

AFGHANISTAN AND IRAN: DYNAMICS AND CHALLENGES IN BILATERAL RELATIONS

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Abstract

This study analyzes the bilateral relationship between Taliban-led Afghanistan and Iran since 2021. In the context of shifting regional and global dynamics, particularly Iran's security concerns and Afghanistan's international isolation, both countries have adopted pragmatic and cooperative approaches to promote a stable and mutually beneficial neighborhood. The research focuses on key areas of engagement, including cross-border security and migration, water resource management, trade, and the Taliban's efforts toward international recognition. Diplomatic interactions between Tehran and Kabul are also examined to provide a comprehensive understanding of their evolving relationship. The study relies on both primary and secondary sources. Secondary sources encompass academic research, expert analyses, news reports, and policy reviews, while primary sources include official documents, press releases, and diplomatic communications. Particular attention is given to public statements, speeches, and interviews of government officials from both countries, offering insights into their strategic priorities. Utilizing a constructivist-realist analytical framework, the study finds that while Iran and Afghanistan have achieved notable cooperation in several domains, persistent challenges remain. These include ideological divergences, disputes over water allocation, and Iran's management of Afghan refugees, which may impede future collaboration and destabilize bilateral relations.

INTRODUCTION

This article is a discussion on trying to comprehend the bilateral relationship between Iran and Afghanistan with the Taliban. The current international and the local issues that have been witnessed recently like the Russian invasion into Ukraine and the aggression on Israel and Iran and the 12day war between the two nations has affected the region in various ways. In this case, it would be beneficial to consider the bilateral relationship of the two that would probably result in Iran recognition of Taliban government in Afghanistan. Jan. 26, this year was the first time a top diplomat of Iran visited

Kabul, the country in nine years as Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi came to visit. There Araghchi met and resolved a series of issues with his Afghan counterparts, which indicates that bilateral relations are starting to operate in a more harmonious mode that may result in the eventual acknowledgment of Taliban rule by Tehran (Avdaliani, 2025). Iran has not done so yet but circumstances on the ground indicate that the two parties have gone past the overt hostility that has typified their ties prior to and during invasion of Afghanistan by American military forces. The new

chapter of collaboration is now starting and both of the sides are promoting the notion of the signing of the entire package of cooperation (Seyed Rasoul Mousavi, 2025). In fact, despite the rocky history, since the restoration of the Taliban government in the country, the Afghan side, as well as Iran, have been acting in a realistic manner towards bilateral relations and both Tehran and Kabul are working on affording each other to look closer, although controlling the tensions so as not to grow to the slope of warfare, especially on the border (Daragahi, 2023).

Among the players in the region, Iran follows the path of the Taliban regime keenly, in order to be relevant in Afghanistan. In the past, the relations between the two sides have had the ups and downs. The paper is a study, therefore, to explore the up and down interaction that Iran and Taliban led Afghanistan experienced, especially in terms of diplomatic interactions since 2021. Friendly relationship between Iran and Afghanistan existed between the year 1919, when Afghanistan got its independence, up to 1979. The attitude towards Afghanistan experienced four phases in the case of Iran after the revolution of 1979. Iran demanded Soviet withdrawal at the initial period which lasted between the Soviet occupation period of 1979 and 1989 and assisted Shiites in Afghanistan. Growing insurgency in the ethnic groups not Pushtun became able to organize themselves in a united front due to the support Iran gave them in the second phase after the exit of the Soviet Army. All the three countries supported different warlords in the Afghan war (Akbari et al., 2022). Iran denied the administration in the third phase, that commenced in 1996, instead providing the Northern Alliance opposition with military aid. Since the toppling of the Taliban regime that was carried out by the Northern Alliance with the help of the United States, Iran has made pleasant relationships with the Karzai administration during the fourth and current phase. It has gone to reconstitute Afghanistan, maintained support with its long-time partners and advocated exit of all foreign troops in the country. Following the withdrawal the Iranian policy appears to be more realistic since the Iranians count the new government in Afghanistan as a new reality. Iran

enjoys special status in Afghanistan. Tehran is well aware that Afghans would naturally gravitate towards their western neighbour as a result of Afghanistan's lack of access to the open sea, proximity to Iran, combined with its energy output and transit to warm seas, such as the Persian Gulf and Caspian Sea. Tehran is aware that it must rely on Afghanistan to maintain its peace and security as well as find a solution to the problem of water shortage in its eastern provinces of Sistan and Baluchistan and Khurasan. Language and religious similarities, in addition to shared cultures and civilizations, improve the effectiveness and engagement between the two countries (Khalili et al., 2023)

Afghanistan and Iran have a 936 kilometer western border. Three provinces of Farah, Herat and Nimruz are linked to Iran. Afghanistan and Iran are divided by the rivers and deserts. Before 1979 Iran had a pro-American monarchy, which was led by the king Raza Shah Pehlevi. Preventing of communism in the region was the first priority of the administration of King. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and establishment of the Muslim regime in Afghanistan threatened the main agenda of Iran in the region, as well as the Iranian revolution; Ayatollah Khomeini regime felt threatened by the Soviet invasion which posed a threat to the stability of Iran. Unfortunately, Iran could not be of any significant help to the Afghanistan Mujahedeen due to the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) (Jabbari, 2022). Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and America assisted to overcome the Soviet Union. The Taliban subsequently took control of Kabul and most parts of Afghanistan with the help of Pakistan later. The Taliban built a regime in Afghanistan in 1996. Since the Taliban was a threat to Iran security and influence within South and the Central Asia, Iran perceived this group to be a threat. Iran has wished to have more influence in the energy-rich state of central Asia. However, when it happened that Taliban seized control of Afghanistan, Iran experienced difficulties in contacting the Central Asian States. Turkmenistan and Iran do have a common border however. Iran and the rest of the Central Asian States are also ethnically and culturally related (Sinelnikov, 2024)

Iran and Afghanistan have always had a relation that is multilayered and at all times under the Taliban

regime. The Taliban first period of rule in Afghanistan (1994-2001) period also saw the group attack the Iranian consulate in Mazar-i-Sharif killing some Iranian consular officials and journalists. This event caused the two countries to almost go to military warfare. In the year 1998, eight diplomats were killed at Mazar-e Sharif. Iran placed on the border with Afghanistan its own troops. Although this was in a tight situation, Iran did not wage war against the Taliban. Iran increased support to the Northern Alliance in order to injure the Taliban. The fall of the Taliban regime had however been beneficial to the Iran-Afghanistan relations. Nevertheless, Iran continues to use a nutshell strategy towards Afghanistan. Iran has locations where Hizb e Islami and Taliban officials reside and accordingly provides it with monetary aid to the Afghanistan government as well. The strategy of Iran towards Afghanistan is a difficult issue of understanding. In the year 2001, America toppled the Taliban government. American troops are now stationed in the middle of Asia to the Iran border. The security dynamics of Iran is interfered with due to the presence of the military in the area (Akbarzadeh et al., 2023).

