

Iran's Response to the Taliban's Comeback in Afghanistan

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By A. Farid Tookhy

Summary: With the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, Iran will most likely see a diminishment of its political, economic and cultural influence in the country. Shia Iran is uncomfortable with the prospect of a Sunni extremist group monopolizing and consolidating power on its doorstep. For now, however, Iranian leaders have decided to engage with the Taliban while denying the group formal recognition. This counterintuitive policy is mainly rooted in the fact that Iran's chief concern is that political instability and economic fragility in Afghanistan might help strengthen the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), a group that Iran views as a more potent security threat than the Taliban. The dilemma facing Iranian leaders is that their short-term policy choices vis-à-vis Taliban-dominated Afghanistan may carry long-term risks for them. Iran's policy of engagement with the Taliban might facilitate the group's consolidation of power. It could also boost the position of Iran's regional rivals in Afghanistan. This paper seeks to analyze, in brief, the drivers and implications of Iran's response to the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan.

Introduction

The collapse of the Afghan government and the Taliban's return to power last August have left Iran in a quandary about how to respond to the new situation in its eastern neighborhood. The consolidation of power by the Taliban, Afghanistan's relapse into yet another period of civil war or the strengthening of Sunni extremist groups (in particular, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, ISIL) in that country — each of these scenarios presents Iran with major challenges. Iran is seeking to prevent the actualization of these scenarios through calculated engagement with the Taliban while denying the group formal recognition pending the formation of a more inclusive governing structure in Afghanistan.

Iranian leaders favored the preservation of Afghanistan's former political arrangements, the foundations of which were laid during the 2001 United Nations talks in Bonn, Germany. Iran benefitted — politically and economically — from the post-Bonn order in Afghanistan. The U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 removed an anti-Iran Taliban government, replacing it with a government in which Afghan groups

close to Iran held considerable influence. Relative stability in Afghanistan and a deluge of aid money allowed Iran to profit economically by vastly increasing its exports to the country.

Recognizing the Taliban as “part of the reality of Afghanistan,”¹ Iran preferred to see a modification of the post-Bonn structures to give the group a share in power. It opposed a scenario in which the insurgent group would play a dominant part in Afghanistan’s politics. Iranian officials rejected the February 2020 Doha Agreement between the United States and the Taliban in part because they interpreted the deal as the beginning of a departure from the political order established in Bonn.

Iran is uncomfortable with the Taliban’s monopolization of power in Afghanistan. However, it is concerned that the current situation in Afghanistan might lead to the strengthening of ISIL and other Sunni extremist groups on its eastern border. Confronting that danger seems to currently be Iran’s top priority in Afghanistan. Iran’s courtship of the Taliban over the past several years and its nonconfrontational response to the group’s return to power in Kabul can be understood as part of a calculated move chiefly designed to counter the threat of ISIL.

A Reversal of Fortunes

The U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 had favorable outcomes for Iran — as with the case of Iraq two years later. It ousted the Taliban — a Sunni extremist group with anti-Shia orientations and a history of confrontation with Iran — from power, replacing it with a government in which groups close to Iran held considerable sway. Iran was apprehensive about the U.S. military presence on its eastern borders, especially after the U.S. invasion of Iraq and occasional calls in Washington for regime change in Tehran. In response, it adopted a Janus-faced policy in Afghanistan, establishing cordial relations with the Western-backed government in Kabul on the one hand and providing measured military support and sanctuary to segments of the Taliban on the other.

That contradictory policy notwithstanding, political and economic rationality dictated Iranian interest in the preservation of the post-Bonn order in Afghanistan. During the two decades of U.S. military involvement in Afghanistan, Iran managed to increase its political, economic and cultural influence in the country. The preservation of the Bonn political arrangements, with some modification to allow for the Taliban’s integration, was Iran’s preferred option after the U.S. departure.

The dissolution of the post-Bonn order and the Taliban’s triumphant return to Kabul represents a reversion to status quo ante as it existed during the Taliban’s previous stint in power. Even worse for Iran, the Taliban are now a more organized, better equipped and far stronger group than they were in 2001. And Iran-backed politico-military groups that fought against the Taliban in the 1990s have, for now, almost disappeared from the Afghan political scene.

