

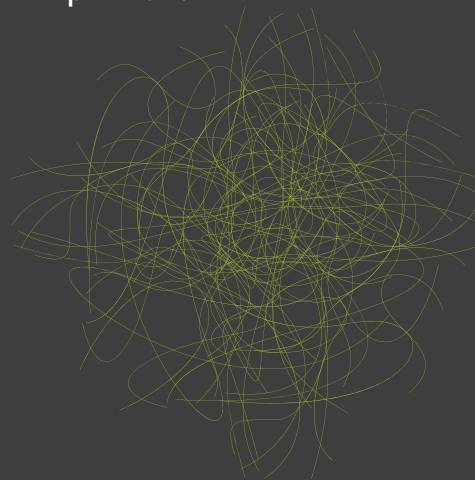
**Sources of Tension
in Afghanistan and
Pakistan: A Regional
Perspective**

**Exploring Iran
& Saudi Arabia's
Interests in
Afghanistan &
Pakistan:
Stakeholders or
Spoilers - A Zero
Sum Game?**

PART 1: SAUDI ARABIA

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& Nils Woermer**

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EXPLORING IRAN & SAUDI ARABIA'S INTERESTS IN AFGHANISTAN & PAKISTAN: STAKEHOLDERS OR SPOILERS - A ZERO SUM GAME? PART 1: SAUDI ARABIA

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Introduction. Saudi Arabian Policy Towards Afghanistan & Pakistan

In the worldview of Saudi Arabian policymakers, Afghanistan and Pakistan lie considerably closer to the Kingdom than a short look at the map would suggest. The coastal regions of the Persian Gulf have long been part of regional trade networks oriented towards South Asia, and relations with cities like Bombay and Karachi have been as close as relations to the Arab countries north and west of the Arabian Peninsula for centuries. As a consequence, the Saudi leadership sees Afghanistan as part of the Kingdom's immediate neighbourhood and has developed a strong interest in the future of the country since the 1980s, when Saudi Arabia feared a continuation of the Soviet advance towards the Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf. Nevertheless, Afghanistan itself is not the core issue in Saudi Arabia's policy towards the country. It rather derives its importance for Riyadh from the fact that Saudi Arabia's relations with Pakistan and Iran are affected by events in Afghanistan. Pakistan is arguably Saudi Arabia's most important ally after the US, and Iran is seen as the main threat not only to the Saudi regional position in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf, but also to the very survival of the Saudi regime. Both the Pakistani and the Iranian dimensions have gained special importance because key Saudi leaders harbour growing doubts about the US willingness to continue protecting the regime of the House of Saud against regional enemies. As a result, Saudi Arabia supports Pakistan in its Afghan policy and – only partly in coordination with Islamabad – competes with Iran for influence in Afghanistan. Since the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) decision to withdraw its troops from Afghan soil by 2014, Saudi Arabia has developed a new sense of urgency in its policy towards the country. Ever since, Riyadh is increasingly pursuing its aim to avoid a new civil war and establish a government of national unity comprising at least parts of the Taliban, keeping Iran out of Kabul and isolating al-Qaida in Pakistan.

This rise in activity has been the most striking characteristic of the latest phase of Saudi Afghan policy, which began in 2008 and 2010, when the Karzai government twice requested Saudi mediation with the rebel fighters – the first time because of the escalation of the insurgency since 2006 and the second time after the US announced its intention to

withdraw from Afghanistan in 2014. The Saudis' positive reaction was influenced by a palpable growth of Iranian influence in Afghanistan and a more general change in Saudi foreign policy since 2005. Traditionally hesitant to take a leading role in regional affairs except in times of severe crisis, the new King Abdallah decided to counter what he perceived as an Iranian quest for regional hegemony in the Middle East – as evident from its successful efforts to influence politics in Iraq and other countries, its nuclear program, and the aggressive rhetoric of President Ahmadinejad – by adopting a more aggressive stance which was called “activist” or “aggressive policy” (*siyasa hujumiya*) by some Arab media.¹ Saudi efforts to hinder Iran from broadening its influence were first obvious in Lebanon and the Palestinian territories, then in Yemen, then Bahrain and Syria. Recent steps in Kabul must be seen as part of this anti-Iranian policy, which is the primary driving force in Saudi foreign policy today.

This post-2008 phase of Saudi Afghanistan policy follows three earlier phases, which started in 1980, shortly after the Soviet occupation of the country in December 1979. Saudi Arabia became a player in Afghanistan as part of the Washington-Riyadh-Islamabad triangle, which supported the Afghan resistance in its fight against the Soviets. Besides the US, Saudi Arabia became the main financier of the *mujahideen* and from the mid-1980s built its own contacts and client networks among the Afghan opposition. The Saudi involvement did not end in the early 1990s, but it was slightly scaled down and followed a different agenda after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989 and the end of the Najibullah regime in 1992.

In the second phase during the 1990s, Saudi Arabia accepted the Pakistani decision to support the Taliban, partly because it had been deeply disappointed by its own Afghan allies Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Abdurrasul Sayyaf, who had condoned the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 and condemned the Saudi decision to call American troops for help against Saddam Hussein. Saudi Arabia – besides Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates – became one of only three countries which recognised the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan as the government of the country and supported the Taliban with money and equipment.

Saudi relations with the Taliban seem to have deteriorated after Mullah Omar did not keep his alleged promise to hand Osama Bin Laden over to the authorities of his home country in 1998. But contacts were only severed after the 9/11 attacks, which would not have been possible without the Taliban allowing al-Qaida to build its headquarters and training camps in Afghanistan. Riyadh now punished the Taliban by quietly supporting the new Afghan government of Hamid Karzai with reconstruction assistance and direct foreign aid and otherwise pursuing a low profile approach in Afghanistan until it mediated two rounds of secret talks in the autumn of 2008 and early 2009. These marked the re-launch of increased activity in Saudi Arabia's policy towards Afghanistan.

In early 2013, there were indications that the new Saudi involvement might lead to escalating competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran in Afghanistan. One such hint was the Afghan government's announcement in October 2012 that Saudi Arabia would have a huge Sunni mosque and Islamic Centre constructed in central Kabul. This move was seen as the Saudi reaction to the Iranian-built *Khatm an-Nabiyin* (the Seal of the Prophets) Mosque and Islamic University, which was opened in

1. al-Hayat (London), 27 August 2007.

