

Perception of Afghan Elites Towards the Islamic Republic of Iran

A summary

Preface

Iran, as the western neighboring country of Afghanistan, with more than 900 km of common border with Afghanistan, cannot be indifferent about what goes on in Afghanistan. Security threats from Afghanistan, along with social and cultural concerns and the consequences of the expansion of drug production and transit, have given Afghanistan a special place in Iran's policies. This importance will become more significant under the shadow of emerging threats like migration and environmental threats (water and dust crisis). Geopolitical conditions and specific ethnic and religious characteristics, the presence of regional rivals, along with different types and natures of regional and international crises, make the two-way influence on interactions between Iran and Afghanistan inevitable; as one issue gets paled, the next one takes its place. As the Taliban came to power in Afghanistan, they practically promoted Sunni-Jihadi narrative of Islam at the eastern borders of Iran, causing severe concerns in Tehran. Meanwhile, Iran was afraid of Sunni minority living in the eastern regions of Iran becoming affected by Islamic radicalism. With the collapse of the Taliban, this concern took a new form.

Developing a comprehensive and an integrated security policy by Iran towards Afghanistan is an inevitable necessity. Given the facts mentioned above and taking into account the strategic policy of Iran in order to strengthen relations with Afghanistan, it is necessary to review the practical and theoretical concerns of the Islamic Republic of Iran's approach in Afghanistan and to introduce new framework for relations between the two countries. The entire foundation of the current research is founded on the primary principle that the general logic of society (and hence politics) cannot be understood unless we deeply think about the characteristics of a time/place-bound fact. This will lead to formation of a model that can be called "Structural Kinship" based on the works of Pierre Bourdieu. A model that lets us know that comparisons are only possible between two systems and their explanation can only be made by understanding of the relationships in which "action" gets to be meaningful. Therefore, discussing a fundamental shift in the security studies makes sense in our current research work.

Traditionally, in the literature of strategic studies to understand crises and conflicts, the concentration has been on "other's" behavior. This emphasis is assumed with the assumption that the "other's" part is of substantial in formation of wars.

Lack of information and ambiguity within the very small amount of classified data leads to an assessment and miscalculation of the intentions of the "others". This issue is applicable to both on misunderstanding of the defensive intentions of an actor before another one, and about negligence in offensive intentions of the very actor. In both

cases, misunderstanding and miscalculation of the “other” leads to formation of crises and conflict. This literature does not provide any place for the role and influence that a country's policies have in shaping the understanding and perception of the elites and decision-makers in another country.

The politics, coalitions and competitions of each actors are formed in a social environment and lead to different perceptions among others. Perceptions are an understanding of the intentions of other and the meaning behind those intentions. These perceptions and impressions create an image of actors that are not necessarily representing the intentions of the others. This image is depended to several other factors, including identity factors such as religion, sect, ethnicity, social status and class, as well as individual experiences. Therefore, an actor's specific policy or function may lead to a variety of observations among others.

Perception of Afghan society, especially of Afghan elites, towards the policies of the Islamic Republic of Iran, is of great significance because it shapes their views towards our country. The focus on perception of others towards a foreign policy of a country is very important. Based on this approach, this study focuses on perception of the elite of Afghanistan that how they see towards our country, which, if successful, could provide a ground for future researches to change their undesired views toward our country.

Main Findings

1. Characteristics of the elite.

In the research sample, 61 percent of the participants were male and 39 percent female from which 69 percent were Sunnis and 30 percent Shiites. The average age of the elite was 33 and the highest frequency of the age was 25. About half of the elite had bachelor's degree, 15 percent master's degree and 2 percent PhDs. By ethnicity, Pashtun and Tajik had the highest number of elite with 34 percent and 32 percent, respectively. After that, Hazaras had 22 percent while Uzbeks had 7 percent. Apart from Kabul, which accounted one-fifth of the sample, the rest of the provinces each had 6.5 or 11 percent of the sample. Of the elite participated the research, about one-third had the experience of being in Iran.