Moreover, the withdrawal of Western forces and aid and the massive contraction of Afghanistan’s economy will deal a blow to Iran’s economic interests in the country. Benefitting from a deluge of aid

¹ *Entekhab*. 2021. “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson: The Taliban Are Part of the Reality of Afghanistan.” February 1, 2021.

money into its neighbor, Iran had, in recent years, become the top exporter to Afghanistan, outperforming China and Pakistan. In the decade since 2011, Afghanistan was almost always among the top five export destinations for Iranian goods.² From March 2020 to March 2021, the value of Iranian exports to Afghanistan reached \$2.3 billion,³ accounting for 6.7 percent of the total volume of its non-petroleum exports — and representing a 15-fold increase compared to its exports in 2002, which stood at \$150 million.⁴ In June, however, Iranian officials reported a 40 percent decline in Iranian exports to Afghanistan compared to last year.⁵

The new politico-economic reality in Iran's eastern neighborhood also throws into disarray Iran's efforts to turn itself into a regional hub for trade, including by providing Afghanistan alternative trade routes. With support from India and Japan, Iran has been developing its Chabahar port, which is being integrated, via road and rail, with the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), which connects India to Central Asia and Russia via Iran. Rail and road projects connect Chabahar to the Afghan border, allowing India access to Afghanistan and the latter alternative access to sea routes. In July 2020, the Asian Development Bank reported that about 70 percent of Afghanistan's transit trade passed through Iran, while traditionally Pakistan served as the main conduit for the land-locked country's access to international shipping routes.⁶ In a Taliban-dominated Afghanistan, Iran will most likely lose a significant portion of its economic and trade gains.

Engagement Without Recognition

In response to the Taliban's takeover of Kabul, Iran has adopted a flexible policy toward the group, the core elements of which are nonconfrontation, pragmatism, necessary cooperation and opposition to rapid recognition. About two weeks after the fall of Kabul, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei stated Iranian policy toward the Taliban: "As regards Afghanistan, we support the Afghan people; governments come and go ... the character of our relations with the governments depends on the character of their relations with us."⁷ In early September, Ismail Qaani, commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' (IRGC's) Quds Force, told a closed meeting of the Iranian Parliament that Iran would seek to resolve the situation in Afghanistan without recourse to war and in a fashion that would allow all Afghan ethnic groups to share in governing the country.⁸

² *Donya-e Eqtesad*. 2021. "Foreign Trade during 1390s [March 2011-March 2021] [in Persian]." April 4, 2021.

³ Khabaronline. 2021. "In 1399 [March 2020-March 2021], Which Countries Did We Export Goods to and Which Countries Did We Import Goods from? [in Persian]." May 2, 2021.

⁴ Abbasi, Ibrahim, and Majeed Ranjbar. 2011. "Iran's Economic Aid to Afghanistan: Goals and Economic Impacts [in Persian]." *Economic Relations Quarterly* 3 (11) (Fall): 221.

⁵ Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA). 2022. "Sharp Rise in the Cost of Iranian Exports to Afghanistan [in Persian]." June 9, 2022.

⁶ IRNA English. 2020. "Around 70 Percent of Afghan Transit Trade Carried through Iran: ADB." July 23, 2020.

⁷ Khamenei, Sayyid Ali. 2021. "Speech during First Meeting with the President and Members of Cabinet [in Persian]." August 28, 2021.

⁸ *Kayhan*. 2021. "Iran Will Not Play in America's Court; All Afghan Ethnic Groups Should Have a Share in Government [in Persian]." September 7, 2021.

In October, Hassan Kazimi Qomi, the Iranian president's special envoy for Afghanistan, said "the Taliban are a reality in this country, a reality which controls the capital and is in charge of providing security in the country." He claimed Iran could work with the Taliban on issues such as water-sharing mechanisms, preventing drug trafficking into Iran and countering ISIL, noting that "reaching agreements on these issues is feasible in the atmosphere of new Afghanistan." Kazimi Qomi added that by expanding its political, economic and trade relations with Kabul, Iran could help stabilize Afghanistan and prevent the migration of Afghans toward the borders. He cautioned, though, that Iran should be patient: "[W]e should take realities into account ... we should understand which matter to pursue at which appropriate time."⁹

Even before the fall of Kabul in August, there were clear indications of Iran's conciliatory response to the Taliban's comeback. As the insurgent group began to make rapid territorial gains, the authorities in Tehran remained unperturbed. The insurgent group's capture, in July, of several districts along the Iran-Afghanistan border, including two key customs facilities, elicited no dramatic response from the Iranian authorities. A week later, normal trade through Taliban-controlled crossings resumed. When Herat fell to the Taliban on August 12, a senior Iranian foreign ministry official tweeted that "the Islamic Emirate" forces were committed to protecting the safety of the Iranian consulate and its diplomats and staff.

