



Potential Cooperation:

Iranian Possible Cooperation with Taliban to Curb Threats

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The situation in Afghanistan, after the Taliban took over the country, is the second key issue that the new Iranian president, Ebrahim Raisi's, foreign policy agenda, after re-viving the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

Factors Governing the Relation

Following is a discussion of the factors which govern the relationship between Iran and Afghanistan, in its current status:

1- Geographical proximity: Afghanistan is Iran's eastern neighbour. The border between the two countries is 950-kilometer-long. Consequently, instability in Afghanistan over the past decades possessed a concern for Iran.

2- Demographic overlap: Both countries share overlapping demographic structure of population, especially in border towns. The Baluch, for instance, live in Baluchistan and Sistan, in the East of Iran, and also in the western region of Afghanistan. It is noteworthy that the region where the Baluch live is a cause of much anxiety to Iran, as it is the home of Sunni movements, opposing the Iranian regime.

Other Iran-related ethnicities are Tajiks and other ethnicities that live in the Eastern parts of Afghanistan. Such common demography makes Iran particularly interested in the situation in Afghanistan.

3- Iran's desire to protect Afghanistan's Shi'ite Muslims: Iran always projects an image of itself as a protector of Shi'ite Muslims in Afghanistan and the whole world. According to estimates, Shi'ite Muslims constitute 15 to 29 per cent of Afghanistan's population. Most of them are Twelver Shia, just like most Iranian Shia Muslims. There is a strong relationship between Iran and Afghan Shi'ite Muslims, especially Hazaras. There are other Shi'ite tribes in Afghanistan, such as the Farsiwan, the Qizilbash and the Sayyeds. Tehran is anxious about the safety of Shi'ite Muslims in Afghanistan after the Sunni Taliban has taken over. Iranian fears are legitimate, given the fact that in 1998 the Taliban launched

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an extensive attack on Mazari Sharif, an important Shi'ite city in the northern region of Afghanistan, laying a siege to the Iran's consulate, and killing ten Iranian diplomats in retaliation for Iran's support of the northern tribes, led by Burhanuddin Rabbani and Ahmad Shah Massoud.

4- Trade exchange and water resources: Iran and Afghanistan have always been close trade partners, and trade between the countries is vital to both of them. For instance, trade exchange between the two countries amounted to 4 billion USD last year. Most of the trade between the two countries is exchanged via three border crossing points. Besides, some of the rivers that flow through Iran come from Afghanistan, the most important of which being the Helmand.

Cooperation with the Taliban

Iran has sought to open communication channels with the Taliban aiming to seek a rapprochement that would serve Tehran's interests. This is manifest in the following:

1- Iran is providing military support for the Taliban: Tehran has provided the Taliban with military aid, including light weapons and anti-tank missiles. Besides, the Taliban forces received training in Iran. In addition, Tehran is hosting the Taliban leaders' families in the cities of Zahedan, Zabol, Mashhad, Kerman, Isfahan and Qom.

In addition, IRGC was accused of sending drones to take photos of parts of Farah province in western Afghanistan to give the Taliban coordinates that would assist the movement in launching attacks against the Afghan government. It is worth mentioning, however, that this support is limited compared to Iran's support of Shi'ite militia.

Generally speaking, however, by supporting the Taliban Iran is probably aiming at winning favour with the movement and gaining ground in combatting the American presence in Afghanistan. Iran

wants to further maintain any gained leverage over the former Afghan government with which it used to have a strong economic relationship.

2- Iran is seeking to open a communication channel with Afghanistan: Tehran has already started to enhance diplomatic communication with the Taliban. In January 2021, Iranian former foreign minister Javad Zarif and other top officials received a Taliban delegation. On Jan 27, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar left his premises in Qatar for Tehran to meet Ali Shamkhani, secretary of the Supreme National Security Council of Iran. Shamkhani commended the Taliban for the remarkable resilience it showed in its battles against the US.

3- Iran is keen on securing Hazaras' allegiance:

Hosam Radwi, director of foreign affairs office in the IRGC-backed Tasnim news agency, warned the Shi'ite Hazaras from fighting against the Taliban, claiming that the Shi'ite who get killed when fighting the Taliban bring it on themselves. Meanwhile, Kayhan, an Iranian newspaper strongly associated with supreme leader of Iran Ali Khamenei, praised the Taliban on July 24, in an article whose title was "The Taliban has mended its approach and no longer slaughters people." In the article, the Afghan movement was described as 'the new Taliban', in reference to the fact that the Taliban has given up targeting Shi'ite.

