

## Between Kabul and Tehran

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On May 27, 2023 clashes broke out between Taliban and Iranian forces on their joint border along Afghanistan's Nimroz province. The recent clashes have contributed to growing tensions between the two countries.

Since the Taliban's takeover in August 2021, Iran has been positioning itself to secure its interests in Afghanistan and forge a working relationship with its new rulers. The relations between the Taliban and Tehran are unstable and there are several areas of disagreement between the countries:

*Border disputes and frequent border skirmishes*

*The dispute over the water rights (Helmand River)*

*Religious conflict (Shia – Suni)*

*The Afghan refugees in Iran*

The Iranian support to opposition groups in Afghanistan

Iran and the Taliban may not appear to be natural partners but the two countries found common ground based on the principle of the “enemy of my enemy is my friend”. The common enemies are the US and the Islamic State–Khorasan Province (ISKP).<sup>1</sup>

### **The diplomatic relations between Iran and Afghanistan**

In the years prior to the takeover of Kabul, Iran was among the few regional countries that publicly engaged with the Taliban and developed close relations with the group.

The Taliban's rapid takeover of Afghanistan came as a surprise to Iran. While the Iranian government was pursuing its broader strategic goal of evicting the US and its allies from Afghanistan, it did not want the Taliban to hold too much power and Iran's relations with the group are becoming increasingly problematic. <sup>2</sup>

In mid-November 2021, shortly after Taliban returned to power in Afghanistan, Hassan Kazemi-Qomi, Iran's special representative on Afghanistan, led an Iranian delegation for an official visit to the country to hold talks. He met several Taliban officials to discuss the country's economy, geopolitics of the region, and security concerns.<sup>3</sup>

The Islamic republic of Iran does not recognize Afghanistan's Taliban government (the Islamic Emirate as the Taliban administration calls itself) but has maintained relations with Afghanistan's new rulers and Iran has retained its embassy in Kabul.

The Taliban in Afghanistan has appointed in January 2022 its first ambassador. The ambassador, Abdul Qayyum Sulymani, is the nephew of the former strongman of Herat Ismail Khan.<sup>4</sup>

On February 26, 2023, Iran allowed diplomats from Afghanistan to take charge of the embassy of Afghanistan in Tehran. This development was a subtle shift from Iran's earlier insistence on not handing over its embassy to a regime it doesn't recognize, reiterating its commitment towards an inclusive government with representatives from all communities.<sup>5</sup>

### **Border disputes**

The Deputy Chief of General Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces Bahram Hosseini Motlaq and his Afghan counterpart Haji Mali Khan Siddique met in Kabul on May 20, 2023.<sup>6</sup> The two sides discussed border issues and ways to enhance bilateral cooperation including the need for a joint mechanism to resolve border issues through dialogue and negotiations. while stressing the need for resolving bilateral problems through dialog.<sup>7</sup>

A few days later, on May 27, 2023, the Taliban and Iran exchanged heavy gunfire on the Islamic Republic's border with Afghanistan in which at least two Iranian and one Afghan guard were killed. Both Iranian forces and the Afghan Taliban blamed each other for the border attack.<sup>8</sup>

Iran's state-run IRNA news agency quoted Iran's police chief, Gen. Ahmadreza Radan, as saying that: "The border forces of the Islamic Republic of Iran will decisively respond to any border trespassing and aggression, and the current authorities of Afghanistan must be held accountable for their unmeasured and contrary actions to international principles." IRNA also quoted the country's deputy police chief, Gen. Qassem Rezaei, accusing the Taliban of opening fire first on the border of Iran's Sistan and Baluchestan province and the Afghan province of Nimroz but Iran inflicted "heavy casualties and serious damage."<sup>9</sup>

Afghan Taliban Interior Ministry spokesman Abdul Nafi Takor accused Iran of shooting first. Takor said the firefight killed two people, one from each country. Afghan Defense Ministry spokesman Enayatullah Khawarazmi said in a statement that: "The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan considers dialogue to be a reasonable way for any problem. Making excuses for war and negative actions is not in the interest of any of the parties."<sup>10</sup>

