

Taliban's Factor in U.S.-Iran Relations: 2001-2009

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Abstract

Since the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the state of interaction between Tehran and Washington has seen considerable ups and downs. Conflict between the Islamic Republic of Iran's national interests and those of the United States gave rise to the dominance of strategic confrontation between the two states, though some cooperative actions have been witnessed between the two sides. The last example refers to some collaboration between Iran and the United States concerning the question of Afghanistan. In this article, we seek to analyze the trend governing the two actors' behavior in the region between 2001 and 2009, using a historical approach and considering the Taliban's agency.

Keywords: Iran, United States, Taliban, Cooperative Process, Interactive Process

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Introduction

After the victory of the Islamic Revolution, the political history of U.S.-Iran relations has been replete with significant ups and downs. Due to its revisionist approach to the principles, domestic and foreign behavior of the Pahlavi regime, the interests of the Islamic Republic of Iran have collided with U.S. national interests. Within such a confrontational framework, the pattern of strategic enmity between the two states was established, although some cooperative actions have been seen between the two sides. The last example refers to some collaboration between the two states regarding the question of Afghanistan. Despite existing enmity between the two states, the diplomatic apparatus of both countries have in recent years expected participatory cooperation from the other side over such issues as the West's row with Iran over its nuclear energy program, continuity and diversity of sanctions against Tehran, and detention of Iranian diplomats in Iraq.

Such a cooperative approach has resonated in the battle against the Taliban in relation to Iran and the United States' regional and trans-regional interests. This collaboration has taken place at various levels, from the issue of reconstruction and economic development, to security and intelligence affairs. A study of the two actors' conduct towards each other shows that at least two stages can be distinguished. We call the first stage the complete cooperation period and the second stage the interactive period. In this article, we seek to analyze the reasons for cooperation and then interaction between Iran and the United States on the Afghanistan question over the past decade (2001-2009). In order to carry out the aforementioned, we need to identify and analyze three factors or players in the region. On the one hand, we have Iran and the United States as dependent variables and on the other, the Taliban as an independent variable in this process, whose nature and effects on the two specific actors have to be investigated. In other words, the article addresses the question



of what characteristic of the Taliban has provided the grounds for closer cooperation between two long-running adversaries in the contemporary international system. For this purpose, firstly, we will look at the nature of the Taliban movement in ideological and historical terms. Then, considering the most important elements in U.S. and Iranian national interests, we will examine how each of these two actors behaved towards the Taliban. At last, adopting a historical approach, we will display the vestiges of cooperation and interaction between these two actors.

I. The Rise of Taliban

With the Soviet invasion and subsequent occupation of Afghanistan, various Islamist Afghan groups rose up against the USSR. In the course of this struggle, seminary students and religious forces from regional nations like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Pakistan became involved along with Afghan militants against the Soviet Union, which they viewed as pagan. With the withdrawal of the Red Army, the religious groups gained power. However, with the continued political anarchy and instability for almost a decade, forces with a mainly Pashtun character called the Taliban, led by Mullah Mohammed Omar, captured Kabul. The Pashtun community has traditionally followed the Sunni Hanafi denomination. However, since the Taliban's leaders were students of or affected by the Deobandi School (Hanafi with an ideational proximity to the Hanbali denomination and Wahhabi thinking), Hanbali and Wahhabi tendencies became stronger in the Taliban's thinking and practices (Kaplan, 2009 and Program for Culture, 2007).

With the start of the U.S.-led "War on Terror" and invasion of Afghanistan, as well as subsequent retreat of the Taliban into Pakistani territory, the militants' ideational proximity to Hanbali and Wahhabi teachings was intensified for several reasons (Afsar, 2008: 60). The Haqqani and Deobandi schools of thought are highly influential in the areas in Pakistan where the Taliban took refuge.



Moreover, they were joined by hardline regional and trans-regional Wahhabi forces, including those associated with al-Qaeda, such as Chechens and Kashmiris. Against the backdrop of intensified fighting against Western forces in Afghanistan, all of the aforementioned radicalized the ideology of the Taliban even further, giving its members a sense that they are protecting the abode of Islam and battling pagans. Therefore, it can be suggested that from a theological perspective, the Taliban are a political movement based on the Hanbali school of thought.

Abuzahreh considers the most important traits of the Hanbali denomination as ex-communication, serious objection to uprisings against ruthless rulers and refraining from cursing deviant Companions of the Prophet. (Abu Zahreh, 145-153). Muhammad Ibn Abdulwahhab, influenced by Ibn Taymiyyah, the hardline Hanbali scholar, propagated his viewpoints in the 18th century on the Arabian Peninsula. The ex-communication of many Shiite and Sunni sects was derived from Ibn Taymiyyah (Masjed Jamei, 2001: 10-14).

