Safavid Dreams and Mongol Realities: The Islamic Republic of Iran's Shiite Clients in the Afghan Resistance and Civil War
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The Islamic Republic of Iran's Shiite Clients in the Afghan Resistance and Civil War

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Glossary

Afghanistani[1] - Non-Pashtun Afghan nationals

Fatemiyoun - a brigade of the IRGC composed mainly of Hazara Shiites and deployed in Syria

Hazara - An ethnic group in Afghanistan of mainly Shia Islamic religion

Hazarajat – Homeland of the Hazara in central Afghanistan

Iran - Used interchangeably with Islamic Republic of Iran throughout this thesis, an inherent identification of the country with the regime is not implied

IRGC - Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, also known as *Sepah-e Pasdaran-e Enqelab-e Islami, Sepah* or *Pasdaran*

Jamiat – Islamic Society (*Jamiat-e Islami*), predominantly Tajik party led by Rabbani, Massoud was its most notable commander

JCPOA - Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, nuclear agreement between Iran and Western states

Khomeinism - *Velayat-e Faqih*

Militant client - Specific form of Iranian NSA ally as outlined by Ostovar (2019), client used here as short form

Nasr - Dominant Afghanistani Shiite client of Iran in the 1980s

NSA - Non-state actor

OILM - Office for Islamic Liberation Movements, an organisation of the Iranian government in the 80s

Pasdaran - Guardians of Islamic Jihad Afghanistan (*Pasdaran Jihad-e Islami Afghanistan),* an Afghanistani Shiite group closely tied to the IRGC

Pashtun - Also known as Afghan, the namesake and historically dominant ethnicity of Afghanistan

Qizilbash - A Shiite ethnic group in Afghanistan

Shiism - One of the two main branches of Islam, followers known as Shia or Shiites

Shura - Used here to refer to the governing body established in Hazarajat in 1978 led by Beheshti

Sunni - One of the two main branches of Islam and the religion of the majority of Afghanistan

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[1] I have chosen this term to indicate Afghan nationality throughout the thesis as 'Afghan' is originally an ethnic term for the ethnicity now known mainly as Pashtun. The differences between Afghanistan's ethnicities plays an important role in the events discussed, and this term will therefore provide greater accuracy in-context. For a discussion of this issue, see Mousavi (1998, p. xv)

Tajik – Second largest ethnic group in Afghanistan, Persian-speaking and mainly Sunni

Twelver Shiism - The largest contemporary branch of Shiism and state religion of Iran

Velayat-e Faqih - The Guardianship of the Jurist, political ideology formulated by Khomeini

Wahdat - Party of Islamic Unity (*Hezb-e Wahdat-e Islami)*

Chapter I: Introduction

In its relentless quest for the restoration of Iran as a regional hegemon and globally significant power, the Islamic Republic of Iran has long pursued an Eastwards-focused strategy. In developing close relations with Central Asia, Russia, and China, it has sought to develop the country into a regional energy and transport hub as well as to secure its independence from the West and the United States. With recent world events challenging the international order dominated by the US, the collapse and comatic state of the JCPOA renegotiations, as well as Iran's accession to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, a long-standing goal of the regime, this strategy would appear ascendant if not for one missing link, Afghanistan. A stable and Iran-friendly Afghanistan is the central axis for Iran's "Look to the East" Grand Strategy, having led Iran in the past to devote enormous efforts toward statebuilding there (Barzegar, 2014). As a result, the return of Taliban rule in 2021 represents a disastrous threat to Iran's ambitions.

Iran is not well-known for treating the security of its borders or regional position lightly, having built a sophisticated network of non-state actor (NSA) allies in the Levant, where it ruthlessly fights to secure the Iran's security and regional ambitions. It has been able to construct this network by exploiting ideological, religious, and ethnic linkages in conjunction with highly chaotic conditions in divided or non-functional states. Yet, while it has secured the Western borders, Iran's position in the East is now more dangerous than at any time since the fall of the previous Taliban regime. Not for a lack of trying however, as Iran has involved itself in Afghan politics and wars by both conventional efforts, as well as its speciality, the engagement with non-state actors such as proxies and militant client allies since the revolution in 1979. While Iran's Western proxies, such as the infamous Hezbollah, are more well-known and studied, far less attention has been devoted to the Afghan theatre. It is known that in the period from 1979 to 1998 Iran developed extensive ties to Afghan Shiite groups similar to its efforts in Lebanon, but that these ties did not last. Thereafter, Iran has not had a militant client in Afghanistan (Ostovar, 2019). The IRGC's *Fatemiyoun* brigade, composed mainly of Hazara Shia Afghans, indicates that Iran can still utilise its religious connections to Afghan Shiite populations, but it operates outside of Afghanistan itself and represents a different kind of client, being directly integrated into Iran's armed forces. In view of the permanent strategic headache Afghanistan has presented for Iran and its strategy of employing militant clients, the question arises why Iran failed to do in Afghanistan what it achieved in Lebanon.

The purpose of this thesis is to examine Iran's attempts to build significant and long-standing relationships with Afghan proxies to advance strategic goals. In doing so, it seeks to answer the research question: **Why did the Islamic Republic of Iran fail to create a long-standing militant client in Afghanistan in the years following the Iranian revolution despite its ambitions for influence in Afghanistan and the favourable local conditions at the time?**

This thesis will attempt to contribute to the understanding of the history, potential, and limits of Iran's proxy strategy in Afghanistan by examining its relations with Hazara and Shia proxies in the 1980s and 1990s. With the return of the Taliban threatening the safety of Afghanistan's ethnic and religious minorities, Iran's turn eastwards, and the general precariousness of the regional situation in the Middle East and Central Asia, it hopes to shed light on a historical process which may help in researchers' and policymakers' understanding of the dynamics of Iran's strategic use of proxies, Afghanistan's Shiite population, and the potential for future developments in the region.

To establish the grounds for this research, the following section will provide a condensed historical overview of Iran's involvement in Afghanistan since 1979 and interaction with Shiite militant groups during the periods of the anti-Soviet resistance and the Afghan Civil War up to the takeover by the Taliban. It will also briefly describe subsequent developments for further context.

Chapter II: Historical Background: Iran, Afghanistan, the Shi'a and Hazaras 1979-2001

The histories of Afghanistan and Iran are entwined, with extensive cultural and religious links and commonalities. Historically, before the formation of the modern state of Afghanistan, the land was part of Iran (Barzegar, 2014). It was during the time of the Iranian Safavid Empire that the majority of Hazaras, an ethnic group thought to descended from Mongol migrants, converted to Twelver Shiism, Iran's state religion, sparking conflicts with the Sunni Uzbeks and Pashtuns (Williams, 2013). Next to the Hazara, other smaller mainly Twelver Shiite ethnicities in Afghanistan include Qizilbash, Farsiwan, and various other smaller groups (Edwards, 1986).[2] With the establishment of the predecessor of the modern Afghan state, the Hazara homeland in central Afghanistan, Hazarajat, eventually came under the full control of a Sunni Pashtun-dominated state, beginning a long history of oppression and revolts, with the Hazaras being relegated to the position of an unwanted second-class minority that desperately hoped for support from their Iranian coreligionists until the communist Saur revolution. At the same time, Afghanistani Shiite and Hazara clerics became involved in Iran's revolutionary Islamist networks that led to the 1979 Iranian revolution. As the communist government was established in Afghanistan, the Khomeinist Hazaras began to return to the Hazarajat to export the revolution there. In 1978, in reaction to the coup in Afghanistan and the policies of the new state, there was a general uprising in Hazarajat that chased out government forces and established a new governing body, the *Shura*, which was mainly led by traditional forces not tied to Iran (Williams, 2013).

Yet, preceding the Soviet invasion, Afghanistan did not occupy a particularly prominent place in Iranian policymaking. From the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, however, this changed as Iran became increasingly involved with its Eastern neighbour's insurgency until the withdrawal of the Soviet Union from Afghanistan in 1989. During this time, the war with Iraq from 1980-1988 was the immediate priority for Iran, and naturally this meant that the Western theatre overshadowed the East. Iran helped to develop groups in Lebanon and Iraq that would later constitute some of its most important allies and militant clients (Ostovar, 2019). However, driven by revolutionary fervour, Iran became one of several

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[2] Due to the inherently political nature of claims to demographic size and absence of an accurate census in Afghanistan, figures about the exact size of the Shiite community are unreliable, especially in the face of the Afghan's state historical attempts to suppress non-Pashtun minorities (Mousavi, 1998).

countries that gave support to the Afghan mujahideen. Already before the Soviet invasion, outraged by the Afghan communist government's actions, a variety of Afghan groups were allowed to operate within Iran, including both Shi'a and Sunni fundamentalist and moderate organisations. As power struggles in the new revolutionary government developed and radical clerics sidelined other actors, Iran's policy changed to an attempt to directly export the revolution by building up new groups aligned ideologically to Iran. (Khalilzad, 1987)

Most significantly, two Hazara parties were created, *Nasr* and later the more extreme *Pasdaran*. Using these parties Iran gained extensive influence in the Hazara homeland within Afghanistan, Hazarajat. They attacked the *Shura* and managed to overthrow it in 1984. However, factors such as the fear of overly antagonising the Soviets, differences within the Hazara community and the relative weakness of the Hazaras compared to the other warring parties, especially the Sunni groups, limited the effectiveness of this influence. Additionally, the Hazaras remained divided and kept fighting among themselves rather than participating in the efforts of the Pakistan-based resistance, remaining primarily in Hazarajat. Overall, Iran built up an influential ideological network similar to its activities in Lebanon and elsewhere among the Shi'ite communities of Afghanistan but did not align with the broader resistance movement based in Pakistan. When the Soviets withdrew in 1989 and the power struggle for the future of Afghanistan set in, Iran influenced the creation of a new group to unite the Hazaras, which culminated in the creation of a party known as *Wahdat*. As an umbrella group, this lessened the Khomeinist element and strengthened the ethnic Hazara element in the party (Williams, 2013).

