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## **Impact of Helmand Water Dispute on the Bilateral Relations between Iran and Afghanistan; an Evaluation**

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**Abstract:** Iran-Afghan relationship is having a long and flourishing historical background. Both the countries shared in religious, socio-economic, cultural and geo-political experiences with a long border sharing. But considerable tensions also emanated from the fundamental differences between the Afghan Sunnites and the Iranian Shiites Muslims. Since long, Iran was concerned over different disputed issues between the two countries as the political anarchy in Afghanistan, drug smuggling, Afghan refugees in Iran particularly after Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and demarcated border issue. But the most ancient dispute between Iran and Afghanistan is the sharing of water of Helmand River which passed over the two countries. For centuries, many measures have been taken bilaterally, trilaterally or multilaterally, but very little success has been shown. This dispute largely influences Iranian foreign policy. Iran's policy towards Afghanistan has been founded on its multiple geostrategic interests. To secure its water interests, Iran adopted a paradoxical strategy through legal channels and less legitimate operations too. Iran's official policy is to reach formal agreements and to pursue the benefits of cooperation. At the same time, Iran has been

following multiple and contradictory influential policies in Afghanistan. Iran offered economic, social, and cultural assistance to Afghanistan; pressured Kabul over Afghan refugees and migrant workers in Iran; tried to develop a deep bilateral relationship between Tehran and Kabul; attempted to create a gap between Kabul and the West. Iran is also accused having influence-peddling activities into Afghanistan, such as reports, Iran was supplying weapons, equipments to Taliban and some other insurgent groups in Afghanistan, forcing repatriation of Afghan refugees, influencing refugees and *Shi'a* minorities against Afghan government, and even Iranian border guards aided the escape of *al-Qa'ida* fighters from Afghanistan into Iran mainly to undermine Afghan central government, establish a friendly government in Kabul, reduce US influence in the region. One of the main reasons behind Iranian policy is to ensure water supply from Helmand River. Thus the Iranian diverse and sometimes conflicting policies in Afghanistan are mainly centered on water sharing of Helmand River. For regional stability and security, the issue must be solved protecting the rights of Afghans and Iranians within the international law and justice.

**Keywords:** Iran, Afghanistan, Disputed Issues, Helmand River, Water sharing, Taliban, Refugee.

## 1. Introduction

Iran-Afghan relationship is having a long and flourishing historical background. Both the countries shared in religious, socio-economic, cultural and geo-political experiences with a long border sharing. But

considerable tensions also emanated from the fundamental differences between the Afghan Sunnites and the Iranian Shiites Muslims. Since long, Iran was concerned over different disputed issues between the two countries such as the political situation in Afghanistan, drug smuggling from Afghanistan into Iran, refugees seeking asylum from Afghanistan to Iran particularly after Soviet occupation of Afghanistan (1979-90) and demarcated border issue. But the most ancient dispute between Iran and Afghanistan is the sharing of water of Helmand River which passed over the two countries. For centuries, many measures have been taken bilaterally, trilaterally or multilaterally, but very little success has been shown. This dispute largely influences Iranian foreign policy towards Afghanistan. Consistent fighting along the border throughout the 1990s cost Iran over 3,000 soldiers and police. Since 11 September 2001, Iran showed virtual signs of a willingness to cooperate with US efforts in Afghanistan. But this direction took a dramatic turn when the US included Iran as a member of the tripartite “Axis of Evil” in 2002 (The White House, 2002). Iran feared of being encircled by the US forces while Iran is having a longstanding antipathy toward the US since Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979 which presently became more complex over Iran’s nuclear issue. The US politico-military penetration in Afghanistan provided additional impetus toward Iranian policy towards Afghanistan. Though Russia and China diplomatically supported the US theory of ‘War on Terrorism’ in Afghanistan, but they are also in many ways deeply ambivalent about the US army presence in the region. Iran’s policy towards Afghanistan has been founded on its multiple geostrategic interests. To secure its water interests, Iran adopted a paradoxical strategy through legal channels and less legitimate operations too. Iran’s

official policy is to reach formal agreements and to pursue the benefits of cooperation. At the same time, Iran has been following multiple and contradictory influential policies in Afghanistan. Iran offered economic, social, and cultural assistance to Afghanistan; pressured Kabul over Afghan refugees and migrant workers in Iran; tried to develop a deep bilateral relationship between Tehran and Kabul; attempted to create a gap between Kabul and the West. Iran is also accused having influence-peddling activities into Afghanistan particularly in and around Herat, such as reports, Iran was supplying weapons, equipments to Taliban and some other insurgent groups in Afghanistan, forcing repatriation of Afghan refugees, influencing refugees and *Shi'a* minorities against Afghan government, and even Iranian border guards aided the escape of *al-Qa'ida* fighters from Afghanistan into Iran. The main objectives of Iran are to undermine the Afghan central government, establish of a friendly government in Kabul with a view to have a favorable conclusion of disputed issues like Helmand water and to gain regional objectives mainly to reduce the US influence in the Eurasian region. Thus the Iranian diverse and sometimes conflicting policies in Afghanistan are mainly centered on water sharing of Helmand River. Focusing on the Iran-Afghanistan historical relationship, this article aims at mainly discovering the root and development of water dispute of Helmand River and how the dispute impacts Iran's policy towards Afghanistan and bilateral relations between them. It also focused on some suggestions to solve the issue securing the rights of the Afghans and Iranians within international law and justice.

