



# Iran's narrative of security in Afghanistan and the feasibility of Iranian–US engagement

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## Summary

The first security priority of the United States, in particular, and Europe after 11 September 2001 has been coping with terrorism in Afghanistan. In contrast, Afghanistan has been a security concern for Iran for more than three decades.

The USA should not expect Iran to cooperate on Afghan security issues at the same time as it exerts pressure on Iran in other areas: Iranian–US problems should be considered as a package. However, the USA's accusation that Iran is helping the insurgency in Afghanistan cannot be justified as far as there is no state of war between Iran and the USA. Iran's desired policy on Afghanistan's long-term security is an Iraqi model: outright withdrawal of foreign troops and national self-reliance on security issues. Iran therefore welcomes the withdrawal of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) from Afghanistan in 2014 and will engage with the USA on Afghan security mostly through multilateral forums such as the International Contact Group on Afghanistan.

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The election of a new Iranian president in 2013 will not change Iran's policy on Afghanistan strategically, but will increase the momentum for lessening of tension between Iran and the USA, which will naturally affect other issues such as Afghanistan's security.

## SIPRI Afghanistan Regional Dialogue

SIPRI has supported a regional dialogue on the challenges facing Afghanistan and its neighbours since 2009. The dialogue is designed to bring together experts, policymakers and representatives of international organizations to explore the key security, political, social and economic issues confronting the countries and societies of the region. A particular focus of the meetings is to develop and to advance ideas on how peace and stability can be enhanced through strengthened regional cooperation.

As part of the SIPRI initiative on Afghanistan and its neighbours, a series of background papers has been commissioned from leading experts on the region. The views expressed in these papers are entirely and solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of any institution or government.

## I. Introduction

Afghanistan is a geopolitical fact for Iran, which Iran can never ignore.<sup>1</sup> Anarchy in Afghanistan has had severe security consequences for Iran, such as refugee influx, illegal narcotics trade, border insecurity and so on.<sup>2</sup> After 11 September 2001, and the consequent invasion of Afghanistan and overthrow of the Taliban by the United States, a new chapter opened in bilateral Afghan–Iranian relations. However, unparalleled and sometimes tense relations between Iran and the USA have overshadowed the neighbours’ relations. Iran was a key factor in the overthrow of the Taliban and has since helped in reviving Afghanistan’s economy and infrastructure. The bilateral ties have, however, become strained due to Iran’s immigration policy and the ups and downs in bilateral relations between Iran and the USA.<sup>3</sup>

Some US politicians and military officials as well as some in the Afghan political elite are of the opinion that Iran is meddling negatively in Afghanistan by playing a double game: pretending goodwill to the government of President Hamid Karzai on the one hand and intangibly supporting the Taliban on the other hand.<sup>4</sup> Iran often denies these accusations, as has the Afghan Government, calling Iran a ‘helpful brother and partner to Afghanistan’.<sup>5</sup> However, many high-level Iranian officials have made no secret of their criticism of the foreign military presence in Afghanistan in the past 10 years. Iran also accuses the USA of supporting the Jundullah terrorist group and therefore of using assassins in its strategy against Iran from Afghan territory.<sup>6</sup>

The broad goal of the military strategy of the USA and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan is now to ensure that Afghanistan acquires the stability that is necessary to be able to run its own security, in order to prevent elements such as the Taliban and al-Qaeda from posing any threat from its soil against the USA and its allies as well as to reduce the risk of a return to civil war. The USA claims that its exit strategy will be based on a phased drawdown until an ‘equilibrium that is manageable’ is

<sup>1</sup> Haji-Yousefi, A. M., ‘Iran’s foreign policy in Afghanistan: the current situation and future prospects’, Canadian Political Science Association Annual Conference, Waterloo, May 2011, pp. 1–4; Milani, M., ‘Iran and Afghanistan’, *The Iran Primer* (USIP: Washington, DC, 2011), <<http://iranprimer.usip.org>>.

<sup>2</sup> Since the 1979, campaigning against illegal narcotics has cost Iran dearly and claimed the lives of c. 4000 Iranian enforcement forces. Rahimi, M. R., Iranian Vice-President, [Speech on World Anti-Narcotics Day], *Ettelaat Newspaper*, 2 July 2012, <<http://www.ettelaat.com/new/index.asp?fname=2012%5C06%5C06-27%5C13-16-24.htm&storytitle>> (in Farsi); and Abbasi, E., [The domestic geopolitical and geo-economical factors in the development of Iran–Afghanistan relations], *Quarterly of Geopolitics*, no. 27 (autumn 2012), pp. 189–99 (in Farsi).

<sup>3</sup> RohZنده, J., [A brief look at the history of Iran–Afghanistan political relations] (Sobhdam: Tehran, 2005), pp. 190–210 (in Farsi).

