



# The politics of the pipeline: the Iran and Afghanistan conflict

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*ABSTRACT* A war between Iran and the Taliban's Afghanistan was averted in September 1998. The roots of the animosity between the two sides go much deeper than the killings of Iranian diplomats in Afghanistan and the reported massacre of Afghan Shi'ites by the Taliban. As the Iranians see it, an Afghanistan ruled by the Taliban is a threat to Iran's national security and economic and political interests not only in Afghanistan but, more importantly, in oil-rich Central Asia. The article argues that at the heart of the conflict between Iran and the Taliban is the question of whether Iran or Afghanistan should be the route for the export of oil and gas from landlocked Central Asia to world markets, as well as Pakistan's plan to use Afghanistan as a corridor to Central Asia. As explained in the article, for commercial and political reasons the Afghanistan route is preferred by both Islamabad and Washington. However, international oil companies prefer the Iran route as it is the shortest, safest and most economical.

Iran and Afghanistan came to the brink of war in September 1998 when it became known that, after the capture of Mazari-i-Sharif, the Taliban militia forces had murdered hundreds of Shi'ite Muslims and eight Iranian diplomats and an Iranian journalist, and held captive 50 other Iranian nationals. War between the two countries was averted when the Taliban, after the threat of a war by Iran and under pressure from the United Nations, returned the bodies of the murdered diplomats and sent the captive Iranians home. Apart from the potential threat that the rise of the Taliban, now in possession of most of Afghanistan, continues to pose to Iran's national security, the killing and the capture of Iranians was seen in Teheran as a national humiliation. To the Iranians it was as if an ungrateful, minor member of the family had slapped them in the face. Although the Iranians may not like the analogy, the public humiliation and the dilemma they faced—damned if they retaliated, damned if they did not—was not unlike the one that the Americans had faced when their diplomats were held as hostages in Teheran two decades earlier. It was tempting to the Iranians to 'teach' the Taliban, a 'rogue', 'barbaric' group (the terms the USA frequently used until recently to describe Iran) a lesson. But the cost to Iran, although much stronger than the Taliban, would have been high, as the former Soviet Union found out when it invaded Afghanistan. The challenge from the Taliban came as no great surprise to the Iranians, who had for some years

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been trying, unsuccessfully, to convince others of the dangers that the Taliban posed to regional security. Nevertheless, the challenge left a psychological scar on the Iranians who have had not only close historical and cultural ties with that country but who have also in the past two decades sheltered more than two million Afghan refugees, first during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s, and then after the breakup of the civil war in 1992.

But Iran's concern about the developments in Afghanistan goes far beyond the murder and holding of Iranian nationals and the Taliban thumbing their noses at them. For Iran those events pale into insignificance in comparison to the threat that the Taliban can potentially pose to Iran's national security and economic interests if the former eventually manage to consolidate their hold on Afghanistan. A full-scale war between the two countries is at present unlikely but, if it did occur, it could draw, directly or indirectly, other states into the conflict. Countries that share Iran's concerns about an Afghanistan ruled by the Taliban are the Central Asian states, Russia, China and India; those which are likely to support the Taliban in such a war are Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and the USA, the latter notwithstanding the fact that the Taliban have given sanctuary to Osama bin Laden, dubbed by President Clinton as 'America's Public Enemy Number One'.<sup>1</sup> As will be explained later, the US primary objective in supporting the Taliban has been to persuade international oil companies to consider Afghanistan rather than Iran as the exit-route for oil and gas from Central Asia to world markets. That objective, however, will lose its significance if and when Teheran and Washington improve their relations. A rapprochement between the two countries is as yet far off but, as will be explained later, that is now more likely than at any time since they broke relations two decades ago.

This article will discuss and analyse Iran–Afghan relations in recent decades. It will argue that, although the current crisis between them stems largely from the absence of a strong, united central administration in Kabul, a more important and determining factor for the crisis is related to the plan by Washington, some oil companies and the Pakistan government that Afghanistan/Pakistan, rather than Iran, should be the exit-route for transporting oil from the Central Asian states to world markets. For Afghanistan and Pakistan such an arrangement would mean several billion dollars in the construction of pipelines and millions of dollars a year in exit fees. Similarly, such an arrangement would deny Iran about an equal amount of revenue, as well as other potential commercial benefits. Pakistan's land access to Central Asia via Afghanistan would mean the arrival of a new rival (Iran's present rival there is Turkey) in the region. The article will also argue that because of the tribal structure and ethnic composition of Afghan society, it is unlikely that the ultra-fundamentalist Taliban can alone bring stability and security to the country, notwithstanding their impressive thrust on Afghanistan's political stage and their military success in recent years. It will also be argued that although Pakistan has for now managed to outmanoeuvre Iran in Afghanistan, the contest between the two countries there is far from over. Iran has too many security and commercial interests at stake in Afghanistan to let the matter rest with the Taliban alone ruling that country. However, in order to understand what the economic and geopolitical implica-

tions would be for Iran if the Taliban succeeded in consolidating their position, as well as to understand the factors that helped bring the Taliban (students of religion) to power in 1994, we first need to discuss briefly the historical background that led to the creation of Afghanistan. This background will partly explain why that country has in modern times failed to establish a secure, stable and functioning central government.

### **The creation of Afghanistan**

The present Afghanistan, the Land of Afghans, was created out of numerous tribal fiefdoms in the mid-19th century as a buffer between British India, Russia and Persia by imperial Britain and tsarist Russia. Because of its geographical location, the country had gained a central position in the 'Great Game' between the two great powers of the time. This state of affairs continued up to the 1907 agreement between the two states. Since then its geopolitical and geoeconomic centrality, its internal stability or instability have become essential conditions for any regional or collective security. Valeria Piacentini argues that Afghanistan is an artificial state, created by force and held together by the military predominance of one tribal group over all other tribes that make up its population. In reality, Piacentini says, it is not even correct to define Afghanistan as an artificial state, since it was created as a federation of tribes not so different from the typical empires of this region which depended on highly personalised and charismatic power, and on precarious, fleeting agreements between tribes and tribal subgroups. The main tribal groups are the Pashtun, a tribal confederation united by common language; the 'Farsiban', or Persian-speaking Tajiks who are the second largest group; a third group, the Hazaras, who are of Mongol origin but have over the centuries been 'Iranianised', have a dialect similar to Farsi and are Shi'ite Muslims; and a fourth tribal group of Turkish Uzbek stock.<sup>2</sup>

This ethnic map of the country, inter-tribal rivalry and its geostrategic position has made Afghanistan an arena where regional and world powers have been vying for influence. One such regional power has been Iran, which has had long historical, cultural, and linguistic ties, as well as a security concern, with that country. Since the early 1970s Iran has shown particular sensitivity to political developments in Afghanistan, and the implications of those developments for Iran's national security. For example, on 17 July 1973 Sardar Davoud Khan, ex-prime minister and cousin of King Muhammad Zahir (who ruled from 1933 to July 1973) of Afghanistan, staged a military coup while the king was in Italy for medical treatment. The Iranians described that event as a 'dark day' for Iran. Of that coup the Shah's Minister of the Royal Court, Asadollah Alam, recorded the following in his confidential diary (1969-77):