## 2. Iran-Afghan Historical Integration and Relationship

Afghanistan and Iran are historically tied to the greater sphere of Persian civilization. Both the countries shared in geographical proximity, common history, and deep socio-cultural affinities. The historical pattern of migration, market integration, interdependence of local communities, their trans-border networks and frequent demographic movements have significance beyond the calculus of national interest. The social, traditional, linguistic, religious, and cultural bonds connected the people of the two countries so deeply that Afghans, especially the residents of *Herat* still speak in Persian *Dari*<sup>1</sup> language.

While the Arab invasion of Iran ended, the Persian *Samanid* dynasty (819-899) reincorporated Afghanistan as a Persian-ruled domain. The *Ghaznavids* ruled much of Persia and Afghanistan from 975 to 1187 and the state was centered in Ghazni, a city in present Afghanistan. Due to the political and cultural influence of their predecessors – Persian *Samanids* - the originally Turkic *Ghaznavids* had become thoroughly Persianized. The fifteenth century *Qara Qoyunlu* dynasty (1375-1468) leader *Jahan Shah* established *Herat* as the capital of his Iranian domains. In the early sixteenth century, the *Safavid*<sup>2</sup> *Shah Tahmasp* (1524-1576)

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<sup>1</sup> Dari refers to the Persian court language of the Sassanids. In contemporary usage, the term refers to the dialects of modern Persian language spoken in Afghanistan. This term officially recognized in 1964 by the Constitution of Afghanistan as one of the two official languages of Afghanistan; the other is Pashto. Dari is the mother tongue of approximately 50% of the population, serving as the country's lingua franca.

<sup>2</sup> The Safavid was one of the most significant ruling dynasties of Iranian empire, who ruled from 1501/1502 to 1722/1736. The dynasty had its origin in the "Safawiyah" which was established in the city of Ardabil in the Azerbaijan region of Iran. The Safavids established control over all of Persia and reasserted the Iranian identity of the

drove the Uzbeks from *Herat* for a short time but, by century's end, *Shah Abbas* (1571-1629) had reasserted Iranian dominance over the city and all of western Afghanistan. As *Safavid* power waned in the early eighteenth century, an Afghan commander namely Nader Shah operating from *Herat* conquered much of Iran, declared himself *Shah*, and established the Afghan city *Qandahar* as the capital of domains spread across both countries. In the early nineteenth century, the *Qajar*<sup>3</sup> dynasty ruler *Muhammad Shah* (1834-1848) sought to reassert Iran's claim to *Herat*. In 1856, Iranian troops seized *Herat*. What came next was surprising. A couple weeks after Iranian troops captured *Herat*, British authorities in Bombay dispatched 45 ships carrying almost 6,000 troops. They seized the Iranian port of *Bushehr* and pushed inland. British forces were withdrawn when the *Shah* abandoned all claim to Afghanistan with the Treaty of Paris in 1857 (Mustawfi, 1964, pp. 85-86). The British Indian Empire and Imperial Russia played the "Great Game" during 19<sup>th</sup> century. Neither the British nor the Russians wanted to lose Afghanistan to its rival power. While the British looked Afghanistan as the key to India and feared that the Iranian *Shah* might welcome Russian transit to reduce informal British influence in Afghanistan, the Russia saw Afghanistan as the Central Asian state that would open up not just India, but Iran as well. From Iranian perspective, the Afghan issue had less to do with Great

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region, thus becoming the first native dynasty since the Sassanids to establish a unified Iranian state.

<sup>3</sup> The Qajar dynasty was a Turko-Persian royal family who ruled Persia from 1794 to 1925. The dynasty took full control of Iran in 1794 and re-asserted Persian sovereignty over parts of the Caucasus. In 1921, Reza Khan staged a coup becoming the effective ruler of Iran. In 1923, Ahmad Shah, the last ruler of Qajar dynasty went into exile in Europe and subsequently Reza Khan was proclaimed Shah as Reza Shah Pahlavi in 1925.

Game strategy but to do with prestige and national security. The legacy of this Great Game, which ended after World War I, was the contentious Durand Line<sup>4</sup> in 1893 and the then Afghan leader was forced to agree with the demarcated border.