After the Soviet withdrawal, Iran became involved in a proxy war with Saudi-Arabia and Pakistan in the country, aiming to create a friendly government in Afghanistan that would secure Iran's border. It now built a greater sphere of influence targeting all the Persian-speaking minorities of Afghanistan. This contributed to the creation of the aforementioned *Wahdat* as a Shia alliance and *Jamiat*, which, with Iran's help, instated a new government in 1992. However, the country soon descended into civil war. Irritated by the *Jamiat*-based government's inconsistency towards Iran and refusal to share power with Shi'ite and Pashtun groups as Iran demanded a peaceful solution to the civil war, Iran's involvement became increasingly chaotic as it sponsored various parties simultaneously (Milani, 2006). At the same time, Iran's relation with *Wahdat* gradually deteriorated as the ethnic affiliation became more and more important. *Wahdat* first allied with the Uzbek Dostum and *Jamiat* against the Sunni

Pashtun Hekmatyar in 1992. However, when they were attacked in Kabul by an alliance of *Jamiat* and the Pashtun commander Sayyaf, *Wahdat* was forced to ally with Hekmatyar. In February 1993 Hazaras in Western Kabul were slaughtered by *Jamiat*'s and Sayyaf's forces, driving *Wahdat* further into the ethnic corner. It began to greatly distrust Iran, perceiving it to have shifted toward supporting the Tajiks. Their formerly Khomeinist leader, Mazari, attempted to negotiate with the Taliban, who proceeded to murder him. As the Taliban's policy toward the Shia Hazara became apparent and the Taliban began overrunning more and more of the Hazaras' areas, *Wahdat* made peace with Massoud and joined his Northern Alliance, which also meant renewed support from Iran. However, it was too little too late, as the Taliban conquered the Hazarajat and established a reign of terror there (Williams, 2013).

Iran supported the Northern Alliance as the political situation was now set to threaten all of Iran's ambitions while delivering victory to the Sunni Pashtun extremists, Saudi-Arabia, and Pakistan. Following the Taliban conquest of Mazar-e Sharif and their subsequent massacre of Iranian diplomats, Iran prepared for an outright invasion of Afghanistan, but ultimately decided against getting involved in another war. Until the US-led invasion of Afghanistan, Iran was the main sponsor of the Northern Alliance with weapons and training, ultimately keeping the anti-Taliban resistance in Afghanistan alive almost on its own (Milani, 2006).

Iran also welcomed the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, providing ample support to the United States in the hope of a diplomatic rapprochement with their archenemy, while also getting rid of the Taliban and building a new Afghanistan conducive to Iran's interests. While rapprochement with the US failed to materialise, Iran continued to pursue its new Afghanistan policy, which meant building an economic zone of influence and transforming Herat, traditionally under Iranian influence, into a buffer zone, as well as collaboration with the new government without abandoning Iran's allies inside the country. The goal was to become the long-anticipated hub between Central Asia and the Persian Gulf, for which a stable Afghanistan was needed (Ibid.) There is no indication or reason to believe that exporting Iran's revolution or maintaining a militant client among the Hazaras featured in the minds of the Iranian government anymore. Even if it had been, the US had supplanted Iran as the Hazaras' foreign beneficiary (Williams, 2013).

Despite various difficulties, Iran grew to become one of Afghanistan's most crucial economic partners and helped greatly in stabilising the Karzai government, while it continued to support Shia and Tajik groups in Afghanistan in anticipation of a resurgent Taliban. It also

extensively deepened its influence with these communities in general, but this only led to a limited amount of influence over Afghanistan as a whole due to Pashtunisation under Karzai. However, despite its goal of a stable Afghanistan, Iran began providing support to the Taliban to put pressure on the US presence (Akbarzadeh, 2014). With the IRGC now helping the Hazaras' archenemy, it was clear that religious solidarity no longer factored into the Iran's thinking (Williams, 2013). Despite outwardly supporting the Afghan government, Iran's policy in Afghanistan became increasingly contradictory a few years after 2001. Its links with the Taliban continued to grow, Iran increased support, and after 2014 even began to publicly acknowledge interactions with Taliban leaders. Beyond providing support for Taliban attacks on the ground, Iran also aimed to influence the political future of Afghanistan and government-Taliban peace talks, as well as giving Iran a voice in the US-led peace talks, from which Iran was excluded (Akbarzadeh & Ibrahimi, 2019). The Taliban were also a useful means to fight the Islamic State, a sworn enemy of both the Taliban and the Islamic Republic (Abbasian, 2022).

During these years Iran also began deploying the *Fatemiyoun* brigade, though not in Afghanistan, but rather in the Syrian Civil War to support the Syrian government under Assad. Formed in 2013, recruited mainly from Shia Hazara Afghans in Iran as well as in Afghanistan, and headed by leadership whose ties with Iran stretch back to the Iran-Iraq war and anti-Soviet resistance in Afghanistan, the *Fatemiyoun* brigade was used with great effectiveness on the battlefield in Syria, representing an important innovation in Iran's militant client strategy. (Azizi & Vazirian, 2023) Preceding the Taliban takeover of 2021, state-affiliated media in Iran partially attempted to improve the Taliban's image. (Solhdoost & Pargoo, 2022) Since then, Iran's policy has been relatively moderate, engaging with the Taliban to push for an inclusive government, but not affording them official recognition (Abbasian, 2022). There have been several incidents in which Iranian and Taliban forces fought at the border (Farr, 2022). The situation remains precarious.

Chapter III: Literature Review: Proxies, State-Proxy Relationships, and the Iran's Militant Clients

This section will present an overview of general literature theories related to the selection, use, and survival of proxy relationships to complement the examination of Iran's proxy activity and the research design. Following this, a literature review on Iran's proxy strategy will set the final grounds necessary for this study, providing additional information, theories and comparative bases for the research design and analysis sections.

1. **General Theory on Proxy Use and State-Proxy Relationships**

The literature surrounding the use of proxies is muddled by a lack of consistent labels, which may have different implications for the kind of relationship discussed and subsequent research (Sozer, 2016). Some have termed Iran's non-state allies as terrorist groups, others as proxies. However, due to the similar nature of all of these relations as well as this inconsistency, a broad body of literature can be drawn upon and different views of proxy definitions can serve as heuristic instruments. Sozer's own definition builds on a combination of previous scholarship's understanding of proxy warfare and therefore serves as a useful framework. Accordingly, proxy warfare is "an external actor(s) seeking to indirectly influence the outcome of a conflict in pursuit of their strategic policy objectives by providing direct and intentional assistance to an existing actor in the conflict (Ibid., p. 643)". Furthermore, to constitute a proxy-relationship both parties need a common target, which may be another proxy, and the relationship needs to last for an extended time.

Ostovar (2019) uses the term militant client to separate Iran's sophisticated relations from more common so-called transactional proxies. He defines the term as follows:

"In this article, the term 'militant' is used to mean specifically any armed group sponsored by Iran that has used armed violence to help advance Iran's strategic goals as an active combatant in conflict or war. The term "client" is specifically reserved for organizations allied with Iran that receive their primary means of outside support from Iran and: a) operate alongside or under the command of IRGC commanders in conflict zones; and/or b) control enough territory (particularly airports and borders) to enable a sustained Iranian ground presence in their areas of operation and direct Iranian military support (Ibid., p. 167)."

Since we are interested in why Iran has not retained such a militant client in Afghanistan, Ostovar's definition of a militant client will serve as a heuristic lens for the outcome of interest of this research, as well as a more accurate label than proxy, as it was crafted specifically to address Iran's unique model.

Proxy relationships in general are not limited to the common transactional model. Fox (2019) attempts to address the long-standing problem by introducing five models of proxy relations; coerced, transactional, cultural, exploitative, and contractual. Iran's strongest proxies are cultural. This cultural connection leads to strong and long-lasting relationships rooted in self-identity, and a high degree of risk sharing. Since the cultural relation of Iran and Afghanistan is continously emphasised in Afghanistan, it is worth considering this dimension, and whether any of the other categories might apply instead.

