

IRAN AFGHANISTAN RELATION UNDER THE TALIBAN

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ABSTRACT

The advent of Taliban and withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan was one of the historic moments that changed the direction regional dynamics. The event left the regional powers and states surprised when the new government was established so abruptly. This article attempts to investigate the relations between Iran and Taliban (EIA) since 2021, while focusing the diplomatic engagements between the representatives of these governments. The Iranian response to the recent developments was pragmatic and more diplomatic. It welcomed the new government of EIA, and highlighted its foreign policy direction by stating that they want to be in relationship with whoever holds the power in Kabul. In a situation when the world was uncertain about the fate of the new government, both governments established a sort of “informal” diplomatic engagements in 2021 and improved it to a stage that Iran had to hand over the Afghanistan embassy in Tehran to the representatives of EIA, in 2023. Both have sought to resolve their mutual issues that might make hurdles for the future engagements, through diplomatic ways. The article primarily focused the official meetings, both bilateral and multi-lateral, since 2021. The findings suggest that both countries wants to engage each other and establish a durable relationship in the future.

Key words: Iran-Afghanistan relation, EIA, Diplomatic relations between Iran and Afghanistan

INTRODUCTION

This paper is intended to investigate the Iran-Afghanistan relation after the Taliban’s take over in 2021. Both of these countries have historically been involved in a mutual relationship. Cultural, social, traditional and religious bonds connected the people of these two countries. But Iran’s relations with Afghanistan have not been cordial in spite of the geographical contiguity, common religion, and shared cultural and economic interests. This is because a number of problems affect both of these neighbours. With regional, if not extra-regional repercussions, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan

has sparked a geopolitical free-for-all scenario in the nation. It quickly handed over leadership of the nation to the Taliban, with China, Russia, and Iran all prepared to establish strong ties with the newly elected Afghan government. World actors with functional ties to the Taliban, such as Qatar, Turkey, and Pakistan, have sought positive interaction with the new administration to the point that a doorway into the world system has been opened for them. Others are alarmed by security worries, whether they are connected to terrorism or not, in particular the Central Asian states, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia

(Shuja, 2022). Iran is one of the regional players that observe closely the trajectory of the Taliban rule to remain relevant in Afghanistan. Historically, there have been ups and downs in the relations between the two sides. This paper is thus an attempt to investigate the up and down relationship between Iran and Taliban led Afghanistan, with a particular focus on diplomatic engagements, since 2021.

Iran had amicable ties with Afghanistan from 1919, when Afghanistan gained its independence, until 1979. Iran's attitude towards Afghanistan went through four periods after the 1979 revolution. Iran demanded a Soviet pullout during the first phase, which spanned the period of Soviet rule from 1979 to 1989, and supported Shiites in Afghanistan. Iran assisted the non-Pushtun ethnic groups in forming a unified front in the second phase following the withdrawal of the Soviet Army. Iran, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia all supported various warlords in the Afghan civil war. Iran refused to recognize the administration during the third phase, which began in 1996, and instead sent military assistance to the Northern Alliance opposition.. Iran has established cordial ties with the Karzai administration throughout the fourth and present phase, which began when the Northern Alliance, supported by the United States, overthrew the Taliban. It has worked to rebuild Afghanistan, continued to stand by its longtime partners, and pushed for the departure of all foreign forces from the nation (Milani, 2010). After the withdrawal, Iranian policy seems more pragmatic as they consider the new government as a new reality in Afghanistan.

Iran enjoys special status in Afghanistan. Tehran is well aware that Afghans would naturally gravitate towards their western neighbour as a result of Afghanistan's lack of access to the open sea, proximity to Iran, combined with its energy output and transit to warm seas, such as the Persian Gulf and Caspian Sea. Tehran is aware that it must rely on Afghanistan to maintain its peace and security as well as find a solution to the problem of water shortage in its eastern provinces of Sistan and Baluchistan and Khurasan. Language and religious similarities, in addition to shared cultures and civilizations, improve the effectiveness and engagement between the two countries (Balkhi, 2011).