Iranian leaders have not remained aloof from Afghan affairs. Geography text books in Iran continue to list Herat as provinces of Iran. Throughout much of the twentieth century, both monarchies faced common enemies and threats from the same movements which muted disputes. In 1921, they concluded a Treaty of Friendship and, in 1934, they resolved a border dispute through arbitration. Three years later, both monarchies, along with Turkey and Iraq, signed the *Saadabad* Pact, in which they agreed to respect each other's territorial integrity and refrain from aggression against each other. Two years later, they resolved a water sharing dispute. Relations deteriorated markedly with the 1979, the year in which both Iran underwent the Islamic Revolution led by *Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini* and Afghanistan was invaded by the Soviet Union. *Khomeini* criticized the Afghan government even prior to his return to Tehran as the Soviet-sponsored government controlled the regime (*Khomeini*, 1985, p. 301, 323). The Iranians complained of border violations following the Soviet invasion. They influenced Afghan *Shi'a* resistance groups to unite and oppose the Soviet-backed government of Afghanistan.

Throughout 1980s, the Soviet Union and the US fought rival

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<sup>4</sup> In 1893 Sir Mortimer Durand, the foreign secretary of the colonial government of India, negotiated an agreement with the king of Afghanistan, Amir Abdur Rahman Khan, to delineate a border. The so-called Durand Line cut through Pashtun territories, dividing them between British and Afghan areas of influence. The Pashtuns refused to be subjugated under British rule. The British compromised by creating a new province in 1901, named the North-West Frontier Province.



power in Afghanistan which ended with the collapse of Soviet Union in 1991 after being defeated in Afghanistan. Following the emergence of the *Taliban* and their harsh treatment of Afghanistan's *Shi'a* minority and particularly after the *Mazar-i-Sharif* incident (Taliban forces seized the Iranian consulate in *Mazar-i-Sharif* and executed Iranian diplomats in 1998) relations deteriorated further and the two countries almost went to war. The *Talibans* metamorphosed into *Al Qaeda*. After the first major attack against the US in September 2001, Afghanistan once again became the first front in America's War on Terror. Iran has shown virtual support for US attack against *Taliban* in Afghanistan which overthrown *Taliban* from power in 2001 though both the countries maintained hostile relation since Islamic Revolution in Iran. The new Afghan government has engaged in cordial relations with both Iran and the US. Iran was a key factor in the overthrow of the *Taliban* and has since helped revive Afghanistan's economy and infrastructure. Iran has built some roads, power transmission lines, and border stations, among other infrastructure projects which would better link the two nations. Iran and Afghanistan planned on building a new rail line connecting *Mashhad* to *Herat* and, eventually, *Tehran* to *Kabul* (Abdullahi, 2009). Trade between the two nations has increased dramatically since the fall of the *Taliban*. According to the chairman of Afghanistan Chamber of Commerce and Industries Iran's exports to Afghanistan in 2008 stands at \$800 million (ICCIM, 2008). Iran exports oil products, cement, construction material, carpets, home appliances, detergents and imports nuts, carpets, agricultural products as well as handicrafts from Afghanistan (ICCIM, 2008). Afghanistan imports 90 percent of its needs, except agricultural products.

### 3. Origin and development of Helmand Water dispute

Despite of Afghanistan's deep socio-religious, linguistic and cultural links to Iran, in the long walk of history there are also some regional and political disputes. The most important and long-standing bilateral dispute is over the water sharing of Helmand<sup>5</sup> River, a river in southwestern Afghanistan and eastern Iran, about 715 miles (1,150 km) long. Rising in the *Baba* Range in east-central Afghanistan, it flows southwestward more than half the length of Afghanistan then flowing northward for a short distance through Iranian territory and falls into the Helmand (Sistan) swamps on the Afghan-Iranian border. Throughout its course in Afghanistan, Helmand receives from a number of tributaries including *Musa Qaleh*, *Arghandab* and *Tarnak* (Mojtahed-Zadeh, 1993, p. 100). Having received *Arghandab* near *Bost* at the edge of mountain zone, Helmand crosses the deserts for about 400 km before reaching *Chahar-Borjak* which is the beginning of Greater *Sistan*, 70 km. upstream of the Iranian border. In the delta begins at *Kuhak*, Helmand divides into two main branches of *Rud-e Sistan* and *Rud-e Parian*, each subdividing into several branches and canals. Helmand's water is essential for farmers in both Afghanistan and Iran's southeastern *Sistan va Baluchistan* Province. The river has been extensively developed under the Helmand Valley Authority of Afghanistan (Zakhilwal, 2011). A reservoir has been built at *Kajaki*, 50 miles above *Gereshk*, for irrigation and flood control, and just above the same town a dam diverts water to a canal. Below the reservoir much of the river's length is tapped for irrigation, and a fertile, populous

