

ISKP: Impact on Afghanistan-Iran Relations

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Introduction

The Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), an affiliate of the Islamic State (IS) in the region, has become a major concern for both Afghanistan and Iran. Its presence has created a sense of insecurity and potential for conflict between the two neighbouring countries. ISKP takes advantage of the ongoing chaos and instability in Afghanistan.¹ The group's violent ideology and brutal tactics have earned it a reputation for extreme cruelty. It poses a direct threat to the struggling Taliban regime, which is attempting to establish its control over the country.

Tehran's strategy towards the Taliban is shaped by various bilateral and regional elements, such as historical conflicts and disagreements. A major point of contention is the religious divide, with Iran being predominantly Shia and the Taliban being a Sunni group.² The Salafi ideology-inspired ISKP's approach towards the Shia Iran is even more extreme. It considers Shia Muslims, a significant population in Iran, as apostates, making them vulnerable to attacks. Its presence on the Afghan soil, therefore, adds to the intricacies of Iran's interaction with the Afghan Taliban. While various factors have affected Afghanistan-Iran relations in the recent past, this paper aims to examine the emergence of ISKP and assess its impact on the relationship between Afghanistan and Iran.

Major Aspects of Afghanistan-Iran Relations

Iran considers Afghanistan one of its most important neighbours due to its sharing of a 921-km border with the country in addition to historical, cultural, political, and economic ties. Iran's main interests in Afghanistan include security and stability. These are considered essential to address

some of its main concerns, such as controlling the flow of drugs from the second-largest opium producer worldwide; avoiding further influx of Afghan refugees into Iran, already home to the second biggest Afghan diaspora community next only to Pakistan (which might total up to 2.5 million);³ decreasing the chances for terrorist groups' presence along its borders; and increasing its exports to Afghanistan.⁴

The relationship between Iran and the Taliban is complex and has evolved over time. During the 1990s, the Taliban took control of Afghanistan and carried out mass killings of numerous Hazara people, a Shia minority group supported by Tehran and having ethnic, religious, and political ties with Iran. In 1998, tensions escalated between the two countries when the Taliban murdered eight Iranian diplomats stationed at the consulate in Mazar-e Sharif. Following the 9/11 attacks in 2001, Iran backed the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance and the US military in overthrowing the Taliban government.⁵ Moreover, a longstanding disagreement over water resources contributes to the strained relationship.

Despite these obstacles, Iran has not taken the same hostile approach it did in the 1990s; instead, it has aimed to establish a more practical and normalized relationship with the group since their assumption of power in Kabul in August 2021. Initially, Iran strongly criticized the US-Taliban deal, stating that the US had no legal authority to determine Afghanistan's future and that lasting peace could only be achieved through intra-Afghan negotiations. Tehran believed that the deal and the rapid US withdrawal it entailed would lead to increased instability and chaos, isolate Afghanistan, and diminish Iran's influence compared to rival countries like the US and Pakistan. Despite former US

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president Donald Trump's proposal for an early US troop withdrawal from Afghanistan, Tehran called for a responsible exit to prevent a Taliban takeover and the establishment of an Islamic emirate. This stance contradicted Iran's usual position, which favoured the withdrawal of US forces from the region to reduce feelings of encirclement and threat perception.

Following President Biden's announcement of a US withdrawal by September 2021, the former Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif welcomed the move but cautioned against reverting to the turbulent 1990s in Afghanistan. Zarif warned against the Taliban exploiting the situation to escalate violence and revive the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, which could lead to a new conflict and further strain Iran's resources due to Afghan migrants.

