Episode Transcript:

Episode Title:
Iran’s Interests in Afghanistan

Guest:
Colin P. Clarke

September 7, 2021
Jon Alterman:
Colin Clark is a senior research fellow and the director of policy and research at The Soufan Center. He taught at Carnegie Mellon and worked at the Rand corporation for 10 years. Colin, welcome to Babel.

Colin Clarke:
Thank you for having me.

Jon Alterman:
You've looked at Afghanistan, and you've looked at Iran for a long time. What's at stake for Iran in Afghanistan right now?

Colin Clarke:
Other countries and other regional powers are going to fill that void. Chief atop that list is Iran looking to extend influence into Afghanistan. The Iranian regime has worked with the Taliban in the past—despite the ideological differences—and the bond between Iran and the Taliban can be strengthened by their common enemy, the Islamic State Khorasan (ISK). Iran suffered a number of Islamic State attacks itself. There's great concern that given the Islamic State's sectarian agenda, more could be on the way—particularly if that group grows and spreads throughout Afghanistan as some expect.

Jon Alterman:
You've said that there's an Iranian relationship with al Qaeda. There is certainly an Iranian relationship with the Taliban. There's an Iranian relationship with the Islamic State Khorasan. Can you describe those relationships? As you suggest, it's not intuitive that Iran would have relationships with any group of Sunni extremists.

Colin Clarke:
You're right. That's one of the areas where we've been forced to think outside of the box as analysts. For too long, there was kneejerk group think that Sunnis and Shi'ites could never work together under any circumstances, and a lot of this thinking was predominant the height of al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), when Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was waging a sectarian conflict in the region, layered on top of the ongoing cold war between the Saudis and the Iranians. The question was countries in the region kind of fall into place behind those respective regional powers. The Iran-al Qaeda relationship is extremely complicated. I wrote a really lengthy peace in Lawfare, with Asfandyar Mir, where we tease some of that out. In a nutshell, Asfandyar and I described the relationship as begrudging in some ways, with Iran hosting al Qaeda leaders but also keeping a very close eye on those leaders—perhaps not close enough as we learned with the assassination of Abu Muhammed al-Masri, allegedly by the Israelis. Saif al-Adel is believed to be in Iran as well, waiting in the wings, depending on what happens with al-Qaeda's current leader Ayman al-Zawahiri. Iran's relationship with al-Qaeda is a marriage of convenience.

Jon Alterman:
You've described it as a sophisticated hedging strategy.

Colin Clarke:
I do think it is a sophisticated hedging strategy. It gives them a little bit of leverage. It gives them some chips to play—especially with Afghanistan in flux, the Taliban taking back over in the region, and al Qaeda once again having the umbrella of Taliban protection. It is not assumed—at least by me—that al Qaeda is immediately
going to set its sights on the West. The Taliban has an interest in making sure that al Qaeda doesn't begin attacking the West again because, if so, it's going to be a complicated task for the Taliban to maintain control of Afghanistan, which will already be a struggle. In terms of Iran and the Taliban, the history is well documented, with some of the enmity and the animosity going back to Iranian diplomats being slaughtered in Afghanistan. Iran has provided material support and assistance to the Taliban at various stages of this conflict, so there is a relationship there. The Iranians can be quite pragmatic. So can the Taliban, but I still see this as a draconian organization ruling the country. People have pointed out, “well it’s not ISIS.” I said, “if you’re moderate compared to ISIS, you’re still pretty extreme.

Jon Alterman:
On the Islamic State Khorasan—which most people haven't heard of until last month—how much of a threat do you think it is for the Iranians? How much of a threat is it to Iranian interest? What tools do the Iranians have to limit the group’s influence?

Colin Clarke:
I want to be measured in the level of threat that I think ISK can pose. Even within Afghanistan, there's no risk that ISK is going to usurp the Taliban or pose any real threat to its leadership, but I do think it can play a spoiler role. Given its presence in Nagarhar and Kunar provinces, its success in recruiting among Salafis in those provinces, and its access to the witches’ brew of Jihadi groups along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, I do think that it has some potential staying power. We've seen its capabilities, its reach into Kabul itself, and the spectacular attacks that this group has launched. I think the chief threat to Iran is that this group has pursued such a sectarian agenda—mainly attacking Shi'ite Hazara in Afghanistan. That’s the way that Islamic State franchises across the board look to generate momentum and recruits. They want to go after Shi’a, almost above anyone else, and so Iran poses an attractive target to the Islamic State—not only Iranian soil, but Iranian interests in Afghanistan. This is particularly relevant as Iran ramps up its presence—as I expect—and we see a bigger footprint that provides more targets for the Islamic State.