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<sup>5</sup> Also spelled Helmund, or Hilmand, or Hirmand, Persian Darya-Ye- Helmand, Latin Erymandrus,

belt follows its course. The river remains relatively salt-free unlike most rivers with no outlet to the sea and is extensively used for irrigation and watering crops. Helmand drains more than 100,000 square miles (160,000 square km.) and more than one billion cubic metres of water are used for agricultural irrigation in the *Sistan* of Iran annually. If the utilization of the water is made limited to the middle basin of the river, naturally would have a strong repercussion on the lower delta region. Data available from *Colonel McMahon's* Arbitration Commission's measurements of Helmand water at the turn of the twentieth century indicate annual flows (from October to September) of three years - 1902 to 1905 - respectively of 7.7, 5.4 and 3.6 billion cubic metres; minimum monthly flows of 45-50 million cubic metres; and a maximum of about 2000 million cubic metres (Italconsult, 1959, p. 52). Against these figures, data gathered in the period between October 1946 and September 1950 by the Helmand Delta Mission, shows that the flows were 2.2, 4.5, 6.6 and 6.5 billion cubic metres respectively, with minimum monthly flows in the months of September and October (excluding the exceptionally low September 1947) of 30 x 10 cubic metres (equal to a capacity of about 11-12 cubic metres. per second) and with a maximum of 1.8 - 2.6 x 10 cubic metres in the months of April and May (700 - 1000 cm. per second) (Italconsult, 1959, p. 52). Although *Sistan* is geographically located in the Iranian plateau of Central Asia, most of it falls politically under Afghanistan, with a small portion in Pakistan. Almost the entire area of the Iranian part of *Sistan* is formed of sediments from Helmand, creating one of the most fertile lands in Iran.

**Population Data by Country in the Helmand Basin: (TFDD)**

| Country Name | Total population living in the basin | Population density within the basin (persons/sq km) | Area of the basin within country (sq km) |
|--------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| Afghanistan  | 5,800,000                            | 20                                                  | 288,000                                  |
| Iran         | 1,050,000                            | 19                                                  | 54,900                                   |
| Pakistan     | 142,000                              | 14                                                  | 10,500                                   |

Both the countries have been involved in a long-running dispute over access to the Helmand River. The dispute can be traced back to the 1870s, when British boundary arbitrator, *General F. Goldsmid* decided in 1872 to put the Iran-Afghanistan boundary in the mid of *Sistan*, the main delta of Helmand without making any arrangement for water sharing between the two sides (Mojtahed-Zadeh, 1993, pp. 578-581). Only it was mentioned in the boundary award that: “It is, moreover, to be well understood that no works are to be carried out on either side calculated to interfere with the requisite supply of water for irrigation on both banks of Hirmand” (Goldsmid, 1876, p. 414). The British protectorate ruler in Afghanistan considered Helmand as an internal river of Afghanistan, reserving the right to utilize its water in whatever way it wished. *McMahon*’s Memorandum of 25 September 1904 asserts: “The Afghan Government does not admit that there is any water question in dispute, as their geographical position makes them sole owner of the whole Helmand above the *Band-i-Sistan*” (McMahon, 1904, Para 3 of clause 69). Thus the Afghan rulers ignored the rights of the people of downstream Helmand whose life depended on the water supplies from the river. It also ignored international trends towards recognizing the

status of rivers passing through more than one country as ‘international rivers’.

Further disputes occurred between the two countries when the river changed its course in the border area in 1896. Once again British arbitration was sought and *Colonel Henry McMahon* was assigned to demarcate new boundaries in 1903. *McMahon*’s new boundary was more or less same as previously defined by *General Goldsmid*, except for the fact that *McMahon* made a water award in 1905 (Mojtahed-Zadeh, 1994, p. 135), which created more problems rather than a settlement. Having decided to divide the Helmand water at the border area, equally between the two sides in 1903-4 (McMahon, 1904), *McMahon* further changed his decision in 1905 and allocated two-third of Helmand water in the delta to Afghanistan and one-third to Iranian *Sistan* (McMahon, 1904A, pp. 34-36), which is more fertile and populous than the corresponding Afghan border district of *Nimrouz*. The Iranians declared this water award unacceptable and refused to ratify it, while the Afghans were pleased (FO 60/728, 1905, p.8). The Iranian newspapers appeared with complaints from the *Sistan* population criticizing *McMahon* and the British for their ‘conspiracy’ against their water rights. The Russians also wrote letters to the Iranian Crown Prince expressing their displeasure at the decision of British arbitration about water rights of the people of *Sistan* (FO 60/729, 1905, p.48). British arbitration headquarters were attacked and burnt by the local *Sistanis* (FO 60/729, 1905A p.280) and the Iranian government requested for fresh arbitration. The dispute continued for years. In the 1930s, when the friendly relations improved between the new centralized Iranian government of *Reza Shah Pahlavi* (1925-1941) and the Afghan