Audience [with the Shah]. A black day [for Iran]: there has been a *coup d'état* in Afghanistan. Sardar Davoud Khan, ex-Prime Minister, cousin of the King and husband of the King's own sister, has masterminded a plot against his royal brother-in-law. What a filthy world we live in. Apparently the rising has already claimed [later proved to be wrong] the life of Abdul Vali Khan, the King's son-in-law, Commander of the Kubaul garrison, and a good friend of mine. The news has come as a dreadful shock ... I suggested to HIM [His Imperial Majesty]

that if only the deposed King, presently in Italy, were to seize the initiative and fly to Western Afghanistan, we would be in a position to offer him all the help he could possibly need. If only he can get the tribes behind him we could topple Davoud without needing to send in a single [Iranian] military unit. 'Unfortunately,' replied HIM, 'the king lacks the guts for anything like that. We must simply have patience and await developments. From my [Alam's] own point of view, I fear that such patience may be the death of us.'<sup>3</sup>

Davoud Khan was a secular, autocratic leader who was intolerant of such power centres as the *Jamaat-e-Ulama*, a religious centre, and deprived them of their power; he incorporated religious affairs into the ministries of justice and education. He also wanted to centralise state authority through the military.<sup>4</sup> These policies should have won him favour with the Shah, who relied so much on the military for his own autocratic rule, and who had little time for, in fact was contemptuous of, the clerical class. But unlike the Shah, Davoud Khan was not obsessively anti-Soviet and so he began attaching Soviet advisers to the Afghan military academies and dispatching military officers to the Soviet Union, actions that the Shah found extremely disturbing. Davoud's looking eastward occurred at the time that the Shah's commitment to the West, and in particular to the USA, had reached a new height. So, by the mid-1970s, the Shah was actively assisting the anti-communist groups in Afghanistan, as he was very worried that the political developments in Kabul would soon lead to the establishment of a communist regime there. To that effect, in 1975, the Shah offered Kabul \$2 billion over a 10-year period and early that same year lent \$400 million on easy terms.<sup>5</sup> He was also scheduled to visit Kabul in June 1978, but political developments in Kabul began to change gradually more in favour of the Left, thus causing greater anxiety in Iran. In fact, during the visit to Iran in March 1976 by then US Vice-President Nelson Rockefeller, the Shah warned him that Davoud Khan was under threat from a group of communist army officers who were poised to topple the government and establish a communist regime. He hoped that Washington would support his efforts to change the situation in Kabul. 'One day', the Shah is quoted as having told Rockefeller, 'we may install Abedul Vali Khan [King's Zahir's son-in-law] as the new ruler of Afghanistan'. Although the Shah did not believe that King Zahir would be able to reclaim his throne, it nevertheless seems that the Shah saw the possibility of a day when political developments there would change to allow the King to return home. To that end, the Shah provided the exiled king with financial support. Again according to Alam, King Zahir, while still living in Italy, had requested the Shah to grant him \$10 000 to buy 'another limousine'. The Shah's response was: 'But of course, we'll grant his request. God has granted us the means to help those less fortunate than ourselves.'<sup>6</sup> Thus, right up to the Iranian revolution of 1979, the Shah's government kept a close watch on the political developments in Afghanistan with a view to reversing the situation there in favour of Iran.

### **The Islamic Republic and Afghanistan**

The Islamic Republic's first direct experience with the political developments in Afghanistan came when the Soviet ambassador to Iran, Vladimir Vinogradov,

was instructed from Moscow to seek an immediate audience with the Ayatollah Khomeini and advise him of the Soviet invasion. According to the ambassador, the audience took place barely hours before Soviet troops entered Afghanistan on 27 December 1979. Because of the historical and political relevance of this audience on Iran–Afghanistan relations in the past two decades, it is important to tell that story at length here.

According to the ambassador, shortly before the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Moscow instructed him to seek an audience with the ayatollah immediately and advise him of the Soviet decision to move troops into Afghanistan. It was in the early hours of the morning when he arrived at the ayatollah's home in Qom, about 250 kilometres from Teheran, and requested an urgent meeting. He was told that it was too early for the ayatollah to receive visitors, but the ambassador insisted that it was very important that he saw him urgently. Once in, Vinogradov informed the ayatollah that 'the Soviet troops would move ... at the request of the Kabul government, temporarily into Afghanistan. We would like the imam to know about that before hand and to be given at first hand the reasons for that unusual and very difficult move on our part ... This is what I have been instructed to convey to you. We hope that the move will be understood by the imam'.<sup>7</sup> After a short pause, the ayatollah replied that he saw the information given to him beforehand as a sign of friendship and confidence between the two countries and he appreciated it, says the ambassador. What the Soviet Union was actually seeking was for Iran to refrain from arousing anti-Soviet and pro-Islamic sentiments in Iran, Afghanistan and the Soviet Central Asian republics. Without being specific as to what Iran's response would be to the invasion of Afghanistan, the ayatollah wondered if Moscow would in return do Iran a favour. The ayatollah said that one of these days the USA would request the UN Security Council to impose economic sanctions against Iran over the question of the US diplomats held as hostages in Teheran. 'Would the Soviet Union support Iran on that issue [vetoing against the sanctions]?', the ayatollah asked. He also said that, even if no sanctions were proposed and voted on, the Americans were likely to blockade all of Iran's ports in the Persian Gulf. If that happened, 'could Iran use the Soviet Union as transit route to Europe?' The ambassador's reply was: 'I answered Khomeini without hesitation he could.'

In the end, Iran condemned the invasion and expressed strong sympathy for the plight of the Afghan Muslims suffering under the occupation. For example, then foreign minister Saeq Qutbzadeh in a message sent to Moscow said: 'Our imam [Khomeini] has described the United States a Great Satan. Unfortunately, you too have proved in practice that you are no less satanic than the United States'.<sup>8</sup> On the whole, however, Teheran's reaction was measured, considering that in the early years of the revolution the Iranian leadership thought of itself as the flag-bearer of all Muslims fighting against the imperialism of both the West and the East. A plausible explanation for Iran's measured reaction is that, first, it could do little to change the Soviet policy towards Afghanistan; second, but more importantly, it was not in Iran's interests to antagonise the Soviet Union overtly at the very time that Moscow's support was still crucial in neutralising US economic and political pressure on the Islamic Republic.

Moreover, in those early days of the revolution the internal situation in Iran was far from stable. The leadership was more concerned about disturbances caused by the Iranian Kurds who were seeking autonomy from the central government, as well as about the street battles which had become almost daily events between the revolutionary forces and the pro-Marxist Mujahidin Khalq on the one hand, and the revolutionaries and the pro-royalists on the other. Even more disturbing to the Iranian authorities were the border skirmishes taking place between Iran and Iraq, skirmishes which eventually developed into an all-out war when Saddam Hussein invaded Iran in September 1980. In short, Iran's somewhat reserved reaction to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan indicated that to the Iranian leadership the country's national interests must take precedence over the state ideology, Islam.