<sup>4</sup> Shanker, T., ‘Iran may know of weapons for Taliban, Gates contends’, *New York Times*, 14 June 2007, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/06/14/world/middleeast/14gates.html>>; Hays, S., ‘The Iran pretence’, *Weekly Standard*, 26 Apr. 2010, <<http://www.weeklystandard.com/keyword/Kandahar>>; US Department of State, ‘Country reports on terrorism 2010’, 18 Aug 2011, <<http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2010/170260.htm>>; Bruno, G. and Beehner, L., ‘Iran and the future of Afghanistan’, Council on Foreign Relations, 30 Mar. 2009, <<http://www.cfr.org/iran/iran-future-afghanistan/p13578>>; and ‘Iran rejects US accusation it is training Taliban’, *Jerusalem Post*, 2 June 2010, <<http://www.jpost.com/LandedPages/PrintArticle.aspx?id=177247>>.

<sup>5</sup> Ashan, M., ‘US–Iran rivalry and Afghan Government’s silence’, 14 Sep. 2011, <[http://outlookafghanistan.net/topics?post\\_id=1852](http://outlookafghanistan.net/topics?post_id=1852)>.

<sup>6</sup> ‘Did the U.S. have contact with terror group that attacked Iran?’, *Newsweek*, 1 Mar 2010, <<http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/blogs/declassified/2010/03/01/did-the-u-s-have-contact-with-terror-group-that-attacked-iran.html>>; ‘Arrested terrorist leader exposes extensive CIA connections’, Truth is Treason, 26 Feb 2010, <<http://www.truthistreason.net/arrested-terrorist-leader-exposes-extensive-cia-connections>>; and YouTube, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YOCa70tkggg>>.

achieved.<sup>7</sup> Negotiations between the Afghan Government and the so-called moderate Taliban, which were encouraged by the USA and are not opposed by Iran, have not made progress since the assassination of Burhanuddin Rabbani, head of Afghanistan's High Peace Council, which had been formed in 2010 to initiate peace talks with the Taliban and other elements in the Afghani insurgency.<sup>8</sup> The 2013 row on the name of the Taliban's Office in Doha overshadowed any prospect of such negotiations. It is believed that the USA and its allies are now looking for a face-saving exit strategy while preventing the re-emergence of the Taliban era.<sup>9</sup>

By training and equipping the Afghan National Army (ANA), the USA has been seeking to ensure the ANA's ability to independently take over responsibility for operational control of Afghanistan. Once achieved, the scheduled drawdown of troops will go ahead as planned. Meanwhile, military operations will continue to be supplemented by a mix of infrastructure development and diplomacy. So, for the USA, it is important to determine how to engage Iran in this regard and what Iran's vision of Afghan long-term security is.

Given the above, this paper answers the following principle questions: What is Iran's vision of sustainable security in Afghanistan? Is there any overlapping between the Iranian and the US visions?

## II. The Western view on Iran's importance to Afghanistan's security

Following the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, Iran believes that it has shown both implicit and explicit willingness to facilitate the US struggle in Afghanistan. More importantly, Iran, as a major ally and backer of the (Afghan) Northern Alliance paved the way for a swift US victory over the Taliban.<sup>10</sup> Iran also perceives that it worked positively with the USA as part of the Six-Plus-Two framework on Afghanistan as well as the 2001 Bonn Conference to shape a post-Taliban system of government and several aid conferences to Afghanistan. Iran is also of the opinion that it has supported the Karzai government in different aspects, and imprisoned and deported a few al-Qaeda and Taliban members who had sought refuge in Iran, as some senior US officials conceded at the time.<sup>11</sup>

But the inclusion of Iran in US President George W. Bush's 'axis of evil', the shadow of an impending US attack on Iran over the nuclear issue, and the two countries' deep historical suspicion, put at bay any chance of direct bilateral dialogue and cooperation on Afghanistan's security. Since then, some elite sources in Tehran have felt that cooperating, even implicitly, with the USA is useless because it does not change its policy toward Iran or its stereotype about it. It would therefore be illogical for Iran to be the ace in the sleeve of its likely enemy without being thanked and appreciated in other areas.<sup>12</sup> On the base of this suspicion, the

<sup>7</sup> Kanwal, G., 'US strategy in Afghanistan and regional concerns', Institute for Defence Study and Analysis (IDSA), 21 Feb. 2011, <[http://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/USStrategyinAfghanistanandRegionalConcerns\\_gkanwal\\_210211](http://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/USStrategyinAfghanistanandRegionalConcerns_gkanwal_210211)>.

<sup>8</sup> It was reported that some elements of Taliban were invited to Iran and negotiated with Iranian officials. It was refuted afterwards by Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman. 'Iran reactions to Taliban's invitation to Iran', <<http://fararu.com/fa/news/151934/>>.

