



## A ROAD UNTRAVELED

# Mending Fences?

Iran and Afghanistan adjust to a new security environment

Maryam Jami, Alamuddin Rizwan, Rajab Taieb



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In view of the recent changes in Afghanistan, particularly the fragmentation of the security sector, this policy brief investigates the security relationship between Iran and Afghanistan's as well as the chances for their future engagement. It examines whether Iran and Afghanistan will find common ground for military cooperation and the security challenges that would be encountered by the two countries. The brief concludes with recommendations on how Iran and Afghanistan can develop their military cooperation and contribute to stabilization of the region.<sup>1</sup>

## A history of Iran's engagement in Afghanistan

Iran is a close neighbour and has extensive cultural, historical and linguistic ties with Afghanistan that have long fuelled a geopolitical relationship between the two countries. Iran also has ideological and religious ties with the Afghan Shi'a minority group.<sup>2</sup> However, Tehran has never directly intervened in Afghanistan's internal affairs, not even in response to the repression of the Shi'a minority groups<sup>3</sup> or the mass killing of Hazaras.<sup>4</sup> Iran has been an active power in Afghan warfare since 2001, while its interests in and concerns regarding Afghanistan traces back to before 1979.<sup>5</sup>

During the 1970s, Iran was afraid of the expansion of communism in the region and the Soviet influence in Afghanistan. The security condition in Afghanistan was of utmost importance to Iran. Approximately nine Shia resistance groups who were fighting against the Soviet-backed government of Afghanistan were supported by the then Iranian government. The groups were divided among themselves. Some of them followed the Islamic teachings and preaching of Imam Khomeini, who aimed to propagate Islamic politics across the region. Some others favoured Ayatollah Kh'ui's ideology of not pursuing any Pan-Islamic ambitions.<sup>6</sup> Iran provided logistical and financial aid to only the first camp of these groups.<sup>7</sup>

After the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, Iran's tense relations with the United States heavily impinged on the Iranian-Afghan relationship. The Taliban killed nine Iranian diplomats in Mazar-e Sharif, Afghanistan, in 1998, which tarnished the Iranian relationship with the Taliban regime.<sup>8</sup> The changing political dynamics led Iran to support the NATO mission to Afghanistan

in 2001, which aimed at stability in the country and the ouster of the Taliban from power. Iran has seen Afghanistan as a safe haven for Sunni extremists since the 1990s.

The Taliban governed Afghanistan until the United States and NATO intervened in 2001, taking control from Afghan warlords in the mid-1990s. The Taliban reverted to guerrilla warfare after being defeated. The American intervention encouraged Iran to back its initiative to fight the Taliban and terrorism in Afghanistan.<sup>9</sup> That said, when President George W. Bush sanctioned Iran along with Iraq in 2002, Iran grew afraid of a possible American attack.<sup>10</sup> Which is why it opted for supporting the Taliban to fight off the American occupation, such as furnishing the Taliban with explosive devices.<sup>11</sup>

Iran's relations with Afghanistan are even bolder in economic aspects. Owing to an extensive shared border in the region, Iran and Afghanistan are major trading partners. Trade between the two countries gained momentum following the ouster of the Taliban from power in 2001. Afghan exports to Iran are mostly in the form of agricultural products, which amounted to US\$20 million in 2019.<sup>12</sup> Iran mostly exports petroleum and its derivatives to Afghanistan, amounting to more than US\$2.9 billion in 2018.<sup>13</sup> Afghanistan has been a significant source of hard cash for Iran in recent years due to American sanctions and the blocking of its foreign reserves.<sup>14</sup> The American sanctions have decreased the value of the Iranian rial, thereby making Iranian products affordable for Afghans and leading Iran to focus on Afghanistan as a priority market.<sup>15</sup> Afghanistan is thus the largest destination of Iranian non-oil products.<sup>16</sup>