For Iran, however, the immediate consequence of the Soviet invasion was the influx of more than two million Afghan refugees into the country (an equal number of them went to Pakistan). Iran's assistance to the refugees was in the form of providing them with shelter, food and jobs. But, unlike Pakistan, it did not allow or help the refugees to use Iranian territory as a base for guerrilla warfare against the Soviet troops or against the Afghan government forces. In addition to the two reasons for this already mentioned, namely Iran's desire to avoid antagonising Moscow and Iraq's (by then) invasion of Iran, there were three other important factors for Iran's reluctance to acquiesce in the creation in Iran of an Afghan militia force similar to the one formed in the neighbouring Pakistan. First, the creation of such a force required providing military equipment and/or financial assistance to the force, and Iran simply could not afford doing either as the war with Iraq was fast exhausting both its resources. Second, the Pakistan-based mujahidin, 'Warriors of God,' were almost exclusively made up of Sunnis, with the obvious exclusion of the Afghan Shi'ites. This in effect presented a rebuff to Iran as an interested party in what was taking place in Afghanistan. Third, other parties heavily involved in the mujahidin movement were the USA and Saudi Arabia, the two countries with which Iran had an acrimonious relationship. Put differently, as Washington and Riyadh were major political and financial backers of the mujahidin, Iran was reluctant to get involved in that movement so as not to be seen as collaborating with the 'Great Satan'. The mujahidin were comprised mainly of six Islamic parties. Three of them were fundamentalists: the Hizb-e-Islami, led by Gulboddin Hekmatyar; the Jamaat-e-Islami, led by Burhanoddin Rabbani; and the breakaway Hizb-Islami, led by Maulavi Yunus Khalis. The other parties, like the National Liberation Front of Afghanistan and the Islamic Revolutionary Movement, though Islamic in orientation, were more in favour of restoring the monarchy in the country, with King Zahir as the constitutional monarch.

The country has almost always been dominated by the majority Pashtuns but during the Soviet occupation other minority ethnic groups like the Persian-speaking Tajiks, Shi'ite Hazaras, Turkic Uzbecks and Turkmens, Baluchis, and Brahuis had formed a broad but loose alliance with the sole objective of defeating the Kabul communist government. The Reagan administration called them the 'freedom fighters' who, in the political environment of the Cold War, deserved US assistance. By the time of the Soviets' withdrawal, the USA would

be subsidising Afghan fighters to the tune of \$3 billion.<sup>9</sup> The job of training, managing and financing the mujahidin was done jointly by the CIA the Saudi Intelligence Department and Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI). However, most of the field operations and management of the mujahidin were delegated to ISI. By the end of 1980s it had become obvious to most observers of international relations that the Soviets would leave Afghanistan and that their departure would also mean the end of the pro-communist Kabul government. The departure, however, had two negative side effects: it fractured the tenuous unity that had existed between the various mujahidin groups, and thus re-ignited the old tribal and factional rivalries there; it also brought Teheran and Islamabad on to a collision course for influence in post-communist Afghanistan.

So, as a very important patron, though not the only one, of the mujahidin's war of liberation against the Soviets, Pakistan used its special relationship with the mujahidin to encourage them to form an interim government to take over the governance after the collapse of the communist Kabul regime. Before the emergence of the Taliban under the leadership of Mullah Muhammad Omar, who has since assumed the title of 'Amin al-Mumeneen' or the Lord of the Faithful, the mujahidin leader who carried special favour with the Pakistan army was Gulbuddin Hekmatyar of the Hezbi-i-Islami. Among his attributes which appealed to Pakistan were his uncompromising Sunni fundamentalist views. According to Hiro, Hekmatyar was inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt, and was unimpressed by the traditional Afghan mullahs whom he felt should constitute themselves into a strong independent force ready to confront an un-Islamic ruler. He wanted to implement *sharia* in its totality and revive the rule of the mosque. He was a good organiser and ran a tightly knit party, and was unwilling to accommodate the peculiarly Afghan social reality of tribes and traditional rural elites. He also appealed to the USA because of his strong anti-communist sentiments and his refusal to accommodate Iran's interests in Afghanistan. So the lion's share of CIA supplies and financial assistance went to him. A senior US official in Pakistan is reported to have said at the time: 'Hekmatyar gets the most weapons because he deserves it'.<sup>10</sup>

It is worth recalling that it was mostly in the camps under the command of Hekmatyar that, beginning in early 1984, thousands of Islamic activists from the Arab Middle East received their military training, later raising the banner of Islamism in other Islamic countries, particularly in Egypt, Algeria and Saudi Arabia.<sup>11</sup> Hundreds of young Arabs—9,000 at a conservative estimate—who had fought alongside the mujahidin, and who were hailed in the Western media as heroes (Osama bin Laden was regarded as chief among them), returned to their home countries well trained in armed struggle. They were also more confident and determined to fight against their secular, pro-Western governments which they regarded as oppressive, politically and financially corrupt, and lacking legitimacy.<sup>12</sup> By contrast, Hekmatyar's rival, Rabbani was (is) more pragmatic and less ideological. Although a Sunni, he conceded to the Afghan Shi'ites' demand that the Jafari school of law be applied to them.<sup>13</sup> He is also a Tajik, and therefore more attuned to Persian culture and to Shi'a Islam, two characteristics that have made him acceptable to the Iranians. He

has been a frequent visitor to Iran and has often praised that country for its policy towards Afghanistan, while in the same breath criticising Pakistan for its support of the Taliban.

### **Pakistan's objectives in Afghanistan**

After the fall of the Kabul communist government in 1992, for a short while it seemed that the Tajik–Uzbek alliance provided an opportunity for the protection of these minorities from the predominance of the Pashtun majority. The Tajik forces were led by Ahmad Shah Massoud, whose effective authority did not reach far beyond Kabul; Rashid Dostum and Hekmatyar represented the Uzbeks and the Pashtuns respectively, with Rabbani as the president. While each of these leaders had his own particular agenda to push, it was Hekmatyar who proved to be the ‘recalcitrant’ one. What tipped the balance of power among the mujahidin coalition forces was Pakistan’s tilt, in March 1993, towards the Hekmatyar group. Soon after, Afghanistan rapidly descended into chaos and the re-ignition of internal tribal rivalries, with generous external help—a situation not unlike the civil war in Lebanon in the 1970s. Between 1994 and 1995 Afghanistan was hit by a wave of violence—pillaging, rape and inter-tribal fighting—causing further devastation. The population fled from villages and towns which had been reduced to rubble and sought refuge in the surrounding areas, increasing the number of refugees in the neighbouring countries, Pakistan and Iran. During this period the two countries tried, sometimes jointly, sometimes separately, to mediate between the warring Afghan factions; but they failed, primarily because the mediators each pursued a different agenda in Afghanistan.

