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Iran-Afghan relations: A historical analysis

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Abstract

Iran is an actual neighboring state of Afghanistan and shares a long border of 936 km. Iran is a critical country with stakes in neighboring Afghanistan and shares historical, cultural, economic, and linguistic ties. After the withdrawal of Soviet troops, civil war erupted in Afghanistan; as the result of the civil war, the Taliban emerged and Iran supported Northern Alliance against the Taliban militants. Tehran considered the Taliban regime a threat to its national security because the Taliban follows the Sunni sect of Islam and Iran is a Shiite state. The incident of 9/11 changed the security structure of the world and foes became friends in several cases. The American invasion in Afghanistan provided a chance for Iran to come closer to the new regime in Afghanistan. Iran supported the U.S. troops against the Taliban militants but considered them a threat to Tehran. Iran also was facing militant movements in its Sunni majority provinces. Iran did not enjoy cordial ties with the U.S. after the 1979 revolution. The end of the Taliban regime provided an opportunity for Iran to enhance its historical and cultural ties with Kabul. The American presence in Afghanistan was not in favor of the theocratic state Iran. Tehran had cordial relations with the Afghan government in Kabul and working on various projects in Afghanistan. Iran also has ties with hardcore militants of the Taliban. This research highlights the historical relations of Iran and Afghanistan.

Keywords: Iran, Afghanistan, Taliban, America, Soviet

Introduction

Iran has a complicated relationship with Afghanistan despite strong religious and cultural ties and a long shared border. Iran's clamorous birth coincided with the Soviet Union's intervention in Afghanistan some forty years ago. Since then, Iran's attempts to protect its interests in Afghanistan have not received much attention from the outside world, but it remains one of the most critical neighboring countries for Tehran's foreign policy. There have been several reports of tactical understandings between Iran and the Taliban. This stands opposed to the Taliban regime's era, which received patronage from Saudi Arabia, Iran's arch-rival. However, the post-9/11 world order changed and old attitudes changed as new geopolitical facts emerged. One such change was Saudi-Taliban relations, as it became difficult for the Saudi Kingdom to support the Taliban at the cost of its traditional ally, America. Saudi Arabia's harsh stand against Doha, where the Taliban maintains its political office, and Qatar's good relations with Tehran have helped Iran and the Taliban become closer. This shows Iran's ability and willingness to play different roles depending on the context and changing circumstances. It is unlikely that developments in Afghanistan will alter Iran's level of support for proxies in Syria and particularly Iraq; backing proxies is already a strategic priority. But if the sectarian divide between Iran and Taliban-ruled Afghanistan sharpens, Iran could further rely on the Shiite proxies it has trained and armed. The new Iranian government has pledged to prioritize relations in the immediate neighborhood more than its predecessor, who spent much of its time drawing western investors and dealing with the nuclear issue. Things have changed in Afghanistan; the Taliban have entered into Kabul and running the state affairs. The Taliban regime is facing severe challenges on different domestic and international fronts. This research focuses on the traditional ties of Iran and Afghanistan.

Research Methodology

The researcher used a qualitative method to complete his research paper. The researcher approached different media personalities to get helpful information to complete his research work. The researcher got most of the data from the existing literature.

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The researcher helped from research papers, online articles and newspapers to complete his research paper. The researcher also used electronic and print media to get relevant data to complete his research paper. Online journals and books helped the researcher to expand his knowledge on this specific research topic.

Iran Relations with Afghanistan

Afghanistan shares its 936 kilometers of western borders with Iran. The provinces of Farah, Herat, and Nimruz are linked with Iran. Afghan-Iran border crosses through rivers and deserts. Before 1979 Iran had a pro-American government headed by King Raza Shah Pehlevi. The primary concern of King's government was to stop communism in the region. But Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the establishment of the Communist government endangered the core objectives of Iran in the area and the revolution in Iran; the government of Ayatollah Khomeini also considered Soviet Invasion as a threat to the stability of Iran. But due to the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88), Iran could not help the Afghan Mujahedeen. America, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan supported Mujahedeen to defeat Soviet Union.

Later with the help of Pakistan Taliban took control over Kabul and most of the parts of Afghanistan. Taliban established their government in Afghanistan in 1996. Iran considered the Taliban as a threat to the stability of Iran and its influence in the South and Central Asian region. Iran had wanted to enhance its impact on the energy-rich part of Central Asia. But after the arrival of the Taliban in Afghanistan, it was difficult for Iran to reach out to the Central Asian States. However, Iran shares its borders with Turkmenistan. Iran also shares cultural and ethnic ties with the other Central Asian States. Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have a large number of people who can speak and understand Farsi. But in Afghanistan, the control of the Taliban with the help of Pakistan and Saudi Arabia was the real worry for Iran. The Eastern province of Iran has a large community of Sunni Muslims. Sunni Muslims in the eastern region of Iran named Baluchistan were opposing Shia theocracy. Taliban also supported those insurgents in Iran.