independent government of *Mohammad Nader Shah* (1929-1933), fresh attempts have been taken for the settlement of Helmand water disputes which concluded in the 1939 treaty by the governments of Iran's *Reza Shah Pahlavi* and *Mohammad Zahir Shah* of Afghanistan. Article I of this treaty recognized that "the governments of Iran and Afghanistan agree to divide in equal shares all waters of the Helmand river which flows to *Band-e Kamal Khan* (30 miles inside Afghan territory) between Iran and Afghanistan," and Article II provided that in order to use more water than that is taken now between *Deh-e Chahr-Borjak* and *Band-e Kamal Khan*, the government of Afghanistan would not construct any other stream in the said district and not even repair any of the existing ones (IATHWD, 1939). From the Iranian point of view, this treaty was a significant improvement of *McMahon's* water award with acceptable international standard. But the Afghans failed to agree on it amongst themselves and subsequently no end to the disputes. It was also because of the changed political circumstances during World War II when *Reza Shah* of Iran was exiled in 1941. The Afghans refused to ratify the treaty, particularly after the Americans began the construction of diversion dams and canals on the river as a result of contracts they concluded with the Afghans in 1945. The *Sistan* population was convinced that the consequence of these dams and canals was going to be immediate. The political diary of the British Consul General of *Mashahd* records a long spell of drought in *Sistan* in the summer of 1947. It remarks:

"From *Zabol* a report has been received that no water from the Helmand has reached the town for a month and that outlying villages have been without it for some three months. The drought-stricken population will not believe

that failure of last winter's snow is the reason and they have expressed their intent of crossing into Afghanistan and forcibly release the water on which they depend and which they are convinced the Afghans are illegally stealing or diverting by their new American engineered irrigation scheme in the neighborhood of *Girishk* (FO 371/62024, 1947)."

The Iranian Ambassador in Afghanistan reported to his government that the canal was of 65 miles. The depth of water all along the canal was 2 metres and its breadth 30 metres gradually reducing until 12 metres at the end. It carried between 15 to 20 thousand square feet of water which was meant to go to *Sistan* (IDOPM, 1947). The construction of two major dams, *Kajaki* reservoir and *Boghra* diversion in Afghanistan in 1949 caused great uproar among Iranians. The two countries eventually sent representatives to Washington in 1959 for negotiation through US mediation, but failed to achieve any result. Iranian Minister of Court *Asadollah Alam* wrote in his diaries in March 1969 that Kabul would agree to ensure water flow to Iran only in exchange for credit facilities, access to Iranian ports, and development assistance (Alikhani, 1991). In 1973 Iranian Prime Minister *Amir Abbas Hoveida* and Afghan Prime Minister *Mohammad Musa Shafiq* signed an agreement determining the specific amount of water that should flow into Iran: 26 cubic meters of water per second. Yet this agreement was not ratified. Many Afghans did not support this agreement and the parliament of that time also rejected it. The issue continued to be delayed by other events: the 1973 Afghan coup, the 1978-1979 revolution in Iran, the 1979 Soviet invasion and

occupation of Afghanistan (1979-1989), and their puppet government of *Dr. Najibollah* collapsed in 1992 and subsequently the rise of *Taliban*, the US attack in Afghanistan in 2001 and the fall of *Taliban*. These developments resulted in a long-standing civil war in Afghanistan which prevented the two neighbors from making fresh efforts for the settlement of Helmand water dispute.

Relations between the Iranian *Shi'a* government and the *Sunni Taliban* regime of Afghanistan were troubled, and the two sides did not reach an accord on use of the Helmand River's water. The *Taliban's* ouster in 2001 and friendly relations between the governments of President *Hamid Karzai* and *Mohammad Khatami* suggested that the situation would change for the better, as the entire region had seriously affected with multiyear drought. But it did not improve water flows for Iran. "The least we expect is implementation of the accord signed between Iran and Afghanistan before the Islamic revolution in Iran," parliamentarian *Alaedin Borujerdi* said on 1 September 2002, IRNA reported. Parliamentarian *Gholam Hussein Aqai*, who represented the *Sistan va Baluchistan* Province city of *Zabol*, also criticized the Afghan's failure to provide water despite a new agreement reached during President *Khatami's* 13 August 2002 visit to Afghanistan. "*Entekhab*" reported on 1 September 2002. An amount of water from the Helmand River reached Iran on 25 October 2002, but Iranians complained that it was too little for farming. Then it stopped completely. Iranian Foreign Minister *Kamal Kharrazi* said during a November 2002 telephone conversation with *Karzai* that Afghanistan must honor the existing agreements regarding the river. When the two met in Bonn the following



month, *Karzai* blamed the drought for the lack of water, adding that they are waiting for seasonal rainfall so the water will resume flowing. In September 2004, Iranian and Afghan officials met in Tehran for a joint meeting within the framework of the 1973 Helmand River treaty. Deputy Energy Minister *Reza Ardakanian* told IRNA on 8 September 2004 that the two sides were preparing for the implementation of the treaty. He said that under normal circumstances, Iran's annual share is 820 million cubic meters. But as of early 2005, the dispute over the waters of the Helmand River seemed no closer to resolution. The *Sistan va Baluchistan* Province Governor-General *Hussein Amini* said that Afghanistan should live up to the commitments in the 1973 treaty, IRNA reported on 1 February 2005. At the end of January, 2005, Expediency Council Chairman *Ayatollah Ali-Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani* said during a visit to the *Milak* border crossing that Afghanistan should fulfill its commitments on use of the waters, IRNA reported on 27 May.