1 The project "A Road untraveled? Options, Scenarios, and Recommendations for Future International and Regional Stabilization Efforts in Afghanistan" is an independent effort of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) and the Institute of War and Peace Studies (IWPS). This brief is part of a series discussing the implications of the US withdrawal for bilateral relations between Afghanistan and its neighbors. The complete list of policy briefs may be accessed here: <https://afghanistan.fes.de/publications>

2 Adnan Tabatabaei, expert on Iran-Afghanistan relations, in discussion with the Maryam Jami, 12 October 2021.

3 Shah Mir Baloch, "Hazara Shias flee Afghanistan fearing Taliban persecution", The Guardian, (2021).

4 *ibid.*

5 Timor Sharan, and Andrew Watkins, "All quiet on the eastern front? Iran's evolving relationship with an Afghanistan in transition", Policy Brief, FES Afghanistan (2021).

6 *ibid.*

7 Bruce Koepke, "Iran's policy on Afghanistan: the evolution of strategic pragmatism", Policy Brief, SIPRI (2013).

8 Tabatabaei, *supra* note 1.

9 Alireza Nader and others, *Iran's Influence in Afghanistan* (Germany, RAND Corporation, 2014).

10 Fatemeh Aman, *Iran-Taliban Growing Ties: What is Different This Time?* (Washington D.C., Atlantic Council, 2021).

11 *ibid.*

12 "Iran resumes fuel exports to neighboring Afghanistan", Nasdaq.com (2021).

13 *ibid.*

14 Esfandyar Batmanghelidi, *The Capture of Kabul: What the Taliban Takeover Will Mean for Iran's Economy?* (European Council on Foreign Relation, 2021).

15 *ibid.*

16 *ibid.*

During the 1980s, Afghanistan emerged as a leading opium producer in the region. Drug traffickers then started smuggling a considerable amount of Afghanistan's opium products into Iran and through Iran to Europe.<sup>17</sup> This trade has resulted in Iranians grappling with drug addiction and opium trafficking. Despite a decades-long initiative to create a concrete barrier along Iran's border with Afghanistan, Iran has failed to stop the flow of narcotics into the country.<sup>18</sup>

### Iran's relations with the Afghan ethnic leaders, political stakeholders and warlords

Iran has promoted its influence among various Afghan stakeholders and national figures. It has hosted many Afghan warlords and ethnic leaders with the potential to control strategic parts of the country, including those warlords and militias operating outside of Kabul. For example, former warlord Ismail Khan, who was previously the de facto ruler of Herat, is reported to have strong relations with Iran.<sup>19</sup> In the takeover of Herat by the Taliban on 13 August, Ismail Khan was arrested. Days later, however, he was reported to be in Mashhad Province of Iran.<sup>20</sup> News spread that Tehran might be backing Ismail Khan. There has been no confirmation or denial of this assertion from Iran's side.<sup>21</sup>

Iran also has hosted Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a leader of one of the warring factions in the Afghan civil war.<sup>22</sup> The Taliban, which formed after the civil war in 1996, had promised to end factional fighting and political tensions in the country. Hekmatyar tried to fight the Taliban, which Islamabad was backing at that time. He ultimately fled to Iran and lived there until 2002,<sup>23</sup> when Tehran expelled him. Hekmatyar also opposed the then newly formed United States-led Afghan interim government chaired by Hamid Karzai. This movement was apparently intended as a gesture to Karzai's government, who had visited Iranian officials in early 2002.<sup>24</sup> Hekmatyar's anti-Shi'a views were also bothering Tehran. By expelling him from its territory, Iran facilitated Hekmatyar's return to Afghanistan.<sup>25</sup>