<sup>9</sup> Kanwal (note 7).

<sup>10</sup> The Afghan Northern Alliance, officially known as the United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan, was a military front that was formed in late 1996 after the Taliban took Kabul.

<sup>11</sup> Mariet De Souza, S., 'Iran, US and the Afghan conundrum: analysis', *Eurasian Review*, 7 Sep. 2011, <<http://www.eurasiareview.com/07092011-iran-us-and-the-afghan-conundrum-analysis/>>; and Stratfor Global Intelligence, 'Iran, NATO: Afghanistan and the potential for cooperation', 27 Jan 2009, <<http://www.stratfor.com/sample/analysis/iran-nato-afghanistan-and-potential-cooperation>>.

<sup>12</sup> Haji-Yousefi (note 1), pp. 1–20.

Iranian Foreign Minister, Ali Akbar Salehi, stated in at the Bonn Conference on Afghanistan in December 2011 that a strategic treaty between the USA and Afghanistan is harmful to Afghanistan security and will pose a serious threat to the region, including Iran.<sup>13</sup>

On the other hand, the USA in its early fighting in Afghanistan did not foresee a moment when it would need Iranian cooperation. But now, as drawdown approaches in 2014, US military and political leaders say that Iran could play a key role. In a tacit gesture, by inviting Iran to the March 2009 Conference on Afghanistan in the Netherlands, the interested powers showed their interest in engaging Iran in Afghanistan's security. The former US Secretary of State, Hilary Clinton, at a NATO foreign ministers meeting in Brussels in March 2009 said that 'It is expected that Iran would be invited as a neighbour of Afghanistan'.<sup>14</sup> General David H. Petraeus, former commander of US forces in the region, has said that the USA and Iran could coalesce around stabilizing Afghanistan.<sup>15</sup> Admiral Mike Mullen, former chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, expressed the same view in late January 2009.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, the European ISAF partners have also sought to include Iran in Afghan strategy decisions. German lawmakers have called for the broadening the International Contact Group on Afghanistan, so it include interested states for charting a new regional course.<sup>17</sup> 'Such an initiative, that would include Iran, would benefit if it came to direct talks between Washington and Tehran'.<sup>18</sup> In a more serious gesture, the NATO Secretary General, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, called on the USA and its NATO allies to engage with Iran to quell the jihadist insurgency in Afghanistan.<sup>19</sup>

### III. How does Iran see Afghanistan's security?

In Iran, these requesting messages are interpreted differently. Iran's vision of Afghanistan's security is a lot different with the Western one. In Iranian opinion, there are two alternatives for Afghanistan's security: (a) the status quo, which means the continued ISAF military presence, led by the USA, or (b) a self-reliant and domestic security system that is politically and logistically supported by interested powers within forums such as the new International Contact Group on Afghanistan, which should include Iran, Russia, China, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, India and NATO countries.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Text of A. A. Salehi speech in Bonn 2 Conference on Afghanistan, Hamshahri Online, 16 Dec. 2011, in Farsi, <<http://www.hamshahrionline.ir/details/153159>>.

<sup>14</sup> Sisk, R., 'Secretary of State Hillary Clinton invites Iran to Afghan talks table', *Daily News*, 5 Mar. 2009, <<https://www.nydailynews.com/news/politics/secretary-state-hillary-clinton-invites-iran-afghan-talks-table-article-1.361435>>.

<sup>15</sup> Bruno and Beehner (note 4).

<sup>16</sup> Bruno and Beehner (note 4).

<sup>17</sup> The International Contact Group on Afghanistan and Pakistan (ICG) is the main forum for political coordination with respect to the international efforts for peace and stability in Afghanistan and the region. This group, which was established by Richard Holbrooke in Feb. 2009, now comprises some 50 countries and international organizations such as the United Nations, NATO, the EU and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). Its members include states contributing troops in Afghanistan, donor countries and regional players. See German Federal Foreign Office, <[http://www.auswaertigesamt.de/EN/Aussenpolitik/RegionaleSchwerpunkte/AfghanistanZentralasien/Bonn\\_Konferenz\\_2011/Kontaktgruppe\\_node.html](http://www.auswaertigesamt.de/EN/Aussenpolitik/RegionaleSchwerpunkte/AfghanistanZentralasien/Bonn_Konferenz_2011/Kontaktgruppe_node.html)>.

<sup>18</sup> Bruno and Beehner (note 4).

<sup>19</sup> Stratfor Global Intelligence, 'Iran, NATO: Afghanistan and the potential for cooperation', 27 Jan 2009, <<http://www.stratfor.com/sample/analysis/iran-nato-afghanistan-and-potential-cooperation>>.

