

Iran and its Relationship to Afghanistan After the Nuclear Deal

A New Era for Constructive Interaction?



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

How would the conclusion of the nuclear deal and the lifting of the sanctions on Iran be expected to alter relations with Afghanistan? The opening of Iran can be turned into the victory for soft power and a model for diplomacy, reform and moderation. But to gain a rightful place as a benevolent and strong neighbor whose dividends of peace could spread over the region, Iran needs to avoid specific pitfalls, this policy brief warns.

Domestic changes: A more pragmatic model of governance. The nuclear agreement has provided the mandate and ability for President Rouhani to take more pragmatic positions domestically and internationally. A more pragmatic, less ideological foreign policy would make Iran closer to Afghanistan. After all, the governments of both countries face the daunting task of modernizing their systems of Islamic democracy and rebuilding state–society trust by giving impetus to civil society participation, empowering and engaging their youth, strengthening parliamentary systems and developing the role of political parties. For Iran to be able to take advantage of the positive momentum and soften its image in Afghanistan, it must abandon any interest it may harbor in exporting a political ideology to Afghanistan, and it must curb xenophobia, racism and anti-Afghan feelings within.

Expanded economic opportunities. Iran and Afghanistan’s solid economic relationship is expected to further expand in the immediate future. Iran is one of Afghanistan’s largest trading partners and it is already exporting electricity to Afghanistan. A concerted effort will be needed to maintain the momentum by which both the quantity and the quality of trade between the two countries is expanding. Iran hopes to include Afghanistan in its plans to export 80 billion cubic meters (bcm) of its natural gas annually to Asian and European countries by 2025 while also planning a boost in non-oil exports to Afghanistan. In the new schemes, the role of border markets is expected to rise as do investments in production lines for small and medium industries in Afghanistan. The lifting of sanctions has ushered in the conclusion of the Chabahar Agreement between India, Iran and Afghanistan. The port gives India and others access to markets in Afghanistan and Central Asia by circumventing Pakistan, and provides a trade link between Afghanistan and Central Asia with Europe and the Middle East. Other opportunities exist in infrastructure projects, such as the construction of the railway connecting Herat to Khaf supposed to be finished in 2016, and the realization of a project to develop the south eastern coastline of Iran (Mokran), which will benefit economic development in Afghanistan.

Unresolved water tensions. Further sustainable cooperation between Iran and Afghanistan requires the resolution of the water conflicts over the sharing of the Helmand River. The post nuclear deal era provides possibilities to start constructive negotiations over water sharing in a way that would satisfy the needs of both countries, possibly brokered through international organizations.

Security guarantees. Opportunities exist for a constructive engagement of Iran in solving the major security threats in the region, such as illicit transnational trade and violent extremism. Iran could potentially participate more actively in regional cooperation mechanisms for border control and exchange of information to curb illicit trans-national trade, especially drug trafficking. It could also consider investing in alternative crops and new economic opportunities for border communities. Iran holds the potential for being a force for combating ideological and religious radicalization in the region by providing alternative models of tolerant Islam. To be a credible model, however, it needs to be seen as more tolerant towards its own religious minorities. Instead of giving more credence to sectarian strife and using Shiite communities, Iran should revitalize the discourse of tolerance, mutual respect and inter-religious understanding between Shia and Sunni communities, put emphasis on reform and adaptation within Islam and highlight tolerance. President Rouhani’s slogan of *Etedal* (moderation) and his proposed initiative for the UN to embark

on “WAVE: World Against Violence and Extremism” are initiatives worthy of more attention. At the same time Iran should take care not to entangle Afghanistan and the region in its own problems with Saudi Arabia.

A Cultural Revival. The revival of Iran’s soft power can be built on Persian Iran as a civilizational identity. Reviving the common cultural heritage of a region formerly known as Greater Khorasan could be set in contradistinction to the association of the name of Khorasan today with the artificial province created by Daesh in Afghanistan. Reviving the peaceful cultural commonality of the region would require like-minded states of the region to invest into modern education, culture, and technological projects in the region. With its own interest in curbing takfiri ideology and extremism in Afghanistan, Iran should invest more in a modern, secular education system in Afghanistan, on all levels, and could also offer Afghans scholarships at its own universities.