When the rule of Taliban was ousted in Afghanistan, there was a good chance of Iran entering the war dynamics due to their common culture and their shared history. Iran tried its best to support the process of rehabilitation of Afghanistan. In the year 2002, Iran reported that it will offer 570 million dollars towards the Afghanistan reconstruction exercise. This showed that Afghanistan and Iran enjoy good relations. The president of Afghanistan, Karzai, praised Iran saying that it assisted in stabilizing the country. The economic-related relationships between Iran and Afghanistan have become more conspicuous. In March 2006, Iran announced donation of hundred million towards Afghanistan rehabilitation in an attempt towards improving trade with Iran. Iran also has a number of businesses in Afghanistan that are undertaking different activities. The major point that Iran is concerned about is the construction of highways between the two countries. Marine route has not been directly connected to Afghanistan. Iran and India desire that the dependency of Afghanistan on

Pakistan decrease. This is because Iran will undertake road projects meant to link up Afghanistan to Chabhar port (Aamir Junaaid, et al, 2021).

Iran has over the years aggressively extended its influence in Afghanistan. Using the opportunity of Kabul wanting investments and infrastructure in the 2010s, Iranian business had already helped in the economic growth of Afghanistan. There is also a heavy presence of the Iranian culture and religion in the western part of Afghanistan where Iranians have long enjoyed control. Political convergence between Iran and Afghanistan has also come increasingly into focus in recent times especially in the days immediately after the controversial elections in France in June 2009 when Afghan President Hamid Karzai threw his full support dramatically behind Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Tehran is taking up the cause of withdrawal of the foreign troops in Afghanistan which would cut off the Kabul-US link and the mutual interest between Kabul and Washington in stabilizing Afghanistan. Its leaders have used the occasional breaks in Afghan and American relations in pushing to weaken the American role in Afghanistan as well as provide to the president of Afghanistan (Karzai a platform to express his discontent with the U.S. administration of president Barack Obama)

Nevertheless, in the last two decades, Iran and the Taliban have displayed a mute knowledge, as they perceived the foreign forces particularly the United States as shared enemies and threats to their causes. This has resulted into secret collaboration to destroy the west in Afghanistan. Though diplomatic relations between Iran and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan took place officially, Iran had always favored the Taliban and cooperated with them. Taliban officials, most notably Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansour, have visited Iran several times; those visits included Mansour being killed in a 2016 U.S. airstrike in Pakistan on his way back to Iran. Afghan Republic troops repeatedly claimed to have discovered Iranian manufactured arms in the possession of the Taliban troops and several sightings of Taliban members infiltrating in and out of Iran were confirmed. Iran has been treating the Taliban through ideologically based realism; since the collapse of the Afghan Republic government due to

the Taliban and the U.S. Govt and the subsequent departure of international forces, in an August 2021 push. Iran increased its economic and diplomatic relations with the Taliban and at the same time offered concerns of suppression of the Persian language and Shiite minorities, widespread use of drugs, extensive illegal migration and the problem of borders.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Most of the existing literature dwells upon the security issues in the region of US disengagement and Taliban control and the implications of the same to the region and Iran, in specific. Just as an example, Verma, (2022) focuses on the impact of Peace Agreement and the impact of regional power. He asserted that in efforts to know how the region will be in the future, one should put into consideration Iran as a potential spoiler exacerbating the blood and volatility in Afghanistan. It gives three reasons why Iran is interested in the Afghan affair: the domination of the Taliban to the inclusive national unity government or to impose the Islamic Emirate by force of arms; a dispute of interests between Iran and Pakistan; continued persecution of Shiite and Hazara by the Taliban; and decline of relations between the US and Iran. It makes one notice the plurality of means and more importantly, the means that Iran can use to achieve its political, economic, and strategic ambitions in Afghanistan, the means at the disposal of non-state actors in particular. It also examines the possible factors that could restrain/bar Iran on achieving her foreign policy and security goals in Afghanistan and the region at large.

Mohsen Solhdoost and Mahmoud Pargoo, (2021) to give an example, asserted that it can be expected that Iran will also develop the existing security problems of an unconventional character and introduce new threats with the withdrawal of the US troops in Afghanistan and the arrival of the Taliban to power in August 2021. Partially due to the more than four decades of fighting in Afghanistan are issues of drug trafficking, inflows of refugees and economic migrants and terrorism issues (all of which are not problems unique only to Iran). The Iranian government has celebrated the withdrawal of the US

and has expressed cautious optimism towards Taliban but Tehran has not yet been serious on how to engage Afghanistan and the new leaders. The only scenario that would make Tehran move away with its policy of engagement with the Taliban is when the Kabul administration becomes re-aligned the enemies of Tehran and poses security threat on Iran. In the latter, given that countries in the Middle East have an interest in achieving US policy failure, Iran is bound to base her Afghanistan policy after her Iraq programme through sponsor sponsorship of proxies.

On the other side, Shuja, (2022), examines the impacts of the US flight in Afghanistan, ranging between strategic gaps in the relations between the nations to deep-seated fears. He argues that the souring relations with the US especially in the issue of the nuclear issue also compelled Iran to regard the Islamist movement as a lesser evil as compared to the mere presence of the US troops in Afghanistan given that Iran had previously fallen out with the Taliban due to sectarian and other differences it had experienced with the Taliban. Therefore, the Iranian-Taliban relations have been warming even before the negative Taliban have regained power recently.

The study by Akbarzadeh et al., (2023) is based on an original survey data and face-to-face interviews to assess the role of Iran in Afghanistan. The present paper investigates the reaction to the main foundation of Iranian soft power projection being the significance of common language and culture, religion and Third World perception of resistance against the western power of the Tehran. This study concludes that structural hard power balances between Iran and Afghanistan and unrealistic contradiction policies by Tehran towards Afghanistan does not support the soft power projection strategy of Iran.

The article is qualitative in nature and the framework suggests that it was conducted under aggressive realism and applied the thematic analysis in exploring the response by Iran in terms of policy on the rebirth of the Taliban. It will analyze the changing position of Iran: whether Iran will stand against the Taliban or deal with them depending on their policies of governance. In the event that the Taliban adapts political inclusiveness; especially to

the Shia and the ethnic minority populations namely Hazara and Turkic speakers, there could be congruency with Iranian interests. On the other hand, a Taliban one-party system, ideologically intransigent, may put the relations between Iran and Taliban under pressure, in particular should the organization be closer to Iranian enemy, Saudi Arabia. The discourse in this section brings to note that there is a major gap in terms of the literature to be filled concerning Iran and Taliban, since 2021, when it became a part of government. This paper also dwells on the difficulties that they meet in a positive relationship without hitch.