2. The attitude of the elite towards Iran's policies

Considering the different aspects of Iran's policies in Afghanistan, the largest agreement is with Iran's religious policy and lowest agreement is with Iran's security policies. In the following section, we will discuss the issues in details.

a. Attitude towards security policies.

More than half of the elite of Afghanistan (55 percent) have said that they have negative view while 45 percent have said that they have positive view on Iran's security policies in Afghanistan. (Figure 1)

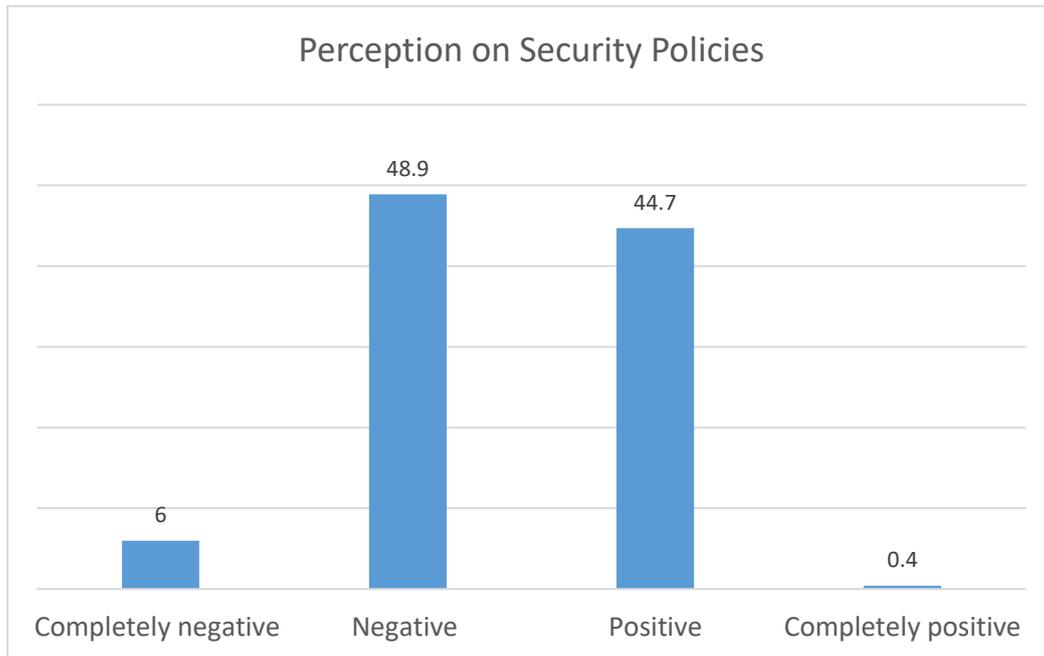


Figure 1

The study shows that the individual's age does not affect their attitude to security policies, which is roughly the same across ages. In contrast, Shiite elites more than Sunni ones; elites with higher education levels, women elites, and elites of Paktia and Badakhshan provinces have a more positive attitude toward Iranian security policies. Also, elites who have had an experience of traveling and living in Iran, have a more positive attitude toward Iran's security policies compared to those who have not lived in Iran.

b. Attitude towards social policies

According to the research, 57 percent of the elites have positive view about Iran's social policies towards Afghanistan, while 43 percent disagree with such policies. (Figure 2)