Cooperation with the West. Finally, the lifting of Western sanctions would inevitably encourage more transactions with the international community in Afghanistan. On the economic front, Iran can better coordinate its development assistance projects through multilateral mechanisms. On the security front, given that Iran feels less threatened after the nuclear deal, it is in a better position to engage in bilateral and international cooperation with Western countries to defeat extremism, be it in Afghanistan or the Middle East.

The lifting of sanctions in Iran presents a host of opportunities for intensifying relations. What does success depend on? First of all, much of the cooperation is preconditioned on the future of the nuclear deal and how momentum will be sustained. Other significant hurdles must also be overcome: refraining from using Afghanistan as a terrain for the Iran–Saudi Arabia conflict, curbing pressure on Afghan migrants in Iran that feeds negative public sentiments in Afghanistan, avoiding the entry of Afghans in any sectarian wars in Afghanistan and in the Middle East.

Should the hurdles discussed in this brief be successfully managed, tangible progress can be made on the most basic challenges that the region has to grapple with: 1) Economic revival of the region, boosted by renewed relations between Iran, India and Pakistan which could then provide new opportunities for jobs and prosperity in Afghanistan through trade and transit; 2) Preventing and curbing violent extremism and terrorism through reviving the common civilizational values, religion, culture, philosophy, literature and history of the region.

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The conflict in Afghanistan is often seen as an extension of the rivalries, animosities and security dynamics of countries surrounding Afghanistan. One of the rivalries that supposedly gets projected onto the Afghan terrain is played out in the Persian Gulf Regional Security Complex, as an antagonistic relationship between Iran, a regional power which has been using the conflict over nuclear capability to its advantage, and a more insecure Saudi Arabia, which is forced to rely on the security guarantees of external powers against both regional and domestic threats.¹ This relationship plays out in four areas:

- rivalry over regional security dominance, leading to mutual accusations of support for terrorism and insurgencies;
- competing ideological orientations, rooted in national and religious identities and claims to the leadership of the Islamic community;
- competition over political influence within the region, and;
- economic competition, particularly over the production of oil.

The rivalry is projected into Afghan soil, with each of these areas influencing both countries' relationships with Afghanistan, their practice of aid, support for ethnic groups and for different religious communities (along the Sunni/Shia rift) and, ultimately, their desire to influence the political process, including negotiations with the Taliban. Viewed from this angle, it could seem that the sole purpose of Iran's interest in Afghanistan is the pursuit of its ambition for regional rivalry in the Middle East. However, this would be a too narrow interpretation of Iran's interests in countries to its East, and to Afghanistan in particular. Geographic contiguity plays an important role in this relationship: Common borders between Iran and Afghanistan means common strategic interests including countering the trafficking of illicit drugs, managing shared water resources, and regulating migration of refugees and workers. Iran, therefore, is not just a security actor in the region. It has other interests for which soft power tools may be more suitable.

Now, with the conclusion of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) – the nuclear deal in short – and the lifting of the sanctions, what new opportunities are there for a changing relationship between Iran and the international community that would have an impact on the regional situation? How would the new standing of Iran in the international arena, combined with domestic changes, be expected to alter relations with Afghanistan? The timing seems opportune. Cooperation on military, intelligence, and economic issues between Iran and Afghanistan was sealed through a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in August 2013, when Afghan President Hamid Karzai was still in power and Iranian President Hassan Rouhani had just been inaugurated. The prospect for closer relations between the two countries developed further through high level exchanges: Foreign Minister Javad Zarif's visit to Kabul in January 2015 and President Ashraf Ghani's subsequent visit to Tehran in April 2015 became opportunities for discussions of cooperation in the areas of trade, transport and infrastructure development. One substantial outcome of these visits has been the realization of the joint project between Iran, India and Afghanistan for developing the Chabahar port and connecting Afghanistan through Iran's border to the Oman sea.