Iran remained equally nonchalant when Kabul fell to the Taliban on August 15. Its embassy was one of only a few foreign embassies which remained open. A day later, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi said Iran would work for "the stability of Afghanistan as today's first need," adding that his country was "committed to good neighborliness."¹⁰ On the day the Taliban entered Kabul, an Iranian official announced that the transit of goods between the two countries via Chabahar port had resumed after a short pause in early August.¹¹

Iranian authorities have tried to control the country's media reactions to the Taliban's return to power. A journalist tweeted that the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance had advised Iranian journalists to refrain from using adversarial language against the Taliban.¹² Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a former president of Iran, said he had been threatened by a senior security official over his remarks about the danger posed by the Taliban.¹³

In stark contrast to its support for the anti-Taliban forces in the 1990s, Iran has refrained — at least publicly — from expressing support for Ahmad Massoud, whose National Resistance Front (NRF) has been fighting the Taliban sporadically in Panjshir. Asked whether Iran had contacts or talks with Massoud, Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Saeed Khatibzadeh said on August 24: "We are in contact with all sides and groups in Afghanistan." However, he added that Iran invited "all sides in

⁹ Defa Press. 2021. "The Taliban Are the Reality of Afghanistan [in Persian]." October 22, 2021.

¹⁰ *Tehran Times*. 2021. "President Raisi: Iran Will Make Efforts to Stabilize Afghanistan." August 16, 2021.

¹¹ Tasnim News Agency. 2021. "Transit of Goods to Afghanistan via Chabahar Is Resumed [Persian]." August 22, 2021.

¹² Voice of America. 2021. "Iranian Social Media Users React to Developments in Afghanistan and the Taliban's Return to Power [in Persian]." August 16, 2021.

¹³ BBC News Persian. 2021. "Ahmadinejad: I Was Threatened by a Senior Security Official for My Warning About the Danger of Taliban [in Persian]." August 14, 2021.

Afghanistan to exercise restraint and to pursue talks and a political solution.”¹⁴ In February, Seyed Hassan Mortazavi, Iran’s deputy ambassador to Afghanistan, said those leaders of the former Afghan government now residing in Iran will not be allowed to establish any formal structures because “we are against any war and chaos in Afghanistan.”¹⁵

Such reassurances notwithstanding, Iran will likely continue to hedge its bets in Afghanistan. Accordingly, it will provide sanctuary and support to friendly Afghan factional leaders, with many of whom it has developed deep ties over the past few decades. Iran will try to marshal these forces in support of its adopted policy toward the Taliban. For now, it may instruct them to keep a low profile, but it will surely look at them as useful assets in pressuring the Taliban and protecting Iranian interests in Afghanistan.

While adopting a policy of engagement with the group, Iran is opposed to rapid recognition of the Taliban government. In this regard, it has adopted a middle position between advocacy for, and outright rejection of, the Taliban’s recognition. For Iranians, the Taliban’s is a “minority government,”¹⁶ which has to give way to an inclusive government representing “all realities of Afghanistan and [its] ethnic and demographic composition”¹⁷ before it can be recognized.

The term “inclusive government” is of course a mantra now employed by many states in the region and beyond to refer to what would, for them, be an acceptable political arrangement in Afghanistan. Regional actors do not pursue the same goals in Afghanistan or have the same vision for the country. As in the past, Afghanistan will continue to be a site for the enactment of regional and global rivalries. As far as Iran is concerned, it prefers a political arrangement in which Shia and Persian-speaking groups close to the Islamic Republic have a meaningful share in Afghanistan’s governing structures. Given the Taliban’s current positions, this is far from assured. In the meantime, Iranian officials will seek to use the issue of recognition as a bargaining chip in their dealings with the Taliban.

What factors account for Iranian policy toward the Taliban? Given its own dire economic conditions, Iran has an eye on preserving and perhaps expanding its economic relations with Afghanistan. In October, during a meeting with the Taliban’s Acting Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi, Iran’s ambassador to Afghanistan, Bahadur Aminian, called economic hardships “a common enemy” of the two countries, adding that Iran was ready to invest in energy, transportation, mining, trade and health sectors in Afghanistan.¹⁸ In addition to economic considerations, two geopolitical factors seem to have influenced Iran’s posture toward the Taliban: countering ISIL and the fact that Iran does not consider Afghanistan part of its strategic depth.