Research Methodology:

This qualitative research investigates and tries to comprehend the situation of the bilateral relationship between Taliban-led Afghanistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran due to the withdrawal of the U.S in 2021. The story lies in selecting the most significant events and policy changes and the list of problems, which are constantly emerging to impede the building of a harmonious and stable relationship between the two neighbors. Amid these ideological, historical, and geopolitical complexities, the research analyzes how these two sides have tried to equally mediate their relationship through diplomacy and somehow trying to deal with suspicions, and irreconcilable interests. The study is largely based on the secondary resources such as scholarly work, advice of experts, news reports, and what is known as policy analysis. Besides, it relies on primary sources which include official documents, press releases, and bilateral correspondence between Tehran and Kabul. Particularly noteworthy is the official statements, speeches, and interviews of the officials on both sides as these statements indicate the changing position and strategic priorities. These, among others, offer information on how both governments view their interaction with each other, and the language of cooperation and dissatisfaction when they feel that the other has done the wrong thing. A thematic analysis approach is applied in the study to determine that the diplomatic contacts are characterized by several common themes that include matters of water control over the Helmand River, cross border migration and movement of refugees,

common security interests (embracing drug trafficking and extremism) and the controversial question of the international recognition of the Taliban regime. It also puts into consideration the contextual scenario of multilateral forums and official visits which have been used to either advance or challenge the bilateral priorities.

Theoretical Framework

The research uses constructivist realism as a theoretical synthesis to capture the breadth of the issues and themes which are the subject of the post-2021 relationship between Iran and the Taliban. This method combines the provision of the constructivism and realism approaches providing a poetic interpretation which reflects not only the materialist dynamics in the interstate relationships but also includes the effects of ideas, identities, and historical narratives. Such two sided approach is best applied in the case of analyzing the multifaceted and even contradictory relations between Iran and Taliban that cannot be examined as solely materialist or ideational.

According to the constructivist point of view, state actions and reaction is driven by historically constructed discourses and identities and the framework of norms through which diplomatic behavior occurs (Jackson & Nexon, 2004). In the case of Iran and Taliban, constructivism can be relevant in pointing out the ideological and sectarian break between Shia Iran and the Taliban led Sunni-Deobandi inclination. But this ideological difference is not merely theological but it is intense political as well, as narratives of historical suspicion have been at work, especially when in 1998 Taliban fighters at Mazar-i-Sharif invaded Iranian diplomats and nearly led to a war between the two nations. The constructivism can also be used to describe how national media, discourse of the states, and the rhetoric of the elites in both Iran and Afghanistan influence each other and define one another as either enemies or unwilling partners according to changing political demands and national narratives. Meanwhile, it is realism that offers such a context to look into the strategic reasoning behind Iranian interaction with the Taliban. Realism focuses on power politics, national interest, security issues and

survival in an anarchic international system (Barkin, 2003). This prism plays a vital role in giving an idea why Iran has taken a pragmatic turn to deal with the Taliban, despite the fact that the two groups have different ideologies. In the most immediate region, Iran is under pressure to tensions with Israel, competition with Turkey and Pakistan regarding influence in Afghanistan, the insecurity of its borders, especially with the Helmand River. Realism can explain why Iran is interested in establishing strategic depth in Afghanistan to counter the American and Gulf influence, close its frontiers, and protect against the rise of the hostile Sunni extremists along its eastern borders.

The combination of both theoretical approaches, constructivist realism will provide a better explanation of the Iran-Taliban relations. It enables one to test the influence of identities and ideologies on the preferences of foreign policy and at the same time recognizes that states exist in circumstances of strategic competition and low levels of trust. As another example, the balancing of ideational and material considerations stem out of Iranian experience to countenance ideological opposition to the Taliban and at the same time practical cooperation on other issues such as trade, reluctance management, as well as counterterrorism measures is indicative of constructivist-realist hybrid: ideational reservations co-exist with material requirements. In this sense, the hybrid structure not only helps resolve the tensions and contradictions in the relationship but also clarifies the dynamics of the changing strategies and policies both actors adopt to new developments in the region.

Iran and Taliban-led Afghanistan

Existing relationship between the Taliban ruled Afghanistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran is that of guarded cooperation with the establishment of the relationship on religious and cultural grounds. The Iranian President, Masoud Pezeshkian, reiterated Iranian pledge with regard to their engagement with the Afghanistan people saying that the engagement was based on religious duty. His statement indicates the eagerness of Iran to increase the collaboration with Afghanistan in various fields, and this attitude is likely to forewarn the approach of aiming

pragmatic cooperation with Taliban government, both politically and economically. The greater ideological vision dictating the Islamic orientation of the Iranian foreign policy was also stressed by President Pezeshkian. He advocated unity in the Islamic world condemning the conflicts among the Muslim countries as unfounded and not in line with strategic interests (Basheleishvili, 2022). Helped by his campaign of Islamic solidarity, Tehran also tried to establish regional stability in terms of religious unity to transmit the message especially to other Muslim dominated states such as Afghanistan. Taliban Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi reacted to that by calling Iran a well-intentioned and good neighbor who helped to maintain positive bilateral relations with Tehran (Irani News, 2025). He had said that Afghanistan is willing to reward this goodwill and would present itself to be a good and responsible neighbor. Instead, Muttaqi highlighted that there are a number of foundations of collaboration, among them being the profoundness of the religious and cultural similarities between the two countries which can act as a balancing force in the affairs of the two countries in the course of diplomacy.

Muttaqi also stated that Iran and Afghanistan share much common ground in lots of regional and global problems including support to Palestine (Kamran Aman, 2025). He underlined the desire of Afghanistan to pursue a non-partisan foreign policy especially in its relations with neighboring powers such as Iran. On economic terms, the relationship seems to be expanding and the bilateral trade is reported to be up to 3billion. Taliban administration views this as a leg up to Afghanistan to become a safe regional trade and transit hub with the assistance of Iran. Also, Muttaqi asserted that Afghanistan was much more secure internally at the Taliban reign, pointing to a severe decline in narcotics production, as well as the eradication of the threat posed by Daesh (ISIL) (Avdaliani, 2025). These claims are meant to display the potential of Taliban to keep the order and be a trusted ally of Iran and the region in general.