### Iran's current policies regarding Afghanistan

By and large, Iranian policies towards Afghanistan can be categorized as "contradictory". Its oscillating interactions with the United States and the Taliban have directly shaped its approach

towards Afghanistan. Iran–Afghanistan relations are also affected by Iran's recruitment of Afghan Shi'a refugees as militia under the Fatemiyoun Brigade, which the United States deems a terrorist group.<sup>26</sup> The Fatemiyoun was founded by the Shia Afghan militants who were fighting against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s. At that time, the Brigade also fought in the Iran–Iraq war.<sup>27</sup> And they resisted the Taliban in 1996.<sup>28</sup> In 2014, the Fatemiyoun re-emerged as part of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' expeditionary force in Syria.<sup>29</sup> The Iranian authorities recruited the Fatemiyoun fighters to fight in Syria in exchange for food, legal protection and money for themselves and their families. The reportedly 30,000–60,000 Fatemiyoun fighters are young—most are in their 20s.<sup>30</sup> The former Afghan government has stated that the Fatemiyoun did not pose any direct threat to Afghanistan's security and stability.<sup>31</sup>

Iran has continued "constructive engagement" in Afghanistan since 2001, though not directly engaged militarily. It has mostly rendered political engagement by participating in national and international conferences concerning Afghanistan and assisting the regional counter-narcotics initiatives.<sup>32</sup> The close ties of Tehran with the Taliban in recent years alarmed both the American government and the former government of Afghanistan. Afghan and American officials suspected that the Iranian Qods forces, who had activated the Fatemiyoun Brigade in the 1980s, were indirectly encouraging the Taliban and damaging the American interests in Afghanistan.<sup>33</sup> This also harmed Iranian interests in Afghanistan: The close ties of the Qods forces with the Taliban diverted Iran's attention from defending the Shi'a minority group in Afghanistan.<sup>34</sup>

The Fatemiyoun fighters criticized Tehran for ignoring the blood of the Hazara martyrs who were killed by the Taliban attacks.<sup>35</sup> American security reports tracing back to 2010 reveal that the Qods forces furnished the Taliban with weapons, including portable surface-to-air missiles known as MANPADS (man-portable air defence systems).<sup>36</sup> One report claimed Iranian troops had been directly involved in the attacks of the Taliban in the western Afghan provinces (in Herat, Helmand and Farah).<sup>37</sup> The Iranian government allegedly provided the Taliban with considerable military equipment to seize the Afghan districts that share a border with Iran.<sup>38</sup> The reason for this support was reportedly to have been Iran's historical conflict with the former Afghan government over water.<sup>39</sup>

17 John Calabrese, *Iran's War on Drugs: Holding the Line?* (Washington D. C. Middle East Institute, 2007).

18 Fatemeh Aman, "Traffickers find novel ways of smuggling drugs into Iran from Afghanistan", Washington D. C. (2021).

19 Scott Lucas, "Afghanistan: the warlords who will decide whether civil war is likely", *The Conversation*, (2021).

20 *ibid.*

21 *ibid.*

22 Mujib Mashal, "Hekmatyar's never-ending Afghan war, *Aljazeera*, (2012).

23 *ibid.*

24 Fatemeh Aman, "The Islamic state and Afghanistan", *Lob Log*, (2015).

25 *ibid.*

26 Lila Hassan, "What is the Fatemiyoun Brigade and why does it make the Taliban nervous?" *FRONTLINE*, (2021).

27 Lars Hauch, *Understanding the Fatemiyoun Division: Life through the Eyes of a Militia Member* (Washington D. C. , The Middle East Institute, 2019).

28 *ibid.*

29 *ibid.*

30 *ibid.*

31 *ibid.*

32 Koepke, 2013.

33 Farzin Nadimi, *Iran Sets Its Eyes on Afghanistan* (Washington, DC, Washington Institute, 2021).

34 Marie Abdi, *Can the IRGC-Taliban Honeymoon Continue? Part 1* (Place, Middle East Institute, 2021).

35 *ibid.*

36 Shawn Snow, "Iran's support to the Taliban, which has included MANPADS and a bounty on US troops, could be a spoiler for peace in Afghanistan", *Military Times*, (2020).

37 *ibid.*

38 Omar, "Military support from Iran bolstered Taliban's offensive in western Afghanistan", *Salaam Times*, (2021).

39 See Askari Naheed and Bashedost Naheed, "Afghanistan No Longer Relinquishes Free Water: Ghani", *Pajhwok Afghan News*, (2021).