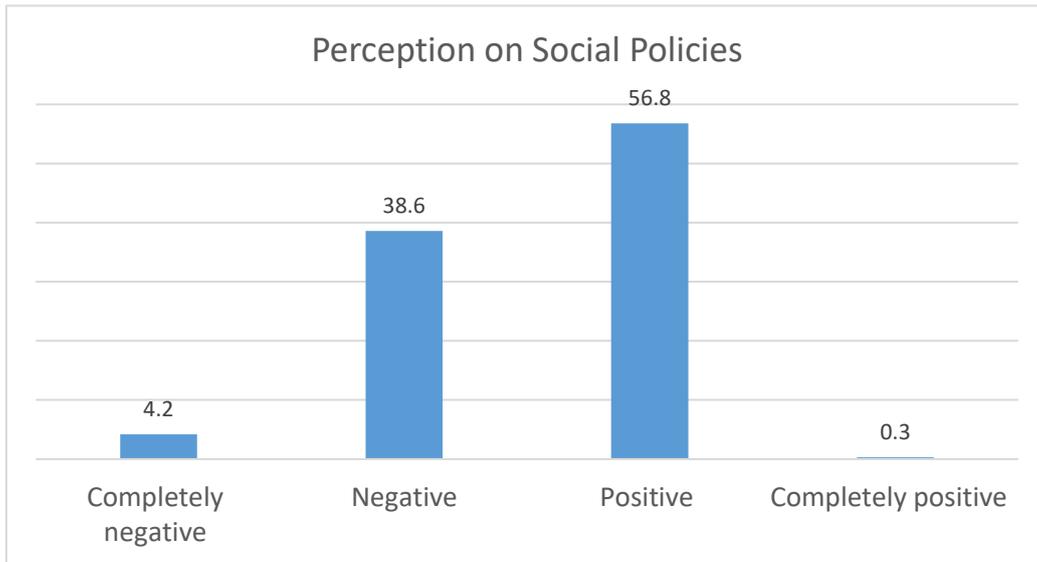


Figure 2

The studies show that the gender, age, and education characteristics of the Afghan elite do not affect their attitude toward Iran’s social policies, which is roughly the same. By contrast, Hazaras and Tajiks, Shiites elites, and elites of Paktia and Badakhshan provinces have a more positive attitude toward Iran’s social policies than other provinces. Similarly, elites who have lived in Iran have a significantly positive attitude towards Iran's social policies compared to those who have not resided in Iran.

c. Attitude towards religious policies

Most of the elites (66.4 percent) have said that they agree with religious policies of Iran. In contrast, 33 percent have said that they disagree with Iran’s religious policies in Afghanistan. (Figure 3)

