

The Taliban Takeover: Iranian Interests in Afghanistan

Bat Chen Druyan Feldman | No. 1515 | September 5, 2021

The American withdrawal from Afghanistan presents Iran with a new and complex situation. On the one hand, the withdrawal is perceived as a positive development, because Iran no longer has United States forces on its eastern and western borders, and it is clear that Tehran hopes that the US will subsequently withdraw its forces from Iraq. On the other hand, Iran and Afghanistan share a 900 kilometer-long border, and a lack of governance in Afghanistan will have immediate implications for Iran's economy and security. Iran is therefore adopting a pragmatic policy of cooperation with the Taliban in order to safeguard its own interests, despite the substantial ideological and religious differences between them.

Iran regards the American withdrawal from Afghanistan as a positive development. At the same time, Iran now confronts a complex situation that compels it to reassess its policy on Afghanistan in general, and its relations with the Taliban in particular. During the first period of Taliban rule in Afghanistan, Iran, together with other countries, including Russia and the United States, supported the Northern Alliance opposition to the Taliban. The tension between Iran and the Taliban peaked in 1998, when the Taliban executed 11 Iranian diplomats and staff members, a measure that nearly resulted in a military conflict between the two sides. One consequence of the poor relations between Iran and the Taliban was military coordination between Iran and the United States during the US invasion of Afghanistan. This cooperation ended, however, following a speech by then-US President George W. Bush in 2002, which referred to Iran, Iraq, and North Korea as the "axis of evil."

Iran's relations with the Taliban have shifted in recent years. Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei halted his public criticism of the Taliban, and began to refer to the organization's similarity to the "resistance" by the rebels in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. One reflection of the change in Iran's approach is the developing relations between the Taliban and the Revolutionary Guards, which include training Taliban forces and supplying them with weapons. An unofficial Taliban presence in Iran was widely reported, with significant evidence provided by the United States killing of Taliban leader Akhtar Mohammad Mansour in 2016 following his return from Iran to

Pakistan. In addition, in 2018 Iran confirmed for the first time that it had hosted a Taliban delegation for talks in Tehran, but stressed that the visit took place with the knowledge of the Afghan government. In August 2021, Iran unsuccessfully tried to mediate between the Afghan government and the Taliban, and hosted their respective delegations in Tehran.

With the American withdrawal and the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan, Iran wants to see the country controlled by a stable government and hopes to cooperate with it. Afghanistan is very important for Iran's national security and regional policy, and presumably, therefore, Tehran's pragmatic attitude toward the Taliban will not change, and will even move further in this direction for the purpose of safeguarding Iranian interests in Afghanistan, especially in security and economic matters.

Iran's primary security interests in this context are to prevent terrorist infiltration from Afghanistan as well as waves of refugees entering its territory. As of now, Iran regards ISIS as the most significant terrorist threat – in contrast to al-Qaeda, which also has a number of operatives in the area. According to American reports, the Afghan branch of ISIS previously conducted many terrorist attacks against civilian Shiite targets in Afghanistan, including a shooting attack against a hospital pediatric ward. The American withdrawal is liable to strengthen ISIS in Afghanistan and reinforce its activity against the Shiite community or Iranian targets. Ali Shamkhani, Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council of Iran, previously referred to the threat posed by ISIS Afghanistan and its severity for Iran. Like Iran, the Taliban is also taking action against ISIS, and this generates an opportunity for cooperation between them in this context.

A large wave of refugees is liable to worsen the internal economic and security situation in Iran. The already large refugee community in the country includes some three million Afghans, about two million of whom are not registered. The Fatemiyoun militia, established among the Afghan refugee community in Iran, was sent to Syria in 2014 to fight alongside Bashar al-Assad. Iran previously asserted that the unregistered refugees constitute a burden on its economy, and that it was therefore trying to prevent additional refugees from entering its territory. In recent weeks, a new wave of Afghan refugees began attempting to enter the country, and Iran established three refugee camps for them in the border area. The Iranian Minister of the Interior said that he expected the refugees to return home when the situation improves.

Iran also wants to safeguard its economic interests in Afghanistan. In response to the Western sanctions, Iran has diversified its sources of trade, and put great emphasis on regional markets, with a strong emphasis on trade relations with Afghanistan, which have greatly improved in recent years. Iran is the largest exporter to Afghanistan, a country with no maritime access and one of Iran's largest markets for non-oil exports.

Iranian exports to Afghanistan include electricity, construction materials, drugs, and wheat, and are estimated at \$2 billion a year. In order to improve its trade with Afghanistan, the first part of a railway project connecting the two countries, financed mainly by Iran, was completed in late 2020. Iran believes that this project has potential for expanding its trade ties with other countries in Central and Southeast Asia, including India.

Another important Iranian interest is the free flow of water from Afghanistan to Iran – a matter of dispute between the two countries. The Helmand River, which flows from Afghanistan to the Sistan region in Iran, supplies water for about a million people. Afghanistan controls the dams and water canals built by the United States in the mid-20th century. In a number of cases, the Afghans have stopped the flow of water to Iran. In early 2021, Iran and Afghanistan signed a water agreement relating to the river, but instability in Afghanistan is liable to hamper its implementation.

The Taliban's oppression and maltreatment of the Hazara Shiite community in Afghanistan was a sharp source of antagonism between Iran and the Taliban during the latter's first years in power. At the same time, given the recent rapprochement between, the Taliban has promised not to harm this community, although there were reports of cases in which Shiites were persecuted during the recent takeover. Iran regards itself as the protector of the Shiites, and is sensitive to attacks against Shiites in Afghanistan. However, the current connection between Iran and the Taliban is essentially pragmatic, and Iran may therefore choose to overlook attacks against the Shiite community in order to safeguard more critical interests.

In view of the importance of Iran's ties with the Taliban, especially following its recent takeover of Afghanistan, the Iranian regime has stepped up efforts to improve the Taliban's negative public image in Iran. Various sources reported that the authorities had instructed Iranian media concerns to refrain from criticism of the Taliban and negative descriptions of the organization. In parallel, the conservative Iranian media, which reflect the official line, are arguing that the Taliban is not what it was in the past; it has softened its brutal practices, and will no longer oppress the Shiite population in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, there is no guarantee that this campaign will succeed in changing popular opinion. The media affiliated with the reformist camp in Iran, which is more sensitive to human rights, frequently criticizes the connection with the Taliban.

In conclusion, the Iranian policy on the Taliban and the improved relations between the two sides, which gained momentum with the United States withdrawal from Afghanistan, reflects a large degree of realpolitik. Iran is willing to cooperate with the Taliban, despite the ideological and religious differences and the Shiite-Sunni rift, in order to safeguard its interests in Afghanistan, particularly in the economic and

security spheres. As long as these interests are preserved, Iran is not expected to switch its policy and support the Taliban's opponents, or to engage in subversive activity in Afghanistan. The internal changes in Iran, in particular the election of Ebrahim Raisi as president and the policy he is pursuing with incoming Minister of Foreign Affairs Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, are likely to prove useful in developing ties with the Taliban for the purpose of expanding Iranian regional influence, improving Iran's ties with its neighbors, and easing tension in the region.

The United States withdrawal from the region is an important element in Iran's regional policy. The removal of American forces from Afghanistan, a symbol of the weakening of US influence in the region, is therefore regarded in Tehran as a positive development. Tehran, hoping for a similar outcome in Iraq, is trying to encourage this scenario by means of the pro-Shiite militias operating there.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Judith Rosen