



# Congressional Testimony

## **AFGHANISTAN AND PAKISTAN: UNDERSTANDING AND ENGAGING REGIONAL STAKEHOLDERS**

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**CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT**

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Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of the committee,

Thank you for inviting me to testify on such a critical issue. I applaud the Obama administration's commitment to stability and human rights in Afghanistan, a country that has endured immeasurable suffering as a result of a longstanding pattern of great power machinations followed by great power neglect.

The administration correctly understands that lasting security in Afghanistan is an enormous challenge that cannot be achieved without the collective efforts and cooperation of neighboring countries. Pakistan, as President Obama recently said, is "inextricably linked" to Afghanistan's future. Likewise, given their deep historical links and cultural and linguistic affinities, neighboring Iran stands to play a decisive role in Afghanistan's future. Effective U.S. diplomacy can help ensure that Iranian influence is decisively positive, rather than decisively negative.

### **Common interests, lingering enmities**

Despite 30 years of hostilities, the United States has more overlapping interests with Iran in Afghanistan than it does with its allies Pakistan and Saudi Arabia (the Taliban's chief patrons). Given their shared 580-mile border, and having accommodated over two million Afghan refugees over the last three decades, Iran does not stand to gain from continued instability and civil strife in Afghanistan. With one of the highest rates of drug addiction in the world, Iran has a strong interest in seeing narcotics production in Afghanistan eradicated. And given its violent history with the inherently anti-Shia Taliban (whom Iran has referred to in the past as "narco-terrorists"), Tehran has no interest in seeing their resurgence.

Indeed, Afghanistan is one of the very few positive examples of U.S.-Iran cooperation since the 1979 revolution. Tehran supported the opposition Northern Alliance long before September 11, 2001, and according to several senior U.S. officials played a critical role in helping to assemble the post-Taliban government. Like the United States, Iran has been a strong supporter of Afghan President Hamid Karzai, who has consistently praised Tehran for its support and cooperation.

Yet Iranian activities in Afghanistan (and elsewhere) are often a byproduct of its relationship with the United States. Tehran felt humiliated after being labeled by President Bush as part of an "axis of evil" in January 2002, believing its initial cooperation in Afghanistan had gone for naught. Relations further deteriorated after Iran's nuclear program was revealed to the public, and as a result of the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. Nefarious Iranian activities meant to counter U.S. influence became in part a self-fulfilling prophecy.

While Iran's strategic objectives in Afghanistan have not changed, efforts to undermine the United States has led Tehran to occasionally employ tactics that are gratuitously unhelpful—such as abruptly and forcefully repatriating Afghan refugees—and even inimical to its own strategic interests—such as providing arms to the Taliban. According to former U.S. officials with access to classified intelligence, Iranian aid to the Taliban was too insignificant to make a difference, but significant enough to send a signal to the United States not to take Iranian restraint for granted.

The Bush administration's decision to cast Iran as a source of the problem in Afghanistan, rather than a part of the solution, was met with chagrin by President Karzai and NATO allies. A senior European diplomat (and fluent Persian speaker) who spent several months in Afghanistan studying Iranian influence remarked to me upon his return that whereas Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan was about "20 percent positive, 80 percent negative", Iran's was more like "80 percent positive, 20 percent negative...and much of their negative activities are a reaction to punitive measures by us." In this context, focusing on Iran's support for the Taliban appears akin to focusing on Canadian illegal immigration to the United States.

Nonetheless, we should not exaggerate Iranian goodwill in Afghanistan. A government that is repressive and intolerant at home rarely seeks to export pluralism and Jeffersonian democracy abroad. Tehran will certainly seek to assert its influence in Afghanistan by supporting Afghan actors who are sympathetic to its worldview and interests. For the foreseeable future, however, Afghanistan's immediate priorities will be far more rudimentary than the creation of a liberal democracy.

No nation has the luxury of choosing its neighbors, and a country as decimated, destitute, and desperate as Afghanistan certainly does not have the luxury of shunning their assistance. Given its previous efforts at promoting political reconciliation, and the fact that it is among the top ten country donors of economic aid to Afghanistan, Iran has shown that when it wants to it can play an important role in helping to develop and sustain a viable Afghan state.