As part of the aforementioned lack of consistent labels, literature on terrorist groups also provides ways to think about proxy relationships. Reasons why states sponsor terrorist groups include credibility for their threats, to compensate for comparative conventional weakness and to avoid direct retaliation by their enemies. For the same purpose, striking through a proxy introduces an element of plausible deniability. Furthermore, states engage in sponsoring terrorism for reasons rooted in domestic politics and legitimacy. Ideology can be very important, as in Iran's engagement with Hezbollah, where it chose to engage with a weak group to ensure ideological convergence. Shirking is common in state-proxy relationships, with the proxy's choice to pursue its own interests leading to agency loss. Converging preferences and aims are fundamental to a strategically significant relationship but insufficient on their own. Differing or unreliable information presents problems for both parties. If the state aims to increase the strength of the proxy, that usually also increases the proxy's autonomy. States have several imperfect control mechanisms available to them to prevent agency loss, such as increasing or decreasing the proxy's autonomy, establishing monitoring and reporting on it, screening recruits, establishing multiple agents to ensure their weakness and dependency, as well as punishments and rewards. In the case of Hezbollah, Iran established all of these except multiple agents. However, none of these would be as effective without the role of shared ideology. Ultimately, both rational-strategic and ideational factors are influential in the success of the relationship and ideological affinity on its own is insufficient to prevent agency loss and diverging goals (Byman & Kreps, 2010). Byman & Kreps's article is valuable because it addresses the factors that may complicate the principal-agent relationship despite factors such

as shared interests and ideology, demonstrating that even the presence of these two factors can be insufficient to sustain the relationship.

Beyond the benefit of compensating for weakness, sponsorship of armed groups also provides a bargaining chip in negotiations. Furthermore, states may derive benefits in domestic politics from their sponsorship, such as when competing factions use their sponsorship in relation to their domestic political manoeuvres. Interstate rivalries are another important factor in deciding state sponsorship of terrorism (Findley et al. 2012). These findings suggest that Iran would have been motivated both by the presence of its rivals in Afghanistan as well as domestic political factors.

In the context of interstate rivalries and external support for insurgent groups, several factors influence which groups are more likely to receive support. Very strong and very weak groups are less likely to be supported, while transnational linkages such as ethnicity or religion create better chances (Salehyan et al., 2011) While Iran's support for groups in Afghanistan forms part of the dataset of these researchers, they list no rivalry as part of Iran's support to *Wahdat*. Since this study was quantitative, qualitative research is necessary to clarify the truth of this matter and whether these factors were influential.

Domestic political factors may also lead states to sponsor insurgents when there is clearly no rational, material, or strategic benefit to this. The reasoning might be tied to the legitimacy of a regime, as well as more personal and ideational factors such as the perception of prestige-gain or desire to enact revenge (McAllister, 2006). This would indicate that the rational or strategic aims Iran had in Afghanistan need not necessarily have aligned with the benefits it could have derived from its client relationships.

2. Proxies and Afghanistan in Iran's Strategy

Though none of these authors intended to focus on Iran's case specifically, Iran is present in all of their articles, indicating the extensiveness of its proxy efforts. What role, then, do proxies occupy in Iran's strategy, considering their prominence? Militant clients[3] are fundamental to Iran's grand strategy, which is centred around asserting Iran's independence by fighting the influence of the US and other foreign powers. Its clients have been responsible for key strategic

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[3] See above for the definition of this term

successes in recent years, such as in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. Militant clients have enabled Iran to extend its military power, while also establishing needed allies and providing a vehicle to export its revolutionary ideology. Through these clients Iran can credibly strike at more powerful opponents, gain political influence in strategically important states, and increase its ability to fight in regional wars. Yet, these clients require a chaotic environment to operate and have a destabilising effect on their host state. Iran has not had a militant client in Afghanistan after the 80s and 90s, and it lost influence over *Wahdat* when their objectives began to depart (Ostovar, 2019). While his article is an important contribution to the study of Iran's proxies through outlining and defining the role of militant clients, Ostovar unfortunately almost entirely neglects the role of Afghanistan and Iran's involvement there, which is reflective of the lack of scholarly attention to the subject. In a book centred around the IRGC, Ostovar mentions their ties to the Hazara Shia only in a footnote, where he blames factionalism and a lack of organisation among these groups as factors preventing Iran from gaining greater influence (Ostovar, 2016).

In a similar manner, the Hazara groups are noticeably absent in other works, such as Seliktar and Rezaei's (2019) book *Iran, Revolution, and Proxy Wars.* Indeed, undoubtedly influenced by the ascendancy of Iran's proxies in the conflicts located in the Arab world as pointed out by Ostovar above, literature on Iran's proxy strategy tends to focus especially on their role in the Syrian Civil War and other Western theatres of Iran's operations (Cohen & Shamci, 2022; Azizi & Vazirian, 2023).

The influence of domestic politics on Iran's proxy strategy can be seen in the dispute between the IRGC and the Iranian Foreign Ministry on the role pro-Iranian militias should play in Iraq after 2003. While the IRGC considered them a tool to control the Sunni Arabs, the Foreign Ministry opposed this idea as it believed that it would be better to build trust with Iraq and encourage reconciliation among the population to stabilise the state. They also disagreed over what role Iraq should have in Iran's regional strategy (Hansen & Henningsen, 2022). This would indicate that the rational or strategic aims Iran had in their sponsorship need not necessarily have aligned with their motivation.

Due to the lack of discussion around Afghanistan in the literature on Iran's proxy strategy, literature centred around Iran's general approach to Afghanistan can be helpful in providing a clearer picture of Iran's strategy there. Afghanistan has been at the core of Iran's foreign policy since the Islamic Revolution due to its cultural relation, geostrategic location, and geoeconomic

situation. However, the diversity of these factors may have led Iran to be unable to clearly decide its priorities, and as a result Iran's policy in Afghanistan has been unclear and misaligned. Differences between the decision-makers in Tehran may also have played a role in this. Iran's thinking was affected by concern over the Soviet Union, internal issues as the Iranian regime consolidated, the Iran-Iraq War, and the presence of rival states such as Saudi-Arabia and the US. Consequently, its policy toward Afghanistan was both prudent and idealistically-motivated, resulting in ambiguity about Tehran's exact aims. Supporting Shiite groups was done in preparation for the Soviet withdrawal and to ensure an important status and role for Iran in post-occupation Afghanistan. During the Afghan Civil War, Iran supported the governments of Mojaddadi and Rabbani while attempting to bring various groups to a compromise. Subsequently, as the Taliban rose to power, Iran considered them one of its most important security threats and concentrated on supporting the entire anti-Taliban coalition (Haji-Yousefi, 2012). This indicates once again that differences among Iran's elites should be taken into account. It also suggests that Iran in the 80s might have been supporting Shiite groups without a clear strategic vision for the purpose of that act. However, Haji-Yousefi possibly underplays the destructive side of Iran's involvement in Afghanistan to some extent and does not devote extensive discussion to these historical periods, so his assessments should be seen critically.

On the other hand, Iran's policy toward Afghanistan can be seen as consistent on the basis of policies derived from Iranian strategic culture. Accordingly, there are six behaviours that marked Iran's policy toward Afghanistan: opposing the interference of other foreign powers, advocating for an inclusive government, supporting fellow Shia and Persian-speakers, helping the people and government of Afghanistan, stabilising Afghanistan, and supporting the established political structure in Afghanistan. Of these, only the last behaviour was non-continuous between 1979-2021, as Iran could not accept the Taliban government. Iran opposes Pashtunism and the dominance of Pashtuns over the other ethnic groups due to its common cultural heritage and own sense of greatness, as well as its sense of strategic loneliness and isolation, rooted in Iran's historical memory, culture, and the revolutionary Shia ideology of the Islamic Republic (Jahanbaksh et al., 2023). Though these authors do not discuss any specifics of Iran's involvement with the groups it supported, this is a valuable perspective as it engages with concepts that affected Iran's policymakers in the specific Iranian context, which might not feature as prevalently in the assessments of non-Iranian scholars.

Milani (2006) categorises Iran's involvement in Afghanistan until 1988 as an attempt to create an ideological sphere of influence, while using Afghanistan as a negotiation tool with the Soviets to decrease their support for Iraq. Iran at this time was ideologically fixated on defeating Iraq entirely which overshadowed all other aspects of its foreign policy. Additionally, it refused to involve itself with the broader resistance due to the strong presence of the US and Saudi-Arabia. Milani writes that "Tehran's Shi'i-centered and parochial policy transformed the historically oppressed and marginalized Hazaras, Qizilbash, and Farsiwans Shi'ites into a disciplined and cohesive force (Ibid., p. 237)" After the end of the Iran-Iraq War, Iran became more assertive and pragmatic in Afghanistan to decrease its international isolation. To establish a stable and Iran-friendly government, Iran encouraged the Shiites to unite into *Wahdat* and began supporting *Jamiat*, immediately recognising Rabbani's government after it had successfully overthrown the communist regime. Milani states that ultimately Iran failed to bring the ensuing civil war to a peaceful end because of its own lack of resources, inconsistency in both Iran and Afghanistan's governments' actions, ultimately rooted in the irreconcilable interest of ethnic constituencies and warlords. While Milani does not discuss the relations between *Wahdat* and Iran in detail, his analysis points to a divergence of interests between the two sides. Furthermore, his analysis must also be seen critically as he overstates the unity created among Shiite groups before 1988 as well as the Shiite identity of the *Wahdat*.