Although this outlook garnered certain advocates on the Arabian Peninsula, it was not the dominant power until the early 20th century when British colonialism viewed the House of Saud as suitable for governing the Arabian Peninsula. The Al Saud ultimately adopted Wahhabism as their formal denomination (Sobhani, 1986).

Wahhabi thinking has managed to attract a number of followers in various territories from the Middle East and Central Asia to Southeast Asia. Pakistan has also never been afar from the sphere of influence of the Salafists (those who believe in returning society and government to that of the early Islamic period). Shah Waliullah Hindi began the Islamic revival movement in the Indian Subcontinent. The Deobandi school of thought (the most hardline religious seminary training Wahhabi students) has been widely influenced by his works. The Taliban represent the military-political dimension of the Wahhabi thinking which has penetrated the region during the past decades. The ultimate goal of the Taliban movement is to capture Kabul and



establish an Islamic government based on Sharia teachings in Afghanistan (Dorransoro, 2009: 10).

The seminary schools in Pakistan are divided into the Deobandi and Bareilvi schools of thought; both offshoots of the Hanafi denomination. The Deobandi School is influenced by the Hanbali and Wahhabi currents extensively financed by Saudi and Emirati sources (Shafiee, 2009b). For this reason, the Hanbali students of the Indian Subcontinent and Afghanistan owe their thinking to the Arabian Peninsula. The Taliban means the students from these schools. Indeed, "Talibanism is an amalgamation of Deobandi radicalism and Wahhabism in Pakistan and Afghanistan" (Shafiee, 2009b). The break-out of the civil war in Afghanistan in the 1990s and the rise of Talibanism have further enhanced the status of the Deobandi School in Pakistan (Mohammad Sharifi, 2009: 26).

According to estimates, the Afghan Pashtun community, with a population of eight million (www.data.un.org), comprises 42 percent of Afghanistan's demographic composition. They are a branch of the Aryan race, stretching from the southern outskirts of the Hindu Kush and in central, eastern and southeastern areas, mainly in the Kabul-Kandahar line. They live in some areas neighboring Iranian borders, near Herat, as well (Pahlavan, 1994: 37). They also constitute a significant part of the Pakistani population living in northern and northwestern areas in Pakistan; particularly in Quetta and Peshavar. Pashtuns in Pakistan maintain ethnic and blood ties with their counterparts in Afghanistan. They were the second generation of Afghan emigrants to Pakistan who went to religious schools out of poverty. Thus, they were taken care of with the Saudi Wahhabi Ulema's funding, shaping their rigid interpretations of the Qur'an (Akhtar, 2008: 56). Some of the Taliban government's orders when in power included closing down female schools, banning music, closing down cinemas, restrictions on TV and photography, ban on women's employment and so on (New York Times, February 2, 1996).

The Taliban emerged after the Afghan Mujahideen's war against



Soviet troops in the 1980s as domestic armed rivalry took shape in a host of events, which will be dealt with briefly. After the Soviet forces withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989 and the reduced financial aid to the Najibullah government, the Afghan Mujahideen found a chance to get ready for the easy and complete conquest of Kabul. With the realization of the Mujahideen's entry into the Afghan capital in 1992, two questions were raised for the Mujahideen: First, abundance of vestiges of an entirely militarized society in Afghanistan; second, the revival of ethnic and racial prejudices among the various tribes. These two factors led the Mujahideen to resort to a traditional coalition of various groups and tribes for the creation of a national government, gaining legal legitimacy and consensus over power sharing. Under such circumstances, an agreement was signed on April 24, 1992 in Pakistan with Navaz Sharif's presence (then Pakistani prime minister) in order to create a framework for an interim Afghan government. First, Sibghatullah Mojaddedi, leader of a small Pashtun Mujahideen group, led a government for two months. After him, Burhanuddin Rabbani, the leader of the Islamic Society of Afghanistan, as movement militarily supported by Ahmad Shah Massoud led the government for 18 months.

Under such circumstances, conditions became ripe for the appearance of an armed group with a majority ethnic backing. The rise of the Taliban in 1994 is one of the most complicated dilemmas in Afghanistan's contemporary politics. They successfully recruited many young men in religious school in Pakistan. It is noteworthy that the Taliban did not just suddenly emerge. In addition to the critical situation in Afghanistan, which gave rise to a violent civil war, a regional foreign network (Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates) and an extra-regional one (the United States and the United Kingdom) were also influential in Afghanistan. They helped the Taliban rise to power as a group that was entirely in coordination with them and in opposition to Iran (Danesh Bakhtiari, 2000: 287 and Rashid, 2002: 408-409).



