



The Islamic Republic of Iran as a factor of influence in Afghanistan

This article was reviewed by Lorenz Garbe



Maximilian Schußmüller [in](#)

Johannes Hollunder has been studying political and administrative sciences in Konstanz and Seoul since 2020. He is primarily interested in international relations and autocratic political systems. He also pays special attention to various aspects of North Korea and inter-Korean relations.

Since the fall of the Taliban in Afghanistan regime after the Western intervention in 2001, numerous actors continue to be involved in the events in the country, including the major powers Russia and China, but also the neighbouring state Iran. The consequences of the recent change of power are still unforeseeable. What seems to be definite is that the country's security and stability have already deteriorated significantly. According to the Fragile State Index, Afghanistan shows the second highest deterioration in the world since 2021 (Fund for Peace, 2022, p.9). In the following, the problematic role of the neighbouring state Iran in recent political developments in Afghanistan will be highlighted. As will be shown, Iran has been a significant factor in political developments in Afghanistan since the 1990s. Against the background of ideological and strategic motives, different parts of the Iranian regime served both sides of the intra-Afghan conflict. In addition to support for the regular government of the neighbouring state, which can clearly be identified as instrumental, various forms of support were provided for the Taliban and episodically also for Al-Qaida. This approach is part of a familiar pattern of Iranian sphere-of-influence policy and constitutes an important factor in the continuing instability in Afghanistan. The present text is intended to shed light on Iran's activities in Afghanistan against the background of known patterns of Iranian hegemonic policy and their ideological-strategic basis.

Iran's sphere of influence strategy

A central pillar of Iranian foreign policy is a claim to hegemony and the associated concept of exporting revolution. There is a congruence between ideological interests and strategic power interests. The first indications of the roots of this offensive grand strategy can already be found in the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Here, the revolutionary state



(1) Iranian and Afghan Presidents, Hassan Rouhani and Ashraf Ghani in Tehran



(2) Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian and Taliban Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi

of Iran is given a world-historical significance, the telos of which is the creation of an Islamic world community. Accordingly, the state is not self-sufficient, and a policy oriented towards the constitution always points beyond its own borders with religious legitimation:

„With due attention to the Islamic content of the Iranian Revolution, the Constitution provides the necessary basis for ensuring the continuation of the Revolution at home and abroad. In particular, in the development of international relations, the Constitution will strive with other Islamic and popular movements to prepare the way for the formation of a single world community (in accordance with the Koranic verse “This your community is a single community, and I am your Lord, so worship Me” [21:92]), and

to assure the continuation of the struggle for the liberation of all deprived and oppressed peoples in the world.”(Constitution of IRI, Preamble)

The claim is primarily aimed at the states of the Muslim world. The reference to oppressed nations reflects the Manichaeic worldview of Iran’s ideological father, Ruhollah Khomeini. His anti-imperialist thinking divides the world into oppressed and oppressors to be fought. Israel and the USA form the extremes of the oppressors’ pole. The concept of exporting revolution, which tends to have no borders, also goes back to Khomeini’s political thinking (Wahdat-Hagh, 2003, pp. 196).

In connection with this claim to hegemony in its own politics, a military component is also named in the preamble of the Iranian constitution:

„[...] they [Note: Army and IRGC] will be responsible not only for guarding and preserving the frontiers of the country, but also for fulfilling the ideological mission of jihad in God’s way; that is, extending the sovereignty of God’s law throughout the world.” (Constitution of IRI, Preamble)

Once again, the expansive and global claim is formulated. When thought together, this results in a religiously underpinned, anti-imperialist mission to spread one’s own influence by diplomatic as well as military means. In practice, this state-ideological basis and its connection to strategic power interests is clearly reflected in the project of the “Axis of Resistance”. This strategy is primarily directed against a perceived threat from the USA. Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Israel are also among Iran’s strategic opponents. The core of this axis is an informal network of allied proxy groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, as well as Iraqi and Syrian militias. Lebanese Hezbollah plays a special role as Tehran’s direct arm. The group was the first non-Iranian organisation to accept the Velayat-e Faqih and thus placed itself under the religious and political authority of Ruhollah Khomeini and Ali Khamenei respectively. The Iranian Revolutionary Guard (IRGC) and its Quds Brigades are the central actors for the support and coordination of these groups (Steinberg, 2021, pp. 7-12). In the case of Afghanistan, this part of the Iranian armed forces will also prove to be an important driving force. Although formally subordinate to the supreme leader it is an assertive actor within the Iranian regime with a high degree of autonomy (Forozan, 2016, pp. 56-, p68). This autonomy goes back a long way in the history of the or-

ganisation (Katzman, 1993, pp. 393-395). Nevertheless, the IRGC does not operate independently of the rest of the regime; its activities can be understood as anticipatory obedience (Ostovar, 2016, p.238).

