

**THE ROLE OF IRAN IN AFGHANISTAN'S POLITICAL SETTLEMENT AND
REGIONAL SECURITY**

Kalandarov Ulmas Fakhriddin ugli

Researcher, TSUOS

olmas.qalandarov24@gmail.com

Annotation: Analysis of the Islamic Republic of Iran's foreign policy toward Afghanistan and its strategic approach to the "Afghan direction." Iran views Afghanistan not only as a neighboring state but also as a key component of its regional security and political stability strategy. The text highlights Iran's main interests, including counterbalancing Saudi Arabia's influence, maintaining ties with Tajik and Hazara communities, expanding trade and economic cooperation, resolving the Helmand River water allocation dispute, addressing the refugee issue, combating narcotics trafficking, and strengthening border security. It also discusses Iran's opposition to U.S. military bases in Afghanistan, its involvement in shaping Afghanistan's post-Taliban political order (notably through the 2001 Bonn Conference), its financial and infrastructural support, and its participation in bilateral, trilateral, and multilateral initiatives. The analysis underscores that Iran's policy toward Afghanistan is multifaceted, combining assistance with political and economic pressure. The future of Iran–Afghanistan relations will largely depend on Afghanistan's military-political situation, particularly the duration of foreign military presence.

Keywords: Iran foreign policy, Afghanistan, regional security, Helmand River, refugee issue, U.S. military bases, Bonn Conference, economic cooperation, trade integration, narcotics trafficking, border security, Iran–Afghanistan relations, regional stability, ISIS threat.

Introduction: Iran's policy toward Afghanistan holds a special place in Tehran's regional thinking. The two countries share not only a long border but also centuries of historical, cultural, and linguistic ties. For Iran, Afghanistan is both an opportunity and a challenge. It offers a chance to deepen economic cooperation, expand cultural influence, and connect more closely with the wider region. At the same time, Afghanistan's instability, terrorism, drug trafficking, and the presence of foreign military forces pose ongoing threats.

Iran's interests are broad and interlinked: countering Saudi and Western influence, supporting Tajik and Hazara communities, solving the long-standing Helmand River water dispute, and finding durable solutions for Afghan refugees[1]. Iran has consistently called for a government in Kabul that includes all ethnic and religious groups.

After September 11, 2001, Tehran became more active, helping shape Afghanistan's new political order through the Bonn Conference and offering financial and infrastructure support—while firmly rejecting the idea of permanent U.S. bases next door. Iran's policy is a blend of diplomacy, investment, and pressure, aimed at keeping its borders secure and preventing Afghanistan from becoming a base for hostile actions. Understanding this policy is key to seeing the bigger picture of regional stability and the future of Central Asia.

The Islamic Republic of Iran's policy toward the Afghan direction remains, without doubt, of crucial importance for Iran's leadership today. This is not only because Afghanistan is Iran's immediate neighbor sharing a common border, and because long-standing trade-economic and cultural-historical ties arise from the ethnic and linguistic affinities of the peoples and

nationalities of both multiethnic states. As Iran lays claim to a role as a regional leader in the Near East and the Persian Gulf, it primarily views the “Afghanistan factor” through its strategic significance and the need to ensure political stability in the region. In such circumstances, any interference by external powers at various stages in Afghanistan’s internal problems has aroused particular concern in official Tehran. It is well known that in recent decades the situation in Afghanistan has been characterized by systemic instability, unpredictability, and the absence of strong central state institutions. This has compelled neighboring countries, including Iran, to follow developments in Afghanistan closely and often to show differing degrees of interest in Afghan affairs. Being interested in stabilizing Afghanistan’s internal political scene, Iran has consistently advocated the swiftest possible political settlement based on balancing the interests of all national-ethnic groups in the country and the formation of a broad-based government that includes all national and religious minorities and political forces of Afghan society.

Like other regional powers, Iran supports political stability in Afghanistan at the state level.