In light of the Taliban taking over in Kabul, Iran has taken flexible approach towards the Taliban and this approach has its primary tenets as non-

confrontation, pragmatism, compulsory collaboration on the one hand and refusing swift recognition on the other hand. About two weeks after Kabul fell, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the supreme leader of Iran, stated the Iranian stance on Taliban: "As far as Afghanistan is concerned, we stand with the people of Afghanistan; a government comes and the government goes... The relationship of the governments to us as it is dictated by the way they interact with us defines the way we relate to them. In early September, Ismail Qaani, Quds Force commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) announced to a confidential meeting of the Iranian Parliament that Iran would cooperate in settling the situation in Afghanistan; however, it would not use force and would do it in such a manner as to enable all ethnic groups in Afghanistan to contribute to nation-building (Kayhan, 2021).

The Taliban official in charge has been quoted two days after control as saying: "Taliban members at all levels have been ordered not to disrespect the presence of any country in Afghanistan." Thus, Iran pronounced during the same day that their embassy in Kabul will remain open and in operation (Mai, 2023). On August 28, 2021, Ayatollah Khamenei made direct what was already insinuated by clarifying the strategy of Tehran to deal with Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. Afghanistan is a brother country of ours, the same language, religion and culture. We are on the side of the Afghan people. changes of government come and go. The country that will be left in its place is Afghanistan. It all boils down to the kind of relations we have with them with regard to the kind of relations they have with us." (Kullab, 2021). After the Khamenei appeared to call the Taliban, an Iranian trade delegation visited them in Kabul on October 4, 2021, and together with the Islamist group, they resolved to enhance their trade, tariff, and road infrastructure coordination (RFE/RL, 2023).

At the beginning of October 2021 the establishment of diplomatic contacts with Tehran by the new Taliban government leadership was announced; three months later the representatives of the organization were invited to Tehran to hold talks. By that point, they have made 67 talks, ranking them fourth after the 58 nations that have diplomatically

interacted with the Taliban behind only China, Turkey, and Qatar. Moreover, only four interactions of Iran took place in a multilateral way, which is an indication of the scope of their relations. More anniversary commemorations of the Iranian Islamic Revolution itself were added to the Taliban last month, not only in Qatar but also in Afghanistan (Christian Hoj Hanseen and Halimullah Kousary, 2022).

Up to today, most of the negotiation between the two parties has focused on a particular bunch of issues: border guarantee (especially the vast drug trade), migration, investment avenues in fields such as energy generation, mining, agriculture and railroads, Taliban concern on how millions of Afghan refugees are being treated in Iran, security matters, water and acknowledgment of the Taliban regime. The talks in May 2022 moved towards the more substantial nature after being exploratory since the two sides engaged in discussions. Many bilateral contacts and discussions about the cooperation on various issues have followed this increasing level of trust and the switch of the embassy is likely to enhance this coordination to a significantly higher extent (Maryam Jami, et al, 2022).

Meeting between top Taliban officials and Iran Foreign Minister Abbas Aragchi was a major effort in diplomatic undertakings, therefore identifying the tension and areas of interest between the two neighbors. This is the first visit to Kabul by an Iranian foreign minister in five years and focused on sensitive topics of border tensions, the receiving of Afghan refugees in Iran and water rights. Aragchi drew attention to the fact that Iran was determined to re-admit about 3.5 million Afghan refugees and assured that Iran would have no intervention in the internal affairs of Afghanistan. He also supported the complete realization of the Helmand River water treaty, whereby, targeted fair sharing of local water resources is meant to be achieved. To this, the acting Prime Minister Hassan Akhund requested Iran to treat the Afghan refugees in a humane manner and that it is not possible to repatriate the Afghans quickly and occurrences such as the execution of Afghans in Iran fuel anger in popular circles. Further talks between the Afghan officials led by their foreign and defense ministers indicated a general trend

towards the enhanced bilateral relations, with Araqchi giving hopes of developing economic relations despite the historical ups and downs in the relationship of the two countries (The Associated Press, 2025).

Border Security and Migration

The increased relationship between the Taliban and Iran based on border security and migration has been another major pillar in the evolving relation of the two entities. Ever since the Taliban insurgency rose to power in Afghanistan in 2021, Iran has been forced to readjust, as it has initiated a three-pronged policy of accommodating the Taliban with maximum tactful alignment to shared interests, especially on border issues along the border that stretches across the nearly 900 kilometer border. There has been an influx of cross border movements (both legal and illegal), and the drug trafficking, human smuggling and the infiltration of militant groups such as ISIS-K are direct threats to Iranian security. Out of this, Iran and the Taliban have held series of negotiations that have addressed the areas of unwinding their frontiers (Jack Roush, 2025).

One significant milestone in this collaboration was in 2022, when the Taliban Ministry of Defence and Iranian authorities signed an agreement on protecting the borders with the intention to prevent illegal activities, especially drug and human trafficking. As part of the pact, a combined committee was formed to organize patrols and sharing of intelligence both sides. This system was drafted so that both the Afghan and Iranian forces could operate in synchronization along high risk borders zones thereby enhancing its response time and closing the surveillance gaps (Bakhtadze & Ustiashvili, 2022).

Managing tensions has been addressed notwithstanding these attempts. Iran is wary, conditioned by decades of suspicions and ideological differences with the Taliban, especially in the way the minority population of Afghanistan Shia - Hazara is treated. Moreover, millions of Afghan refugees remain in Iran; most of them took flight in Taliban Regime. Tehran has consistently expressed worries about uncontrolled flows of migrants and pointed to the Taliban to stabilize the domestic situation in

Afghanistan to remove the burden of migration. Border security and migration have been key points of pragmatic cooperation on the Taliban's side and Iran relations. In late 2022, Iran offered to create a regional security commission where Afghanistan and the countries around it would participate. This program was supposed to bring cooperation with efforts geared towards sharing of information, joint training and supply of border management equipment and Iran positioned itself to stabilize the region using common security institutions (, Prof. Dr. Aurangzaib Alamgir, 2022).

Such collaborative effort was further boosted through 2025 Tehran Dialogue Forum, where Taliban Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi expressed a vision bringing the borders of Afghanistan to become opportunities of mutual benefit. He had focused on the need to improve trade with Iran as a way of transforming the boundary region between the two countries to be a bridge of economic integration rather than a zone of conflict. It symbolizes the general Taliban initiative of sterilizing Afghanistan in the role of a partner as opposed to a pariah, especially in its relations with Tehran. The top tier meeting like the one between the Iranian Foreign Minister, Abbas Araqchi, and Taliban Defense Minister, Mawlawi Muhammad Yaqoob Mujahid, in Kabul has solidified this path. The two nations agreed on the extreme interdependence of their domestic security as well as reiterated areas of similar interests like, terrorism, drugs, drug traffic, and illegal border crossings. The demands of stronger institutional collaboration made by Araqchi demonstrates that Iran had security interests in the region and the Taliban has been willing to accept Iranian aid and has noted that Iran had been a longtime host of the Afghan refugees (Daragahi, 2023). Most importantly, this conversation shows a movement towards a more controlled and balanced relationship, despite outstanding problems like the management of the refugees and sectarianism and the absence of international recognition of the Taliban. The mention of common security before they begin talking about economic cooperation has a grain of confirming that each of the sides sees the value of stability with their borders. Although there can be no

denial of geopolitical complexities, the realization of common problems and intent of cooperative effort constitutes positive movement toward a more stable Afghanistan-Iran relationship at the border areas (Tasnim News Agency, 2025).