However, constructive measures have taken place in recent years to solve the disagreements between Iran and Afghanistan. Both the countries have assigned a common Helmand River Commissioners Delegation in accordance with Protocol 1 of the Helmand River Treaty of 1973 and they currently meet on a quarterly basis to promote bilateral cooperation and the formation of subcommittees on dredging, food control etc. in the Helmand. They have worked in close cooperation with the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) through a process of trilateral sessions between Afghanistan, Iran, and UNEP. It is a part of integrated efforts addressing water management and sustainable development in

the basins of the rivers flowing into the *Sistan* Basin. Iran has expressed its willingness to transfer its experiences in several fields of water and agriculture to Afghanistan. Current Iranian technical assistance to the construction of a research institute in the Afghan Ministry of Energy and Water is an example for the enhancement of regional data and information sharing (Ziaie, 2008, p. 28). But Iran perceives the US economic strategy in Afghanistan particularly agricultural development and dam rehabilitation and construction —a crucial element in the *Obama* strategy as major security threats. These developments would severely effect in the *Sistan* and *Baluchistan* province, Iran's poorest and most unstable province. Tehran cannot afford to risk water scarcity that can further disenfranchise *Sistan* and *Baluchistan* from the capital, although the water issue remains disputed between Iran and Afghanistan even today.

#### **4. Impact of Helmand Water Dispute on the Bilateral Relationships**

The Iran-Afghanistan disputes on the Helmand water have played a major role in the two countries relationships. Iran's foreign policy towards Afghanistan has been founded on its multiple geostrategic interests and also directed with a view of attaining more water and facilities from Helmand River. Historically, cooperation and trust between Iran and Afghanistan on the water issue has been limited. With the exception of 1973 water accord that defined an acceptable rate of discharge from the Helmand, there are no formal water-

sharing agreements. The development of more water infrastructure in Afghanistan, unbounded by agreements increased Iran's vulnerability. To secure its water interests, Iran appears to have adopted a paradoxical strategy. While pursuing its interests through legal channels, it has adopted less legitimate operations too. Iran's official policy is to reach formal agreements and to develop bilateral cooperative relationships in different fields such as flood and drought control, political stability, regional economic development. Since 2003, Iran has entered into a UN partnership to protect the *Hamun*<sup>6</sup> lakes and established an Iran-Afghan commission to negotiate the discharge flow of the Helmand River. In late 2010 energy ministers from Iran, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan agreed to establish a tripartite "supreme water council".

At the same time, Iran has been following multiple and contradictory influential policies in Afghanistan. On the one hand, Iran offered economic, social, and cultural assistance to Afghanistan; tried to develop a deep bilateral relationship between Tehran and Kabul, on the other hand, it pressured Kabul over Afghan refugees and migrant workers in Iran; lent limited military support to the *Taliban* and possibly other insurgent groups; attempted to create a gap between Kabul and the West; and possibly tried to destabilize the government of *Hamid Karzai* (Katzman, 2008). Iran's assistance to Afghanistan is unquestionably significant. President *Mohammad Khatami* visited Kabul in August 2002—the first such high level visit in forty years. Trade agreements

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<sup>6</sup> Hamun Lake is a term applied to extended wetlands in endorheic Seistan Basin on the large border region in southeastern Iran and southwestern Afghanistan and mainly fed by the Helmand River.

followed in January 2003, including efforts to replace *Karachi* with the Iranian port of *Chabahar* as Afghanistan's principal trade outlet. Iran offered Afghanistan a 90 percent discount on duties and tariffs for goods exported through the *Chabahar* free trade zone (Khan, 2004). Iranian-Afghan trade grew from less than \$10 million in 2001 to \$500 million in 2006 (PAN, 2007). By mid-2007, Iran had extended more than \$500 million in credits to Afghanistan, at least half of which were in grants (IRNA, 2007). Some of Iran's assistance was general support to Afghan reconstruction. In June 2006, Tehran promised to build two fifty-megawatt electrical power stations to supplement Kabul's electrical supply at a cost of around \$80 million (PAN, 2006). Tehran has also been helping to link western Afghanistan to the Iranian power grid and to upgrade the electrical capacity of the western provincial capitals generally. In January 2007, an Iranian-funded thirty-megawatt transformer began operating in the *Ghurian* district of *Herat* province (at a cost of \$2 million), and Tehran has promised another such plant in the area soon (PAN, 2007A). Iran provided nearly \$2 million to assist the Afghan Administrative Reforms and Civil Service Commission to train government officials in *Kandahar*, *Herat*, and *Kabul* in 2006 and 2007 (PAN, 2007B). Since it is natural for a large and wealthier state to assist an impoverished and war ravaged state on its border, or for any state to try to expand commercial relations with its neighbors, Iran's activities in these areas have aroused little comment and even some praise. In the broader context of Iran's activities in Afghanistan are creating a set of incentives and disincentives that operate powerfully on the Afghan government and that are changing power relations within Afghanistan and between Iran and Afghanistan in important ways.