Iran’s interests in Afghanistan include:

- **First**, counterbalancing Saudi Arabia’s influence in the region;
- **Second**, maintaining strong ties with Tajik and Hazara communities in Afghanistan so as to further develop cooperation between the countries. In the Afghan government, Pashtuns (predominantly Sunni) constitute the majority, with Tajiks (both Sunni and Shia) and Hazaras (Shia) forming smaller shares. In this regard, Iran is interested in Tajiks and Hazaras—who are closer to Iranians in terms of religious affiliation—holding as many seats as possible in the Afghan parliament, which would strengthen Iran’s position and enable more mutually beneficial cooperation with Afghanistan;
- **Third**, actively joining the processes of regional economic¹ and trade integration and seeking opportunities to invest in Afghanistan’s oil sector;
- **Fourth**, managing the 936-km common border with Afghanistan, where the territories are divided by several rivers flowing from Afghanistan into Iran. For many years there has been an unresolved issue between Iran and Afghanistan over the allocation of the Helmand River’s flow, which supplies water to Iran’s Hamun Lake. In 1939, officials in Tehran and Kabul signed an agreement specifying the volume of water to be delivered to Iranian territory. The Taliban’s rise to power and ensuing instability in Afghanistan suspended this bilateral arrangement, which led to the sharp drying of Iran’s Hamun Lake. Unfortunately, since 2002 the flow of water to Iran has been irregular. At the same time, Iran is highly interested in resolving the water problem between the countries;
- **Fifth**, the refugee issue escalated with the Taliban’s ascent to power in Afghanistan. Tajiks and Hazaras, largely persecuted by the Taliban (most of whom are Pashtuns), fled to Iran. After the Taliban regime fell in 2001, Tehran raised the question of returning Afghan refugees from its territory. Despite the signing in 2002–2003 in Geneva of tripartite agreements between Iran, Afghanistan, and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) that established procedures for the return of Afghan refugees from Iran, the issue remains pressing to this day. In this connection, Iran intends to organize the repatriation of Afghan refugees. From January to

¹ Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO). Summit Declarations. Baku, 2006.

July 2018, **370,575** migrants lacking the necessary documents for legal residence abroad returned from Iran to Afghanistan.

The tragic events of 11 September 2001 in the United States and the subsequent counter-terrorism operation in Afghanistan marked a fundamentally new stage in the Islamic Republic of Iran's foreign policy toward Afghanistan. These events significantly altered the world order. A transition to a new system of international relations became visible, and the alignment of forces in strategically important regions—the Middle and Near East and Central Asia—changed dramatically. All this naturally reshaped Iran's regional policy, including its policy toward Afghanistan.

After U.S. representatives formally announced in early 2011 their intention to establish permanent military bases in Afghanistan—and official Kabul supported the plan—Tehran assumed the role of principal opponent of U.S. basing in Afghanistan. It focused its efforts on exerting political pressure on the Afghan government to make it abandon support for the idea of creating U.S. bases. Iran's position on this matter is that there should be no foreign troops stationed in a neighboring country.

In early March 2011, Iran's Interior Minister, Mostafa Mohammad-Najjar, paid an official visit to Kabul. Behind closed doors he held a four-hour meeting with the UN special representative, attended by several IRI officials. Mostafa Najjar expressed the Iranian government's opposition to plans to create permanent U.S. military bases on Afghan soil. Such political pressure was applied at all levels up to the head of state. For example, on 2 May 2012—just hours before the signing of the U.S.–Afghanistan Strategic Partnership Agreement—the new Iranian ambassador to Afghanistan, Abu al-Fazl Zohrehmand, met former President H. Karzai and tried to dissuade him from participating in the ceremony. At the meeting, the Iranian ambassador not only condemned the impending signing but also directly asked Karzai whether he had consulted the Iranian president on the matter. Karzai ignored these remarks, saying Kabul was taking neighboring countries' interests into account. Despite Iranian objections, the agreement was signed.

Iran's concerns regarding Afghanistan are above all security-related. Terrorism emanating from Afghan territory can spill over into Iran. The narcotics trade is considered the most dangerous factor—**2.8 percent** of Iran's population is said to be dependent on drugs. Iran consistently seeks stabilization in Afghanistan and takes concrete steps in this regard. Thus, the post-Taliban political order in Afghanistan took shape with Iran's active participation: at the 2001 Bonn Conference on Afghanistan's future political architecture, the head of the Iranian delegation, Javad Zarif, succeeded in reaching agreement with representatives of the "Northern Alliance" to transfer power to the Pashtun Hamid Karzai. This was an important Iranian step, because prior to the Taliban's six-year rule, authority had been in the hands of non-Pashtun representatives of the Northern Alliance, who might have resisted a new distribution of power in the country.

