

# Roundtable Discussion on Assessing US–Iran Tensions and its Implication for Afghanistan

30 January 2020



[www.aiss.af](http://www.aiss.af)



@AISS\_Afg



@AISSAfghanistan



انستیتوت مطالعات استراتژیک افغانستان  
Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies

AISS-R-001-2020

## Roundtable Discussion

### "Assessing U.S-Iran Tension and Its Implications for Afghanistan"

Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies (AISS)

30 January 2020

Kabul, Afghanistan

The Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies (AISS), held a roundtable on Thursday, January 30, 2020 titled "Assessing Iran-US Tensions and Its Implications for Afghanistan". The purpose of the roundtable was to examine recent tensions between the United States and Iran their impacts on Afghanistan. Amb. Mahmoud Saikal, former Permanent Representative of Afghanistan to the United Nations; Prof. Barnet Rubin, senior fellow at New York University's Center for International Cooperation and member of AISS advisory board, and Dr. Arian Sharifi, former Director of Threat Assessment at the National Security Council, were the speakers of the event. The roundtable was moderated by AISS Research Fellow, Nassir Sidiqee.



At the beginning of the event, Mr. Sidiqee briefed the participants on the history of US-Iranian relations and recent tensions between the two countries. Mr. Sidiqee said that the issue of terrorism has been a major element of Iran-US tensions. Iran has been labeled as ‘State Sponsor of Terrorism’ by us government since 1984. He said, “the west, particularly has constantly accused Tehran of masterminding terrorist acts and breaded it a (rogue state) or a member (axis of evil) mainly due to Iran’s support to Hamas, Hezbollah and Islamic Jihad”.

According to Mr. Sidiqee, the foundation of US allegation and accusation are the following:

- 1- The 1983 Beirut bombing of US military barracks.
- 2- The 1983 bombing of Khobar towers in Saudi Arabia.
- 3- Support to militant groups in Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan and Yemen.
- 4- Anti-Israel Rhetoric and support of anti-Israel “elements”
- 5- Killing of dissidents in Europe.
- 6- The threat of exporting Jihad

Mr. Sidiqee said that, The Iranian Perspective has been that Iran has suffered from scourge of terrorism. The MEK, the Junaidullah group and other foreign-backed anti-state (Nezam) elements have inflicted considerable damage to the Iranian society.



The Iranian governments have constantly accused the US support anti-state elements, pursuing a (Regime Change) strategy, playing a double standard with human rights issue in Iran and the Middle East, denying Iran’s right to use nuclear technology for peaceful purpose.

Mr. Sediqi also underlined mutual cooperation between Iran and US

- 1- The overthrow of Taliban regime in Afghanistan.
- 2- The overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq
- 3- Exchange of American and Western hostages
- 4- Fighting al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)
- 5- Middle East peace process
- 6- Combating drug trafficking and human trafficking
- 7- Chabahar port

The first speaker of the event was Amb. Mahmoud Saikal, who began his talk on the root causes of tensions between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United States, adding that, the assassination of Qasem Suleimani, the commander of the Quds Force of the IRGC, followed by Iranian attack on the US base in Iraq, has been unprecedented, putting Afghanistan in a critical position. According to him, Afghanistan has had unorganized but reasonable stances in this regard. Amb. Saikal said that Afghans are seriously worried about negative implications of the current tensions between the two countries for Afghanistan, adding that “there is information, that both sides are pushing Afghanistan to take a series of actions in favor of one side, which could be on the security, trade and banking aspects of Afghanistan’s relationships with them.”



According to Amb. Saikal, the Islamic Republic of Iran is an important neighbor of Afghanistan with many commonalities and deep historical ties, but Iran has been increasingly focused over the past fifteen years on the Middle East (Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, and the Persian Gulf). “This is increasing and has made Iran unable to invest on its good neighbor, Afghanistan.” On the other hand, the United States is a strategic partner for Afghanistan, which has played an important role

in the physical and human development in it over the last twenty years. The U.S. has supported Afghanistan in providing security and defending the great values of human rights, democracy, but in interactions with regional countries, the US has taken its own stances, which are considerable. “Iran and the US have some common interests, on their efforts to combat the production and trafficking of drugs, human trafficking and for a long time, in the past, against the Taliban violence,” he said. “Iran and the US have aligned positions on the Afghan Peace Process”, he added.

### **Foreign Policy of the Triangle**

Amb. Saikal said that Afghanistan's foreign policy toward Iran is economically driven. Also, Afghanistan is trying to bring into effect as much of the ‘Bilateral Security Agreement’ with the United States as possible, particularly a clear understanding of the non-use of the Afghan soil against a third country. According to Amb. Saikal, Iran's policy of engaging with Afghanistan over the past few years has had a security and hydro-focus, and their bilateral cooperation is tied to this issue. Iran's engagement with the United States is more focused on balancing power in the Middle East, and Iran is seeking to withdraw US forces from the region to bring about a balance in Iran's favor. Amb. Saikal said the United States is trying to prevent Afghanistan from turning into a land that would threaten American interests, and in its dealings with Iran, is more focused on Israeli security and the flow of oil in the region. According to Amb. Saikal, in the current situation, Afghanistan's policy towards Iran is merely economic driven and that may be problematic. “Taking into consideration the situation in the region and the world, Afghanistan should have economic, political and security relations with Iran,” he added.



## Concerns of the Triangle

According to Amb. Saikal, Afghanistan is worried about becoming a competition ground between the United States and Iran, as Afghanistan is currently so between some countries. There is concerns that the competition will increase and intensify. Afghanistan has so many problems with Pakistan and Iran's addition can make the situation much worse. He continued that the tension between two countries may also delay the peace process with the Taliban and the Iranian-backed militias will also be a threat to Afghanistan's stability. Amb. Saikal said that Iran's concerns include use of Afghan soil by the US against Iran, presence Islamic State in Afghanistan, drug production and trafficking, and the influence of Arab countries, especially Saudi Arabia in western Afghanistan. He added that the main US concern is Iran's use of extremist groups against US interests and troops in Afghanistan.