In 1994, the Taliban sent a delegation to Kabul in order to meet with Burhanuddin Rabbani, obtaining his support in return for financial assistance. Another factor behind Rabbani's acceptance of the Taliban's offer was rival Hezb-e-Islami leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar bombardment of Kabul with rockets. However, after a cease-fire was enforced between Hekmatyar and Rabbani and the premiership was granted to Hekmatyar, the Taliban stopped agreeing to working with the Afghan government and started dispatching its troops towards Kabul. (Gharayagh Zandi, 2001: 16-20).

As described above, ex-communication is one of the most important theological components of Deobandi thinking and consequently a major political practice employed by the Taliban. In Pakistan, the extremist Wahhabi group Sepah-e-Sahabah deems murdering Barelvis and Shiites as necessary, although Shiites became considered as the main enemy of Wahhabi thinking (Mohammad Sharifi, 2009 26). Such viewpoints were one of the main causes of the massacre in the Afghan city of Mazar-e-Sharif and slaying of Iranian diplomats in the city in the late 1990's. Such enmity against Shiites, including the Islamic Republic of Iran, will be further elaborated below.

The Taliban have been classified as a variety of things, depending on the analytical approach. We intend to present the Taliban as a group influencing the region. Hence, we will not address the political and ideational differences and cleavages within the Taliban. In one of the classifications mentioned above, the Taliban are divided into the following three groups: the most hard-line and hardcore group, which provides most of the forces when the Taliban were in power in Afghanistan, is the Quetta Shura (Council), led by Mullah Mohammed Omar. Since they represent the most ideologically hardline element within the Taliban, rejecting any negotiations and concessions to the Afghan central government and the occupation forces, the United States describes them as the 'bad Taliban' and the first degree enemy. The Quetta Shura is closely connected to al-



Qaeda. Its aim is to establish an Islamic government with a tribal basis as inspired by the tribal pattern of the early Islamic age (Shafiee, 2009a).

There is also the more moderate Miranshah Council, led by Jalaleddin Haqqani. It is based in Pakistan's North Waziristan tribal agency. This group is more politically oriented and does not negate the possibility of negotiations with the enemy, although the emphasis is on the withdrawal of pagans from the region and gaining more power, which has complicated negotiations. Poverty and political instability as well as religious impetus constitute the main motives for the Miranshah Council's activities (Shafiee, 2009a, and Bagchi, 2009). The least hard-line of the main groups making up the Taliban is the Shamshato Refugee Camp and Bajawa Council (based in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkwa province). It is led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezb-e-Islami. Hekmatyar's "forces played a crucial role in the Jihad against the Russians. They do not like to be considered as part of the Taliban, but are in practice called as such because they act against the status quo" (Farrall, 2009 & Giustozzi, 2010: 6).

Hekmatyar's Hezb-e-Islami is the most organized force in Afghanistan and his participation has enhanced the Taliban's power, although he has refused to work with the Taliban at most occasions (Giustozzi, 2010: 14). Most of the powerful positions in Afghanistan's current government are occupied by former members of Hekmatyar's movement. The Americans are suspicious of them, but are unable to dismiss them because of their heavy political weight (Return of the Taliban, Hamshahri Newspaper, March 7, 2004). This party has maintained a presence in the political scene and has a history of resorting to arms under duress. Since its members have a more tolerant outlook towards religious commandments, it is possible to negotiate with them. However, the radical political and religious conditions dominating Pashtun tribal culture and Pakistan's northern tribes have practically deprived them of the chance to behave differently (e.g. unlimited cooperation with the central government



and acceptance of Kabul's conditions).

II. Relations between the Taliban and the United States

Relations between the United States and the Taliban are among the most secret of America's ties with foreign governments and movements in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. While some view the Taliban movement as the result of intelligence, military and financial cooperation among the security services of the United States, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Pakistan, some other experts do not consider their role in the Taliban's rise to power as essential.