This paper will outline possible ways that Afghanistan is likely to benefit from the restoration of Iran's role as a responsible and secure neighbor and power. For the neighborhood, the opening of Iran can be turned into the victory for soft power and a model for diplomacy, reform and moderation. But, as this brief will warn, to gain a rightful place as a benevolent and strong neighbor whose dividends of peace could spread over the region, there are also specific dangers and pitfalls that Iran needs to avoid.

¹ See Ch. 4 'The Persian Gulf and Afghanistan: Iran-Saudi Competition', in Kristian Berg Harpviken and Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh, *A Rock Between Hard Places: Afghanistan as an Arena of Regional Insecurity*, London: Hurst & Company, 2016.

Domestic Changes: A More Pragmatic Model of Governance

The nuclear agreement has given new impetus to the reform movement within Iran and empowered democratic constituencies. The February 2016 parliamentary election results proved this point, especially in Tehran, where all elected members were from the reformist camp. The composition of the parliament changed in favor of President Rouhani, who had been recently able to gain more support from liberals (including members of the Parliament, reform minded journalists, intellectuals and general public) thanks to his success in settling the nuclear case. Now with his proven promises to convert diplomatic achievements into tangible economic gains (by lifting of sanctions), he has more freedom to pursue a variety of reforms. These include steps towards more stable internal politics, institutional reforms which could open the path to a more attractive environment for foreign investment, and a sustained strategy of constructive engagement with Iran's neighbors, as well as with western countries and with rising powers globally (BRICS countries and others). President Rouhani has, more than ever before, both the mandate and the ability to take more pragmatic positions domestically and internationally. At the foreign policy level, these changes will likely intensify the pragmatism with which Iran has been pursuing its security interests in recent years.

How does such pragmatism impact relations with Afghanistan? Most likely, these reforms and intentions would bring Iran and Afghanistan closer, especially given that they – despite apparent differences – share a number of characteristics:

- Both have inherited a diverse and stratified society that is at its core religious, but consisting of different ethnicities, classes (in the case of Iran) and tribes (in the case of Afghanistan) with disparate socio-economic level.
- Both countries are Islamic republics, with governance systems built on competitive democracy where a variety of groups find their voices, ranging from the clergy, tribal or religious leaders, secular intellectuals, civil society groups, women's lobby group, to independent media.
- Both aspire for modernity through institution building and participation as a principle. For both countries, however, enabling participation in the political and economic process would require progress in a number of areas, including enhancing literacy and civic education, creating jobs, and ensuring economic empowerment.

If Iran moves towards a more pragmatic, less ideological foreign policy, it would find common ground with Afghanistan. After all, the governments of both countries face the daunting task of modernizing their systems of Islamic democracy and rebuilding state–society trust by giving impetus to civil society participation, strengthening parliamentary systems and developing the role of political parties. Both countries have a large majority of youth, hungry for new ways to engage in the political and economic lives of their societies. If Iran and Afghanistan succeed, they could present a model of Islamic democracies that builds on the energy of the youth, as a third way between the Islamization options offered by Saudi Arabia and the secular but authoritative models presented by Central Asian countries.²

Yet, caution is called for. For Iran to be able to take advantage of the mentioned positive momentum created by the nuclear deal and elections, and portray a gentle face that could begin to soften its image in Afghanistan, it needs to avoid a few dangers. First, it must abandon any interest it may harbor in exporting a political ideology to Afghanistan. Second, Iran, both at the state and society levels, must absolutely curb xenophobia, racism and anti-Afghan feelings among its population.

² Davood Moradian, 'Iran deal: A possible game-changer for Afghanistan', *Al Jazeera*, 22 July 2015. available <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2015/07/iran-deal-game-changer-afghanistan-150722075109925.html>

The perpetuation of discrimination, overt and covert, can only do harm to the image of Iran in Afghanistan and the region. Iran has been able to absorb millions of Afghan refugees and migrant workers (one million officially according to UNHCR, and 3 million according to Iranian Ministry of Interior numbers).³ Yet, their treatment in Iran has not always been positive: Dozens have been hanged for drug trafficking charges, a few thousands are in prison, and negative sentiments towards Afghan migrants are often expressed among the public, especially in social media. One may hope that the public outrage for the rape and murder of a six year old Afghan girl by an Iranian man in southern Tehran that shocked the nation in April 2016 would bring with it the potential for the gradual abating of discriminatory anti-Afghan feelings.