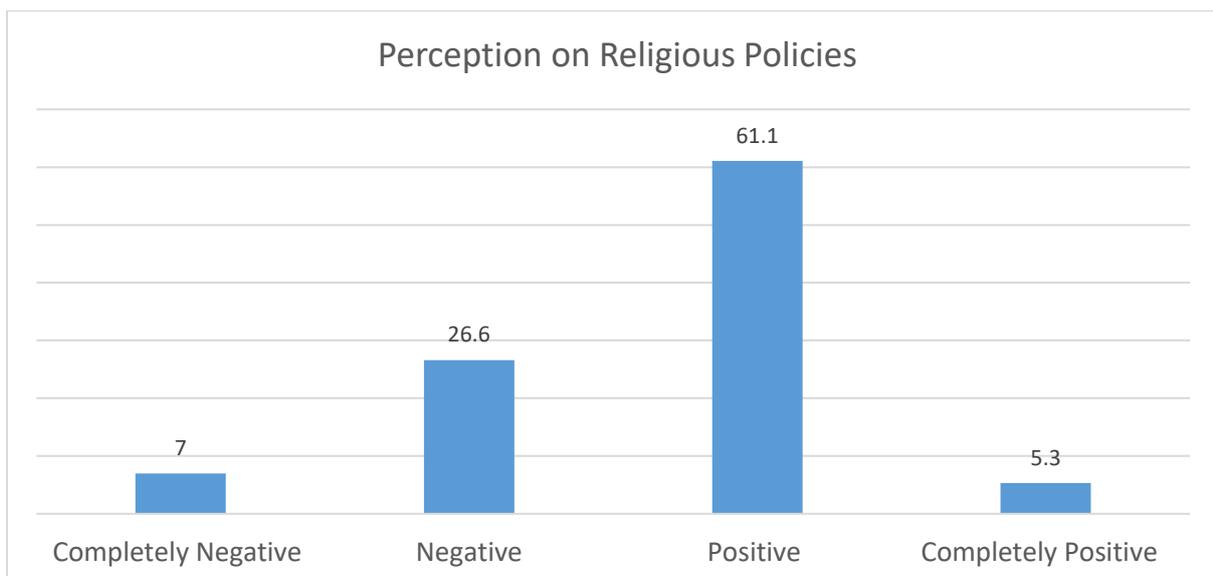


Figure 3

A closer examination reveals that elite women and men in Afghanistan have almost the same attitude to Iran's religious policies. Also, the age of the elite does not affect their attitude toward religious policies of Iran. Elites who have stayed in Iran have a more positive attitude toward Iran's religious policies than those who does not have the experience of living in Iran.

Conversely, the most decisive characteristics are the type of ethnicity, religion, and place of residence of the elites. More precisely, Shiite elites have a much more of a positive attitude towards the religious policies of Iran compared to Sunni ones. The elites of Paktia and Bamyan provinces have, meaningfully, a more positive attitude toward Iran's religious policies than any other province. More accurate findings of the study also show that the Hazara elites have a significantly more positive attitude toward the religious policies of Iran in Afghanistan than Pashtuns. Therefore, the perception of the elite of Afghanistan towards religious politics of Iran is influenced by religious and ethnic characteristics rather than influenced by the personal and modern life experiences (literacy, age, travel to Iran, etc.). Sociologically, Afghan society is a tribal community with religious differences, which both leads to gaps in the society. If religious and ethnic divisions become flared up, it will easily endanger the security of the country.

d. Attitude toward economic policies

Findings show that 59 percent of the elites of Afghanistan agree with economic policies of Iran towards Afghanistan, while 41 percent said to be disagree. (Figure 4)