A group of analysts believe that Iran's withdrawal from the Central Treaty Organization after the Islamic Revolution, the Red Revolution in Afghanistan and Soviet invasion of Afghanistan to support the then Communist government, disrupted the belt once designed to prevent Communist forces from proceeding southwards. The Afghan army was not capable enough to fight, thus the United States paid attention to Islamist political parties and armed groups in Afghanistan. These groups, in addition to possessing the ability to fight with the religious motivation contained in jihad, enjoyed firm popular support within Afghan tribal society. The most important objectives shared by the United States and the other aforementioned states included victory over the Red Army, controlling these parties and groups for further management of Afghanistan's political system and establishing a presence on Iran's eastern borders. Those states also sought to present a violent image of Islam in the region and the world at a time when there were fears that Iran's Islamic Revolution might spread. Additionally, they aimed to make Iran's eastern borders insecure and "protect" Iran's eastern neighbors from an Islamic revolution or government (Vaezi 2001, Rashid 2000, Amir Shahkarami, 2002, and Keynzer 2008).

Nonetheless, there are certain observers who maintain that despite the deterioration in the relations between the United States



and the Taliban, their strategic relationship continues to exist although the façade of the game has changed. That is to say, due to a change in conditions -- most notably the existence of a justification for a U.S. presence in the Asian heartland amid 21st century developments -- U.S. regional planning and tactics have varied. So Taliban had to be defined as an adversary (Gharayagh Zandi, 2001: 57).

A second group of analysts view the aforementioned domestic reasons paving the way for the formation of the Taliban as sufficient, negating the importance of the role played by foreign intelligence services. On this basis, tribal conflicts and domestic political instability - including the rise of a pagan government along with Pashtun ambitions to gain control over the central government – are viewed as reasons for the formation of the Taliban. In the meantime, the significant role played by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) in the process of formation and continued support for this group in line with its strategic interests and gaining access to the strategic depth in Afghanistan cannot be ignored.

When did the United States start opposing the Taliban? The end of the Cold War was the harbinger of a redefinition of U.S. regional objectives and the start of a new regional order based on those objectives. A number of theorists view the relationship between the self and otherness as a pillar of politics; thus, a foreign enemy is a way to preserve national identity. In this analysis, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and even since the advent of the Islamic Revolution, the United States sought to create a new 'other' to maintain its identity (Melissen, 2009: 25-26). Therefore, from within Western security bodies and more specifically Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), hardline Wahhabi groups were identified in Central and South Asia (Mottaghi, 2008: 80)

After the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, U.S. attention to the country decreased considerably. It was manifested in the 1989 U.S.-Soviet agreement, which stipulates that both sides will stop their



military support for the Afghan state and insurgent forces in the country. The other sign is that in her speech, then U.S. ambassador to the United Nations Madeline Albright was reluctant to point to Afghanistan as a critical region in need of the world's attention (Shintamani Mahapatra, 1998: 116).

Iran backed the formation of Rabbani's government. Meanwhile, the Taliban continued to be supported by the West. Initially, the Taliban's dominance over Afghanistan received the implicit approval of U.S. authorities (Kelenzi, 1998: 132 and *Patterns of Global Terrorism*, 2003: 3). When the Taliban's Foreign Ministry spokesman spoke of the group's determination to restore order and security as well as the formation of an elected government, all sides became convinced that the processes of reconciliation would occur at the national level. While concerned about the non-inclusive coalition-building process in Afghanistan, the United States also viewed the fundamentalists' presence, given their anti-modern outlook, as a suitable solution to implement order and its influence in Afghanistan (P. Stodan, 1999). The United States estimated that the Taliban would be able to fulfill such expectations as disarmament of the paramilitaries, struggle against narcotics, expulsion of alien terrorists and the establishment of a uniform stable state system. "The turning point in U.S. support for the Taliban occurred when the American oil company Unocal, in a statement, viewed the new Taliban government in Afghanistan as a positive development (Marzden, 1999: 153).

Nonetheless, the Taliban's tendency to challenge world relationships and developments (both political and cultural) led to its harsh reaction to the attitudes backed by the United States. Such behavior on part of the Taliban led the United States, which already viewed this group as anti-modern rather than anti-Western, to learn about the serious problems arising from Taliban policies in practice. The main function of the Taliban, envisaged by the United States, was supposed to be the disarmament of militant groups, which failed dramatically (Karkowski, 2001).



On the other hand, Taliban obstruction clouded the goal of ridding Afghanistan of terrorist groups (Karkowski, 2001). This occurred while regional concerns over such conduct by the Taliban increased (Akhtar, 2008: 50). In its 1999 annual report, the U.S. Department of State states that Afghanistan had turned into a training hub and a suitable operational base for global terrorist activities. In light of such a development, individuals who were largely dispatched to Afghanistan from Egypt, Algeria, Pakistan, Central Asian republics and Saudi Arabia were trained by al-Qaeda, assisted by the Taliban (Patterns of Global Terrorism, 1999). The provision of special facilities and support including the issuance of passports for international terrorists was among the other activities undertaken by the Taliban.

