

Iran and Afghanistan: Growing Tensions after the Return of the Taliban

Written by Grant Farr

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GRANT FARR, AUG 23 2022

Iran and Afghanistan share a common border, similar languages and cultures, and in many ways common regional interests. But the Taliban takeover of the Afghan government in 2021 has introduced new challenges to this relationship. These challenges include the access to water from Afghan rivers, the large number of Afghan refugees in Iran, the flow of illicit drugs into Iran, and the Taliban attack on Shia Muslims.

Trouble at the border

On July 3, 2022, Iranian border authorities and Taliban border guards engaged in gun battles at the Iran-Afghan border in the Iranian province of Baluchistan. One person on the Afghan side was killed. Iran claims the clash occurred because Taliban forces attempted to raise their flag “in an area that is not Afghan territory” (Reuters, 2022). This clash, while minor compared to fighting in other areas, is indicative of the growing tensions. On August 14th, 2022, an Iranian delegation arrived in Kabul to discuss border issues with Afghanistan, and particularly the increasing conflicts between the two nations regarding water rights and refugees. This coincided with the July clash in the Darwish area of Kang district of Nimruz Province of Afghanistan where at least one Taliban soldier was killed (Eqbal, 2022).

Iran and Afghanistan share a 572-mile border that starts in Northwest Afghanistan at the tripoint with Turkmenistan and ends at the southern tripoint with Pakistan. The border was drawn largely by the British in 1872. In that year, a committee headed by British civil servant Sir Frederic Goldsmid was asked by the Iranian Shah Naser al-Din Shah Qajar to determine the border after a series of clashes between Iran and Afghanistan (Balland, 2000). This drawing of the border has been generally accepted since, but in some areas tensions remain. The area along the border is mostly arid, supporting little inhabitation, except for the Lake Hamun area near the Zabol-Zaranj border in the southern region. There are three major border crossings: Islam Qala in the northern area, Abu Nasr Farahi in the middle area, and the Zaranj border crossing in the southern Baluchistan area. The Zaranj border crossing is the major crossing. Most goods and products enter Afghanistan through the Zaranj crossing and this is also where most Afghan refugees attempt to enter Iran. This area encompassing eastern Iran, western Afghanistan, and parts of Central Asia is known in Persian as *Khorasan* and was established as a region during the Sasanian dynasty (224–651 CE) – the last Iranian dynasty before the coming of Islam. This area is important in Iranian mythology and plays a major role in Persian legends and folktales (Zeidan).

Herat, the major city in western Afghanistan, is over 100 miles from the border, and Mashhad, the major city in eastern Iran is approximately 130 miles from the border. Zaranj, the only Afghan city near the border, has a population of over 100,000 people. Zaranj – an Afghan city in the Dasht-e Margow desert in the southern area – has little political or economic importance. It is known mostly as a jumping off place for smugglers going into or out of Iran. Despite its remoteness, the Zaranj border crossing sees considerable traffic. Goods crossing the border include construction material, petroleum and food items mostly travelling from Iran to Afghanistan. Afghanistan makes considerable money taxing goods coming into the country. However perhaps the most important and contentious exports to Iran are refugees and illegal drugs.

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Water Rights

The Helmand River begins as a tributary in the Sanglakh range of the Hindu Kush in Northeastern Afghanistan. It then flows southwest across Afghanistan passing through the Afghan city of Lashkargah and eventually feeding Hamun Lake on the southern border between Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. It is the major water source for the Sistan Basin in southwest Afghanistan and southeast Iran. Lake Hamun is a series of lakes, shallow lagoons, and marshes, located mostly in Iran. The lake has no outlets, so the water that flows into the lake stays there (or evaporates). It is Iran's largest freshwater lake – important to the economy and the environment. Lake Hamun is in the Iranian province of Sistan-Baluchistan, the poorest province in Iran. Between 1999 and 2001 a severe drought in the region led to a shrinking water supply; in some areas the lake completely dried up. The Iranian government estimates that 25% to 30% of the population in the region have left the area over the past two decades because of water shortages and moved to the suburbs of major Iranian cities in the region (VonHein 2021). In 2016 UNESCO designated Lake Hamun a world biosphere reserve with the goal of preserving the ecological, cultural, and economic importance of the lake. The water from the Helmand is vital to farmers on both sides of the border, and conflicts have recently arisen over who gets to control the water. Over the years Afghanistan has constructed a series of dams to control water flow from the Helmand River for irrigation and hydro-electric power. These dams have restricted the amount of water going to Iran, to Iran's increasing consternation.