2006. Though mainly symbolic steps for the time being, these religious-cultural measures were rightly interpreted as reflecting a new Saudi attitude towards events in Afghanistan.

1. Domestic Determinants of Saudi Afghan Policy

Saudi Arabia is ruled in an authoritarian way by about a dozen or so leading princes, members of the Al Saud dynasty. This influences its policy towards Afghanistan in two main ways. Firstly, all important decisions are taken by a few individuals in an utterly intransparent way, making it difficult even to find out who is responsible for Afghan policy. Secondly, just like for all authoritarian regimes, the ruling family's overriding political interest is to remain in power. Although the Al Saud regime enjoys a certain historical and religious legitimacy and is able to support this by lavish cash handouts to the population, its fear of opposition movements is intense. This holds especially true for the Shi'as in the Eastern Province of the country, who are viewed as a potential Iranian "fifth column" by at least parts of the leadership in Riyadh. As a consequence, the Saudi government tries to prevent an effective mobilisation of Shi'a communities in the Middle East and South Asia to avoid being confronted with a model for the Saudi Shi'as. Afghanistan and Pakistan, where Shi'as represent 20-25 and 15-20 percent of the population, respectively, are two of the countries where the Saudis follow such a policy.

The Decision-Making Process

Relations with Pakistan and the decision whether to mediate in the Afghan conflict – a question which arose in 2008 and 2010 – are matters decided by an inner circle of power, which most importantly includes the King, who for the last decades has acted as a *primus inter pares* among his brothers. Today, the 90 year-old King Abdallah still seems to play an important role in the strategic decision-making of Saudi foreign policy. Besides the King, Crown Prince Salman (born 1936) is a part of that circle and has become especially important since November 2011, when he replaced his brother Sultan (1925-2011) as Defense Minister. The Defense Ministry maintains strong relations with Pakistan and has credibly been reported to have financed parts of the Pakistani nuclear program. Furthermore, the Interior Minister Muhammad b. Naif (born 1959) is part of that circle. He is a grandson of Ibn Saud and replaced his father, the long-serving Interior Minister Naif after the latter's death and a short interregnum in November 2012. The Interior Ministry is the main ministry responsible for countering al-Qaida in the country and in neighbouring Yemen and therefore has a strong interest in Pakistan and Afghanistan as well. Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal, son of the late King Faisal b. Abdalaziz (1906-1975), also plays a role in these decisions, although it is not known to what extent. His deputy Abdalaziz b. Abdallah, a son of the current king, seems to have grown in importance in 2012 against the background of Saud al-Faisal's chronic ill health and disagreements between the latter and the King in at least one important policy matter.²

2. There seems to have been a disagreement between the King and Saud al-Faisal about the enlargement of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in 2012, with Saud al-Faisal rejecting the inclusion of Jordan and Morocco.

Primary responsibility for the Afghan file rests with the General Intelligence Directorate (GID, sometimes called General Intelligence Presidency), in coordination with the above-mentioned personali-

ties. This is the outcome of the Afghan war of the 1980s, when the American government supported the Afghan mujahideen against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. Early in 1980, the US government approached the Saudis, who took part in the financing of the insurgency and became the third pillar in the Islamabad-Washington-Riyadh triangle managing the support network. As the American effort was managed by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), it was only logical that its equivalent Saudi Arabian foreign intelligence service, namely the GID, should take over. As a consequence, the then GID head, Prince Turki al-Faisal (a brother of the current Foreign Minister, born 1945) became responsible for relations with Afghanistan and Pakistan all through his long tenure from 1977 to 2001, and built strong relations with both the US and the Pakistani military and its intelligence service, the Directorate of Interservices Intelligence (ISI). Although the position of the GID has somewhat deteriorated since the departure of Prince Turki, with the Interior Ministry and its General Security Service (*al-Mabahith al-Amma*, GSS), the Saudi domestic intelligence service, dominating the Saudi intelligence scene, it seems to have retained its strong role in Afghan affairs.³ This became clear when Prince Muqrin b. Abdalaziz, who headed the GID between October 2005 and July 2012, showed that he was clearly in charge of the Afghan file.⁴

As a consequence, the current head of the GID (since July 2012), Bandar b. Sultan Al Saud (born 1949), another of Ibn Saud's grandsons, is likely to become the central figure of Afghan policy in Riyadh in the coming years. It is not totally clear how strong his position in the Saudi government is. His predecessor, Prince Muqrin, is considered a close confidant and key ally of King Abdallah within the ruling family and might become the next Crown Prince, while Bandar belongs to the so-called Sudairis, who have long been considered a competing line, but have lost influence after the deaths of their most important representatives.⁵ On face value, however, it seems that Bandar might become an influential GID-head as he also remains in his old office of Secretary-General of the National Security Council (NSC), a post he has filled from October 2005. A question mark remains, however, because the post did not give him much power vis-à-vis the strong Interior and Defense ministries in the past. As a consequence, the NSC did not seem to have much effect in the power structure in Riyadh until 2013.⁶ If Bandar prevails, however, it is very likely that Riyadh will look for close cooperation with Washington in its policy towards Afghanistan. Prince Bandar has served as Saudi Arabia's ambassador to the US from 1983 and 2005 and has built a reputation as a leading transatlanticist in the Saudi government. Furthermore, Bandar is considered to be a hardliner concerning Iran and will try his utmost to press his uncles and cousins in the Saudi government to pursue an aggressive proxy strategy against what he perceives as the rise of Iranian influence in the Middle East and South Asia. According to some reports, Bandar has recently emerged as the official coordinating increased assistance to the Syrian rebels.

The Shi'a Question

Saudi Arabia's foreign policy is heavily influenced by its problems with the Shi'a minority in the Kingdom's Eastern province. As an authoritarian regime, the country's rulers' main interest is securing regime stability and

3. On the GIP/GID and its place in the Saudi Arabian intelligence community cp. Anthony Cordesman, *Saudi Arabia: National Security in a Troubled Region*, Westport, Connecticut 2009, pp. 293-294.

4. Muqrin b. Abdalaziz (born in 1943) is the youngest son of Ibn Saud and was named Second Deputy Prime Minister in February 2012. This step was widely interpreted as designating him to become Crown Prince after the death of King Abdallah. On his role and the GID in Riyadh's Afghan policy cp. Christopher Boucek: *Saudi Arabia*, in: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, *Is a regional strategy viable in Afghanistan?* Washington D.C. 2010, pp. 45-50 (47).