Iran and Afghanistan share a 936-kilometer western border. Iran is connected to the provinces of Farah, Herat, and Nimruz. Rivers and deserts separate Afghanistan and Iran. Iran had a pro-American monarchy under King Raza Shah Pehlevi prior to 1979. Stopping communism in the area was King's administration's top priority. The primary goals of Iran in the region and the Iranian revolution were jeopardised by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the formation of the Communist regime; the Ayatollah Khomeini administration also saw the Soviet Invasion as a threat to the stability of Iran. Iran, however, was unable to assist the Afghan Mujahedeen because of the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988). To defeat the Soviet Union, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and America provided help. Later, the Taliban seized control of Kabul and the majority of Afghanistan with the aid of Pakistan. In 1996, the Taliban erected an administration in Afghanistan. Iran saw the Taliban as a danger to both its security and its influence in South and Central Asia. Iran has hoped to have a greater influence in the energy-rich region of Central Asia. But once the Taliban took over Afghanistan, Iran found it challenging to communicate with the Central Asian States. Turkmenistan and Iran do share a border, though. Iran and the other Central Asian States are likewise ethnically and culturally related (Christensen, 2011). Eight diplomats were slain in Mazer-e Sharif in the year 1998. Iran stationed its troops at the border with Afghanistan. Despite the tight circumstances, Iran chose not to wage war on the Taliban. In order to hurt the Taliban, Iran upped its assistance for the Northern Alliance. However, the collapse of the Taliban administration had proved advantageous for Iran-Afghanistan ties. Iran still has a crazy approach to Afghanistan, nevertheless. Iran is a host country for Hizb e Islami and Taliban officials, but it also gives the Afghan government financial support. Understanding Iran's strategy towards Afghanistan is a challenging task. In 2001, America overthrew the Taliban government. American soldiers are currently deployed in Central Asia, close to the Iran border. The military's presence in the area disrupts Iran's security dynamics (Worden, 2018).

Iran had a good opportunity to enter Afghanistan when the Taliban administration was overthrown because of their shared culture and history. Iran made every effort to aid Afghanistan's rehabilitation. Iran

said in 2002 that it will provide 570 million dollars to Afghanistan's reconstruction effort. This was an indication that Afghanistan and Iran have good relations. Iran was hailed by President Karzai for helping to stabilize Afghanistan. Iran and Afghanistan now have more pronounced economic relations. Iran made an announcement of \$100 million towards Afghanistan's rehabilitation in 2006 in an effort to strengthen trade ties with Iran. A variety of Iranian businesses are also engaged in various initiatives in Afghanistan. Iran is primarily focused on building highways to connect the two nations. The marine route has not been directly linked to Afghanistan. Iran and India want Afghanistan's reliance on Pakistan to decline. Iran will embark on road projects to connect Afghanistan with Chabhar port for this reason (Aamir Junaid, et al, 2021).

Over time, Iran has aggressively extended its sway in Afghanistan. By capitalising on Kabul's need for investment and infrastructure development in the 2010s, Iranian businesses had continued to support Afghanistan's economic development. Additionally, Iranian culture and religion are strongly felt in western Afghanistan, where Iranians have traditionally held authority. Recently, there has also been a greater appearance of political alignment between Iran and Afghanistan, particularly in the days following the contentious Iranian elections of June 2009, when Afghan President Hamid Karzai unambiguously backed Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Tehran actively advocates for the removal of foreign troops from Afghanistan in an effort to erode Kabul's ties with the US and sever Kabul and Washington's shared commitment to stabilizing Afghanistan. Its leaders have exploited periodic fractures in the relationship between Afghanistan and the U.S. in order to undermine the American position in Afghanistan as well as offer President Karzai a public outlet to voice his dissatisfaction with President Barack Obama's administration (Maseh Zarif and Ahmad Majidyar, 2009).