Despite Afghanistan's tremendous vulnerabilities, Iranian ambitions for hegemony in Afghanistan are tempered by historical experience and demographic realities. In contrast to Iraq, which is the cradle of Shiism—home to the faith's most important shrines and seminaries in Najaf and Karbala—and also the country's majority religion, the Shia in Afghanistan are a distinct minority, comprising less than 20 percent of the population. Moreover, Tehran saw in the early 1990s that a Tehran-centric, minority-led government in Kabul was simply not sustainable and led to more unrest. Experience has taught Tehran that its interests are better served with a stable, friendly, majority-led government, rather than a minority-led government subservient to Tehran but inherently unstable.

### **How to engage Iran on Afghanistan**

Ultimately, U.S. engagement with Iran as a full partner and "responsible stakeholder" in Afghanistan has little cost and potentially enormous benefits. Though Tehran will express reluctance at working with Washington, and may couch its cooperation in critiques of U.S. policies, given its desire to be seen as the champions of the Muslim world's downtrodden, it cannot give the appearance that its enmity toward the United States trumps its empathy for the Afghan people.

While direct cooperation between U.S. and Iranian forces in Afghanistan may not be immediately realistic, Washington should support and encourage EU and NATO countries that have attempted to work together with Iran on myriad issues ranging from counter-narcotics, infrastructure and agricultural development, and using Iranian ports and roads as a

supply route for aid and NATO troops. Iranian agricultural expertise, in particular, should be enlisted to help Afghan farmers in planting alternative crops to the poppy.

Critics of engagement cite the fact that the Bush administration's attempts to engage with Iran in Iraq did not bear any fruit. Despite several meetings between the U.S. and Iranian ambassadors in Baghdad, U.S. officials saw no improvement in Iranian policies in Iraq and in some cases even claimed that Tehran's support for militant groups opposed to the United States increased despite this engagement.

A fundamental shortcoming of the Bush administration's approach, however, was that it gave Tehran no indication it was interested in a broader strategic cooperation. It simply implored Iran to facilitate America's mission in Iraq because Iraqi stability was in Tehran's own interests. As one Iranian diplomat told me at the time, "The U.S. consistently threatens us militarily, encourages our population to rise up, and does its utmost to punish us economically and isolate us politically. And then we're expected to help them out in Iraq? We're not going to be good Samaritans for the sake of being good Samaritans."

The Obama administration should continue to make it clear to Tehran that it is not merely interested in tactical or isolated engagement with Iran in Afghanistan, but is genuinely interested in overcoming the animosity of the last three decades and establishing a broad working relationship.

While it's important to understand Iran's sizable influence on other issues of critical importance to the U.S.—Iraq, the Arab-Israeli conflict, nuclear proliferation, terrorism, and energy—and the linkages between them, it's also important to disaggregate Iran policies. In other words, while U.S.–Iran tension over Hezbollah or Hamas will not be resolved anytime soon, this should not preclude U.S.–Iran cooperation in Afghanistan.

Given Tehran's policies in Afghanistan (as well as in Iraq and Lebanon) are executed not by the Iranian foreign ministry but rather the elite Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), attempts by Congress to designate the IRGC a terrorist entity, if successful, would severely complicate any diplomatic initiatives with Iran. U.S. officials would effectively be prohibited from talking to the Iranian actors who matter most. To paraphrase Donald Rumsfeld, we have to deal with the Iranian leaders we've got, not the ones we wish we had.

Ultimately, the underlying source of tension in the U.S.–Iran relationship is mistrust. Washington does not trust that Iran's nuclear intentions are peaceful, and does not believe that Iran can play a cooperative role in bringing peace and stability to the Middle East. Iran's leadership, on the other hand, believes that Washington's ultimate goal is not to change Iranian behavior, but the regime itself.

For this reason, President Obama, Secretary of State Clinton, and Ambassador Holbrooke are wise to temper expectations of a diplomatic breakthrough with Tehran. Given three decades of compounded mistrust and ill will, the results of any engagement process will not be quick, and antagonism will not melt away after one, two, or perhaps even many meetings.

That said, we should be aware of the possibilities. Constructive discussions about Afghanistan could have a positive spillover on the nuclear dispute, which is a symptom of

U.S.-Iranian mistrust, not the underlying cause of tension. If indeed Iran's nuclear ambitions reflect a sense of insecurity vis-à-vis the United States, building cooperation and goodwill in Afghanistan could set a new tone and context for the relationship, which could allay Tehran's threat perception and compel its leaders to reassess various aspects of their foreign policy, including their nuclear disposition.

A win-win-win is not often in international relations. U.S.-Iran cooperation in Afghanistan would be to the benefit of all three countries, just as U.S.-Iran antagonism the last several years has been to the detriment of all three.