

RUSSIA'S AND IRAN'S STRATEGIC POLICIES TOWARDS THE AFGHANISTAN CRISIS

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Abstract. The war in Afghanistan began with the Soviet intervention and geopolitical developments of this crisis somehow attracted all the claiming actors of the international system. In this article, the authors have analysed the role of Russia and Iran by acknowledging the role of local causes and the other actors such as the United States, China, India, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia in complicating the Afghanistan crisis. The difference between the role of Russia and Iran and that of other countries is that the two countries are trying to drive the US out of Afghanistan. That is, although they also have secondary goals, their priority is to make Afghanistan unsafe for the United States. The authors are thus trying to answer this question: “in a long process what steps have been taken by Russia and Iran to neutralize the US in Afghanistan so far?”

Keywords: Afghanistan, civil war, Russia, Iran, security, the Taliban

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1. Introduction

From Russia's point of perspective, the United States is there to maintain the unipolar system and blockade of Russia. For Russia, the US presence in Afghanistan has deepened the crisis and made pervasive security threats to Central Asia, which is Russia's backyard. The growth of extremist groups in recent years is a serious threat to Russian society. Also, since Russia is one of Afghanistan's drug destinations, the growing cultivation of opiates is a critical threat to Russia. The Russian officials are aware that Afghanistan has been the main hub for extremist groups that have been burning the Middle East after 2011. Therefore, in the post-Soviet era, Afghanistan has been a source of threat rather than a source of interest to Moscow. Hence, in general,

the threats from Afghanistan towards Russia are symmetric and asymmetric. The symmetric threats have intensified the asymmetric threats as extremist groups have been raised recently. Russia attributes this to the presence of trans-regional forces, which has become an excuse for extremist groups in their Jihad against foreigners (Stepanova 2018; Marshall 2014; Galeotti 2016).

Iran's policy also overlaps with Russia's strategy. The US presence is a serious and first-rate threat to Iran. Given the US presence in Iraq and the Persian Gulf region, the US presence in Afghanistan means a physical blockade of Iran, and Iranian officials trying to defeat this strategic threat. In addition, Iran is competing with Saudi Arabia and Pakistan over various geopolitical issues. Iran regards Afghanistan as its natural geopolitical backyard and considers the presence of foreign armies as aggression to its vital interests. The presence of foreign troops in Afghanistan has not only caused peace in Afghanistan but has also doubled the range of Iran's problems. Drug smuggling and transit, as well as the illegal presence of Afghan refugees, are the most important socio-cultural threats in Iran that have intensified since the occupation of Afghanistan (Koepe 2013; Boulverdi 2005; Akbarzadeh 2014).

2. Russia's policy on the Afghanistan peace process

The first diplomatic relations between Afghanistan and Communist Russia goes back to 1919 when Russia recognized the independence of Afghanistan (Evsikov 2009). Moreover, the treaty of friendship was signed between the two countries in 1921. The treaty was important in political, economic and military terms (Ziganshina 2014: 74; Noorzoy 1985). From 1950 to 1973, the two states had very close relations and the Soviet Union influenced the political life of Afghanistan. During this period, the Soviet Union helped Afghanistan in areas such as military, economy, and agriculture (Payind 1989: 110-116). Moreover, by the contributions of the Soviet Union, the economic and technical foundation of Afghanistan was formed. Numerous projects including highways, factories, residential houses, and others were carried out by the Soviet Union (Allen 2014).

When the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979, the relation between these two states broke down. During the occupation, the US supplied all equipment to the 'Mujahedeen' through Saudi Arabia and Pakistan in order to defeat the Soviet Union. After ten years of catastrophe, the Soviet Union was forced to withdraw from Afghanistan in 1989. The main reason behind the occupation of Afghanistan was the establishment of the anti-communist religious fundamentalist government, which was a huge threat to the Soviet Union. Indeed, after the collapse of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan fundamentalist religious groups came to power (Pear 1988, Xiaochuan 2016). During the civil war in the 1990s, Russia fully supported the Northern Alliance, which represented Uzbeks, Tajiks and Hazaras. In fact, Russia along with Iran, India and Central Asian countries actively contributed to the unification of Afghan national minorities. In 2003, Moscow entered the Taliban to its list of terrorist organizations. Russian President Vladimir Putin said in early

2000 that the Taliban had no place in Afghanistan's future (O'Flynn, 2001, Asarryan 2018). But subsequent developments show that Putin was wrong because Russia played its own role in legitimizing the Taliban.