Iranian Concerns

Iran is concerned over the Taliban's success in taking over one Afghan city after another. The reasons of Tehran's fears can be summed up as follows:

1- Afghanistan may turn into a terrorist haven under the Taliban rule: Tehran fears that Afghanistan may become a safe haven to terrorist organizations, such as al-Qaeda and ISIS, under the Taliban's rule. It is true that Iran, pragmatically enough, received al-Qaeda leaders and reached agreements with them whereby they were granted safe passage



from Afghanistan to Iraq through Iranian territories. It is also true that Tehran allowed these leaders to collect money in return for not carrying out any anti-Iran terrorist attacks, whether in Iran itself or outside it. However, Iran has not reached a similar understanding with the Taliban yet. Therefore, as it became obvious that the Taliban would have the upper hand in Afghanistan, Iran started, in the last few weeks, to deploy its army and IRGC along its border with Afghanistan, to face any potential threats, especially as it is possible for terrorists to infiltrate Iran with the Afghan refugees flowing into it.

2- Afghanistan may become a base for separatist movements: Tehran also fears the possibility of Afghanistan's becoming a base for separatist movements, such as the Sunni Baluch.

4- Influx of Afghan refugees: Instability in Afghanistan may result in huge migration waves from the country into Iran. According to estimates, a million Afghans are expected to cross the borders to Iran to avoid fighting or to escape the Taliban's rule. Iran already gave refuge to about 2.5 (registered and unregistered) million Afghans. These huge numbers undoubtedly put more pressure on Iran's economy, which is already suffering from the sanctions. Iranians have to deal with water and electricity crises repeatedly, so the last thing Iran needs is more Afghan refugees.

Tehran tried to eschew this migration problem by directing migrants to Turkey. Afghans would warmly welcome such a step as it facilitates their passage to EU countries. However, Turkey has recently begun to see to it that its borders be closed in immigrants' faces.

4- Iran's economy may be negatively affected for a considerable period of time: The Taliban has taken over major border crossing points between Afghanistan and Iran, such as Islam Qala and Abu Nasr Farahi, in addition to important border towns.

This has paralyzed the flow of trade between both countries, which previously amounted to 4 billion dollars. These short-term losses, however, can be compensated when stability is achieved in Afghanistan, as trade relations between the two countries will be resumed.

5. Iran's water-related interests could be in danger: Instability in Afghanistan may threaten Iran's water-related interests there. It is expected that the 'new' regime will follow in the footsteps of former Afghan president Ashraf Ghani by demanding Iranian oil in return for Afghan river water. It is noteworthy that president Ghani stressed that principle in a speech he delivered after inaugurating the Kamal Khan Dam last March. This relatively new Afghan policy is expected to negatively affect Iran's quota of the water of Helmand River. The situation is even aggravated by the fact that Iran is currently experiencing its worst drought in more than 50 years, which resulted in huge protests in many Iranian cities.

Potential Scenarios

As far as dealing with the situation in Afghanistan is concerned, Iran has to choose between three scenarios as per the following:

1- The First scenario: opting for positive neutrality: According to this scenario, Iran will closely watch the developments in Afghanistan for a limited period of time, in order to find out whether the measures and steps taken by the Taliban will constitute a threat to Tehran's security and economic interests. Based on this short-term policy, Tehran will decide whether it can cooperate with the Taliban or adopt a hostile attitude towards it.

2- The second scenario: waging a proxy war: Iran could resort to Shi'ite militia in order to have some leverage over the Taliban. In this case, Tehran will have to recall Liwa Fatemiyoun from Syria (where it has fought since 2012) to Afghanistan. This brigade consists of Shiite Afghans trained by IRGC. Iran will




also have to depend on the Baba Mazari militia, which, according to former foreign minister Zarif, consists of five thousand fighters. In addition, Iran can resort to former warlords who still have grudge against Afghanistan, such as Ahmed Massoud, son of Ahmed Shah Massoud, and Salahuddin Rabbani, son of the late Burhanuddin Rabbani.

3- The third scenario: seeking cooperation: Tehran may use the military support it provided for the Taliban in the past to build cooperative relations with it, based on common interests between them. According to this scenario, Iran will try to contain any conflicts with the movement, especially those pertaining to terrorism and separatist movements.


In conclusion, it can be said that Tehran will most probably seek to establish cooperation with the Taliban, if the latter does not try to harm Iran's interests. In this respect, Tehran will try to make use of its already successful economic cooperation with Afghanistan. At the same time, Iran will go on supporting pro-Iran Afghan militia, lest the new Taliban government should adopt anti-Iran policies.

ABOUT FARAS

Future for Advanced Research and Studies (FARAS) is an independent think tank founded on April 4, 2014 in Abu Dhabi, U.A.E. FARAS seeks to enrich public dialogue, support decision-making and enhance academic research pertaining to future trends that currently constitute a real problem in the Middle East region. In light of instability and unpredictability, the overarching goal of FARAS is to help ward off future shocks regarding these developments.

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