression used is that Afghans can be rented but never bought.

Tehran's own relationship with Saudi Arabia can best be described through an interview by an Iranian news outlet with Iran's ambassador to Saudi Arabia. While he is obviously stressing the official position, the exchange also reveals the basic tenets of how Iran understands Saudi Arabia: "*The region and the world of Islam suffers from the dimming of Iran-Saudi relations.*"<sup>33</sup> Returning to one of the most durable staples of Iranian foreign policy Ambassador Seyyed Mohammad Javad Rasuli Mahallati stated that if Iran and Saudi Arabia could co-operate there would be no need for foreign troops in the Persian Gulf, nor would outside powers be able to use Iran as a bogeyman in order to scare neighbouring countries to make massive arms purchases from the West. In general he refrained from mentioning sects but stressed the need for Islamic unity and an implicit joint leadership role for the two countries: "the rest of the Islamic worlds looks to us to set things right and show the way". He cast the differences between Saudi Arabia and Iran as minor, especially when compared with what they have in common, and furthermore stated that talk of schism and sectarianism, encouraged by outside forces and media outlets, only serves the purpose of diverting attention from the real danger in the region – Israel.

The rivalry with Saudi Arabia is also more about power projection and the role of the US than ideology *per se*. And there is a debate inside Riyadh as

33. 'Iran's ambassador to Riyadh: 'Decline of Iran-Saudi relation will be to the detriment of the Islamic world', ISNA 10/03/2013 <http://isna.org.ir/fa/news/91122012992/>  
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to how far to go with pushing Iran and joining the US.<sup>34</sup>The circle that the Arab states in the Persian Gulf have difficulty squaring is, as Jon Alterman puts it, that “the problem with deterrence is that it is most persuasive when it is unambiguous; yet the Gulf states crave ambiguity as they navigate their course through their publics, the regional audience, and their allies.”<sup>35</sup>

This debate on how far to take the contestation has, however, changed in the last couple of years. The change began in a sense with the demise of Saddam Hussein and the fact that the US did not replace him with another Sunni strong man (i.e. dictator) as many in the Gulf states expected. In their narrative Iraq was ‘lost’ to Iran due to US ineptitude. The revolt in Syria opened up the possibility of not only putting Iran back in its corner, but also in the long run of regaining Iraq. There seems to be less hesitation about going to the brink with Iran in this struggle and in this process the rhetoric from Riyadh against Iran, depicting the competition in sectarian terms, has harshened considerably. It is today not easy to tell to what extent it remains rhetoric and to what degree it has now been internalised in Saudi political discourse as a valid interpretation of reality.

## 8. After the US Withdrawal

The US hopes to be able to keep some bases in Afghanistan post-2014, in order to keep fighting terrorists in this part of the region – an attempt to not repeat the mistake of abandoning Afghanistan after the Soviet withdrawal.<sup>36</sup> There have also been signals to the effect of *not* designating the Taliban as a terrorist group in order to facilitate a political understanding between the Karzai government, the US and the Taliban. So far these attempts have not yielded any positive results, as the Taliban tend to see things in black and white when it comes to the US presence and the Karzai government. In short, for the Taliban there is no compromise to be had and no power sharing on the horizon and any kind of US presence no matter how small, will thus spell continued hostilities.

For Tehran, it is important that the US leaves, as it is a step towards both the withdrawing of the threatening US presence on its borders, and hopefully calming down the situation in Afghanistan itself. The thinking is that there will be no compromise between the Karzai government and the Taliban, thus lessening the risk of a total take-over by the latter à la 1998. At the same time, Tehran has developed its own contacts with the Taliban and believes that both parties can establish red lines that the other party will respect. It would be simplistic to equate the Taliban with *jihadi* salafism of the kind espoused by Al-Qaeda among others. The Taliban are Afghan, they are bound to a territory they claim as their own while many *jihadi* salafists are universalists, in the sense that they aspire to a Caliphate encompassing all believers and are thus not focused on particular nation-states. And in fact when the US accuses Iran of cooperating with the Taliban, this is a boon for Iran’s standing among certain Pashtun groups.