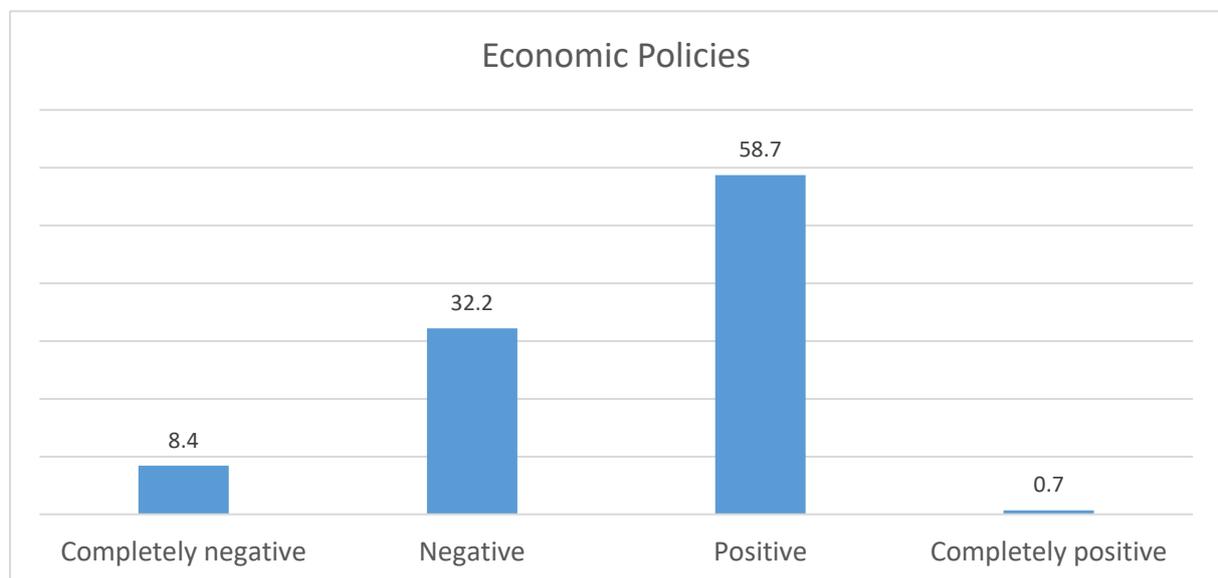


Figure 4

More precisely, Shiite elites have a much more positive attitude toward Iran's economic policies than Sunni elites. In fact, Shiite elites, generally, have a more positive view towards Iran's overall policies. Hazaras and Tajiks also have a more positive attitude, whereas Pashtun people have a more negative attitude toward Iran's economic policies.

Elites with higher education levels and the elites of Paktia and Badakhshan provinces have a more positive attitude toward economic policies and other policies of Iran than other provinces. Studies show that the gender does not affect their attitude to economic policies, which is roughly the same.

Chart 5 shows the attitude of the elite of Afghanistan in the four axes studied in the research.

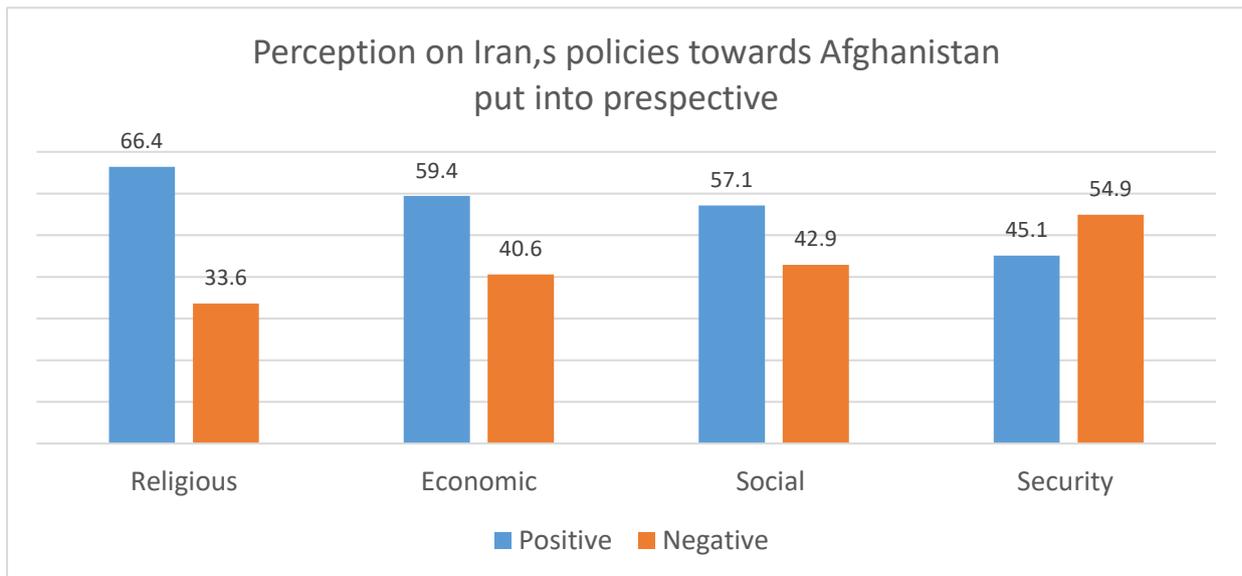


Figure 5

Confidence index

Generally, according to the findings of this survey, an examination of the trust index among the Afghan elites towards the Islamic Republic of Iran presents unfavorable conditions, with about 34 percent of the Afghan elite, meaning that one third of the elites have little trust on Iran. While about 43 percent of the elites trust mark “very”, and about 22 percent are in the midst of these two levels. (Figure 6)