5. The most important Sudairis were King Fahd (d. 2005), Crown Prince Sultan (d. 2011), and Crown Prince Naif (d. 2012).

6. Guido Steinberg, *Saudi-Arabien als Partner deutscher Nahostpolitik*, Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, Dezember 2008 (SWP-Studie 35/2008), p. 9.

all its policies are deeply influenced by this goal and by the latent paranoia resulting from its distrust of at least parts of the Saudi population. From the point of view of the Saudi ruling family, the gravest domestic danger for its future emanates from the Shi'a minority, the majority of whom live in the Eastern region, which is also the seat of the country's oil industry. Most leading members of the Sunni ruling family see the roughly 2 million Shi'as as a potential Iranian fifth column serving as the nucleus of a bridgehead on the western side of the Persian Gulf.

Partly based on the experiences of the 1980s, when Iran indeed instrumentalised (or tried to instrumentalise) Shi'as in the Gulf states to perpetrate terrorist attacks in order to destabilise Bahrain, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia, the leadership in Riyadh has decided to counter any Iranian effort to establish itself as the protector of Shi'a communities in the Middle East and South Asia. This has had repercussions in Pakistan, where Shi'as represent about 20 percent and in Afghanistan, where the Shi'a Hazara represent 15-20 percent of the population. The Saudi government seems to fear that successful mobilisation of Shi'a minorities might serve as a model both for the Iranians and the Saudi Shi'as. Nevertheless, the view of the Saudi Shi'as as potential Iranian clients is for the time being rooted more in the Saudi leadership's perception of things than in reality. Since the 1990s, the Saudi Shi'as have taken the conscious decision to remain a local actor and although religious-cultural relations to Iran are obvious, these are much stronger between the Saudi Shi'as and their brethren in the holy cities of southern Iraq, and there is no conclusive evidence of Iranian political influence on them.⁷

The main political representative of the Saudi Shi'as, the Reform Movement (*al-Haraka al-Islahiya* or short *al-Islah* (reform)) led by Shaikh Hasan al-Saffar, has long ago abandoned its formerly close relationship with Iran and has decided to lobby the Saudi government to introduce domestic reforms securing equal rights for Shi'as in the country. Similarly, the pro-Iranian Saudi Hizbullah has always been a small fringe actor and has been dismantled as an organisation since the late 1990s. Although some of its leading personalities are still around in the Eastern Province and its ideology enjoys some support, there is no evidence that it has retained any organisational structure. There is, however, no guarantee that the situation will not change in the coming years. The Saudi authorities vividly remember the Khobar bombings on 26 June 1996, when the Saudi Hizbullah perpetrated an attack on the Khobar Towers, a residential complex of the nearby Dhahran airbase, killing 19 Americans and wounding nearly 400 persons. They especially fear that a nuclear-armed Iran will use its military capabilities as a protective shield and restart its efforts to destabilise Saudi Arabia and the smaller Gulf monarchies. This perception of the Shi'a-Iranian danger has prompted Riyadh to clamp down on any signs of dissent among Shi'as in the Eastern Province and influenced its decision to intervene militarily in Bahrain in March 2011, when Shi'a protesters (Shi'as form a majority of between 50 and 70 percent in Bahrain) demanded greater rights and the local security forces were in danger of losing control of the situation.

Although the situation in Bahrain has calmed down, there have been near daily clashes between young Shi'a protesters and the security forces in Shi'a areas of the country since 2011. There have also been frequent clashes in Eastern Saudi Arabia. In both cases, more militant

7. On this topic in detail cp. Laurence Louer: *Transnational Shi'a Politics. Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf*. New York: Columbia University Press 2008.

youth movements have severely criticised the accommodating stances taken by the established Shi'a parties and movements who have sought to co-operate with the regime, and have taken action by themselves. As the governments of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain stick to their repressive policies, it is possible that these youngsters will look for outside political, financial and logistical assistance and possibly even military hardware, and it is very likely that Iran or allied Iraqi and Lebanese actors will be ready to grant at least some help. In the event of the clashes escalating into major turmoil in the coming years, Saudi Arabia is likely to react not only in its Eastern Province and in Bahrain, but also abroad. Afghanistan and Pakistan are potential battlefields for a strategy in which the Saudis fight Iran by proxy.

2. Saudi Arabia & Iran

The Saudi perception of Iran as the major threat to the Kingdom's security is still shaped by the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and its aftermath. First, the fall of a pro-Western monarchy shocked the Saudi leadership, especially because it had expected the US to come to the Shah's help, which it did not. Secondly, the rise of Shi'a Islamists to power confronted the leadership in Riyadh with an ideological challenge to the very substance of its religious legitimacy. It regarded the Islamic Republic's drive to export the revolution to other Middle Eastern countries as a direct threat to the Kingdom, and interpreted disturbances among the Shi'a minority in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia as first evidence of an Iranian design to topple the Saudi monarchy. Ayatollah Khomeini's rhetoric denying the Saudi family's right to rule over the Holy Sites of Mecca and Medina further strengthened this perception among policy-makers in Riyadh.

The Saudi fear was not unfounded, as a powerful faction within the Iranian ruling elite supported Saudi Shi'a oppositionists. Under the leadership of Hasan al-Saffar, these founded the Organisation for the Islamic Revolution in the Arabian Peninsula, which aimed at toppling Saudi rule. Furthermore, the Iranians used the yearly pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina to spread anti-Saudi propaganda and foment unrest among the pilgrims. This policy culminated during the pilgrimage season of 1987, when turmoil broke out and about 400 people, among them 275 Iranian pilgrims, were killed during clashes with Saudi security forces.⁸ The Saudi government reacted by trying to foster its Islamic credentials, for instance by the Saudi King Fahd adopting the title of Protector of the Two Holy Sites (*Khadim al-Haramain al-Sharifain*) in 1986. Even when the pragmatists around Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Ali Khamenei gained ground from 1987 and especially after Khomeini's death in 1989, the Saudi fear did not abate. This was partly due to continued support for Saudi Shi'a Islamists, although the new leadership in Tehran preferred the more easily controlled Saudi Hizbullah to the group around Hasan al-Saffar, who lost Iranian support already in 1987. Although the small organisation did not pose a major threat to the Saudi state, it perpetrated a major attack with the Khobar bombings on 26 June 1996.