Expanded Economic Opportunities

Iran and Afghanistan have been solid economic partners ever since the fall of the Taliban, and this relationship is expected to further expand in the immediate future. Since 2002, Iran has pledged more than \$500 million to Afghanistan towards roads, energy infrastructure and schools,⁴ and it has spent approximately \$50 million per year between 2007 and 2013.⁵ Iran is also one of Afghanistan's largest electricity-exporters, with parts of the western provinces entirely dependent on Iran's power supply. With an expanding economic relationship based on geographic, historical and cultural linkages, the question is how both countries could now benefit even more by the opening that follows the lifting of international sanctions against Iran?

First of all, a concerted effort will be needed to maintain the momentum by which both the quantity and the quality of trade between the two countries is expanding. In 2014, for example, the volume of trade between Iran and Afghanistan was close to \$2.4 billion, out of which \$2.3 billion consisted of the export of Iranian goods to Afghanistan.⁶ Iranian exports consisted of chemical solvents (\$226 million), hydrocarbons (\$221 Million), mineral oils (\$146 million), sweets (\$63 million) and bread (\$56 million). Afghan imports to Iran, by comparison, were worth a mere 10 million dollars, including sesame seeds, plants and silkworm cocoons. Iran is planning a boost in non-oil exports to Afghanistan, which will also increase the role that border markets play, such as the ones set in Iran's Northeastern Khorassan Razavi province, as well as investments in production lines for small and medium industries in Afghanistan. This trans-border trade will undeniably be facilitated by the lifting of banking restrictions which had been imposed under the international Sanctions regime. Iran also hopes to include Afghanistan in its plans to, by 2025, export 80 billion cubic meters (bcm) of natural gas annually to Asian and European countries.⁷ Furthermore, during his spring 2016 visit to Tehran, President Ashraf Ghani promised to facilitate Iran's investment in the Afghan mineral sector,⁸ something that Iran could take advantage of given that it has the technological capabilities that Afghanistan lacks, and where Iranian private sector companies are well placed to compete in extraction bids, assuming there is adequate support from the Iranian government.

³ Bruce Koepke, *The Situation of Afghans in the Islamic Republic of Iran Nine Years After the Overthrow of the Taliban Regime in Afghanistan*, Middle East Institute & Fondation pour la Recherche Strategique, February 2011. Available http://www.refugeecooperation.org/publications/afghanistan/pdf/03_koepke.pdf

⁴ Alireza Nadr, Ali G. Scotten, Ahmad Idrees Rahmani, Robert Stewart & Leila Mahnad, *Iran's Influence in Afghanistan: Implications for the U.S. Drawdown*, RAND Corporation, 2014. Available http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR600/RR616/RAND_RR616.pdf

⁵ Page 11 in Bruce Koepke, *Iran's Policy on Afghanistan: The Evolution of Strategic Pragmatism*, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), September 2013. Available <http://books.sipri.org/files/misc/SIPRI13wcaBK.pdf>

⁶ 'Mobadelat-e Tejari Iran va Afghanistan chegouneh ast?' [How are trade relations between Iran and Afghanistan?], *Azad News Agency*, 21 April 2015. Available <http://www.ana.ir/news/24566>

⁷ 'Official: Afghanistan planning to import Iran's natural gas', *Fars New Agency*, 20 January 2015. Available <http://en.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13931030001005>

⁸ 'Gowl-e Ashraf Ghani baray tashil-e sarmayeh gozari ma'dani Iran dar Afghanistan' [Ashraf Ghani promises to facilitate mining investment of Iran in Afghanistan], *Mines&Mining Industries News*, 23 April 2015. Available <http://www.minews.ir/fa/doc/news/23839/>