On the same day as the border clashes, Afghanistan's Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi met with the Iranian ambassador to Afghanistan Hassan Kazemi Qomi in Kabul where the two discussed "coordinated management of the border" and "Assuring Iran's rights in the waters of Helmand River," the foreign ministry said in a statement.<sup>11</sup>

On May 27, 2023 a Taliban account on Twitter that appears to belong to the Badri Unit, an elite commando force of the Afghan Taliban tweeted: "If the elders of the Islamic Emirate give permission for the mujahideen of the Islamic Emirate, the Islamic Emirate's mujahideen will conquer Iran within 24 hours, Allah willing. Iran is playing a game of cat and mouse with the West; in fact, they are the same. But if it is faced with the truth, it will be destroyed from the map, Allah willing."<sup>12</sup>

The border between Iran and Afghanistan has three official crossing points (Dogharoun/Islam Qala in the north, Abu Nasr-e-Farahi in the center, and Zaranj/Milak or Silk Bridge or Abresham crossing in the south). Following the border violence, Iranian authorities closed the Milak-Zaranj border cross with Afghanistan, an important commercial route, until further notice over the gunfight.<sup>13</sup>

During the clashes, the Taliban used U.S.-made military equipment left behind when American forces and allies withdrew from the country in August 2021. On May 31, 2023, a convoy of Humvees and tanks has been sent from Herat to the border with Iran and the Taliban has deployed heavy military equipment and weapons at the Islam Qala border with Iran.

The deployment of troops and advanced military equipment has taken place after the Taliban have prevented the construction of a road and the installation of barbed wire by the Iranian border guards. However, Taliban officials have not officially commented on deploying troops to the border at Islam Qala.<sup>14</sup>

Hours after the deployment of military forces to the border areas near Iran, Zaem Agha, the Taliban commissioner in Islam Qala, said that Islam Qala is open for passengers and goods.<sup>15</sup>

Iran and the Taliban are working to reduce border tensions. In February 2023, the Taliban released an Iranian border guard who was captured at the Milak border crossing, where regular cross border fire is exchanged.<sup>16</sup>

In July 31, 2022, an exchange of fire took place between a force of the Afghan Taliban and an Iranian force near the border between the two countries. In border fight one Taliban soldier has died and another has been wounded.

According to IRNA and the semiofficial Tasnim news outlet, fighting began when Taliban forces entered Iranian soil in Hirmand, located in the province of Sistan and Balochistan, and tried to raise their own flag. Iran's state-run IRNA did not comment on the reported casualty, but said the fight was started by Taliban forces.<sup>17</sup>

Several similar incidents have taken place since the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021. The first such publicized incident, which didn't result in any casualties, came in December 2021 and was called a "misunderstanding" by both countries' authorities.<sup>18</sup>

### **The water dispute between Iran and the Taliban**

Iran and the Taliban have been at odds over Iran's water rights from the Helmand River. Iran has stepped up pressure on the Taliban government in Afghanistan to resolve a long-running dispute over shared water resources.

The dispute is centered around the Hirmand River, also known as Helmand River, that originates in the Hindu Kush Mountains near Kabul and streams into lake Hamoun wetlands in the Sistan-Baluchestan province after flowing through 1,000 kilometers.<sup>19</sup>

The UN's Food and Agriculture Organization says Afghanistan and Iran have suffered from a prolonged drought, and drought conditions have worsened over the past decade. The Iran Meteorological Organization says that an estimated 97 percent of the country now faces some level of drought.<sup>20</sup>

According to the Helmand Water Treaty signed by Afghanistan and Iran half a century ago (1973), Afghanistan should annually share 850 million cubic meters of water per annum from Helmand with Iran. It also calls on both sides to address their differences via diplomatic channels and, if that fails, through an advisory board headed by a mutually chosen arbitrator.<sup>21</sup>

