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Motivations of Russian-Iranian Interference in Afghanistan

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The growing role of Russia and Iran in Afghanistan has been a planned and systematic approach over the past two years. The two countries were initially fully involved in the Syrian crisis due to common interests and the confrontation with the US and NATO within the framework of the Hybrid War to stop the Western military expansion in the Russian and Iranian strategic depth. 1 Russia-Iran mobilization strategy in Afghanistan is similar to the Obama administration's rebalancing strategy in the Middle East conflicts.

This strategy relies on scaling down of direct military involvement, leading from behind, cost-sharing, and progressive containment of threats through coordination between all concerned countries.² The United States adopted a force downsizing strategy that created security and a political vacuum in Afghanistan, which paved the way for the Taliban and ISIS to expand in this country. This chaotic situation prompted Russia and Iran to interfere in Afghanistan and cordon the Western military presence, stop the military expansion of Al-Qaida, reshape the Afghani political structure, and exclude the pro-Western political elite to preserve the interests of the two countries. Accordingly, this research focuses on agents of change in the Russia-Iran strategy toward Afghanistan and the consequences of this strategy on regional security and stability, interactions between the great and regional powers involved in Afghanistan, and the possible reactions of Russia and Iran toward the recent heavy US military presence in this country.

First: The Increasing Russia-Iran Presence in Afghanistan

Russia and Iran's increasing mobilization in Afghanistan is a fundamental shift in the two countries' strategy toward the political and security conditions in this country. After decades of its defeat in Afghanistan in 1979 and the collapse of the former Soviet Union in 1989, Russia returned to this country by supplying intelligence and logistic support to NATO to stop Taliban and Al-Qaeda expansion in Central Asia following the events of 2001 in the United States.³ Iran adopted the same strategy before and after 2001 and was one of the first countries to support the United States' operations to topple the Taliban and hunt its elements and leaders in Afghanistan. In fact, Tehran accused the Taliban of antagonizing Shiites, attacking the Hazara Shiite minority, storming the Iranian consulate in Mazar Sharif in 1988, and executing eight Iranian diplomats, which prompted Tehran to mobilize seventy thousand IRGC elements on its borderline with Afghanistan.⁴ The Ideological difference between the Taliban and Iran did not cut off all ties between both sides, however. The ISIS establishment in Khorasan State, the control of wide territories of Nanjin Har Province, and the decrease in US military presence prompted Russia and Iran to change their strategy toward Afghanistan based on the following:

Approaching the Taliban

Until 2013, Russia had criticized the inclusion of the Taliban in Afghani politics due to counter-terrorism laws and to prevent the political legitimacy of this organization. However, Russia changed its views on the Taliban in December 2015 when the Russian representative for the Afghani affairs, Zamir Kapulov stated that ISIS was the number one enemy of Moscow and that his country's interests corresponded to those of the Taliban's through cooperation and exchange of information between the two sides.⁵ In December 2016, the Russian ambassador in Kabul, Alexander Mantinski announced his country's readiness to mediate between the Afghani government and the Taliban due to Russia's strong relations with the organization.⁶ During the Moscow International Security Summit in April 2017, the Russian chief of military intelligence, General Igor Koropove praised the Taliban's role in halting the expansion of ISIS in Afghanistan, asserting that the Taliban enjoyed great support domestics and was in control of about 40 percent of the country.⁷

On the other hand, the United States gave a negative evaluation of Russia's role in Afghanistan. In February 2017, the US forces commander in chief in Afghanistan, General John Nicolson, said in the US Senate that Russia had legitimized the Taliban, asserting that the Russia-Iran mobilization in Afghanistan was aimed at limiting the US and NATO's role in this country.⁸

Taliban-Iran relations seemed to be stronger than Taliban-Russia relations were. The Taliban-Iran rapprochement started in June 2013 when Tehran officially invited a Taliban delegate to meet some Iranian officials. In 2014, Iran opened a representation office for the Taliban in the Iranian city of Mashhad, giving the organization an international character. In May 2016, the Taliban leader, Mullah Akhtar Mohammed Mansur, was killed in the province of Baluchistan in Pakistan. At the time, he was traveling back to Pakistan after residing for two months in Iran where he held intensive negotiations and signed several contracts with Iranian officials to confront ISIS in exchange for Iran's support of the organization.⁹ Furthermore, Tehran is providing political support to the Taliban and is hosting a number of Taliban leaders who are classified as terrorist elements on the international lists. In December 2016, Tehran invited some Taliban leaders to participate in the Islamic Unity Summit, which was confirmed by the Iranian cleric, Muhsin Araki, Secretary General of the Islamic Sects Rapprochement Association, when he said that Tehran had invited the non-extremist elements in the Taliban to participate in the conference.¹⁰ Additionally, the Iranian ambassador in Kabul, Mohammed Riza Bahrami, acknowledged direct contact between his country and the Taliban after the Afghani authorities officially accused Tehran of providing direct military and logistics support to the organization. A spokesperson for the Taliban in Afghanistan, Mullah Zabihollah, also recognized the organization's strong relations and understanding with Tehran.¹¹