3. Case Studies of Iran's Proxy Relationships

Williams's (2013) chapter on the Shia Hazara of Afghanistan is to my knowledge one of the most recent and comprehensive published accounts of the events in the Hazarajat in the 80s and the role of the Hazaras in the Afghan Civil War, though not specifically focused on Iran's proxy activity. Iran decided to establish new groups on its own in Hazarajat as the *Shura* was insufficiently aligned with Iran's ideology. It created *Nasr,* but deemed it insufficiently dedicated to the revolution to overthrow the *Shura*, and additionally created the more extreme *Sepah-e Pasdaran* with the help of Hazaras who also fought for Iran against Iraq, and with which it succeeded in establishing dominance in the Hazarajat. However, Iran's support did not match that given to the Peshawar-based groups, many elements of the Hazaras remained opposed to the Khomeinist ideology, and the Hazaras continued to fight among themselves instead of participating in the broader resistance. When the Hazara groups put their squabbles aside and united under the *Wahdat*, their ethnic identity became more and more prevalent and

their ideological connection to Iran weaker, which led them to increasingly act in their own interest and against Iran's. Because Iran supported the Tajik forces of Massoud who then became the *Wahdat*'s enemy, *Wahdat* began to distrust Iran which led to the end of their special relationship. According to Williams, the reason for Iran's failure to maintain their militant clients in Afghanistan lay in the ideological departure of their clients as *Wahdat* and its members became increasingly ethnically-based, and their goals diverged. Subsequently, when they reconciled with Iran their relationship never again amounted to its previous significance and the US stepped into the role of the Hazaras' main supporter.

In view of the comparative lack of literature discussing the Afghanistan case, examining Iran's relations with proxies in other countries provides a comparative basis of factors that contributed to the successful relations with its current militant clients. The longevity of the Iran-Hezbollah alliance is a good example. Iran and Hezbollah built trust between each other by establishing a committee of trusted clerics from both sides and other consistent meetings, as well as aligning with each other ideologically and publicly declaring their common rivals. Additionally, the high amount of autonomy Iran has given to Hezbollah and the latter's effective management of the received resources also played a role. The position of the Shiites of Lebanon as an ethno-religiously marginalised community within Lebanon provided a strong foundation for the alliance. Due to the significant trust both partners have built with each other, their common interests consistently superseding divergent interests, and the chaotic regional environment the alliance has survived and prevented opportunistic disassociation (Khan & Zhaoying, 2020). If information could be found relating to the presence or absence of similar factors in the Afghan case, they could be helpful indicators for the factors that harmed Iran's state-client relationship there.

Iran did not only sponsor Hezbollah during the Lebanese Civil War, but also more minor groups such as the Islamic Unification Movement (IUM). For both groups, relationships between the leaderships before the war were an important factor in Iran's decision to support them. Additionally, their ideological commonality and shared rivalries (Israel) were also decisive. Notably, Iran decided to sponsor groups that were comparatively weaker at their outset, which may indicate that either Iran attached much more importance to shared transnational constituencies or that it would enable Iran to have much more influence over the proxies and direct their activities and development (Sozer, 2016). As this holds for both the case of the 'model' proxy, Hezbollah, as well as IUM, it indicates that any comparative weaknesses the

Afghan groups Iran supported might have had should not have been a decisive factor in their relationship. It also suggests that the degree of influence Iran was able to exert over them may have played a significant role.

The *Fatemiyoun* brigade offers an additional perspective. While it is effectively integrated into the IRGC and therefore different to the sort of client we are interested in, aspects of its history can be used to gain further insight into Iran's relation to the Hazara Shiites, which make up the majority of the Brigade's fighters. The roots of the *Fatemiyoun* stretch back to the Soviet Invasion, where, in addition to organising Afghan Shiites to fight the Soviets, Iran also trained a brigade of volunteers to fight Iraq. This brigade, however, was subsequently disbanded due to a lack of support from the IRGC, and its fighters returned to Afghanistan to fight the Taliban in the 90s. Core leaders of the *Fatemiyoun* were also involved in the anti-Soviet resistance and the Afghan Civil War (Azizi & Vazirian, 2023). These facts demonstrate the continued relevance of Iran's connection to Afghanistani Shiites and present another reason why more effort should be devoted to studying the origins of this connection. Furthermore, the fact that a lack of support in the 80s for the aforementioned IRGC-organised brigade led to its dissolution raises the question of how the level of Iran's support affected the relationship with the Afghanistan-based groups at the time.

Chapter IV: Research Design

1. Methodology

I am seeking to explain why the Islamic Republic of Iran failed to create a longer-lasting relationship with the militant clients in Afghanistan that it had built during the 80s and early 90s. For this purpose, explaining-outcome process-tracing as outlined by Beach and Pedersen (2013) is the most suitable method. This method "attempts to craft a minimally sufficient explanation of a puzzling outcome in a specific historical case" (Ibid., p. 3). It is distinguished from other process-tracing methods that are more theory-centred, which has important implications for the approach of this thesis. Accordingly, theories are used heuristically to help in the analysis of the studied case, and it is not necessary to distinguish between systematic and case-specific parts since this methodology is based on the ontological view that generalisations are impossible and not useful when dealing with the infinitely complex nature of the social world. The resulting theory from this type of process-tracing tends to be eclectic and based on conglomerates of several mechanisms. It is case-specific and generally not generalisable toward other cases. Another way to think about this method is abduction, which combines inductive and deductive logic.

Explaining-outcome process-tracing based on Bayesian logic introduces a degree of subjectivity to research, as it is based on the researcher's opinion or belief in the probability of the hypothesis based on prior research, knowledge, and theories, as well as the probability of finding evidence supporting the hypothesis before gathering data. However, this subjectivity does not decrease the scientific validity of the research, as researchers are always influenced by their subjective expectations based on their previous research, and the research and analysis of the case itself will disprove erroneous assumptions stemming from subjectivity. It is a distinct advantage of this method that it is transparent about resulting choices and assumptions which are less clear yet nonetheless present in most similar methods (Ibid.).

I am starting with the prior that, based upon the research outlined in the previous sections, I believe that the main reason for the breakdown in this state-militant client relationship laid in the divergence of the goals of Iran and *Wahdat* in the early 90s during the Afghan Civil War. This is what I expect to be a minimally sufficient explanation for this outcome. The other factors of interest outlined in the literature review may serve as systematic parts forming the mechanism that led to this outcome, while further case-specific parts will be described based

on the analysis of gathered data. Based on my prior research, other factors that appear especially relevant can be summarised as mutual trust, information, domestic factionalism within Iran, ideological convergence, rivalries, and leadership connections.

In terms of case selection, this thesis treats Iran's relations with Hazara and Shia proxies as one single case, being a process beginning sometime before the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan and culminating in the breakdown of the Iran-*Wahdat* relationship. For practical purposes, however, it is prudent to divide this into two sections. Firstly, Iran's relationship with clients in Hazarajat during the 80s, primarily *Nasr* and *Pasdaran*. Secondly, the relationship with *Wahdat*. Since Iran's proxies in the first period interacted primarily with each other and Shiite or Hazara groups not backed by Iran, and most of these groups would unite into *Wahdat* later on, they are intrinsically interlinked and can barely be studied in isolation of each other, representing one case overall.

As is common in social sciences, the results of the research and the validity of the resulting theory can never be fully confirmed. It is rather a matter of to what degree the researcher judges it to be sufficient and accurate. Furthermore, studies, especially those based on the collection of empirical material, can always be improved with subsequent developments, just as in the general study of history (Ibid.) Finally, there is one main weakness to this approach: the availability of reliable sources. This is a general weakness of any academic research in the field of International Relations that engages with information unlikely to be publicly available, but all the more so when it comes to proxy relationships. As Sozer (2016) points out, proxy relationships are in most cases secretive processes and most government data related to them is likely to be classified. Since this topic is one that has received relatively little attention, the amount of useful sources is likely to be even more limited. Additionally, especially in the older sources stemming from the examined period, many political and other biases may be found, which must be treated carefully. It must therefore be kept in mind that any research on this topic will amount to an approximation of the truth based on data that is available and found by the researcher. However, this is common to all study of events in human history and should not be an obstacle to researching such topics. After all, the alternative would be to abandon the pursuit of knowledge in the face of uncertainty entirely.

