

— Report —

# DEVELOPMENTS AND IMPEDIMENTS IN IRAN- AFGHAN RELATIONS

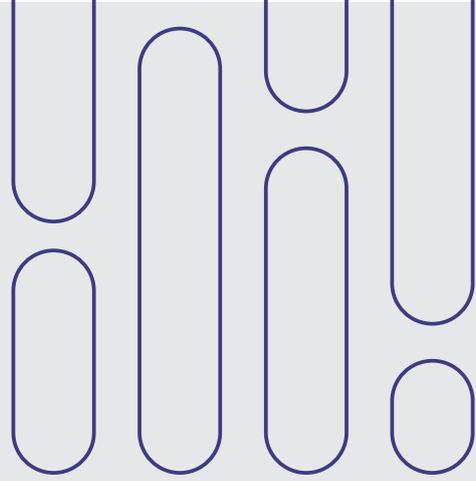
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Image source: Bryan Denton/The New York Times





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## Overview



Historically, Iran has adopted a pragmatic posture toward Afghanistan. During the Cold War, the relationship between the two countries remained nominal although both were a transit point for western tourists visiting South Asia and beyond. However, a paradigm shift occurred in 1978 when Sardar Daoud was assassinated by Afghan communists led by Nour Mohammad Taraki, and in 1979, the Shah of Iran Reza Pahlavi had to leave the country because of Iran's clergy who revolted against the monarchy under the leadership of Imam Khomeini. Subsequent developments in Afghanistan, including Soviet occupation, civil war, the rise of the Taliban movement, and, finally, 9/11 have played a significant role in shaping Iran's policies toward Afghanistan and the Middle East region.

## Post-Taliban Scenario



It was after the fall of the Taliban that Iran while cooperating with the United States in the creation of an interim government in Bonn started to make more inroads and gains in Afghanistan. Iran has traditionally adopted a two-pronged strategy toward Afghanistan; first, it has used the Shia card to establish its influence within the Shia community (mostly Hazaras) in Afghanistan, and second, Iran has used the Persian card to attract other non-Pashtun ethnic groups, including Tajiks, Uzbeks and Turkmen.

From the beginning, Shiite Iran distrusted the Sunni Taliban movement due to its proximity to Saudi Arabia. Tehran believed that Riyadh would use the Taliban against it. In addition, Iran believed that Saudi Arabia would pressure it via Afghanistan's borders.

During the tenure of the Karzai administration, Iran started to strengthen its position in Afghanistan and joined hands with its nemesis, the Taliban. So much so that the Taliban started to use Iran as an alternative sanctuary. Mullah Mansoor, the Taliban's leader, was **killed** by an American drone when he was travelling from Iran to Pakistan in 2015. To increase and strengthen its influence within Afghanistan, Iran has contributed \$500 million to help in reconstructing

the war-torn country.

Washington has been skeptical of Iran's role in Afghanistan, accusing Tehran of supplying weapons to the Taliban. Although Tehran has denied this allegation, Iranian officials nevertheless have acknowledged having **contacts with the Taliban**. Much to the chagrin of Afghanistan's leadership, Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif via intra-Afghan dialogue has advocated a **political role** for the Taliban in the country although he is not in favor of the movement ruling the country once again.

## Rapprochement With the Taliban



It appears that both Iran and the Taliban reached an understanding not to harm each other's interests, and that the Taliban would not disturb the Iranian border with Afghanistan. Consequently, Iran's border with Afghanistan has remained rather quiet despite massive Taliban operations across the country. As early as 2002, **allegations** emerged that Iran was supporting insurgent groups in Afghanistan, including its former arch enemy, the Taliban. Some Afghan officials have openly **accused** Iran of arming and training the Taliban within Iranian territories.

However, at the same time, Iran has avoided direct confrontation with the United States in Afghanistan. In the emerging future scenario in Afghanistan, Iranian policy makers would prefer to deal with the Taliban rather than face US pressure on their borders. "Much like the United States, Iran has come to accept that accommodating the Taliban is the only way to build a more peaceful future for its neighbor," according to a commentary in **Foreign Affairs** magazine.

