

REPORT

Iran's Love-hate Relationship With the Taliban

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RASANAHA
المعهد الدولي للدراسات الإيرانية
International Institute for Iranian Studies

The Taliban are at ease from all sides in Afghanistan. What could have been the most worrisome issue is now of minimal concern. Iran's bitter grudge against the Taliban vanished amidst the realities of realpolitik as well as geography. The ground realities became evident to the defiant neighbor of Afghanistan as well as to the group that ruled it with an iron fist. Tehran adopted a more pragmatic approach to mend fences with the group. Two decades later, the Taliban not only allowed Ashura processions in Afghanistan but also delivered sermons during these public ceremonies. Toeing the line of Iran's establishment, Shiite clerics advised their followers to wait and see before reaching any conclusions about Afghanistan's new rulers. More recently, Iran's ambassador to Afghanistan was photographed holding meetings with the Taliban and other political stakeholders in the capital. Following the Taliban's general amnesty, Tehran handed over the Afghan soldiers seeking refuge and returned their weapons as a gesture of goodwill. Iran and Taliban relations are the fruit of consolidated labor over years based on overlapping interests. Earlier in 2015, The Wall Street Journal reported that Iran [had been paying](#) Afghanistan's Sunni militants a monthly salary of \$580 besides "providing 82mm mortars, light machine guns, AK-47 rifles, rocket-propelled grenades and materials for making roadside bombs." The supply line never ceased to exist, hence the Trump White House imposed further [sanctions on Iran](#).

Evolution From Rivalry Into Partnership

The advent of UNSC-mandated forces in Afghanistan necessitated a structural rebalance for Iran. With Pakistan hastily adjusting its position against al-Qaeda and the Taliban, Iran found an unlikely ally, one with which it was ready to go to war in 1998 after the killing of [nine Iranian diplomats](#) and an Iranian citizen. The ancient proverb "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" stood true and the Taliban and Iran realized their overlapping interests. At the time, Tehran was [cooperating](#) with Washington in dismantling the group networks in Afghanistan. In the early years after

9/11, the late Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani [facilitated](#) the CIA in establishing America's foothold in Panjshir and Bagram. America's Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan James Dobbins held meetings with Iran's Ambassador Ebrahim Taherian and Quds Force officials in Kabul. Dobbins and Javad Zarif, then Iran's deputy foreign minister, had [a good working relationship](#), easing America's headache vis-à-vis Shiite and Hazara participation in the new Afghan interim setup.

From the days of helping to set up [the Northern Alliance](#) to maintaining close relations with Sunni warlord Ismail Khan of Herat, Iran relied alternatively on Shiite harmony and shared ethno-lingual identities. The policies of the clerical government were more pragmatic than the rhetoric propagated from its podiums. At the time, the objective was to curb Sunni radical militants from power centers in Afghanistan, protect Shiite communities scattered across the country and secure a 921-kilometer border from external threats.

It would be misleading to assume that Iran was seeking some sort of thaw with the United States. Soon after the signing of the US-Afghanistan [strategic partnership](#), Defense Secretary Robert Gates flanked by President Hamid Karazi [spoke](#) of suspected arms trafficking undertaken by Iranian non-state actors. However, the Afghan leader expressed confidence in Tehran, "There's no reason that any of our neighbors should support the Taliban." Washington remained [adamant](#) about its claim of strengthening cooperation between Tehran and the Taliban. [CENTCOM's](#) head Admiral William J. Fallon said, "The Iranians are clearly supplying some amount of lethal aid. There is no doubt...those agents from Iran are involved in aiding the insurgency."

Around the same time, key Taliban leaders, al-Qaeda figures, and other anti-US Afghan leaders like Gulbuddin Hekmatyar had safe havens in Iran where they lived with their families in secure compounds.

Just as the Taliban pursued a contradictory policy of opening

channels with the United States through Pakistan, Qatar and Germany, Iran did the same with both Washington and the renegade group for diplomatic and strategic advantages respectively. In exchange for the Taliban softening its view on the Hazaras, Tehran provided the group with IEDs, sophisticated small arms and cash. The relationship strengthened behind a veil of secrecy as Iran's narrative of accusing Sunni Arab and neighboring states continued unabated.

Iran's first formal public invitation to the Taliban came in June 2013 for the group to attend a conference regarding Islamic solidarity. Within months, it was confirmed that Iran was providing [training safe havens](#) to the militants in Tehran, Mashhad, Zahedan and Kerman. It is worth mentioning here that the Taliban had [established](#) the Mashhad shura in 2007 to safely plan and monitor operations in the Afghan provinces of Nimroz, Farah, Herat, and Badghis.

After the death of Mulla Omar, Akhtar Mohammad Mansour, who had spent significant time in Iran, was elevated as his successor. While the Taliban kept Mulla Omar's death secret, Iran possibly knew it and deepened ties with Mulla Mansour. His Helmand province was a major [producer of opium](#) which was trafficked mainly by his Ishaqzai tribe through Makran sea and land routes in Iran to mainland Europe. As per UN reports, 84 percent of the world's total opium production over the last half decade originated from Afghanistan. The IRGC benefited from the trafficking network in many ways including thwarting the UNSC sponsored sanctions and smuggling in sophisticated nuclear, missile and drone technology and US dollars. When a US drone eliminated Mulla Mansour inside a Pakistani border town in May 2016, he was [returning from Iran](#) after spending a few months there. The assassination brought Tehran-Taliban ties within the realm of public knowledge, and Iran started openly interacting with the group's political office in Doha. The group's negotiating team also visited Iran.