Military Infiltration

The Russia-Iran military influence has escalated in Afghanistan. In April 2017, the US forces supreme commander in Afghanistan, General John Nicolson, released a report about the Russian military supplies delivered to the Taliban, especially machine guns, despite Russia's denial.¹² The Iranian military support for the Taliban also increased. In 2015, the *Wall Street Journal* revealed that Iran had provided the Taliban with 82 ml mortar shells, rifles, bombs, Kalashnikov guns, and explosive materials. Some Afghani officials also confirmed that Iran trained Taliban elements in camps in Mashhad and Zahedan in the Iranian province of Kerman under the supervision of the IRGC.¹³ In January 2017, the governor of the Afghani Province of Helmand, Hayatollah Hayat, said that Iran had supplied the Taliban with Iranian ballistic missiles to attack Afghani cities. This information was confirmed by the Afghani authorities when they discovered the remains of Iranian-made missiles launched by the Taliban on Afghani forces in the cities of Karamseir and Sankeen.¹⁴ Moreover, the Afghani authorities seized Iranian-made mines and huge amounts of arms and ammo in a raid on a Taliban arsenal in February 2016.

Political Mediation

The Afghani government's, clans', and opposition's failure to come to an agreement and the collapse of the quartet that included representatives from Afghanistan, China, Pakistan,

and the United States prompted Russia and Iran to establish a new regional roadmap for reconciliation. It also prompted them to build bridges between political rivals in Afghanistan and diminish the United States' role in this country. Russia held three rounds of the International Peace Conference. The first round took place in December 2016 with the participation of China, Pakistan, and Russia. The conference centered on the future of peace and security in Afghanistan, the consequences of instability on its neighboring countries, and the confrontation of ISIS in the country. However, participants were criticized by the Afghani president, Ashraf Ghani, for excluding his country from participation in the conference.¹⁵ The second round was held in February 2017 with the involvement of China, Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan. In this conference, Russia sharply criticized US politics during the Obama era while the other participants were willing to cooperate with the Trump administration.¹⁶ The third round was held on April 14, 2017, after the US had dropped its largest non-nuclear GPU-43 bomb (the mother of all bombs) on ISIS caves in eastern Afghanistan. Twelve countries attended the conference, including Pakistan, China, India, and Afghanistan while the United States declined the invitation.¹⁷

In Syria, Russia tried to build bridges and enforce a temporary truce between the Assad regime and the opposition. Accordingly, Russia strove to sponsor negotiations and bring the Afghani government and the Taliban to table on the Syrian model with the exclusion of the United States from these negotiations. To achieve its hegemony over Afghanistan, Russia linked its economic and military aids to investment in the various economic sectors in the country.

Recruitment of Afghani Refugees

Iran recruits Afghani refugees and sends them to Syria and Iraq to defend Shiite holy places and support the Assad regime. On June 30, 2017, the *New York Times* published a report about the IRGC utilization of the Afghani refugees' adverse conditions to enlist them in 'Fatimiyoun' brigade, which was established in 2014 from Hazara Afghani Shiites. The number of the Afghani refugees enlisted in 'Fatimiyoun' brigade ranged from eight thousand to fourteen thousand. Iran paid them each eight hundred dollars per month and granted a ten-year legal residency for their families in exchange for defending Shiite holy shrines and fighting on the front lines in Damascus, Aleppo, Hama, and Latakia in Syria.

The Iranian religious and political leadership honored the Afghanis who were killed in Syria by roaming the streets of Tehran and Qum, carrying their coffins before they buried them. Furthermore, the Iranian Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, and General Qassem Suleimani met the families of those killed and promised them Iranian citizenship and several economic and social benefits.¹⁸

Suppressing the Afghani Government

Russia and Iran believe the Afghani government is a puppet of the United States and NATO. Recently, they exerted more pressure on the Afghani government to hold talks with the Taliban and give up any policies that challenge the interests of the two countries.