<sup>20</sup> The 6 plus 2 Group on Afghanistan (also known as the 6 plus 2 Contact Group or '6 plus 2') describes an informal coalition of the 6 states bordering Afghanistan—China, Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan—plus Russia and the USA, which functioned from 1999 to 2001 under the aegis of the UN. The coalition worked first to find a solution between the Afghan Northern Alliance and later to explore a post-Taliban government for Afghanistan.

Iran has not put forward a specific, detailed initiative on Afghanistan's long-run security, but by analysing the content of speeches by high-ranking Iranian officials, it is possible to understand its general vision and direction. First of all, it has to be taken into account that the Iranian Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, draws up the main Iranian foreign policy. So, if the Supreme Leader has a specific idea about a foreign policy issue, it is imperative for the Iranian Foreign Ministry to follow and operationalize it. Iran's top officials have strongly opposed the US and ISAF military presence in Afghanistan and believe in a domestic–regional solution to Afghanistan.

Khamenei, in a meeting with Karzai, stated that withdrawal of foreign military forces from Afghanistan is the wish of Iran.<sup>21</sup> He stressed that the people of Afghanistan deserve to take their destiny into their own hands. He also said that the people of Afghanistan put up a brave fight whenever they were faced with foreigners who wanted to occupy their country. Here, he compared the US military presence with the Soviet military operation. He then said: 'The people of Afghanistan are suffering from the presence of American troops in their country because this presence will bring about suffering for the Afghan people and the entire region'.<sup>22</sup> The Supreme Leader also referred to US President Barack Obama's promise to withdraw US troops from Afghanistan and stressed: 'The Americans are after permanent bases in Afghanistan which is dangerous because as long as American forces are present in Afghanistan, genuine security will not be established.'<sup>23</sup> By taking such a stance, Khamenei is expressing his pessimistic view about any long-term US–Afghan strategic cooperation which entails a US military presence in Afghanistan after 2014. However, he stressed that Iran is ready to offer all kinds of assistance to help Afghanistan build its infrastructures and make progress: 'Iran is ready to share its experiences and technical knowledge in different areas'.<sup>24</sup>

In a similar vein, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said during a visit to Afghanistan that the US-led military presence will not resolve any of the problems in Iran's eastern neighbour: 'They are not successful in their fight against terrorists because they are playing a double game. They themselves created terrorists, and now they say they are fighting them. It's not possible; we can see that. Billions of dollars spent [with] casualties on both sides.'<sup>25</sup> Ahmadinejad said that Iran's recent bloodless capture of the man at the top of its most wanted list (Abdolmalek Rigi<sup>26</sup>) should serve as an example: 'Iran captured one terrorist, and didn't kill anyone, it's possible. The fight against terrorism is not a military one; it requires the work of intelligence . . . we do not see the presence of foreign military forces in Afghanistan as a solution for peace in Afghanistan.'<sup>27</sup> With this wording, Ahmadinejad reiterated Iran's grand policy toward Afghanistan: outright withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan and establishing a national self-sustained security apparatus by Afghans.

<sup>21</sup> Office of Iranian Supreme Leader, 'Supreme Leader meets Afghan President', 25 June 2011, <<http://www.leader.ir/langs/en/index.php?p=contentShow&id=8232>>.

<sup>22</sup> Office of Iranian Supreme Leader (note 21).

<sup>23</sup> Office of Iranian Supreme Leader (note 21).

<sup>24</sup> Office of Iranian Supreme Leader (note 21).

<sup>25</sup> 'Iran President Ahmadinejad attacks US during Afghanistan visit', *Christian Science Monitor*, 10 Mar. 2010, <<http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2010/0310/Iran-President-Ahmadinejad-attacks-US-during-Afghanistan-visit>>.

<sup>26</sup> Abdolmalek Rigi (1983–20 June 2010) was the leader of Jundallah, an Islamist Sunni terrorist militant organization based in the Sistan and Baluchestan Province of southeast Iran, until his capture and execution in 2010 by the Iranian Government. Iran believes that he and his group was supported logistically by the USA to undermine Iranian security. 'West facing constant defeat in Iran', Press TV, 13 July 2010, <<http://edition.presstv.ir/detail/134627.html>>.

<sup>27</sup> 'Iran President Ahmadinejad attacks US during Afghanistan visit' (note 25).

On another occasion, the former Iranian Foreign Minister, Manouchehr Mottaki, outlined a more tangible Iranian policy towards Afghanistan: 'The solution to Afghanistan should not be sought in military confrontation and any action in Afghanistan should be based on realities.' He also said: 'Iran believes that despite ten years of foreign military presence in Afghanistan, the security situation has deteriorated in the country. Hence, Tehran maintains that its proposal to bring back stability to Afghanistan is to recognize "vulnerabilities" and review and rectify policies adopted over the past ten years.'<sup>28</sup> In the Iranian vision, the Afghan people and the neighbouring states can do a great deal to bring security back to Afghanistan. Other top officials have mostly followed this direction.