Despite considerable differences, the Iranian regime started to support the Taliban against America in Afghanistan. Iran played both sides of the wicket; she also supported the Afghan government to stop America from hitting Iran's nuclear sites. Taliban got benefits from the American-Iran rivalry. Iran presently sees its interest in Afghanistan through the spectrum of American-Iran rivalry. Iran is supporting both militants and the Afghan government at the same time. However, Iran does not want a complete victory over the Taliban. But Iran wants to minimize American's influence in South Asia and Afghanistan. In the beginning, both America and the Taliban supported each other to topple the Taliban regime and set up a new government in Afghanistan. Both Iran and America supported the foot soldiers of the Northern Alliance to defeat the Taliban.

Iran and America both wanted a centralized government in Afghanistan that would stop the revival of the Taliban in the country. Iran had closed ties with Northern Alliance leaders. Northern Alliance did not want to share power with Hamid Karzai in the government. Iran used her influence on Northern leaders to sit with Karzai in the government. The end of the Taliban regime provided Iran an opportunity to build its relations with her neighbor and enhance her

influence in Afghanistan. The Taliban had been firmly against the Shia community in Afghanistan during its reign. In the year 1998, in the city of Mazer-e Sharif, eight diplomats were killed. Iran deployed its forces on the Iran-Afghan border. It was a tense situation, but Iran did not try to war against the Taliban. Iran increased its support to the Northern Alliance to harm the Taliban. But the end of the Taliban regime had been a positive thing from the perspective of Iran-Afghan relations. But still today, Iran has a demented policy towards Afghanistan. Iran is hosting Taliban leaders and militants of Hizb e Islami, but on the other hand, Iran is also providing financial aid to the Afghan government. It's a difficult thing to understand Iran's policy towards Afghanistan. America toppled the Taliban regime in 2001. As a result, American troops have been stationed right in Central Asia next to the Iran border. This presence of the military in the region disturbs the security dynamics of Iran.

Iran's eastern areas have the same modern history as the border areas of Afghanistan in the west. Both states have some everyday things like traditions, religion, and language. But Sectarian differences create troubles between both sides. Afghanistan has a Sunni majority, while Iran has Shia Muslims in large numbers. Afghanistan is the country in the region that shares Islamo-Persian identity with Iran. Iran only sees Afghanistan as a state intervened by Super Powers and its severe effects on Iran. Soviets invaded Afghanistan and approximately 1.5 million refugees fled towards Iran. At the same time, the American invasion put up thousands of soldiers in front of Iran.

After removing the Taliban government, Iran was a solid chance to get into Afghanistan based on the same culture and history. Iran also tried its best to support Afghanistan's reconstruction phase. In 2002 Iran announced to help Afghanistan's reconstruction phase with 570 million dollars. This was a positive sign of the relation between Afghanistan and Iran. President Karzai thanked Iran for her assistance in bringing peace to Afghanistan.

Economic ties between Iran and Afghanistan have become more assertive. In 2006, Iran tried to enhance its economic relations with Iran and announced 100 million dollars for the reconstruction phase of Afghanistan. Different companies in Iran are also working in Afghanistan on various projects. Iran's primary focus is on constructing roads to connect both countries. Afghanistan has not been associated directly with the sea route. Iran and India want to decrease Afghanistan's dependency on Pakistan. For this purpose, Iran will work on road projects to connect Afghanistan with Chabhar port.

The government of Iran has directly supported the development of Herat city. Iran has planned a rail track from Herat to Mashhad. This rail track will help the economy of Afghanistan. Herat is considered the most developed and well-managed city of Afghanistan due to the cooperation of Iran. Many districts to Herat province back in 2011 were transferred to the Afghan forces. It shows Iran's role in stabilizing Herat province.

Iran's efforts towards the strong economy of Afghanistan are seen in western parts of Afghanistan. Iran is providing non-stop electricity to the residents of Herat. Even though Kabul has a shortage of electricity, but Herat has enough electricity to use. Iran's different companies are investing in Afghanistan. Iran's largest automobile company announced to invest about 20 million dollars in Herat. This project will

boost the country's economy, and these steps have shown Iran's interest in Afghanistan. Iran also showed great interest in enhancing trade ties between both countries. To strengthen trade relations, Iran set up the Chamber of Commerce in 2009.

