

Report

The Future of Iran-Taliban Relations: Challenges and Concerns

23 Aug. 2021



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Taliban militants captured large swathes of Afghan territories and recently [took over](#) Kabul. The Taliban also captured important border crossing points along the Iran-Afghanistan border and took control of the provincial capitals of Herat, Nimroz, and Farah. As the Taliban prepares to govern, Iran's engagement with the Taliban remains important, especially as it could impact the overall domestic and regional security situation. Iran has for years been a destination for Afghan refugees, however, with a strained economy, stifled by US sanctions and a [surge](#) in COVID-19 cases, Iran is now facing multifaceted challenges and concerns after the Taliban's capturing of power in Kabul. Iran's primary interest in the region has been to reduce the US presence. Towards this end, Tehran had [provided](#) the Taliban with weapons. Iran blames US policies for the lack of stability and the worsening socioeconomic conditions in Afghanistan. However, in light of US troop withdrawal and the Taliban taking power, Iran foresees consequences such as a further influx of Afghan refugees into its territories. Moreover, several news agencies [reported](#) that the Taliban has released thousands of prisoners including some former members of ISIS.

Iran is one of Afghanistan's biggest trade partners, however, in light of recent developments, bilateral trade could face challenges. As per the data released by the Tehran Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines and Agriculture (TCCIMA), Afghanistan [accounted](#) for nearly 11 percent of non-oil imports from Iran. These items were mostly fruits and foods. In recent months, the transport and logistics involved in supporting trade between the two countries came under pressure as the Taliban deployed its fighters across the border. As a result, Iranian exporters have been unsure about exporting their items to Afghanistan. Several reports suggest that exports from Iran have

[fallen](#) drastically because of the escalating conflict. Some [reports](#) indicate that more than half of Afghanistan's population lives below the poverty line and food insecurity affects over 11 million Afghans in the country. Moreover, many households in Afghanistan's western provinces face food shortages and have a below-average household purchasing power. In this context, it would be in Iran's interests to support Afghanistan economically in order to avert a new refugee crisis. Iran intends to widen trade prospects with Afghanistan and the inauguration of the [Khaf-Herat railway](#) connecting Iranian and Afghan cities indicates Tehran's intent to boost its exports to Afghanistan. Iran does not want to risk its commercial operations, hence, in recent years Iran has engaged with the Taliban. Iran also tried to play a diplomatic role by hosting talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government.

Another key aspect in the emerging Iran-Taliban dynamics is the cross-border drug trade. The Taliban understands that Iran is an important country to expand Afghan opium exports, as the latter remains a vital source of [revenue](#) for the movement. Iran has one of the highest rates of opium addiction and remains a hotspot for drug trafficking. As the Taliban controls several key border areas, there is a likelihood of illicit cross-border trade increasing and this could possibly be a point of contention between Iran and the Taliban in the future as Tehran in recent years has strengthened its [efforts](#) to clamp down on drug networks.

Despite engaging with the Taliban in recent months, Tehran remains wary about the intentions of the movement. Iran's Foreign Ministry recently expressed concerns regarding the safety of its consulate in [Herat](#) after the Taliban took over the province. Iran announced that it was temporarily [closing](#) its consulate in Mazar-i-Sharif. Iran also [closed](#) some of its important border crossing points with Afghanistan

such as in Milak district. Taliban's [seizure](#) of Islam Qala added to the tensions and aggravated the fear and scepticism between the two sides. The Taliban has been alarmed by Iranian military deployments along Iran's eastern borders. On the security front, contrary to what Iran has been stating, Iran's Armed Forces and the IRGC have been on full alert and have increased their presence along the borders by [deploying](#) additional troops in the provinces of South Khorasan and Farah. Reports also indicate that the IRGC has [deployed](#) troops from Tehran, Nishapur, and Zahedan to Birjand to assist the border guards to prevent Taliban infiltration into South Khorasan. In addition, the Iranian military has deployed T-72S1 tanks, rocket launchers, Bell attack helicopters, and armored vehicles in Birjand. These developments suggest that Iran is preparing for any possible escalation of tensions with the Taliban.

Iran is also likely to focus on diverting some of its proxy groups to Afghanistan and boosting its influence over the border territories. The future of Iran's cooperation with the Taliban will also depend on how the militia maintains its engagement with the Shiite minority community in Afghanistan. This is against the backdrop of growing [criticism](#) against the Iranian government's "softened policy" towards the Taliban by people like Grand Ayatollah Loftallah Safi Golpaygani. Several [reports](#) suggest that Iran is preparing to provide arms and reorganize the [Fatemioun Division](#) to secure the border territories. The Taliban in the past persecuted Shiites belonging to the Hazara minority group. Taliban dissident leader Mullah Abdul Manan Niazi, who was recently killed, had said during an [interview](#), "inside Afghanistan, all the Hazaras are Fatemioun. I will kill Fatemioun and all others who are key players in the civil war in Afghanistan. I will kill thousands of Hazaras."

Tehran is likely to monitor the Taliban's relationship with Afghan Shiites and only intervene if it aids its strategic interests, let's not forget that many Shiites in different regions have been left to suffer as intervention did not suit Iran's interests. Iran is likely to adopt a pragmatic approach to the Taliban focusing on securing its economic interests to aid its faltering economy and to secure border regions to prevent an influx of Afghan refugees. The foregoing is likely to be at the crux of the discussions between Tehran and the Taliban, and one will have to wait and see how things develop between the two sides, whether there will be a cordial relationship or tensions will surface due to ideological divides or divergences in interests.