Iran’s approach within the framework of its hegemonic sphere of influence policy can be divided analytically into the two dimensions of hard power and soft power. Eisenstadt identifies four strategic elements for the dimension of hard power and five for the dimension of soft power: Armed proxies, people’s war, an asymmetric navy and strategic missile programmes on the side of hard power, as well as image propaganda, the export of revolutionary Islam, support for Shiite militias, economic dependence and state propaganda on the side of soft power. In addition to the military component for asserting one’s own claim, an extensive programme is thus employed that includes cultural and religious aspects, e.g. by means of cadre training, classical propaganda via the media, as well as political pressure through economic levers (Eisenstadt, 2011, pp. 6-7). In the case of Afghanistan, the dimension of soft power is particularly relevant. As will be shown, Iran worked with all five aspects mentioned. Only the support of the Shiite militias is replaced by cooperation with Al-Qaeda and, more recently, with the Taliban.

Iran’s Afghanistan policy in the recent past

According to analysts, Iran’s Afghanistan policy has long been shaped by geopolitical considerations (Nader & Laha, 2011, pp. 5-6). The country began to play a role in foreign policy shortly after the Iranian Revolution in 1979. The young regime supported nu-

merous, mostly Shiite mujahedin groups in the fight against the Soviet Union. In the 1990s, Iran was opposed to the Sunni Taliban and began to support the opposition coalition. After the killing of several Iranian diplomats and a journalist by Taliban fighters in Mazar-i Sharif in 1998, there were brief preparations to intervene militarily. Until the Western intervention, which was supported by intelligence, Iran remained the Northern Alliance's biggest ally (Akbarzadeh & Ibrahimi, 2020, p.4). After the intervention, Iran took a leading role in the formation of the Karzai government. Pressure from Tehran persuaded the Northern Alliance leadership to bow to compromises. At the same time, the focus of Iranian interest in Afghanistan began to change fundamentally. More and more, the US presence took a central place as a perceived threat (Nader & Laha, 2011, pp. 5-6). In line with the ideology developed by Ruhollah Khomeini, the American troop presence now appeared to the leadership in Tehran as colonial powers alien to the region (Wahdat-Hagh, 2019a, p.86).

In the new Afghan state, numerous opportunities opened up for Iran to exert influence. Tehran has provided hundreds of millions of US dollars in reconstruction assistance since 2002. Soon, the then president of Afghanistan publicly thanked Iran for its "limitless help" in restoring stability in Afghanistan (Akbarzadeh, 2014, p. 67). In the same year, Iranian President Khatami travelled to Kabul on a state visit and signed a joint trade agreement (Nirumand, 2002, p.13). In the following years, economic relations grew enormously. According to official figures, exports between March 2005 and March 2006 amounted to 300 million US dollars. Exports included oil, electricity, and services in the form of infrastructure projects. The volume of imports from Afghanistan at the same time was three million

dollars (Wahdat-Hagh, 2019a, p.87). According to official figures, 2000 Iranian companies had started activities in Afghanistan by that time (Nader & Laha, 2011, p.7). In 2018, Iran became Afghanistan's largest economic partner with a total trade volume of almost US\$2 billion, ahead of the previous leader Pakistan, with Iranian exports accounting for by far the largest share of this sum (Mohammadi, 2018). There is a clear imbalance between the trading partners. A power-political component has long been suspected in these economic relations (Wahdat-Hagh, 2019a, p.84).

An indication of such a politicisation is the partial blockade of fuel deliveries to Afghanistan through early 2011. Iran severely restricted the export of fuel for several weeks, with only 40 transporters per day allowed to cross the Iran-Afghanistan border. At times, up to 2000 vehicles were jammed. Petrol prices rose by up to 35% nationwide. The Afghan Chamber of Commerce and Industry stated that Iranian officials had feared a transfer of Iranian fuel to Western troops (Shalizi, 2011). The end of the blockade was accompanied by the conclusion of a new trade agreement that provided for an expansion of relations and closer customs cooperation (Nirumand, 2011, p.15). A power-political abuse of the dependence of Afghanistan's significantly smaller trading partner on Iranian fuel supplies in the silent conflict with Western actors in the country is obvious in this case.

There seems to be an explicit sense of superiority on the part of Iran towards Afghan refugees who have been seeking protection in Iran since the Soviet invasion in 1979. Many of those seeking protection do not have a recognised status even after years. Integration into the majority society does

not take place, marriages between Iranian women and Afghan refugees result in the loss of Iranian citizenship. Children from such marriages are also denied citizenship (Wahdat-Hagh, 2019b, p.96). At the same time, the Iranian regime is taking advantage of the situation of Afghans. Since 2014, Shiite refugees from Afghanistan have been recruited as fighters for the Liwa Fatemiyoun militia. Coordinated by the IRGC, the militia fights as an Iranian proxy group against Sunni rebels in Syria (Smyth, 2014).

Iran is also trying to gain a foothold in Afghanistan in the field of cultural policy. The state radio has been broadcasting programmes in Pashto and Dari for decades. The Iranian clergy has also been exerting great influence on Shiite clerics in Afghanistan for a long time. The Emdad Imam Khomeini Committee foundation, which is committed to conveying Iranian state ideology as a counterweight to Western influence, plays a sig-

nificant role. In 2008 alone, almost 10,000 Afghans attended training courses run by the foundation. Anti-Semitism directed at Israel is also part of these targeted propaganda measures. In 2010 Afghan clerics close to Iran accused the Afghan TV station Emrooz TV of supporting Zionism. Between August and October 2010, the channel was briefly banned in response to Shia pressure (Wahdat-Hagh, 2019c, p.89-94). A final pillar of Iran's power policy towards Afghanistan is its increased support for the Taliban since the late 2000s, which analysts believe serves as leverage against the central government in Kabul in addition to countering Western powers (Nader & Laha, 2011, pp. 13-14). Iran's relationship with the Taliban is examined in more detail below.