The fleeing of millions of Afghans into Iran has caused a humanitarian crisis, with the refugees living in undesirable conditions.<sup>40</sup> They are restricted on movement, possessing property, employment, education and health care.<sup>41</sup> They endure mistreatment and torture inside Iran and while entering through its border.<sup>42</sup> This issue has long strained Afghan–Iranian relations, with tensions intensifying between Kabul and Tehran following the drowning of Afghan migrants by Iranian officers on the Iran–Herat border (in May 2020).<sup>43</sup> Afghan officials blamed Iran for these recent incidents, and Afghan nationals organized protests against the Iranian government in Herat, Helmand, Kabul, Washington and London.<sup>44</sup> The protestors openly disregarded the Iranian regime and outraged the Iranian officials. Tehran warned the then Afghan authorities that the defamation of the Iranian regime by the Afghan protestors would take a drastic toll on the relationship between the two countries.<sup>45</sup>

Considering the current increase in Afghan refugees in Iran and Iran's reluctance to accept new refugees, the issue of Afghan refugees and their basic rights will remain a controversial point in Iran–Afghanistan relations beyond 2021.

Tehran's policies have shaped the fate of the Afghan peace process as well. Its growing ties with the Taliban have been of concern to the United States. That is why the United States tried to keep Iran shut out of the peace process. Nevertheless, the Iranian government tightened its relations with the Taliban by hosting their delegation in January and reaching out to their officials in Doha and Quetta.<sup>46</sup> Taliban officials had also met Javad Zarif, Iranian Foreign Minister, in 2019.<sup>47</sup>

Regarding the Doha Accord of February 2020, Iran argued that the United States had overshadowed the former Afghan government's sovereignty by making statements and commitments on its behalf.<sup>48</sup> Iran is seen as the only regional actor that has overtly objected to the Bilateral Security Agreement or the Doha Accord.<sup>49</sup> Tehran also tried to influence Afghanistan's security and stability, using it as a potential threat to the United States, because Iran's future approach towards Afghanistan would largely depend on the United States' withdrawal and how it would maintain its future relationship with the Afghan government and its security sector.<sup>50</sup>

When Kabul collapsed on 15 August 2021 following the Taliban attack, Iran was dealing with issues related to the transition of its government to a new president.<sup>51</sup> On 18 June 2021, approximately 59 million Iranians voted for a successor to Hassan Rohani,<sup>52</sup> with Ebrahim Raisi announced the winner the following day.<sup>53</sup> Being preoccupied by domestic affairs, Iranian officials could not quickly lay out an approach towards the newly formed Taliban regime in Afghanistan.<sup>54</sup> At first, Iran happily welcomed the United States' departure from Afghanistan.<sup>55</sup> Officials in Iran regard the withdrawal as a concession to the Taliban—an achievement for Iran's government that it sees as vindicating its investment in its regional network of militia groups.<sup>56</sup> However, Tehran recently criticized the Taliban for forming a cabinet that ignores the need for an inclusive government.<sup>57</sup> Ayatollah Khamenei, Iran's Supreme Leader, stated that, based on the new structure of the Taliban cabinet, the Iran–Taliban relations will not be friendly.<sup>58</sup>

The fall of Kabul has damaged trade and economic relations between Iran and Afghanistan. Afghanistan is currently facing degrading economic conditions and escalating political uncertainty. As cash becomes nearly unavailable, consumer demand among Afghan families has decreased, including for Iranian goods.<sup>59</sup> The freezing of the monetary system in Afghanistan by the international community is also preventing the flow of hard cash from Afghanistan into Iran.<sup>60</sup> The decline in bilateral trade between the two partners in turn is affecting the income of the Islamic Emirate.<sup>61</sup>