The visit by the Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi to Kabul alongside a high level political and economic delegation was a strategic mission in an effort to solve key bilateral and regional provocations between Iran and Afghanistan. The discussions revolved around the sensitive issues of security in the region, water rights, population flow and economic integration indicating the complex and at the same time interdependent issues, tough both countries are experiencing. One area that dominated their conversation was the security issue on their common frontier with Acting Prime Minister Hassan Akhund pointing out the importance of increased cooperation to deal with menace of terrorist organizations. Akhund noted that Afghanistan is ready to share intelligence and cooperate more in the realm of counterterrorism activities and stressed that the future sustained stability in the region is premised upon a unified effort (Tehran Times, 2025). This visit was an indication of a common ground around common interests and a need to maintain constructive dialogues in ensuring tensions were controlled and furthering better relations.

In the meeting, Araghchi stressed shared security challenges, like terrorism, drug trafficking and cross-border crimes a problem that has deepened following the Taliban takeover of power in 2021. The instability in Afghanistan has been perceived as the direct threat to the national security in Iran especially with the activities of ISIS-K and other extremist groups in the border provinces. In this regard, Araghchi demanded that Tehran and Kabul enhance their defence and intelligence relationship as a way to ensure that the region does not develop into an incubator of transnational militancy. In his turn, Mujahid has recognized the decades long contribution that Iran has made in terms of being home to millions of Afghan refugees, and reinforced the intention of the Taliban government to stabilize Afghanistan. He underlined attempts to modernize the defense system of Afghanistan, especially by

protecting the colonial zones which were prone to traffick and insurgent intrusion. Imperatively, he also emphasized the aspect of intelligence exchange and multilateral action against the threats of terrorism- a move that was an indication of the increasing need by the Taliban to prove its capability of governance and regional responsibility (Poorhashemi et al., 2025).

In addition to the cooperation in the military effort, migration is also the focus of Iran. There are more than 3 million Afghans in Iran many of whom are illegal which taxes Iranian resources and infrastructure. In Iran, the inflow of refugees has been on the rise following the reemergence of the Taliban and there have been demands that the Taliban should strive to establish an environment within Afghanistan that would discourage migration of people. Tehran has also wanted to institutionalize processes to regulate these flows, in the form of border accords and proposed regional security commissions in which training, equipment exchanges and systematic intelligence cooperation would be in play. Later in 2022, Iran suggested that Afghanistan and the neighboring countries should establish a regional security commission to counterbalance the situation on the territory. It shows Tehran wider approach in not acknowledging Taliban, but involving it in regional security outfits. These actions will enable Iran to protect its borders, control refugee flows, and eliminate the emergence of threats such as ISIS-K and not incur political costs to recognize the Taliban on the international scene (Abbasian, 2022).

Further, Taliban by now have demonstrated their interest in reframing their borders as, rather than liability, as an element of trade and cooperation. In the 2025 Tehran Dialogue Forum, Taliban foreign minister Amir Khan Muttaqi presented the vision of developing border regions as the gateways by some economic relations with Iran. Both Iran and the Taliban have also become aware of the strategic value of cooperation despite a long historical animosity and ideological differences especially when it comes to sectarian issues and systems of governance. Common issues have necessitated a transactional and security-based relationship which revolves around their common interests in controlling the

border, combating terrorism and managing migration. Although more pronounced political normalization is still far away, close cooperation in these areas has been improving.

Trade relations

Over the last years, trade relations have improved considerably between the Taliban and Iran due to both sides economic needs and pragmatic relations. Among the most important developments is the technical joint evaluation of the Abu Nasr Farahi Highway that is a vital trading route connecting western parts of Afghanistan and Iran. Joint ministerial delegations including Zain-udin Mahmood, the deputy minister of technical affairs of the Taliban and the deputy minister of public works of Iran investigated the logistical problems of the highway with proposed solutions since both had an interest to upgrade the infrastructure to enhance bilateral trade (Loyn, 2025).

On diplomatic level, Taliban Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi and the then Iranian Ambassador Bahadur Aminian agreed to form joint delegations with a view to meet regularly and streamlining trade negotiations. The step reflects the willingness of the two sides to institutionalize cooperative economic ventures as opposed to ad hoc agreements. One of the turning points in their trade relations was an agreement that was signed in Tehran under which, Afghanistan would import 350,000 tonnes of the Iranian oil. Various provisions of the deal covered some of the fundamental Afghan organizations such as Da Afghanistan Bank, the Norms and Standards Agency, and various ministries. It was also planned to construct shared oil refineries and to expand the run-up pipeline between both countries via a more long-term perspective of energy collaboration (Maira Hilal & Umair Ali, 2025).

In addition to that, the two parties highlighted strategic importance of the Chabahar Port in Iran on Afghan trade. Greater Iranian investment promotion in Afghanistan was also given a boost with a great promise by Iranian representatives of the private sector of considering investing the amount of 100 million dollars in manufacturing industries in Kabul. They indicated their readiness to increase these investments to a greater extent in case the initial

projects get successful. Such trade undertakings are not only meant to help in alleviating the economic isolation of Afghanistan but also indicate Iranian interest in regional security by means of economic relations. Amidst politics, however, the two parties are getting to use trade as a point of balance in establishing a fruitful and stable relationship with each other (Zelin, 2023).

Perhaps one of the most aggressive ideas to have been floated of late was by the Iranian new ambassador, Hassan Kazemi Qomi, who, in briefing Shahabuddin Delawar, the Taliban Minister of Mines and Petroleum, confirmed that Iran would soon be creating a joint free economic zone along the Afghanistan-Iran border. The idea is to enhance cross-border trade, raise employment opportunities on either or both sides and promote the local economies that have already been closely connected through informal trade (News, 2023).

The Afghanistan Chamber of Commerce also reports that bilateral trade grew up to more than 1 billion USD, and this trend demonstrates economic interdependence, which continues to rise regardless of the existing political and ideological disparities (Agency, 2023). Long-running U.S. sanctions make Iran keen to use its economic relationship with Kabul as part of its so-called resistance economy, or policy of survival and self-sufficiency. On its part, Afghanistan is deeply dependent on Iranian imports; Iran today provides about a third of all imports of Afghanistan, and these are fuel, food, building materials and household items.