Iran's influence policy on Afghanistan by means of political-economic and cultural strategies thus reflects the soft power strategy described at the beginning. After the fall of



(3) US Army/Sgt. Ken Scar (2012).

the Taliban in 2001, Iran first appeared as a generous donor and economic partner. Iran's highly imbalanced economic relations correspond to putting Afghanistan's smaller partner in a position of dependency, the political dimension of which became clear in the 2011 border blockade. Furthermore, Iran attempted to introduce its Islamist state ideology into Afghan society. This was not without success, as the number of visitors to the training courses, the invitation of the Iranian cleric by the Afghan embassy and the temporary ban on Emrooz TV show. Patterns can thus be discerned that suggest a hegemonic motivation on the part of Iran in its Afghanistan policy.

Iran's cooperation with the Taliban until August 2021

According to UK, US and NATO officials, evidence of Iranian support for the Taliban in the form of Iranian-made assault rifles and explosives was discovered as early as 2007. However, there was no direct evidence of the origin of the weapons. At the time, it was suspected that the weapons were connected to the IRGC. The Iranian regime denied supporting the Taliban (CNN, 2007). Which of the two sides initiated the increasing rapprochement cannot be proven. Also in 2007, the Taliban launched several diplomatic forays, one of which was addressed to Iran. It referred to the common interest in withdrawing American troops from Afghanistan and asserted that they posed no threat to neighbouring states. Accompanying this push, the Taliban's relationship with Iran's enemy Saudi Arabia cooled considerably (Rubin, 2020). The indications of support for the Taliban by the Iranian regime was substantiated in the following years by investigations by the USA. In 2010, the U.S. Department of the Treasury identified two senior members of the Quds Brigades of

the IRGC, Hossein Musavi and Hasan Mor-tezavi, as responsible for supporting the Taliban with financial resources and hardware. Selected Taliban fighters were also supported through military training (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2010). The central interest for Iranian aid at this time was to fight American troops in Afghanistan, and the Taliban in practice worked in the role of a proxy group for the Iranian regime. As The Sunday Times reported, citing a Taliban financial manager, tens of thousands of US dollars flowed to the Taliban through a network of Iranian companies. Up to 1000 dollars would be paid as a bounty for each US soldier killed (Amoore, 2010).

Yet, there is also evidence that points to a scepticism towards Iran that existed at the time, at least in parts of the Taliban. The Taliban representative Tayyab Agha reportedly described Iran as Afghanistan's most dangerous neighbour in talks with a US representative (Rubin, 2020). This scepticism was only clarified in the following years. In 2012, the Iranian regime had allowed the Taliban to set up a representative office in the country. In addition, there had been concrete considerations in IRGC circles to supply the Taliban with surface-to-air missiles (Abi-Habib, 2012). According to Afghan sources, such weapons were supplied to the Taliban until at least 2020 (Fazeli, 2020a). Also in 2012, the U.S. Department of the Treasury identified the Quds Brigades general Gholamreza Baghbani as a crucial player in supporting the Taliban. Through existing networks of drug smuggling from Afghanistan through Iran, Baghbani orchestrated the delivery of weapons to the Taliban (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2012).

After internal leadership disputes, the Tal-

iban's relations with Iran improved further from 2014 onwards. An important circumstance was the emergence and increasing success of the Islamic State in Afghanistan. Following a visit by the then Taliban leader Akhtar Mansour at the invitation of the IRGC, Iran established political relations with the Taliban (Rubin, 2020). In mid-2018, The Sunday Times reported that hundreds of Taliban fighters were being trained at Iranian military academies (Loyd, 2018). It was not until late 2018 that Iran then openly acknowledged these ties. At this point, the Taliban also acknowledged their ties with Iran (Akbarzadeh & Ibrahimi, 2020, p.6). After a delegation trip to Tehran, Taliban representatives stated that they had exchanged views with Iranian officials on the political future of the region after the end of the foreign troop presence (AFP, 2019). Shortly afterwards, a news site close to the Iranian IRGC published a report that considered the Taliban as partners in the fight against the Islamic State as well as the US (Tabatabai, 2019). Once again, the central role played by hostility towards Western troops in the alliance between the Taliban and Iran becomes obvious. The official expression of condolences on the occasion of the killing of Quds Brigades commander Qassem Soleimani by the USA also provides information about this motive. In it, the Taliban leadership expressed its admiration for the "great warrior" and its contempt for "American adventurism" (Fazeli, 2020b).