A major issue of contention between Iran and Afghanistan is the construction of the Kamal Khan Dam in Afghanistan on the lower Helmand. The dam is located about 60 miles southeast of Zaranj – about 60 miles from the border. Work on the dam began in 1996, but construction was suspended because of fighting in Afghanistan and a lack of technical expertise. The project resumed in 2014 and the dam was officially inaugurated in March 2021. Iran has expressed concerns about the dam, fearing it would shut off or dramatically reduce their water supply for this arid region. In 1973 Iran and Afghanistan had signed a water sharing accord giving Iran the rights to 22 cubic meters per second of water with the option of an additional 4 cubic feet (VonHein, 2021). Iran maintains that this is not an equitable agreement and that it should receive more water. On August 3, 2022, Mujeeb-ur-Rahman Omar, Taliban deputy minister of energy and water, said that the Taliban government would not grant Iran additional water supply as was agreed upon in the treaty.

Currently without diplomatic relations between the two countries (Iran does not recognize the Taliban government) and with no one in Kabul to discuss this issue with, there is little chance of reaching a more equitable agreement. Adding to the tension, Iran claims that Afghan farmers are digging additional water canals to capture even more water – and armed conflict between the Iranian military and Afghan farmers over these water rights has taken place (Ramachandran 2022).

Refugees

Another issue that has caused tension between Afghanistan and Iran is the growing refugees situation. At the time of the Taliban takeover in August 2021, it was estimated that there were over 3 million Afghan refugees in Iran of which 780,000 are registered and another 586,000 are admitted with passports and visas (Rich, 2022). There is no accurate count of the non-registered refugees, where they live, or what they do. However, although the refugees in Iran come from all areas of Afghanistan and represent all ethnic groups, it is generally believed that they are mostly Tajiks (Persian speakers) or Hazara (Shia Muslims undergoing persecution in Afghanistan). Much of the Afghan refugee population in Iran is concentrated around the major cities where they attempt to find work in low level construction trades (Sawhney 2020).

Afghan refugees who are officially registered in Iran have some support. Their children are allowed to go to school, they are eligible for medical services, and Afghan men are allowed to marry Iranian women. But for those Afghans in Iran who are not officially registered, perhaps most of the Afghans in Iran, the situation is not good. With the Taliban take over, the number of Afghans fleeing to Iran has dramatically increased. In 2021 the Norwegian Refugee Council estimated that as many as 4,000-5,000 Afghans are fleeing to Iran each day (Jazeera 2021). Most attempted to enter Iran illegally around the Southern border near Zaranj. Reports describe Zaranj as overflowing with Afghans seeking to be smuggled into Iran (France24, 2022). Iran has also been sending unregistered refugees back to Afghanistan. It

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is estimated that over one million Afghan refugees who were in Iran have been sent back to Afghanistan in 2021, mostly after the Taliban take over. In many cases, the returning refugees simply turn around and attempt to flee to Iran again (Omid, 2021).

The refugee situation has created friction between Iran and Afghanistan. Videos showing Afghan refugees being mistreated by Iranian border guards have been shown on Kabul TV creating anger among Afghans. In Kabul protesters have demonstrated at the Iranian Embassy and thrown rocks at the Iranian consulate in Zaranj (Khan, 2022). This refugee issue is sure to escalate as more Afghans try to flee and Iran continues to send them back.

Drugs

For the last several decades Afghanistan has been the world's leading producer of opium. It is now branching out – producing heroin, marijuana, and methamphetamines. In 2020, the last year that statistics on opium production were reported, Afghanistan produced over 6,000 tons of opium and 320 tons of pure heroin, supplying 85 percent of the global opium production (UNODC, 2021). This drug trade produces over 2 billion dollars, of which most goes to smugglers and traffickers and little to the farmers. Most of these drugs are smuggled through Iran, Pakistan, or north through Central Asia.

Traditionally Iran, and other countries in the region, have allowed the use of opium – but not alcohol or other drugs. The Islamic government in Iran has gone back and forth on the use of opium, essentially declaring it illegal, but understanding that its use is common. References to opium are found in classical Iranian literature and folklore. The Persian word for opium is *afyun* or *taryak*, and it is seen as an antidote for the troubles of the world and a medicine for treating disease. While Iran may have accepted the limited domestic use of opium in the past, this view has changed in the last few years as Iran had seen a dramatic increase in the abuse of drugs. Iran now has the second most severe opioid addiction in the world (Zarghami, 2015). Most of these drugs come from Afghanistan. While the Taliban have officially outlawed the growing of opium and the production of heroin, it continues unabated.