The Taliban's hosting of Osama bin Laden, who was charged with bombing two American diplomatic premises in east Africa, was another point raised in the report. Their support for bin Laden and transformation of their territory into a backyard for al-Qaeda led to a deterioration in U.S. relations with the Taliban movement and exacerbation of regional tensions and challenges.

Production and distribution of narcotics, a major U.S. concern, is the subsistence method of more than one million Afghan. In this regard, due to its proximity to Afghanistan and location along the transit route of narcotics to the Middle East and Europe, Iran has suffered a lot (Sullivan, 2002: 194 and White Paper, 2009: 4-6). While reducing the production of narcotics was one of the agreements between the United States and the Taliban, disruption of the subsistence of many people caused the Taliban to fail to implement the agreement, leading to a negative U.S. outlook towards the Taliban.

With the Taliban's obstruction, debates about a change in government in Afghanistan started at the Pentagon in the late 1990s. Following the September 11 attacks in 2001, the United States demanded the extradition of al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden to the United States and the Taliban's cooperation with the U.S.-led "War



on Terror". With the Taliban's refusal to hand over bin Laden, the plan for invading Afghanistan was initiated at the Pentagon, accelerated by the presence of neo-conservatives in the White House. Within weeks, Afghanistan had been occupied by U.S.-led forces.

Following the fall of the Taliban regime after the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, the group's hostility towards the United States has intensified in a way that both al-Qaeda and the Taliban movement in the region have become the number one enemies of the U.S. in the world. The withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan has become the primary goal of the Taliban movement and its offshoots. The reasons for U.S. hostility towards the Taliban can be enumerated as follows: threat to U.S. interests throughout the world by al-Qaeda and supporters of the Taliban, such as attacks on American restaurants, sports teams, offices and troops and threat to international peace and security.

Other items can be added to the list, such as making the Afghan government accountable, eliminating administrative corruption, forming an efficient government, improving administrative transparency and developing the Afghan economy and living conditions. This, as a lack of efforts to carry out the aforementioned will contribute to the rise of terrorism in the region (Sajjadpour, 2009 and Dorronsoro, 2009: 9).

On the other hand, due to its non-state character, al-Qaeda has made the situation more difficult for actors opposing it in the international scene. In this respect, al-Qaeda as an international terrorist group - apart from the fact that it does not have any specific territory-is equipped with modern military hardware, using new strategies of asymmetrical warfare. For this reason, the attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon were "conducted by a non-state actor. To battle such threats proves more difficult, because they can come from anywhere and against anybody. Use of military force in relation to such cases as experienced by the United States in Afghanistan and then in Iraq would not lead to a long-term solution for such a



problem” (Sukma, 2004: 86).

The West’s failure to successfully fight Taliban militants in Afghanistan and Pakistan for almost a decade and destroy their major centers of training as well as al-Qaeda safe havens has provided one of the strongest reasons for cooperation between Iran and the United States – although superficial and temporary. Iran's geographical proximity to Afghanistan justifies close cooperation between the United States and Iran on issues in the region.

III. Iran and Taliban

After Washington’s decision to invade Afghanistan, Iran played a crucial part in the United States’ overthrow of the Taliban regime (Kagan, 2008: 37). The lapse of time has not eliminated the need for the U.S. to invite Iran to cooperate on Afghanistan. Among the reasons for Western states, and particularly the U.S., to pay attention to the need to engage Tehran in order to solve regional crises is Iran’s geopolitical and geo-strategic status and constructive outlook towards the issues Afghanistan is facing (Dehghani, 2009: 489-490). Inviting a state to help resolve a crisis and reconstruct a crisis-ridden country, apart from proving the state's historical importance, will add to its capabilities and prestige. It is noteworthy that NATO member states, since the very start of the U.S.-led occupation of Afghanistan, have called for Iran's constructive presence in this arena (Fars News, May 2, 2009). This invitation becomes more significant when considering the decades-old conflict between the Islamic Republic and the West, which has been exacerbated by a row over Iran’s nuclear energy program.

Contrary to the initial perception among Coalition commanders, the invasion of a territory with a tribal fabric did not prove to be an easy task. The protracted war of attrition in Afghanistan has led to fatigue among the NATO military forces (Fars News Agency, January 6, 2010 and December 9, 2009). That is the reason why there are rumors about behind the scenes compromise and negotiations



between the occupation forces' commanders and Taliban leaders (Rahimi, 2008: 23).