It was thought that Russia will forget forever Afghanistan, but the subsequent events made it clear that Russia won't leave Afghanistan for the United States. By the occurrence of 9/11 attacks, Russia declared its preparation to deal with terrorism, and along with the United States has tried to promote its international status. Russia helped the US to fight against terrorism in Afghanistan in 2001 and let the US use Central Asia in order to defeat terrorism. By these attempts, it can be said that Russia succeeds in gaining much in the short term but in the long term, it does not gain much in Afghanistan.

After the collapse of the Taliban regime in 2001, the relations between Russia and Afghanistan were immediately strengthened. President Hamid Karzai visited Russia two times. Russia promised to supply military equipment as well as training Afghanistan security forces. During Karzai's visit, 17 bilateral agreements were signed between the two countries. Between 2002–2009 Russia's assistance to Afghanistan is 109 million dollars. At the NATO Lisbon Summit in 2010, Russia offered to transport of NATO equipment through Russia. After 2012 the relations between Afghanistan and the US became worse and instead Afghanistan's relations with Russia advanced significantly. Russia's trade relations with Afghanistan have been growing in the 2000s and 2010s. For instance, the trade relations grew from 571.3 million USD in 2010 to 1 billion USD in 2013. In 2014 Russia imported Afghanistan's goods and placed the fifth-largest importer from Afghanistan, and at the same time, Russia tried to export an important part of Afghanistan's needs and placed in the sixth-largest exporter to Afghanistan (Brattvoll 2016:3).

After 2014 when Ashraf Ghani came into office as the new president of Afghanistan, the relation between Russia and Afghanistan became deteriorated. The ambassador of Russia in Afghanistan laid out in 2019 that "Unfortunately, we cannot say that the current President of Afghanistan, during his tenure, has been able to maintain balanced relations with international partners and especially regional partners. This has also affected Russian-Afghan relations, whose indicators can in principle be denoted by the 'negative' sign... The hiding the aspirations of the leadership of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan for cooperation with their Western partners diminishes Russia's presence in Afghanistan" (Sputnik 2019). He also adds that not only political but also economic relations have been worsened. The ambassador's remarks indicate that Russia is not satisfied with Afghanistan's relations with the West, especially the United States. In this regard, Russia has tried to establish a political balance within Afghanistan through its initiatives. Cooperation with Iran, China, and even the Taliban is the main option for Russia in balancing and controlling Afghanistan's politics.

3.1. Russia's relations with the Taliban

In November 2018, Russia launched a conference about Afghanistan peace between the Taliban and other Afghanistan groups in Moscow (Roth 2018). It was not Russia's first meeting with the Taliban as the first relation between the two sides was established in 1995 when the Taliban started to take control of some southern province in Afghanistan including Kandahar (Menkiszak and Jarzyńska 2011: 15). It was an unofficial contact but the first secret meeting between the Taliban and Russia took place in the capital city of Turkmenistan in Ashgabad. At this meeting, the Taliban asked Russia to support their permanent representative in the United Nations, but this request was not accepted. It was a great opportunity for Russia to use this group for their advantage, but Russia rejected the request. Russia was determined to maintain its relations with Mujahideen led by Rabbani rather than the Taliban, which was strongly supported by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. After that, the re-establishment of contact between Russia the Taliban began in 2010 when the Russia–US relations deteriorated sharply, and a move of terrorists started from Afghanistan to Syria and from Syria to Afghanistan (Dubnov 2018). In October 2015 the Taliban tried to take the control of Kunduz in the north of Afghanistan and near the borders with Tajikistan. In this attack citizens of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Russia were in the Taliban's armed group and this worried Russia (Brattvoll 2016). A year later Taliban took control of Kunduz City (France24 2016). After that, the relations between Russia and the Taliban became closer step by step (Stepanova 2018).