Pakistan’s interests in helping the mujahidin went far beyond its Islamic sentiments towards fellow Afghan Muslims to force the Soviets out of Afghanistan, or to assist the USA in its global crusade against communism, thus enhancing Islamabad’s relations with Washington. In helping the mujahidin in the 1980s, Pakistan hoped to realise three objectives. First, in a ‘liberated’ Afghanistan, Pakistan sought to exercise influence over the post-communist government in Kabul; second, an Afghanistan sympathetic, if not beholden, to Pakistan was likely to act as a buffer zone between Pakistan and its perceived enemy, India; third, by playing the Pashtun-speaking card against the Afghan Shi’ites and the Persian-orientated Tajiks, Pakistan wished to undermine Iran’s influence in Afghanistan. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent independence of the Central Asian republics added a new dimension to Pakistan’s special interest in Afghanistan. By the early 1990s extended exploitation and new discoveries of oil and gas reserves, *and* the transport of energy from Central Asia to the outside world, had become one of the most important issues among the energy industries and various governments. Pakistan has since sought to open a corridor to that region through Afghanistan. It is not, therefore, accidental, that Washington has been sympathetic to Islamabad’s latter objective and that both have found the Taliban a willing collaborator to open that corridor. We will return to these points later.

### Iran and the Afghan civil war

The civil war in Afghanistan had implications for Iran far beyond the arrival of new refugees, the subsequent additional financial burden, and other problems associated with sheltering a large number of people. For Iran, Afghanistan presented some serious foreign policy challenges. These challenges should be looked at from the country's foreign policy perspective in the post-Iran–Iraq war and the post-Cold War era. Broadly speaking, Iran's foreign policy has since 1990 been premised on the notion that the country's population (about 65 million), its vast natural resources (especially oil and gas) and, most importantly, its geographical location, entitles it to play a leading role in the international arena, particularly in the Middle East, the Persian Gulf and Central Asia and the Caucasus. There are both internal and external reasons for Iran's proactive foreign policy in the 1990s. Internally, Iran survived eight years of war with Iraq (1980–88). Although it did not win the war, the fact that the country successfully withstood Iraq's overwhelming military power was in itself regarded as a remarkable achievement. It should be recalled that in the past century and a half Iran has been invaded at least four times, by Great Britain, Tsarist Russia, the Soviet Union and Iraq, but the war with the latter was the only one in Iran's modern history in which the Iranians did not lose territory to the invaders. Also, the Islamic Republic has managed to survive the many and wide ranging economic sanctions and political pressures imposed on it during the past 20 years. These factors and the fact that the regime has not only survived but consolidated its position both internationally and internally has certainly boosted, justified or not, the Iranians' confidence in their own ability and resourcefulness.

Externally, the collapse of the Soviet Union has had two immediate effects on Iran's foreign policy. The first is that it has removed a superpower as Iran's neighbour and this has greatly reduced Moscow's ability to pose a threat to the former's national security. To put it differently, for the first time in nearly two centuries Iran now feels no threat from Russia. Not only that, the two countries have now formed some kind of 'strategic alliance' and their relationship has not been so good for decades.<sup>14</sup> The second is that, as the result of the breakup of the Soviet Union, Iran now has as its neighbours six newly independent states in the Caucasus and Central Asia. These changes in the geopolitics of the region have created new challenges as well as new political and economic opportunities for Iran. In other words, the Caucasus and Central Asian states—and their geographical vicinity to Russia, Turkey and China, as well as their economic ties with the EU states and the USA—have presented Iranian foreign policy makers with the opportunity to take a proactive, some may call it assuming, stance, especially in the regional arena. Thus, Iran's conflict with Afghanistan's Taliban should be seen in the context of the former's overall policy in Central Asia, particularly in the context of the construction of the gas and oil pipeline from that region to the outside world, and also in the light of the decision by some oil companies that the gas pipeline should go via Afghanistan and not via Iran, the former route being preferred by Washington. Hence Iran's special interest in the outcome of the civil war in Afghanistan and the attempts by

Teheran to ensure that the developments there would not have an adverse impact on Iran's interests in Central Asia. As we shall shortly see, initially Iran seemed to have somewhat succeeded in its objective, namely, to bring the various parties to compromise on a solution that would bring the Afghan crisis to an end without compromising either Iran's interests in Central Asia, or enhancing Islamabad's position in Afghanistan at the expense of Teheran.

Iran's real concern about the Taliban heightened when the latter captured Herat, a city close to the Iranian border, in September 1995. Noting danger at the prospect of having the Taliban as a neighbour, a foreign ministry spokesperson in Teheran 'warned' that his country would deal with the Taliban 'if it created security problems along Iran's borders'. He said Iran 'will not tolerate any incident which could threaten the security of its borders'.<sup>15</sup> The Taliban for their part cautioned Iran against sending reinforcements to the Herat 'rebels'.<sup>16</sup> Soon after these warnings, Afghanistan's Foreign Minister (in President Rabbani's government), Najibullah Lafraie, visited Teheran to discuss the situation in his country and the gradual loss of villages and towns to the Taliban. Alarmed at the disintegration of the Kabul coalition forces and the possibility of total victory by the Taliban, Iran invited anti-Taliban groups to a three-day summit in Teheran in early July 1996. Called the 'Summit on Afghanistan and Regional Security', it was attended by 11 of the 13 Afghan groups. Perhaps the most significant outcome of the summit was the peace accord reached between President Rabbani's Jamiyat-i-Islami and Hekmatyar's Hezbi-i-Islami, the two staunch rivals who were facing a formidable opponent in the Taliban. After the summit, Hekmatyar's deputy, Gutbbudin Hillal, told the press that, 'The [Teheran] peace accord is the first step towards bringing a complete end to the civil war and preparing the ground for a united Afghanistan'.<sup>17</sup> In hindsight, the prediction of an end to tribal fighting was premature and highly optimistic. This became obvious when, only a couple of months after the Teheran summit, Iran sent a special envoy to Afghanistan to help broker a new peace deal between President Rabbani and his prime minister, Hekmatyar. That the Teheran summit failed in its objective, ie the end of the civil war, should have come as no great surprise to Afghanistan observers. What were missing at the summit were two very important players in the Afghan game. The first were the Taliban, who were not invited, although at the time they controlled 15 out of Afghanistan's 30 provinces, while President Rabbani's forces controlled only five, and the rest were controlled by other factions. The second was Pakistan, which did not attend the summit, although it reportedly 'tacitly welcome[d] the accord'.<sup>18</sup> What the summit clearly demonstrated was that, while Iran exercised both political and moral influence among many of the Afghan factions, it was Pakistan that mattered on the ground and which pulled the strings with the most powerful of the militia groups, the Taliban.