In 2009, news reports surfaced saying interaction between Iran and the West in regards to Afghanistan and its reconstruction has taken place. Fars News Agency reported Hillary Clinton on April 2, 2009 as saying that the current Hague meeting referred to Afghanistan and we believe that this issue can help us have Iran's cooperation once again. We have had this cooperation at the beginning of our presence in Afghanistan. Iran has been fairly useful in the Afghanistan question and participated in the Afghanistan aid conference in Tokyo, promising to contribute to the realization of stability in Afghanistan. This is one of the strategies that we have adopted towards Iran, but there are numerous issues ahead and we are at the start of the road to see if Iran is willing to become committed along with us (Fars News Agency, April 28, 2009).

The fact that officials from various countries invited Iran to participate in the establishment of peace and stability in Afghanistan and Pakistan attests to their inability to resolve regional problems without Iran's involvement. For instance, on March 27, 2009, the Acting Deputy U.S. State Department Spokesperson, before the international Afghanistan conference in The Hague, described the gathering without Iran's presence as imperfect. According to the BBC, Gordon Duguid added: "Iran's government has not played a positive role in Afghanistan all the time." But he expressed hope that this conference would indicate the beginning of a positive role for Iran in Afghanistan (BBC, May 12, 2009). In this relation, as part of more international efforts to establish peace and security in Afghanistan, a conference was held in London on January 28, 2010 to which Iran was invited to participate actively and constructively (Fars News Agency, January 2, 2010). Nonetheless, assessing the possible outcomes and repercussions of this meeting, Iran's diplomatic apparatus declined to take part in it (BBC Persian, January 28, 2010).

Since the Taliban's very appearance, the Islamic Republic of Iran



has stood firmly behind the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan (Sullivan, 2002: 193). One might argue that the reason behind this position is perhaps the Taliban's uprising against Rabbani's Iran-backed government and Kabul's call for Iranian help vis-à-vis Western implicit and explicit support for the Taliban. However, there are more reasons for Iran's support for the Northern Alliance when examining the situation more closely.

The formal ideology of Iran's central government is based on Shiite teachings. Meanwhile, the Taliban have adopted a Wahhabi interpretation of Islam, negating any compromise with other Islamic denominations (Gharayagh Zandi, 2001: 93). Still, Iran was ready, if the Taliban showed moderation, to avoid any friction with them like Iran's other neighbors. However, the Taliban's savage killings of civilians - including women and children - and presenting of an unsuitable, violent image of Islam, including the destruction of ancient monuments, minimized the chance of ameliorating conditions (Gharayagh Zandi, 2001: 97). The Taliban's genocide of Afghan Shiites, murder of Iranian consular officers and a journalist, production and trafficking of narcotics, insecurity on Iran's eastern borders and attacks on border checkpoints and spillover of insecurity in Iran's Sistan and Baluchistan Province resulted in hostile bilateral relations. Since the Taliban's very formation, Iran held the perception that the establishment of the Taliban in Kabul might turn Iran's eastern borders into the most critical ones for Iran, transferring tensions, hostilities and enmities to Iran (Shafiee, 2008).

In the almost a decade that has passed since the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan, production and trafficking of narcotics have expanded. During the same period, Pakistan has become a hub for supporting the Taliban forces. The presence of militants opposing Iran in Pakistan, exemplified by the terrorists formerly led by Abdulmalek Rigi, is among Iran's top concerns in its eastern borders. Such issues have strained Iran's relations with regional powers, including Pakistan. In this relation, Abdulmalek Rigi's confession that



the (Jamejam Online, May 20, 2010) new leader of his group has met with one of the Taliban's leaders, and collaborated with al-Qaeda commander Omar al-Baghdadi is worthy of mention (www.tebyan.net, March 4, 2010).

In this relation, the deputy commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, General Salami, observes: "Iran's southeast area is among the regions that in geopolitical terms has a large capacity for the coincidence of policies adopted by the trans-regional and intraregional states, creating worrying security functions. This area is a hub for world transit of narcotics for which Iran has paid hefty human and material costs. In Sistan and Baluchistan Province, such groups as al-Qaeda and the Taliban which are affected by U.S. regional policies are active as well" (Fars News Agency, November 6, 2009). Other writers have pointed to the dangers of possibly insecurity near Iran's eastern borders, particularly in areas adjacent to Pakistani territory (Sullivan, 2002).

States adjust their relations with other countries on the basis of national interests. Iranian political scientist Mohammad Reza Tajik enumerates Iran's national interests as follows: "1- Islamic character of the political system, 2- Republican nature of the political system, 3- Territorial integrity, 4- National sovereignty, 5- National unity, 6- People's substantial subsistence, 7- Public order and safety, 8- Existence of Islam and specifically Shiite Islam in the world, 9- Political independence, 10- National prestige and distinctions, 11- Spread of justice and welfare in society, 12- International peace and security, 13- Protection of the environment" (Tajik, 2002: 18).