Second, the conclusion of plans for the construction of the Chabahar port with the support of the Indians is an important milestone now that sanctions have been lifted. In April, New Delhi and Tehran concluded an MoU, and India pledged \$85 million to construct container and multi-purpose terminals.⁹ In May 2016, India, Iran, and Afghanistan finalized the parameters of a trilateral agreement known as the Chabahar Agreement. Afghanistan will benefit by diversifying its list of partners beyond South and Central Asia, with a fully operational port potentially generating trade volumes totaling billions of dollars.¹⁰ Through this cooperation, Afghanistan gets access to an international sea transport hub, Iran could develop the international market for its energy and India would enhance its energy security and get access to Central Asia by circumventing Pakistan. Afghanistan, Iran and India also have common interest in developing a railroad to transport iron oxide and other minerals from Bamyan Province to the Chabahar port and on to India and other ports.¹¹ However, these budding trade potentials will have to factor in the balance needed between the security and economic interests of both Iran and Afghanistan when dealing with Pakistan and India.

Third are opportunities in infrastructure projects. The construction of the railway connecting Herat to Khaf is supposed to be finished in 2016, with a total of 191 kilometers, of which 124 in Afghanistan. Iran is further planning to develop the southeastern coastline of the country to improve its access to the Indian ocean through a project named Mokran through its 6th five-year development program. Iranian investments in the coastline represent an opportunity for the economic development of Afghanistan, and will also draw in India as well as China.

Unresolved Water Tensions

One of the most contested problems between Iran and Afghanistan, which is not expected to be eased in the near future is the conflict over water. Disagreements have brewed since the 19th century over the sharing of the Helmand River. What started as a problem of border delineation has become a trans-boundary water management problem which also encompasses the other major shared water resource, the Harirod-Murghab basin. The lack of agreements affects the livelihoods of millions of inhabitants of both basins. It also poses environmental dangers for the volatile Sistan wetlands. The development of hydro-electric power, such as through the Salma hydroelectric dam along the Hari Rud, is also likely to heighten tensions between the two countries, as the dam will likely affect the amount of water available to Iran.¹² Afghanistan has a plan to build 21 dams in different parts of the country, some of them on rivers that flow downstream to Iran.¹³ Further sustainable cooperation between Iran and Afghanistan is contingent on the resolution of the water conflicts, which would help protect the fragile environment of Eastern Iran while providing conditions for satisfying Afghanistan's needs for agricultural development and food security. The post nuclear deal era provides possibilities to start constructive negotiations over water sharing in

⁹ Michael Kugelman, 'Examining the implications of the Indo-Iranian Chabahar port deal', *Deutsche Welle*, 8 May 2015. Available <http://www.dw.com/en/examining-the-implications-of-the-indo-iranian-chabahar-port-deal/a-18439937>

¹⁰ Partha Maitra, 'Strategic Chabahar transit deal soon, will bolster trade ties with India: Afghan ambassador', *The Times of India*, 29 March 2015. Available <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/India/Strategic-Chabahar-transit-deal-soon-will-bolster-trade-ties-with-India-Afghan-ambassador/articleshow/46731336.cms>

¹¹ 'Inja Afghanistan ast, malek bozorgtarin ma'dan sang ahan bekr Asia' [This is Afghanistan: The owner of the largest iron ore mine in Asia], *Madan24*, 24 December 2014. Available <http://www.madan24.com/Pages/News-اينجا افغانستان است مالک بزرگترین معدن سنگ آهن بکر آسیا-19297.aspx>

¹² Paula Hanasz, 'The Politics of Water Security between Afghanistan and Iran', *Future Directions International*, 1 March 2012. Available <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/The%20Politics%20of%20Water%20Security%20between%20Afghanistan%20and%20Iran%20-%20March%201%202012.pdf>

¹³ 'Rais Jomhur Afghanistan az aghaz ejray tarh sakht-e 21 sad dar sal ayandeh khabar dad' [The president of Afghanistan announced plans to build 21 dams from next year], *Islamic Republic News Agency*, 20 February 2016. Available <http://www3.irna.ir/fa/News/81971239/>

a way that would satisfy the needs of both countries, possibly brokered by international organizations.