### Iran's concerns regarding the Taliban rule in Afghanistan

Like other regional powers including China, which has scolded the United States for its "irresponsible" departure from Afghanistan, Iran is criticizing the United States' withdrawal amid unstable circumstances.<sup>62</sup> Tehran has lambasted the United States for not addressing the challenges that followed its pull-out from Afghanistan.<sup>63</sup> Iranian officials wanted the United States to leave Afghanistan when it was reasonably stable. For example, Iran would be happy to support an inclusive government in Afghanistan, after a settlement. However, the Taliban's extension of power in Afghanistan affects Iran in many aspects of international relations and international security, including the stability of

40 Aryaman Bhatnagar, Iran: Understanding the Policy towards Afghan Refugees (India, Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, 2021).

41 See Joshua Evangelista, "Afghans in Iran: no SIM card, no house, no rights, Middle East eye", (2017). See also Abbasi-Shavazi, Second Generation Afghans in Iran: Integration, Identity and Return (Afghanistan, Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2008); Ahmad Shuja, "Iran bans Afghan and Iraqi refugees from moving to regions for employment", UN Dispatch, (2012).

42 Danish Institute for International Studies, Guests or Trash: Iran's Precarious Policies towards the Afghan Refugees in the Wake of Sanctions and Regional Wars (2016).

43 "Iranian border guards accused of forcing Afghan migrants into Harirud River, causing some to drown", ABC News (2020). See also "Deaths of Afghan migrants in burning car after police chase in Iran sparks fury", The Observer, (2020).

44 Omar, "Horror, outrage as Afghan migrants burned to death by Iranian forces", Salaam Times, (2021). See also "Afghans hold anti-Iran protests in US, UK", Reporterly, (2020).

45 "Iran warns Afghan envoy over 'intolerable' protests in Kabul", Tolo News, (2020).

46 Aman, 2021.

47 ibid.

48 Sharan, and Watkins, 2021.

49 ibid.

50 ibid.

51 Ray Takeyh, Where Iran Stands on the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan (New York, Council on Foreign Relations, 2021).

52 "Iran election 2021", France 24, (2021).

53 Garrett Nada, "Raisi: election results explainer", The Iranian Primer, (2021).

54 Takeyh, 2021.

55 Takeyh, 2021.

56 Ali Fathollah-Nejad and Hamidreza Azizi, Iran and the Taliban after the US Fiasco in Afghanistan (Washington D. C., Middle East Institute, 2021).

57 Zafar Mehd, "Iran slams Taliban government formation in Afghanistan", AA, (2021).

58 Jamsheed K. Choksy, and Carol E.B. Choksy, "'No friend of Iran'": Tehran's responses to the Taliban's return to the power in Afghanistan", E-International Relations, (2021).

59 Batmanghelidi, 2021.

60 ibid.

61 ibid.

62 Expert on Iran–Afghanistan relations, in discussion with the Maryam Jami, October 2021.

63 ibid.

its borders. Despite being of paramount importance for other countries that were engaged in Afghanistan, human rights, religious freedom and democracy are not important concerns for Tehran. It cares about regional stability. In particular, Iran is afraid of a possible resumption of Al-Qaeda operations in the region. The Iranian government does not want Afghanistan to become an exporter of extremism. They fear that their Baloch minority groups might be energized, in the event that the Taliban intend to cooperate with other regional insurgent groups.<sup>64</sup> Balochs are a number of underresourced Sunni minority groups in Iran that have historically been repressed by Iranian governments.<sup>65</sup> The group usually engages in anti-government protests and professes its dissatisfaction with the government's negligence.<sup>66</sup>

The Taliban have historically instigated Iran's concerns regarding the security of the Shi'a minority group in Afghanistan.<sup>67</sup> The persecution of Hazaras, who are one of the largest Shia groups in Afghanistan, by the Taliban is of utmost concern to Tehran. Tehran sees itself in a position to protect Shi'as in the Islamic world.<sup>68</sup>