Considering the tensions on Iran's eastern border and Iran's national interests, we can identify major threats posed by the Taliban to Iran as follows:

Discrediting the image of Islam and political Islam propagated by Iran: Iran's Islamic Revolution and the Taliban movement share the idea that both seek to implement Sharia commandments in society. Due to the use of a violent extremist approach to introduce



and implement Sharia Law by the Taliban, the image of political Islam is hurt, undermining the spread of the Islamic Revolution,

- Religious and Ethnic Cleansing: This means violent treatment of non-Pashtun ethnic groups and members of minority religious groups, particularly Shiite Muslims,

- Deployment of the Mujahedin-e-Khalgh Organization in Afghanistan under the Taliban's rule (Gharayagh Zandi, 2001: 100): Moreover, an agreement was reached in 2009 between this organization and the Rigi terrorist group in Pakistan according to which collaboration for conducting terrorist attacks was envisaged (Tabnak, February 18, 2010),

Michael Rubin suggests that when a state is entangled in serious challenges, its neighbors automatically try to stabilize it. On this basis, the Baker-Hamilton Report asked the U.S. administration to engage Iran in the resolution of questions in Iraq and Afghanistan (Rubin, 2005: 5).

IV. Taliban in the U.S.-Iran Relations

During the past two years, the Coalition Forces have become disappointed with the elimination of the Taliban from Afghanistan's political scene, calling for negotiation with what's labeled as "the good" Taliban. It is not intended to pave the way for the militants' full presence in Kabul's presidential palace, but to engage them along with the other political and ethnic groups within the framework of a coalition government. The Taliban's return to the political scene in this manner may reduce tensions to some extent as it will provide the grounds for the reemergence of Taliban beliefs and conducts in the Afghan government's policies (Rahimi, 2008). Ahead of the second Afghan presidential election, former U.S. special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan, Richard Holbrooke, formally called on the Taliban to sit down at the negotiation table, take part in the electoral process and agree to share power (Hosseini Miri, 2009). "Not only have the Taliban rejected this call, but also with the Taliban's



withdrawal, the Pashtun community has had the least participation in the elections" (Mollazehi, 2009). Moreover, the Taliban had intimidated people with death threats if they cast their votes in the polls. According to experts, the Taliban's domination over the production and distribution of narcotics and their opium-like ideology are among the most important reasons for the Taliban's reemergence (Shariatinia, 2009).

Such a reemergence would serve neither the national interests of Iran nor those of the United States. As Ashley Tellis has once indicated, a prolonged American presence in Afghanistan is clearly against the interests of Afghanistan's neighbors (Tellis, 2009: 39). In this sense, a long-term future cannot be imagined for Iran-U.S. cooperation in the region, because the general ground for U.S. confrontation with the Taliban, which is closely related to American national interests, contradicts Iranian interests. There is only limited ground on which Tehran and Washington may agree to short-term cooperation on regional issues. But in what form will Iran cooperate with the United States? Pakistan's tribal areas seem key to the dilemma. Pakistan will either resolve the security issues in the region by extending its full control over the tribal areas or allow the U.S. military or NATO to enter the area via land. Frequent attacks by U.S. drones in northwestern Pakistan serve this goal (Mollazehi, 2009, Tellis, 2009: 75; Peters, 2009: 23). The United States had once asked Iran to grant it the right to use its territorial space in the "War on Terror" in Pakistan and Afghanistan (Aftab News, February 6, 2009).

One of the other strongest motives for Iran's engagement with the Coalition is that like other Muslim countries, Iran wishes to prevent the discrediting of Iran and Muslim countries in relation to global terrorism. The invasion of Afghanistan, U.S. inclusion of two Muslim countries (Iran and Iraq) in the "Axis of Evil" and illustration of al-Qaeda as the main enemy of Western civilization has led Muslim countries - including Iran - to make efforts to cleanse the taint of terrorism off Islam by siding with the world coalition against



terrorism and objecting to the Taliban interpretation of Islam (Sukma, 2004: 87-88).

The massive protracted presence of Afghan emigrants and refugees on Iran's soil during the past 30 years due to wars and instability within Afghanistan, and the adverse consequences for Iranian society is another reason that compels Iranian authorities to take advantage of all leverage including the United States in order to bring stability to Afghanistan and subsequently repatriate Afghan refugees (Sullivan, 2002: 193-4).