Security Guarantees

The post deal Iran can similarly provide openings for addressing the major security threats that menace the region in general and Afghanistan in particular: militarization, illicit transnational trade, and most importantly, violent extremism.

First, the nuclear deal can be a model for assuring a nuclear weapon-free zone in the Middle East. The deal, and the alleviation of tensions between Iran and the US, has also reduced concerns of Iran that the USA may be using Afghanistan for attacking Iran's nuclear sites. The joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) as a model for pragmatic win-win dialogue also strengthens the soft power of Iran, allowing it to contribute constructively to long term security in and around Afghanistan.

Second, while Iran will likely become an attractive transit route for economic transactions in the region and access to warm seas, it must also intensify efforts to curb illicit trans-national trade in the region, and in the first instance, drug trafficking through its Afghanistan and Pakistan borders. Iran could potentially participate more actively in regional cooperation mechanisms for border control and exchange of information. But it could also complement its defensive strategies with a proactive approach, such as investing in alternative crops to replace poppy plantation in the fields of Afghanistan or investing in the economic opportunities of border communities to curb the lure of lucrative trafficking.

Third, resurrected from its isolation, Iran could potentially be a force for combating ideological and religious radicalization in the region. While the potential cooperation of Iran with the USA and its allies in combatting Daesh in the Middle East and potentially in Afghanistan represents opportunities in its own right,¹⁴ Iran could also use normative power to provide alternative models of tolerant Islam. Given Iran's national interest in containing various forms of Sunni extremism, including Salafism and *takfiri* ideology in the region, those who are persecuted by Daesh can gain support from Iran (albeit moral more than physical). It could work with Sunni clerics to help develop curricula for madrasas, trainings and religious edicts to counter hate narratives in the region. More tolerant and spiritual facets of Islam, such as Sufism (which has the greater Khorasan as one of its genesis), could be reinforced to combat extremism, the way that it is being done in Turkey and Bosnia. To be a credible model, however, Iran needs to be seen to be more tolerant towards its own religious minorities including Sunni Islam as well as Sufism. Any policies or action that support the entry of Afghans in sectarian wars in Afghanistan in the Middle East would tarnish the soft power image of Iran.

When it comes to supporting non-*takfiri* space in Afghanistan, some caveats apply. Iran should not be seen as endangering Shia communities by building exclusively on them for support. Iran may have interests in protecting the rights of the Hazara group, who constitute the bulk of Afghanistan's Shia population, who have cultural and religious ties to Iran, and who may hope for a policy of inclusiveness by the government of President Ashraf Ghani. If Tehran wants to project its power through Shia symbolism, it should refrain from using Shia communities. This would endanger these minorities even more, especially now with the presence of Daesh. To this end, Iran has to play its cards right and not give more credence to sectarian strife. Instead, it should revitalize the

¹⁴ Jamie Dettmer, 'Experts: Nuclear Deal May Spark US-Iran Cooperation Against IS', *Voice of America*, 16 July 2015. Available <http://www.voanews.com/content/experts-say-nuclear-deal-may-spark-us-iran-cooperation-against-islamic-state/2865514.html>

discourse of tolerance, mutual respect and inter-religious understanding between Shia and Sunni communities, put emphasis on reform and adaptation within Islam and highlight the religion of peace and tolerance instead. President Rouhani's slogan of *Etedal* (moderation) is a step in the right direction and needs to be practiced more widely in Iran and in the neighborhood. Other Iranian initiatives which Iran should pursue more forcefully through its foreign policy are President Rouhani's WAVE concept ('World Against Violence and Extremism'), proposed to the United Nations General Assembly in September 2013, but subsequently sidelined when efforts were concentrated on achieving the JCPOA; as well as the concept of 'Dialogue of Civilizations' proposed by former President Khatami (1997–2005) but abandoned during the more aggressive presidency of his successor, President Ahmadinejad (2005–2013). The WAVE initiative especially has much currency if it were to revive to its full capacity.