¹⁴ *Donya-e Eqtesad*. 2021. “Iran’s Official Position on the Taliban [in Persian].” August 24, 2021.

¹⁵ Tasnim News Agency. 2022. “Deputy Ambassador: We Are Against Any War and Chaos in Afghanistan [in Persian].” February 10, 2022.

¹⁶ Defa Press. 2021. “Press Conference by Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson [in Persian].” September 13, 2021.

¹⁷ *Donya-e Eqtesad*. 2021. “Iran’s Official Position on the Taliban [in Persian].” August 24, 2021.

¹⁸ Fars News Agency. 2021. “Resolving the Problems of the Afghan Refugees, the Focus of a Meeting between Iranian Ambassador and the Taliban Foreign Minister [in Persian].” October 23, 2021.

Countering ISIL

It seems that a major reason for Iran's courtship of the Taliban is to counter the threat posed by ISIL. Because of its Shia population, its long border with Afghanistan and its history of fighting against the group in Iraq and Syria, Iran is particularly concerned about the presence of ISIL on its eastern borders. Iranian leaders seem to have calculated that given the enmity between the Taliban and ISIL, they can work with the former to deal with the security threats the latter could pose to the Islamic Republic.

Iran has been concerned about ISIL's activities on its eastern borders since 2015, when the group first surfaced in Afghanistan. To avoid being flanked by ISIL when it was fighting the group in Iraq and Syria, Iranian leaders held secret talks with former Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Mansour in 2016. It appears Iran was worried about the formation of an alliance between the Taliban and ISIL. Mansour was told that ISIL was a U.S. protégé working on behalf of Washington to pursue U.S. goals in Afghanistan.¹⁹

To justify Iran's courtship of the Taliban, ideologues and media outlets close to Iranian conservatives have made two moves: first, they have argued that the Taliban should be distinguished from ISIL; second, they have tried to reinterpret some of the Taliban's past actions, especially those affecting Afghanistan's Shia communities.

In January 2021, shortly after a Taliban delegation's visit to Tehran, Abdullah Ganji, editor-in-chief of the IRGC-affiliated *Javan* daily, wrote: "Unlike ISIL, the Taliban is open to negotiations, which shows that it seeks power within Afghanistan's geography (not the Islamic world)." Ganji even tried to reinterpret the Taliban's actions in the 1990s: the Taliban's attacks on Kabul's Shia-populated areas, their killing of Abdul-Ali Mazari (then leader of Hizb-e Wahdat, a Shia party with close ties to Iran) and their attacks on Bamiyan, he argued, were aimed at capturing territory; their killing of Shia Afghans was due to the latter's resistance, not because the Taliban considered them *kafir*, or nonbelievers.²⁰

Ahmad Naderi, a conservative member of Iran's Parliament, called the Taliban "an indigenous movement" of the region — implicitly distinguishing it from the non-indigenous ISIL — adding that "working with them can increase stability in the Afghan society and prevent the influence of groups such as ISIL."²¹ In an editorial on the Taliban's advancements in June 2021, the conservative daily *Kayhan* wrote: "[T]here is no news of them committing atrocities like those ISIL committed in Iraq. The Taliban have even announced that they are not going to harm the Shia community."²²

Three days after the fall of Kabul, an Iranian news website run by hardliners carried a piece in which the author questioned those who see "the Taliban as ISIL and even speak of the necessity of Iran's or

¹⁹ Pakayeen, Mohsen. 2019. "Iran's Considerations in Talking with the Taliban [in Persian]." Strategic Council on Foreign Relations, December 11, 2019; another topic of discussion may have been heroin trafficking out of Helmand, which Iran hoped to keep out of the reach of its Saudi-supported Baloch separatists; see Rubin, Barnett R. 2020. *Afghanistan: What Everyone Needs to Know*. New York: Oxford University Press, 287.

²⁰ Ganji, Abdullah. 2021. "We and the Taliban [in Persian]." *Javan*, January 31, 2021.

²¹ Insaf News. 2020. "Member of Parliament: The Taliban Is An Indigenous Movement of the Region [in Persian]." December 2, 2020.

²² Boloori, Ja'far. 2021. "What Is Going on in Afghanistan? [in Persian]." *Kayhan*, June 25, 2021.