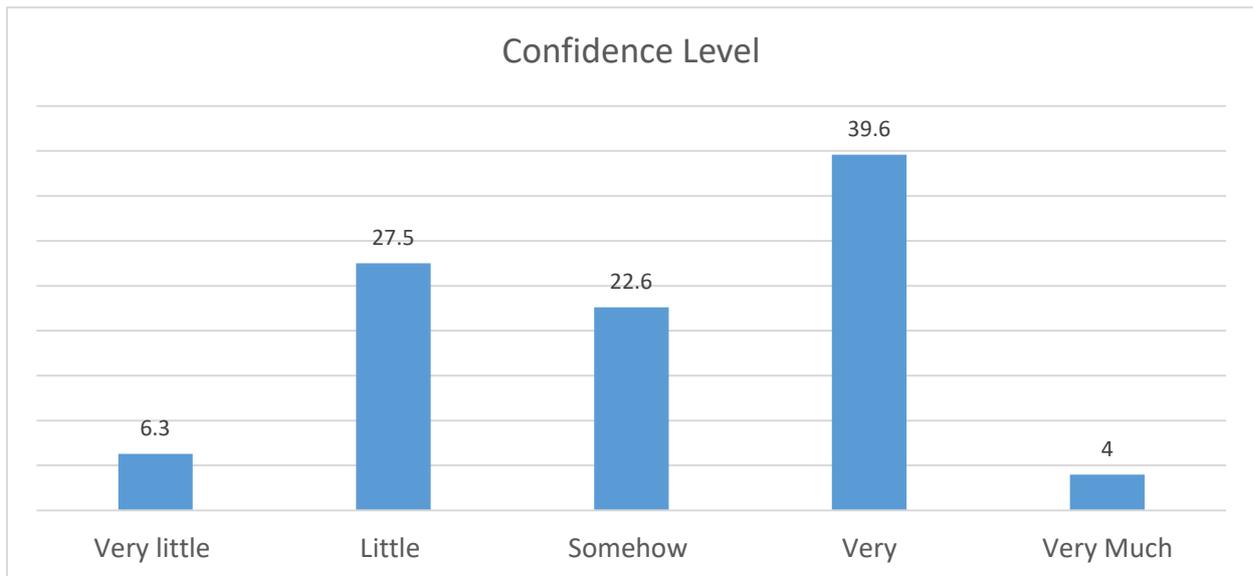


Figure 6

These conditions are similar in terms of gender, age, and level of education, while in contrast, religion, place of residence and ethnicity, do affect the view of the elites towards Iran. Shiites in the provinces of Paktia, Badakhshan, Kabul, Herat and Balkh, as well as Tajik and Hazara have more confidence in Iran than Sunni residents in the provinces of Kandahar, Jalalabad, and Farah, as well as Pashtun and Uzbek families.

Research outcomes

Iran and Afghanistan have traditionally been located and defined in one historical and civilizational domain, and the cultural heritage of the two countries share a lot of commonalities. Over the past decades, a number of trends and developments (including the huge migration of Afghan citizens to Iran, the civilian conflict in Afghanistan with the presence of regional powers and outside the region, environmental crises and, in general, human security issues), have led to changes in the various dynamics between the two countries, which is important at least regarding one concern: its future impact on Iran-Afghanistan relations.

Although the ethnic, historical, social and cultural ties between the two countries are great, new tensions may lead to animosity between these two countries.

The second point is that, when it comes to conflict, the inevitable result is not military confrontation, and it is easy to get rid of this minimalistic-holistic approach. Disruption of the current balance between Iran and Afghanistan (given the historical and civilizational background) is not necessarily a reason for conflict. Disruption of this balance considering the pre-existing relations and commonalities is less than a serious international conflict. As a result, one of the findings of the present study is this very simple point: the conflict between Iran and Afghanistan due to misunderstandings is as likely as possible between Iran and Saudi Arabia, or between Iran and the United States.