Another issue that needs to be settled between the Taliban government and Iranian officials is the water crisis. Located along the border with Afghanistan, Sistan and Baluchistan are two of Iran's poorest provinces. These provinces struggle with water paucity resulting from ongoing droughts and water mismanagement. In 1973, Iran and Afghanistan signed a treaty

allowing a specific amount of water from the Helmand River of Afghanistan to flow into Iran. But then, Afghanistan built the Kamal Khan Dam on the Helmand River that shares the border with Iran. Iran alleges that Afghanistan has been violating its water rights<sup>69</sup> and that the dam prevents a significant amount of water from flowing into Iran.<sup>70</sup>

In March 2021, then Afghan president Ashraf Ghani stated in a televised speech after inaugurating the Kamal Khan Dam that Afghanistan would no longer give free water to anyone and if Iran wanted more water, it should give Afghanistan oil in exchange.<sup>71</sup> According to Iranian media, more water has been pouring into Iran since the Taliban gained authority. The Taliban allegedly built new outlets at Kamal Khan Dam, although neither Tehran nor Kabul have confirmed this.<sup>72</sup>

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64 *ibid.*

65 Hamid Yazdan Panah, "Baloch protests in Iran underscore repression against the ethnic minority", *Global Voices*, (2021).

66 *ibid.*

67 Borzou Daragahi, "Iran spent years preparing for a Taliban victory: it may still get stung", *Atlantic Council*, (2021).

68 Murat Sofuoglu, "How Iran-Taliban ties are shaping up post-US pullout from Afghanistan", *TRT World*, (2021).

69 "Shattered Afghan economy is Taliban's biggest challenge", *DW*, (2021).

70 *ibid.*

71 Ayaz Gul, "Afghan leader demands Iranian oil in exchange for river water", *Germany* (2021).

72 *DW*, 2021.

## Recommendations

- To address Iran's biggest fear regarding the expansion of terrorism and Sunni extremism in the regional neighbourhood, the Islamic Emirate should ensure the security and stability of its borders and should cooperate with the anti-terrorism initiatives in the region.
- The Islamic Emirate should establish an inclusive government that involves minority groups, for example the Shi'as and Hazaras. It would then help assure Iran that it will protect the rights of the Shi'a and Hazara minority groups.
- Border security is important for the continuation of trade between Iran and Afghanistan. The Islamic Emirate should ensure the stability of the borders that Afghanistan shares with Iran.
- To address another concern of Iran, the Islamic Emirate should cooperate with Iranian authorities to block the flow of narcotics from Afghanistan into Iran.
- Delegations from the Islamic Emirate should meet with Iranian authorities regarding the conditions of the Afghan refugees in Iran. Any successful bilateral relations between the two countries beyond 2021 will require that the issue of refugees and the humanitarian crisis be settled.
- Iranian officials and the Islamic Emirate should engage in diplomatic efforts to resolve the water crisis in a sustainable fashion. Diplomats from both sides should be experienced enough to preserve the long-term interests of Iran and Afghanistan in a way that would not breed additional tension between the parties. To prevent further controversies, the diplomats should create a win-win environment for both sides.

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**Maryam Jami** (Lead Author) is a Researcher at the Institute of War and Peace Studies (Afghanistan). Her research focuses on War and Peace Studies, International Relations, International Law, and Politics. Her works have appeared on the Oxford Human Rights Hub Journal, the Australian Outlook, and the Glocality.

**Alamuddin Rizwan** (Co-Author) holds an MSc. in Development Economics from Université Clermont Auvergne (France) and a BA in Economics from Kabul University (Afghanistan). He has over four years of experience in research on socio-economic development, fundamental rights, security, peace and conflict, and gender equality.

**Rajab Taieb** (Co-Author) holds an MA in International Relations from OSCE Academy in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. He works as a researcher at the Institute of War and Peace Studies (IWPS), and as a journalist for TOLONews. His research focuses on war and peace studies, ethnic politics and governance structure.

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Responsible:

**Dr Magdalena Kirchner** | Country Director FES Afghanistan

**Tamim Asey** | Executive Chairman IWPS

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