3.2. Russia's aim to expand relations with the Taliban

By contacting the Taliban, Russia shows to the West and especially to the United States that they are not far behind the Afghanistan peace talks. Moscow cannot be ignored in any way when it comes to Afghanistan. In 2016, a process of negotiations with the Taliban with the participation of China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan launched by the USA (BBC 2016). Russian policymakers felt that the United States wants to marginalize Russia in the region. In response to this meeting, Russia carried out a meeting with the participation of China and Pakistan. Later, Iran supported this process. By having relations with the Taliban, Russia wanted to strengthen barriers to the interest of the United States as well as NATO. Also, Russia wants to increase its influence beyond Central Asia including Afghanistan, Pakistan, and even the Middle East. Russia officially supplied military helicopters to the Afghanistan forces, but the Taliban claims that Russia has also provided weapons to them (DW 2016). Since the Taliban continues to fight against the ISIS in Afghanistan, close relations with the Taliban are an important aspect of Russia's national security strategy in combating terrorism. Russia fears that terrorism will spread to the whole of Central Asia (Hurley 2018).

Although various Russian political groups have different views on foreign

policy and Russian security priorities, a large part of them consider Afghanistan with Duginist geopolitical point of view, and they believe that the United States is trying to put Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan under its domination. This claim can be proven by looking at Russia's activities in the new millennium. On the one hand, Russia cooperated with the US in Afghanistan; on the other hand, it has always criticized the presence of the United States and the West in Afghanistan. Despite some differences in the Russian elite discourse on Afghanistan, it seems that many of them see the United States and its presence in the region from a geopolitical point of view based on the Heartland theory of Mackinder and Rimland theory of Spykman (Sanga 2016: 64).

Looking at Russia's strategy under Putin's presidency, and the proximity of his views to Alexander Dugin's perspective, Russia is worried about the presence of the United States in the region. Dugin defines the collapse of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan as a result of the US' 'anaconda strategy', which is still continuing. Dugin believes that the United States, by controlling the former Soviet territories, is attempting to dominate Russia. In fact, taking a closer look at the US strategy and its operations, these efforts become visible. For instance, the United States and NATO have created a corridor from Europe to Afghanistan through the GUAM Organization (consisting of Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, and Moldova). He regards this organization as anti-Russian (Dobaev and Dugin 2005: 75-77). Therefore, it is Russia's duty to hold the countries of Pakistan and Afghanistan under its control.

The fight against narcotics is at the heart of Russia's foreign policy thinking, as the smuggling of opiate is one of the major challenges of Russia's recent history and to the extent that this issue is a national security threat rather than health crisis (Sanga 2016: 73). In 2009, Victor Ivanov, head of Russia's anti-narcotics service said that "in recent years Russia has not just become massively hooked on Afghan opiates, it has also become the world's absolute leader in the opiate trade and the number one heroin consumers... 90 percent of Russian addicts now take Afghan heroin... [however, the drug trafficking is] a challenge to Russia's civilization" (the Telegraph 2009). Many Russians, including Vladimir Putin, believe that narcotics production in Afghanistan which increased 40 times, maximized damages to Russia. In 2005, Putin accused foreign forces based in Afghanistan of neglecting Afghan drug traffickers who smuggle drugs to the former Soviet Union and European countries (Sanga 2016: 73).

In the future, Russia can play a huge role in providing peace in Afghanistan. It is because Russia is one of the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council and global power. Based on this position, Russia is able to mobilize the UN to interfere in peace negotiations about Afghanistan. Moreover, nowadays, Russia has also close contacts with the Taliban, in this way it can urge and even force the Taliban to make peace. Besides this, by using central Asia states Russia also has an advantage for the peace negotiations and influencing the Taliban.