Iranian cooperation with the Taliban as of August 2021

Despite this long cooperation, scepticism seems to have been aroused in Tehran in view of the rapid triumph of the Taliban and the re-establishment of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan in August 2021. Tehran seemed to

be particularly concerned about the diplomats in the Herat region. Ebrahim Raisi welcomed the withdrawal of the USA and the West, but did not address the Taliban. He called for Afghan unity, including the Taliban, and said Iran stood ready as a partner for a future of peace. He also repeated this view to Chinese President Xi Jinping as well as Vladimir Putin (Nirumand, 2021, p.17). The leader of the pro-Iranian Afghan Hezbollah expressed his confidence in the new leadership to provide security for Shi- as in Afghanistan to the Iranian news agency Tasnim (Tasnim, 2021). Raisi repeated the call for an inclusive government in June 2022 (Fars News, 2022a). Ali Khamenei spoke of making Iran's next steps dependent on the behaviour of his counterpart (Fazeli, 2021). After the visit of a Taliban delegation to Tehran in January 2022, a spokesperson for the Iranian Foreign Ministry stated that the talks had been positive, but that Iran would not recognise the Taliban as the government in Afghanistan at this point in time (Motamedi, 2022). Strategically, this ambivalent position of Iran can also be interpreted as an attempt to keep the Taliban in uncertainty about future support from Tehran. As things stand, Iran is one of only ten states that maintain diplomatic relations with the Taliban (Voice of America, 2022). Iran also returned to its normal economic mode quite quickly; at the Taliban's request, oil exports to Afghanistan were resumed as early as the end of August 2021. The country remains dependent on these supplies (Sharafedin & Payne, 2021). In early June 2022, the Iranian news agency Fars reported that Afghanistan was one of the five main importers of Iranian goods even after the Taliban took power. Trade relations are to be expanded further, and official representatives from both sides are in close exchange to this end (Fars News, 2022b).

There is also circumstantial evidence to suggest a pre-emptive concession by the Taliban. Social media reports from September 2021 suggest that American-made Afghan army military equipment has been sold to Iran. The equipment passed on, including Humvees and MRAPs, is said to be used for reverse engineering purposes (Mousavizadeh, 2021). The Taliban leadership also continued to send positive signals towards Tehran. As the pro-regime newspaper *Tehran Times* reported, the Taliban welcomed calls by Ali Khameinei to fight American influences to overcome the historical rifts between Sunnis and Shiites. According to a Taliban spokesman, Afghans would stand firmly together against foreign conspiracies (*Tehran Times*, 2021). Despite these positive references, a violent clash occurred on the Iranian-Afghan border in late November 2021. According to the IRGC news organisation *Tasnim*, it was a mere “misunderstanding”. A Taliban representative confirmed the incident but did not give further details. Reuters cites tensions over escape routes across the border as a possible background (Reuters, 2021). The situation on the border between the two countries remains unstable. A similar incident with equally unclear circumstances occurred at the end of July 2022. According to Iranian media, a Taliban flag had been hoisted on Iranian territory. The Taliban reported one Afghan border guard killed (Reuters, 2022). An official statement by the Iranian army names misunderstandings about the course of the border on the Afghan side as the cause of the repeated conflicts. The friction can be resolved through diplomatic efforts, and there is no need for military action (Mehr News, 2022). Further tensions between Tehran and the rulers in Kabul as well as the Afghan population exist

regarding the situation of Afghan refugees in Iran. After several videos of mistreatment surfaced, violent protests broke out in April 2022 in front of the Iranian embassy in Kabul and the consulate in Herat. Iran summoned the Afghan representative and suspended its diplomatic service for a short period for security reasons (Mehdi, 2022).

Although the relationship is still not smooth, it is clear that the Taliban have been and continue to be an important partner for Iran. The longstanding support for the Taliban suggests a relationship of dependency between the two sides, and the repeated ambivalent affirmations of the need for national unity in Afghanistan appear to be an attempt to strengthen this relationship through an implied uncertainty about the future course. In the past, Iran acted as a donor and arms supplier, while the Taliban filled the role of a proxy group in the fight against Western troop presence and as a lever against the central government. By supporting the Taliban, Iran’s role in destabilising Afghanistan and seizing power in August 2021 cannot be denied. The IRGC, which belongs to the faction of radical hardliners, has repeatedly presented itself as a driving force in the Iranian regime. The statements made in connection with the collapse of the Afghan government suggest that other parts of the regime are less convinced of the Taliban’s suitability as an ally, or that this image is to be conveyed. In any case, Afghanistan remains dependent on Iran’s oil supplies at the present time. The expressed intention to further expand economic relations suggests a projected increase in Afghan dependence beyond the energy market. An important security-related factor for the future of this alliance is the ongoing war of the Islamic State in Afghanistan (Jadoon et al, 2022, pp.33-43).

Once again the Taliban and Iran are facing a common enemy and once again Iran can play a role as a stronger partner in Afghanistan. In the current situation also without being hindered in its grip by Western actors. Iran’s position in Afghanistan has thus been significantly strengthened by the withdrawal of Western troops. Further cooperation with the Taliban is thus to be expected despite partial ambivalences. The close ties to the new rulers and their dependence continue to bring strategic advantages for Iran beyond the immediate region. Against the background of the events in Afghanistan, Tehran appears to be an anchor of stability. A first consequence is strengthening the geopolitical alliance of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) around China and Russia. Following a change of course by the Afghan neighbouring states Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in the light of the events of August 2021, which had previously been sceptical about Iran’s too close involvement, the possibility of full membership in the SCO opened up for Iran in September of that year (Silk Road Briefing, 2021). An official application for membership in the organisation was signed by Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian on 15 September 2022 (Hafezi, 2022). It must be explicitly emphasised at this point that an intention regarding the support of Afghan actors for this purpose cannot be proven.