At that time, however, the Saudis had already reacted positively to the Iranian moderation and relations slowly improved. This is possibly why the Saudi government did not want to highlight a possible Iranian

8. Alexei Vassiliev, *The History of Saudi Arabia*, London 1998, p. 471.

role in the attacks on an American target. With the Saudi Crown Prince Abdallah taking over the management of affairs from his ailing brother King Fahd in 1995, and the election of reformer-President Mohammed Khatami in 1997, Saudi-Iranian relations entered a period of détente. Nevertheless, the Saudi government was highly distrustful of Iranian motives and kept in mind that the major decisions on Iranian security policies were taken not by the President, but by the religious leader Khamenei. In fact, there seem to have been two schools of thought among Saudi policymakers in the 1990s and 2000s, which supported different strategies to deal with the Iranian threat. While the “Americanists” under the leadership of the Minister of Defense Prince Sultan and his son and ambassador to Washington Bandar b. Sultan argued for closer cooperation with the US and an aggressively anti-Iranian strategy, the “regionalists” under the leadership of the Crown Prince and Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal argued for a more independent Saudi policy in the Middle East and increased efforts to deal with regional conflicts by engaging opponents like Iran and Syria.⁹

From 2003 and especially 2005, both positions converged because of an increasing fear of Iranian designs in the Middle East. First and perhaps foremost, the Saudi leadership rejected the American invasion of Iraq, because it assumed that the fall of the regime of Saddam Hussein would lead to either the breakup of the country and a civil war and/or to the emergence of an Iranian-dominated government of Iraqi Shi’as. The fact that the Bush administration did not heed Saudi advice led to a substantial loss of trust on the Saudi side which partly explains why Riyadh chose to adopt a more aggressive anti-Iranian line in the following years. Secondly, in August 2002 news emerged that Iran was conducting a secret nuclear program, which convinced the Saudi leadership that Iran was secretly developing nuclear weapons. Riyadh does not necessarily fear that Iran would use these arms against the Gulf states, but rather suspects that Tehran would try to undermine Gulf security by proxy and would be immune to outside pressure under a nuclear umbrella. This view was further reinforced by the election of President Mahmud Ahmadinejad in August 2005, which finally caused the Saudi détente with Iran to end.

In the following years, Riyadh embarked on a new “activist policy” (*siyasa hujumiya*) in the Middle East, trying to roll back Iranian influence in the region. This first became palpable in the Levant, where Saudi Arabia relied on diplomatic means and financial incentives in order to contain Iran’s allies in Lebanon and the Palestinian territories, and tried to convince Syrian President Bashar al-Asad to give up his alliance with Iran. Subsequently, and in neighbouring countries like Yemen and Bahrain, Saudi policy became more aggressive. Most importantly, Saudi-Arabia’s military intervened in the Yemeni civil war in the north of the country in November 2009. Since 2004, the Huthi movement of Zaidi rebels had successfully beaten back several government offensives and threatened to build a quasi-independent state. The Zaidis are a Shi’a sect and Riyadh suspected Iranian involvement, prompting the Saudi leadership to start a short campaign against the insurgents. Similarly, when the Arab Spring reached Bahrain in March 2011 and security forces seemed to lose control over protests dominated by the Shi’a majority in the small island, Saudi Arabia sent troops to the island kingdom. Riyadh’s foray into Afghan affairs since 2008 is a part of this larger regional policy.

9. Guido Steinberg, *Saudi Arabien als Partner deutscher Nahostpolitik*, p. 28.

3. Saudi Arabia & Pakistan

Pakistan is Saudi Arabia's most important ally after the United States. Both countries complement each other's strengths and weaknesses, with Saudi Arabia being financially strong but with a small population and a weak military, while Pakistan enjoys the advantage of its strong military and huge population of more than 180 million people. Cultural issues play a role as well, with Pakistan looking at Saudi Arabia as the cradle of Islam and an important champion of Islamic causes worldwide, while the Saudis admire Pakistan as the second-biggest Muslim nation worldwide and the only one possessing nuclear arms. For the Saudi government, the security dimension is paramount and as a consequence the Pakistani military – which controls the foreign and security policies of the country – is its main interlocutor in Islamabad. Besides, Saudi Arabia has built strong relations with some civilian politicians like the former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, who has lived in exile in Saudi Arabia since 2000 but has sometimes tried to make a comeback. Relations with the current President Asif Zardari are strained, however, because many Saudi politicians see him as too friendly to the Iranians.¹⁰ Pakistan for its part is mainly interested in Saudi Arabia's oil riches. The country receives several hundred million US-Dollars of direct aid and oil products every year besides development assistance through the Saudi Fund for Development and investments by public and private sources. Furthermore, it profits enormously from the remittances of the one million or so Pakistani expatriates working in the Kingdom.

Relations between the two countries greatly improved during the time of King Faisal (1964-1975), who tried to counter the rise of Arab nationalism and the challenge posed by Nasser's Egypt by developing Islamic internationalism and a strong alliance with Pakistan. Besides creating Pakistani-Saudi political, cultural, and religious bonds through institutions like the Muslim World League (founded in 1962) and the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (founded in 1969), the bilateral relationship was shaped by strong military cooperation. In the 1970s and 1980s, Islamabad readily sent Pakistani soldiers to staff parts of the Saudi military. Pakistani pilots are reported to have flown Saudi military aircraft as early as the late 1960s, but there were also other larger units serving in Saudi Arabia in those years. By employing non-Saudi troops, Riyadh tried to compensate for the lack of an adequate professional Saudi military and preferred Pakistanis because they were Muslims – making it easier for the conservative Saudi population to accept the presence of foreign troops.

The Saudi-Pakistani alliance gained a new impetus after the Islamic Revolution in Iran 1979, when a regional cold war developed, during which Saudi-funded anti-Shi'a terrorist groups began targeting Shi'as in Pakistan and Iranian-funded Shi'a groups responded in kind. Saudi support for the (Sunni) Afghan insurgents was a part of this policy. Although the Pakistani leadership did not share the anti-Iranian motives of the Saudis and mainly aimed at gaining control over what it considered its strategic hinterland in its conflict with India, the cooperation in funding and arming the Afghan *mujahideen* gave the Saudi-Pakistani leadership a new depth. From 1980, the Saudi GID provided funds, the American CIA funds and weapons, and the Pakistanis channeled these to their clients among the Afghan insurgency. From the mid-1980s, both the US and the Saudis attempted to build their own contacts with Afghan groups, but these always remained limited if compared to the Pakistani

10. US-Embassy Riyadh, Pakistani Relations with Saudis "Strained", Oct 16, 2008, <http://www.cablegatesearch.net/cable.php?id=08RIYADH1541&q=zardari>, accessed Mar 12, 2013.

effort. The Saudis in particular were a junior partner in the control of the Afghan war against the Soviets.