Iran has never formally proposed an elaborated security initiative on Afghanistan, partly because it may not be welcomed by interested parties such as the USA and Afghanistan; but it can be inferred from its officials' stances that they no longer like the Western military presence in Afghanistan. In Iran's opinion, given that with the passage of time it has been shown that the Western military presence has not brought about a viable peace as Iran defines it and taking into account the escalating challenges for the ISAF and the USA, dovetailed with domestic pressure in the USA and ISAF countries, it is imperative for all interested parties that Afghanistan's security system be revised. The Iranian Foreign Minister, Ali Akbar Salehi, clearly expressed the Iranian position that a long-term US military presence in Afghanistan would fan regional insecurity and could plunge the war-torn country back into further turmoil. According to Salehi, the US–Afghan Strategic Partnership Agreement added to security concerns among Afghanistan's neighbours: 'In regard to Americans' long history of military intervention in other countries we do not consider their intentions honest and this is a source of worry for us.'<sup>29</sup> Therefore, in Iran's opinion, the status quo policy for maintaining security in Afghanistan—namely the military presence of the USA and ISAF—is no longer applicable.<sup>30</sup> Iran believes that the USA is using the pretext of the Strategic Partnership Agreement to make permanent its military presence and thereby contain Iran or, if possible, change the Iranian regime.<sup>31</sup>

Furthermore, Iran believes that the USA and many large European are in severe financial crisis, and so cannot bear the further burdens of military engagements in different parts of the world. The US Congressional Budget Office (CBO) estimates the cost of the US engagements in Afghanistan and Iraq could reach \$2.4 trillion by 2017.<sup>32</sup> Adding this amount to the US gross debt of \$14.71 trillion dollars (as of 9 September 2011) delineates a terrible financial problem for the USA. At the same time, the credit rating agency Standard and Poor's has downgraded the credit ranking of the USA and other ISAF countries and the rate of economic crises such as unemployment has not shown any downward trends.<sup>33</sup> With a critical financial condition and a fragile security situation in Afghanistan, it will be difficult

<sup>28</sup> 'Iran raps armed action on Afghanistan', Press TV, 20 July 2010, <<http://edition.presstv.ir/detail/fa/135515.html>>. After leaving the Foreign Ministry, Mottaki now has warm relations with the Supreme Leader's political circles.

<sup>29</sup> 'Iran's Salehi warns about U.S. military bases in Afghanistan', Mehrnews Agency, 15 June 2012, <<http://www.mehrnews.com/en/newsdetail.aspx?NewsID=1627278>>.

<sup>30</sup> Safavi, S. Y and Sheikhan, A., [The US long-term and short-term goals by aggression to Afghanistan], *Quarterly Journal of Human Geography*, no. 3 (summer 2011), pp. 1–24 (in Farsi).

<sup>31</sup> Safavi and Sheikhan (note 25); and Pak Aeen, M., High-ranking Iranian diplomat, [Interview], 1 July 2012, <<http://www.avapress.com/vdcyup.t1a5w2bcct.html>> (in Farsi).

<sup>32</sup> 'War costs will top \$2 trillion', Capitol Hill Blue, 25 Oct. 2007, <<http://www.capitolhillblue.com/node/3610>>.

<sup>33</sup> Tripathi, D., 'Discussing the prospect of a regional solution for Afghanistan', *Eurasia Review*, 5 Sep. 2011, <<http://www.eurasiareview.com/05092011-discussing-the-prospect-of-a-regional-solution-for-afghanistan-analysis/>>.

for the US Government to garner domestic political support for its further long-term military involvement.

Moreover, discontent with the European military presence in Afghanistan is increasing as well. According to a study by the Strategic Studies Institute of the US Army War College, the support for war has fallen to 34 per cent from 67 per cent in France, it is 27 per cent in Germany, and it is 30 per cent in the United Kingdom, and this support is decreasing with the passage of time.<sup>34</sup> Of course, there may be counter claims on the reliability of such studies, but there is no doubt that the democracies cannot tolerate the fatalities that are occurring for the Western soldiers in Afghanistan. Following this argument, after assuming power in France, President François Holland decided to withdraw French forces by the end of 2012. On November 2012, it ended its combat operations in Afghanistan, pulling out hundreds of troops and fulfilling promises to end its combat role at a faster pace than other ISAF allies.<sup>35</sup> Other ally countries such as Australia have made similar decision. These arguments lead to this conclusion that Iran has a cynic view of the Western military presence in Afghanistan and consider it as a symbol of neo-colonialism. So, the status quo in the Afghan security order is not acceptable at all for Iran.