Iran’s cooperation with Al-Qaida

Contacts between the Iranian regime and Al-Qaida have reportedly existed since the early 1990s. In 1995, for example, the Quds Brigade of the IRGC offered leading cadre Mahfouz Ould al-Walid the use of a Hezbollah training camp in Lebanon to train Al-Qaida fighters. The extent to which this offer was taken up is not known (Levy & Scott-Clark,

2017). Also since the 1990s, the Iranian regime allowed members of Al-Qaida to transit through Iran to Afghanistan. At that time, Al-Qaida sometimes acted as a mediator for the Iranian regime with the Taliban, who were enemies at the time. The decisive actor on Iran’s side was again the IRGC, and the coordinator on Al-Qaida’s side was Mustafa Hamid, who was temporarily resident in Iran (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2009). After the Western invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the Quds Brigade again offered Al-Qaida help, and members were promised refuge from American attacks. Parts of the Iranian regime went along with this plan with the ulterior motive of handing over the cadres to the USA in the course of an easing of relations. This plan failed, among other things, because of the unwillingness of the American government under George W. Bush to approach Iran. Among the members of Al-Qaida who found shelter in Iran were the leading figures Saif al-Adel, Abu Mohamed al-Masri and parts of Osama bin Laden’s family, including his son Hamza bin Laden (Levy & Scott-Clark, 2017). Al-Masri as well as his daughter, Hamza bin Laden’s widow, were killed by Israeli intelligence in Tehran in August 2020 (Goldman et al, 2020). This circumstance suggests that cadres remain in Iran to this day, thus evading international prosecution. Iran is not merely a retreat for Al-Qaida, but is actively used as an operational base. The US Department of the Treasury identified Iran as the central hub of the terrorist network. There is an agreement between Al-Qaida and the Iranian government that grants operational freedom such as unhindered entry and exit in exchange for a security guarantee on Iranian soil (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2012). In its Country Reports on Terrorism, the US State Department emphatically points out that such coop-

eration continues to this day. Iran continues to be unwilling to identify or extradite leading Al-Qaeda cadres residing in the country (U.S. Department of State, 2021, p.200). This cooperation with Al-Qaeda remains ambivalent in tendency, the Iranian regime also seems to pursue strategic purposes, as repeatedly occurring arrests of Al-Qaeda members by Iranian authorities suggest. In 2015, for example, five senior cadres were extradited to Yemen in exchange for a kidnapped Iranian diplomat (U.S. Department of State, 2021, p.299).

One aspect that allows Al-Qaeda to benefit from Iranian activity in Afghanistan is the group's close ties to the Taliban. According to a UN Security Council report from May 2020, there are still strong indications that, contrary to the Taliban's statements, the ties are being maintained. In the context of the Taliban's negotiations with the USA in Doha, representatives of the Haqqani network repeatedly consulted Al-Qaeda (UN Security Council, 2019). The follow-up reports also continue to see no break between the two actors (UN Security Council, 2020). Furthermore, with the Taliban coming to power, there is growing evidence that Afghanistan is again a safe haven for Al-Qaeda (UN Security Council, 2021). This close relationship with the Taliban makes the assumption of a strengthening of Al-Qaeda through Iran's policy since August 2021 seem very plausible. This dimension of support became visible at the latest with the killing of Al-Qaida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in early August 2022. Al-Zawahiri had been hiding in a house of the Taliban interior minister Sirajuddin Haqqani in Kabul (Associated Press, 2022).

The Iranian regime has thus maintained a close strategic partnership with Al-Qaida for almost three decades. These contacts go

beyond indirect cooperation through Al-Qaida's proximity to the Taliban, even if the motive seems to lie in the common hostility towards the USA. In particular, the treatment of the group's cadres, which fluctuates between security guarantees with operational freedom and arrests for prisoner exchanges, also suggests that this is only partly a case of cooperation at eye level motivated by the common image of the enemy. Rather, Iran seems to see Al-Qaida very clearly not as a partner, but as a strategic means of pursuing its own interests, brought into a relationship of dependency through assistance. Furthermore, Al-Qaida also benefits indirectly from Iran's course towards the Taliban. Through its behaviour, Iran contributes directly and indirectly to the continuing danger of international terrorism.