The Iranian Rial is also used in border towns such as Zaranj and Iranian goods dominate local markets. This is not only a sign of proximity but also one of necessity as Afghanistan has limited access to international markets and needs most foreign aid which stalled in the wake of the Taliban take over. Even though this economic relationship is on the increase, other spheres, including resource extraction, have not advanced much. Most of the deals are exploration only, although the Taliban has been encouraging regional investment in the huge mineral resources in Afghanistan. A case in point is an Iranian firm which entered into an agreement in 2022 to mine lead and zinc in Ghor province,

although this is still in planning stages (International Crisis Group, 2025).

As they both realize they will get a lot out of closer economic cooperation, Tehran welcomed the Iran-Afghanistan Joint Economic Committee gathering in November 2023, its first activity with the Taliban since 2021. At that meeting he chaired Deputy Prime Minister Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar led to the formation of more working groups that were to find out the obstacles to trade and come up with solutions. This led to a technical Taliban delegation in February 2024, to inspect Chabahar Free Trade Zone, which is a strategic and influential piece of infrastructure that has the potential to completely change trading routes in Afghanistan (Vinay Kaura, 2025).

The Chabahar Port is the joint venture developed by India and Iran which is gradually becoming strategic transit point to landlocked Afghanistan. Iran needed an export route through Afghanistan as it overlaps into the Indian geo-political scenario of reaching out to central Asia through Afghanistan. Taliban Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi met with India top envoy to Afghanistan, J.P. Singh and restated intentions to develop trade ties through Chabahar, to establish a landlocked Afghanistan as a pivotal hub to connect South and Central Asia. To conclude, although the nature of the Iran-Taliban ties is complicated, the trade cooperation has been a balancing factor with the respective countries having feasible reasons to enhance ties beyond our widening diplomatic and ideological differences.

Water Distribution

A major and very delicate aspect of Taliban Iran relations is water distribution, especially as relates to the Helmand River. At an official meeting between the Iranian Energy Minister Ali Akbar Mehrabian, and the Taliban Minister of Energy and Water Abdul Latif Mansoor, the Taliban once again supported the commitment to the 1973 Helmand River Water Treaty, a legal treaty that gave Iran an annual percentage of water previously taken out of the river (Bolourchi, 2022). This pronouncement was seen as quite a good step especially in consideration of the fears that Iran had that, a dam that had been constructed by the former Afghan

administration like the Kamal Khan dam had cut off the supply of water in the environmentally sensitive Iranian Hamoun Wetlands environment causing degradation and in turn exacerbating drought conditions in the Iranian province of Sistan-Baluchestan (Kocatepe, 2024).

Water rights also played a major role when the Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi visited Kabul in the year 2025. During a meeting with the Taliban Prime Minister Mullah Mohammad Hassan Akhund, the matter was addressed with a significant diplomatic language. Akhund reiterated that the Taliban regarded water sharing with Iran as a not only political but also religious and humanitarian duty and pointed out that no efforts had ever been made to deny Iran its access voluntarily anyway (Tehran Times, 2025).

The meetings bear out a definite rhetoric change and strategy shift by the Taliban who seem eager to defuse long simmering tensions and appear ready to portray renewed themselves as a responsible actor in the region. Although the politics of the Helmand River flows has always been a source of tension particularly in instances of droughts, such a new focus on respecting the terms of the treaty is an indication of Taliban trying to develop trust with Tehran in a way of managing common resources in a cooperative manner. After all, water distribution is a strategic matter that involves not only the environment, but also the geopolitics and the fact that the activities of the Taliban against Iran include outreach, which is indicative of a move towards diplomacy, as opposed to conflict, access over major natural resources (Kharitonova, 2025).

Water is another key issue which has been a source of continuing tensions in the dynamic between the Taliban-led Afghan government and Iran as the Helmand (Hirmand) River flows out of Iran. An important discussion in 2023 took place between the Iranian Foreign Minister, Hossein Amirabdollahian and the acting Afghanistan Foreign Minister, Amir Khan Muttaqi that showed the extent to which the issue has strained territories. Iran forced the Taliban to maintain the 1973 Helmand River Water Treaty that would provide Iran with an annual allotment of water. Antagonistic and insistent, Amirabdollahian tied the lack of compliance to possible harm to its

bilateral relations as the lack of water in the Iranian Sistan and Baluchestan province further increases humanitarian and ecological crises (Abbasian, 2023). The fact that Iran highlighted the need to operationalise a common technical committee that should oversee the flows of water shows that Iran wants tangible measures, and not mere promises. More to the point, Amirabdollahian described border security as a red line, which means the border security is bleeding into the rest of the security and regional stability. Due to his warning, along with noting external actors actively trying to sabotage any relations, one can see Iran trying to play a delicate balancing act of expressing dissatisfaction, but not breaking full diplomatic ties with Kabul. The conciliatory-tone response by Muttaqi had no firm promises. He used that problem as Afghanistan had its own drought and limitations in infrastructures, he did not give a definite deadline on how this dilemma will be solved. This reaction comes out to illustrate the personal conflict of the Taliban in handling scanty resources of water domestically, and unwilling to take stern steps against the pressure of external push (Tasnim News Agency, 2025a).

This swapping highlights the fact that though there are already diplomatic channels open, the Helmand River affair has now become a benchmark concerning the overall Iran- Taliban association. With water becoming an even more limited resource, especially in contested and partitioned regions, addressing this conflict will become the focal point of deciding whether the two can continue the peaceful and amicable association in future.

Diplomatic recognition

Early in 2022, the process of diplomatic outreach between the Taliban and Iran received another significant boost with a Taliban delegation being received in Tehran, headed by Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi. At the same time, the Iranian ambassador to Afghanistan visited Muttaqi in Kabul and demonstrated the readiness of Tehran to keep channels of communication open in the unstable political environment (Syed Basim Raza, 2022). In the contexts of such interaction, Iran hosted negotiations between the Taliban and several Afghan opposition leaders living in Iran individuals that

could gain Taliban power. This action taken by Tehran was an oval bid to promote reconciliation and inclusiveness in the Afghan governance system since it is the interest of Iran to have a stable and representative government in Afghanistan.

Nonetheless, Iran was also skeptic of Taliban commitments and approach to governance as its actions indicated. Although Iran was reserved in such attempts, it became quite obvious that Tehran was trying to appeal to both pragmatism and regional security concerns to achieve the objective, which is going to deal with the Taliban and hedge risks that could trigger by political marginalization or unstable conditions. At the time of such diplomatic efforts, the Taliban publicly requested Iran to spearhead the recognition of their government. Zabihullah Mujahid who is the top spokesman of the Taliban assured in an interview with Tabnak News Agency in Iran that the importance of recognition by Tehran should be placed before all other nations. This call demonstrates the fact that the Taliban recognized the strategic role played by Iran since this country can be discussed as a neighbor of Afghanistan that has strong political, economic, and cultural connections with the country (Lawson & Legrenzi, 2023).

