



# Atlantic Council

## MIDDLE EAST PROGRAMS

ISSUE BRIEF

# Afghanistan: Where US-Iranian Interests May Yet Intersect

MAY 2022 BORZOU DARAGAH

When the Taliban seized control of Kabul and much of the rest of Afghanistan in a lightning offensive in the summer of 2021, the country's neighbor to the West, Iran, seemed as surprised as any other interested party including the United States and United Nations agencies. Like other regional and global powers, Iran found itself scrambling to secure its personnel and facilities. Like Afghanistan's other neighbors, Iran braced for the humanitarian fallout, as thousands of Afghan families sought an escape from what they feared would be unbearable and possibly fatal living conditions under the victorious, self-declared "Islamic Emirate."

More than any other nation except Pakistan or other institutions closely linked to Afghanistan, Iran was prepared for the cataclysm of August 2021. Despite past confrontations and the sectarian and ethnic divide between Shia, Persian-speaking Iran and the Sunni, Pashtun-dominated Taliban, Tehran had spent at least a decade cultivating ties to the network. While it was apparently as shocked as any nation at the quick collapse of Ashraf Ghani's Kabul government, Iran clearly had had for months a sense of the potentially impending dangers and opportunities that a US withdrawal would present. It had approached Ghani just months earlier, offering security assistance,<sup>1</sup> and it had bolstered refugee camps at its border in anticipation of fleeing Afghans.

"The Iranians knew that one day the Americans would go and the Taliban would be stronger," said a European official who works closely on Afghan matters but asked not to be named for fear of damaging his role as an intermediary.<sup>2</sup> "What they could not imagine was this rapid implosion of the Afghan state."

Iran's satisfaction over the dramatic and embarrassing US withdrawal from Afghanistan has been tempered by deep worries and insecurities

The Atlantic Council's **Future of Iran Initiative** provides transatlantic and regional policy makers with unique perspectives and analysis of the complex American-Iranian relationship.

1 Confidential interview conducted by the author with a European official, December 2021; and a transcript of a TOLONews interview with Iran's Javad Zarif, Moby Group channel, December 22, 2020. All unattributed interviews were conducted in confidentiality, and the names of interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement.

2 Confidential interview, European official, December 2021.

about the fate of its eastern neighbor. Those concerns include: geostrategic realignments that could weaken Tehran and strengthen rivals acting through Pakistan; a narcotics trade that damages and destabilizes both Iran and Afghanistan; the potential resurgence of armed extremist Sunni groups that have targeted Shia Muslims; and perhaps most urgently, waves of Afghan refugees migrating into Iran.

This paper attempts to sketch out Iran's concerns about Afghanistan and argues that they are not so different from those of other countries, including the United States. This could provide the basis for tacit multilateral cooperation against these challenges, as it did when the Taliban last ruled more than two decades ago.

Recognizing shared interests between Iran and the West over Afghanistan could help offset and alleviate some of the tensions and mistrust that have arisen over Tehran's nuclear and missile programs, as well its support for armed groups in the Middle East. Even if the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) is not revived or collapses soon after its "revival," Afghanistan can be an avenue for diplomatic engagement and collaboration that could advance the interests of Iran, the United States, Europe, and perhaps most importantly, Afghans themselves.

History has taught world powers such as Britain, Russia, and the United States that Afghanistan is a hornets' nest. Iran has also been stung repeatedly in encounters with its mountainous eastern neighbor and Afghanistan's rugged, diverse peoples. In postrevolutionary Iran's approach to Afghanistan so far, a carefully measured pragmatism can be discerned, perhaps in contrast to Tehran's approach to the Arabian Peninsula, Levant, or the West. There are no easy slogans that can be spray-painted on Tehran walls or chanted after Friday prayers to characterize Iran's relations with Afghanistan. There is only an abundance of caution and an eagerness to resolve problems through diplomacy. That potentially presents a low-risk opportunity for the United States and the West to encourage Iranian policies more favorable to mutual interests in Afghanistan.