The discord between Kabul and Tehran over the latter's ties

to the Taliban did not hit the headlines until the Taliban [ran over](#) much of Farah city in May 2018. The Afghan government [alleged](#) that IRGC troops were directly involved.

Since the Taliban blocked water from the Helmand River flowing to Iran during its first administration, Iran has worked with the group since. A few months ahead of Kabul's fall, Ghani inaugurated the Kamal Khan Dam in Zarang district while [stating](#) that Iran should provide fuel in return for water. To satisfy Iran's water security concerns, the Taliban not only captured the district but also opened the dam's gates. When Zaranj was overrun, a large convoy consisting of troops and military equipment crossed into Iran for refuge. The men and the military wherewithal were returned two weeks later as a gesture of goodwill to Afghanistan's incumbent rulers.

Iran's post-revolutionary establishment has been wary of internal security threats stemming from ethnic, religious, or sectarian lines. Along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border lies Iran's migraine, i.e., the insurgency in Sistan-Balochistan led and fought by half a dozen Sunni resistance groups which Tehran perceives as being affiliated with ISIS or ISIK. Iran went after Jundullah full throttle after discovering Israel's false flag operations. In June 2010, Iran [hanged](#) Abdolmalek Rigi, the Sunni militant leader of Jundullah after intelligence sharing from Pakistan. He was arrested in February while taking a flight from Dubai to Kyrgyzstan. Over a decade later, Tehran has the Taliban on its side against Baloch secessionist militants. In August, Amir Naroui, a prominent leader of another militant outfit Jaish ul-Adl, died in clashes with the Taliban. Naroui had reportedly gone to negotiate the release of his arrested colleague, but armed clashes broke out. Iran and the Taliban brands these Baloch Sunni groups as affiliates of ISIK while the United States has also put them on its terrorist blacklist. The Baloch militant outfit, Jundullah, was added to the terrorist blacklist during the Obama presidency to appease Iran in light of Washington's efforts to initiate talks regarding Tehran's nuclear

program. The Trump presidency added Jaish ul-Adl to the terror blacklist possibly to signify that Washington sees all terrorist outfits through the same lens. After Jaish ul-Adl killed 26 Iranian security personnel in February 2019, Iran's Interior Minister Abdelreza Rahmani-Fazli threatened to carry out hot-pursuit operations inside Pakistani territory. Now Iran may not need to go after the Sunni militants in the Nimroz region, Afghanistan's only province with a Baloch majority.

The Likely Irritants Ahead

Once in power, the priorities of the Taliban will not remain the same. The ideological elements will become as important as the political and pragmatic side of power dynamics. This Ashura, the Taliban showed unprecedented support for Shiite gatherings across Afghanistan while being present in some and conveying the message of coexistence and religious harmony. Though the group does not have a global aspiration of transforming into a caliphate, the Taliban pledged to implement Islamic law in Afghanistan, with its interpretation varying from Iran's, often contrasting altogether. The group is threatened from within not only by its renewed approach of moderation on certain issues like permitting women's participation in the workforce or allowing music on national media but also from ignoring Shiite beliefs and the projection of some revered Islamic figures. Over the past two decades, Iran's ideological vanguard universities in Qom and Mashhad have established a vast network of affiliate institutions in Afghanistan, which follow their syllabus. The Taliban will not only see this as interference but also as an ideological contradiction. The moment the Taliban enters the realm of educational reforms, a Pandora's box is set to open for Iran.

The Taliban will also annoy Iran while uprooting its media affiliates in the country. The Afghan media, especially in the Dari language, has been of specific interest to Iran. While the group will block or curb Western propaganda, it will not be able to restrain itself for long regarding Iranian or Iran-inspired propagan-

da. Tehran's soft power in the country can only survive with a rapid transformation process, which is an oxymoron as the two cannot coexist. Afghan politicians explicitly speaking Iran's language are also facing unforeseen consequences. Though pro-US and pro-Iran Shiite figures and warlords have openly expressed allegiance to the Taliban, their future role will be determined after due diligence. It is yet unclear the extent of the Taliban's open-mindedness to include other political and religious parties in the government formation process.

The optics seem much different than what Iran might have accepted at the time of the US withdrawal. Washington has a rather impressive working relationship with the Taliban leadership and the likelihood of NATO recognizing its government is quite likely. Given the rising threat of destabilization from radical outfits like ISIS and other militias including the so far independent Panjshir Valley, the Taliban would like to work with the United States rather than sever the existing mutually-beneficial working relationship.

Though the Fatemiyoun Brigade or the recently renamed Hashd al-Shia remains dormant and warily supportive of the Taliban rulers on instructions from Tehran, it can potentially pose a challenge to the group. The rulers of Kabul do realize the potential threat while also knowing that the Shiite populace will be quick to switch loyalties in any untoward military and political situation. The fact remains that the Taliban are better trained and equipped than Iran's proxy militia.

On the economic front, Iran is currently benefiting from good ties with the Taliban by selling vital oil to Afghanistan besides ramping the trade volume through border checkpoints. However, Iran's smuggling networks are likely to see a clampdown as the Taliban needs every penny possible. It is a matter of the new government's capability to curb smuggling and the transfer of funds to Fatemiyoun veterans and active members. Over the past few weeks, Iran's engagement with the Taliban has paralleled that of Pakistan, Qatar, and Turkey. All along, Tehran appears cautious

of the Taliban's deepened engagement with the aforementioned Sunni majority countries as well as the renewed interests of key the Gulf States.

