

STRATEGIC REALISM AND THE NON-PASHTUN CORRIDOR: IRANIAN FOREIGN POLICY DURING THE MUJAHIDEEN ERA (1992-1996)**Mamajonova Madinabonu Xamidjon kizi**

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Abstract. The period between 1992 and 1996, marked by the rule of the Afghan Mujahideen following the collapse of the Soviet-backed Najibullah regime, represents a transformative phase in the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI). Shifting from the ideological fervor of the 1980s toward a doctrine of strategic pragmatism, Tehran sought to secure its eastern borders, protect the Shia minority, and counter the influence of regional rivals particularly Pakistan and Saudi Arabia in Kabul. The findings indicate that Iran's policy was driven by the objective of establishing a stable, multi-ethnic government that could also function as a gateway to Central Asian markets. However, this strategic vision was ultimately undermined by the rise of the Taliban.

Keywords: Strategic realism, Iranian foreign policy, Afghan Mujahideen, non-Pashtun corridor, geopolitical strategy, Afghanistan Civil War, Iran–Afghanistan relations, ethnic alliances, regional balance of power, post-Najibullah era.

Introduction

In April 1992, the collapse of Mohammad Najibullah's government marked the definitive end of the Communist era in Afghanistan and the beginning of a volatile period of Mujahideen governance (Haji-Yousefi, 2011). For the Islamic Republic of Iran, this transition was both an opportunity and a crisis. Sharing a 936-kilometer border, the two nations are inextricably linked by history, the Persian (Dari) language, and the presence of a significant Shia minority (approximately 20–25% of Afghanistan's population) (SIPRI, 2013).

During the Mujahideen government era (1992–1996), Iranian foreign policy moved away from the early revolutionary goal of "exporting the revolution" toward a more pragmatic defense of national interests. This shift was necessitated by the conclusion of the Iran-Iraq War and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, which opened the Central Asian "near abroad" to Iranian influence. Tehran's primary objectives were three-fold: the political representation of the Hazara Shias, the containment of Saudi-backed Wahhabism, and the creation of a "non-Pashtun corridor" that would link Iran with Tajikistan and Uzbekistan (A.Wilde, 2009). This essay examines how Iran navigated the "bewildering array of alliances" in Kabul to prevent the emergence of a hostile Sunni-fundamentalist state on its flank.

Methods

The analysis is based on a corpus of academic dissertations from CUNY, strategic policy papers published by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), and regional studies produced by the Carnegie Moscow Center and Shahid Beheshti University.

The study focuses on the four-year period of Mujahideen rule (1992–1996), examining diplomatic records of the Tehran and Esfahan peace conferences, as well as evidence of military and logistical support provided to the Hezb-e Wahdat and Jamiat-e Islami factions. It also analyzes the geopolitical transformations triggered by the emergence of the Taliban in late 1994.

The bibliographic framework incorporates secondary references to leading scholars of Afghan studies such as Ahmed Rashid, Barnett Rubin, and William Maley as cited within the primary sources, ensuring a comprehensive and methodologically consistent literature review.

Results

Following the collapse of Mohammad Najibullah's Soviet-backed regime in April 1992, the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) underwent a definitive transformation,



transitioning from the ideological fervor of the 1980s toward a doctrine of strategic pragmatism under President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (S.Azizi, 2019). Tehran's immediate priority was to ensure that its long-term allies were not marginalized within the new political order established by the Mujahideen. Throughout the late 1980s, Iran had worked to unify eight disparate Shia resistance factions into a single cohesive entity known as Hezb-e-Wahdat (Islamic Unity Party), established in 1989 to guarantee Shia political representation.

As the Mujahideen factions entered Kabul, Iranian diplomats successfully lobbied for Wahdat's inclusion in the Leadership Council of the interim governments led by Sebghatullah Mojaddadi and later Burhanuddin Rabbani. Tehran viewed the Rabbani administration, which was dominated by ethnic Tajiks and Dari-speakers, as a natural partner against the Pashtun groups traditionally favored by Pakistan's ISI.