At the same time, Iran should take care not to entangle Afghanistan and the region in its own problems with Saudi Arabia. After the incidents with the execution of the Shia cleric, Sheikh Nimr, in Saudi in January and the takeover of the Saudi embassy in Tehran that followed, the Afghan National Unity Government (NUG) displayed caution in its reaction to the tensions. While President Ashraf Ghani has supported Saudi Arabia's actions in Yemen, Chief Executive Officer Abdullah Abdullah made a visit to Tehran. If the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran escalates over economic, religious, ideological and security ambitions, it is imperative that the soil of Afghanistan not be used to project the conflict. Afghanistan should maintain its relations with Saudi Arabia, while at the same time preserving its strategic ties with Iran. Afghanistan, much like the other neighbors, should not be forced to take sides and engage in this new Great Game within the region. Instead, the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia should eventually be overcome if both sides realize their common interest in overcoming joint challenges: radicalization, extremism, dwindling economic opportunities, lack of competitiveness of the youth in global job markets, poor education systems, etc.

Finally, the intensification of political, strategic and economic cooperation between Iran, Afghanistan and India can create bargaining power for Afghanistan and help to balance the influence of Pakistan in Afghanistan, with positive security consequences.

A Cultural Revival

The revival of Iran's soft power can be built on Persian Iran as a civilizational identity to replace the more confrontational and exclusive Shia and anti-Western identity in Iran's foreign and national security policy. The renaissance of a Persian Iran can help Afghanistan and some Central Asian countries recover parts of their Persian identity and heritage.¹⁵ Emphasis on Persian Iran can also provide impetus to revive the heritage of Greater Khorasan, reclaiming its symbols from Daesh which has established its front in Afghanistan under the appellation of Vilayat-e Khorasan. Reviving the common cultural heritage of the region could be set in contradistinction to the extremist association with the Khorasan appellation today, and would require like-minded states of the region to invest in modern education, culture, and technological projects in the region, with earnest support from Iran.

Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, in addition to India and Kazakhstan, are some of the countries of the larger neighborhood which have invested in the educational system of Afghanistan. While Saudi Arabia and Pakistan have been known for supporting Sunni extremist schools in Afghanistan and in Pakistan and using the religious agenda of the Taliban to put pressure on the government of Afghanistan, other countries have invested in the secular education system, in the

¹⁵ Moradian, *op. cit.*

hope of preparing and influencing Afghan elites and bureaucrats of the future. Iran has the most powerful impetus of all for curbing extremism in Afghan schools and religious curriculum, being directly impacted should *takfiri* ideology prevail in the region. It is for this reason that Iran should also invest more in a modern, secular education system in Afghanistan, including provision of support to higher education within the country as well as offering of scholarships at its own universities.

Given the similarity in language and the low cost, a great number of Afghan students would like to study in Iranian universities. The governments of Iran and Afghanistan have to work together to develop a framework for more cooperation in the fields of educational and scientific exchanges. Iran has an important role to play in promoting a more Persian oriented cultural policy in Afghanistan as opposed to an ideological/religious one, and by doing so help strengthen people-to-people ties and pave the way for a more stable Afghanistan where extremist groups would find less fertile ground.

Yet, here too caution is necessary. Iran has been accused of cultural imperialism in Afghanistan because of its overt support for Tamadon, a television channel that regularly broadcasts Iranian shows, and another channel, Rah Farda, which belongs to the Shia-Hazara leader Mohammad Muhaqq. 2015 saw a number of protests by Afghan civil society organizations calling for an end to the cultural invasion of Afghanistan by Iran, such as the one organized by the political party Afghan Milli Ghorzang in May. Accusations have also concerned the alleged inflow of Shia religious texts. Overall, Iran's soft power would be best projected in a less religious form and more based on Persian Iran.

Cooperation with the West

Finally, the lifting of Western sanctions would inevitably open up for more investments of Iran in Afghanistan and translate into a different disposition for Iran to help coalition forces and the international community to succeed in its stabilization efforts in Afghanistan. On the economic front, Iran can better coordinate its development assistance projects through multilateral mechanisms. Tehran, after all, made a tall pledge of \$540 million to contribute to the reconstruction in Afghanistan at a donor conference in 2002 (although it is unclear how much it has actually delivered).