The ISIS's rise and growth in Afghanistan is threatening Russia and Central Asian fragile states. In 2014, the Islamic State of Khorasan (IS-K) announced its existence. The Great Khorasan is the old name of a large area of Central Asia, Afghanistan and

Iran's eastern territories (CSIS 2018). Putin's special envoy to Kabul estimates that there will be between 20 and 30,000 IS in Afghanistan (Lefeuvre 2019). Although this figure appears to be exaggerated, given the attractiveness of terrorist groups and fundamentalism in some parts of Afghanistan it can become a huge threat. Moreover, the group naming reflects ISIS's expansionist agenda and Russia is scared of getting involved with it along its borders. Regarding Russia's initiatives to hold peace talks between Afghanistan Central Government and the Taliban, it seems Russia is determined to fight against increasing any insecurity and instability on its borders. Russia also has the possibility of organizing some regional entities in line with its interests. If developments in international relations continue in this way, Russia can activate the Shanghai Organization for its own purposes, even in Afghanistan, as the task of the Shanghai Organization is to combat the kind of threats that exist in Afghanistan. In the future, Russia will use all these capacities in cooperation with China, India, and Iran. It is important to note that China is more concerned about the stability of the region than Russia because China has designed long-term plans for the region, and Russia is aware of this.

4. Iran's policy on Afghanistan peace

At regional level, the Cold War affected Iran and Afghanistan, as Iran was on the verge of revolution along with the events of Afghanistan in 1979. The internal dynamics of the war led to dramatic changes in the two neighbouring countries. When Afghanistan fell into communism, the USA and the western block lost this important country, and eight months later, they lost Iran in the same way (Saikal 2010: 112). Therefore, the Islamic Republic of Iran became a neighbour with its ideological adversaries in the north, the Soviet Union and a new communist state in the east, Afghanistan. In this period, which continued until the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, Iran's foreign policy was based on an idealistic aggressive approach, which was seen as the exportation of the Islamic Revolution. By using the slogan of neither East (Soviet Union) nor West (United States), Iran's ideology was strongly opposed to the communist forces. However, Iran which was severely under the pressure of the war with Iraq in the 1980s (1980–1988) was virtually unable to support like-minded groups in Afghanistan. On the other hand, Iran was reluctant to disrupt the balance of power in the war between Iran and Iraq, as Iran's support for its opponents to Afghanistan's Communists could encourage the Soviet Union to retaliate by giving Iraq more support in its war against Iran. Therefore "Iran played its 'Afghan card' as an effective means to gain concessions from Moscow, to limit the Soviet supply of arms to Iraq during the eight-year Iran-Iraq War, to counter the looming US threat" (Milani 2006: 237).

But in the 1990s, Iran considered Afghanistan as a place for the spread of radical Sunniism (Worden 2018), inspired by Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. So, by changing its policy, Iran supported the Northern Alliance in their fight against those groups which were supported by Saudis and Pakistanis. At the same time, by the ideal of Islamic

solidarity, Iran sheltered all the Afghans who fled from the communist regime. Thus, with generous policy, Iran accepted more than 3 million Afghan as refugee, the largest in the years 1991–92 (Bruce 2013: 4). In this decade, Iran's foreign policy was 'idealistic-realistic' and the decision-makers were determined to adopt the ideals to reality. Therefore, during this period, the Shias, Tajiks and Uzbeks received the main priority in Iran's foreign policy towards Afghanistan. But during the presidency of Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005), Iran's foreign policy was realistic-idealistic, and Afghanistan can be measured in this way. The policy of de-escalation and Khatami's theory of a 'dialogue between civilizations' affected Iran's policy on Afghanistan in the form of a stable state establishment with the participation of all groups and in constructive cooperation with all actors involved. The most prominent manifestation of this policy is the Bonn Summit in 2001 (Shafaei 2004: 833–34). In line with this policy, Iran even had limited coordination with the United States in its attack on Afghanistan.

In the aftermath of the fall of the Taliban, a strategic opportunity arose for Iran to reform its relations with Afghanistan and expand its influence. During their five-year rule, the Taliban were severely anti-Shiite and anti-Iran as they were financed by Saudi Arabia. Thus, the fall of the Taliban ended a downward phase in relations between Iran and Afghanistan (Akbarzadeh 2014: 63–64). However, Iran faced a much bigger security concern with the fall of the Taliban, and it was to be a neighbour to a country that was captured by the US. The number of US troops, their technological capabilities, and their international support was a serious concern for Iran. Consequently, Iran tried to perpetuate its interests in Afghanistan and to enter the USA to an erosion war by any means until it withdraws. The presence of the United States in Afghanistan coincided with the Iranian nuclear issue and the US war in Iraq, and it seems that Iran has been under the pressure of the international system.