In addition, Iran later provided substantial financial assistance to Afghanistan's then-President H. Karzai. Economic ties have also been developing. In a speech at a meeting of the Coordinating Headquarters on International Relations—with representatives of the Foreign Ministry and the Iranian ambassadors to Afghanistan and Pakistan in attendance—Deputy Foreign Minister for Economic Affairs Gholamreza Ansari stated that Iran's exports to Afghanistan and Pakistan amounted to **\$5–6 billion**. In particular, exports from customs and border terminals in Iran's Sistan and Baluchestan Province have been growing rapidly, exceeding **\$181 million**; the

volume of exports passing through these terminals in the first two months of **2020** rose by **56 percent** compared with **2019**.

In **2016**, by supporting the conclusion of a peace agreement between the Afghan government and the Hezb-e-Islami Afghanistan (HIA) led by G. Hekmatyar, Iran once again made its position on Afghanistan clear. Despite extensive debate, making peace with Hekmatyar and integrating HIA into the political system has been assessed as a concrete step toward regulating intra-Afghan relations.

In December **2018**, during a visit to Kabul, Ali Shamkhani, Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, stated: "We have held a series of consultations and negotiations with the Taliban movement. Such practice will continue. The current negotiation process between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Taliban is being conducted with the goal of helping to resolve security problems in Afghanistan."

At the same time, regarding a peaceful settlement, Iran has a clear position on U.S.–Taliban talks. Ali Shamkhani said: "We oppose U.S. negotiations with the Taliban for two reasons. First, any strategy or decision without the participation of the Afghan government is invalid." Second, in his view, Americans took part in the [001 Bonn [3] intra-Afghan agreement on forming a new government. "After Iran's constructive and benevolent actions, we were placed on the 'axis of evil,' and now we do not trust the Americans to take part in such formats." Shamkhani made this statement at a meeting concluding the second round of multilateral consultations on Afghanistan that involved Russia, Iran, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, India, and China. In late November **2019**, in the search for ways to resolve Afghanistan's problems peacefully, Iranian diplomats received a Taliban delegation in Tehran, where it met Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif. The Russian side has repeatedly emphasized the need for broader participation by Iranian diplomats in processes dedicated to settling the Afghan issue. Russian Foreign Minister S. V. Lavrov said on the "International Review" program on the "Russia-24" TV channel that Moscow is interested in bringing the Islamic Republic into the Russia-China-U.S. format on Afghanistan. "We have a dialogue with them (the U.S.) on Afghanistan. A Russia-China-U.S. format has emerged with Pakistan added. There is interest in Iran joining this format. It could be promising."

Tehran's active political and economic involvement in regulating the situation in Afghanistan demonstrates not only Iran's desire to stabilize the region but also its intention to ensure the security of its borders.

Under constant psychological pressure from Washington, and sharing borders with states hosting military contingents of the U.S. and its allies, including NATO countries, the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) is making use of various opportunities to develop relations with Kabul. Above all, it seeks to prevent Afghan territory from becoming a springboard for unfriendly actions against Iran. In particular, a special headquarters on Afghan affairs operates in Tehran, coordinating Afghan-direction activities across Iran's various agencies. The headquarters includes representatives of the Office of the Supreme Leader A. Khamenei, and the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Interior, Defense, Intelligence, as well as the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Especially in recent times, the IRI has been taking steps to expand bilateral, trilateral (Iran–Afghanistan–Tajikistan and Iran–Afghanistan–Uzbekistan), and multilateral ties (through international organizations) with its eastern neighbor.

As for Kabul, its leaders cooperate to some extent with Iran in rebuilding Afghanistan's war-ravaged economy. These matters were discussed during President H. Karzai's official visit to Tehran in **2006**. The same topics were raised at meetings of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) heads of state in Baku (May 2006), at the Shanghai SCO summit (June 2006), at the gathering of Persian-speaking presidents in Dushanbe (July 2006), and at the UN General Assembly session in New York (September 2006).

Recently, exchanges of government delegations have intensified markedly, contacts among business circles have increased, and inter-parliamentary relations have been established. For example, during the seventh session of the Asian Parliamentary Assembly held in Tehran in **2006**, the Speaker of Iran's Majles received the heads of both chambers of Afghanistan's parliament, and the parties discussed ways to boost cooperation between their legislative bodies.

Given Kabul's dependence on the United States and U.S. opposition to Iran-Afghanistan ties, which seriously hinders the development of relations between the two states, Tehran is taking steps to expand first and foremost its economic[2]—and also its cultural—presence in Afghanistan.