Chapter V: Case Study

Exporting the Revolution: Iranian Influence in the Hazarajat 1979-1989

Before the Iranian Revolution and the overthrow of the government in Hazarajat, Afghan Shiite clerics had established connections with the clerical networks in Najaf and Qom, where they were influenced by new and radical political discourses such as Khomeini's. The clerics returning from their studies participated in the liberation of Hazarajat and the *Shura* to some extent, but quickly began to abandon it. The Shiite Islamists deemed it reactionary and sought to establish their own control over Hazarajat and conduct a radical revolution there. (Ibrahimi, 2017) After an initial power struggle that preceded the establishment of full control by the clerics in the wake of the Iranian revolution, the new Islamic Republic shared this aim (Khalilzad, 1987). Despite expectations and efforts by the *Shura* to court Iran, the Iranians extended little if any support since the *Shura* refused to recognise Khomeini as the Supreme Leader (Ibrahimi, 2017). Iran eventually forced all non-Islamist Shiite and Hazara groups to move their bases out of the country (Mousavi, 1998).

Iran concentrated its efforts primarily on creating an internal revolution in Hazarajat because it needed to maintain cordial relations with the Soviet Union (Harpviken, 1996). The Iran-Iraq War was the most important issue for Iran. Drawing upon the pool of over 2 million mainly Shiite refugees from Afghanistan in Iran, Iran recruited and trained many of them to fight in the war, with the promise that they would then be able to use their experience in returning to fight for the resistance in Afghanistan (Emadi, 1997). The Afghanistani Shiite groups encouraged their members to participate in this (Mousavi, 1998). Offices and headquarters were established in Iran by the multitudes of organisations and leaders from the Khomeinist groups. Many groups were founded and active at this time, accessing a multitude of clerical patronage networks in Iran in an essentially decentralised process, and to demonstrate their relevance, these groups quickly began to establish bases and claim territory in Hazarajat (Ibrahimi, 2017). The most important organisation, *Nasr*, was set up after the Communist coup (Roy, 1990). Possibly influenced by Iran, *Nasr* increasingly targeted the secularists of the *Shura*, which resulted in the beginning of armed conflict (Harpviken, 1996). Fighting continued until Summer 1982, when *Nasr* attempted to overthrow the *Shura* by striking at its central power base, but failed and was forced to retreat to its own strongholds in other parts of Hazarajat (Ibrahimi, 2017). This development ignited the fully-fledged civil war in Hazarajat. After an Iranian delegation visited Hazarajat in 1982, they were dissatisfied with

Nasr's use of their support and sought to create a new group which they could control directly, which led to the establishment of *Pasdaran* (Edwards, 1986).

As *Pasdaran* received greater military assistance and drained key leaders off the *Shura*, it substantially boosted the collective position of the Iranian clients in Hazarajat vis-à-vis the *Shura* and other opponents. After biding their time and building up their capabilities, in 1984 *Pasdaran* and *Nasr* jointly attacked the *Shura* and managed to drive it out of most of its controlled areas. While they were unable to completely wipe out their enemies, the Islamists became the dominant force in Hazarajat and controlled most of the region. *Pasdaran* and *Nasr* were their two most powerful groups. At this time, they received the highest levels of Iranian assistance throughout the decade. They were able to establish an alliance with each other that secured their coexistence in several provinces. However, fighting continued between them and other groups, both Iran-backed Islamists and the non-Iranian groups, and even between *Nasr* and *Pasdaran* in certain instances. In general, alliances and conflicts were highly localised. As the devastation caused by the conflicts in Hazarajat took its toll on land and people, and the appeal of the Islamists' ideology also waned as a result, a stalemate evolved in the second half of the decade. Eventually, the Islamist leaders began to realise the need for a more inclusive alliance as they realised their inability to attain complete control over Hazarajat and the unsustainable situation in which large amounts of traditional Hazara society had been effectively driven out of any form of political participation. Iran also pushed for this, creating an alliance of eight of its affiliated groups in 1985, which gave them a united voice toward the rest of the Afghan resistance, but failed to stop the infighting in Hazarajat. The push for a broader Shiite alliance increased when the Sunni parties in Pakistan effectively excluded the Iran-based alliance from negotiations for a future government in 1989. In 1988, *Nasr* coordinated an attack with other parties on Bamyan, ending the last presence of the government in Harajat, with Bamyan thereupon becoming the centre of the developing political unification process (Ibrahimi, 2017).

With the end of the Iran-Iraq war in 1988, Iran increased its support to its clients and efforts to unite the Shia of Afghanistan (Rais, 1993). Iran had previously made steps in this direction, but without much success, such as when it sought to bring other groups under *Nasr*'s leadership as early as 1981 (Khalilzad, 1987). These steps were also part of a broader pragmatic reorientation of Iran's foreign policy to end its international isolation, with Khomeini ordering a mitigation of the revolutionary export policy in 1985. This was followed by a coordinated move by pragmatist elements of the Iranian leadership to discredit and end the activities of the

Office of Islamic Liberation (OILM), responsible for exporting the revolution, which had become an obstacle to this pragmatic change (von Schwerin, 2015).

The process leading to the formation of *Wahdat* will be discussed in the next chapter, dedicated to the second period of the case study.

The Two Pillars of Iranian Influence in Hazarajat

While not the only clients of Iran at the time, *Nasr* and *Pasdaran* were clearly the most influential, receiving the most Iranian support and dominating the political development of the Afghanistani Shiites. Therefore, a closer examination of these two groups is appropriate.[4]

Nasr was founded sometime between 1978 and 1979 (Kakar, 1995; Roy, 1990).[5] It appears to have been composed of both members of a clerical network that had studied under Khomeini in Naja, as well as Hazara nationalists with ties to a Hazara nationalist organisation from the 60s (Harpviken, 1996; Kakar, 1995; Roy, 1990). It was led by Mir Hossein Sadiqi, an early defector of the *Shura* (Edwards, 1986). As a result, *Nasr* came to combine dedication to Khomeini's Islamism with Hazara nationalism. This aspect, coupled with extensive ambitions for social reform, led its enemies to slander *Nasr* as a leftist, non-Islamic, Hazara nationalist party, and its ethnic dimension became the primary source of friction between it and the Iranians (Ibrahimi, 2017). It was most likely initiated primarily by its own Hazara leaders and not through the Iranian authorities, as some alleged (Mousavi, 1998). *Nasr* was also influenced by elements of Iranian Islamist thought outside of the clerical networks. *Nasr* was one of the best organised mujahideen groups, and focused extensively on education and the dissemination of its ideology through schools in the areas it controlled. It recruited from among the refugees in Iran, which were trained by the Iranians. It was involved in some of the first significant conflicts in Hazarajat (Ibrahimi, 2017). *Nasr* was closely connected to the Iranian Foreign Ministry (Harpviken, 1996; Ibrahimi, 2006). One of its most important leaders, Abdul Ali Mazari, who would later become leader of *Wahdat*, was a Khomeinist cleric that had studied in Iran and been imprisoned there before the revolution (Williams, 2013). It was reported that in prison he was together with Khomeini's successor as Supreme Leader and President of Iran

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[4] For a comprehensive overview of Shiite parties active in Afghanistan at this time, see Ibrahimi (2017, p. 158-159)

[5] The time and circumstances of the creation of *Nasr*, as well as the exact time and circumstances for other key events in this case-study, are not entirely clear as sources offer various accounts. In such instances I have chosen to go with the most convincing version based on a cross-reading of these sources, as well as the circumstances in which they were produced.

from 1981-88, Khamenei (Edwards, 1986). However, there is no evidence beyond speculation to show that this had any impact on the relationship between *Nasr* and Iran.

Despite *Nasr*'s effectiveness and continued close connection to Iran throughout the entire period until the formation of *Wahdat*, its failure to overthrow the *Shura* in 1982 convinced Iran to create *Pasdaran*, directly tied to the IRGC, to exercise much greater direct influence over Hazarajat after it had sent a disappointed delegation to assess how *Nasr* was utilising Iran's support (Edwards, 1986; Sinno, 2008). Key *Shura* leaders, who had defected, travelled to Iran in the same year and returned as *Pasdaran*'s new leaders with new vigour and substantial military assistance. It became one of the most radical Shiite groups in Afghanistan, concentrating on Shia Islamic identity and with greater participation of other ethnic groups such as Qizilbash. It was largely composed of less-educated young militants at lower levels, leading to a greater emphasis on military activity as opposed to cultural activities like *Nasr*'s. This was further reinforced by access to better military equipment from Iran, leading it to become one of the most important parties in the region. *Pasdaran* was less centralised than *Nasr*, however, functioning more like a network of local leaders. IRGC officials frequently travelled to Hazarajat to supply local commanders and monitor *Pasdaran*'s activities. Due to its military strength, it played a leading role in overthrowing the *Shura* (Ibrahimi, 2017). Many *Pasdaran* members had been trained in Iran and some had fought in the Iran-Iraq War (Williams, 2013). *Pasdaran*'s connection to Iran was so strong that in these years it had ambitions for Hazarajat to secede from Afghanistan to Iran entirely (Harpviken, 1996).

In general, both of these groups functioned efficiently, providing services in the areas under their control, which enabled them to mobilise the population, and they created relatively professional military forces (Sinno, 2008). Despite cooperating frequently depending on local circumstances, *Nasr* and *Pasdaran* also fought each other, with *Pasdaran*'s ruthlessness leading *Nasr* to pay greater attention to its own military aspect (Ibrahimi, 2017).