Summary

As has been shown, there are clear indications of attempts on the part of Iran to transform Afghanistan into a dependent state. Iran is working in many ways with the soft power strategies of image propaganda, the export of a revolutionary Islam, the support of militias and the creation of economic dependence. During the period of Western troop presence, the Iranian regime played both sides of the inner-Afghan conflict. This set the course early on for a positive relationship with all possible future rulers after the West's withdrawal. The shift to support for the Taliban, who were enemies of Iran until the early 2000s, represents a remarkable adjustment of strategy. With regard to the prospect of membership in the SCO, this step has turned out to be a success even outside the direct reference to Afghanistan. The initial support of Shiite mujahedin associations was only substituted by cooperation with the Northern Alliance, and after Western intervention, by cooperation with the

Taliban and Al-Qaida. Again and again, the IRGC and its Quds Brigade appear as driving sub-actors of the Iranian regime. It seems plausible to interpret the organisation's involvement in activities as a source of its political power within the regime. At least until 2021, the Taliban functioned in Afghanistan in the role of a proxy group in the fight against Western troops perceived as hostile, especially the US Army. However, unlike other proxies of Iran, most notably Lebanon's Hezbollah, there is no ideological control and no Taliban commitment to the Velayat-e Faqih. The Sunni orientation of the group may play a decisive role in this. It is thus not an Iranian proxy in the sense of Hezbollah. This differ-

ence is clearer in the case of Al-Qaida. The organisation served the Iranian regime as a bargaining chip and bargaining chip beyond strategic purposes directed against the USA.

All in all, Iranian activity in Afghanistan can be seen as an important concomitant of the destabilisation of the state. The Iranian re-

gime's actions clearly strengthen the position of Islamist terrorist organisations. The course taken since 2001 towards the Taliban has proved successful in preventing a confrontation like the one in 1998 on the one hand, and in strengthening its own regional power on the other. Last but not least, Afghanistan, which is perceived as unstable under the Taliban, reinforces Iran's self-portrayal as an anchor of stability and an indispensable actor in the region. Even after the withdrawal of Western troops, a continuation of this cooperation can be expected for the future. The Taliban, as the new rulers in Afghanistan, continue to see themselves forced to adopt an Iran-friendly course in view of the econom-

ic ties that have been built up over the years and the threat posed by the local offshoot of the Islamic State. A definitive answer to the subsequent question of whether and to what extent the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan is developing into an Iranian proxy state is reserved for future research.

"Iranian activity in Afghanistan can be seen as an important concomitant of the destabilisation of the state."

References

- Abi-Habib, M. (July 31, 2012). Tehran Builds on Outreach to Taliban. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10000872396390444130304577560241242267700> (retrieved January 20, 2023)
- AFP (January 1, 2019). Afghan Taliban says 'post-occupation' discussed with Iran. <https://www.france24.com/en/20190101-afghan-taliban-says-post-occupation-discussed-with-iran> (retrieved January 20, 2023)
- Akbarzadeh, S. & Ibrahim, N. (2020). The Taliban: a new proxy for Iran in Afghanistan? *Third World Quarterly* Volume 41, 2020 - Issue 5. DOI: 10.1080/01436597.2019.1702460

Akbarzadeh S. (2014). Iran's Policy towards Afghanistan: In the Shadow of the United States. *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* 1(1) 63–78, S.67

Amoore, M (September 5, 2010). Iran pays the Taliban to kill US soldiers. <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/iran-pays-the-taliban-to-kill-us-soldiers-k6vmxmqvlv> (retrieved January 20, 2023)

Associated Press (August 1, 2022). CIA drone strike kills al-Qaida leader Ayman al-Zawahri in Afghanistan. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/cia-drone-strike-kills-al-qaida-leader-ayman-al-zawahri-in-afghanistan> (retrieved January 20, 2023)

CNN (May 31, 2007). Coalition: Taliban have Iran arms. <https://edition.cnn.com/2007/WORLD/asiapcf/05/30/iran.taliban/> (retrieved January 20, 2023)

Constitution of Islamic Republic of Iran. Translated by A. Tschentscher. <https://www.servat.unibe.ch/icl/ir00000.html> (retrieved January 20, 2023)

Eisenstadt, M. (2011). *The Strategic Culture of the Islamic Republic of Iran Operational and Policy Implications*, MES Monographs No. 1, August 2011,

Fars News (June 29, 2022a). Iranian President Reiterates Need for Formation of Inclusive Gov't in Afghanistan. <https://www.farsnews.ir/en/news/14010408000231/Iranian-Presiden-Reier-aes-Need-fr-Frmain-f-Inclsive-Gv'-in-Afghanistan> (retrieved January 20, 2023)

Fars News (June 6, 2022b). Iran, Afghanistan Paving Way for Reciprocal Trade. <https://www.farsnews.ir/en/news/14010316000590/Iran-Afghanisan-Paving-Way-fr-Reciprcal-Trade> (retrieved January 20, 2023)

Fazeli, Y. (February 19, 2020a). Iran supplying Taliban with missiles, says Afghan security official. <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/world/2020/02/19/Iran-supplying-Taliban-with-mis-siles-says-Afghan-security-official> (retrieved January 20, 2023)

Fazeli, Y. (January 5, 2020b). Taliban condemn killing of Iran's Qassem Soleimani. <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2020/01/05/Taliban-condemn-killing-of-Iran-s-Qas-sem-Soleimani-> (retrieved January 20, 2023)

Fazeli, Y. (September 2, 2021). US military equipment previously owned by Afghan army spotted in Iran: Reports. <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2021/09/02/US-military-equipment-previously-owned-by-Afghan-army-spotted-in-Iran-Reports> (retrieved January 20, 2023)