Some US officials appear to have recognized this. "It's just imperative that allies act and work together effectively when it comes to securing our interests in Afghanistan," Thomas West, US Afghanistan envoy, said on November 8, 2021. "It's also imperative that we work with the region—with Russia, China, Pakistan, Iran, and the Central Asian states—on our common and abiding interest in a stable Afghanistan that does not represent a threat to its neighbors, is at peace with itself, and respects human rights, women's rights, the rights of minorities."<sup>3</sup>

## A History of Trauma

Iran has a complex and deep relationship with Afghanistan rooted in centuries of history, trade, and cultural and religious exchanges. "The nation of Afghanistan is the Islamic Republic of Iran's neighbor," Bahadur Aminian, Iran's envoy to Kabul, said in an October 2021 interview with Tolonews, an Afghan cable news channel.<sup>4</sup> "And we have close relations in all aspects—economic, political, cultural, civilizational. The comings and goings of various governments cannot have a very big impact on the relations between the two nations."

Yet traumas also run deep. Afghanistan was part of the Persian Empire until the early eighteenth century, when the two nations parted ways. What is not so well-known in the West is that the breakup was bloody and prolonged. During a murky and violent period in the 1720s and 1730s, Iranian armies repeatedly invaded Afghanistan in failed attempts to keep control, and were massacred. Various Afghan warlords in turn conquered Safavid-era Persia and exacted retribution against locals, until they were violently crushed.

Disputes over water rights and river flows dominated relations between the two countries during much of the nineteenth century, and continue to this day. Earlier this year, residents of Iran's southeastern Sistan-Baluchistan province staged riotous protests and blocked cross-border traffic near the Afghan frontier, demanding that the Taliban increase the flow of water from the Helmand River through the Kamal Khan Dam, according to reports in Iranian, Afghan, and international media.<sup>5</sup>

3 Thomas West, US Special Representative for Afghanistan, Telephonic Press Briefing, State Department (website), Remarks and Releases, Brussels Media Hub, November 8, 2021.

4 Bahadur Aminian, Tolonews *Mehwar* Interview by Cable News Host Giti Rahimi, October 27, 2021.

5 Sudha Ramachandran, "Afghanistan-Iran Disquiet Over the Helmand River," *Diplomat*, February 15, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/02/afghanistan-iran-disquiet-over-the-helmand-river/>.



A member of Taliban forces patrols in front of people waiting to get visas, at the Iran embassy in Kabul, Afghanistan October 4, 2021. REUTERS/Jorge Silva.

Iran and Afghanistan sought to normalize diplomatic ties throughout much of the twentieth century, but both found themselves plunged into turmoil in the 1980s—Iran because of the 1979 revolution and the 1980-88 war with Iraq, and Afghanistan as a result of the December 1979 invasion by the Soviet Union and the ultimately successful effort that drove the Soviet Union out of Afghanistan in 1989.

In the 1990s, Iran joined the coalition of international powers including Russia and India backing the Northern Alliance of rebel groups against the Taliban. Iran and Afghanistan nearly went to war after Taliban forces overran Iran's consulate in Mazar-e-Sharif in 1998, killing ten diplomats and a journalist. Iran considers itself a guardian of Afghanistan's Shia Hazara community as well its Sunni Dari-speaking Tajiks, both of whom have clashed violently with the Sunni Pashtuns who dominate the Taliban's leadership and ranks.

Right after 9/11, Iran acquiesced to and indirectly assisted the US invasion and occupation of Afghanistan, but grew hostile to the presence of American hardware, soldiers, and spies in the country in the ensuing years.

Over the last decade, Iran has recruited thousands of Afghan men living in both Iran and Afghanistan to fight in Syria for the Fatemiyoun Brigade, an ideologically motivated mercenary army built by both the late Quds Force commander, Qassem Suleimani, and his successor, Esmail Qaani to defend the regime of Bashar al-Assad.