This alignment formed the backbone of Iran's "geo-cultural" strategy, which utilized the shared Persian language and Shia faith to unify non-Pashtun minorities including Hazaras, Tajiks, and Uzbeks into a "non-Pashtun corridor" (Milani, Mohsen 2006). This corridor was intended to secure Iran's "strategic depth" and provide a secure transit gateway to the newly independent Central Asian republics, effectively bypassing Pakistani and Saudi influence (E.F.Troitskiy, 2010).

Iranian involvement during the 1992–1996 civil war was further characterized by a pragmatic dual-track policy that balanced military necessity with tactical flexibility to prevent a total state collapse. Tehran provided critical weapons, fuel, and funding to Hezb-e-Wahdat to prevent their destruction by Sunni extremist factions like Abdul Rab al-Rasoul Sayyaf's Ittehad-e-Islami, which was heavily financed by Saudi Arabia to contain Iranian influence.

Simultaneously, Iran occasionally encouraged its allies to form unlikely partnerships, including tactical flirtations with the Sunni Pashtun leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar (Hezb-e-Islami). Despite Hekmatyar's traditional reliance on Pakistan, Tehran viewed him as a potential partner in a broader Islamist coalition that could resist Western interference and stabilize the capital.

Throughout this era, Iran emerged as a primary diplomatic mediator, hosting high-level peace conferences in Tehran and Esfahan to facilitate power-sharing agreements among warring commanders. These efforts were driven by an existential fear that total anarchy would lead to a humanitarian catastrophe on Iran's border, which already hosted over 3 million Afghan refugees, a population that significantly burdened Iran's post-war economy. Consequently, Iran consistently advocated for a "National Unity Government" where all ethnic and religious groups, particularly the Shia minority (comprising 20–25% of the population), would hold a proportional and guaranteed share of power.

The emergence of the Taliban in late 1994 radically disrupted these strategic calculations, catching Tehran off-guard with the rapid advance of the movement. Iran correctly identified the Taliban as a radical Sunni force backed by the Pakistani ISI and Saudi funding, representing both an ideological and security threat (M.Gulati, 2013). The Taliban's virulent anti-Shia dogma was brutally confirmed by the execution of Wahdat leader Abdul Ali Mazari in March 1995, an event Tehran viewed as a direct assault on its interests and a personal betrayal of mediation efforts.

As the Taliban captured the strategic western city of Herat in late 1995, forcing the influential Tajik commander Ismail Khan to flee to Iran, Tehran realized the Mujahideen government was the final bulwark against a "Sunni-fundamentalist Pashtun state."

In response, Iran shifted to providing massive logistical and military support to the United Front (Northern Alliance), establishing an air bridge from Mashhad to Bagram that reportedly operated up to 13 flights daily to supply Ahmad Shah Massoud's forces with weapons and fuel.

By late 1996, as the Taliban neared Kabul, Iran's policy had transitioned into a desperate effort to prevent a total extremist takeover while simultaneously pursuing geoeconomic goals,



such as conceptualizing the Mashhad-Herat railway and transit routes to the port of Chabahar to cement its long-term regional hegemony (A.Wilde, 2009).

Discussion

The analysis of Iranian foreign policy during the Mujahideen government (1992–1996) demonstrates a fundamental evolution from revolutionary ideological fervor to a doctrine of strategic pragmatism. Following the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989 and the conclusion of the catastrophic eight-year war with Iraq, the administration of President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989–1997) shifted the nation's focus toward domestic reconstruction and regional stability (F.Soltani and E.Amiri, R. 2010). This “pragmatist approach” necessitated a move away from the 1980s mission of “exporting the revolution” in favor of a policy based on geopolitical necessities and national interest. Tehran increasingly realized that an Afghanistan dominated solely by radical Sunni Islamists would become a breeding ground for sectarian violence and radicalism that could inevitably spill over into Iran's own restive provinces, such as Sistan-Baluchistan. This period was also defined by the immense burden of the Afghan refugee population, which peaked at over 3 million during this era, posing a significant strain on Iran's post-war social fabric and economy (B.Koepke, 2013). Consequently, Iran's strategy evolved to favor a multi-ethnic, inclusive Afghan government where the Shia minority and Dari-speaking groups held a proportional share of power, serving as a buffer against radicalization.