Taking into account all facts and political equations, Iran maintains that there is one option for long-term security in Afghanistan, which Iran terms a native and self-reliant security system by the Afghan state based on political and logistic support by interested regional and extra-regional powers. Whereas now this states in the region have a peripheral role in the International Contact Group on Afghanistan, Iran's proposal would involve powers such as Iran, Russia, China, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, India and NATO. In this system, first of all, the Afghan state should manage its security by itself, which is shown by the Iraqi case to be applicable. If necessary and if the Afghan state demands it, an international force led by the UN can perform any security role.<sup>36</sup> In Iranian opinion, the continuation of foreign forces in Afghanistan just provokes and motivates combat foreign occupation.<sup>37</sup>

In the Iranian opinion, all countries in the region (except some Gulf Arab states such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar) have security stakes in Afghanistan. For India, Russia and Iran, the Taliban and Talibanism as an ideology are a threat, especially given its linkage to terrorist organizations and its totalitarian nature.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, forming a fruitful regional contact group on Afghanistan is not an easy job. There are histories of conflict between India and Pakistan, the USA and Iran, and Russia and Afghanistan. Hence, handling Afghanistan's security through an international contact group such as the International Contact Group on Afghanistan will give better results.

Therefore, Iran believes that it is better to take lessons from history and not focus on any particular country or single out any other countries. It is also important that this kind of

<sup>34</sup> Tripathi (note 33).

<sup>35</sup> Keaten, J., 'France Afghanistan war mission ends, troops withdrawn before NATO allies', Huffington Post, 20 Nov. 2012, <[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/11/20/france-afghanistan-war\\_n\\_2164675.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/11/20/france-afghanistan-war_n_2164675.html)>.

<sup>36</sup> This is the author's impression; Iran has never officially explained this position.

<sup>37</sup> See a website attributed to Taliban: 'US-Taliban negotiations', 20 June 2013, <<http://www.khilafah.com/index.php/analysis/asia/16319-us-taliban-negotiations>>.

<sup>38</sup> Talibanism is an ideology which sees the Taliban as a movement to restore Islam from what they perceive to be innovations, superstitions, deviances, heresies and idolatries such as Shiism. It completely rejects the doctrine of political and religious Shiism, especially as applied in Iran and Afghani Hazara. This approach explains why at the time the Taliban captured Mazar-e Sharif, the epicenter of Afghani Shiites, they began to massacre them. This also explains why the Iranian theocracy cannot tolerate entities such as the Taliban at all, let alone bolster them or interact politically. Rashid, A., *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 2000), pp. 80–90; and Sajjadi, A. Q., 'Afghanistan, Talibanism and liberalism', *Journal of Political Science*, no. 40 (autumn 2007), pp. 165–75 (in Farsi).



grouping should mostly be a political arrangement, and in an emergency situation it will assume a back-up and advising role while the own national forces undertake any offensive operations. In other words, by this arrangement, the bitter experiences of the Soviet or US military interventions would not be repeated. This arrangement requires that the pace of developmental aid to Afghanistan is doubled and the USA and European countries increase their economic investment in Afghanistan as well as focusing on peacebuilding, so that peace and stability can be institutionalized in this war-torn country. Likewise, the neighbouring countries' special economic interests in Afghanistan should be respected.

Iran believes that neighbouring countries are capable of providing viable solution; if the extra-regional powers have the political will to allow it. On the basis of such reasoning and premises, pragmatism requires that neither can the USA ignore Iran, nor can Iran disregard the USA on Afghan security developments. The diplomatic history has proven that negotiation and bargaining is a rational policy for achieving national interests. So the big question is: can the USA and Iran engage directly on Afghanistan?

#### IV. The difficulty of bilateral Iranian–US diplomacy on Afghanistan

Iran's political identity since 1979 has been defined as anti-US and anti-Western imperialism. On the other hand, a kind of anti-Islamic and counter-Iran identity has developed in the USA after the 1979 hostage crisis and generally after 1979 Iranian Revolution. Iran has been considered by the USA as anti-Israel and a sponsor of terrorism that has undermined US interests in the Middle East. The different identities and narratives of mutual grievances and threats have developed in Iran and the USA over a long time.<sup>39</sup> There is no public speech in which Ayatollah Khamenei does not label the USA as the Global Arrogance, Great Satan and Enemy. Iranian leaders believe that the USA is not honest in negotiations and wants to decide the outcome of negotiations beforehand. They deem the US negotiation proposals as tactical tricks: 'Negotiations in which the US predetermines the result are like the relationship between a wolf and a lamb'.<sup>40</sup> The Iranian ideology after the 1979 revolution has been oriented against the so-called US imperialism or US arrogance, and negotiation with such a state would undermine its legitimacy. Therefore, Iran declined any rapprochement signals from the USA, the latest of which was proposed by US Vice President Joe Biden speaking at the Munich Security Conference in February 2013.<sup>41</sup> In response, the Iranian foreign minister welcomed it with reservation but made clear that it is the Iranian Supreme Leader who will decide on this critical issue.<sup>42</sup> So, any rapprochement solution for the two states looks unlikely in the near future.

