



# Middle East Studies

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## Iran's Policies Towards Afghanistan

by Amin Tarzi

Since the demise of the Taliban regime in late 2001, Iran's policies towards Afghanistan have seemed confused or contradictory at times; however, they have fed into Tehran's complex regional political gaming. Understanding how these apparent contradictions have served Iran's goals will assist in discerning which direction Iranian policy may take in the coming years and what Iran's power projection may be within Afghanistan post-2014. In Tehran's calculations, there are three critical phases in Iran's approach to post-Taliban Afghanistan, and each demands a multifaceted policy agenda whose goals, while interconnected, appear contradictory at times. The first phase began with the Bonn process and continued with the subsequent international military presence in Afghanistan through 2008. In 2008, the second phase started and focused on securing Iran's interests in shaping the drawdown of the NATO led-International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) from Afghanistan. The final phase will begin in 2014 as ISAF combat units withdraw. In this last phase, the shape of Iran's political agenda has yet to be determined; however, the political machinations have begun so that Tehran is positioned to serve its national interests.

Iran-Afghanistan... (CONTINUED ON PG 2)

## Disturbing Questions on Nuclear Deterrence

by Gabriel Avner

Frequently when a state finds itself in a position of genuine weakness, it will seek out courses of actions that it believes will best secure its interests at the lowest possible cost. Since its 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran has attempted to ensure its status as a dominant regional power. In addition to its considerable conventional military forces and heavy handed influences in the affairs of regional states, many in the international community now contend that the Shiite regime is attempting to achieve nuclear weapons capabilities.

Disturbing Questions... (CONTINUED ON PG 3)

### MES Notes

#### *Under the Drones*

Dr. Amin Tarzi has written a chapter in the just released edited volume, *Under the Drones*, by Harvard University Press. His chapter, entitled "Political Struggles Over the Afghanistan-Pakistan Borderlands," provides both a historical review of the local attitudes about the Durand Line as well as a plausible pathway toward moving beyond this contentious policy issue. In the introduction, the editors, Shahzad Bashir and Robert D. Crews, remark, "Challenging one of the central tropes about the border, Tarzi highlights the centrality of the Durand Line to nationalist politics in both states and reveals how this boundary—often dismissed by observers as a meaningless fiction—has in fact been critical to elite conceptions of sovereignty and nationhood."

#### MES at MCU Disclaimer

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Tehran has been both Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde in its dealings with and about Afghanistan. Tehran has foiled the success of certain United States policies in Afghanistan while at the same time safeguarded against a total failure of that country in Afghanistan. Iran provided substantial economic and reconstruction assistance to western Afghanistan, yet funded and equipped the armed opposition, including the Taliban. Additionally, Iran has acted as perhaps the most active neighbor of Afghanistan in countering narcotics, while the Islamic Revolution Guard Corps' Qods Forces are not only trafficking in narcotics, but are also using the smuggling routes to assist the Taliban. In another example, Iran has provided financial and political support to President Hamid Karzai as well as funded his opponents and critics.

There are less contradictory aspects of Tehran's goals as well. During the first two phases identified above, Iran has sought to expand its reach into Afghanistan. This policy serves obvious economic and strategic aims of securing markets and allies to Iran's eastern flank, furthering its regional hegemonic goals, and curtailing the influence of Pakistan. Tehran has structured its policies to nurture old alliances and forge new ones among almost all ethnic groups of Afghanistan and within both the Shiite and Sunni populations to have chips on every number of the Afghan roulette table in case of the ball falls in a number not liked by Tehran in the third phase after 2014. This is reminiscent of Iran's playing host to Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a staunch Sunni Pashtun, soon after the Taliban took control of Kabul in September 1996 and Tehran's favoring the Sunni, Ahmad Shah Masud, over their longstanding Shiite allies, Hezb-e Wahdat, during the Afghan civil war in the mid-1990s. Afghanistan also is part of Iran's greatness narrative — something with which both the Islamic Republic and its predecessor monarchy seemed to have been preoccupied. A large part of Iran's master narrative of imperial greatness is based on the geographic area that currently is Afghanistan. This territory was the hub of ancient Iranian culture and where Persian language witnessed its revival after the onslaught of the Arabic language and culture from the west by Muslim armies. Without Afghanistan being within Iran's sphere of influence, at least culturally, it would be difficult for future Iranian policymakers to claim the status of regional power. Furthermore, the linking of Iran's Chabahar port to the Indian-built Zaranj-Delaram highway in Afghanistan's Nimroz Province effectively circumvents Pakistan's exclusive position as Afghanistan's main access to world markets.

After the plans for the gradual withdrawal of ISAF combat forces from Afghanistan by 2014 were determined during the 2010 Lisbon NATO Summit, Iran began to recalibrate in earnest its Afghan policies to reflect the new realities. From Tehran's perspective, the future of its involvement in Afghanistan remains uncertain, and it should be expected that the Iranians will continue to use both Jekyll and Hyde policies as long as the current governing structure maintains its legitimacy in Afghanistan. However, there are a few new elements that are affecting Iran's decision-making process. First, Iran is watching the reconciliation process with the Taliban and the Taliban's potential for a political future in Afghanistan. Tehran should be expected to resist a successful reconciliation process whereby the Taliban renounce violence, cut their ties with al-Qaeda, accept the provisions of the Afghan constitution, and respect the rights of women and minorities. Iran's cementing of alliances, both old and new, is partly to counter an unsavory political outcome in Kabul and to ensure Iran has military allies should the situation escalate to civil war.