Mutual Trust

Iran's hostility to Shiite groups that refused to adhere to Khomeini's *Velayat-e Faqih*, as well as the decision to form *Pasdaran*, demonstrate that the Iranian leadership was highly cautious and distrustful of even close partners it did not have direct control over. It is likely that this distrust contributed to strained relations.

Because of the multitude of Iranian-backed groups and infighting in Hazarajat, a common complaint voiced both by Hazaras in general and even leaders affiliated with those groups was the suspicion or claim that Iran intended this division as it feared losing control and influence over a single powerful organisation. However, it is most likely that the multitude of separate clerical networks and factionalism in Iran was the cause for division (Ibrahimi, 2017). In fact, Iran frequently tried to pressure groups to unite, as a single group would be easier to influence and direct toward Iranian goals (Sinno, 2008; Mousavi, 1998). Still, the perception on part of those affected groups may have severely affected their trust in Iran's beneficence.

Information

A lack of reliable information, caused by local conditions, had important consequences for both Iran and the leaders of its clients. Hazarajat's mountainous geography and heavy winters, a lack of radio equipment, and the patchwork-like state of the region marred by ever-shifting local conflict lines made it near-impossible for the upper leadership of the clients to effectively communicate with their local commanders in short timeframes, having to rely on letter-carrying messengers (Ibrahimi, 2017). With this near-medieval state of communications, it is no surprise that Iran sent its own personnel to monitor the situation (see above). Naturally, this fundamental flaw in communications greatly reduced the ability of Iranian and Afghanistani political leaders to affect developments in Hazarajat effectively and steer their fighters in the right direction.

Iran's Domestic Situation and Factionalism

The domestic situation and factionalism in Iran had a substantial impact on its clients. Before the defeat of the Bazargan government and the sidelining of the liberal nationalists by the clerics, the Iranian government offered a wide base of support for a variety of Afghan resistance groups, including fundamentalist Sunni groups. With the increase in clerical power, however, the focus shifted to exporting the revolution directly, which meant that Iran focused on nurturing Shiite groups in agreement with Khomeini's ideology and claim to leadership (Khalilzad, 1987). The power struggle between the moderate and radical clergy caused Iran to oppose the *Shura* in Hazarajat. The success of groups in Hazarajat greatly depended on the fortune of their patron inside Iran's own power struggles, which influenced the level of support

(Ibrahimi, 2017). *Pasdaran* and *Nasr* were associated with the IRGC and the Foreign Ministry respectively (see above). Yet, due to the diversity of sources of support, even these strongest groups were unable to completely dominate the region and establish a strong political order there. The case of Mehdi Hashemi and the OILM, as well as the manoeuvring by the pragmatists in Iran against him and his benefactor Montazeri in 1986, which ultimately resulted in the prevalence of a more pragmatic approach to foreign policy, should be seen in this context. The exact details of Hashemi's involvement and importance is impossible to tell. As the coordinator of the assistance of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards to Afghanistan in the early 80s, it is apparent that he was involved with Iran's proxy efforts (Ibrahimi, 2017). According to Khalilzad (1990), Montazeri and Hashemi essentially had full control over the Afghanistan policy, sidelining the foreign ministry's much more pragmatic and comprehensive approach until Montazeri's decline following the execution of Hashemi in 1986. One of the significant Shiite groups that was connected to Montazeri substantially declined after his fall from grace (Ibrahimi, 2017).

Ultimately, the perception of their role might have been more important than the reality. For example, a Hazara author based in Pakistan at the time accuses him of having played a devastating role in fuelling the conflicts, based on his televised confession: "Whenever I wanted, I could have controlled and eliminated the civil wars in Hazarajat" (own translation, Maqsoudi, 1989, p. 254). In the same year, the amount of arms Iran funnelled into Hazarajat also significantly decreased in line with the moderation of its foreign policy (Harpviken, 1996). The process of moving away from the idealistic radicalism of the early years of Iran might have begun as early as late 1984 (Halliday, 1986; Emadi, 1995).

Ideological Convergence

As seen in the above sections, adherence to Iran's ideology was a crucial element in for accessing Iranian support. Many of the client parties established places of education to disseminate the Khomeinist political ideology and religious doctrine, and activists travelled throughout the Hazarajat to teach the local lower ranks about the ideologies of their organisations. In Iran, training centres disseminated the ideas of exporting the Islamic Revolution to recruits from the refugee population (Ibrahimi, 2017). Additionally, Iran also sent agents to Afghanistan to propagate Khomeinism (Emadi, 1997). By the middle of the decade, large swathes of the Hazarajat effectively constituted revolutionary governments modelled after Iran, reminiscent of the territories the Lebanese Hezbollah controlled.

However, other factors reduced the ideological convergence between Iran and its clients. *Nasr*'s emphasis of its Hazara identity was not appreciated by Iranian leadership, and it was also influenced by revolutionary Islamist ideas outside of the framework that was established in Iran (Ibrahimi, 2017). *Nasr*'s emphasis on the unity of Afghanistan, minority politics, and regional politics stood in contrast to the model of transnational Islamic revolution favoured by Iran (Harpviken, 1996). The conflict between pan-Shiism and Hazara ethnic interests would remain an enduring challenge for Iran's relationships. Furthermore, it is likely that the need for Iranian backing would have inspired some groups to nominally claim adherence to Khomeini, whether they were true believers or not.

The localised politics of Hazarajat also diluted the ideological cohesion of the clients. The conditions of the fighting led to a rise of a caste of local military commanders which gradually shifted further away from their central leadership after 1985. One group, *Nahzat,* provides a particularly striking example, where the Iran-based political leadership lost control of its military commanders and soldiery who gradually discarded their ideological underpinnings. Conflicts between local tribes and communities could decide party affiliation. While in the earlier years of the decade ideology had been decisive, ideology gradually lost more and more significance in the rhetoric and actions of the parties (Ibid.) Additionally, fighters also frequently moved from one group to another, demonstrating less lasting cohesion than found in the Sunni resistance. Eventually, as time went on, the Iranian Revolution lost its initial appeal and inspiration as people became disillusioned with its results (Roy, 1990). Khomeini's death in 1988 further lessened Iran's appeal as it lost the unique and charismatic leader that had also inspired the Hazaras (Harpviken, 1996). Disillusionment and a turn to pragmatism in the face of enduring destruction and hardships reflected the turn toward pragmatic politics within Iran. Coupled with the developments in the rest of Afghanistan, even for the most loyal groups the trend was to move away from their ideological commitment and toward the need for ethnic and religious unity to secure their future in the country (Mousavi, 1998).

Leadership

Preceding both the uprising in the Hazarajat and the Iranian Revolution, the younger generations of the Afghan Shiite clergy had been in contact with the clerical networks in Najaf in Iraq and Qom in Iran. Here, they became involved in the modern political activism that was developing among some Shiite clergy, and subsequently the young clerics returned to their

communities in Afghanistan under the influence of new and radical political ideas, including those of Khomeini, under which some of them had studied in Najaf. For example, Sadiqi Nili established a *madrasah*[6] to spread his radical Islamist ideology, and was designated as Khomeini's representative in Afghanistan in 1971 (Ibrahimi, 2017). Mazari is another example of an important leader with direct connections to the Iranian leadership (see above). In general, the Shiite groups backed by Iran all had connections to Iranian leaders.

Rivalries

Iran distrusted the resistance based in Pakistan and most Sunni groups, though it did cooperate with some non-Shia groups outside of the Hazarajat in certain instances. This distrust was partially rooted in the large amount of support the Peshawar groups received from Iran's rivals, especially Saudi Arabia and the US (Khalilzad, 1987). However, Iran did not direct its militant clients against these groups in any major fashion. Rather, they were used against competing Hazara and Shia groups in Hazarajat. Iran was seeking to export the revolution to Hazarajat and Afghanistani Shiites. Furthermore, Iran made minor attempts to build better relations with some Sunni leaders as early as 1984 (Ibid.). The clients did not fight the Soviet Union, theoretically the actual enemy of all the resistance forces, or even the Afghan government in any notable way, and Iran effectively made a deal with the Soviets in 1985 that secured their already existing non-interference in Hazarajat more formally (Sinno, 2008). Therefore, while the presence of Iran's rivals might have played a role in restricting Iran's activity almost entirely to Shiite groups, it cannot be said that Iran's intention was to directly fight its rivals or their proxies. However, as a way to secure Iran's future influence in Afghanistan when it was obvious that its rivals were interested in the very same thing, rivalry considerations did factor into Iran's compulsion to involve itself in Afghanistan in the first place (Roy, 1990). Overall, Iran's level of support remained relatively low and cautious throughout the entire period, even at its highest points and toward its most favoured groups. This level of assistance was much lower than that received by the Pakistan-based groups from their Western and Arab sponsors (Ibrahimi, 2017).

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[6] A traditional religious school.