This did not change in the 1990s, when Pakistan supported the Taliban in their quest to wrest control of Afghanistan from the warring *mujahideen* factions. Saudi Arabia followed suit and became the only country besides Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates to recognise the Islamic Emirate Afghanistan as a state. This policy only ended in 1998, when it became clear that the Taliban had not kept their alleged promise to GID-head Turki b. Faisal Al Saud that Bin Laden would not be allowed to plan and organise terrorist attacks from Afghan soil. This did not, however, affect the Saudi-Pakistani relationship. Although it soon became clear that Pakistan was not a partner of Western efforts to stabilise Afghanistan, but rather played a double game, supporting the Taliban, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and the Haqqani network, and thereby – at least indirectly – Arab groups like al-Qaida, and thereby countered Saudi efforts to contain the jihadists, Saudi policy towards Islamabad did not change.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the Saudi-Pakistani military alliance has been the nuclear sector. Since the second half of the 1990s, there has been constant speculation about a possible cooperation in this field. According to numerous press reports, the Saudi Defense Ministry financed parts of the Pakistani nuclear program from the 1980s. In return, so the story goes, the Saudis expect Pakistani help in the case of Iran developing nuclear arms. This help might involve a more formal alliance, effectively guaranteeing Saudi security against Iran or the opportunity to buy or lease nuclear warheads from Pakistan to deter a nuclear-armed Iran.¹¹ Although it is quite obvious that the Saudis expect something in return for their generous financial help to Pakistan in recent decades, there is no concrete information as to what that might mean in detail and whether the Pakistanis are ready to deliver.

4. Saudi Arabian Afghanistan Policy

After the 11 September 2001 attacks in New York and Washington, the Saudi government fully supported the American war against the Taliban and furthermore helped convince the Pakistani leadership to cooperate with the US. Its post-2001 policy towards Afghanistan reflects the Kingdom's experiences during the anti-Soviet jihad of the 1980s, the civil war of the 1990s and the Taliban's refusal to hand over Bin Laden. At various levels, close ties between Saudi and Afghan governmental, religious and private actors going back to these times still persist. But although the defeat of the Soviet Union was partly due to Saudi efforts, the successes of Riyadh's Afghan policy ever since have been substantially less impressive. At crucial moments, Saudi Arabia's key proxies among the Afghan factions and main receivers of financial aid, like Abdurrasul Sayyaf's *Ittehad-e Islami*, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's *Hezb-e Islami* and later the Taliban, betrayed their benefactors instead of serving the Kingdom's regional policy. As a result, the Saudi government started to support the new government of President Hamid Karzai economically and diplomatically from early 2002 onwards. This sometimes generous support could not hide Riyadh's loss of interest in Afghan affairs, which was only revived in 2008.

11. The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS): Nuclear Programmes in the Middle East. In the Shadow of Iran, IISS Strategic Dossier, London 2008, pp. 43-44.

Although some Afghan politicians including President Karzai repeatedly requested that the Saudi government play such a role, the latter's mediation efforts in 2008 and 2009 met with widespread distrust among Afghans, who regard Saudi-Arabia as a party that interferes in the Afghan conflict rather than a disinterested mediator. Thus, the Saudi role as peace broker or intermediary is not very likely to bring about success. Distrust of Saudi designs is strong among both main camps in the country. The non-Pashtun and particularly Shi'a groups that constituted the former anti-Taliban Northern Alliance are extremely suspicious of Saudi political initiatives in Afghanistan, and some of them completely reject any Saudi involvement in a possible political settlement of the conflict. This attitude is exactly in line with the policy of Iran - Saudi-Arabia's fiercest opponent in Afghanistan and beyond. Even parts of the Taliban supposedly reject a possible mediating role by Saudi Arabia as they regard the country's policy after 2001 as an outright betrayal, after they had received Saudi support until 1998.

Saudi Arabia's Afghan Legacy: The Jihad of the 1980s

Following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979, Saudi-Arabia alongside Pakistan and the United States became the most important supporter of the Afghan mujahideen's anti-Soviet jihad. The three countries focused on seven Sunni mujahideen political-military organisations (*tanzeem*, pl. *tanzeemha*), which they formed as instruments to pursue their policy goals in Afghanistan and beyond. The Saudi policy towards Afghanistan during the 1980s was mainly driven by three factors: After the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran and the seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca by Islamist militants in November 1979, the Saudi monarchy grasped the opportunity to polish its image of defending Islam by supporting the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan. Hereby, they (a) repaired relations with the clergy and appeased the religious establishment on their home front, (b) contained their main ideological rival, Iran, which was supporting the Shi'a bloc within the Afghan mujahideen resistance, and (c) strengthened the relationship with their main global ally (the US) and their key regional partner (Pakistan).

When orchestrating their support for the Afghan resistance, the United States, Pakistan and Saudi-Arabia developed a clear division of work. Under the aegis of Pakistan's main intelligence agency, the ISI (Directorate of Interservices Intelligence), the *tanzeemha* were allowed to establish their headquarters in the Pakistani city of Peshawar, which is why they are often referred to as the Peshawar Parties or Peshawar Seven.¹² The role of the ISI was to control the Peshawar Parties and to distribute money, weapons and equipment that were mainly provided by the United States and Saudi-Arabia. Pakistan also supported the Peshawar Parties in creating military and logistical structures, running training camps, recruiting fighters and launching propaganda campaigns. In addition, operatives of the ISI were active inside Afghanistan in order to support the planning process for military operations and to observe and evaluate the execution of the mujahideen's actions.¹³

12. Conrad Schetter, *Ethnizität und ethnische Konflikte in Afghanistan*, Berlin 2003, pp. 224-241.

13. Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001*, New York et al. 2004, pp. 63-65.