Although the United States did not intend to change the regime of Iran using the territory of Afghanistan, this fear was an impression that strongly influenced Iranian leaders' thoughts (Akbarzadeh 2014: 64). The Iranian officials repeatedly objected to the continuation of the American presence. This strategic concern about the US also strongly affected the Iran-Afghanistan relations. Iran's foreign policy has changed dramatically during the Ahmadinejad era, which has led to a stronger US presence in the region. In fact, Ahmadinejad's radical slogans led to the legitimacy of the United States presence in the region, and Iran, which also was feeling insecurity from the Iraq side, needed to design its own balance with the United States preventing any thought about Iran. It is clear that Iran was dissatisfied with the powerful US presence in Afghanistan and sought push out the US forces in the region.

Iran's position on Afghanistan and its relations with Afghanistan government did not change from the start of Ahmadinejad's government in 2005. However, even before Ahmadinejad's presidency, Hamid Karzai's policy of empowerment, as well as his efforts to centralize state power and reduce the power of forces close to Iran, led to some fluctuations in Afghanistan's relations with Iran. Ahmadinejad was emphasizing that the presence of multinational forces is causing instability in Afghanistan, and in addition to the presence of these forces, there will be obstacles

to the reconstruction projects launched by Iran in Afghanistan. Therefore, Iran demanded an agenda for the withdrawal of multinational forces from Afghanistan (Milani 2006: 255).

Iran is essentially opposed to the continued presence of foreign troops, especially US troops in Afghanistan. Because, Iran believes that this presence legitimizes the extremist movements such as the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and at a wider regional level. Iran also argues that US policies in Afghanistan undermine Iran's goals, including the establishment and consolidation of close political and economic ties between Iran and Afghanistan. But Iran's goal was to strengthen the Shiites and Tajiks of Afghanistan and this has fuelled friction between Iran and other major regional actors, such as Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. This policy was pursued by Iran in Lebanon during the 1980s and Iraq after 2003 which strengthened the Shia groups in these countries. Nonetheless, Afghanistan's situation differs from that of Iraq as it does not have the necessary human resources for Iran's political engineering. Iran has not even been able to create an armed group in Afghanistan to defend its interests while it was able to organize Shia groups in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen.

4.1. Saudi Arabia factor and Salafi anti-Shia movements

Iran opposed the occupation of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union. At the same time, Iran was viewing the Islamabad-Riyadh-Washington anti-Soviet axis with much suspicion. Of course, Iran did not act against the mentioned axis but did not participate in the battle against the Soviet Union. The nature of the US, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia cooperation was a direct threat to Iran. The jihadists were fighting against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, at the same time the United States and Saudi Arabia were supporting Iraq in its war against Iran. In addition, another major concern of Iran was the expansion of Saudi Arabia's Wahabism in Pakistan and Afghanistan, because Iran regards it as 'American Islam' (Milani 2006: 238-39). Any mistake in Afghanistan could have a huge cost to Iran since it was involving in an unequal war with Iraq which was supported by most Arab countries and Western powers.

The collapse of the communist government in 1992, and the formation of the government of Burhanuddin Rabbani, led to Iran's dominance in the political arena of Afghanistan. It didn't take long as Iran suffered a devastating failure after the fall of Kabul in 1996 by the Taliban. Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates isolated Iran from Afghanistan's political scene by recognising Taliban rule. Iran's decisive support from the Hazara Shiites, as well as Tajiks and Uzbeks (Sunni) and the opposition of Pakistan's allies led to the resistance of the North Front until 2001 (Kopke 2013: 5-6) and this front, was able to consolidate its presence in Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban in collaboration with US military. Indeed, after years of effort, Iran succeeded in defeating Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates by US military expense and weapons.