Unity and Collapse: Iran and the Hezb-e Wahdat 1989-1992

There are several different versions of the story of the creation of *Wahdat*, assigning varying levels of Iran's importance and involvement, but there is general agreement that Iran was making efforts to convince the Shiite leaders to unite (Rais, 1993; Sinno, 2008; Harpviken, 1996; Ibrahimi, 2017; Williams, 2013).[7] Building upon trends outlined in the previous section, two major events gave the impetus for unification, the announcement of the Soviet Union's withdrawal from Afghanistan and the rejection of Shiite claims for representation and participation in the negotiations for the future interim government by the other parties in Peshawar (Harpviken, 1996). The initiative that would end up creating *Wahdat*, however, came from meetings between the leaders of *Nasr* and *Pasdaran* in the middle of 1988 in Hazarajat (Harpviken, 1996; Ibrahimi, 2017; Mousavi, 1998). Their initiative was followed by numerous negotiations in the region involving the other parties, Iranian officials, and leadership based in Tehran, until in July 1989 at a congress in Bamyan they produced the founding document of *Wahdat*, pledging to dissolve their individual organisations in favour of a new unified party to represent all the Shia of Afghanistan (Harpviken, 1996; Ibrahimi, 2017). *Wahdat* sent a delegation to Tehran which was well-received by Iran (Emadi, 1997). In November 1989, the remnants of the *Shura* joined, and the party's establishment was officially declared in Tehran in June 1990 (Harpviken, 1996). *Nasr* and *Pasdaran* provided most of the base of *Wahdat*, having succeeded to convince the other parties of proportional representation after long and fierce negotiations. Abdul Ali Mazari, one of the key leaders of *Nasr*, became leader of the new party (Ibrahimi, 2017). While ultimately this meant a final victory of the Islamists in the fight for dominance over the Shia of Afghanistan, the Islamic nature of the party was lessened by the inclusion of their former enemies, who felt compelled to join to secure their future as well, and their accommodation formed a substantial part of the negotiation process. While *Wahdat* framed itself within universal Islamism and not as an exclusively Hazara party, there was a clear emphasis on minority politics and the future rights and participation of Shiite minorities in Afghanistan (Harpviken, 1996; Ibrahimi, 2017).

In the three years following its creation, *Wahdat* managed to gain control over the entirety of Hazarajat and unified almost all Hazara groups in the country. It also managed to gain international recognition, participating in international gatherings such as those organised by the UN (Mousavi, 1998). However, in view of the hostile attitude the Sunni resistance had

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[7] Claims that Iran directly created *Wahdat* appear mainly in older literature at a time when less accurate information was available.

shown toward the Shiite delegations in Peshawar and the historical hostility of the Pashtuns toward the Hazaras and other minorities in Afghanistan, *Wahdat* sought alliances with other minority groups, which culminated in the alliance between *Wahdat* and the forces of the Tajik Massoud and the Uzbek Dostum (Ibrahimi, 2017). This was welcomed by Iran. In the wake of Soviet withdrawal, Iran became concerned about the possibility of its enemies filling the political gap in Afghanistan and began reaching out properly to the other parties in Afghanistan, especially those of the Tajiks under *Jamiat* because it considered them ethnically and culturally close to Iran (Harpviken, 1996).

However, *Wahdat* also had begun to take actions completely unrelated to Iran's objectives, such as when it expelled Pashtuns from Hazarajat. The de-facto government *Wahdat* instated in Hazarajat was not a theocratic government like Iran's. Its secular nature disappointed the Iranian clerics (Williams, 2013). The development of *Wahdat* as it increasingly watered down its Islamist component reflected the growing ethnicisation of the Afghan political process. In March 1992, Najibullah's government began disintegrating, causing *Wahdat*, Massoud, and Dostum, as well as their Pashtun enemy Hekmatyar, to move on the capital. *Wahdat* ended up in de-facto control over the Western half of Kabul after the Hazaras there, who had been affiliated with the previous PDPA government, handed over these territories, military depots, and weapons caches in exchange for protection and integration into *Wahdat*. *Wahdat* also fought battles with Ittihad, another predominantly Pashtun group led by Sayyaf (Ibrahimi, 2017). Together with its allies *Wahdat* repulsed the attacks of Hekmatyar from Kabul, igniting the Afghan Civil War (Williams, 2013). Meanwhile, hardly corresponding to the speed and reality of developments on the ground, a hasty political process brought the leader of a small Peshawar-based party, Mojadeddi, to power as a weak interim head of state, until he was replaced by the Tajik Rabbani of *Jamiat* in June. Rabbani reneged on agreements *Wahdat* had reached with Mojadeddi concerning its participation in government. Then, in July, Rabbani's *Jamiat* allied with Ittihad and began attacking *Wahdat* in Kabul, ending the short-lived alliance of minority parties (Ibrahimi, 2017). *Wahdat* was now forced to ally with Hekmatyar. Iran supported the government because it believed that the Tajiks would secure its interest in Central Asia, while trying to convince Mazari to support Rabbani (Emadi, 1997). What followed was a power-struggle among Afghanistan's Shiites within and outside *Wahdat*, as well as an alliance between *Wahdat* and other forces opposing Rabbani after a brutal massacre of Hazara civilians by *Jamiat* and Ittihad in February 1933, enabled by *Wahdat* commanders who switched sides to Rabbani. The political power struggle inside *Wahdat* was led by the pro-Rabbani faction of the former leader of *Pasdaran*, Akbari, on the one hand, and

Mazari on the other. Rabbani gave substantial support to Akbari's faction. Their competition culminated in the narrow win of Mazari for party leadership in 1994, which was followed shortly after by an attack by Mazari on Akbari's faction, causing a political split between Afghanistan's Hazaras and other Shiite groups (Ibrahimi, 2017). Many Qizilbash left *Wahdat* and ended up fighting against it (Sinno, 2008). Iran sent agents into Afghanistan to help Rabbani and his Shiite allies against the Hazaras. In response to the pro-Rabbani Shiites, Mazari decidedly threw himself behind Hazara nationalism and discarded Shiite radicalism as well as religion-based politics. The enduring relationship between Iran and its client ended, after more than 12 years since the beginning of the relationship between Iran and Mazari's *Nasr*, as Mazari cut ties with Iran for its support of Rabbani and *Jamiat*, as well as the pro-government Shiites (Emadi, 1997). Despite attempts to mend relations again later by Iran, and the eventual move of *Wahdat* into the Northern Alliance giving them a common enemy in the form of the ascendant Taliban, their special relationship was over.

Mutual Trust

As mentioned in the previous section, trust by the Hazaras in Iran had already declined due to the devastation caused by the civil war in Hazarajat. Naturally, their trust in Iran vastly deteriorated due to Iran's support for *Jamiat*. In the minds of the Hazaras, the Iranians were choosing their ethnic kin over their coreligionists, driving them further toward Hazara nationalism and away from Islamism (Williams, 2013). Activities of Iranian and *Jamiat* agents to divide *Wahdat* and coopt its leaders are certain to have destroyed the remaining trust of many Shiite Hazaras (see above).

The Iranians possibly also already distrusted *Wahdat* upon its creation because they had not initiated the process and were bothered by the emphasis on ethnicity in its discourse. Adding to that, they feared losing control over a single party that was based inside Afghanistan rather than Iran. Khamenei's representative allegedly even tried to prevent its formation (Ibrahimi, 2017). I have been unable to verify the truth of this claim, but its existence itself illustrates an element of distrust.

Information

It does not appear as if information problems significantly affected the relationship in this period beyond the complications already discussed in the previous section. The fact that *Nasr* and *Pasdaran* leaders possibly met for their initial discussions without Iran's knowledge, and

that this prevented Iran from significantly interfering in its formation nevertheless suggests that a lack of information about their clients' activities caused problems for the Iranian sponsors (Ibrahimi, 2017).

Iran's Domestic Situation and Factionalism

The inclusion of non-hardline elements in *Wahdat* essentially represented another victory for the pragmatist faction in Iran and the foreign ministry (Williams, 2013). In 1989, Iran's foreign minister called for a neutral and independent Afghanistan which should also retain its Islamic identity (Roy, 1990). The aims of *Wahdat* for the political future of Afghanistan and the party were therefore in line with the aims of the ministry. This is also reflected in the fact that the strongest opposition within *Wahdat* to the inclusion of non-Islamist policies and members came mainly from *Pasdaran* (Harpviken, 1996). The influence of the pragmatists resulted in rapprochement with *Jamiat* and the Tajiks, which ended up undermining the unity of the Shiites.

However, while the pragmatists seem to have been in the dominant position, the hardliners also still influenced Iran's policies. After all, the IRGC had not been eliminated like the OILM, and the new Supreme Leader was hardly moderate himself. The pro-Rabbani faction within *Wahdat* under Akbari descended directly from *Pasdaran* and its ideology, as well as from other groups that emphasised Shiite, not Hazara, identity (Ibrahimi, 2017). The hostility Iran demonstrated toward the *Wahdat*'s ethnicisation can be seen as the continued influence of the hardliners that expressed itself through the attempt to turn *Wahdat* back into a purely Shiite organisation.

