

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Published on *The National Interest* (<http://nationalinterest.org>)

Source URL (retrieved on Jun 12, 2013): <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/engage-iran-afghanistan-8528>

Engage with Iran in Afghanistan

| [More](#)^[1]

[Seyed Hossein Mousavian](#)^[2]

|

May 30, 2013

[Seyed Hossein Mousavian](#)^[2]



Despite the U.S. plan to withdraw from Afghanistan in late 2014, Washington is likely to maintain a presence of around 10,000 civilian and military personnel. The need to protect the security of those remaining forces requires the United States to engage Afghanistan's neighbors—including Iran—during the transition.

The Taliban and Al Qaeda were originally created in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Thus, in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, Iran fully backed the U.S. war on terror. Tehran also served as the key diplomatic liaison at the 2001 Bonn Conference, which streamlined the efforts of the United States and UN to manage the Afghan crisis. This displayed the pragmatic side of Iranian foreign policy and a desire to contribute to a stable Afghanistan. For example, Iran was instrumental in establishing international legitimacy for the Kabul government by insisting [3] the word “democracy” was introduced in the agreement. But in return for such unprecedented overtures, President George W. Bush labeled Iran as part of the “Axis of Evil.”

The withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan provides another opportunity for practical reengagement with Iran. After nearly a decade of involvement in the region, Washington should consider Tehran as a potential strategic partner to enhance the prospects for a peaceful exit and stable Afghanistan.

Iran’s interests in Afghanistan include a 600-mile common border, and the threat posed to Iranian health and security by the cross-border narcotics trade. Afghanistan produces nearly 90 percent of the world’s opium. Half of that amount enters Iran, costing the country over \$1 billion annually in its war on drugs. The National Drug Control Headquarters of Iran (DCHQ) has declared drug addiction to be the country’s “largest social harm and a major threat for the national health and security,” as well as the main “hurdle” for development. The number of individuals infected with HIV in Iran has doubled since 2001, to about 91,000, and up to 70 percent of infections may be transmitted by dirty syringes.

But Iranian interests in Afghanistan extend beyond drugs. Since 1979, approximately 16,000 Iranian border agents have been killed or wounded in the line of duty. Iran still hosts more than a million illegal Afghan workers and refugees who have strong cultural and religious ties to Iran. There is also the question of water security, as Iran’s arid east relies heavily on waters that originate in the mountains of central Afghanistan. Finally, cross-border activity from Pakistan and Afghanistan by terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda and Jundullah is one of the main security concerns facing Iran.

The United States and Iran continue to have some convergent interests in Afghanistan. These include achieving lasting improvements in governance in Kabul; preventing the flow of drugs and other illicit goods; addressing the Afghan refugee crisis; making Afghanistan a reliable trading partner and

promoting regional trade and transit routes by reviving the Silk Road initiative; enhancing the capabilities of the Afghan security forces by training them at the federal and provincial level; and promoting national reconciliation, including the reintegration of moderate Taliban forces into the system.

In February 2011, Iran extended an official invitation to the U.S. special representative in Afghanistan, Marc Grossman, to visit Tehran. Washington dismissed the overture. Tehran, however, continued to cooperate with the international community on Afghanistan with the participation of high-ranking officials, including the Iranian foreign minister, at two international meetings in Istanbul (November 2011) and Bonn (December 2011). At these meetings, Tehran supported the goal of a stable and democratic Afghanistan by endorsing a plan that would lead to full Afghan control over security by the end of 2014. In terms of Afghanistan's reconstruction, Iran continues to be one of the most prominent contributors to infrastructure, energy and construction projects—surpassing many western donors.

The United States should change its stance on Iran from one of confrontation to pragmatic cooperation on issues of shared concern. Having led successful negotiations with Iran on Afghanistan in 2001, Ambassador James Dobbins, the new U.S. special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, can play a critical role facilitating this initiative. My experience suggests that direct negotiation between the commander of U.S. Central Command, Lloyd J. Austin, and the commander of Iran Qods Army, Haj Qasem Soleimani, also would be an effective approach. Haj Qasem played a central and constructive role in combating Al Qaeda in Afghanistan after the September 2001 terrorist attacks. Despite the accusations levied against Soleimani in the United States, he has been instrumental in the safe exit of U.S. forces in 2012-13.

This military-to-military contact might lay a foundation of mutual trust between Iran and the United States. Following the June presidential election in Iran, there may be an even more prominent opportunity for progress on U.S.-Iran relations.

Hossein Mousavian is associate scholar at Princeton University. He served as the head of the foreign relations committee of Iran's National Security Council from 1997 to 2005. He is author of The Iranian Nuclear Crisis: A Memoir, published by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in

2012.

More by

Seyed Hossein Mousavian [2]

Topics: Global Governance [4] Security [5]

Regions: Iran [6]

Source URL (retrieved on Jun 12, 2013): <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/engage-iran-afghanistan-8528>

Links:

[1] <http://www.addthis.com/bookmark.php?v=250&username=nationalinterest>

[2] <http://nationalinterest.org/profile/smousavi-princetonedu>

[3] <http://www.cfr.org/iran/afghanistans-role-irans-drug-problem/p11457>

[4] <http://nationalinterest.org/topic/global-governance>

[5] <http://nationalinterest.org/topic/security>

[6] <http://nationalinterest.org/region/middle-east/persian-gulf/iran>