This identity-forming process and atmosphere of animosity does not mean that all doors have been firmly locked and the two states are condemned to eternal wrath. But it needs time, long-lasting dialogue, demonstration of goodwill and a confidence-building process. Therefore, expectations such as that Iran could be persuaded to engage in any direct engagement or to acquiesce in the long-term US military presence in Afghanistan are far off.

<sup>39</sup> Aghaee, S. D. Rasooli, E., 'Constructivism and Iranian foreign policy toward Israel', *Quarterly of Politics*, no. 9 (spring 2009), pp. 1–8.

<sup>40</sup> Office of Iranian Supreme Leader, 'Speech among students', Nov. 2010, <<http://farsi.khamenei.ir/news-content?id=8337>>, (in Farsi).

<sup>41</sup> Croft, A. and MacDonald, M., 'Biden raises possibility of direct U.S.-Iran talks', Reuters, 2 Feb 2013, <<http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/02/02/us-iran-nuclear-idUSBRE91107720130202>>.

<sup>42</sup> Iranian Diplomacy, 'Salehi's response to Biden proposal', 3 Feb. 2013, <<http://www.irdiplomacy.ir/fa/>> (in Farsi).

On the other hand, Iran no longer wants to play the role of ace card in the US sleeve without its concerns being addressed appropriately. Iran is smart enough to understand that a weakened Afghanistan means an opportunity to return for the Taliban and extremist groups; so if Iran does cost-effective calculations, it will bargain with concerned parties in Afghanistan or at least undertake ‘implicit cooperation’.

The history of Iran after the 1979 revolution has proven that its foreign policy is not just ideology oriented, but there are a lot of cases of pragmatic foreign policy decision making. In this regard, Rouhollah K. Ramazani holds that Iran’s history is full of ‘circumstances [that] have forced Iranian foreign-policy makers to interpret their religious ideology pragmatically in order to advance state interest’.<sup>43</sup> According to Mohsen Milani, Iran’s foreign policy has its own ‘strategic logic’ and is ‘formulated not by mad mullahs but by calculating ayatollahs’ based on the Iranian state’s threat perception.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, previous bilateral discussions from 2005 to 2007 in Kabul between US and Iranian ambassadors as well as bilateral negotiations on Iraq serve as a precedent. If we take into account this pragmatic history, common ground can be traced regarding cooperation between Iran and the USA on Afghanistan.<sup>45</sup> But this cooperation is only possible through multilateral forums, not in direct Iranian–US contact. Indeed, the technicality of persuasion of Iran is important. Four policy changes are needed in order to implement the proposed multilateral engagement.

First, the literature of addressing Iran is important. Unfortunately even many who encourage and recommend negotiation between Iran and the USA mistake negotiation with a trial. The US diplomats’ main goal of negotiation with Iran is that they take for granted the charges they attribute to Iran and indicate that the main goal of negotiation is persuading Iran to drop its so-called malign activities. This is unacceptable for Iran; it will just backfire and destroy any prospect of rapprochement.

Second, both Iran and the USA need a confidence-building process. To achieving this process, it is better that they start their cooperation on low politics. Border security and counternarcotics are areas in which the two countries share common goals and no sensitivities. Stopping the influx of illicit drugs into Iran from Afghanistan is a security and public health priority for Iran, while cutting off the drug trade as a source of income for the Taliban in Afghanistan is a counterinsurgency priority for the USA. The logical place to start with counternarcotics initiatives includes intelligence sharing among all counternarcotics stakeholders. The USA should also seek to expand cooperation with Iran to other areas of interest, such as Afghanistan’s infrastructure development, refugee problems and other less sensitive issues.<sup>46</sup>

Third, Iran should be considered in all multilateral forums that coordinate international efforts in Afghanistan. By inviting Iran to these conferences and by insisting that Iran is a vital component of the regional solution in Afghanistan, the USA and Iran can achieve their bilateral interests in Afghanistan in a diplomatic and save-saving way. If the International Contact Group on Afghanistan is more activated and its umbrella is more broadened, it will

<sup>43</sup> Ramazani, R. K., ‘Ideology and pragmatism in Iran’s foreign policy’, *Middle East Journal*, vol. 58, no. 4 (autumn 2004), pp. 549–59.

<sup>44</sup> Milani, M., ‘Tehran’s take’, *Foreign Affairs*, July/AuG. 2009, <<http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/65123/mohsen-milani/tehrans-take>>.

<sup>45</sup> Sadat, M. H. and Hughes, J. P., ‘US–Iran engagement through Afghanistan’, *Middle East Policy*, no. 1, vol. 17 (spring 2010), pp. 31–51.

