Iran's Afghanistan Policy: Security Parameters *

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The U.S. has been gradually decreasing the number of its combat troops in Afghanistan and continuing negotiations with the Karzai administration on the timing and terms of the complete withdrawal from the country. Although the parties have not yet reached full agreement on these questions, they have agreed that the troop presence will be considerably reduced by the end of 2014. Iran is keen to lead those countries that will need to reshape their policies toward Afghanistan in the post-2014 period, depending on the changing conditions in the country.

Iran's major parameters in relation to its strategy during as well as after the U.S. invasion in Afghanistan are its threat perceptions and the security precautions developed in response to those threat perceptions. Consequently, it is crucial to extensively analyze the security parameters that constitute the foundations and framework of Iran's Afghanistan policy.

A close opponent, a distant opponent, and a distant opponent getting closer

The Iranian regime has two opponents in Afghanistan at present: the U.S. and the Taliban. As an example of strategic pragmatism, Iran supported the U.S., the distant opponent, in its struggle against the Taliban, the close opponent, during the early phases of the U.S. invasion in Afghanistan. For instance, the Iran administration reached an agreement with U.S. on preventing Al-Qaeda terrorists from escaping over its borders, allowing U.S. soldiers who were forced to cross Iranian borders during the invasion to return freely, encouraging its allies in the Northern Alliance to support the U.S. against the Taliban, and cooperating with Pakistan (against which Tehran has struggled for influence in Afghanistan) in support of a new administration in Kabul. Nevertheless, the continued U.S. presence in Afghanistan after the Taliban means that the distant opponent is getting closer, generating Iran's first security parameter in relation to its policy on Afghanistan.

The Iranian leadership sees the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan as part of Washington's strategy to surround Iran, and perceives the existence of permanent U.S. bases in Afghanistan as a particular threat. For instance, according to Iran's supreme leader, Ali Khamanei, the existence of these permanent bases constitutes a threat, because real security in Af-

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ghanistan is impossible as long as Washington keeps its military forces in the country. The major source of concern for Iran is the Shindand air base in the Herat province of Afghanistan. Located on the main road between Herat and Kandahar, Shindand Airbase is 120 km from the Iranian border and the second largest military base in Afghanistan. Iran is anxious about the potential for its use by the U.S. troops in operations hostile to Iran, particularly intelligence gathering activities.

The second factor considered by Iran in determining its Afghanistan policy is the position and role of the Taliban in Afghanistan's political and social life. For the Iranian administration, the Taliban's rise to power has posed the most serious threat to national security since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Moreover, the killing ten Iranian diplomats working at the Iranian Consulate in Mazar-ı Sharif in August 1998 by the Taliban almost sparked a war between Iran and Afghanistan. The real threat for Iran is the mentality the Taliban represents, and the political and social order it imposes rather than its military force. Iranian social scientists have named this mentality *Talibanism*, considering it to be the most serious "ideological threat" to Iran. At this point it should be noted that in branding *Talibanism* as a threat to its values, Iran's perception of the origins of the primary ideological threats has shifted from the West to the East.

For example, according to Ali Ümidi from Isfahan University, Talibanism is a conservative, totalitarian and fascist narration of Islam that completely rejects the religious and political doctrines of Shia Islam that are practiced in Iran. Moreover, Emir M. Hacı-Yusufi from Shahid Beheshti University in Tehran believes that the Taliban is "a terrorist group which reflects an unrealistic and fake description" of Islam. He argues that this group is also anti-Iranian; thus, it targets not only the "religious" but the also the "Iranian" aspects of Iran. Finally, Ibrahim Abbasi from Isfahan University suggests that the spread of the Taliban's Salafi/Wahhabi Islamic views among Sunnis and especially the Sunni Beluch may generate "a critical threat against Iran's national identity and territorial integrity".

The third security parameter determining Iran's Afghanistan policy is the Afghanistan policy pursued by Pakistan, Iran's main rival for regional influence. From the perspective of the Iranian administration, Pakistan's rapidly diminishing influence in Afghanistan following the overthrown of the Taliban is a positive development, in light of the fact that Pakistan is one of the three countries around the world which recognizes the Taliban administration. During the post invasion era, the primary goal of Iran's security policy will be to restrict the influence and activities of Pakistan and its Afghan allies on the political and social life of Afghanistan.

Stability in Afghanistan, stability in Iran?

The determinant of Iran's Afghanistan policy is the chronic political and social instability in Afghanistan. In addition to the security parameters mentioned above, this instability has generated two crucial security threats for Iran. Firstly, the long term instability has caused large waves of mass migration from Afghanistan to Iran; Iran currently has about three million Afghan refugees, of which one million are official and two million are unofficial. This situation continues to cause problems, crucially, security threats and economic, social and legal issues. Secondly, the instability in Afghanistan has created a serious drug trafficking problem for the Iranian administration. Iran is one of the major transit routes for global drug trafficking originating in Afghanistan. Among other negative consequences, more than 4000 police officers have lost their lives during the struggle against drug trafficking since 1979. Moreover, drug addiction has risen to significant levels in Iran, and the flow of drugs from Afghanistan has led to over one million drug addicts in Iran, according to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime.

Following from this analysis, Iran's policies on Afghanistan will be shaped by its security parameters. The threat that Afghanistan poses against Iran derives mainly from the instability in the country. The Iranian administration can be expected to support stability in Afghanistan in the post-2014 period, or at least to prefer "a stable instability", considering Tehran's other interests and goals.