Forozan, H. (2016) *The Military in Post-Revolutionary Iran*, New York

Fund for Peace (2022). *Fragile State Index Annual Report 2022*, <https://fragilestatesindex.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/22-FSI-Report-Final.pdf>

Goldman, A. Schmitt, E. Fassihi, F. & Bergmann, R. (2020). Al Qaeda's No. 2, Accused in U.S. Embassy Attacks, Was Killed in Iran, 13.11.2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/13/world/middleeast/al-masri-abdullah-qaeda-dead.html> (retrieved January 20, 2023)

Hafezi, P. (2022). Iran to join Asian security body led by Russia, China, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-signs-memorandum-joining-shanghai-cooperation-organisa-tion-tass-2022-09-15/> (retrieved January 20, 2023)

Jadoon, A. Sayed, A. & Mines, A. (2022). The Islamic State Threat in Taliban Afghanistan: Tracing the Resurgence of Islamic State Khorasan, *CTC Sentinel*. January 2022. Volume 15, Issue 1. S.33-43

Katzman, K. (1993). The Pasdaran: Institutionalization of Revolutionary Armed Force. *Iranian Studies* (Vol. 26, No. 3/4), pp. 389-402

Levy, A. & Scott-Clark, C. (November 11, 2017). Al-Qaeda Has Rebuilt Itself—With Iran's Help. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/11/al-qaeda-irancia/545576/> (retrieved January 20, 2023)

Loyd, A. (July 7, 2018). Taliban's best fighters being trained by Iran. <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/talibans-best-fighters-being-trained-by-iran-bbzc68n3m> (retrieved January 20, 2023)

Mehdi, S. (2022). Iran summons Afghan envoy over attacks on diplomatic missions. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/iran-summons-afghan-envoy-over-attacks-on-diplomatic-mis-sions/2561511#> (retrieved January 20, 2023)

Mehr News (August 15, 2022). Border conflict with Taliban has to be resolved via diplomacy. <https://en.mehrnews.com/news/190245/Border-conflict-with-Taliban-has-to-be-resolved-via-diplomacy> (retrieved January 20, 2023)

Mohammadi, Z. (2018). Afghanistan-Iran Trade Volumes Rise, *Tolo News*, 22.03.2018 <https://tolonews.com/index.php/business/afghanistan-iran-trade-volumes-rise> (retrieved January 20, 2023)

Motamedi, M. (January 10, 2022). Iran says won't officially recognise Taliban after Tehran talks. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/1/10/iran-says-wont-officially-recognise-taliban-af-ter-tehran-talks> (retrieved January 20, 2023)

Mousavizadeh, M. (September 8, 2021). Iran to Benefit from U.S. Equipment Military Left in Afghanistan. <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/iran-benefit-us-equipment-military-left-afghani-stan-193272> (retrieved January 20, 2023)

Nader, A. & Laha, J. (2011). *Iran's Balancing Act in Afghanistan*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation. https://rand.org/pubs/occasional_papers/OP322.html (retrieved January 20, 2023)

Nirumand, B. (2002). Böll Iran-Report 07/2002. https://www.boell.de/sites/default/files/assets/boell.de/images/download_de/presse/iran-report07_02.pdf (retrieved January 20, 2023)

Nirumand, B. (2011). Böll Iran-Report 03/2011. https://www.boell.de/sites/default/files/iran_report_03_2011.pdf (retrieved January 20, 2023)

Nirumand, B. (2021). Böll Iran-Report 09/2021. https://www.boell.de/sites/default/files/2021-09/Iran_Report_09_21.pdf (retrieved January 20, 2023)

Ostovar, A. (2016). *Vanguard of the Imam. Religion, Politics, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards*, Oxford

Reuters (December 1, 2021). Clashes over Iran-Afghanistan's 'border misunderstanding' ended. <https://www.reuters.com/world/clashes-over-iran-afghanistans-border-misunderstanding-ended-2021-12-01/> (retrieved January 20, 2023)

Reuters (July 7, 2022). Iran and Taliban forces clash, 1 Afghan border officer killed. <https://www.dw.com/en/iran-and-taliban-forces-clash-1-afghan-border-officer-killed/a-62662591> (retrieved January 20, 2023)

Rubin, B. (September 16, 2020). A New Look at Iran's Complicated Relationship with the Taliban. <https://warontherocks.com/2020/09/a-new-look-at-irans-complicated-relationship-with-the-taliban/> (retrieved January 20, 2023)

Shalizi, H. (January 16, 2011). Afghanistan condemns Iran fuel blockade amid protests. <https://reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-iran-idUSTRE70FOOT20110116> (retrieved January 20, 2023)

Sharafedin, B. & Payne, J. (August 23, 2021). EXCLUSIVE Iran resumes fuel exports to neighbouring Afghanistan. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-resumes-fuel-exports-afghanistan-after-taliban-request-union-says-2021-08-23/> (retrieved January 20, 2023)

Silk Road Briefing (August 12, 2021). Iran To Finally Take Full Membership Of The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. <https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2021/08/12/iran-to-finally-take-full-membership-of-the-shanghai-cooperation-organisation/> (retrieved January 20, 2023)