## A Porous Border

The most urgent matter pressuring Iranian authorities over Afghanistan is refugees. The Norwegian Refugee Council estimates that since August 2021, between 4,000 and 5,000 Afghans per day are entering Iran across the countries' 550-mile border,<sup>6</sup> a rate that threatens to reverse two decades of Iranian efforts to repatriate hundreds of thousands of migrants back to Afghanistan.

6 "Humanitarian Needs in Iran Rise as 300,000 Afghans Arrive Since Taliban Takeover," Norwegian Refugee Council (website), November 10, 2021, <https://www.nrc.no/news/2021/november/humanitarian-needs-in-iran-rise-as-300000-afghans-arrive-since-taliban-takeover/>.

Over the decades, cross-border migration has reshaped the character, values, economies, and urban landscapes of both nations. More than three million Afghans have settled in Iran, and many go back and forth between the two countries for work and family visits. Under pressure from women's rights advocates, Iranian authorities recently granted citizenship rights to the Afghan husbands and wives of Iranians as well as their offspring.

In addition to the pressure on schools, healthcare, and wages, Iran may also be worried about potential security threats posed by Afghan refugees. Nearly one hundred Afghans attempting to cross the border were shot dead by Iranian forces in the first six months after the Taliban's victory.<sup>7</sup>

In April 2022, protesters enraged by alleged treatment of Afghan migrants at the frontier attacked and set fire to Iran's consulate in the western city of Herat, chanting "death to Iran," before being dispersed by Taliban enforcers. Iranians stepped up border security after two Shia clerics were knifed to death at the Imam Reza shrine in Mashhad in an attack blamed on Sunni extremists.<sup>8</sup>

In recent years, the number of Pashto-speaking Afghan families settling in Iran has jumped dramatically, according to an aid official who spoke to this author, and Iranian authorities are keeping a close eye on their family sizes, wealth, and even social values.<sup>9</sup>

Parts of the Afghan community in Iran, in places such as Yazd and Kerman provinces, include high concentrations of Pashto speakers. Those communities tend to be far more politically and socially conservative and potentially susceptible to extremist Sunni ideologies than previous refugees, who were predominantly Dari-speaking Shia Hazara and Dari-speaking Tajiks. "They are worried about the demographic shift," said the aid official. "They keep a close eye on that."

In fact, Iran's frequent calls for the international community to release funds for the Taliban government are more likely being prompted by worries about Iran's security than about the Kabul government's stability. Helping alleviate a food crisis that is prompting many in aid-dependent Afghanistan to flee the country—and some who might consider joining the ranks of extremist groups—helps Iran as well as Afghanistan.

"We're very concerned about the economic crisis," Aminian said in the Tolonews interview. "The effects and end result of this economic situation can be migration. Every day, thousands of Afghans illegally migrate to Iran. When people have economic problems, terrorist groups have a good place to develop, groups like ISIS."<sup>10</sup>

The heroin and opium trade, along with associated violence, criminality, and social ills, has been a major problem in both countries, especially Iran, where a rampant opioid addiction epidemic has destroyed families and lives. There also is evidence that the drug trade is evolving and expanding. In early February, Iran's security forces reportedly captured 1,283 kilograms of narcotics in Sistan-Baluchistan province, including more than 600 kilograms of crystal meth as well as opium.<sup>11</sup>

## Building Influence

Since the US-led invasion and occupation of Afghanistan, Tehran has been intensely invested in the political order in Afghanistan, cultivating ties with all sides in the country, including local and tribal officials. Iran befriended former Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai, handing him what he described as wads of cash to win his loyalty,<sup>12</sup> as well as his rival Abdullah Abdullah, and Iran sought to build relations with Ghani. Iran has built significant cultural and political influence in the Shia Hazara-heavy districts of Kabul and the Hazarajat, the mountainous center of the country. Iran has financed the construction of mosques and recruited Afghan Shia clerics for training in Iran's holy cities.<sup>13</sup>

7 "Nearly 100 Afghan Refugees Shot Dead by Iranian Security Forces during Past 6 Months: Local Officials," ANI (South Asian news service), February 8, 2022.