The visit of former Afghani president Hammed Karzai to Russia on April 25, 2017, unveiled Russia's ambitions to expand its political influence in Afghanistan. In his meeting

with Karzai, Russian foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, insisted on including the Taliban in the Afghani national talks while Karzai criticized the US policies in his country and accused it of being behind the instability and chaos in Kabul. The visit also raised the Afghani governments' fears that accused Karzai of attempting to weaken the Afghani president Ashraf Ghani.¹⁹

On the other hand, Iran adopted a more aggressive policy against the Afghani government. According to the International Relief Organization, Tehran has deported about seven hundred thousand Afghani refugees since the beginning of 2016 and is planning to deport 2.5 million Afghani refugees from Iran in the next eighteen months, adding 10 percent to the Afghani population that would exert more pressure on the Afghani government.²⁰

Iran also increased threats against Afghani water security. In July 2017, the Iranian president, Hassan Rouhani, criticized the construction of the Afghani dams Kamal Khan, Kajki, and Salma under the pretext of damaging Iranian water security. This criticism elicited protests from the Afghani government that accused Iran of building more than thirty water dams on the rivers flowing into Afghanistan and consuming huge amounts of water from the Afghani districts of Helmand and Harod.²¹

Second: Motives for the Russia-Iran Mobilization

The Russia-Iran mobilization in Afghanistan is linked to the recent dramatic changes in Central Asia and the Middle East. The rolling back of the US's role during the Obama era and the minimizing of US military presence led to a state of security and a political vacuum in these territories, which paved the way for Russia and Iran to fill the gap in Afghanistan. Russia and Iran were driven by the following motives:

The US Flexible Balance Strategy

Although the US and NATO put off withdrawal from Afghanistan that was scheduled to be completed by the end of 2014, they deployed only eight thousand four hundred American soldiers and a small number of NATO forces to train and support the Afghani forces, which created a state-of-security vacuum in Afghanistan.²² This Obama doctrine was based on the avoidance of direct military involvement in points of conflict around the world, limiting the US's role in air strikes on the terrorist groups' strongholds and establishing multilateral coalitions on the model of the international coalition against ISIS in Syria and Iraq.²³

The Obama administration also adopted the strategy of flexible balance through avoiding direct confrontation with regional and international powers on the issues not affecting the US's interests. For example, Obama believed that the Russian interference in Ukraine and Crimea was an internal affair within the vital Russian sphere and away from the US's and NATO's interests. Similarly, the Obama administration remained silent regarding the Russian military interference in Syria and believed any unplanned procedures would deplete the US military's capabilities.²⁴

In fact, the US's neutrality during the Obama era paved the way for Russia and Iran to penetrate Afghanistan on the Syrian model. Moreover, the Iranian nuclear deal with the P5+1 group in 2015 drove Tehran to expand and adopt a more aggressive policy toward its

neighbors. Nevertheless, after Donald Trump winning the presidency of the United States, the new US administration adopted a more tense policy toward Iran and its hostile activities in the region.

Securing Strategic Depth

Russia and Iran strive to protect their vital spheres against any threats. The establishment of the state of Khorasan in Afghanistan by ISIS prompted the two countries to form domestic coalitions to confront this group in light of the weakness and disruption of the Afghani governmental organizations. Iran believes its 936 km borderline with Afghanistan is a direct threat to Iranian security, which provoked Tehran to proactively address potential threats and interfere in Afghanistan through joining forces with the Taliban. Likewise, the 2,087 km Afghani border with Central Asian countries—Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan—are a source of threat to Russian security, especially after the expansion of ISIS threats across these borders.²⁵ There are also other threats across these borders, such as drug smuggling; 90% of opium production comes from Afghanistan. Indeed, Russia suffers high rates of opium addiction and AIDS due to this problem. According to official Russian statistics, the number of addicts reached six hundred thousand people, 60 percent of whom were under age in April 2017. However, the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, announced that there are 7.5 million drug users in Russia; two million of whom are permanent addicts.²⁶

Anticipating the ISIS Threat

Russia and Iran fear the transition of ISIS's command and most experienced elements from Syria and Iraq to Afghanistan and Central Asia. The fall of the final ISIS stronghold in Mosul and the blockade of Raqqa—the ISIS capital in Syria—by Syrian democratic forces might drive ISIS to Khorasan province in Afghanistan, making it the new stronghold of ISIS. This fear was confirmed by the statement from the chief of Russian intelligence, Igor Korbov, on April 27, 2017, when he said that the number of ISIS militants amounted to three thousand five hundred elements spread across northern Afghanistan near the weak Russian front in Central Asia and Caucasasia. According to a UN report released in September 2015, ISIS elements spread in twenty-five out of the thirty-four Afghani provinces.²⁷

Russia and Iran believe the decapitation strategy adopted by the United States against the Taliban weakened the organization through targeting its leaders.²⁸ Accordingly, Russia and Iran interfered in Afghanistan on the Syrian model and focused on defeating the armed groups outside the Russian and Iranian borders to prevent them from going back to Russia and the other former Soviet Union Republics.