On the contrary, Sometimes Iran is accused having influence-peddling activities into Afghanistan, particularly in and around *Heart* such as reports, Iran is supplying weapons to insurgent groups, forcing repatriation of Afghan refugees, influencing refugees and *Shi'a* minorities against Afghan government, and even Iranian border guards aided the escape of *al-Qa'ida* fighters from Afghanistan into Iran. There are also reports that Iran may be using the *Taliban* as proxies to disrupt Afghanistan's water projects. Both the provincial governor and police chief of *Farah* of Afghanistan have publicly claimed to have intelligence implicating Iran and Iranian manufactured arms and explosives have been found in the vicinity of the dams. These speculations are also consistent with the US reports that Iran's *Qods* Forces have provided *Taliban* with limited training, arms, and plastic explosives since 2006. Due to the long-standing antipathy of the *Shi'a* Iran and the *Sunni Taliban* as well as continuous Iranian rhetoric to demonize the *Taliban*, It is difficult to imagine a basis for any long-term relationship between these two or any desire in Tehran to see the *Taliban* return to power. There is also the possibility that some people within the Iranian military have been smuggling advanced weapons to the *Taliban* without the knowledge of the senior leadership in Tehran. There is no direct evidence to prove the relationship between Tehran and *Taliban*. Iran's collaboration with the *Taliban*, despite the political risks, is indicative of its urgency to enter into binding water sharing agreements while Afghanistan's water management capacity is low. Reports are that during the *Taliban* rule, Iran entered Afghanistan and dredged 30 km of the Helmand River in order to divert the flow to storage basins where the water is pumped to other regions in Iran (Fipps, 2006). The net result is decrease flow to

Afghan farmers in the region and an increase in the flow taken by Iran to levels exceeding the treaty amount. According to some reports some high ranking officials of Afghan government are also accused for protecting of Iran's interest.

Over the past three decades, millions of Afghans fled the country particularly after the Soviet invasion of 1979 to Iran. War against the Soviets throughout the 1980s and civil war during the 1990s created more refugees. The collapse of the *Taliban* and the establishment of a representative government have reversed this flow. Reports suggest that as many as 4 million Afghans may have returned from abroad already (Tan and Farhad, 2007). There are still nearly a million Afghan refugees in Iran (UNHCR, 2005). Iran has not confined Afghan refugees in camps but rather has allowed them to live among the Iranian population and more or less enjoy the benefits of Iranian citizenship. Poor Afghan migrant workers are also permitted to take jobs away from Iranians. But Iran took initiatives of mass deportation of Afghans in 2006-7 mainly because of supply of opium in Iran and illegal migration. The overall decision to expel the refugees may have been aimed primarily at threatening the *Karzai* government—demonstrating Iran's limitless virtual ability to cripple Afghanistan's reconstruction at any time by dumping hundreds of thousands of destitute refugees and migrant workers into Afghanistan. Creating pressure upon Kabul government about water sharing is also secondary benefit.

Iran is meddling in Afghanistan by playing a double game. Iran wants to revise the existing agreement on the minimum amount of

water that Afghanistan must allow to flow into Iran legally, while it also engages in some influence-peddling and pressure-creating activities through legal or illegal ways, which are having no direct evidences to prove. It seems, Iran has adopted competing policies on Afghanistan—one of cooperation in certain cases and one that contributes to destabilizing in others. Iran usually denies all these accusations, and the Afghan government under *Hamid Karzai* has also denied these, calling Iran a “helpful brother and partner to Afghanistan (NPR, 2007).” In July 2010, several high-level Iranian officials criticized foreign military presence in Afghanistan. “The Americans will have the same success in Afghanistan as in Vietnam. Years ago the Soviet Union made exactly the same mistake. Many people were killed and it finally pulled out. History repeats itself. We know Afghanistan. We know that Afghanistan will never submit to foreign armies (TOLO News, 2010).” The Iranian policy of combination of violence and economic cooperation created a powerful synergy that drove Afghanistan’s western provinces further from Kabul and closer to Tehran. The Iranian aid program combined with the threat of more mass expulsions, muzzled the Karzai government on the issue of Iranian support to the *Taliban*. With Tehran’s surreptitious approach, it has also been following legitimate considerations concerning water security. Thus the Iranian diverse policy in Afghanistan is mainly centered on water sharing of Helmand River sometimes by developing cooperative relationship, providing financial aid, establishing of a friendly government in Kabul and sometimes by undermining the Afghan central government, providing aid to *Taliban* or other rival groups and influencing *Shi’a* sects and refugees to destabilize central Afghan government.