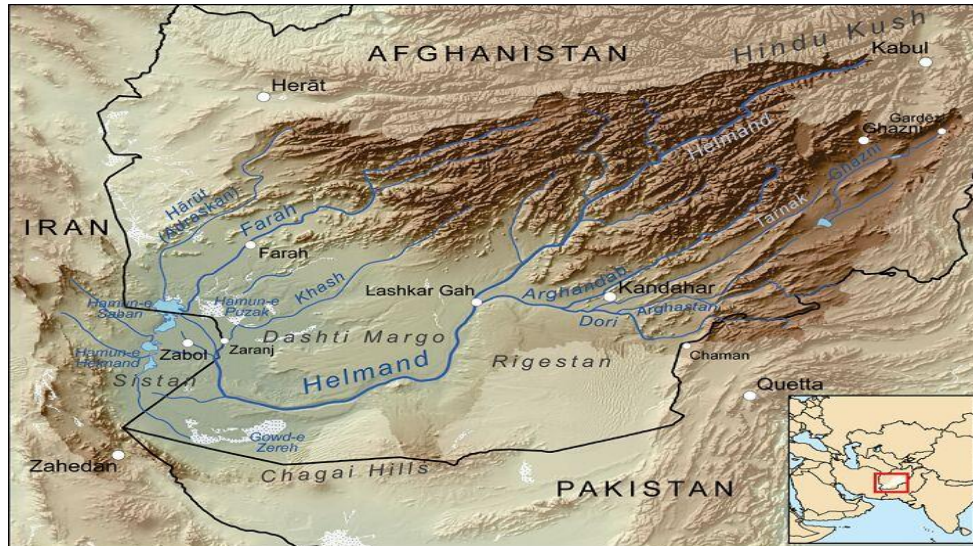
Iran has over the years accused Afghanistan of restricting the flow of water from the river by constructing many hydroelectric projects on the river, most notably the Kamal Khan dam in Nimrouz province and the Kajaki dam located 160 kilometers northwest of Kandahar province. The Kajaki dam project aims at generating 100 MW hydropower and storing one extra Billion Cubic Meter of water behind the already existing dam.<sup>22</sup> The Iranian side has asked the Taliban to permit Iranian experts to assess the water level in the Kajaki Dam, but the Taliban have yet to respond.<sup>23</sup>

Afghan authorities have denied the accusations and Afghanistan has blamed climatic factors for reduced river volumes. In a statement shared on Twitter, Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said that in recent years there has been a severe drought in various provinces of Afghanistan and in this situation, the repeated requests for water by the Iranian authorities and a series of inappropriate statements in the media are harmful. Such statements will ruin the political relations of the two brotherly countries, he added.<sup>24</sup>

In July 2022 Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian warned his counterpart in the Taliban that their relations would be affected if the group does not eliminate the hurdles to Tehran's water rights from the Helmand River.<sup>25</sup>

He pointed to the southeastern Iranian province of Sistan and Baluchestan's dependence on the river's water, saying if the issue was not "expeditiously and seriously" resolved, it would have an adverse effect on the other areas of cooperation between the two countries.

Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi during a visit on May 18, 2023, to drought-parched southeastern Iran warned the Taliban not to violate Iran's water rights to the Helmand River.<sup>26</sup>



### **The Shia – Sunni conflict**

Hazaras currently make up 9 to 10% of Afghanistan's total population of 39 million.<sup>27</sup> The Taliban consider the Shia-Hazaras apostates and the Hazara minority was the target of deadly attacks since the 1990s and hundreds of thousands of Hazaras have fled to Iran.

The Shia-Hazaras are hardly represented in the new Taliban regime and Iran called for the formation of an inclusive government that represents all ethnic and religious groups in Afghanistan including the Hazara Shiites and Tajiks.<sup>28</sup>

Iran has expressed concerns about the security and welfare of the Afghan people, especially the Shia Hazara minority, who have faced persecution and violence from the Taliban in the past and now from ISKP.