8 "Afghan protesters set fire to the Iranian consulate in Herat" Radio Farda, April 11, 2022; "Iran summons Afghan envoy after diplomatic mission attacks," by Maziar Motademi, April 12, 2022, Al Jazeera English website.

9 Confidential interview conducted by the author with an international aid official, November 2021.

10 Aminian, Tolonews interview; ISIS refers to the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham.

11 "Sardar Goodarzi announced; Arrest of Two Drug Traffickers at the Border: Discovery of 600 kg of Meth," Mehr News Agency, February 5, 2022.

12 Dexter Filkins and Alissa J. Rubin, "Afghan Leader Admits His Office Gets Cash from Iran," *New York Times*, October 25, 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/26/world/asia/26afghan.html>.

13 Borzou Daragahi, "A Formerly Persecuted Minority Gains Clout in Afghanistan," *Los Angeles Times*, December 16, 2010; and Abdolmohet Banikamal and Wahabuddin Ra'ees, "Iran's Educational Diplomacy in the Muslim World," *Insight Turkey*, Winter 2018.





The flag of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (Taliban) is pictured from the Dowqarun border crossing between Iran and Afghanistan, Razavi Khorasan Province, Iran August 29, 2021. Majid Asgaripour/WANA (West Asia News Agency).

Meanwhile, since around 2010, Iran has also built up strong relations with various local and national Taliban figures and groups, recognizing early on that the network would be a major player in Afghanistan's future.

Following the Taliban's victory, however, many of Iran's political investments have come to naught, an experience shared by other regional countries and world powers.

Unlike the late 1990s era of Taliban rule, Iran has been extremely hesitant to provide support to the Taliban's domestic enemies including the latest iteration of the Northern Alliance—perhaps in part because that opposition is so weak.

Iran and the Taliban also share a common enemy in the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), which remains the number one security threat in Afghanistan, and Tehran has likely concluded that any Northern Alliance-style

insurgency against the Taliban would weaken the Taliban's ability to fight ISIS.

One senior aid official who regularly interacts with Iranian officials told this author that there were some in Tehran's leadership who preferred the Taliban over Ghani. "Ghani was not the person they wanted," said the official. "The type of interactions he had with Iranians were negative. The general understanding is that Ghani was appointed by the Americans and was giving the Iranians a really hard time."<sup>14</sup>

Yet Iran is not reticent about hosting Afghan opposition figures, including former Herat warlord Ismail Khan and resistance leader Ahmed Massoud, son of slain Northern Alliance leader Ahmed Shah Massoud.

<sup>14</sup> Confidential interview, international aid official.

## A Balancing Act

Rare internal divisions have also emerged over Iran's Afghanistan policy. For months there have been debates between conservatives and reformists over whether to bless or oppose the Taliban's return to power. The debates have broken out even within the conservative camp, with those close to the Revolutionary Guard eager to build ties with the Taliban and those with memories of 1998 more reluctant. Old-school conservative newspapers such as *Jomhuri-e Eslami* voice concerns about the trustworthiness of the Taliban and whether the group would abide by any agreements it forged with Iran.<sup>15</sup>

"Iranians know the Taliban and hate the Taliban," said the European official deeply involved in Afghanistan matters. "But they are stuck between a rock and a bad place. They are deeply concerned. They have many questions. Will the Taliban fight back against the Islamic State [group]? They are afraid of the Taliban having an air force. This would be a threat to all of the countries in the neighborhood."

Such vacillations, debates, and diplomatic balancing acts are not so different from those unfolding in Russia, China, and even the United States. And like elsewhere, much of the internal Iranian debate became moot as the Taliban over the last few months consolidated its rule.