## 5. Concluding Remark

Iran and Afghanistan historically shared in common geo-strategic-political developments as well as socio-economic-cultural-religious-linguistic and ethnic experiences. There are also different issues of dispute between the two countries. Among the issues, sharing of Helmand River's water is long-standing which still remains disputed. Though many efforts have been taken throughout the centuries, but met with little success. Iran claims as a downstream country it has the right of use of enough water of Helmand according to International river law, while Afghanistan demands the river belongs to Afghanistan and is entitled to the unalienable right of use of Helmand's water. Because of a large number of populations in Iran and Afghanistan depend on this river; the issue has been an important consideration of Iran concerning its policy towards Kabul. Iran applied diverse and paradox policies towards Afghanistan mainly aimed at influencing Afghan government to ensure flow of enough water from Helmand River.

With the withdrawal of Soviet occupation and many political disagreements, Afghanistan descended into a state of collapse and fragmentation. Iran took the advantages to establish its influence in Afghanistan by supporting and financing different groups along regional ethnic and sectarian lines from the *Shi'a*, Persian-speaking and Turkic groups, ultimately playing out a proxy war to prevent one or the other from gaining geopolitical dominance. Since the fall of *Taliban* government in 2001, Afghanistan's relations with Iran have significantly improved. Iran has shown virtual support for the US military action



in 2001 against the *Taliban*, whom Iran had actively opposed since 1995. It also participated in the post-war Bonn Conference of December 2001 at which the transitional governing authority for Afghanistan was established. Iran also offered economic, social, and cultural assistance to Afghanistan which included trade agreements, access to Iranian ports at a high discount on duties and tariffs, granting of credit aids, supporting reconstruction as electrical power stations, even administrative reforms too. Being aware of the importance of regional cooperation, in December 2002 the Afghan government initiated the Kabul Declaration on Good-Neighbourly Relations with its six immediate neighbour states (Iran, Pakistan, China, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan). For these states the reconstruction of Afghanistan is an opportunity to influence the country for a favoured leadership and Iran took the opportunity through increasing cooperation in trade and other possible fields. In January 2003, landlocked Afghanistan was guaranteed for virtually tax free access to Iranian ports by new agreements. Afghanistan, India and Iran signed an agreement to upgrade roads and build a railway from *Chahbahar* to the western Afghan border. Through these economic activities its influence over Afghanistan's western provinces particularly *Herat*, the host of Helmand River, is steadily increasing.

Despite these positive moves, Iran has at the same time been suspected of undermining the *Karzai* government, supporting regional sectarian groups, influencing Afghan *Shi'a* against Kabul government and even aiding the escape of *Al-Qaeda* leaders through its 580km-long shared border with Afghanistan. Iran claims that Afghanistan is not doing enough to return of Afghan refugees. Tehran demonstrated

its ability to destabilize western Afghanistan using Afghan refugees and migrant workers. It has intensified the pressure by withdrawing the right of Afghan refugees to free education. In addition ensuring refugees return home, Iran wants an Afghan government that will ensure enough flow of water of Helmand River to Iran. It evinces a willingness to deploy all resources—military, diplomatic, political, economic, social, and religious—in support of this effort. Iran has also signaled its power to influence Afghanistan's minority *Shi'a* population, mainly through its support for the pro-*Shi'a Hizb-i-Wahdat*. The US is suspicious of the dichotomy in Iran's behaviour towards Afghanistan and Iran in turn, is opposed to the US presence in the region. Diplomatically Kabul government is in dilemma in balancing regional cooperation with its influential neighbour Iran without antagonizing the US, its biggest supporter and sponsor. Afghanistan has chosen to remain neutral and avoid taking sides in the US–Iran dispute. However, the dispute over access to water from Afghanistan could cause for future conflict between the two countries as well as the resolve of the issue could lead regional cooperation and political stability. So the issue is to some extent precondition for regional security, economic development and peaceful co-existence. International steps to address Iran's concerns would be a productive start toward an optimal regional solution. Depolitization of the Helmand issue both in Afghanistan and Iran is needed as it has never been a national issue since McMahon's water awards of 1905. Both nations should be aware that the flow of Helmand River is not the exclusive right of either of them, and also both *Sistan* of Iran and *Nimrouz* of Afghanistan have equal rights to the river in accordance with their needs and agricultural prospects. Thorough surveys of agricultural

lands and irrigation possibilities, the water should be distributed based on the annual water flow and needs. Both the countries could take joint initiatives on the construction of regulatory and reservoir dams to prevent wastage on both sides. The joint commission should take more effective measures addressing the issue.

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