In **2006**, Iran completed construction of the Khaf-Herat railway line, which provides Afghanistan access not only to IRI ports on the Persian Gulf but also to mainlines leading to Turkmenistan and beyond. Among transport projects built with IRI assistance, mention should be made of the operational highway connecting Dogharun (IRI) with Herat (IRA). The provisions of a previously signed trilateral agreement (Iran-Uzbekistan-Afghanistan) on creating the **Termez-Mazar-i-Sharif-Herat** trans-Afghan corridor with subsequent access to Iranian ports are also being implemented.

One important factor enabling Iran to exert some influence on the development of bilateral relations is the shared border and the regular caravans of drug traffickers, smugglers, and irregular migrants. This allows Iranians to establish working contacts with Afghan law-enforcement and border-control services. According to some reports, in **2006** IRI Interior Ministry representatives held a series of talks with Afghan counterparts. Apparently, Iran believes that tighter control by Afghan border guards would hamper the entry of undesirable elements from Afghanistan into Iranian territory.

As regards cooperation between Iran and Afghanistan in combating the trafficking of narcotic substances into Iran, this cooperation took on tangible form after a **2006** visit to Iran by an Afghan delegation composed of the minister for counter-narcotics H. Qodiri, his deputy, and heads of certain departments of that ministry and the Interior Ministry. The delegates visited Tehran and Mashhad, as well as several border posts in Khorasan Province.

In January of the current year, relations between Iran and Afghanistan in the field of border cooperation took on a practical dimension. During a visit to Afghanistan by a delegation led by Brigadier General M. Moqaddam, commander of the Law-Enforcement Forces under Iran's Interior Ministry, a cooperation agreement was signed. Under it, joint posts and checkpoints were to be installed within a year in the provinces of Herat, Farah, and Nimroz.

Following negotiations and proposals made during that visit, the Afghan Cabinet of Ministers announced the following intentions: to prepare a bilateral agreement on the mutual extradition of criminal elements detained for drug smuggling or serious crimes; to draft a special document providing for the exchange of information on the activities of criminal groups engaged in the

narcotics business; and to create a joint working group for rapid information exchange. In addition, it was planned to set up an Iran–Afghanistan working group through the two countries’ Interior Ministries for joint efforts against drug trafficking. Iran was also authorized to open a representative office of the Anti-Narcotics Headquarters in Kandahar, in addition to similar offices already existing in Kabul and Herat. The Afghan leadership welcomed Iran’s proposal to provide financial aid to the families of Afghan border guards killed in clashes with drug traffickers along the Afghanistan–Iran border.

Plans were made to establish Iran–Afghanistan organizations and centers, in cooperation with the Ministries of Agriculture and Health, aimed at developing measures to replace poppy cultivation with other agricultural crops and to provide treatment for Afghan citizens suffering from drug dependence³.

In Tehran, it is understood that invigorating trade ties is expedient for normalizing relations with Afghanistan. In addition to goods needed for implementing various joint projects, Iran’s export basket includes foodstuffs, clothing, textiles, medicines, construction materials, and petroleum products—especially gasoline. In **2006**, Iran’s “Khodro” company began exporting its products to Afghanistan, planning to supply **3,000** passenger cars, **1,000** trucks and buses to the market. In autumn **2006**, the Union of Afghan Entrepreneurs and Investors began operating in Tehran. Its aim is to develop overall bilateral trade-economic cooperation—promoting the Afghan market among Iranian entrepreneurs, assisting in holding specialized trade exhibitions in Afghan cities, and conducting marketing research to solve organizational issues in implementing commercial projects.

The volume of bilateral trade between Iran and Afghanistan is not large and, according to various data, ranges from **\$200 to \$400 million** per year. It should also be noted that Iranian imports into Afghanistan exceed Afghan exports to Iran by many times.

As it explores possible pathways to expand its presence in Afghanistan, Iran is providing significant financial assistance in the cultural sphere. It allocates funds to restore war-damaged schools, libraries, printing houses, and other educational, religious, and cultural facilities, as well as to build new ones. For example, in October **2006**, a cultural-educational center was opened in Herat, for which the Afghan Affairs Headquarters allocated **\$220,000**. To strengthen its cultural influence in the country, Iran has initiated academic conferences, meetings, and exhibitions; sent teachers to Afghan educational institutions; and published curricula and teaching materials.

Iranians have achieved some successes in training specialists in communications and information technologies: the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and the Iranian government, together with Afghanistan’s leadership, signed an agreement to establish a modern Institute of Communications and Information Technologies in Kabul. Under this program, Afghanistan’s Ministry of Communications received title to a land plot for constructing the institute’s administrative, educational, and residential buildings; construction by Afghan contractors selected from among local companies has already begun. The main funding—**\$4 million**—was allocated by the Iranian government, with an additional **\$1.3 million** planned for these purposes.