Contrary to Pakistan's on-the-ground involvement, the United States and Saudi-Arabia acted mainly behind the scenes. However, their commitment was the pre-condition and framework for Pakistan's Afghan policy of the 1980s. The United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) ran a secret program (Operation Cyclone) to finance, arm and equip the Afghan mujahideen. Saudi-Arabia committed itself to match every single US dollar with an Arab dollar, so that both countries officially spent about 4 billion dollars each. The official financial aid provided by the Saudi government was distributed by the General Intelligence Directorate (GID) and its principal, Prince Turki al-Faisal. The bulk of the official Saudi payments went to the CIA's secret program and was used for arms purchases. The remainder was distributed as direct cash payments among the leaders of the Peshawar Parties and influential clerics, politicians and commanders by Prince Turki and the Saudi embassy in Islamabad.¹⁴ The second pillar of Saudi-Arabia's financial contribution to the Afghan jihad were unofficial or private donations that were estimated to be even higher in total than the official payments. These donations came from a vast number of religious charities, mosques (that facilitated charity collections) and private individuals like businessmen or members of the royal family.¹⁵

Out of the Peshawar Parties the strictly fundamentalist, Wahhabi-prone *Ittehad-e Islami bara-ye Azadi-ye Afghanistan* (Islamic Union for the Freedom of Afghanistan), led by Abdurrasul Sayyaf, and the militant Islamist *Hezb-e Islami-ye Afghanistan* (Islamic Party of Afghanistan), under the leadership of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, emerged as the key clients of the Kingdom's Afghan policy and received the bulk of the direct official donations. However, during the period following the Soviet Union's withdrawal from Afghanistan in early 1989, relations between Riyadh and both Sayyaf and Hekmatyar became tense. The party leaders heavily opposed a small Wahhabi Emirate that existed in Afghanistan's northeastern Konar province under the leadership of Maulawi Jamil ur-Rahman from 1990 to 1991. The case of the Wahhabi emirate was one of only very few occasions when the Kingdom developed an initiative of its own and acted unilaterally (and not in concert with Pakistan) by supporting the emerging mini-state. The destruction of the Wahhabi Emirate and the assassination of Jamil ur-Rahman by *Hezb-e Islami* forces with the consent of Pakistan's ISI strained Saudi-Pakistani bilateral relations and caused deep irritation in Riyadh with regard to the Afghan allies.¹⁶ Saudi aggravation was further enhanced when both Sayyaf and Hekmatyar openly sided with the Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein during the 1990/91 Kuwait war – again illustrating the difficulties of ensuring that proxies actually act in the sponsor's interests. The Saudis had to learn the hard way that financing a group does not necessarily lead to control over its actions.

14. Peter Tomsen, *The Wars of Afghanistan: Messianic Terrorism, Tribal Conflicts, and the Failures of Great Powers*, New York 2011, pp. 196-198.

15. Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001*, New York et al. 2004, p. 296.

16. On the Wahhabi emirate cp. Peter Tomsen, *The Wars of Afghanistan: Messianic Terrorism, Tribal Conflicts, and the Failures of Great Powers*, New York 2011, p. 367.

Proxy Warfare During the 1990s

In spite of this betrayal, Saudi Arabia banked on *Ittehad* and *Hezb-e Islami* in the internal mujahideen power struggle after the fall of the communist regime in Kabul in April 1992. But the kingdom failed to forge a strong Sunni Islamist alliance capable of sidelining the key Iranian proxy, the Hazara Unity Party (*Hezb-e Wahdat*). Between 1992 and 1995 Pakistan and Saudi Arabia witnessed their preferred Afghan

allies *Hezb-e Islami* and *Ittehad* battling each other in opposing alliances, with neither of them able to prevail. When Pakistan slowly shifted its focus and support to the newly emerging Taliban movement and thereby tried to overcome the deadlocked situation in Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia soon followed and evolved into one of the Taliban's most important allies by the mid-1990s. The support for Mulla Omar's movement culminated when Saudi Arabia granted official recognition to the Taliban government after its forces captured Kabul in September 1996. Nevertheless, in 1998 Saudi-Taliban relations deteriorated considerably due to the Bin Laden issue. Apparently, Mulla Omar at first promised the extradition of the al-Qaida leader when this was requested by Prince Turki al-Faisal during a visit to Kandahar in June 1998. However, when the latter approached Mulla Omar again in September 1998, after the al-Qaida bombings of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania and the US retaliatory strikes against training camps in Afghanistan, the Taliban leader backed up Bin Laden.¹⁷ As a result, the Kingdom cut off its official financial help to the Taliban, closed its embassy and consulates in Afghanistan and expelled the representatives of the Taliban from Saudi Arabia. The financial support of private and religious Saudi entities and individuals continued, though, as it did throughout the following phase of the Afghan conflict post 2001.

Realignment & Unassertive Engagement: Saudi Arabia's Post-2001 Afghan Policy

Immediately after the 9/11 terror attacks Saudi-Arabia assured the Bush Administration that it would diplomatically back any action taken by the US including retaliatory strikes and cooperate in the fight against terrorism without restrictions. The Saudi clergy condemned the terror attacks and clearly distanced itself from the ideology of the perpetrators.¹⁸

After the Afghan interim government under President Karzai had taken office in late December 2001, the new Afghan leader chose Saudi Arabia for his first state visit in January 2002 and met with Saudi King Fahd and Crown Prince Abdullah. The meetings marked the revival of Saudi-Afghan bilateral relations and the beginning of a prolonged and substantial contribution by the Kingdom to international reconstruction efforts in war-shattered Afghanistan.

The Saudi government transfers the implementation of aid and reconstruction projects to a number of Saudi aid organisations, charities and private companies that often do not report their investments to either the databases of the Afghan Ministry of Finance, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) or the World Bank. Thus, there is a gap between the official Saudi pledges (which according to an official Saudi statement amounted to about \$429 million between 2001 and mid-2010¹⁹) and the disbursement figures of the above-mentioned organisations, which are lower. As a consequence, whereas Saudi projects can be found all over the country, it is hard to assess whether the Saudi state, a private or a religious entity is the donor. The focus of Saudi aid efforts has been the reconstruction of infrastructure (for example the Kabul-Kandahar-Herat highway), the building of hospitals, and humanitarian support for Afghan refugees in Pakistan and returnees from there to their home country. In 2010, the Saudi gov-

17. Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Towers: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11*, New York 2006, p. 244. In addition cf. Interview with Prince Turki al-Faisal, *Der Spiegel*, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel/spiegel-interview-and-then-mullah-omar-screamed-at-me-a-289592.html>, accessed March 12, 2013.

18. *Taieb Mahjoub, Saudi Arabia lines up with US in fight against terrorism*, Agence France Press, 18 September 2001.

19. Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia, Washington, July 1, 2010. <http://www.saudiembassy.net/announcement/announcement08051001.aspx>, accessed March 12, 2013.

ernment directly supported the Afghan Ministry of Education with \$ 24 million in order to improve educational infrastructure. By far the biggest move in the cultural and educational sector caught the lime-light on 29 October 2012 when the Afghan government announced that Saudi Arabia would build an Islamic complex including a mosque (for up to 15.000 worshippers) and a madrassa (for about 5.000 students) on top of Maranjan hill close to the city centre of Kabul. The hilltop complex will cost about \$ 100 million and is due to be completed by 2016. The project is being thought of as an ideological counter-initiative to the Iranian funded *Khatm an-Nabiyin* mosque and religious seminary that was completed in 2006.²⁰

The Kingdom's Afghan policy is complicated by the financial nexus between private persons and religious entities in the Persian Gulf and key actors of the current Afghan insurgency. Fundraisers for the Taliban and Haqqani Network are believed to extensively exploit networks and use old mechanisms dating back to the times of Saudi cooperation with mujahideen and Taliban functionaries. The fundraising of the Taliban and Haqqani network in the Persian Gulf (mainly in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Kuwait) is widely believed to be one of the main pillars (beside drug trafficking) of the organisations' budgets. This is why one of the key propaganda instruments of the Taliban, the monthly online magazine *al-Sumud* (literally, steadfastness), is exclusively published in Arabic.²¹ *Al-Sumud* aims at attracting and appeasing wealthy donors in Arab countries.

Since 2008, politicians and academics have highlighted the possible role of Saudi Arabia as a peace broker. At the request of the Afghan government, the Saudi side facilitated the first initiative that lead to direct high-level contacts between the Karzai government, the Taliban and the militant wing of the *Hezb-e Islami*. Two rounds of talks were held in Saudi Arabia in September 2008 and February 2009. Both gatherings discussed possibilities for a power sharing agreement in Afghanistan, whereas the Saudi government apparently offered sanctuary for the senior leadership of the Taliban and *Hezb-e Islami* in case a political resolution of the conflict was about to be reached. However, the Saudi government made its core concern - that the Taliban openly distance itself from al-Qaida – a precondition for any future engagement in peace talks. Although repeatedly mentioned by President Karzai over the past years, the Saudi role as mediator meets rejection by Shi'a groups and individual leaders of the former Northern Alliance, while even Taliban authorities allege that the Taliban senior leadership does not accept Saudi Arabia as a broker, but regards the Kingdom as having betrayed them and the true faith, and having lined up with Western countries.

20. Cf. Frud Bezhan, *Saudi Arabia Sets its Sights on Afghanistan*, Nov 6, 2012 <http://www.rawa.org/temp/runews/2012/11/06/saudi-arabia-sets-its-sights-on-afghanistan.html>, accessed Mar 12, 2013.

21. Walid N. Khildani, *Who is the Audience? The Taliban's Arabic Language Media Strategy*, Apr 27, 2011 <http://repository.library.georgetown.edu/bitstream/handle/10822/553529/kildaniWalid.pdf?sequence=1>, accessed Mar 12, 2013.

5. Future Scenarios

The future of Saudi Arabia's Afghanistan policy is highly dependent on the development of the conflict in the country. Therefore, the authors have developed three scenarios for Afghanistan, namely a best-case one entitled "successful transition", secondly the "Taliban comeback" scenario and thirdly the worst-case "civil-war" scenario. All three seem to be plausible to the authors and represent the spectrum of possible developments which Western policymakers should prepare for.

Successful Transition

In a first scenario, the current political system would prevail and consolidate itself after 2014. The April 2014 elections would take place in most parts of the country and allegations of fraud and corruption remain limited. Hamid Karzai's successor (Karzai himself would not be eligible for a third time) would take over and consolidate his rule on the basis of his new-won legitimacy. This in turn would strengthen the cohesion and raise the morale of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). They would be assisted by a contingent of at least 15.000 international troops tasked with a training and advisory role. This is the minimum number of remaining troops that would lend a new credibility to the Western assertion that it is indeed interested in the fate of the country. The US and its allies would thereby show their eagerness to avoid the mistake of the early 1990s, when they left Afghanistan to its fate, and they would convince parts of the population that they plan to stay until a reasonable degree of stability has been reached. All these positive developments would not end sporadic fights, and Afghan governance would remain weak in large parts of the country, but the security situation would not be worse than today.

In this scenario, Iran would continue to broaden its influence in the west and northwest of the country and retain a certain influence on the political elite in Kabul – which would comprise a substantial number of Shi'a politicians. The Pakistani reaction would depend on the policy of the new president. If he were perceived to be hostile to Pakistani interests – as in the case of a President taken from the ranks of the former Northern Alliance – Pakistan would rely on a more aggressive approach in its support for the Pashtun insurgency. If this were not the case, Islamabad would still continue to support the insurgents, but would also employ diplomatic means. Its goal would be to revise the consolidation of an anti-Pakistani system – if only out of fear that a stronger Afghan state would one day try to revise the Durand-line border with Pakistan. In order to reach this goal it would continue to build its own influence by supporting Pashtun insurgents and try to prompt the Afghan government to integrate pro-Pakistani Pashtun groups into the government in Kabul.

In this “successful transition” scenario, the Saudi government would most likely try to enhance its own influence in Kabul without, however, supporting a militant reversal of the power equation in the country. Riyadh would make a sustained effort to counter Iranian influence in the educational sector and strengthen religiously conservative Sunni culture in Afghanistan. By avoiding a prolonged civil war and stabilising the country, at least one important Saudi interest would be met.

The “Taliban Comeback”

In this scenario, the April 2014 elections would not take place in about a third of the country because of an escalation of violence. Widespread allegations of fraud and manipulation would damage the legitimacy of the vote. This could prompt Hamid Karzai to extend his own term and rule by emergency law. Most Afghans would lose the remainder of their faith in the national government and would see the events as a repeti-

tion of the early 1990s, when the United States quickly lost interest in the country after the Soviet Union had withdrawn its troops. This time, NATO would withdraw all its troops with the exception of an American counter-terrorism mission of not more than 3000 men, who would focus on fighting al-Qaida and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). In the “Taliban comeback” scenario, the insurgents would take control of south and southeast Afghanistan. Some time after 2014, they would be able to topple the Kabul government and take over the country just like in the 1990s. Due to the small number of Pashtuns in the Afghan north and northwest, these regions would fall under the control of a renewed Northern Alliance of ethnic Tajiks, Uzbeks, and the Shi’a Hazara. The Afghan political and military scene would again be divided into two.