Another concern for Iran is the existence of terrorist groups in Afghanistan such as the Islamic State–Khorasan Province (ISKP) that are vehemently anti-Shia and anti-Iran. The Taliban promised Shias and Hazaras protection from the Islamic State group after regaining control in August 2021, but they were unsuccessful and ISKP has repeatedly targeted Afghanistan's Hazara Shia community, which the terrorist group views as an extension of Iran.<sup>29</sup>

In October 2022, at least 80 people were killed and hundreds wounded in suicide bombs targeting Shia mosques on two successive Fridays in

northern Kunduz and southern Kandahar provinces, respectively. The bloodiest incident in recent memory occurred in May 2021 at a girl's school in the capital's Dashte Barchi district, killing 110 people, most of whom were young girls, and injuring roughly 290.

Iranian leaders are concerned about the Taliban's inability or unwillingness to fight ISKP to prevent terrorist attacks in Iran or against the Shiite minority in Afghanistan.

### **Iran and the Afghan anti-Taliban opposition**

Iran has close ties with the anti-Taliban leaders. A number of Afghan opposition leaders found refuge in Iran after the Taliban came to power in Afghanistan, others moved their families to Iran and remained in Afghanistan and Afghan opposition leaders also often come to talks with senior officials in Iran.

Ismail Khan the former Herat governor has been living in Mashhad since the fall of Herat to the Taliban in 2021. Ismail Khan was captured, but later he was allowed to go to Iran by the Taliban.<sup>30</sup>

Ismail Khan, who is a senior commander, who also fought against the Soviet invasion in the 1980s, surrendered and handed over Herat as part of an agreement with the Taliban in August 2021 when the militant group entered the city. In return, the Taliban announced amnesty for Khan and its soldiers.

Iran is maintaining some level of cooperation with Ahmad Massoud, leader of National Resistance Front (NRF). Ahmad Massoud is the son of the legendary fighter Iran had backed in the 1990s. Massoud is reportedly close to senior figures in the Iranian leadership, including Qods Force commander Esmail Qaani, and his group is said to receive funding from the government.<sup>31</sup>

The NRF mainly consists of several ethnic groups in Afghanistan such as Hazaras, Tajiks, Shiites, and other Persian-speaking populations. Thereby, from Tehran's perspective, it should continue to support these groups due to its historical connections as well as cultural, linguistic, and religious closeness to these minority groups. In July 2022, the special envoy of the Iranian president to Afghanistan, Hassan Kazemi Qumi, praised Massoud and said that "he represents an inextricable part of Afghan society."<sup>32</sup>

In January 2022, the Iranian government tried to broker peace talks between the Taliban and the NRF on Iranian soil, but those efforts failed.<sup>33</sup> After the meeting the Taliban representative posted a video saying "We met commander Ismail Khan and Ahmad Massoud, and other Afghans in Iran, and assured them that anyone can come to Afghanistan and live without any concerns."<sup>34</sup>

Tehran is clearly interested in dealing with all parties in Afghanistan, both the Taliban government and its opponents, in order to prevent either side from monopolizing power.<sup>35</sup>

### **Iran and the problem of Afghan refugees**

Iran has for decades hosted millions of Afghans fleeing armed conflict in their country. Based on cultural commonalities and the relative ease of crossing the 900-km border, Iran has always been a preferred destination for Afghans escaping Afghanistan.<sup>36</sup>

The UNHCR stated in July 2022 that around 780 000 registered Afghan refugees were residing in Iran. Moreover, as of May 2022, some 586 000 Afghan passport-holders with Iranian visas resided in the country. In addition, around 2.3 million undocumented Afghans were living in Iran as of third quarter of 2022.<sup>37</sup>

Hazara and Tajiks represent over 70% of the Afghan refugee population in Iran, with the remainder consisting of other ethnic groups such as the Pashtuns. Most refugees in Iran reside in urban areas, with only 3 per cent living in settlements mostly located in rural areas.