Ideological Convergence

On the surface level, *Wahdat* still had substantial ideological agreement with Iran. Its constitution included the aim of establishing an Islamic state based on Khomeini's *velayat-e faqih*, as well as the slogan 'Neither East nor West' of the Iranian revolution. However, this was a pragmatic move to ensure Iran's continued support, as well as to appease the elements within *Wahdat* that remained loyal to Iran (Mousavi, 1998). Furthermore, *Wahdat*'s programme was framed in universal Islamic terms with no reference to the individual Hazara ethnicity, and institutionalised important positions for the clergy, but it was framed in such a way to be able to appease all parties that joined *Wahdat* and received the most opposition from the Islamists. It essentially built on *Nasr*'s ideology (Harpviken, 1996). Considering *Nasr*'s ideological relationship with Iran, this is further indication that *Wahdat* was far from Iran's

ideal client by this point. Islamism became increasingly rhetorical as *Wahdat* continued to shift further to its ethnic base over time (Ibid.)

The ideological split that ensued after *Jamiat*'s attack on *Wahdat* best demonstrates the influence of ideology on its relationship with Iran. Clearly, Khomeinist thought still affected a significant amount of *Wahdat*'s members in 1989, but they gradually left *Wahdat* either willingly or when they were driven out in the fight between Mazari and Akbari. The Islamists ultimately failed to impose their ideology on the party. Still, the aid of Iran to help them in their attempts shows that the Iranians must have believed that the Islamist part of *Wahdat* was significant enough to become its main inspiration again.

Leadership

The leaders of *Wahdat* were drawn mainly from *Nasr* and *Pasdaran* (Ibrahimi, 2017). Their origins were outlined in the previous section. Therefore, this aspect needs no further discussion here.

Rivalries

Iran's rivalries turned into a decisive factor after the Soviet Withdrawal. Iran feared that the political vacuum could be filled by Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, or the US (Roy, 1990). One reason why Iran was willing to accommodate *Wahdat* was the need for a united Shiite group to resist the Sunni groups sponsored by Saudi Arabia (Williams, 2013). The Iranian focus on fighting what it saw as the proxies of its rivals clearly influenced Iran's selection of clients, eventually seeing *Jamiat* as a better vehicle for this purpose.

Analysis

The research demonstrates that while it is true that the end of the relationship between Iran and *Wahdat* lay in the divergence of their goals in the Afghan Civil War, this explanation is insufficient to understand why Iran failed to build a militant client in Afghanistan. In the first period during the 80s, Iran built relationships with several groups that fit the criteria of its militant clients as laid out by Ostovar (see above). These groups received their support exclusively from Iran, controlled territory within Afghanistan that Iranian personnel could access, and, primarily in the case of *Pasdaran*, were also directly aided by IRGC officers. They also shared its ideology, recognising Khomeini as their Supreme Leader and the doctrine of *velayat-e faqih* in their politics. Like the Lebanese Hezbollah, they instituted Iranian-inspired governments in the territory under their control, where they attempted to institute revolutionary social reforms and spread their ideology to the wider community. However, several problems were apparent. The large number of groups supported by Iran simultaneously prevented the victory and consolidation by a single one of these groups and kept them divided. Even when they had control of the majority of Hazarajat, their infighting prevented Iran from gaining full control over Hazarajat as it sought, and the ensuing devastation caused many Afghanistani Shiites to distrust the role of Iran and to become disillusioned with the appeal of the Iranian revolution. The factional divisions and decentralised nature of the political structure inside Iran enabled this process to the extent that Iran was unable to conduct an effective and coherent policy for its revolutionary export. Furthermore, the local conditions of Hazarajat exacerbated these problems. Even with the most loyal clients like *Pasdaran*, the localised nature of the conflict and the departure of local military commanders from the party line, as well as the informational obstacle posed by Hazarajat's geography for command and control, impeded the development of a cohesive and enduring ideological and political partnership. The overall picture one is represented with here is that Iran's connections to its clients at this time were far stronger on paper than in reality.

With its strongest partner, *Nasr*, Iran also had substantial ideological disagreements from the very beginning. Iran's unwillingness to accommodate the Hazaras' ethnic interests remained a constant problem that came to a head with the creation of *Wahdat*. The particular stubbornness of Iran concerning this aspect is apparent as it seemed to continue even after the pragmatists decided the main directions of its foreign policy. The pragmatist turn also effectively ended the ambition to export the revolution on an official level, ultimately endorsing *Wahdat* in an attempt to secure its interests in Afghanistan. However, Iran's policy remained

contradictory, acting at once pragmatically and at the same time causing extensive damage to *Wahdat* in the attempt to reinforce its Shiite identity. Ultimately, Iran's conscious decision to support Rabbani while the Hazaras faced the prospect of ethnic cleansing, as demonstrated by the massacre in Kabul, was an ill-calculated strategic move. Essentially, throughout both periods Iran's policy was contradictory and misaligned, whether for domestic factors, misunderstanding of the processes in Afghanistan, or its perception of Afghanistan's Shiites as its subordinates. Distrust toward the Afghanistanis remained constant, with the creation of *Pasdaran* as a practical example of its consequences. Furthermore, with *Nasr* and *Wahdat* Iran was unwilling to meet its client on an equal level as it has done with the Lebanese Hezbollah. The internal disagreements of Iran's institutions, characterised by the IRGC and the Foreign Ministry, are reminiscent of the later internal disagreements on Iraq (see above). In general, it seems that a lack of trust caused by Iran's imperious attitude toward the Afghanistanis remained a constant obstacle to the creation of a long-standing ally like Lebanon's Hezbollah.

However, other factors were beyond Iran's control, such as the growing ethnicisation in Afghanistan and the decision by *Jamiat* to assault *Wahdat*, but the decision to back *Jamiat* and refuse to accept the importance of the Hazara's ethnic grievances exacerbated these problems. On the other hand, *Wahdat* itself chose to pursue policies not in line with Iran's wishes after its creation. It would be unjust to assign blame only to Iran. On a strategic level, it was also facing the disproportionately larger influence and support of its rivals for their own clients, and it would be unreasonable to suggest that Iran could have prevented the Civil War which unravelled from within Afghanistan itself. Local elements like the rivalries between commanders and warlords, as well as the tendency of fighters to frequently switch sides were aspects that no foreign power could control. Still, *Wahdat* found itself under attack first, and it was Iran's conscious choice to support the attacker. Iran could not prevent the war, but it could have chosen to maintain its connection to *Wahdat*.

In view of the aforementioned factors and the case study, the minimally sufficient explanation for this historical outcome is as follows; Iran was significantly hampered by the factional divisions inside the new regime in creating a united militant client among the Shia of Afghanistan in the 1980s, which resulted in distrust which gradually removed the ideological affinity it had with the leadership of the most significant Shiite group in Afghanistan, the Hazaras. As a result, its relationship with *Wahdat* was strained by the same distrust and ideological disagreement, leading Iran to lose agency over its client. It then aggressively attempted and failed to realign the party with Iran's own ideological preferences, causing Mazari to sever the relationship. While many local factors played an important role, the

ultimate failure of Iran to maintain its militant client in Afghanistan was caused by a misalignment of Iran's policy rooted in its domestic political structure and its unwillingness to treat the Afghanistani Shiites as equals.

Chapter VI: Conclusion

While the common explanation for the end of the relationship between Iran and *Wahdat* as the successor of its militant clients is that their goals diverged, this gave little insight into the reasons for this development. Upon an extensive examination of the processes leading to this situation, it is apparent that although the local dynamics working in Afghanistan toward the ethnicisation of the conflict could not be overcome, the agency of Iran played a decisive role. Its internal power constellation resulted in a failure to formulate an enduring and cohesive policy in Afghanistan, ultimately leading to failure to accomplish the goal of gaining complete control over Hazarajat, and subsequently the futile attempt to ally with both *Jamiat* and *Wahdat* in the Afghan Civil War as those two parties became sworn enemies.

This is especially significant in view of the subsequent development of Iranian foreign policy toward Afghanistan, which was again contradictory during the years of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. The return of the Taliban to power for the second time serves to further underline how Iran's engagement with Afghanistan has consistently failed to achieve its strategic aims ever since the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979.

However, the scope of this thesis is too limited to make any decisive conclusions about the level of impact one can ascribe to Iran alone, as it did not study the involvement of other states and the groups in Afghanistan that were not sponsored by Iran. Furthermore, if more information on this period becomes available it could significantly change the conclusions that can be drawn from current knowledge. In particular, more information about the more obscure parties other than *Nasr* and *Pasdaran* would be helpful in getting a more accurate picture. It does, however, indicate that factionalism among the Iranian regime has continually harmed its formulation and implementation of effective foreign policy strategies. It also raises the question of why Iran was willing to accommodate the Lebanese Hezbollah when it acted so stubbornly towards *Wahdat*, and how Iran's historical connection to and perception of Afghanistan as well as its ethnic and religious groups continues to affect its policies.

With the insecure future of Afghanistan and the demonstrated continuity of Iran's connection to segments of the Shiite and Hazara population in the form of the *Fatemiyoun* brigade, the role Iran will play in any future political developments in Afghanistan will be highly dependent on its ability to decide its priorities there clearly, and how it chooses to engage with the minority groups of Shiites and Persian speakers.

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