Not only would recognition give legitimacy to Taliban rule internationally but it would also create a wider economic and political cooperation between the two. Nonetheless, the tentative stance on Iran suggests that the official recognition is unlikely to take place at all unless the Taliban shows its inclusive nature in ruling and observance of commitment on some major aspects, including border security, water sharing and human rights. Therefore, as the diplomacy takes new stages, there can hardly be any denial to the fact that Iranian recognition is a somber yet a closely balanced aim in the intricate perimeter of Taliban Iran connections (Zahidi, 2024)."

Ever since the Taliban returned to power in Afghanistan in 2021, their request to be considered as a formal state has been a protracted and multistage process influenced by regional dynamics and reluctance of many international actors. The Taliban government was finally recognized by Russia in 2025 after several years of quiet contacts and is a remarkable development compared to the intense

animosity which coloured the interaction between the two sides during the first Taliban rule in the 1990s (Shamim, 2025). The importance of international legitimacy gained by the Taliban with recognition by Russia conferred significant weight on this geopolitically as an indication that key world powers were at least interested in a pragmatic approach towards the new Afghanistan regime.

In similarity to the same timeline with Russia, the developing interaction between Iran and the Taliban in the course of 2023 follows the same path of gradual but significant shifting of mutual suspicion and acrimony into the domain of slight cooperation, with both sides being deliberate in taking such steps. In the past, Iran had considerable mistrust of Taliban, particularly because of the sectarian issue and the bloodthirsty policies they treated Hazara Shia minority. One of these milestones was the official handing over of the embassy of Afghanistan in Tehran to the Taliban officials on February 26, 2023. This was not only a reinforcement to existing diplomacy, but also an indication of tacit recognition to Taliban regime as the de facto government of Afghanistan in Tehran. Embassy transition provided a greater form of engagement, which has enabled Afghanistan Taliban rule to handle its diplomatic relations in Iran and offer consular services to Afghans (Bhat & Efezil, 2023).

In line with this enhanced collaboration, Alireza Bikdeli, a representative of the Iranian Foreign Ministry told the foreign minister of the Taliban says that the Iranian consulates in Afghanistan would begin issuing visas again. The action is expected to control cross-border flow, curb illegal immigration, and ensure better control over the population to cross over the frequently widened and tensed border. This kind of coordination points to the fact that Iran is interested in stabilizing border zones and reducing security threats related to infiltration by refugees, drug trafficking and insurgency. The slow steps of Iran to engage in diplomacy with the Taliban relate directly to the rebalancing of Iranian policy in South Asia and Central Asia as a whole. Tehran understands it is essential to keep Afghanistan stable to ensure security and economic prosperity of Tehran itself through trade routes etc. Meanwhile, Iran knows that official recognition of the Taliban

government is sensitive politically at the domestic levels as well as internationally. The policy of Tehran, thus, has been cautious-not granting it full formal recognition until guarantees are given on governance, human rights, and counter terrorism (Tomar, 2025).

This developing relationship cements a wider regional pattern in which strategy is coming to trump ideology. Taliban needs to be recognized by its neighbors including Iran and other influential powers like Russia in order to come out of the isolation, bring in some much required economic aid to the economy and also legitimize their rule. In the case of Iran the diplomatic contact with the Taliban enables Iran to protect its border, wield influence in the Afghan politics, and place itself within the regional relations in the case of realigning alliances (Jack Roush, 2025).

In short, Iranian diplomatic acceptance of the Taliban government has been tacitly approved, as official transfer of an embassy, renewal of issue of visas, and increasing bilateral communication are the confirmations to that reality. This development of hostility to engagement has been representative of a much pragmatic regionalism to the new political reality in Afghanistan between security interests on the one hand, and geopolitical and economic interests of the region on the other.

Challenges

As Afghanistan shared borders with Iran, Iran accused many of the miseries of the people of Afghanistan on the military presence of the United States and its allies interfering in Afghanistan which according to Iran was a war of imperial conquest. However, two years after the American withdrawal that Iran had insisted on, and in a situation where the Taliban has currently established its rule in Kabul, Iran is increasingly posed with a distinct challenge in the form of post-U.S. Afghanistan that poses a barrier to bilateral relations (Esfandiary, 2021).

The re-emergence of Taliban (Afghanistan) and the attendant shift in security across the Iran-Afghanistan border have deeply realigned the security environment with the emergent problems posing strain on bilateral issues. Although Iran is

publicly open to the idea of dialogue with the Taliban, the real situation in the country indicates that both security expenses and tensions are increasing. Millions of dollars have been spent by Iran to protect its eastern border with Afghanistan through building of long walls and barriers to prevent the movements through the borders. Such an infrastructure is symptomatic of Tehran being terrified of unregulated migration, drug trafficking, and militant infiltration, all of which is compounded by the instabilities of the Taliban takeover (Poorhashemi et al., 2024).

Besides physical border security, Iran also faces a serious humanitarian problem, which is the hosting of thousands of followers of Afghanistan who have come to Iran seeking Taliban repression, political uncertainty and economic hardships. Presence of refugees puts a burden in the Iranian border provinces such as Sistan and Baluchestan and makes the security situation of the Iranian capital Tehran even more complicated. The presence of refugees still pouring into Iran and the threat of transnational violence has put an immense strain on the Iranian security system despite its intentions to have stability as well as influence in Afghanistan. The other point of tension is the unclear foreign policy stand by the Taliban particularly with the unstable conflicts in the Middle East that poses a great concern to Iran. Although Iran has been extremely critical of Israel and its stance on the issues concerning Palestine, the Taliban have mostly been reluctant to take a firm stand on Iran-Israel conflict. Other than the criticism of the American assault on the nuclear reactors of Iran, the Taliban have been cautious. However, instead of allowing people to protest in Afghanistan to show support with Gaza as saw in most Muslim countries, the Taliban had not allowed multiple protests in the country since the last three years with only one small protest ever allowed in Kabul in solidarity with Gaza. This caution echoes a larger Taliban policy of not getting Afghanistan mired up in regional warfare that could prove destabilizing to their tenuous claims to power or liable to foreign interference (International Crisis Group, 2025)

Such a pessimistic approach makes the Iranian expectations challenging as Tehran is historically accustomed to behaving as one of the leaders of the

resistance to the Israeli nation and finds supporters who help it maintain its position on the region in the region. Taliban doubts about complete agreement with Iran on such matters contributes to Iranian doubts concerning the trustworthiness of Taliban as an ally. The Iran Taliban relationship experiences tremendously challenging issues making it difficult to establish a friendship and mutual relationship. A prominent area of contention is the refusal of the Taliban to allow groups associated with the Iranian government to convene rallies in Afghanistan on the International Quds Day, an annual event first declared by Iran in the year 1979 to show support to the Palestinians, and oppose Israel. These meetings have been intercepted by the Taliban in the last three years implying that there is a wide ideological gap between the two regimes. The rule of the Taliban reflects on radical Sunni version of Islam whereas the Iranian politics rests on Shia version of Islam and the principle of Wilayat-e Faqih (Guardianship of Islamic Jurist). Such theological and political rifts do not portend that Taliban will be less than supportive of Iran in its ideological regional interests, especially at a time when security conditions in Afghanistan are extremely untenable. As opposed to this, the Taliban protocol has largely consisted of remaining impartial, and they with the purpose of not mixing themselves up in the Middle Eastern wars or the Iranian politics (Besmillah Taban, 2025).