That same thing is true of other countries as well. There is a lot of talk about Chinese influence in Afghanistan and people assume that it is going to be clear sailing for China, but I think a more significant Chinese presence in the region is going to come with some strings attached. The U.S. security umbrella is not there. China's not going to have unfettered access to minerals like people have been describing. There are going to be some security implications that come with a larger footprint—even if it’s mostly an economic footprint.

Jon Alterman:
Afghanistan had emerged as a large trading partner for Iran, partly because foreign aid to Afghanistan represented more than 40 percent of the Afghan GDP, and the Iranians were selling fuel. They were selling all kinds of things across the border. What happens to the economic ties between Iran and Afghanistan, when Afghanistan gets much more isolated from the global economy?
That's at the forefront of the thinking of a lot of folks that I've spoken to recently. They bring up the economy and some of those ties and if there are struggles, do we see an increase in illicit economic activity, including cross border smuggling—smuggling of humans, drugs, and illicit goods back and forth across the border. I do think the refugee issue is going to be a big deal as Afghans figure out whether or not they want to stay under Taliban rule. If they don’t want to stay, are there human smuggling networks along the border that are reactivated? How does that pad the pockets of some economic power brokers that operate over in western Afghanistan? Moreover, do we see any kind of involvement by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) or others tasked with monitoring that border? We know there have been allegations of corruption before. How does the IRGC deal with that? If you start seeing security incidents along that border, it’s even more of an impetus to shut down some of the trade and the back and forth. I think it’s a significant concern.

Jon Alterman:
As one of the consequences of the previous flood of Afghans into Iran in the 1980s and 1990s, Iran created these Afghan brigades, the Liwa Fatemiyoun, who have gone off and fought in other parts of the Middle East, on behalf of Iranians under Iranian leadership. Do you think there’s a likelihood that Iran is going to try to inject some of these Afghan origin fighters under Iranian command back into Afghanistan as there’s a battle for control state?

Colin Clarke:
It seems totally plausible depending on what the security situation looks like. There have been some Iranian government officials—it might have even been Zarif—that have openly mused about what they were going to do with the Liwa Fatemiyoun brigades. Back in 2017, I wrote an article in the CTC Sentinel with Phillip Smith, where we talked about this. There is this Iranian foreign fighter network, and once Syria winds down, these guys are not going to go home and become bakers and mechanics and schoolteachers. This is now a new tool for Iran to use in the region—much in the way that it's wielded the cudgel of Hezbollah, Iraqi Shi’ite militias, and the Houthis. This is just another option for Iran to conduct its foreign and security policy, or—in the case where it feels really threatened by what's happening in Afghanistan—to have some kind of a kinetic solution that still keeps Iran itself at arm's length working through proxies. This is a trend that I think is increasing. We're seeing this with what Turkey is doing in Libya. There is a lot more of this trend that seems to be a just a normal part of almost any conflict across the region now.

Jon Alterman:
You’ve talked about the ways the Iranians have developed a whole series of interests in Afghanistan—a whole series of people they can influence in Afghanistan. Over the last several decades, the other place they've done that has been in Iraq. How would you compare and contrast the way the Iranians have sought to build clients and instruments of influence in Afghanistan, versus what we've seen them doing in Iraq?

Colin Clarke:
To me, Iraq is more organic. There's more of an Iraqi presence and a history and a lineage of some of these Iran-backed Shi’ite groups in Iraq. The Afghan model is a little bit different, and it’s interesting to me in
many ways because the Afghans that are under Iranian tutelage at the moment are largely trained and cutting their teeth and gaining battle experience in Syria. If you think about the way the United States has attempted to train some counterterrorism forces, it’s said, “let’s take them out of Syria, bring them to Jordan, train them up, and send them back.” It is like players from the home team playing an away game—to use a baseball analogy—because they’ve been in a different theater against different adversaries, operating alongside Russian air power. There are so many more different dynamics in Syria. When you look at the Iraqi case for comparison, the capabilities are also a lot higher with some of these groups like KH.