Fatemiyoum's military intervention [in Afghanistan]."²³ He claimed Iran could establish "strategic friendship" with the Taliban, thereby improving the security of its eastern borders.²⁴ In October, a senior IRGC commander said, "The Taliban's ideology is totally different from the ideology of ISIL, and even during this short period since their domination of Afghanistan, their confrontation with ISIL is quite evident."²⁵

Strategic Depth

Tehran's nonconfrontational response to the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan is in part rooted in the fact that Iran does not consider the country as part of its strategic depth. Over the past few decades, Iran's strategic focus has been on the Arab Middle East on its western and southern borders to counter Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Israel. Afghanistan has almost always been of secondary importance in Iran's strategic calculus. The country's leadership was caught off guard the first time the Taliban came to power back in 1996 — a fact some Iranian analysts have attributed to a lack of interest in, and expertise on, Afghanistan within the country's foreign policy establishment at the time.

Three weeks after the Taliban's return to power, the IRGC-affiliated Tasnim News Agency published a piece arguing that the Iranian approach to the situation in Afghanistan was based on "revolutionary rationalism." It noted that Iran "does not believe in the naïve notion that one should issue the same prescription for any time and any place," adding that "if it followed the same prescription in Afghanistan as it did in Iraq and Syria — this [mode of acting] would not be in keeping with prudence and wisdom, but exactly the opposite."²⁶

In October, Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, the speaker of Iran's Parliament, invited Iranian analysts and commentators "to clarify the issue of Afghanistan, which raises some questions as to why Iran's strategic depth is in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq, but not in Kabul and Panjshir," adding that "explaining this issue is important so that our society and youths understand our strategy."²⁷

At a time when tensions between the Islamic Republic and Western powers and some countries in the region have increased over Iran's nuclear program, its regional posture and its missile program, the authorities in Tehran are even more averse to getting entangled in their eastern neighborhood. Iran is concerned that Taliban-dominated Afghanistan may serve as anchorage for ISIL and other Sunni extremist groups. Its strategy of courting the Taliban is in part designed to deal with that threat.

²³ Fatemiyoum is an Iranian proxy Afghan Shia militia formed to fight in Syria.

²⁴ Komeili, Alireza. 2021. "Black and White Analyses Cannot Explain the Complex Movement of the Taliban [in Persian]." Raja News, August 18, 2021.

²⁵ Neelfrooshan, Abbas. 2021. "Interview with Nasim News Agency [in Persian]." Tasnim News Agency, October 12, 2021.

²⁶ Tasnim News Agency. 2021. "Iran and the Issue of Afghanistan [in Persian]." September 7, 2021.

²⁷ *Tehran Times*. 2021. "Qalibaf Says Sanctions and Distortion Are Two Serious Wars against Islamic Revolution." October 12, 2021.

Iran's Dilemma

A major dilemma facing Iran is that its adopted policy might help its regional rivals. Pragmatic engagement with the Taliban could benefit Pakistan. Over the past few decades, Iran and Pakistan have been careful not to antagonize one another — for several reasons, including the fact that they share an interest in curbing Baloch separatism in their territories and that Pakistan relies on Iran for electricity and energy.²⁸ But they have competing interests in Afghanistan. They supported opposing sides in Afghanistan's civil war in the 1990s.

Iranian officials have tried to communicate their concerns to Pakistan. In a meeting with Pakistan's then Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi about 10 days after the fall of Kabul, Raisi, Iran's president, pointedly said, "paternalism toward Afghanistan is the American failed model and does not stand the chance to create enduring peace and stability in Afghanistan."²⁹ Raisi repeated a similar line in his brief reference to Afghanistan in his address to the U.N. General Assembly in September: "paternalism, just like occupation, is doomed to failure."³⁰

In October, Kamal Kharrazi, the head of Iran's Strategic Council on Foreign Relations, said, "the interests of the Taliban and the interests of Pakistan, as the main supporter of the Taliban, entail a change in the Taliban's behavior during its rule so that peace inside Afghanistan and good neighborliness with its neighbors can be achieved." Kharrazi, a former foreign minister of Iran, added only then will Pakistan benefit from a stable neighbor such as Afghanistan, which could help its strategic depth.³¹

Similarly, some Iranian analysts have warned that Iran's lack of support for the Tajiks and Hazaras could open the space for its other regional rivals — such as Turkey — to become active in northern Afghanistan.³² In May, some 40 former Afghan military and political leaders met at the residence of ethnic Uzbek leader Abdul Rashid Dostum in Ankara to announce the formation of a High Council of National Resistance against the Taliban.³³ Only time will tell whether this means increased Turkish involvement in Afghan affairs and how Iran might respond to it.