Furthermore, Iran's foreign policy during the Mujahideen era was not merely a reactive security measure but was driven by long-term geoeconomic ambitions following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Tehran viewed the newly independent, landlocked Central Asian republics as its “near abroad” where it could establish itself as a pivotal regional trade hub. A stable Mujahideen-led government in Kabul was seen as the essential “bridgehead” or corridor linking Iran to the markets of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. Specifically, Tehran pursued the creation of a “non-Pashtun corridor” in northern and western Afghanistan, utilizing deep ties with ethnic Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks who shared linguistic or religious affinities with the Persian world. Strategic projects conceptualized or initiated during this era, such as the development of the Mashhad-Herat railway and transit routes to the Iranian ports of Bandar Abbas and Chabahar, were intended to provide Central Asian states an alternative to Russian or Pakistani routes, thereby cementing Iranian regional hegemony.

The evidence highlights that Iranian policy was also a defensive response to the perceived “Sunni encirclement” orchestrated by the alliance between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. Tehran viewed Pakistan's support for Hekmatyar and later the Taliban through the lens of Islamabad's “strategic depth” doctrine, a policy designed to transform Afghanistan into a client state to counter Indian influence (S.Azizi, 2019). Simultaneously, Saudi Arabia's heavy financial backing of radical Sunni groups and its sponsorship of regional madrassas were perceived by Tehran as a calculated effort to export Wahabbism and marginalize Iran's Shia influence. Iran's support for the Rabbani government and the non-Pashtun “United Front” was thus a maneuver to prevent the emergence of a hostile Sunni-fundamentalist state on its eastern flank, which Tehran considered an existential threat to its national security (B.Koepke, 2013).

Despite its extensive involvement, however, Iran was never the absolute “master of Afghan affairs”. The sources suggest that Iranian policy suffered from significant internal fragmentation and a “painful split” between different power centers in Tehran. While the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) often favored diplomatic mediation and regional peace conferences such as the 1997 Esfahan talks the Revolutionary Guard (IRGC) and various religious foundations (bonyads) often focused on the military arming of specific proxies. This internal division was compounded by the inability of Iran's Afghan allies to maintain cohesion, exemplified by the bloody splintering of Hezb-e-Wahdat into competing factions led by Khalili and Akbari. Ultimately, while Iran acted as a significant “third-party actor” that could prolong or intensify the conflict, it lacked the singular, decisive influence of a “veto player” like Pakistan, whose superior logistical



and military support for the Taliban eventually overwhelmed Iranian-backed forces and led to the capture of Kabul in 1996.

Conclusion

The foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran during the Mujahideen government (1992–1996) represented a pivotal transition from revolutionary ideological fervor to a doctrine of strategic realism. Tehran's overarching objective was the cultivation of a stable, multi-ethnic, and friendly Afghanistan that could simultaneously serve as a buffer against the rise of radical Sunni extremism and as a primary gateway to the newly independent markets of Central Asia. Throughout this era, Iran successfully established a long-term proxy network, primarily centered on Hezb-e-Wahdat, and positioned itself as a critical diplomatic mediator through high-level peace conferences in Tehran and Esfahan aimed at ending intra-Mujahideen factionalism. However, these diplomatic and regional efforts were ultimately overwhelmed by the superior military, financial, and logistical backing provided to the Taliban by regional rivals, most notably Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. Despite the fall of Kabul in 1996, the alliances formed and nurtured during the Mujahideen period specifically the ironclad links with the Northern Alliance and non-Pashtun minorities provided the essential foundation for Iran's decisive and cooperative role in the 2001 Bonn Agreement. This period proved that Iran had successfully consolidated its "strategic depth" ensuring that it would remain an indispensable stakeholder in any future stabilization of post-Taliban Afghanistan.

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