### MES Notes (cont.)

15 May 2012

Dr. Amin Tarzi presented a lecture entitled "Iran: The Domestic Scene" at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies (BESA), Bar-Ilan University, Ramat Gan, Israel.

16 May 2012

Dr. Amin Tarzi presented a lecture entitled "Peering into Post-Ahmadinejad Iran" at The Alliance Center for Iranian Studies, Tel Aviv University, Tel Aviv, Israel.

22 May 2012

Dr. Amin Tarzi presented a lecture entitled "Between Green Movement and Arab Revolts: Tehran's Quest for Legitimacy" at International Strategic Research Organization (USAK), Ankara, Turkey.

With a rapidly deteriorating economy and a deadly fear of Western backed regime change, the leadership is desperately seeking the proper balance to ensure the continuance of their regime. While it would stand to reason that a regime on the defensive would choose to pursue nuclear deterrence, an analysis of the costs and benefits might explain why certain policies might prove to be less practical than they might appear upon first glance.

The Islamic Republic now faces its greatest perceived threats in recent memory. The economy has been hard hit with high levels of unemployment and inflation. In 2010, the rial was valued at around 9,000 rials to the dollar. It now trades for somewhere between 12,000 to 19,000 according to the inflated official and black market rates respectively. Sanctions from the West aimed at raising the cost of nuclear development have significantly affected the price of imports and are rapidly depleting crucial foreign currency reserves. The American led invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan along with the decade of neoconservative political rhetoric have further convinced the Shiite theocracy that the longevity of their domestically unpopular regime is under threat.

More often than not, a regime will misplay their nuclear hand. Possession of nuclear weapons comes with certain advantages. In the case of the Islamic Republic and other semi-isolated states, it can mean a veto against foreign intervention within their sphere of influence. For some, it has ensured the continuance of their regime that otherwise would have been overthrown long ago. However these advantages often come at a great cost, turning a contentious regime into a pariah state. At the same time, abandoning one's nuclear weapons program can severely weaken a leadership that lacking their key bargaining chip, becomes vulnerable to overthrow. The two ideal cases of these principles can be seen in the dealings between the West and North Korea as well as the fall of Muammar Qadhafi. The North Korean dictatorship inherited by Kim Jung Il was a starving state facing the combined South Korean and American military forces sitting on its border threatening regime change. Kim realized that he could ensure his regime's security through developing nuclear weapons. While it is true that he has managed to secure monetary aid and assurances against intervention, Kim further established North Korea as a pariah state cut off from most of the international community. On the other side of the spectrum is Libya's former dictator Muammar Qadhafi. In the wake of the fall of Saddam Hussein, Qadhafi opted to surrender his weapons of mass destruction programs in hopes of avoiding a fate similar to the Iraqi leader. This strategy appeared to be successful until the 2011 uprising by his people that was aided by Western powers, most of whom would never have considered confronting Qadhafi had he maintained his arsenal of deterrence.

In considering these cases of cost benefit analysis gone wrong, the parameters of actions open to Iran assists in assessing how the regime is likely to proceed with their program. Iran cannot afford to become a total pariah due to its dependency to access global energy markets. Oil exports are estimated to comprise over 60% of state revenues. Iran is also unlikely to give up what is a nationally popular program while fears of Western imposed regime change appear to be imminent. There is perhaps a third middle ground option that would allow both sides to save face while maintaining their primary objectives. Whether the course will include International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors at nuclear sites or assurances for continued low level enrichment, there are numerous creative solutions that could be expected to rise out of a negotiated agreement is yet to be seen. What is certain is that a continuance of the status quo is untenable for all sides involved. With the effects of sanctions biting away at the economy and the threat of an oft predicted Israeli air strike in the spring, the clock is ticking for such a compromise to be found. One can only hope that the regime will be able to sort out their internal calculations in time.

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Second, while eager to see NATO-ISAF leave its neighborhood and to claim the defeat of Western designs in the region, Tehran is weary of the strategic alliances Kabul has secured with a number NATO member states, especially the recently concluded agreement with the United States. Iran's recent attempts to block the passage of the U.S.-Afghan strategic agreement in the Afghan parliament failed to achieve their aims. Thus, Tehran should be expected to try various means, such as increasing its pressure through financial incentives and growing its role in the Afghan media, to try to limit possible presence by U.S. forces in Afghanistan beyond 2014. Third, Iran most likely will oppose the plan to link the Turkmen gas fields to markets in Pakistan and India through Afghanistan — the potential pipeline would transverse western Afghanistan, a region in which Iran's influence is greatest. There are other issues concerning Tehran as well that Iran will be factoring into its political calculations, such as the presence of around 2.5 million Afghan refugees within Iranian territory and the flow of water from Afghan rivers to eastern Iran. The refugee situation is used by Iran both as a leverage to pressure Kabul and as a potential way to slip in Qods Force operatives into Afghanistan. The degree of instability in Afghanistan affords Iran access to more water than it would have should the proposed Afghan dams become operational and the Afghans begin to use their full share of the water.

Looking back, while Iran has chips in most numbers of the Afghan roulette table, most Afghans do not seem to regard their western neighbor as the model to emulate. No matter where the ball falls in the Afghan game, Iran's chips may not have the power to win what Tehran seeks — a subservient client state. In time, however, cultural penetration into a weak Afghanistan might afford Iran a prolonged foothold in parts of Afghanistan, further deepening Afghanistan's ethno-sectarian divide.

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