The return of the Taliban would prompt Iran to increasingly worry about the security of its own eastern provinces and enter into a new alliance with Russia and India to support the remaining opponents of the Taliban, who on their part would try to defend the west and the north. Due to the urgency of the issue, Iran would substantially raise its profile in Afghanistan and send arms, equipment and advisers to try and stop the Taliban from taking over the whole country. In such a situation, Pakistan would continue supporting the Taliban, but would closely watch their policies concerning the Pakistani Taliban (TTP) – who have targeted the Pakistani state in recent years. Most probably, Pakistani support for the Taliban would be more cautious than in the 1990s, if Islamabad came to the conclusion that this support would lead to an intensification of the “Talibanisation” process inside Pakistan.

In this “Taliban comeback” scenario, the Saudis would again not play a leading role, possibly staying on the sidelines while giving some limited support to the Pakistanis and the Taliban. They would be caught between the wish to roll back Iranian influence in Afghanistan and their fear of the rise of Arab jihadists on the side of the Taliban, thereby repeating the experience of the 1980s and 1990s. For Riyadh, it would be essential for the Taliban to sever their links to al-Qaida and other global jihadists, and it would also be interested in the Afghan Taliban giving up their Pakistani brethren. Otherwise, Saudi support for Pakistan and the Taliban would be much more hesitant and limited. Nevertheless, containing Iran is a more important goal of Saudi policy than fighting al-Qaida – at least as long as the group is under control in Saudi Arabia itself. Therefore, Saudi Arabia would have a strong interest in an Afghan state dependent on Pakistan and limiting Iranian influence in its western and northwestern parts.

The “Civil War” Scenario

In this third scenario, a full-blown civil war would break out, in which the dividing lines between the Pashtun camp and the Tajik, Uzbek, and Hazara camps would slowly disappear and rather develop into a fight between smaller entities, drawing the whole country into an infernal chaos resembling the situation between 1992 to 1996, when the loss of the common enemy led to anarchy. Afghanistan would be ruled by a plethora of small fiefdoms without dominant actors and constantly shifting alliances. On the one hand, the Taliban networks would no longer be dominated by any one leadership. Instead, the Quetta Shura Taliban

would dominate in the south, the Haqqani family in the southeast and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Islamic Party in the east. Besides, possibly more radical splinter groups would manage to build new, competing power centres. The same would hold true for the centre and the north of the country, where the Hazara and Tajik political and military actors would split along regional lines and only the Uzbeks would manage to retain some cohesion.

In such a scenario, the Iranians and Pakistanis would continue supporting their clients in the country by sending arms and advisers and fight a proxy war. The intensity of this would depend on where the fighting would take place – meaning how close it would come to the

Iranian and Pakistani borders. At the same time, both would try to negotiate, first between their possible clients in order to unify them, and second between the conflict parties in order to avoid the civil war spiraling totally out of control.

In the “civil war” scenario, the Saudis would most probably choose new clients of their own, some of them together with the Pakistanis, but also some who would either emphasise their identity as, or simply pose as, Wahhabis or Salafis in order to get access to Saudi funding. They would aim at keeping the Iranians from gaining too much influence and they would make major efforts to start negotiations out of fear of the consequences of turmoil in Afghanistan.

6. Policy Recommendations

In all these scenarios, Saudi Arabia will be an important party to any political solution for the conflict in Afghanistan, and has established itself as the third-most important regional actor after Pakistan and Iran – and besides India, which might be considered as being as important as Saudi Arabia – since 2008. Its former and current involvement in the conflict limits its role as a mediating party and even as a facilitator for meetings because the two sides in the Afghan conflict view the Saudis critically. The Taliban for their part distrust Riyadh because it gave up its former support of the movement after 1998 and 2001, siding with the rival Karzai government. In the pro-government camp, distrust of Saudi motives is also widespread among the non-Pashtun groupings that formed the Northern Alliance and especially the Shi'a Hazara, who fear Saudi sectarian policies. Although Riyadh has managed to alleviate some of these fears, the perceived Saudi preference for Pashtun Islamists like Sayyaf and Hekmatyar makes it an extremely controversial actor for most Tajiks as well.

As a consequence of these negative views of Saudi Arabia, the country would ideally support a settlement behind the scenes but would not be openly involved in mediation and facilitation efforts. A more active role could be assumed by Qatar, which does not have a history of active involvement in Afghanistan and has already proved to be a more acceptable mediator and facilitator to the conflict parties – the Taliban having opened an office in Doha in 2012. Both countries share a strong interest in stability in Afghanistan and Pakistan and Doha just as Riyadh has shown that it is willing to invest financial and political capital in a settlement of the

Afghan conflict. Although Saudi Arabian politicians have sometimes been quite unhappy with Qatari initiatives, and relations between the two countries strained for most of the 2000s, relations between the two countries substantially improved after 2008, so that it is possible that Saudi Arabia would accept a more visible Qatari role and Doha as the venue for talks.

Nevertheless, there are important question marks regarding a Saudi role in Afghanistan. Saudi Arabia sees the Middle East and its surroundings primarily through the prism of its conflict with Iran and therefore follows an anti-Iranian agenda in its dealings with all neighbouring states. If this conflict escalates, this will have repercussions for Afghanistan and will possibly endanger any political progress that will have been made until that point. Given increased involvement of both Iran and Saudi Arabia in the conflict in Syria, an escalation of tensions between the two states is highly likely in the near future. In order to reduce the dangers emanating from the Iranian-Saudi conflict, Western countries will have to convince the Saudi government that its policy of supporting anti-Iranian and anti-Shi'a actors might prove to be detrimental to its interests in the long run. Equally important, Saudi Arabia will have to do a lot more in reining in private and semi-governmental forces in the country. Wealthy donors and religious scholars have been the main sources of financing for militant Islamist forces in Pakistan and Afghanistan for the last two decades, including the Taliban, the Haqqani network, al-Qaida, Uzbek jihadists and anti-Shi'a groups like *Lashkar-e Jangvi*. While the Taliban will have to be a partner to any successful settlement, the others might pose important obstacles to political agreements and their implementation.

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