Iran has move aggressively to stop the flow of illegal drugs into the country. According to the UNODC World Drug report, Iran accounts for 74 per cent of the world's opium seizures and 25 per cent of the world's heroin and morphine seizures. Iran has spent millions of dollars annually on border control. Fighting drugs on the Afghan border is dangerous work. Iran reports that more than 3,700 drug agents have been killed and over 12,000 injured in counter-narcotics operations. (UNODC, 2021).

The Persecution of Shia Muslims

Afghanistan is a majority Islamic country, although it had a small Hindu and Sikh population until recent times. In addition, there were small, but active, Catholic and Jewish communities in Kabul – most of whom have left. There are also small populations of Ismailis and Zoroastrians. The Muslim population in Afghanistan makes up 99 per cent of the population and is divided between Sunni Muslims of between 80–85 per cent, and Shia Muslims who comprise the remaining 15–20 per cent. No accurate census of Afghanistan has ever been attempted, so population numbers are educated guesses (CIA, 2022).

The Taliban follow a conservative brand of Islamic fundamentalist Islam referred to as Deobandism. Deobandism developed in the Indian subcontinent in the 1850s. It was preached by Pakistani Islamic parties in Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan in the 1980s. There it mixed with Pashtun tribal customs to form a very conservative religious/cultural ideology that dramatically restricted the role of women and called for the punishment of other religions. Deobandism, at least as practiced by the Taliban, is especially hostile towards other Islamic sects, particularly Shia Muslims, whom they consider heretics and idolators.

Shia Islam came to Afghanistan between 1501 and 1736 CE when the Safavid dynasty ruled Iran and controlled a large area of central Asia. The Shia in Afghanistan belong mostly to the Hazara ethnic group, but also includes the small numbers of Qizilbash and other small Shia populations. The Hazara historically live in the high mountains of the Hindu Kush in an area called the Hazarajat, although in the last few decades many have moved to Kabul, where they

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now live in large encampments around the city. The Shia are considered heretics and idolaters by the Taliban and are harassed and even murdered. This persecution of Shia is in part because the Shia venerate descendants of the Prophet Mohammed, whom they call Imams. These imams live in the Shia community as a separate caste. The Shia veneration of the prophet's family challenges Mohammed as the last of the prophets and this is considered heretical to Sunni Muslims.

To date the Taliban has killed hundreds of Afghan Shia, mostly Hazara. Much of the killings have been bombing of Shia mosques, although Shia are also randomly pulled from buses or singled out in public and shot. Complicating the picture, many of the killings may be the work of the Islamic State of Khorasan, which shares the same view of the Shia as the Taliban. Iran has good reason to fear the Taliban's treatment of Shia in Afghanistan. When the Taliban first controlled Afghanistan between 1996–2001, it murdered 10 Iranian diplomats and an Iranian journalist in Mazar-Sharif in August 1998 at the Iranian consulate. The killing was thought to be the work of *Sipah-e Shahaba Pakistan*, a Pakistani terrorist group working with the Taliban. The killings were thought to be revenge for Iran's support for the resistance group, the Northern Alliance, which had killed several hundred Taliban fighters previously.

As the major Shia country in the world, Iran sees that its role is to support and protect Shia populations throughout the Islamic world. Iran has also created a military unit referred to as the *Fatemiyouon*, made up of Afghan-Shia refugees in Iran. *Fatemiyouon*, *Liwa Fatemiyouon* in Arabic, literally means Fatimid's Banner, and was formed by Iran in 2014 to fight in Syria to defend the shrine of *Zaynab bint Ali*, who is the prophet Mohammed's granddaughter (Jamal 2018). This unit has been used by Iran to assist Shia resistance movements in Syria and Yemen. Since it is made up mostly of Afghan Shia who have fled to Iran, there is an expectation that the *Fatemiyouon* may be sent to Afghanistan by Iran to protect the Afghan Shia. but, to date, this has not occurred.

Conclusion

Iran and Afghanistan share a common history, a long border, a similar language, and culture. Yet they have had had conflicts over water rights, refugees, drugs, and the persecution of Shia and other groups. The Taliban have been in power in Afghanistan for a year at the time of writing, and Iran is still attempting to ascertain if they can work with the Taliban in any capacity. The tensions between Iran and Afghanistan may well increase, and the possibility of armed conflict remains.

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Iran and Afghanistan: Growing Tensions after the Return of the Taliban

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