On the security front, cooperation is also expected. Given that Iran feels less threatened after the nuclear deal, it is in a better position to engage in bilateral and international cooperation with Western countries to defeat extremism, be it in Afghanistan or the Middle East.¹⁶ It has less reason to fear that the United States and NATO will use Afghanistan as a staging ground for attacks on its territory. Iran and the USA already cooperated in negotiating the 2001 Bonn Agreement for Afghanistan and Tehran helped US Secretary of State John Kerry in its formation of the Afghan National Unity government in 2014.¹⁷ Now they could cooperate more openly in the reconciliation process and in promoting talks between the government and the Taliban.

¹⁶ At present, Iran denies cooperating with western countries on curbing Daesh and other terrorist groups in the Middle East.

¹⁷ As Michael Kugelman writes, "At the Bonn conference in 2001, it was Iran that broke a stalemate over the composition of Afghanistan's first post-Taliban government. Several years later, according to journalist Barbara Slavin, Iran gave maps to Washington that revealed Taliban positions in Afghanistan and offered to train 20,000 Afghan troops as part of an American project to rebuild Afghanistan's army." In "Why Afghanistan is a Big Winner in the US-Iran Deal", *War on the Rocks*, 29 July 2015. Available <http://warontherocks.com/2015/07/why-afghanistan-is-a-big-winner-in-the-us-iran-deal/>

Conclusions

During his visit to Iran in April 2015, President Ashraf Ghani stressed the importance of cooperation on issues related to counter-terrorism, curbing narcotics trade, refugees, economic links and transit trade. The lifting of sanctions in Iran presents a host of opportunities for intensifying relations on each of these areas. However, as discussed above, success comes with a few preconditions.

First of all, much of the cooperation is hinged on the future of the nuclear deal and how momentum will be sustained. Assuming that the JCPOA will be in effect for at least two decades, it will have profound implications on opening up domestic politics and softening the image of Iran in the world, which will in turn provide a new impetus for improving Iranian–Afghan relations. In a potentially more cooperative new climate, the soft power of Iran could become more salient. One byproduct of the nuclear deal would be the alleviation of tensions between Iran and the USA, which could pave the ground for more favorable regional and global cooperation in controlling the narcotics trade, preventing terrorism and boosting trade corridors. For these opportunities to be fulfilled, however, the JCPOA needs to be saved from domestic opposition both in Iran and in the USA.

The survival of the nuclear deal aside, other significant hurdles must be overcome to ensure improved relations between Iran and Afghanistan. Among pitfalls, one can include the sustained Iran–Saudi Arabia rivalry in the Middle East, which could have reverberations on Afghanistan if it continues to be projected there. The rivalry will not abate until both Iran and Saudi Arabia understand that there are more benefits to cooperation (for combating extremism, for investing jointly into the economy of the region, for boosting the education systems, for coordinating oil production and pricing etc.) than conflict over archaic sectarian ideologies that truly hamper progress. Continued pressure on Afghan migrants in Iran would also feed more negative public sentiments in Afghanistan, which could hamper improved state–to–state relations. The water sharing arrangements between Iran and Afghanistan also need to be resolved through bilateral efforts supported potentially by international organizations interested in achieving a fair and win–win agreement for water management for both countries.

Should the hurdles above be successfully managed, tangible progress can be made on the most basic challenges that the region has to grapple with. The most pressing challenge, the economic revival of the region, could be boosted by renewed relations between Iran, India and Pakistan which could then provide new opportunities for jobs and prosperity in Afghanistan through trade and transit. Investments should also be made into the education systems in order to bring up new generations capable of competing in global markets. The other main regional challenge, preventing and curbing violent extremism and terrorism, needs concerted efforts by regional countries to revive the common civilizational values of the region which provide peaceful directives derived from the common religion, culture, philosophy, literature and history of the region. In this midst, a more pragmatic and moderate Iran would put more emphasis on Persian civilizational policies instead of ideological/religious ones. By doing so, it would provide more impetus for the rise of the soft power and lead to more favorable attitudes among Afghan and other regional elites.