This research is primarily concerned with the Iran-Afghanistan relations and formal engagements with the Taliban and hurdles to its positive engagements. The paper investigates the recent engagements and active participation and interaction between the officials of Taliban and Iran.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The existing literature largely focus security challenges after the US withdrawal and the Taliban's takeover for the region and Iran particularly, regional implications, implications of the Peace Deal and so on. (Verma, 2022) for example, examines the influence of the Peace Agreement and the role of regional authority. He claimed that in order to understand the future of the region, it is important to consider Iran as a possible spoiler who is aggravating the bloodshed and instability in Afghanistan. It discusses three causes for Iran's involvement in Afghan affairs: the Taliban's control over the inclusive national unity government or attempts to impose an Islamic Emirate through military force; a conflict of interests between Iran and Pakistan; the Taliban's continued persecution of Shi'ites and Hazaras; and the deterioration of US-Iran relations. It draws attention to the variety of means, particularly those available to non-state actors, at Iran's disposal to accomplish its political, economic, and strategic goals in Afghanistan. It also analyses the potential constraints that might limit/inhibit Iran in meeting its foreign policy and security objectives in Afghanistan and the broader region.

(Mohsen Solhdoost and Mahmoud Pargoo, 2021) for example, claimed that Iran is projected to see the escalation of current unconventional security issues and the introduction of new dangers with the US exit from Afghanistan and the Taliban takeover in August 2021. Drug trafficking, an influx of refugees and economic migrants, and terrorism—all of which are still problems in Iran—are issues that are partially a result of the more than four decades of conflict in Afghanistan. Iranian authorities have applauded the US withdrawal and voiced cautious optimism about the Taliban, but Tehran has not yet decided on its approach to Afghanistan and its new leaders. Unless the Kabul administration realigns with Tehran's enemies and poses security dangers to Iran, Tehran is likely to maintain its strategy of engagement with the Taliban. In the second case, Iran is likely to model its Afghanistan approach after its Iraq programme by using proxy sponsorship.

(Shuja, 2022), investigates, on the other side, the effects of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, including everything from strategic gaps in interstate relations to underlying fears. He contends that despite its prior sectarian and other disagreements

with the Taliban, Iran was forced to view the Islamist movement as a lesser evil than the continued presence of US troops in Afghanistan due to deteriorating relations with the US, particularly over the nuclear issue. Thus, even before to the Taliban's recent return to power, relations between Iran and certain factions of the group were improving. A Taliban-run Afghanistan may be a member of Iran's expanded "Axis of Resistance" given that ISIS is a danger to both Tehran and the Taliban. Furthermore, (Solhdoost, 2021), argues that the *modus vivendi* they reached with Iran shows the Taliban's unprecedented prioritisation of pragmatism over ideology. He draws upon Machiavellian pragmatism in International Relations theory to examine the shift in the Taliban's political posture through the lens of Iran-Afghanistan relations in three crucial episodes: the Taliban's rule in Afghanistan, the Taliban's war with the Soviet Union, and the Taliban's war with the United States.

Iran would have preferred a complete US exit from Afghanistan, followed by the formation of a friendly and stable Afghan government that was not completely under Taliban control. Instead, just half of its aspirations came true, with its powerful arch nemesis giving way to the Taliban, a lot more manageable foe who can still barely hold the nation together. Nevertheless, since the US withdrawal from Afghanistan seemed to be a certainty by the end of 2014, Iran has shrewdly been planning for this likely eventuality. So Tehran's capacity to formulate a plan to cope with the new administration in its neighbourhood was not adversely affected by the Taliban's abrupt return to Afghanistan. Ayatollah Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of Iran, made a clear declaration that expressed Iran's position on an Afghanistan governed by the Taliban. On August 28, 2021, during his first meeting with Ebrahim Raisi's cabinet, Khamenei outlined Iran's strategy for dealing with the Taliban-run Afghanistan by putting a condition on reciprocity: "The nature of our relations with other governments depends on the nature of their relations with us." (Latifi, 2023).