Under the Taliban the economy collapsed amid sanctions and the removal of foreign aid (most of the previous government's budget), causing Afghans to flee the country in large numbers. According to UNHCR estimates between 500, 000 and 1 ,000 ,000 Afghans arrived in Iran. Most of them were thought to be undocumented.<sup>38</sup>

Afghan refugees are not popular in Iran and have for a long time been subject to abuse and discrimination. Many have been forcibly expelled back to Afghanistan, and reports of their abuse at the hands of Iranian security forces have been on the rise but those reports, however, have not deterred Afghans from seeking a better life in Iran.<sup>39</sup>

The Taliban administration has raised concerns with Tehran over difficulties faced by Afghan refugees in Iran, as reports of mistreatment continue to emerge from the neighboring country.<sup>40</sup>

Afghan refugees have frequently been used in Iran as scapegoats and threats to deport the refugees can be used as leverage over the Afghan government.

### **Summary**

The Taliban seized Afghanistan in August 2021. The Islamic republic of Iran does not recognize Afghanistan's Taliban government but has maintained relations with Afghanistan's new rulers. Iran and the Taliban may not appear to be natural partners and the relationship between the countries can be described as an "uneasy partnership."<sup>41</sup>

The reasons for the latest clashes along the borders between the Afghan province of Nimroz and Iran's Sistan-Baluchistan province are still

unknown but there is a lack of clear demarcation of the border and the ties between the two countries have been recently tense over a water dispute.

Clashes between Taliban and Iranian forces have erupted on multiple occasions but both sides tried to de-escalate the situation and reaffirm their commitment to dialogue and cooperation and the countries are trying to demonstrate good neighborliness.

The Taliban regime in Afghanistan is characterized by contradiction between the public and declared policy and the implementation of this policy. This problem characterizes the Taliban's policy both in domestic policy on issues such as minority rights and women's rights and in foreign policy.

The Taliban regime pledged that it would prevent terrorist organizations from using Afghanistan's territory for terrorist activities, however, the Taliban regime has so far failed in dealing with the terrorist activities of the ISKP and according to Iran it is not doing enough to keep its promises.

The Taliban also claim that they want to settle the water and border disputes with Iran peacefully, but the Taliban are not promoting a meaningful dialogue with Iran to resolve the border and water issues.

Iran attempts to use dialogue and diplomacy with the Taliban to achieve its objectives, however, Iran has several options of pressuring the Taliban:

**Political pressure** – Iran is one of a few countries with diplomatic relations with the Taliban, Iran has an embassy in Kabul and the Taliban has embassy in Tehran. These embassies are of great importance to the Taliban, and they are unwilling to lose them. Iran can also put pressure on the Taliban if it gets close to the opposition groups of the Taliban, a step that could be dangerous for the stability of the Taliban regime.

**Economic and social pressure** – several million Afghans are living and working in Iran and immigration and deportation have always been a tool of pressure for Iran. If Iran decides to deport these immigrants, it will have a catastrophic impact on Afghanistan 's economy and social and political stability.

Neither side is interested in engaging in war, and the tension is not yet at a level that would necessitate a military solution; however, it seems that Iran will need to exert significant pressure on the Taliban regime if it really wants to achieve its goals, mainly in the areas of water distribution and keeping the calm along the common border.



## Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> Marjam Sadat, they both hate the West, but they also hate each other. Here's how Iran and the Taliban's uneasy partnership works, Toronto star, June 13, 2023.

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<sup>3</sup> Maziar Motamedi, Iran and Taliban forces clash in border area, Al Jazeera, December 1, 2021.

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<sup>5</sup> Shivam Shekhawat, Mapping Iran's policy towards a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, ORF, April 19, 2023.