<sup>46</sup> Gavrilis, G., ‘Harnessing Iran’s role in Afghanistan’, Council on Foreign Relations, 5 June 2009, <<http://www.cfr.org/>>.

facilitate Iranian–US dialogue tacitly and integrate Iran's efforts into security maintenance in Afghanistan.

Fourth, any US bilateral strategic agreement with Afghanistan has to be clear that it is not directed against Iran, and Iranian concerns should be acknowledged in these arrangements. The USA should also avoid resorting to any dishonest policy such as engaging with the Taliban. Iran holds that the Taliban is extremely totalitarian with an anti-modern and anti-Shiitism ideology, mixed with jihadism and pan-Islamism. Their ideology does not admit ideas such as power sharing. The killing of Burhaniddin Rabbani, a former Afghanistan president, at his home by a Taliban suicide attacker who had concealed a bomb in his turban is an example of the nature of this group. So, any rapprochement with Taliban should not result to their re-emergence in Afghanistan politics.

## V. Conclusions

Afghanistan went from being a decade-long shelter for terrorism to the focus of the anti-terrorism campaign of the USA and its European allies after 11 September 2001. The long anti-Taliban war in Afghanistan has not had the desired result. The USA and ISAF attribute part of their failure to what they call Iran's measured support to the Taliban insurgents battling US and coalition forces in Afghanistan. However, Iran categorically rejects such accusations and, irrespective of the US charges, has been bolstering its relations with Afghanistan's central government in many fields.

Iran is one of main stakeholders in Afghanistan's security and, more than of any other countries, closely follows its developments. Given the cultural, religious, political and security interests that influence Iran's behaviour in Afghanistan, a stable and anti-terror state is favourable to Iranian national interests and, ironically yet naturally, coincides with US security objectives.

Given the Iranian–US mutual suspicion, history has overshadowed any overt cooperation between the two states in Afghanistan; in other words, the USA cannot expect cooperation from Iran selectively just where its interests are at stake. On the contrary, Iran has its special vision of viable security in Afghanistan that is mostly based on a domestic military as well as international political and logistic mechanism. However, this vision has some commonalities with the USA's grand strategy. Nevertheless, the absence of any explicit Iranian–US cooperation on Afghanistan does not indicate that Iran is a troublemaker in the way of the US troops and its ISAF allies, so long as they suppress insurgency in Afghanistan and do not act militarily from there against Iran. Iran with its perceived national interests and given the definition of its political identity, is unlikely to engage overtly or directly with the USA on Afghanistan or do a grand bargain. So long as Iran does not consider ISAF and the US military presence in Afghanistan as an impending security threat, it will not obstruct ISAF's 2014 drawdown.

In the context of Iranian–US relations, Iran has been a good neighbour to Afghanistan, particularly when it is compared with another neighbour, Pakistan. Although Pakistan is the main backer of insurgency in Afghanistan, Iran has often been blamed. Iran works strongly to protect its vast borders with Afghanistan, hosts millions of Afghans, and is accounted as the number one donor to Kabul. Nevertheless, Iran believes that its constructive role is ignored and is purposely tarnished by, as Iran calls it, baseless charges.

Therefore, given the deep historical differences between Iran and the USA on various issues, there is unlikely to be any grand bilateral cooperation between them on Afghanistan. But, as mentioned, Iran and the USA have converging interests and common aversions in Afghanistan, on which their tactical cooperation is possible in a multilateral forum. Both states have sought a stable central government in Kabul, capable of putting down insurgents and narcotic traffickers and wish to avoid the total collapse of the Afghan state. But Iran is deeply cynical about any long-term US military presence in Afghanistan and the strategic Afghan–US agreement concluded in 2012, which Iran perceived as a pretext for a longer US military presence. Even if no bilateral negotiation or cooperation happens between Iran and the USA on Afghanistan, this does not mean that Iran has or will support insurgency in Afghanistan. If Afghanistan’s long-term security were to be based on domestic–international equations, then Iran strongly supports it; otherwise, Iran will implicitly cooperate with the USA multilaterally through strengthening the state-building process in Afghanistan. Any fruitful negotiation between Iran and the USA on Afghanistan should be on confidence-building processes, which start first with low politics, such as refugee protection and Afghani state-building process and campaigning against drug smugglers. But on issues of high politics, Iran mostly prefers to engage with the USA multilaterally. Now that Iranian–US confrontation on the nuclear issue is escalating in the early months of 2013, any hope of explicit bilateral cooperation on other issues such as Afghanistan’s security is vanishing. Although, election of Hassan Rohani as a moderate president of Iran in August 2013 may lessen the two states’ tensions, Iran’s foreign policy toward Afghanistan will not change fundamentally.