Smyth, P. (June 3, 2014). Iran's Afghan Shiite Fighters in Syria, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-afghan-shiite-fighters-syria> (retrieved January 20, 2023)

Steinberg, G. (2021). Die Achse des Widerstands, SWP-Studie 2021/S 08. doi:10.18449/2021S08

Tabatabai, A. (August 9, 2019). Iran's Cooperation with the Taliban Could Affect Talks on U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan. <https://www.rand.org/blog/2019/08/irans-cooperation-with-the-taliban-could-affect-talks.html> (retrieved January 20, 2023)

Tasnim News (August 19, 2021). نی‌م‌آت نارگن ناب‌لاط ند‌م‌آ اب: نات‌س‌ناغ‌فا هل‌ل‌ا بزح / دن‌س‌ری‌من دوخ فاد‌ها هب دی‌دج ماظن رد ا‌ه‌ری‌ف‌کت / می‌ت‌س‌ی‌ن اروش‌اع تی‌من‌ا <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1400/05/28/2556764/ناب‌لاط‌ند‌م‌آ‌اب‌نات‌س‌ناغ‌فا‌هل‌ل‌ا‌بزح> / تی‌من‌ا دوخ فاد‌ها هب دی‌دج ماظن رد ا‌ه‌ری‌ف‌کت - می‌ت‌س‌ی‌ن - اروش‌اع - تی‌من‌ا - نی‌م‌آ‌ت - نارگن - دن‌س‌ری (retrieved January 20, 2023)

Tehran Times (October 26, 2021). Taliban welcomes Ayatollah Khamenei's remarks on Shia-Sunni unity. <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/466379/Taliban-welcomes-Ayatollah-Khamenei-s-remarks-on-Shia-Sunni-unity> (retrieved January 20, 2023)

UN Security Council (2019). Eleventh report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2501 (2019) concerning the Taliban and other associated individuals and entities constituting a threat to the peace, stability and security of Afghanistan. <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N20/110/60/PDF/N2011060.pdf?OpenElement> (retrieved January 20, 2023)

UN Security Council (2020). Twelfth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2557 (2020) concerning the Taliban and other associated individuals and entities constituting a threat to the peace stability and security of Afghanistan. <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N21/107/61/PDF/N2110761.pdf?OpenElement> (retrieved January 20, 2023)

UN Security Council (2021). Thirteenth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2611 (2021) concerning the Taliban and other associated individuals and entities constituting a threat to the peace stability and security of Afghanistan. https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3975071/files/S_2022_419-EN.pdf?ln=en (retrieved January 20, 2023)

U.S. Department of State (2021). Country Reports on Terrorism, 12.2021, S.200

U.S. Department of the Treasury (January 1, 2009). Treasury Targets Al Qaida Operatives in Iran. <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/hp1360.aspx> (retrieved January 20, 2023)

U.S. Department of the Treasury (2010). Fact Sheet: U.S. Treasury Department Targets Iran's Support for Terrorism Treasury Announces New Sanctions Against Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force Leadership. <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg810.aspx> (retrieved January 20, 2023)

U.S. Department of the Treasury (October 18, 2012). Treasury Further Exposes Iran-Based Al-Qa'ida Network. <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1741.aspx> (retrieved January 20, 2023)

Voice of America (April 9, 2022). Russia Latest Country to Establish Diplomatic Ties With Taliban. <https://www.voanews.com/a/russia-latest-country-to-establish-diplomatic-ties-with-taliban/6521949.html> (retrieved January 20, 2023)

Wahdat-Hagh, W. (2003). Die islamische Republik Iran, Münster 2003

Wahdat-Hagh, W. (2019a). Iran und seine Nachbarn. Wahdat-Hagh, W. Iran: Eine islamistische Diktatur. Göttingen

Wahdat-Hagh, W. (2019b). Iranerinnen sollen keine Afghanen heiraten. Wahdat-Hagh, W. Iran: Eine islamistische Diktatur. Göttingen

Wahdat-Hagh, W. (2019c). Irans Finger in Afghanistan. Wahdat-Hagh, W. Iran: Eine islamistische Diktatur. Göttingen

Images:

(1) Tasnim News/Meghdad Madadi (2015). <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/media/1394/01/30/715555/%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%85-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%B1%D8%B3%D9%85%D8%AC%D9%85%D9%87%D9%88%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%BA%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%A7%D9%86> (retrieved January 20, 2023). CC BY 4.0

(2) Tasnim News (2022). <https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2022/05/01/2704083/fm-urges-taliban-to-protect-iranian-diplomatic-sites-in-afghanistan> (retrieved January 20, 2023). CC BY 4.0

(3) US Army/Sgt. Ken Scar (2012). [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Flickr_-_DVID-SHUB_-_Giant_standing_Buddhas_of_Bamiyan_still_cast_shadows_\(Image_2_of_8\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Flickr_-_DVID-SHUB_-_Giant_standing_Buddhas_of_Bamiyan_still_cast_shadows_(Image_2_of_8).jpg) (retrieved January 20, 2023)