There are other issues, besides ideological differences, which affect the relationships, the practical and security issues. Tensions have been escalated by unilateral development of water infrastructure including the dams and canals developed by the Taliban without notifying and consulting its neighbours downstream, Iran and Uzbekistan. Water conflicts are especially touchy considering the shortage of water in the region and the dire need of common rivers such as the Helmand (Hirmand) River to Iran. Such tensions have on certain occasions degenerated into battles between Taliban fighters and the army of the neighboring nations further worsening instability along the borders of Afghanistan.

This hotbed scenario threatens to derail efforts to find constructive approaches toward the Taliban by

regional states. Diplomatic and economic relations have been developed marginally and carefully in some countries, but continued security incidents and undecidedly argued resources could kill camaraderie and collaboration. On the one hand, paradoxically, a lessening of the level of interaction on the part of its neighbors would make the possibility of peacefully eliminating conflicting issues and jointly addressing greater problems, including migration, security, and economic development, even more remote (Intel Drop, 2022).

There has been a great tension regarding water management between the government which is under control by Taliban (Kabul) and other neighbors, mainly Iran. Despite the tensions in varied decades, the current development has aggravated the conflict, creating the turnaround of insecurity in the region and the harshness of bilateral relations. The main point of the conflict is evident in the Helmand River which is the longest river flowing in Afghanistan and supplies about 40 percent of the country drainage and is vital in the southern parts of Afghanistan through irrigation. The point of conflict mainly revolves around the Kamal Khan dam, which was finished and opened in 2021 by the past government of Afghanistan. This dam has conjured up grave prospects in Iran, particularly the Sistan-Baluchestan province down-stream where people largely depend on the river Helmand to irrigate and sustain more of its fragile wetlands. The shrinking of such wetlands already inflicts the grievous ecological and humanitarian effects such as jeopardizing the local livelihoods and food security. Scientific evaluations are alerting the fact that should Afghanistan proceed with arranging dams without coordination, up to 70 percent of wheat cultivation of Iran in this region can be threatened (Irani News, 2025).

Not only have these water conflicts strained relations but, in the reportedly highly violent clashes between Taliban and Iranian forces that were also related to water conflict late May 2023. Though on both sides the water dispute is officially denied to be a direct input of the clashes the fact that they happened at this time at this spot seems to indicate the tension of water management. The relationship is fragile as indicated in these incidents with a possibility of

resources play quickly degenerating into issues of security. To Iran, the Helmand river is a lifeline and when the Taliban government is perceived to infringe its rights in utilizing water, frustration and mistrust breeds. In the meantime, the Afghanistan sees its water supply projects as its national growth and economic independence strategy. Misunderstandings are further fueled by the absence of an effective, collaborative, and workable water-sharing system, which creates the potential of possibly resulting into conflict (Akbari & Torabi Haghighi, 2022).

Altogether, the questions of water management concerning the Helmand River can be seen as another burning issue troubling the feasibility of the Taliban and Iran relations. In the absence of effective discourse and joint mechanisms, such tensions threaten to shake an already-fragile border region, set back greater regional cooperation and peace efforts. The imperative need to achieve water rights in an open and just manner will continue to encourage trust and avoid untold conflicts between the two neighbors in the future.

Conclusion

Since the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan in August 2021, the dynamics between Afghanistan and Iran have taken on renewed significance. Both countries now find themselves in a situation of increased political and demographic interdependence. This growing reliance is shaped not only by geographic proximity but also by mutual challenges, particularly their respective international isolations and the broader regional security dilemmas they face. While Iran grapples with mounting pressure from the West over its nuclear program and internal repression, the Taliban remain largely unrecognized by the international community. As a result, both regimes are turning toward each other in search of economic, political, and security alternatives.

Their engagement since 2021 has generally been pragmatic and cautiously positive. There have been diplomatic efforts and some cooperation, particularly in areas of mutual concern such as border security, refugee management, and trade. However, despite these efforts, a set of deep-rooted structural issues

continues to hinder the development of a smooth and stable relationship. Chief among these are disputes over water distribution from the Helmand River, the recurring crises surrounding Afghan refugees in Iran, and ongoing challenges tied to cross-border smuggling and militant activity. These issues are not new, but under the current political circumstances—marked by weakened institutions and fragile legitimacy—they have become more difficult to resolve.

Water politics, in particular, remains a critical flashpoint. Iran has long accused Afghanistan of failing to deliver its share of water from the Helmand River, which is vital to the Sistan-Baluchestan province. The Taliban, on their part, have made statements about respecting existing agreements but also face domestic pressures to prioritize Afghan needs amid drought and infrastructure challenges. This dispute has occasionally escalated into border skirmishes, highlighting the fragile nature of trust between the two sides. Meanwhile, the refugee issue continues to strain relations. Iran hosts millions of Afghan refugees and undocumented migrants, a burden that has intensified since the Taliban takeover. Tehran frequently deports large numbers of Afghans, drawing criticism and increasing resentment.

Despite these significant hurdles, both Iran and the Taliban-led Afghanistan have shown a clear willingness to engage. Iran has allowed the Taliban to maintain diplomatic missions, while the Taliban have sent delegations to Tehran, signaling their interest in building a functional relationship. Trade between the two countries has continued, and both sides have emphasized the need to expand economic ties. These efforts show that, while the relationship is fraught with tension, it is not without potential.

Ultimately, the Iran-Taliban relationship is shaped by necessity rather than ideological alignment. Both are operating in an environment of international pressure and limited options, which has pushed them into a cooperative, if uneasy, arrangement. However, unless the structural challenges—especially those related to water sharing, refugee treatment, and border control—are addressed through institutional mechanisms and long-term planning, the relationship will remain fragile. Nevertheless,

their ongoing engagement reflects a shared recognition that regional cooperation is vital for survival in an increasingly polarized geopolitical landscape.

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