On April 3, 2017, ISIS announced its responsibility for the explosion in the subway in the Russian city of Petersburg followed by a series of threats in reaction to Russia-Iran interference in Syria and support of the Assad regime.²⁹ This attack reflects the changes in the terrorist group's ambitions and points of expansion toward the Islamic territories in Central Asia, Russia, China, and Iran through the twin attack on Iranian parliament and the Khomeini tomb on June 7, 2017, which was the biggest attack in Tehran since the Zahedan attacks in 2010.³⁰

Encountering NATO

Russia-Iran interests intersect in the utilization of proxy war strategy through using the Taliban to target the US and Western troops in Afghanistan. Some sources consider this war a Russian retaliation against the US and Western nations in response to their support of the armed Afghani groups that led to the defeat of the former Soviet Union in Afghanistan. This information was confirmed by the chief of the US forces in Afghanistan, General John Nicolson, on February 2017 when he accused Russia of trying to diminish the US and NATO's role in the country.³¹

Iran believes the US military presence in Afghanistan near its borders is a direct threat to its security and existence, and that the US military mobilization in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the Arabian Gulf, in addition to the NATO bases in Turkey, encircle Iran from two directions. Consequently, Tehran adopted a counter-containment policy toward the US and NATO and used the weak military presence of the West in Afghanistan to expand its military and political expansion in this country.³²

Russia and Iran continued their accusations of the US and NATO's failure to counter terrorism over the seventeen years since the US mobilization began in Afghanistan. Although the Afghani army outnumbered ISIS and the Taliban, it failed to take over the country because of the social division and bad economic conditions. Moscow strives to eliminate Western interference and the penetration of vital Russian spheres through supporting the Taliban to target NATO troops in Afghanistan and drive them away from Central Asia and Caucasia. Furthermore, the Kremlin's special envoy to Afghanistan, Zamir Kapolov, supported the Taliban's call for the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Afghanistan unconditionally, asserting that all Afghani neighbors support this step.³³

Periphery Policy

Russia and Iran adopted this policy against their regional and domestic rivals through taking the battle outside their own geographic spheres and pursuing their interests in several conflict hotspots. The Russian mobilization and support of the Taliban came in response to the Western sanctions on Moscow after the Russian military interference in Ukraine and Crimea as a way to exert more pressure on the Western military presence in Afghanistan.³⁴ Moscow also strives to establish a regional security system in Central Asia and Caucasia that excludes the Western forces through spreading the idea that the US is a source of threat and instability in this region.³⁵ It also tries to exert more pressure on the US and Western countries to negotiate a deal with the US president, Donald Trump, and pursue Russian interests in Ukraine, Eastern Europe, Syria, and Afghanistan in exchange for Russia contributing to achieving peace and stability and decreasing pressure on NATO in Afghanistan.

Likewise, Iran has adopted the same strategy in the face of the US and the other domestic rivals in Afghanistan. Tehran is also using its alliance with the Taliban to exert pressure on the Afghani government to weaken its control over the country and obstruct the Afghani building dams and their negative impact on the Iranian water flow.³⁶ Additionally, Iran aims

to stand against the formation of a strong Afghani government that allies with the West and antagonizes Iran. Consequently, Tehran escalated its military and political support of the Taliban to fight a proxy war against the weak Afghani government, NATO, and the US as a way to impose itself as a major player in settling the conflict and restoring stability in Afghanistan.

Third: Consequences of the Russia-Iran interference in Afghanistan

The Russia-Iran interference in Afghanistan raised controversy about each country's goals. Observers and analysts were divided into two groups concerning this issue. The first believed that Russia and Iran were concerned about confronting the threats resulting from the chaotic state of their regional environments to prevent the expansion of ISIS, eliminate the cross borders drugs smugglers, and stop the flow of refugees from Afghanistan to its neighboring countries.³⁷ The second group gave a negative evaluation of Russia-Iran policies. It believed that Afghanistan is only one part of many points of conflict between Russia and Iran on one side and the West on the other.