In line with Western governments, Iran has clearly and repeatedly stated that it would recognize a Taliban government, now overwhelmingly dominated by Pashtun Taliban leaders, only if it were more inclusive of Afghanistan's ethnic and religious components.

Iran is, however, engaging with the Taliban, even as it has yet to recognize the Taliban government. The Kabul regime's acting foreign minister, Amir Khan Muttaqi, was welcomed warmly in Tehran on January 9, 2022, for talks with his counterpart, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, to discuss political, economic, and refugee issues.

During the meeting, Iran mediated a surprise dialogue between a clearly uncomfortable Muttaqi and Afghan opposition leaders Ismail Khan, Massoud, and others. Yet Tehran also called on the international community to unfreeze Afghan assets to the Taliban.

## Geostrategic Fears

Iran is clearly looking for diplomatic partners to help it deal with Afghanistan. Iran has been involved in intense discussions with Tajikistan and India, both of which regard themselves as patrons of some segments of the Afghan political scene. Both Tehran and Islamabad, the two capitals with arguably the most at stake in Afghanistan, are engaged in frequent talks. Whenever Iran is invited, it has enthusiastically joined international forums on the future of Afghanistan. Last September, during the annual UN General Assembly meeting in New York, Iran indicated that it was even willing to sit in the same room with the United States under the "Six Plus Two" umbrella: Afghanistan's neighbors plus the United States and Russia. However, the proposed meeting was nixed by Russia, China, and Pakistan. In October 2021, Tehran hosted a meeting of Afghanistan's neighbors, welcoming the foreign ministers of Pakistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, with counterparts from China and Russia joining via video link. In November, it took part in a similar conference hosted by India, which Pakistan did not attend.

In recent months, Iran has also sought to build up economic ties with the Taliban government, including launching power generation projects,<sup>16</sup> and dangling the prospect of reviving the Chabahar port project that was meant in part to provide landlocked Afghanistan with an alternative trade channel to Pakistani seaports.<sup>17</sup>

One great worry in Tehran is not only a potential loss of influence in Afghanistan, but that Afghanistan could be used by Iran's rivals against it. The Taliban this time around have strong relations not only with Pakistan, long the Taliban's main patron, but also with China, Russia, Turkey, and Qatar. To some analysts, the Taliban does not absolutely need Iran, and could open the floodgates of narcotics or migration to put pressure on Tehran without paying a significant cost.

Afghanistan also has served in the past as a key tool in Iran's ability to evade US sanctions, and the Taliban could significantly cut off or crack down on illicit financial activity in an attempt to pressure Tehran, or to win plaudits or aid money from the United States or the Arab nations of the Persian Gulf. Afghanistan is Iran's fifth-largest export

<sup>15</sup> "Tehran Daily Warns Growing Taliban Role Threatens Iran," *Iran international* (London-coordinated news platform), July 1, 2021.

<sup>16</sup> "Iran Shares Power Generation Project with Afghanistan," Bakhtar News Agency (Afghanistan's state agency), February 7, 2022.

<sup>17</sup> Milan Abrar, "Neighbours Agree to Mega Plan for Afghanistan's Economic Reconstruction," *Pakistan Today*, April 5, 2022.



Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian (C) speaks during the Second Meeting of Foreign Ministers Afghanistan's Neighboring Countries in Tehran, October 27, 2021. MORTEZA NIKOUBAZL/NurPhoto (Photo by Morteza Nikoubazl/NurPhoto).

destination, and official trade between the two countries totals \$3 billion a year. Iran fears the surging influence in Afghanistan of Pakistan, which itself has become a battleground for influence between Saudi Arabia, one of Tehran's archrivals, and China.

"Afghanistan was part of Iran's anti-sanction *lebensraum* and so the Taliban will have more leverage on Iran," said Adnan Mazarei, an economist focusing on the Middle East and Central Asia at the Peterson Institute for International Economics in Washington.