This article aims to evaluate Khamenei's views on the Taliban, as reflected in his own statements as well as those transmitted through his close associates, and use them as a basis to extrapolate the likely course of Iran-Afghanistan relations since the Supreme Leader of Iran has the final say on both domestic and foreign

policy. Despite its historical sectarian and other conflicts with the Taliban, Iran was forced to view the Islamist movement as a lesser evil than the ongoing presence of US soldiers in Afghanistan due to deteriorating ties with the US, notably over the nuclear issue. Thus, even before to the Taliban's recent return to power, Iran's relations with some of the organisation had strengthened. With ISIS being a common threat to both Tehran and the Taliban, a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan could potentially be a part of Iran's extended (Shuja, 2022)

The old political structures of Afghanistan, which were established at the United Nations negotiations in Bonn, Germany, in 2001, were favoured by Iranian authorities. Iran benefited from the post-Bonn order in Afghanistan, both politically and economically. After the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 overthrew the anti-Iran Taliban regime, an Afghan government with a sizable Iranian influence was installed. Due to Afghanistan's relative security and the flood of assistance funds, Iran was able to greatly increase its exports to the nation and make a profit. Considering the Taliban to be "part of the reality of Afghanistan," Iran wanted a change to the post-Bonn institutions that would have given the group a part of the authority. It was opposed to the idea that the rebel organisation would have a disproportionate influence on Afghan politics. Because they saw it as the start of a break from the political system established in Bonn, Iranian authorities condemned the Doha Agreement between the United States and the Taliban in February 2020 (Tookhy, 2021).

The relationship between Iran and Afghanistan has alternated between times of contestation and collaboration. No matter who is in charge in Kabul, several problems have persisted, including the periodic border clashes, the ongoing influx of refugees into Iran from its eastern border with Afghanistan, and the disagreement over the equal distribution of water. But now that the Taliban are in charge, there may be potential for cooperation given other security concerns and the apparent cross-border danger posed by the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) to Iran. Geographically and politically constrained, both parties place value on the connections because they believe that interaction in some capacity is necessary to protect their interests (Shikawat, 2023)

Iran has adopted a flexible stance towards the Taliban in response to the Taliban's takeover of Kabul, which has as its main tenets non-confrontation, pragmatism, necessary cooperation, and opposition to rapid recognition. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the supreme leader of Iran, declared Iran's position on the Taliban around two weeks after Kabul fell: "As for Afghanistan, we support the Afghan people; governments come and go... The nature of the governments' interactions with us determines the nature of our interactions with them. Ismail Qaani, commander of the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), declared to a secret session of the Iranian Parliament in early September that Iran would work to resolve the situation in Afghanistan without resorting to force and in a way that would allow all Afghan ethnic groups to participate in nation-building (Kayhan, 2021).

A senior Taliban official reportedly made the following statement two days after seizing control: "Taliban members have been ordered at all levels to ensure that we don't disrespect any country's presence in Afghanistan." Iran consequently said that day that its embassy in Kabul will continue to be operational and open (Mai, 2023). When Ayatollah Khamenei explained Tehran's strategy for dealing with Taliban-run Afghanistan on August 28, 2021, he made explicit what had previously been implied. He said, "Afghanistan is our brother country, with the same language, religion, and culture. We stand with the Afghan people. governments change throughout time. It is the Afghan nation that will remain. The nature of our relations with other governments depends on the nature of their relations with us." (Kullab, 2021). Following Khamenei's apparent support for the Taliban, an Iranian trade team met with the Islamist organisation in Kabul on October 4, 2021, and the two parties decided to improve their trade, tariff, and road infrastructure coordination (RFE/RL, 2023).