Iran is also helping Afghanistan in the energy sector. Iran is an energy-rich country in the region and gives almost fifty percent of Afghanistan's oil utilization. Iran-Afghan trade is nearly half of Afghanistan's economy. However, this move is one way only. Iran sends only its products to the Afghan market. International sanctions affected not only Iran but also Afghanistan. Iran's currency is highly under pressure due to the sanctions. Iran's minister for trade said that many Afghans are working in Iran and due to these sanctions, they are going to lose their jobs. It reflects the pressure on Iran's and Afghanistan's economies.

After the Taliban regime, Iran has set up good relations with the Afghan government of Hamid Karzai and later Ashraf Ghani. Karzai was the first Afghan President with a Pashtun background. Iran accepted him as President and showed interest in working with him. Iranian foreign minister said we are ready to work with a positive approach with our brotherly country Afghanistan. He said Iran would continue to support her neighbor and brotherly Muslim country, Afghanistan.

Iran has supported Afghanistan in the economic sector and Iran also wants to enhance people-to-people contact. For this purpose, Iran has invested in the education sector. Iran has set up a university in Kabul and announced establishing campuses of well-known Iranian universities in Afghanistan.

There is no doubt that Iran has invested a handsome amount in Afghanistan. Iran has a political, social, and economic interest in Afghanistan. Iran also has its support in the different parts of Afghanistan. Iran always talked about peace in Afghanistan. But as with all other stakeholders in Afghanistan, Iran also wants peace on its terms. Iran wants a firm grasp on all stakeholders of Afghan society. Iran always talked about the Afghan-led peace process. Iranian Foreign Minister said in Tehran that Iran would not accept any peace agreement without the presence of the Afghan government. Foreign Minister said Iran would only take those talks which will be held under the umbrella of Afghanistan. Foreign forces are getting their benefits. They are not thinking about the Afghan people.

Iran rejected a peace deal between America and the Taliban. Iran says America has no legal position to deal with the Taliban. America is not talking about ordinary Afghans; President Trump is only looking at his next election. Iran favors only Afghan-led peace talks. Iran also pays stresses that only neighboring states have the right to observe those talks. Iran wants the complete withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan. Iran thinks this peace deal is only an attempt to legitimize America in Afghanistan.

Taliban have divided into different groups in Afghanistan. Iran has captured the place of Saudi Arabia in Afghanistan. Saudi Arabia has cut down its support to the Taliban militants and Iran took it a chance to get deep in the Taliban ranks and files. Iran supported Taliban militants with weapons and money. A group of Taliban emerged who are against the peace process in Afghanistan. Iran is supporting the hardliner group of Taliban militants. The emergence of the hardliner group backed by Iran creates different questions regarding Iran's role in the peace process and Iran

is working on a hedging strategy in Afghanistan and supporting Taliban militants and, at the same time as the Afghan government. Pakistan-based Taliban group is supporting Peace Process while Iran is supporting spoilers of peace. Iran also has some water issues with Afghanistan. Iran thinks the Taliban are getting a share in the future's Afghan government, so links with both identities of Afghanistan are necessary. Things are not clear from Iran's side, as Iran already rejected the peace deal between America and the Taliban. Now the Taliban have entered into Kabul and American troops have gone back. Iran has also appeared to be hesitant toward Pakistani influence in Afghanistan. The Taliban and Pakistan have developed strong relations, with some Taliban leaders being closely linked to Islamabad. Iranian experts don't think that relations between the Taliban and Tehran have reached total rupture. Things are not evident in Afghanistan; although the Taliban has announced their interim cabinet, more work is needed to make it inclusive.

Conclusion

Iran has connections within the Taliban factions. Iran does not want complete Taliban control in Afghanistan. Iran thinks the Taliban are the puppets of Pakistan. Tehran had not enjoyed cordial relations with the Taliban in the past. Iran also recruited persons from the Hazara community to send them to Syria and Iraq to fight. Militancy in Afghanistan has a remarkable impact on the rebellion segments in Iran. Iran wants to remain vital in Afghanistan and unlike 1996, now the Hazara community in Afghanistan feels comfortable with the Taliban. Like all other countries of the region, Tehran wants an inclusive government in Afghanistan. Iran does not want to host more refugees from Afghanistan. Iran fears ISKP but thinks that the Taliban can control and protect Afghan soil from other militant actors.

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