In any case, in order to resuscitate the Rabbani-Hekmatyar alliance, Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister, Alauddin Boroujerdi, visited Pakistan in August 1996, with a proposal for a regional conference to be held in Teheran to discuss all aspects of the Afghan crisis. Under the proposal, Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan (the latter represented by the Rabbani-Hekmatyar coalition govern-

ment), Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and China were to be invited to the conference. That Pakistan showed no interest in the proposal can clearly be inferred from Boroujerdi's statement to the press following his discussions with Pakistani officials. He said, 'Iran will continue to work for the improvement of relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan'.<sup>19</sup> The inference was obvious: Islamabad did not recognise the Rabbani government as the legitimate government of Afghanistan; it did not want to withdraw its support of the Taliban; and it wished to go it alone in Afghanistan and not in cooperation or partnership with Iran. This diplomatic rebuff prompted an Iranian editorial writer to be blunt to the Pakistanis: 'Let us tell our Pakistani friends in plain language that enough is enough. Iran cannot remain indifferent when its eastern borders are threatened. Pakistan should understand that relations between the two countries would suffer if they try [sic] to continue their support for the rebel Taliban. So they [the Pakistanis] should not make Iran lose its patience ... Pakistan's contribution to America's Taliban ... is against Iran's security and national interests.' The Taliban, the writer added, wanted to put Afghanistan 'to the tails of donkeys and drag the country back 700 years'.<sup>20</sup> It is worth noting that the Iranians saw the Taliban as 'rebels' and 'dangers' to regional security long before they had gained international notoriety for brutality and the oppression of women. In any case, in November 1996, President Rabbani, who had by then lost Kabul to the Taliban but who was (still is) recognised by most governments and the UN as the head of the legitimate government of Afghanistan, visited Iran and had talks with Iranian officials, including then President Hashemi Rafsanjani. Ostensibly, the visit was to thank Iran for sheltering Afghan refugees and for its efforts to bring peace to Afghanistan. These were fine sentiments towards Iran, but the negative side-effect of all these was that the more the mujahidin leaders leaned towards Teheran, the more Islamabad and Washington became suspicious of Teheran's policy and therefore persisted in assisting the Taliban.

### **Why Iran opposes the Taliban**

If one were to take at face value the media reports about Iran's opposition to the Taliban, one could reasonably conclude that it is mainly based on religious and ethnic differences between the two sides, ie the Pashtun-speaking Afghans versus the Persian-speaking Afghans, the Iranian Shi'ites versus the orthodox Sunni version of the Taliban. In the context of the Afghan, civil war, it is important to recall that initially the mujahidin coalition forces comprised all sections of Afghan society (ie the Persian Tajiks, the Uzebecks and the Pashtuns), but over time the Pashtun leaders dominated the movement. The Taliban, who are Pashtun and orthodox Sunnis, and who were trained in the *madrassa* (religious schools) in Pakistan, regard the Shi'ites almost as non-Muslim. In highlighting the Pashtuns' disdain of the Shi'ites, Olivier Roy says that there has been a whole body of anti-Shi'ite literature available in Pakistani markets which is little known outside the country. He quotes a certain Pakistani Sheikh Hudaybi, imam of Masjid-e-Nabavi mosque, describing the Shi'ites as *kaffar* (ungodly), *rafawiz* (heretics) and *monafiqin*, (hypocrites).<sup>21</sup> The sheikh's co-religionists executed as many as 2000 civilian Shi'ites when Mazar-i-Sharif

was captured by the Taliban. The New York-based Human Rights Watch described the massacre of the Shi'ites 'as one of the worst atrocities in Afghanistan's long civil war'.<sup>22</sup> A report issued in November 1998 by international human rights investigators said that Taliban militiamen and their allies—including militant Muslims from Pakistan—methodically executed between 2000 to 5000 civilians, predominantly Shi'ite Muslims. A Shi'ite woman who fled to Pakistan is reported to have said: 'It did not matter whether they were small children, women or old men. They [the Taliban] were just shooting people'.<sup>23</sup> The Hazaras who survived the onslaught were told by the Taliban commander either to adopt Sunni Muslim rituals, pay a special tax as non-Muslims, face death or emigrate to Iran.<sup>24</sup> The Taliban are 'a group of rigid-minded, brainless, violent and illogical people [who] are ruining Islam's reputation', in the words of Iran's parliamentary speaker, Ali Akbar Nateq-Nouri.<sup>25</sup> And the Ayatollah Khamenei, the country's spiritual leader, has derided them for their 'barbaric stone-age ideas'.<sup>26</sup> He added that the plight of the Shi'ites in Afghanistan was a 'highly crucial issue' and that the Taliban should make up 'for their past errors'.<sup>27</sup> The Taliban, however, were far from apologising for the massacre, as they threatened to hit Iranian cities with missiles if they were attacked by 70 000 Iranian troops massed along the Afghan border in September 1998.

The relevance of the sectarian dimension of the conflict between Teheran and the Taliban cannot be dismissed. As the only Shi'a Muslim country, Iran would find it difficult to remain indifferent to the plight and killings of fellow Shi'ites elsewhere; even the secular regime of the Shah showed sensitivity to the safety and security of Shi'ite minorities in the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf and in Lebanon. Hence the deep anger shown in Iran at the massacre of the Afghan Shi'ites. In parenthesis, it should be recalled that it was only in 1959 that Sheik Mahmud Shaltutte, the Rector of al-Azhar in Cairo, the leading theological institution of the Sunni world, issued a *fatwa* which recognised Shi'ism as a legitimate Islamic school of law. Another issue of concern to the Iranians is the refugees, as the Taliban advances in recent years have halted Iran's efforts, through the UN, to repatriate Afghan refugees. Repatriation was suspended nearly four years ago when the Taliban captured some of the provinces close to the Afghan–Iranian border. Not only that, the Taliban's total grip on the country has the potential for a new influx of refugees into Iran and the associated financial burden. A further concern is the growing drug trade across the 850 km border with Afghanistan. Given the collapse of the Afghan economy, the traffic in narcotics is one of the few means of access to foreign currency for the Taliban who, the Iranians say, are assisting drug trafficking into Iran and from there to Europe. In November 1998, for example, Iranian anti-drug agents seized one-and-a-half tons of drugs in Khorasan province near the Afghan border.<sup>28</sup> But these problems, serious as they are, can be regarded as secondary in importance in comparison with Iran's concern about the national security and economic interests that an Afghanistan controlled by the Taliban could pose to it. First the security concern.

As has already been noted, Iran views the Taliban as 'puppets' of Saudi Arabia (as an orthodox Sunni movement, the Taliban appeal to the Saudis, who

reportedly funded the Afghan mujahidin to the tune of some \$20 billion during the 1980s<sup>29</sup>), Pakistan and the USA, notwithstanding the sanctuary that the group has provided to bin Laden, accused by the USA of masterminding terrorism in the Middle East and of the embassy bombings in Nairobi and Dares-Salam.

There is a strong historical and religious affinity between the Saudis and the Taliban. The latter's core leaders belong to the Deobandi *madrasas* in the Pashtun tribal areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan. The *madrasa* was established in the 19th century, and was developed from conservative reform movements among Indian Muslims. The *madrasa* provided a conservative education focused on Islamic law and jurisprudence. Deobandi looked back for inspiration to Shah Waliullah who was influenced by Muhammad iben Wahhab, or the Wahhabis of present-day Saudi Arabia. Hence the Taliban's Saudi connection, like their antipathy to Iran, has roots several centuries old. Also, an alarming statement is attributed to a Wahhabi cleric, Ahmad bin Jibreen, a man appointed to his post by King Fahd, who said: 'the Shi'ites are heretics and idolaters who should be eliminated'.<sup>30</sup>

It may sound like paranoia on the part of the Iranians, but their perception of the Taliban is that they are a 'trap' set up by the USA and assisted by its two Muslim allies in order to drag Iran into a war with Afghanistan. This paranoia persists despite the thaw in relations between Washington and Teheran since the election in 1997 of the moderate cleric Muhammad Khatami, and also despite criticism by Washington of the Taliban over their suppression of women, human rights and their alleged tolerance of, if not involvement in, drug trafficking. The Iranians are unconvinced that Washington would not support the Taliban if a war broke out between Iran and Afghanistan. This theory argues that, since the Persian Gulf War of 1991, the USA has been seeking to lure Iran into some war or other that would serve as an opportunity to destroy its renovated military machine and further exhaust its economy. Such a policy, it is argued, is consistent with the Clinton's administration's containment policy towards Iran. According to at least one Arab commentator, the overall objective is to restore Iran to its former status as a piece on the US strategic chessboard. That objective applies 'regardless of whether that war occurs to the east or to the west [of Iran], though it would prefer to distance it as far as possible from the Gulf region, to avoid repercussions that might prove hard to control later on'.<sup>31</sup> In other words, a war between Iran and the Taliban's Afghanistan would have very little, if any, impact on the flow of oil to the West from the Persian Gulf, but it would weaken the Islamic Republic considerably.