Tehran will thus only help the US in Afghanistan within the framework of a re-definition of US-Iranian relations. This may not amount to a proper relationship in the immediate future, but could at any rate become a much more functional non-relationship. Both reformists and principlists in Tehran remember with bitterness what they consider to be the piecemeal approach of US governments. The case in point being the Bush

34. M. Monshipouri & B. Keynoush, *Insight Turkey* Vol. 10 / No. 4 / 2008 p.147. See also Frederic Wehrey et.al. ‘Saudi-Iranian Relations Since the Fall of Saddam. Rivalry, Cooperation, and Implications for U.S. Policy’, RAND 2009

35. Jon B. Alterman, ‘*The Gulf Cooperation Council States*’ in J. B. Alterman (ed.) *Gulf Kaleidoscope. Reflections on the Iranian challenge*. CSIS report May 2012, p.72.

36. A.M. Haji-Yousefi, ‘*Iran’s Foreign policy in Afghanistan: The Current Situation and Future Prospects*’, *South Asian Studies* Vol. 27, No. 1, 2012, pp. 71-73.

administration's request for help in Afghanistan in 2001, which they received, only to repay by designating Iran as part of an Axis of Evil in early 2002, severely undermining those in Tehran arguing for engagement with Washington. This is a path no one in Tehran intends to tread again, nor would they be able to afford to do so politically. In addition, the sanctions regime that the West has imposed on Iran does not make attempts at co-operation in other areas particularly credible. When discussing Afghanistan and possible cooperation between Iran and the West, an Iranian MP succinctly pointed this out in 2010 in the context of Afghanistan: "We are facing a number of sanctions. Why do you expect us to solve your problems?"<sup>37</sup>

Furthermore, as far as Tehran is concerned the US does not have a strategic partner in Afghanistan. Pakistan is a highly unreliable partner by necessity and nothing else.<sup>38</sup> Islamabad backed the Taliban that hosted Osama bin Laden and only reluctantly switched to aid the US following the September 11 attacks. This relationship has been very volatile and the fact that the leader of al-Qaeda was finally tracked down to Abbottabad, a city in Pakistan with numerous military facilities, speaks volumes of the ambivalent attitude Islamabad and the ISI have towards the US.

## 9. Conclusion

Considering the narrative laid out in this paper and the general gloominess of most analysis of the region, it might seem far fetched to propose possibilities for breaking the trajectory of the steady drizzle of bad news and bad decision making. Yet it is striking how many areas of mutual interest and benefit there actually are. Inevitably, identifying common problems is perhaps the best way of bringing the different actors together and breaking the mould of a zero sum game.

All these neighbouring countries have a drug problem; many of them are also in great need of establishing better energy security for themselves, something that Iran can help provide. In this regard, closer co-operation on the illicit drug trade and the expansion of energy and trade are necessary, but not sufficient, elements in creating a positive dynamic. The other important element is how security is perceived, defined and established, both between and within these countries. To a large degree these are matters that are dealt with (or neglected not particularly benignly) on the regional level but in this case the presence of all major global powers is also felt. The US, Russia, India and China all have stakes and red lines<sup>39</sup> in this game, partly for tangible needs and reasons, and partly in order to keep up with the competition. In the former dimension, their needs may not always be fully compatible, but this can be managed – it is the latter dimension that generates most of the deadlock and problems, the notion of denying others presence, assets, resources etc., regardless of whether it is of any relevance for oneself. The stabilisation of Afghanistan is crucial in this respect, but just as with the intervention to help save a single individual from drug addiction (or religious cults for that matter), this is not something that can be done sequentially in a piecemeal manner. One cannot stem the flow of drugs, thus hiking the street price of the drug, and only later worry about the lack of jobs and drug substitution programmes. While the

37. J.B. Christensen, 'Strained alliances. Iran's troubled relations to Afghanistan and Pakistan.' DIIS Report 2011:03, p.8.

38. 'Are you with us or are you with the Taliban?' Interview with Mohammad Ebrahim Taherian (fm. Ambassador to Islamabad and Kabul) <http://www.irdiplomacy.ir/fa/page/1908938/ان‌اب‌اط‌اب‌ای‌دی‌ت‌س‌د‌ام‌اب>.html. 15/11/2012

39. For a useful mapping of the red lines and interests of each actor see CIDOB report 'Mapping the Sources of Tension and the Interests of Regional Powers in Afghanistan and Pakistan', December 2012, pp.10-15.



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