## The Saudi Factor in Iran-Afghan Relations



It is important to note that Iran sees the Afghan arena as an extension of the Middle East conflict. Tehran believes that Saudi Arabia may use Afghan based proxies against it. What worries Tehran the most is that Riyadh's involvement in Afghan affairs would push it out of the country, especially if the Taliban are once again in the driving seat. Additionally, Tehran believes that the Americans, Saudis and Emiratis may initiate “**regime change**” by using Afghanistan as a springboard to instigate cross-border terrorism to destabilize its territories. Tehran fears that the US objective in Afghanistan is to create a Syria-like situation in the region that will engulf Iran with violence and mayhem.

## Iran's Geo-economic Interests in

### Afghanistan



Iran is aware that despite Afghanistan's status as a landlocked country, it enjoys immense geographical importance and can serve as a bridge for trade and transit between South and Central Asia. Iran has facilitated Afghan transit trade and has developed Chabahar Port, which is 70 km west of Pakistan's Gwadar deep sea port. India is to invest \$500 million in the first phase of the port's development.

Despite Chabahar's ongoing development, it is operational, with Afghan traders using it for trade with India. The **first shipment** from Afghanistan left the port for India last year. Transit facilities between the two countries have led to Iran's trade with Afghanistan increasing. Consumer goods and edibles make up the bulk of Iranian exports to Afghanistan. The value of annual trade between the two countries is around **\$3 billion**.

American sanctions imposed on Iran have led the country to **face a hard currency shortage**. This deficit has been partially overcome due to the development of a foreign exchange black market operating along the Afghanistan-Iran

border. President of the Federation of Money Changers in Herat, Bahulludin Rahimi, estimates that \$2 million to \$3 million enters Iran **illegally** from Afghanistan every day.

## Points of Contention Between Iran and

### Afghanistan



The foremost issue which is a source of contention between the two countries is Iran's **recruitment of Shiite youth** from Afghanistan to join the Fatemiyoun Brigade. It is estimated to have between 8,000 and 14,000 fighters.

The sharing of waters of the Harirud and the Helmand rivers has also become a source of contention between Iran and Afghanistan. Built by India at a cost of \$290 million, the "**Afghanistan-India Friendship Dam**," known earlier as the Salma Dam, in Afghanistan's Herat province has reduced Kabul's dependence on its neighbors for electricity and is irrigating around 75,000 hectares of land. However, Iran is complaining that the dam has reduced the flow of water into its territories — it used to receive 17 percent of the Harirud River's waters but is getting just 11 percent after the Friendship Dam's construction. This could result in the Hamoun wetlands turning into a dustbowl, impacting the lives and livelihoods of tens of thousands of people living there. Afghanistan's expansion of the Kamal Khan Dam on the Helmand River will have a similar impact on Iran.

Narcotics is another major problem that has led to friction between the two countries. Afghanistan produces more than **90 percent of the world's illicit opium** and more than half of this is smuggled across the Iranian-Afghan border. Almost **30 percent of heroine** is smuggled through Iran to the Middle East, Europe and beyond. Furthermore, approximately 2.8 million Iranians, mostly youth, are addicted to opium.

Since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Iran has hosted approximately 3 million Afghan refugees. Most of these refugees are from Afghanistan's Tajik and Hazara communities. Iranian officials maintain that there are **one million** registered refugees while the rest live illegally or have short-to-medium-term work visas. During the past two decades Iran has forced thousands of refugees to return to Afghanistan. **Afghan officials** have described such expulsions as pressure tactics used by Iran against the Kabul government and its American and European backers.

## **Iranian Position on the US-Taliban Peace**

### **Agreement**



The long-lasting peace negotiations between the United States and the Taliban culminated in an historic peace agreement on February 20, 2020. Given the bilateral nature of the agreement, it was rejected immediately by Tehran, who argued that it excluded the Afghan government and other Afghan stakeholders. In addition, Tehran was skeptical toward the peace agreement, believing that it would legitimize the existence of US troops in the country. Iran has emphasized intra-Afghan dialogue as the only way to establish peace in the country under the supervision of the United Nations. This Iranian position conflicts with the US-Taliban agreement, and is indicative of how Iran wants peace in the country but on its own terms that will ensure its interests in the country.

## Conclusion



The primary concern of Afghanistan's neighbors is peace as they have, in one way or another, suffered due to the country's instability over the last four decades, especially after the 9/11. An unstable Afghanistan is not desirable to Iran. Its 938 kilometer long porous border, makes Iran not only vulnerable but also endangers the country's security on multiple fronts at a time when the country is under severe American sanctions and its precious resources are being exhausted in promoting the government's expansionist interests in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen.



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