Early in October 2021, Tehran made its first diplomatic contacts with the new Taliban leadership public; three months later, representatives of the organisation were invited to Tehran for discussions. Since then, they have conducted 67 talks, placing them fourth out of the 58 nations that have diplomatically dealt with the Taliban, behind only China, Turkey, and Qatar. Furthermore, just four of

Iran's interactions were multilateral, demonstrating the breadth of their links. Even more events commemorating the anniversary of the Iranian Islamic Revolution were invited to the Taliban last month, not just in Afghanistan but also in Qatar (Christian Hoj Hanseen and Halimullah Kousary, 2022).

Until now, the majority of discussions between the two sides have centred on a specific set of concerns: border security (particularly the massive drug trade); business opportunities in industries like energy production, mining, agriculture, and railroads; Taliban worries about how millions of Afghan refugees are being treated in Iran; and the group's quest to improve its systems at home by acquiring knowledge in various fields, particularly the health sector. These discussions changed in May 2022 from being purely exploratory between the two sides to being more substantial. Numerous bilateral agreements and conversations regarding collaboration on numerous subjects have emerged from this rising degree of confidence, and the turnover of the embassy will probably strengthen this cooperation much further (Maryam Jami, et al, 2022).

A border security agreement is reached in 2022 between the Taliban's Ministry of Defence and a team from Iran in order to stop drug and people trafficking. To assist the border patrols of both countries be coordinated, a joint committee is established. A combined technical team led by the Taliban's deputy minister of technical affairs and the Iranian deputy minister of public works examines the Abu Nasr Farahi Highway's many issues and suggests solutions. Amir Khan Muttaqi, the foreign minister of the Taliban, and Bahadur Aminian, Iran's ambassador at the time, decide to form joint delegations that will have frequent meetings in order to simplify future trade negotiations. A deal to import 350,000 tonnes of Iranian oil is signed in Tehran by representatives of the Afghan government's state oil and gas corporation, Da Afghanistan Bank, the Norms and Standards Agency, and the Ministries of Finance, Foreign Affairs, and Trade. Additionally, they consent to building joint refineries and extending the pipeline that now connects the two nations. In a meeting with Iranian energy minister Ali Akbar Mehrabian, Taliban minister of energy and water Abdul Latif Mansoor reiterates his

government's adherence to the 1973 Helmand River Water Treaty. The action was taken as a result of a dam that the previous Afghan government constructed that Iran deemed detrimental to the environment of the Hamoun Wetlands (Bolourchi, 2022).

Alireza Bikdeli, a representative of the Iranian Foreign Ministry, informs the Taliban's foreign minister that Iranian consulates in Afghanistan will once more issue visas with the intention of reducing unauthorised migration and better understanding who is trespassing the border. To discuss the completion of facilities in Bamyan and Kabul as well as Iranian technical training on cancer treatment, Taliban health minister Qalandar Ebad meets with Ambassador Aminian. Ebad travels to Iran in early September to study more about their healthcare system and put what she discovers into practise at home. Abdul Baqi Haqqani, the Taliban's minister of higher education, and a technical team are welcomed by Ambassador Aminian to visit Iran's higher education system. Hassan Mortazavi, the deputy ambassador of Iran, informs the governor of Afghanistan's Nangarhar province that Tehran is prepared to assist in the renovation of the regional airport to enable more Afghans to go to Iran using visas. Nooruddin Azizi, the Taliban's minister of business and industry, and Hassan Kazemi Qomi, a special envoy from Iran, spoke about starting a private-sector dialogue to better organise chances for collaborative ventures. Additionally, they stress the need for greater Iranian investment in Afghanistan as well as increased transit and commerce of products through Chabahar Port and Afghan exports to Iran. Iranian merchants promise to spend \$100 million in manufacturing plants during the first of the scheduled private sector dialogues, which is conducted in Kabul. If these efforts are successful, they also promise to extend their investments (Zelin, 2023).