During the Taliban's domination over the capital of Afghanistan, Iran's policy was based on four pillars. First, it did not identify the Taliban government and sought to change the status quo in favour of the Rabbani government. Secondly, it supported

the Northern Alliance as a hostile force against the Taliban. Third, Iran used this front against the Taliban and did not engage directly against this group. Fourth, Iran has increased its efforts on Afghanistan peace talks and the future of this country (Milani 2006: 243). Summarily, with the inroad of the Taliban and the capture of Mazar-e-Sharif in 1998 and killing 11 Iranian diplomats, Iran lost the game to the Taliban and indeed to Pakistan and Saudi Arabia temporarily. As mentioned above, this loss was the start of a new round that began with the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001.

Iran and the United States collaborated in the defeating of the Taliban and the creation of a new Afghanistan government. The Iranian Army, whose elements were united with the Northern Alliance units, helped the US in 2001 when the US military arrived in Kabul (Slayin 2005), however, this cooperation was not stabilized due to other issues. The US invasion of Iraq and US policy towards Iran's nuclear program has led to an aggressive policy of Iran towards US presence in Afghanistan afterwards (Nader and Laha 2011: 7). Therefore, Afghanistan has come under the Iranian authorities' attention as an area where regional superpowers and rivals such as Saudi Arabia and Pakistan are competing for interference. The continuation of this situation and its consequences has caused the flood of Afghan refugees to Iran in the last two decades after the US invasion.

However, in the aftermath of the US invasion, Iran has serious concerns about Afghanistan's uncertain status. The issue of refugees, the presence of the United States, the influence of the radical axis under the protection of Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, and ultimately the presence of al-Qaeda and most recently the ISIS's rising in Afghanistan and the threatening the security of the Iranian Sunni area borders were among the most important concerns of Iran, and they are continuing. The existence of a significant minority of Shia Hazara and Tajik has been linked Afghanistan ethnically and linguistically to Iran, and these two elements form an integral part of the presence of Iran in Afghanistan.

The importance of the religious and cultural ties of Afghanistan to the extent that during the eight years of Iraq's war against Iran, many Afghan citizens fought on the Iranian front and more than 2,000 of them were killed (Mashreghnews 2015). Also, in other conflicts, Afghans have contributed to the armed forces of Iran. For example, some in Iran claim that in the war between Azerbaijan and Armenia in the 1990s, Iran has sent Afghans to the front in the form of assistance to Azerbaijan (Asriran 2011) or sending them to the Karabakh Front (Islamic World News 2018), which has not been approved officially. There are even reports of sending Afghans by Iran to the Bosnian war in the 1990s (Shahidrasul 2016). In the Syrian war after 2011, Iran has also managed to organize Shiite Afghans in the form of the Fatemiyoun Division.

However, Iran has long-term goals in Afghanistan. One of its serious concerns about Afghanistan is the issue of the Hirmand and Heriudud rivers and the rights of Iran from these rivers. This concern is due to the severe decrease of water resources in the south-eastern provinces of Iran, which are facing a famine crisis (Aman 2016, Hanasz 2012). In this regard, Iran's Supreme Leader advisor, Major General Rahim Safavi have said recently that "Iran is one of the most important countries in the

world in terms of hydropolitics and is located in an area that will be the most volatile region in the water issues in the future, and Afghanistan will be in the center of water dispute” (Tasnimnews 2019).

This view of Afghanistan helps to understand Iran’s policy towards the country. In addition, the socio-cultural problems of the huge flood of Afghanistan migrants have led to the susceptibility of Iran, where Iranian authorities have even threatened to expel Afghan refugees from Iran if the US continues its pressure to Iran in other issues such as nuclear program (Aftabnews 2016). Another important issue that matters in the future of Afghanistan is the Taliban and its role in the Afghan administration. The regional balance of power forces Iran to accept the reality of the Taliban. “I think it would be impossible to have a future Afghanistan without any role for the Taliban. But we also believe that the Taliban should not have a dominant role in Afghanistan. Nobody in the region believes that a Taliban dominated Afghanistan is in the security interests of the region. I believe that is almost a consensus”, Iran’s Foreign Minister said on a TV conversation (Reuters 2019). This position is due to the influence of Pakistan and Saudi Arabia in the leadership cadre of the Taliban, and Iran fears that will suffer damage from Pakistan and in particular Saudi Arabia, by the predominance of the Taliban in the politics of Afghanistan.