"There is a worry about a replication of the scenarios of the 1990s when countries like Saudi [Arabia] and Pakistan dictated what the Taliban does," said Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi, an Iran specialist at the Royal United Services Institute in London. "What they're likely to do is try to hedge their strategy that allows them to use their leverage and influence and ties and prepare for a scenario where

the Taliban listens to the Saudis and Pakistan, and accepts funds from them."

## 'Something in Their Back Pocket'

More likely than not, Iran is accommodating the Taliban while quietly developing a strategy for any future confrontation. That strategy likely would include a kinetic component. Grooming Massoud and Ismail Khan may be one option, but Iran may conclude it has a better one: the Fatemiyoun Brigade.

Qaani, the Revolutionary Guard veteran who now commands the Quds Force, epitomizes Iran's pragmatic stance toward Afghanistan. On the one hand, "he was the main architect of improving the relationship with the Taliban," according to a senior Western official.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, he was in Kabul in late 2020, offering the Ghani government the services of the brigade to fight against the Taliban as it advanced on urban centers. The offer was declined, according to multiple former officials,

18 Confidential interview conducted by the author with a Western official, December 2021.

by a Ghani government mistrustful of Iran and convinced that the Americans would never let it fall.<sup>19</sup>

More likely than not, however, the Fatemiyoun Brigade remains a card the Iranians can play if relations with the Taliban sour. “The Iranians need to have something in their back pocket,” said Tabrizi. “My gut tells me there will be a Plan B, and the Plan B will have some kind of Fatemiyoun element.”

## Will Iran Be Included in Regional Discussions About Afghanistan’s Future?

There would be very little upside for Iran, the international community, and even nations opposed to Tehran from further disruptions or geopolitical rivalries in Afghanistan, given the fragile situation in the country, with food insecurity rampant, the healthcare system collapsing, and major security concerns bubbling just beneath the surface. By including Iran in any future regional diplomatic dialogues and collaborative efforts on Afghanistan, international actors can assure Tehran that its legitimate security and economic concerns are being addressed and are even shared by others—including Russia, China, Pakistan, India, and the Central Asian states. Western nations concerned about the Taliban’s treatment of minorities could collaborate with Iran along with other like-minded, influential regional nations such as Tajikistan to put pressure on Kabul.

“Iran’s needs and concerns about Afghanistan are not very different from others: terrorists, refugees, and drugs,” said Aryaman Bhatnagar, a foreign policy and security analyst based in New Delhi.

Some of the issues—including matters such as refugees or even ongoing disputes about the flow of water in the Helmand River—could benefit from international mediation and expertise through global agencies of the United Nations or the World Bank. A series of cooperative

arrangements with Iran over Afghanistan could yield modest follow-on successes, even if the JCPOA collapses. In any case, unlike Yemen, Syria, or Israel, where Iranian and Western aims clash, they tend to mesh in Afghanistan. Diplomats and senior officials in both Iran and the West will pay little political cost by clearly stating and spelling out the convergences of interests on Afghanistan, which could open channels for engagement and a possible improvement of the diplomatic atmosphere.

If the world must learn to live with an Iran dominated by hardliners such as President Ebrahim Raisi and like-minded regime apparatchiks, Afghanistan offers a way to convince Iran’s leaders of the advantages of being (at least somewhat) responsible, cooperative, and constructively engaged rather than disruptive.

On the other hand, allowing any antagonism to take root and fester between Iran and the West over Taliban-run Afghanistan risks turning Afghanistan into yet another theater of confrontation, with Iran using the Fatemiyoun or other tools to play a potential spoiler role, regardless of how further destabilizing the country could damage its own interests.

“This is an area for potential cooperation,” conceded one former US official who spoke on condition of anonymity. “Iranians are in a pretty tough spot in Afghanistan, and it is an area where it is possible to work together. We’re not doing that.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Confidential interviews conducted by the author with US, European, and former Afghan officials in 2021.

<sup>20</sup> Confidential interview conducted by the author with a former US official, October 2021.





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