Against the backdrop of joint trade-economic and cultural projects, there are several factors that negatively affect the development of bilateral relations. Chief among these is the refugee issue, which, according to official UN figures, currently involves approximately **950,000** people.

It should be emphasized that the United States is hindering the development of Afghan-Iranian relations. Because of American efforts, for example, H. Karzai's visit to Tehran for the Iranian president's inauguration and a number of economic agreements were derailed, and the volume of cross-border trade between Iran's frontier regions and Herat Province declined. Iranian representatives state all this openly, maintaining that Iran-Afghanistan relations have considerable potential. Washington's influence on Kabul also limits other areas of Iran-Afghanistan cooperation, especially efforts to ensure regional security and to combat extremist and terrorist groups.

Taking U.S. opposition into account, Iranians at the present stage are unable to fully achieve their strategic[4, 145] goal of drawing Afghanistan into their sphere of influence. Therefore, the future prospects of Iran-Afghanistan relations will largely depend on how long American military involvement continues in Afghanistan and the extent to which the U.S. can control political processes in that country.

Iran's leadership seeks to consolidate its position in Afghanistan. The chief objective is to prevent the emergence on Afghan territory of conditions that could threaten Iran's state security or be used by leading Western powers as a means of exerting forceful pressure on Tehran. For this reason, Iran pursues an active policy aimed at strengthening its standing in Afghanistan through economic assistance.

Tehran's policy toward Afghanistan is active yet complex. It combines elements of assistance with signs of political or economic pressure. The above analysis shows that at crucial junctures Iran's political influence is very strong and decisive—implying that Iran's activism will increase if crises intensify in Afghanistan and the broader Near East[5, 155].

With the aim of boosting its influence in Afghanistan, Iran will continue to support the country's socio-economic recovery. However, the nature and direction of its assistance will largely be determined by Afghanistan's military-political situation—above all, by how long Western military presence persists on Afghan soil. As long as foreign troops remain in Afghanistan, Iran will refrain from large-scale strategic investments, limiting itself to the most urgent aid and participation in international projects (for example, railway construction).

Given that Iran-Afghanistan relations overall are developing in a positive direction and that occasional bilateral problems are being resolved through negotiation, Iran's role in international stabilization efforts on the Afghan question is steadily growing. The main aspects of this policy are that Tehran does not accept the long-term presence of foreign military forces in Afghanistan nor any negotiations with the Taliban conducted on any basis whatsoever. From this perspective, the withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan would benefit Iran and significantly strengthen its position in Afghanistan and the region as a whole. The emergence of the ISIS threat and the possibility of this terrorist organization entering Afghanistan are turning Iran into one of the key elements of regional security.

Iran has not always pursued a constructive policy toward Afghanistan and has at times understood its security interests too narrowly. For instance, efforts to expel Afghan refugees from Iran may have seemed at first to improve security, but in practice such actions pushed desperate people into the ranks of the Taliban[6]. Experience, however, shows that there is potential to improve the regional political situation within the framework of Iran-Afghanistan relations. The examples cited above indicate that, with the mediation of international organizations—particularly the UN—Iran has followed a constructive policy toward Afghanistan

and taken steps to improve bilateral relations. Without such mediation, relations between the two states have tended to unfold as one-sided Iranian pressure on Afghanistan. For example, with international mediation, the issue of Afghan refugees in Iran was addressed[7].

Because Iran, on the whole, listens to international organizations and can adjust its policies, it should be possible to significantly improve the political situation in the region by involving major international organizations (such as the UN, the SCO, and potentially the CSTO and the EAEU) in Iran–Afghanistan relations, monitoring these ties, and proposing effective ways to develop them. With the political support of Russia and these international organizations, the Iranian side would carry out measures more actively and enthusiastically to exert positive political and economic influence on Afghanistan in order to strengthen regional security. Such measures correspond to Russia’s political interests in the region from the standpoint of national security and the fight against narcotics production.

Iran should be regarded as an important and integral part of the political-economic situation in Afghanistan, while Iran–Afghanistan relations should be seen as a key element in resolving the Afghan crisis[8]. Moreover, as the withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan proceeds and threats associated with the expansion of ISIS influence grow, the importance of the “Iran factor”—especially with regard to Afghanistan—will increase markedly.

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