Iran will see the US, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Pakistan in one front and will focus its policies on containing this coalition. Therefore, Iranian politicians have formed a coalition with the presence of Russia, China, and India, the first issue is the stability of the central government of Afghanistan and the fight against ISIL in Afghanistan. The first issue of this alliance is the stability of the central government of Afghanistan and the fight against ISIS in Afghanistan (Mashreghnews 2018). This policy is a tactical and meaningful step for all competitors. Iran, as a country surrounded by its enemies on all fronts, must choose between the worse and the worst. Because Iran’s heavy burden on other Middle East fronts, such as Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Lebanon, has forced Iran to accept some ground realities and Iran is trying to avoid a new conflict with another group. Of course, this does not mean full legitimacy for the Taliban. In any case, Iran seeks to destabilize Afghanistan for its global rivals such as the United States and regional rivals such as Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and the UAE.

Moreover, with the establishment of a strong central government in Afghanistan, Iran is seeking a more serious fight against narcotics. Afghanistan produces 90 per cent of world opium (UNODC 2010: 37), and at least about 60 per cent of its transit is through Iran (Beehner 2006). This issue has caused severe social crises in Iran. In 2010, Iran seized 528,928 kilograms of opium, 10,903 kilograms of morphine and 16,116 kilograms of heroin from smugglers, the world’s first largest in opium and second largest in morphine and heroin. An important point is that the second-largest opium trafficker is Pakistan which has seized 64,608 kilograms. This indicates the level of opium security threats for Iran (UNODC 2010: 15).

Since the main ways of Afghanistan’s drug trafficking pass from Iran, it is clear that Iran has a serious problem. For example, drug addiction is the first divorce factor among Iranian families in metropolitan areas (Khabar Online 2019). It is important

to note that the family is of fundamental value in Eastern societies including Iran and that drugs have put this value in serious jeopardy. Undoubtedly the fragile state of Afghanistan has had a direct impact on Iran's national security as well as its political, economic and social spheres, and this situation continues. Iran is thus trying to implement its scenarios as a border country to Afghanistan.

5. Conclusion

The Afghanistan crisis, as the longest-running crisis in international relations in the twentieth century, has not only a regional but a global dimension as well. The Jihadi forces were formed and organized in the 1980s to defeat the Soviet Union by the US, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan. These warrior angels became very dangerous terrorists in the 1990s, posing threats to peace and international security. In the 1990s, both Russia and Iran failed to respond strongly to the Taliban's domination of Afghanistan, prompting the United States and NATO forces to attack Afghanistan in the name of combating international terrorism. The US invasion caused Russia and Iran to face geostrategic dangers and see NATO at their borders. Russia and especially Iran regard the presence of foreign troops in Afghanistan as a potential security threat and therefore, pursue their policies based on US containment. According to the Russian officials, the purpose of US and NATO operations in Afghanistan is not to counter terrorism, but to promote terrorism for their political and military exploitation. Thus, the US aims to control Afghanistan's neighbours, including China, Iran, Central Asia and Russia. In summary, Russia's intent to approach the Taliban in recent years is to manage and stop threats, knowing the Taliban for future deployments, using Taliban as a tool against the US and NATO, persuading the US to engage and focus on Russian interests in Afghanistan, to pressure on the Afghanistan central government to take Russia's interests into account, to create internal divisions within the Taliban and ultimately to use the Taliban against more dangerous terrorist groups such as ISIS.

Among Afghanistan's neighbours, Iran has suffered the most damage from the civil war in the country. In a geopolitical competition with Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, Iran has sought to establish a system similar to its Islamic Republic in Afghanistan. Nonetheless, due to the impossibility of this goal, Iran has tried to strengthen groups close to Iran. The Tajiks and the Shiites and somehow Uzbeks were therefore backed by Iranian authorities. Given the importance of some factors such as race and religion in Afghan politics, Iran has based its policies on this. The persistence and deepening of the Afghanistan crisis have convinced Iran to come closer to the Taliban and abandon selective policy as far as possible. Iran's strategy is US withdrawal from Afghanistan in any possible way, and so Iran has prioritized proximity to a weak enemy to defeat a stronger one.

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