<sup>6</sup> Tufail Ahmad, Tensions deepen between Iran and Afghan Taliban on Helmand River issue – Taliban forces twitter account tweets amid bloody border clashes: 'if the Islamic Emirate's elders give permission... The Mujahideen Will Conquer Iran within 24 Hours, Allah Willing', MEMRI brief no 485, May 30, 2023.

<sup>7</sup> Taliban says committed to more cooperation with Iran, IRNA, May 21, 2023.

<sup>8</sup> Iran exchanges heavy gunfire with Taliban on Afghan border, escalating tensions over water rights, Arab news, May 28, 2023.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Jon Gamrell, Iran exchanges heavy gunfire with Taliban on Afghan border, escalating tensions over water rights, AP, May 27, 2023.

<sup>11</sup> Three killed in clashes on Iran-Afghanistan border, Taliban says, the new Arab, May 27, 2023.

<sup>12</sup> Tufail Ahmad, Tensions deepen between Iran and Afghan Taliban on Helmand River issue – Taliban forces twitter account tweets amid bloody border clashes: 'if the Islamic Emirate's elders give permission... The Mujahideen Will Conquer Iran within 24 Hours, Allah Willing', MEMRI brief no 485, May 30, 2023.

<sup>13</sup> What caused deadly Afghan-Iran border clashes? What happens next? Al Jazeera, May 30, 2023.

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- <sup>15</sup> Islam Qala Customs Activities Ongoing, Says Taliban, Afghanistan international, May 31, 2023.
- <sup>16</sup> Fragile Iran-Taliban Ties Officially Expand Despite Multiple Hurdles, Rasanah, April 26, 2023.
- <sup>17</sup> Maziar Motamedi, border fight between Iran and Taliban kills one: Afghan official, Al Jazeera, July 31, 2022.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>19</sup> Iran ups pressure on Taliban to resolve long-running water dispute, aa.com, May 16, 2023.
- <sup>20</sup> Border clashes subside between Iran, Afghanistan, VOA, May 28, 2023.
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- <sup>22</sup> Mohd Faizee, The emerging dynamics for conflict and cooperation between Iran and the Taliban over the Helmand River, WPS, September 9, 2022.
- <sup>23</sup> Ali Sajad Mawlaee, is tension growing between the Taliban and Iran? Hasht e Subh daily, May 23, 2023.
- <sup>24</sup> Tufail Ahmad, Tensions deepen between Iran and Afghan Taliban on Helmand River issue – Taliban forces twitter account tweets amid bloody border clashes: 'if the Islamic Emirate's elders give permission... The Mujahideen Will Conquer Iran within 24 Hours, Allah Willing', MEMRI brief no 485, May 30, 2023.
- <sup>25</sup> Iran warns Taliban on its water rights from Helmand River, Asharq Al Awsat, July 30, 2022.
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<sup>33</sup> Rupert Stone, For Tehran, Afghanistan is a problem not an opportunity, Middle East Eye, August 25, 2022.

<sup>34</sup> Hamza Boltaev, is Iran distancing itself from the Taliban government? The diplomat, March 8, 2023.

<sup>35</sup> Hamza Boltaev, is Iran distancing itself from the Taliban government? The diplomat, March 8, 2023.

<sup>36</sup> Fatemeh Aman, The Afghan refugee crisis: What does it mean for Iran? MEI@75, September 20, 2012.

<sup>37</sup> Iran – situation of Afghan refugees, European union agency for asylum, January 11, 2023.

<sup>38</sup> The UN refugee agency, refugees in Iran 2023.

<sup>39</sup> Taliban raise concerns over ‘problems’ faced by Afghan refugees in Iran, Arab news, January 29, 2023.

<sup>40</sup> Taliban raise concerns over ‘problems’ faced by Afghan refugees in Iran, Arab news, January 29, 2023.

<sup>41</sup> Marjam Sadat, they both hate the West, but they also hate each other. Here’s how Iran and the Taliban’s uneasy partnership works, Toronto star, June 13, 2023.