But the conflict between Iran and Afghanistan has a broader and more significant implication than simply wearing Iran down economically and militarily. To Iran, the Taliban are a destabilising force in Central Asia, where Iran has in recent years put much diplomatic effort and trade investment. Sharing Iran's view of the Taliban as a destabilising force are other Afghanistan neighbours—Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and of course Russia, which still regards that region as its sphere of influence. For example, alarmed by military developments along the Tajik–Afghan border, a high-level Russian delegation, led by the Minister for Defence Pavel Grachev and the then Foreign Minister (now Prime Minister) Yevgeny Primakov, visited Tajikistan in late

January 1996, and at a press conference there Grachev said that 'Russia would not abandon Tajikistan and would continue to lend its support with extensive aid', including military assistance to the Tajik bases along the Tajik–Afghan border.<sup>32</sup> And in late April 1998 Iran's special envoy on Afghanistan, Alauddin Boroujerdi, met the Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Boris Pastukhov in Moscow to discuss the situation in Afghanistan 'which had engendered the security and interests of the neighbouring countries'.<sup>33</sup> Also, in early August of the same year, the chief of the Russian general staff, General Anatoly Kvashnin, and Boris Pastukhov met their Uzbek counterparts in Tashkent and in a joint communiqué expressed their 'deep concern' at the developments in Afghanistan, demanded that the Taliban stop their armed activity 'immediately' and offered to mediate between the warring groups. Finally, to underscore Russia's concern about the Taliban's perceived threat to the Central Asian republics, President Boris Yeltsin said in mid-August 1998 that Russia and those republics agreed that the Taliban movement posed 'a real threat to the Commonwealth of Independent States' southern borders'. Unimpressed by the Russian involvement in the case, the Taliban quickly responded by accusing Russia and Uzbekistan of trying 'to defend the remaining communists in Afghanistan'.<sup>34</sup>

Security considerations along the Iran–Afghan border, the destabilising effect of the Taliban on Central Asia, the repatriation of the Afghan refugees, and the Taliban's disdain for and the murder of Shi'ites are collectively and individually serious enough to create hostility between Iran and Afghanistan. But possibly *the* real bone of contention between them is which of the two countries, Iran or Afghanistan, should be the exit-route for the export of oil and gas from Central Asia to world markets. For reasons that will be explained later, Pakistan and the US government favour the Afghan route and therefore that issue has become an area of dispute between Iran and those two countries as well.

### Politics of the pipeline routes

Ever since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Iran and Pakistan have been (as have Iran and Turkey<sup>35</sup>) vying for political influence and trade and commercial advantages in Central Asia. Iran's geographical position, historical, cultural and linguistic ties with Central Asia have given it a definite edge there over Pakistan. More importantly, Iran has direct land access to the region, while Pakistan has to use Afghanistan as a corridor to get to the region. It is through this perspective that we can to a great extent understand and examine the emergence of the Taliban and the blessing that it has received from Washington and Islamabad.<sup>36</sup> The prize for the winner in this contest—the Afghanistan/Pakistan versus Iran route—is millions of dollars in investment by oil companies in the construction of the pipelines and in exit-fees received for the transit of energy from Central Asia. It was, therefore, no coincidence that the latest Taliban victory was in Mazari-i-Sharif, near borders with Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Nor has it been by accident that, since the Taliban's military campaign took off in 1994, the US has been giving the green light to that campaign. US officials have at different times and on different occasions said that they saw 'nothing objectionable' about the version of Islamic law the Taliban have imposed in the areas

under their control; that the Taliban should be 'acknowledged' as an 'indigenous' movement which has 'demonstrated staying power', and that when 'you get to know them you find they really have a great sense of humour'.<sup>37</sup> In fact, by merely declaring its 'neutrality' in the Afghan civil war, Washington has in effect withdrawn its recognition of the national unity government of President Rabbani, and has therefore, by implication, given recognition to the Taliban. It appears that what stands in the way of the US officially recognising the Taliban is the latter's unwillingness to apprehend bin Laden. US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright is reported to have said that, were the Taliban to cooperate with Washington on bin Laden (ie to hand him over to US authorities), it would facilitate US recognition of the movement as the legitimate government of Afghanistan.<sup>38</sup> The Taliban have so far refused to oblige the Americans on bin Laden but, hoping to secure international legitimacy, they and a delegation from the opposition Northern Alliance, led by Ahmad Shah Massoud, met in Turkmenistan in mid-March 1999. The Taliban agreed, in principle, to share power with the opposition, but at this stage one should not get too excited about the new move towards power sharing, for previous agreements made between the various Afghan factions have been broken. In some ways, the USA's *de facto* relations with the Taliban are not unlike the US *de facto* recognition of the Khmer Rouge (1975–79) in Cambodia.

Since the independence of the Central Asian republics and the subsequent interest from international oil companies in exploiting the energy resources there, the question of an exit-route/s to transport energy from that region to world markets has been debated and examined by both oil experts and US geopolitical strategists. Four of these republics—Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan—have oil and gas reserves estimated to be worth between \$2.5 trillion and \$3 trillion at today's prices. Their mineral wealth is believed to be the largest find in three decades. To exploit these reserves requires \$50–\$70 billion of foreign investment during the coming decades.<sup>39</sup> As these countries are landlocked, *the* question for the investors and energy producing countries, as well as for the energy consuming world, is which of the several exit-routes—Russia, Turkey, Afghanistan/Pakistan or Iran—is the shortest, the cheapest and the safest for exporting oil and gas from that region. There are, however, two aspects to that question: commercial and geopolitical. It is not so much the former but the latter aspect that has in the past eight years or so made it difficult for the companies and governments involved in the whole enterprise to decide on the most suitable route. In fact, to make that decision would have been rather easy but for the hostility between Teheran and Washington over the past 20 years. For it has become almost impossible to discuss any aspect of Iran's foreign policy and of the US policy in the Middle East, the Persian Gulf and Central Asia without bringing into the discussion the almost inevitable clashes between the policies of the two governments. The selection of the oil pipeline route from Central Asia and its connection with the Iran–Afghanistan conflict is a good example of that inevitability.