The Russia-Iran mobilization in Afghanistan lacks real justification and relies on aligning with terrorist organizations and illegal armed groups that manage the cultivation and trade of drugs as a projection of power. It also relies on the ability to alter regional and international events, compel the Western countries to acknowledge Russia-Iran's regional influence, and include them in the settlement of conflict in Afghanistan.³⁸ The Russia-Iran penetration of Afghanistan escalated the Taliban's military operations on the Afghani forces and caused them to incur heavy losses. On April 21, 2017, the Taliban launched a wide military attack on the Afghani army in the city of North Mazar Sharif, killing 170 Afghani soldiers and injuring many more. The attackers were camouflaged in the Afghani army's uniform and broke into the Shahin camp in the city of Mazar Sharif.³⁹ Moreover, the Taliban's operations were not confined to attacking the army and police forces but included the US forces in Afghanistan. The Taliban launched several attacks on the American military bases in this country. For example, the Taliban attacked an American military base in the city of Khost, killing four Afghani soldiers and injuring eight when a booby-trapped car hit a control tower in the American Chapman camp on April 24, 2017, which coincided with the surprise visit of the US defense minister, James Mattis.⁴⁰ On May 27, 2017, the Taliban also launched a suicide bombing on the US forces in the city of Khost, killing eighteen soldiers.⁴¹

Recently, the US and NATO increased their military presence in Afghanistan on the orders of the US president, Donald Trump, in June 2017. The US Minister of Defense stated before the congress that the United States would deploy a small number of troops in Afghanistan. However, US military experts suggested deploying additional three to five thousand soldiers to train the Afghani forces and air support, increasing the US forces in Afghanistan to thirteen thousand soldiers.⁴² Additionally, on June 29, 2017, the Secretary General of NATO, Yens Stoltenberg, announced that the organization had plans to increase its forces in Afghanistan after the Brussels summit resolutions in May 2016. He also referred to an agreement between fifteen countries to support international operations in Afghanistan in addition to the thirteen thousand soldiers stationed in the country to

support the Afghani forces.⁴³ Furthermore, in April 2017, the United States dispatched another three hundred soldiers to train Afghani soldiers in Helmand, which was the first US deployment of forces since 2014.⁴⁴ This change in NATO's strategy for a long-term military presence in Central Asia might lead to a direct confrontation between Russia and Iran on one side and the US and NATO on the other as a result of conflicting interests and growing NATO military pressure on Russia and Iran's allies in Afghanistan.

In contrast to Russia-Iran's declared goals of fostering negotiations between all Afghani factions, the biased roles of Russia and Iran in Afghanistan obstruct the resolving of conflict in this country. Russia-Iran's political and military support of the Taliban also gives this organization the incentive to take a more radical stance and reject negotiations with the Afghani government in order to enhance its political position, expand in the Afghani provinces, and target the US and Afghani forces before the United States and NATO increase their military presence in this country.

Conclusion

The Russia-Iran mobilization in Afghanistan is one reason for political and security instability in the country. The two countries' stated political and military support of the Taliban in the face of the US, NATO, and the Afghani government within the framework of a proxy war between the US and Russia has led to escalation of domestic tension in Afghanistan and the weakening of the Afghani forces ability to confront the armed groups and drug-smuggling rings. Furthermore, the Russian mediation in Afghanistan with Chinese, Pakistani, and Iranian support was aimed at excluding the Afghani government and the US-supported political factions in the country and including the Taliban in the Afghani negotiations to give it political legitimacy. These procedures have changed Russia's role from mediator to a supporter of the Taliban, exerting more pressure on its political rivals. However, the US and NATO's military mobilization in Afghanistan could change the political and military balance by supporting the Afghani government in the face of Russia, Iran, and the Taliban, in addition to exerting more pressure on Moscow and Tehran to stop interfering in Afghani internal affairs. Accordingly, the rivalry between Russia and the West regarding Afghanistan might lead to following consequences:

An escalation of the tension between the two sides running the proxy war in the various areas of conflict in the Middle East, starting with Libya, Syria, and Afghanistan could occur because of the conflict of interests and Russia's attempts to exert pressure on NATO and draw attention away from its points of weakness in Eastern Europe.

Russia-Iran could tactically retreat to avoid direct confrontation with the US and NATO and to practice indirect influence on Afghanistan. Such a retreat is unlikely to happen in light of the non-negotiable interests of the two world powers in this country.

Common ground for coexistence between the Russian camp and the Western camp that includes a minimum amount of agreements between both sides could be found. However, the conflict of interests prevents this option from coming to light.

All disputes and disagreements between both sides could be solved, including Russia's role in Ukraine, the West's sanctions on Russia, the expansion of NATO in Eastern

Europe, the deployment of missile defense systems on the Russian borders, and the distribution of balanced roles between the countries concerning the areas of conflict in Syria, Afghanistan, and Libya. This scenario relies on rapprochement between the US president, Donald Trump, and his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin. However, the institutionalized resistance, historical heritage, and conflict of interests make this scenario impossible to achieve in the short term.

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