

Iran's Smart Power Analysis in Afghanistan after the US-led Invasion in 2001

Hadi Tolouei*

PhD in Political Sciences, Tarbiat Modares University

Mohammad Shafieefar

Assistant Professor of Political Sciences, University of Tehran

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Abstract

The Taliban's rule in Afghanistan has been the source of many ideological, political and security challenges for Iran. Therefore in the wake of Taliban's fall, the Islamic Republic gained diverse opportunities in the field of foreign policy. This opportunity happened on October 7, 2001, following the US-led invasion of Afghanistan. A fanatical and tyrannical government collapsed in Afghanistan and various tribes and religious groups of Afghans found the opportunity to engage in socio-political life. From the time of its creation, the Taliban was one of the main threats to the Islamic Republic. The invasion of the United States to Afghanistan in 2001 removed the group from the political scene in Afghanistan and opened the way for Iran to establish ties with new Afghan government. The new Iranian policy can be analyzed on a smart power scale (a combination of soft and hard power). Due to the cultural nature of the Islamic Revolution and its patterns for Muslim countries, attention to smart power issue is necessary.

Given Iran's great civilization, historical and cultural backgrounds, the formation of the Islamic State terrorist group (ISIS) and the rule of democratic values within the framework of religion, the country has both the soft and hard powers to advance its foreign policy. In this regard, Afghanistan has a variety of platforms to enable Iran's smart power but the presence of Western forces in the form of the NATO-led alliance in Afghanistan has been a threat to the Islamic Republic of Iran. This article seeks to highlight the history of Iran-Afghanistan relations during the Taliban era and describe the power and influence of the Islamic Republic in Afghanistan after the occupation of the country by Western troops. The main question of research is how the US invasion of Afghanistan created opportunities and challenges in terms of smart power for Iran's foreign

* E-mail: htolouei66@gmail.com (Corresponding author)

policy? The research hypothesis suggests that in the context of establishment of new government in Afghanistan, Iran's soft power has grown significantly in terms of good relations with this country, by participating in its reconstruction and supporting the influence of the Shiites and its historical and cultural ties with Afghan people. The presence of NATO-led forces in Afghanistan, the Afghan government's tendency toward the United States and the West and diminished Islamic bonds between the two countries have created challenges for the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Iran took a dual stance to the September 11th 2001 attacks. On the one hand it analyzed the invasion as an opportunity to defeat the Taliban; An enemy that had threatened the identity and national security of the Islamic Republic, so the country supported the fall of the Taliban. On the other, according to its historical relations with the United States, Iran viewed American troops presence in Afghanistan as a threat to its national security because the invasion of US-led forces to Afghanistan was a threat to Iran for three reasons:

1. US military presence was close to Iran eastern borders.
2. The NATO'S expansion to the East.
3. Expanding its domination and siege of the region's energy resources.
4. To operationalize the Greater Middle East plan.

On this basis, Iran spoke with a moral policy of the oppression of the Afghan people. Iran's strategy in Afghanistan was based on a partnership effort to reach to a political consensus in Kabul and balance of interests between ethnic, religious and various politico-military groups. To this end, Iran supported the United Nations and the international community initial steps to resolve the country's political conflicts. In this regard, establishing good relations between the two countries, Iran's participation in reconstruction of Afghanistan, maintaining its influence on Shiite sects and creating cultural and social ties with Afghans were the main objectives of the country to advance its smart power in Afghanistan.

Despite common identity and historical elements in Iran and Afghanistan, relations between the two countries have been challenged in recent years. According to some experts, the military presence and political influence of the United States in Kabul, the development of poppy cultivation and fragility of Afghan security are deterrents and negative factors in expanding relations between the two countries. Be having presence in Afghanistan as one of Iran's neighbors, the United States can put more pressure on the Islamic Republic. Establishing a military base in Afghanistan is also considered a serious threat to Iran. On the other hand, the potential of the tribal groups and people who live in both frontiers and ethnic and religious

differences in Afghanistan will cause divisions within Iran. In energy field, the United States has removed Iran from exporting its hydrocarbon resources to the international markets (by not allowing the country to be connected to the Central Asian pipelines) and has prevented improving relations of other countries with it.

In internal policy issues of Afghanistan, after several years, Iran showed its satisfaction with the Tajik government officials. The policy of support to Borhaneddin Rabbani and his followers, led Afghanistan Shiites to be disillusioned with Iran. In current situation, many reports by Afghan and American officials regarding relationship between Iran and the Taliban are being rejected by Iranian officials. Iran is also strongly opposed to the signing of a security pact between Afghanistan and the United States. It can be said that the level of political cooperation with the Shiites has been diminished due to the diversity in Iranian foreign policy apparatus. The Islamic republic of Iran, by supporting state-building process in Afghanistan prefers to communicate with those Shiite or Sunni groups that have nationalistic and anti-western inclinations. Another point is that Iran's encounter with Shiite immigrants has been nationalized and has become the topic of international regulations, rather than religious ideals. For this reason, Iran has been somewhat erased from their minds as the Kiblah of Afghanistan Shiites. The wave of growing dissatisfaction with Iran, which has been raised in recent years in connection with immigration policies, has caused Shiite clerics of Afghanistan to reconsider their relationship with Iran.

However, Iran is still looking to create a good image among Afghans. In this regard, the country's goal is to maintain friendly ties with Afghanistan central government and prevent the Taliban from returning to power and minimize the presence and influence of Western troops in the country. Iran's efforts to reconstruction and development of Afghanistan have been focused in eastern parts of the country. Iran is also seeking to expand its influence in the capital Kabul in addition to the border areas. It has established and opened consulates in six major cities such as Herat, Kandahar and Mazari-Sharif. These issues are important because the Islamic Republic of Iran is moving beyond Western-imposed regional isolation and the country's efforts to attract Afghan public opinion should be increased.

Keywords: Afghanistan, America, Foreign Policy, Iran, Smart Power.