The Islamic Consultative Assembly's (Majles) Research Center in a paper studied the impact of Taliban and militant activity along the eastern borders of Iran on the identity of Iranian youths. The author concludes that there is a strong correlation between youth motivations and identity policies related to social uprisings, public insecurity, armed ethnic conflicts, and serious domestic and foreign threats (Research Center, 2009). Hence, there is a need for rational foreign policy management on part of Iran's diplomatic apparatus along with other concerned institutions to take optimum advantage of the outcome of the U.S.-led "War on Terror" in Afghanistan.

Conclusion

One of the beauties of diplomacy is its ability to facilitate cooperation between two enemies. Although there has been a shift from strategic amity to strategic enmity between Iran and the United States since the victory of the Islamic Revolution, we have seen some explicit and implicit collaboration between the two influential regional and global actors. The last example, which is still underway, refers to their collaboration concerning Afghanistan.

In the course of the U.S.-led occupation of Afghanistan and removal of the Taliban regime, foreign forces have played the crucial role, but Iran's role cannot be denied. Because of its influence on a segment of domestic Afghan actors and other regional players, Iran managed to provide the conditions for the presence of foreign forces



to cause less friction in Afghanistan. Bobby Ghosh writes: "After the September 11th events, Washington and Tehran have worked together silently: Iran engaged in training, equipping and financing most of the anti-Taliban North Alliance militants and commanders in Afghanistan who cooperated with the United States in toppling the Taliban and al-Qaeda" (Alef News Website, December 11, 2009).

Interaction between the two countries has persisted after nine years. This can be seen in Western countries' invitation of Iran to the latest international conference on the reconstruction of Afghanistan, which was held in London in January 2010. "The Islamic Republic of Iran has been concerned with the reconstruction of its eastern neighbor more than any other country, and it basically considers its security and interests as being contingent on the creation of a stable and developing state. Afghanistan's economic growth and development will lead to the repatriation of more than two million Afghan refugees, reduced production and transit of narcotics, and decreased insecurity in Iran's eastern borders and it will open a reliable large market to Iranian goods" (Shafiee, 2008).

Iran desires peace and stability in the region. The years that the Taliban were in power were bitter for the Islamic Republic. Former U.S. ambassador to Iraq Ryan Crocker, who was tasked with gaining the support of regional states for forging a coalition for the "War on Terror" after September 11, has spoken of his meeting with three Iranian diplomats who expressed Iran's approval of the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan (Islamic Republic News Agency, July 29, 2009).

If we put this data together, we can conclude that firstly; once again, despite a history of political conflict, two enemies have and can reach peaceful agreements. Areas for possible cooperation between Iran and the United States should be sought in relation to particular issues rather than in general, as overarching positions are fixed on both sides. If we set the two countries' national interests as our dependent variable, friendly interaction between the two countries on



major international questions is logical.

Moreover, this relationship has been uniformly moving ahead. At least two phases can be discerned in the two countries' positions towards the Taliban. The first period began with the September 11th attacks when there was participatory cooperation between Iran and the United States in coalition against terrorism. This development occurred within the framework of Khatami's *détente* approach in foreign policy, aiming at maximum cooperation with the West, which ended in 2005. Western powers, and most notably the United States, failed to react positively to Iranian diplomatic overtures under Khatami. This was one of the causes of why after the next presidential elections in Iran, a government was formed that had sufficient reasons to reduce collaboration with the United States, even in regards to shared interests, as part of resistance against major powers. The reduction in cooperation has however not led to a complete cut in relations. Rather, it has changed the character of Iranian cooperation with the U.S. from participatory cooperation to mere interaction. To Iran, Western states have to pay further costs in order to attract its cooperation, making mutual respect a basis for their conduct.

In this regard, we have tried to identify the particular reasons for Iran and America to cooperate in this paper. Some of these reasons include the struggle against the production and distribution of narcotics, Taliban's threatening of both countries' national interests, opposition against acts of terrorism, recognition of the Taliban as a factor of instability in the region, the danger of Taliban rule in Afghanistan and Pakistan and subsequent disruption in regional peace and stability, terrorists' access to nuclear weapons, and securing oil transit.

In order to show its willingness to reduce tensions in accordance with the logic of cooperation at the time, the Islamic Republic of Iran seized the chance to cooperate with the coalition against terrorism to prove this claim and simultaneously to provide the grounds for



lowering the high wall of distrust between Iran and the United States. In spite of the aforementioned reasons for proximity between Tehran and Washington, the unsuitable treatment of Iran by the United States and its regional allies led the Iranian authorities to decide to suffice to interaction with the Coalition Forces, while preserving Iran's interests in Afghanistan.

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