Most independent energy experts, as well as Western oil companies, agree that the Iran route is the best choice.<sup>40</sup> There are, of course, other routes, like the Russian-controlled pipeline system that was built during the Soviet era. But

using that pipeline system would give Russia a monopoly to keep Central Asia's gas and oil from competing with Russian gas in European markets. In the words of Turkmenistan's President Saparmurad Niyazov, that sort of monopoly smells like the old Soviet ambitions.<sup>41</sup> While Washington's policy has been to tap Central Asia's energy resources to the full, at the same time tries to give as little leverage as possible to Russia in the north and Iran in the south. However, when the countries of the Caspian Sea region began to turn their attention towards Iran as an exit-route, the USA granted official invitations to the presidents of the republics to visit Washington. Between July 1997 and 1998, Presidents Haidar Aliyev of Azerbaijan, Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan and Saparmurad Niyazov of Turkmenistan, all visited Washington to hear about US preferred route/s: the Baku–Ceyhan route in Turkey, or the Afghanistan/Pakistan one bypassing Iran. However, the oil companies have not up till now (July 1998) endorsed either route, despite strong US administration pressure. As Donald Kramer in the *Washington Post* points out: 'The clash between the companies and the administration over the pipeline is ironic for a White House that prides itself on the aggressive promotion of US business interests around the world. The Clinton administration's preoccupation with promoting that pipeline [the Baku–Ceyhan route] is an end in itself'.<sup>42</sup> The pipeline is estimated to cost nearly \$4 billion, a project that oil companies find financially unjustifiable if the USA and the Turkish government are not prepared to pay part of it. Arguably, oil companies would not have wrangled over such a relatively small figure (in terms of investment in energy industries) if the demand for oil and gas, and therefore their price, had not been so low in recent years.

To Washington strategists another preferred route is a pipeline which would pass through Turkmenistan across to Afghanistan to Pakistan, connecting the energy resources to South Asia. Such a line, if constructed, would deprive Iran of transit fees; it would also deprive it of the South Asian markets, since the latter is itself an exporter of oil and gas. Furthermore, it would deprive Iran of potential political and trade influence in South Asia. To Iran, Asia and the idea of an Asian Common Market has always been an attractive proposition. In fact, the establishment of such a market was first proposed by the Shah in 1976, but in the first decade of the Iranian revolution that idea was relegated to a lower priority. However, since the end of the Cold War, Iran has sought to revive the old idea and has since forged strong trade links with Asia. China and Iran, for example, reached an agreement in 1997 on a joint venture project to upgrade a refinery in Guangdong in southern China to expand its capacity to process Iranian crude oil. Chinese officials regard Iran as a regional power, and treat this as an unalterable geopolitical fact. They also view Iran as a 'natural' egress route for Central Asian oil and gas, and a pivotal power in determining the extent of Russia's control over these energy resources, and in meeting the Asia–Pacific region's energy requirements.<sup>43</sup> In short, Teheran has now gained diplomatic recognition as a power broker in the region.

The attempt to forge new links with Asia is aimed largely at breaking the US containment policy towards Iran, and so the rise of the Taliban and the challenge it has presented to Iran's national security is viewed by the Iranian

leadership as part of that containment policy, strangling Iran economically. According to Mackenzie, what secured Washington's support of the Taliban was the latter's *commitment* (emphasis added) to a particular commercial enterprise. The Taliban had promised to permit the construction of the pipeline through Afghanistan to Pakistan. The main contender for that project was an American–Saudi coalition of Unocol and Delta oil companies. When the Taliban seized Kabul in 1996, the Unocol vice-president described it as a 'positive development'.<sup>44</sup> But when it became publicly known in the West that the Taliban had adopted an oppressive policy towards women and denied education to them, and generally failed to observe human rights in Afghanistan, the Clinton administration shelved the idea of officially recognising the Taliban. Without Washington's public endorsement of the new regime in Kabul, banks and international financial institutions have shown reluctance to lend money to build the pipeline from Central Asia to Afghanistan. Hence a statement by Unocol Vice-President Marty Miller in March 1998 that the 'lenders have said the [pipeline] project at this moment is not financeable'.<sup>45</sup> In addition to the financial problem facing the project, the most obvious problem of moving oil and gas across Afghanistan is one of insecurity. Insecurity could range from the kidnapping of expatriate staff, to financial blackmailing, to blowing up pipelines. If the history of the past three decades is anything to go by, then it is not hard to predict that Afghanistan, whether ruled by the Taliban or some other group, will for the foreseeable future be unable to provide that security for many years to come. That brings the question of the pipeline back to the Iranian route and then to the very uneasy relationship between Teheran and Washington.

As noted earlier, the Iranian route is favoured by countries and companies involved in the exploitation and transport of the energy resources of Central Asia.<sup>46</sup> A new factor in the oil companies' decision to resist the administration's pressure to bypass Iran has been the election of a moderate president, Muhammad Khatami, in May 1997. His election has heralded a detente with the West, and has opened an opportunity for establishing a 'dialogue among civilisations', in the words of President Khatami. The EU countries have welcomed Khatami's moderate and cooperative stance towards the West, particularly on economic cooperation, technology, drug control and energy. Pressured by the EU, the Clinton administration has since waived all sanctions against European oil companies that have signed contracts with Iran; it has also promised that companies that might in the future invest in Iran would not be sanctioned by the USA. Moreover, the EU foreign ministers have also argued that Iran is critical for peace and stability in the Persian Gulf region, Lebanon and Afghanistan, and that its influence in the Central Asian states has grown stronger.<sup>47</sup> This positive view of Iran within the EU, and Khatami's policy of promoting dialogue with the West, has compelled the Clinton administration to respond, albeit cautiously, to Iran's overture. Hence Secretary of State Albright's suggestion for a 'road map' towards the normalisation of relations between the two countries. Although such a development is still far from being realised, the question of a rapprochement between Teheran and Washington is no longer if, but when. When that happens, then the Iranian route will most probably be the one to be selected from among other alternative routes. Such a selection would obviate the construction

of an alternative pipeline from Central Asia to world markets. It would also doubtless lessen the geo-economic importance of Afghanistan and therefore of the Taliban to both Washington and Islamabad, although the latter has more at stake in an Afghanistan ruled by the Taliban than allowing the building of the gas pipeline.

### Conclusion

Although a war between Iran and the Taliban's Afghanistan was averted in September 1998, the conflict between them is far from over. For Iran, there are too many economic and geopolitical interests at stake in the region to let the matter rest with the Taliban establishing themselves as the sole rulers of Afghanistan. True, with the rise of the Taliban the Iranian policy towards Afghanistan has suffered a serious setback in recent years, but Iran's 'assets', such as its historical links, cultural, ethnic and religious (Shi'a) ties to a large section of the population, enable Iran to play an important role in the political developments in Afghanistan. There are two other crucial factors which favour Iran's stance against the Taliban. One is that no country other than Pakistan, the Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, has been prepared to recognise the Taliban as the government of Afghanistan. In other words, the group lacks international legitimacy. It is worth noting that even Saudi Arabia has now expressed doubts about the Taliban because of the latter's refusal to expel Osama bin Laden for his alleged financial support of the Saudi opposition groups. The other crucial factor is that Afghanistan's other neighbours in Central Asia view the Taliban, as does Iran, as a destabilising force in the region. These states, along with Russia, are very uncomfortable with the Taliban's religious fundamentalism, which is even less flexible than that of Saudi Arabia. However, in the case of a war with Iran, the Taliban could conceivably count on support from two powerful allies: Pakistan and the USA. Washington's support for the Taliban is not so much for what the group claims to stand for, ie the establishment of a 'pure' Islamic state. Rather, it is for the former's long-standing hostility towards the Islamic Republic of Iran. Washington has for years been accusing Iran of sponsoring international terrorism, undermining the Middle East peace process, and attempting to develop a nuclear capability and weapons of mass destruction.