Appreciating this point leads us to a more important point: Understanding the current relations between Iran and Afghanistan can be a starting point for assessing the relationship of the country in the future. It is significant that so far there has not been any study conducted to directly ask the perception of the elites and the Afghan society about Iran's policies and actions of Iran regarding to Afghanistan. Iran's past actions in Afghanistan have largely been rational, reasonable and desirable; and there has never been any survey to study and present the perception of Afghan people towards the policies of Iran in Afghanistan. Based on the findings of this study, it can be said that decision and policy makers in foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, while considering (perhaps) all other factors in Afghanistan in their decisions, have neglected the most important factor, namely, how these policies are interpreted in Afghanistan and what their results could be. This is the second objective that the research has been looking for. Looking at one's self from the angle of the "other" is the most important point that the research has been determined to look for.

The third point that this study has been looking for, which is important both for Iran and Afghanistan, is to present a picture how Afghan elites view Iran; the study provides an opportunity for both countries to regulate and strengthen the ties between them avoiding taking decisions passively. Of course, neither the Iranian leaders nor the politicians in Afghanistan are looking for unrelated foreign factors to lead to an unwanted and unconscious regulation of relations between the two countries, and thus understanding each other's issues and managing the shortcomings are the most basic principles that the countries should take in their considerations. A dynamic and active engagement in this field (which requires a strong central government in Afghanistan) leads us to understand the current situation, and based on that, make decisions in the future. Meanwhile, the focus on strengthening the central government in Afghanistan and avoiding of tactical encounters in strengthening the centrifugal trends, sustainable strategies will be the prelude to such adjustment in the future, because any deliberate or unwanted efforts to undermine the central government in Afghanistan, will lead us to leave the affairs by its own and to non-controlling factors.

The findings of the study has inevitable implications for the elites and decision-makers of Afghanistan as well. Afghan government officials should make it clear to themselves that Iran is an integral part of Afghanistan's geopolitics and that Iran's interaction and understanding of Iran's actions in Afghanistan will directly contribute to strengthening the central government in Afghanistan and its domination over the political and social boundaries of the country.

In sum, it can be said from the point of view of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the complicated conditions in the West, South and East of Iran, in the Arabian and Persian Gulf, on the one hand, and issues of Afghanistan on the other hand, have put Iran at a critical condition; it includes opportunities and threats together. The sensitive conditions of the peripheral environment of Iran have put no place for any mistakes, even if these mistakes and miscalculations do not lead to long-term results. Sensitivity

in the peripheral environment is so much that miscalculations with short-term consequences may have implications that threaten the national security of Iran with serious threats.

The findings of this survey show that the perception and understanding of the Afghan elites about the policies of the Islamic Republic of Iran in their country may not be as positive as the policy makers think in Iran. Today, not only is there absolutely no positive and complete understanding of the role of Iran among the Afghan elites, but the findings show that certain perceptions are significantly negative about policies of Iran in Afghanistan. Practically, these negative perception about policies of Iran in Afghanistan can be seen in several demonstrations of the people of Afghanistan against the embassy of the Islamic Republic Iran in Kabul.

According to this study, strengthening of the central government in Afghanistan is the only way to secure Iran's national security, and it does not support some current policies of Iran that have caused the elites of Afghanistan to have negative view about Iran. Based on this paper, to change this negative perception about Iran, Iran should review and reform its policies towards Afghanistan.

In conclusion, this is the nature of existing threats which also determine the way of managing them. The nature of the threats posed by instability in Afghanistan to Iran will only be controlled and managed through the formation of a strong central authority in Afghanistan. On the other hand, the weakness of the central government in Afghanistan will not only affect Iran, but will also have a devastating effect on the daily lives of millions of people who do not even have the basic needs of life due to instability and insecurity. Any improvement or hope for improvement in the lives of these people will only be conceivable if there is security, and this will only happen with the formation of a powerful central government in Afghanistan.