Iran's growing engagement with Afghanistan in 2023 heralds a gradual change in its foreign policy, from hostility to collaboration. Iran formally turned up control of the Afghan embassy in Tehran to Taliban officials on February 26, 2023, formalising and strengthening their connections. Shahabuddin Delawar, the Taliban's minister of mines and petroleum, is informed by Hassan Kazemi Qomi, Iran's new ambassador, that Iran wants to create a

joint free economic zone that spans the border in order to improve exports and imports and create jobs for both populations (News, 2023). According to the Afghanistan Chamber of Commerce, two-way commerce has increased dramatically over time, exceeding \$1 billion USD. Tehran has relied on commerce with Kabul to get around the crushing impacts of the US sanctions, which have been in place periodically since 2005 and have supported Iran's "resistance economy." Border regions are also intricately intertwined, as seen by the usage of Iranian Rials in the Afghan border town of Zaranj and the pervasiveness of Iranian items on shop shelves. But even while commerce has increased, tensions in other areas have persisted (Agency, 2023).

From formal and informal diplomatic engagements to economic cooperation and interaction indicates that both states have sought to establish a durable relationship based on mutual cooperation and interest since 2021. Despite the positive responses of each government, this relationship is facing some pressing issues, some historic and other recent, that may challenge them in the future.

CHALLENGES

Several allegations of border skirmishes between Iranian security forces and Taliban groups since the Taliban took control have been motivated by smuggling and concerns over water supplies. One Taliban fighter was wounded in the confrontation over gasoline smuggling, according to the governor of Iran's Nimroz region in December of last year, and nine Iranian border guards perished or were seriously hurt. After Afghan farmers started excavating a nearby water canal in March of this year, the Taliban and Iranian security forces engaged in gunfire on the border in Nimroz. A comparable occurrence took place in April 2022 (International, 2022). According to Iranian officials, the Taliban attempted to build a road in the Herat region that was near to the border. The interim Afghan government should take these border disputes as a very significant problem for Tehran, according to a spokesman for Iran's foreign ministry (Times, 2022).

Another significant concern for Iran is refugees. Tehran has urged the Taliban leadership to stop the refugee influx, while Taliban commanders have cited the mistreatment of Afghan migrants in Iran as a

serious issue. The Taliban leadership summoned the Iranian ambassador in Kabul in April 2022 after videos emerged showing Iranians attacking Afghans violently in many towns. The Iranian Embassy and Iranian Consulate in Herat were assaulted with rocks during the protests that followed. Iran retaliated by calling Afghanistan's chargé d'affaires in Tehran and suspending its diplomatic posts for nearly two weeks (Press, 2023). Iran has expanded its military presence near the border as a result of these occurrences. Tehran views water resources and smuggling routes as being particularly sensitive concerns, and the Taliban's internal strife may make it more challenging for them to prevent border incidents. Therefore, if the situation in the border area worsens, it may encourage Tehran to focus more on its minority allies rather than cooperating with the Taliban (Motamedi, 2022).

CONCLUSION

The history of Afghan-Iran relations suggests that both countries have a sort of relationship that is largely influenced by the international events and national instabilities. Despite its geographic proximity and interdependence of each other these influences remained dominant and changed the trajectory of their mutual relationships. The advent of Taliban to power in 2021 was another historic event but did not change the direction of their mutual cooperation and engagements. This is partly due to the international scenario as the world powers are busy in Russian war in Ukraine and Chinese soft corner for the new government of the Taliban. Both states have been involved since 2021 in a diplomatic process of deciding the future of their mutual cooperation, economic relations and security. Despite the fact that both states have disputes and issues on things like cross border terrorism, the issue of Afghan refugees and the most important one, the distribution of water, these states have sought to resolve these issues through diplomatic way. The handing over of Afghan embassy in Tehran to the representatives is biggest break through that symbolically indicates that the Iranian government wanting to formally engage the EIA, if not recognizing them as the first government in the world.

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