It has been argued here that the conflict between Iran and the Taliban is not so much about sectarianism or ethnicity (ie Sunnis versus Shi'ites; the Pashtun-speaking Afghans versus the Persian-speaking Afghans) as it is about Iran's economic interests and national security considerations. The sudden emergence and rise to power of the Taliban has much to do with their apparent commitment to allowing the construction of oil and gas pipeline from oil-rich Central Asia through Afghanistan to Pakistan and from there to the world market. The construction of such an exit-route would bypass Iran, which has for the past two decades experienced economic sanctions and political pressure from the USA. The conflict between Teheran and the Taliban is likely to continue as long as the construction of the gas and oil pipeline through Afghanistan is considered a serious option. The consideration of that option, however, is only likely to continue as long as relations between Teheran and Washington remain hostile.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Quoted by Robert Fisk, 'Osama Bin Laden: America's no 1 enemy,' *Independent International*, 26 August–1 September 1998, p 13.
- <sup>2</sup> For the information contained in this paragraph, I am indebted to Valeria F Piacentini, 'The Afghan puzzle,' *Iranian Journal of International Affairs*, 8 (3), 1996, pp 655–656.
- <sup>3</sup> Asadollah Alam, *The Shah and I: The Confidential Diary of Iran's Royal Court, 1969–1977*, New York: St Martin's Press, 1991, p 305.
- <sup>4</sup> Dilip Hiro, *Islamic Fundamentalism*, New York: Paladin, 1988, p 240.
- <sup>5</sup> Raymond Garthoff, *Detente and Confrontation: American–Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan*, Washington, DC: 1985, p 894.
- <sup>6</sup> Alam, *The Shah and I*, p 480.
- <sup>7</sup> Vladimir Vinogradov, 'Audience at dawn: Qom residence of Ayatollah Khomeini, 27 December 1979', *International Affairs*, Moscow, April 1991.
- <sup>8</sup> Martin Sicker, *The Bear and the Lion: Soviet Imperialism in Iran*, Praeger: New York, 1998, p 115.
- <sup>9</sup> Richard Mackenzie, 'The price of neglecting Afghanistan: the succession', *New Republic*, 14–21 September 1998, p 26.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, p 25.
- <sup>11</sup> Olivier Roy, 'Fundamentalists without a common course', *Le Monde Diplomatique*, October 1988, p 2, reprinted in *Guardian Weekly*, 25 October 1988.
- <sup>12</sup> Fisk, 'Osama bin Laden', p 13.
- <sup>13</sup> Hiro, *Islamic Fundamentalism*, pp 258–259.
- <sup>14</sup> For a detailed discussion of Teheran–Moscow relations, see Adam Tarock, 'Iran and Russia in "strategic alliance"', *Third World Quarterly*, 18(2) 1997, pp 207–223.
- <sup>15</sup> *Kayhan Havai*, 13 September 1995, p 24.
- <sup>16</sup> Piacentini, 'The Afghan Puzzle', p 665.
- <sup>17</sup> *Kayhan Havai*, 10 July 1996, p 24.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>19</sup> *Kayhan Havai*, 4 September 1996, p 22.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>21</sup> Roy, 'Fundamentalists without a common cause', p 2.
- <sup>22</sup> *Guardian Weekly*, 8 November 1998, p 7.
- <sup>23</sup> Kenneth J Cooper, 'Taliban massacre based on ethnicity', *Washington Post*, 28 November 1998, p A01.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>25</sup> Cited in *The Economist*, 15 August 1998, p 42.
- <sup>26</sup> *Middle East International*, 584, 2 October 1998, p 16.
- <sup>27</sup> *The Economist*, 19 September 1998, p 32.
- <sup>28</sup> 'Iran cops seize 1.5 tons of drugs', Associated Press, 22 November 1998.
- <sup>29</sup> Dilip Hiro, 'Taliban tighten their grip', *Middle East International*, 581, 21 August 1998, p 14.
- <sup>30</sup> See respectively, Barnett R Rubin, 'Afghanistan and the Taliban', *Current History*, 98 (625), 1999, pp 81–82; and Said K Aburish, *A Brutal Friendship: The West and the Arab Elite*, London: Indigo, 1998, p 45.
- <sup>31</sup> *Al-Hayat*, 8 September 1998, cited in *Middle East International*, 583, 18 September 1998, p 22.
- <sup>32</sup> Piacentini, 'The afghan puzzle', p 663.
- <sup>33</sup> *Iran News*, 19 April 1998.
- <sup>34</sup> *Middle East International*, 581, 21 August 1998, p 13.
- <sup>35</sup> For a detailed discussion of the rivalry between Iran and Turkey see Adam Tarock, *Iranian Foreign Policy Since 1990*, New York: Chapter Five, 1999.
- <sup>36</sup> The Taliban greatly owe their rise to the tutelage of Maulana Fazlul Rahman's party, Jamiat ul-Ulam -I-Islami (JUI). The Bhutto government was electorally aligned to JUI and Interior Minister Maseerullah Babar, an associate of JUI, chose to support the Taliban in order to open a trade route to Central Asia.
- <sup>37</sup> Mackenzie, 'The price of neglecting Afghanistan', p 26.
- <sup>38</sup> *Middle East International*, 15 January 1999, p 23.
- <sup>39</sup> Jahangir Amuzegar, 'OPEC as omen', *Foreign Affairs*, 77 (6) 1998, p 95.
- <sup>40</sup> See Julia Nanay, 'The US in the Caspian: the development of political and commercial interests', *Middle East Policy*, 6 (2) 1998, pp 150–57.
- <sup>41</sup> *Washington Post*, 5 October 1998, A01.
- <sup>42</sup> Donald J Kramer, 'Pipeline dreams in the Caspian', *Washington Post*, 3 December 1998, p A23.
- <sup>43</sup> John Calabrese, 'China and the Persian Gulf energy and security', *Middle East Journal*, 52 (3), 1998, p 362.
- <sup>44</sup> Reuters, 1 October 1996.
- <sup>45</sup> Quoted in William Maley, 'The perils of pipelines', *The World Today*, August/September 1998.
- <sup>46</sup> For a detailed discussion and analysis of the transport of oil and gas from the Caspian basin to the world market, see Tarock, 'Iran and Russia in "strategic alliance" '.
- <sup>47</sup> Mahmood Monshipouri, 'Iran's search for the new pragmatism', *Middle East Policy*, 6 (2), 1998, p 104.

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