Amb. Saikal said that the Taliban's violence brought the US forces into Afghanistan and they will remain unless the group put an end to violence. According to Amb. Saikal, the U.S. forces were not present in Afghanistan in 1988 when eleven Iranian diplomats were killed by Taliban in Mazar-e-Sharif that almost led the two countries into a full-scale war. "The two countries should try to eliminate the Taliban's violence instead of using the group as tool against each other and Afghanistan can assure both sides with active diplomacy in Tehran and Washington that our soil will not be used against them," he added.



**Professor Barnet Rubin**, spoke about the U.S. policy towards Afghanistan amid sanctions and its hostile relationship its neighbor, Iran. He said that the U.S. will continue to support Afghanistan, its current constitutional order and the peace process. He continued that the US military presence in Afghanistan is crucial for the Afghan military and government, but on the other hand, other countries such as, Russia, Iran, China and even Pakistan, consider the U.S. presence a threat to themselves.

Prof. Rubin added that before President Trump`s presidency and the United States withdrawal from Iranian nuclear deal, relations between the United States and Iran were improving. However, as soon as the US withdrew from the deal, tensions between Tehran and Washington increased.

Prof. Rubin said that there is a lack of clarity in the U.S. policy towards Afghanistan. He added that other aspects of the U.S. relationship with Iran precedes its relationship with Iran regarding Afghanistan. He said that the US pursued maximum pressure through sanctions on Iran, which has even affected U.S. behavior in Afghanistan. Although the United States exempted sanctions on foreign companies that contributed to Afghan development or decided to invest in Afghanistan, some companies still found it difficult to obtain a permit to invest in the country.

In pro. Rubin's view, after the assassination of General Soleimani by the United States, the two countries were on the verge of military confrontation. Iran, on the other hand, has always said that if the United States attacks Iran, one of Iran's response would be to attack U.S. forces in the region, Afghanistan is one of the countries where US troops are present. He noted that Iran has the potential to destabilize Afghanistan. Prof. Rubin said that Iran is doing what its national interests require, but the problem is that America's problems with Iran outweigh the common interests of the two countries in Afghanistan. According to Pro. Rubin, Iran must understand and it is an undeniable fact that war and instability in Afghanistan have a very negative impact on Iran.

Speaking about the tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran, Pro. Rubin said that competition between the two countries would be harmful not only to Afghanistan but to the entire region. He said that, in recent years, the competition has been more focused in the Middle East, particularly in countries such as Syria, Lebanon and Yemen; however, Afghanistan has been less affected.



***Dr. Aryan Sharifi*** said that he would not be concerned about implications of the recent tension between the United States and Iran on Afghanistan because of four underlying reasons.

**First**, he said that relations between Iran and the United States have been tense over the past forty years, following the Islamic Revolution, and the ground of the conflict between the two countries has been Middle East. Afghanistan, however, has been spared. “Even in the past nineteen years, he said, in the presence of U.S. military in Afghanistan, Kabul has never been a field of competition between the U.S. and Iran”. Afghanistan continues its economic and trade relations with Iran despite U.S. sanctions against Iran.

**Second**, he said that the major interests of the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran in Afghanistan are in parallel with each other, not in opposition, including terrorism and prevention of Afghanistan from turning into a safe haven for extremist groups that will threaten the interests of both countries.

**Third**, he said that Iran's interests could be realized in a secure and stable Afghanistan. Iran's interest in Afghanistan is counter-terrorism because Iran is concerned about ultra- Sunni extremist groups in Afghanistan. Iran's other interests are water, illegal drugs industry and the issue of Afghan refugees in Iran. Dr. Sharifi said that if we carefully analyze the issues mentioned above, we will find that the escalation of instability in Afghanistan is endangering everything and that Iran does not want to jeopardize its strategic interests.



**Fourth**, he said that Iran is strongly opposed to the re-establishment or revival of the Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan, noting that Iran may wish to have a cold peace with a part of the Taliban group, formerly under Mullah Mansour's influence. According to Dr. Sharifi, by analyzing the tensions between Iran and the U.S. three different scenarios (strong, moderate and weak) can be predicted.



**A:** Recent tensions between the two countries may eventually decrease and relations between the United States and Iran return to the pre-existing situation. Dr. Sharifi said that in his view, this is the most plausible scenario given that the two countries had no diplomatic relations for 40 years. “In this case, the limited proxy war will continue in Afghanistan”, he said.

**B:** Tensions between the two countries may decrease, but their relations may not return to normal. “In this case, the proxy war between the two countries will intensify in Afghanistan”, Dr. Sharifi noted.



**C:** Tensions between the two countries may intensify and lead to a war between Tehran and Washington. Dr. Sharifi said that the possibility of a war between Iran and the US is low, but not impossible. In case of a war between the two countries, Afghanistan will become a battlefield between the two countries as the US will use its bases in Afghanistan against Iran, and Tehran will directly target the US bases in Afghanistan.

Dr. Sharifi concluded that a neutral and moderate Afghan policy towards both countries is for the benefit of Afghanistan. He continued that Iran is far more sensitive to Saudi presence in Afghanistan than the U.S. presence in Afghanistan, and that our government and our people must take this issue seriously because Saudi Arabia is Iran's major ideological rival in the region. The Afghan government must try to be an opportunity for cooperation between countries.

At the end, the participants engaged in Q&A with the speakers of the program.