²⁸ Nader, Alireza et al. 2014. *Iran's Influence in Afghanistan: Implications for the U.S. Drawdown*. Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation.

²⁹ Office of the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran. 2021. "Iranian President's Meeting with Pakistani Foreign Minister [in Persian]." August 26, 2021, <https://www.president.ir/fa/130768>.

³⁰ Raisi, Ebrahim. 2021. "Speech at the U.N. General Assembly Meeting [in Persian]." September 21, 2021, <https://www.president.ir/fa/131474>.

³¹ *Tehran Times*. 2021. "Tehran's Policy toward Afghanistan Depends on the Taliban's Behavior: Official." October 13, 2021.

³² Poorhossein, Alireza. 2021. "The Purpose of the Talks Is Getting Concessions from the Taliban [in Persian]." *Arman Melli*, October 27, 2021.

³³ Al Arabiya. 2022. "Exiled Afghan Warlords Form Resistance Council to Fight Taliban." May 19, 2022. <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/world/2022/05/19/Exiled-Afghan-warlords-form-resistance-council-to-fight-Taliban>.

Conclusion

Despite the current rapprochement, most likely mistrust, tension and precarity will characterize Iran-Taliban relations in the future. There are several potential sources of tension between the two sides. At the end of the day, Shia Iran is politically and ideologically opposed to the Taliban. It does not want a Sunni extremist group to successfully transition from an insurgent group into a state party, thereby presenting Iran with a permanent menace on its doorstep. In fact, a major dilemma for Iran is how to counter the threat of ISIL without legitimizing the Taliban or facilitating their success.

The Taliban's treatment of Shia Afghans can sour relations with Iran, although it is unlikely that Iran would risk any major confrontation with the Taliban over the matter. Iranian leaders will also continue to be concerned about the production of opiates in Afghanistan and their trafficking through, and consumption in, Iran. The influx of Afghan refugees and migrants into Iran will be another source of controversy, an issue that could get worse given the collapse of the Afghan economy and the Taliban's repressive policies on the one hand and Iran's own economic hardships on the other.

Given the fact that Iran is the lower riparian country on two transboundary rivers originating in Afghanistan, water-sharing disputes will also test Iran-Taliban relations. Officials in Tehran have in recent months accused the Taliban of violating Iran's water rights by refusing to open the gates of the newly constructed Kamal Khan Dam on the Helmand River, which flows into Lake Hamoon in Iran's Sistan-Baluchistan province. In May, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian said the Taliban's stance on the water-sharing issue will be one factor affecting Iran's interaction with the ruling group in Afghanistan.³⁴ With the worsening water crisis in the region, tensions between the two states over water rights will likely heighten in the future, casting a shadow over Iran-Taliban relations.

Finally, Iranian perception of the Taliban will be in part a function of the latter's relations with Iran's regional and trans-regional adversaries. For a long time after the group's emergence on the Afghan political scene, Iranian leaders perceived the Taliban as a tool serving the interests of Saudi Arabia and the United States. Saudi Arabia was one of three countries to recognize the Taliban government in the 1990s, but bilateral relations fell apart after 9/11. Rapprochement between the Taliban and Saudi Arabia will produce angst in Tehran. Similarly, Iran would feel unease if the Taliban were to mend its relations with the United States.

For the moment, though, the authorities in Tehran seem to have calculated that their safest bet is to coexist with the Taliban as they wait to see how things unfold in Afghanistan. Some Iranian analysts have warned that the Islamic Republic's decision to court the Taliban is a strategic blunder. Regardless of how Iran's new policy in Afghanistan may play out, one thing is certain: given the new strategic environment on its eastern borders, Iran will be forced to pay far more attention to its "backyard" than ever before.

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³⁴ Mehr News Agency. 2022. "Afghanistan Must Respect Iran's Water Share from Helmand [in Persian]." May 10, 2022. <https://www.mehrnews.com/news/5486207>.

About the Authors: A. Farid Tookhy is a researcher and political analyst. He is a senior fellow on Afghanistan and Middle East at the Institute for Peace and Diplomacy, based in Toronto, Canada. He served with the United Nations in Afghanistan, Sudan and South Sudan. Tookhy holds a Ph.D. in political science and government from Georgetown University and has held teaching appointments in his alma mater and at the University of Ottawa.

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