Jon Alterman:
That’s Kataib Hezbollah.

Colin Clarke:
Yes. Sorry for slipping into acronyms speak. Those groups are a lot more developed than what we would see in Afghanistan, but again, Iran is patient. They've done this successfully with Lebanese Hezbollah and with other groups. I think we've seen what a force multiplier tacit knowledge transfer can be. IRGC Quds Force hands-on trainers and the provision of sophisticated technology and weaponry can get you a lot in the Middle East. We talk a lot about state actors, and this is one of these interesting areas of convergence between great power competition and counterterrorism. The Iranians are at the center of that. This is a state that has long been a state sponsor of terrorism, and it's now—as part of its foreign policy—looking to grow many Hezbollah-like groups across the region. Why have they done it? Frankly, because it's been effective.

Jon Alterman:
You've written a lot about how much the Iranians benefited from the U.S. security presence in Afghanistan. It helped cut down on drug smuggling. It helped cut down on some of these very anti-Shi'a groups that circulate in Afghanistan. What do you see as the possibility of the United States and Iran aligning along common goals and Afghanistan, as indeed they did shortly after the fall of the Taliban?

Colin Clarke:
Making predictions about the Middle East is fraught. right, what did Yogi Berra say, “I don't like to make predictions, especially about the future”? I tag, “and especially about the Middle East,” on top of that. It is one of those situations where geopolitics makes for strange bedfellows, and you're right, they did coordinate early on in this conflict. By some accounts they coordinated quite effectively, so that's something we could see again. I often wonder without a U.S. security umbrella there, does it make the United States more likely to cooperate because the U.S. sees itself as having little leverage? The fact the matter is that the United States is going to have to rely to some degree on powers in the region that fill this vacuum for intelligence because al Qaeda and the Islamic State are not just U.S. problems. That is especially true when you throw in Uyghurs, Chechens, and Uzbeks—and all these other groups into the mix. Moscow is concerned about blowback. Beijing is concerned about blowback. Tehran is concerned about blowback. India and Pakistan see everything through their own zero-sum lens. There is going to have to be greater communication between the United States and countries that we would consider adversaries. Is that something that
can be viewed in isolation? We're at loggerheads in many other areas. Is this an area where we can expect some kind of partnership? Again, I've been skeptical in the past—particularly on the U.S.-Russian front, of anything of value we would get from the Russians—but there have been instances of cooperation. It's just not something I would base my entire strategy around.

Jon Alterman:
Let me ask the flip side of that question. What do you think is the danger of the U.S. and Iran falling into grey-zone competition in Afghanistan—that there are some issues where Iran seeks to advance its own interest by using Afghanistan as a platform in a way that threatens American interests?

Colin Clarke:
It threatens to derail other areas where we do need to make progress and where the stakes are higher. I've spent the last 20 years studying terrorism and counterterrorism and I don't find terrorism to be an existential threat to the United States. I think that in many ways we've overreacted to the threat of terrorism. That said, it is something to take seriously. I think that grey-zone competition between the United States and Iran in Afghanistan could lead to escalation, and if that escalation derails more important objectives—like reaching an accord on the nuclear issue—that's really problematic. We've been able to look at these issues in isolation so far, but does that continue? I think a lot depends on what form that grey-zone competition takes and if the United States considers it beyond the pale of what other nations would normally do.

Jon Alterman:
Is there something that you think the United States should do to try to ensure that the United States and Iran can use Afghanistan as a platform for greater understanding and cooperation, rather than a platform for veiled competition?

Colin Clarke:
The United States could very well take initiative. We've been there for 20 years. Even though we're now leaving, we've got a decent understanding of the players and their objectives. It could be an olive branch to the Iranians to say, “look, we're leaving, and we can help you understand the lay of the land, particularly what we think is going to change in our own absence,” because surely, we've done an analysis of how things on the ground will change without a U.S. presence there. Some of those changes may be negative for Iran, so helping to assuage Iranian concerns could create a crack in the door that opens the possibility for further conversations. I've seen other people that are really pessimistic about anything that the United States could offer the Iranians—or that the Iranians would be willing to reciprocate with because of the recent change in leadership. I think there's an opportunity. How likely is it to be fruitful? It is hard to say.

Jon Alterman:
That is a lot to think about. Colin Clarke, thank you for joining us on Babel.

Colin Clarke:
Thanks very much for having me.