Iran's strategic hosting of anti-Taliban Afghan opposition leaders and a large number of Afghan refugees gives it leverage against the Taliban, potentially complicating Iran-Afghan relations. In January 2022,⁶ Tehran facilitated a meeting between the Taliban and Afghan opposition figures, demonstrating a willingness to engage with both parties. The Taliban's emphasis on diplomatic recognition has likely deterred public criticism of Iran's backing of Afghan opposition leaders. The intricate dynamic between Iran and Afghanistan is further muddled by Iran's enlistment of Afghan Shia Hazara fighters for proxy conflicts in Syria through the Fatemiyoun Division.⁷

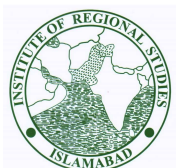
Overall, however, Iran's determination to avoid a repeat of the scenarios that emerged during the Afghan civil war, including an influx of migrants and a hostile Taliban regime, is becoming more and more pronounced. This change in Iran's stance towards the Taliban represents a significant shift from its previous confrontations with the group. Iran's cautious response to the Taliban's rise to power was driven by its wish to see the withdrawal of US and NATO troops from Afghanistan, which Tehran saw as a potential factor for regional stability. Essentially, Iran's engagement with the Taliban government is a delicate balancing act designed to

safeguard its own interests while navigating the intricate geopolitical dynamics of the region. While Afghanistan-Iran cooperation could partly be attributed to Iran's economic interests in Afghanistan as well like the development of Chabahar port to expand its economic interaction with Afghanistan,⁸ dealing with ISKP is a significant point of convergence between the two states.

ISKP: A Common Enemy

The ISKP's rigid adherence to the Sharia law and its anti-Shia position have positioned it as a longstanding adversary of Tehran. The shared danger presented by the ISKP has prompted Iran and the Taliban to put aside their disagreements and work together on counter-terrorism initiatives. Iran's intelligence minister has openly acknowledged collaboration with the Taliban in combating ISKP militants, while Iranian lawmakers have commended joint efforts that have thwarted terrorist plots.⁹ Nevertheless, the emergence of ISKP has complicated the movement of refugees and migrants across the Afghanistan-Iran border. With Iran already accommodating hundreds of thousands of Afghan refugees, a destabilized Afghanistan could trigger a new wave of migration. This surge could strain Iranian resources and potentially spark social unrest within Iran.

In response to the threats posed by the ISKP in 2015, which jeopardized Iran's eastern and western borders, Tehran opted to enhance its relationship with the Taliban to prevent the group from gaining a foothold along its borders. The deeply anti-Shia stance of ISKP and its persecution of the Hazara community in Afghanistan were key factors influencing Iran's shift in position. To address Tehran's worries, the Taliban assured Iran that they would cease targeting the Hazara community and even enlisted a local leader from this minority group.¹⁰ Although Tehran has shown openness towards these actions, there is still apprehension that the Taliban's rise to power could lead to the establishment of an Islamic Emirate posing a threat to Afghanistan's Shia population.¹¹ Nevertheless,



connections with the Taliban are expected to persist, at least temporarily.

In the last couple of years, worries about ISKP's actions from Iran's perspective have mostly diminished, as the group has significantly weakened.¹² The erosion of the driver that initially brought Tehran close to the Taliban stemmed from a shared animosity toward ISKP. However, the relationship extended beyond this factor and encompassed addressing common concerns over the US presence in the country, managing the heroin trade, and securing the border from groups such as Jaish al-Adl (formerly Jundullah).¹³ Furthermore, Tehran is strategically diversifying its approach to shape the future political landscape in Afghanistan, utilizing its limited sources of influence from various angles, including its connections with the Taliban. The recent visit of the Taliban to Tehran in January 2021, despite existing tensions and internal pressures, can be better understood within this framework. If the security conditions deteriorate, particularly due to the resurgence of threats like ISKP in the power vacuum, Tehran will once more prioritize border security concerns. Iran's apprehension regarding this situation is apparent in its acknowledgment of the threat posed by ISKP to Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. At present, Iran is preparing to mitigate the worst-case scenarios that it has been striving to prevent for the past two decades.¹⁴

ISKP has demonstrated a pattern of behaviour, particularly since 2020, that suggests its intentions to conduct cross-border attacks. This could be interpreted as the group reaching the necessary organizational capacity to sustain an international campaign. Recent attacks by the Islamic State in Iran, such as the January 2024 incident in Kerman, along with previous strikes in October 2022 and August 2023,¹⁵ further reinforce this assessment. The group's narratives have consistently included targeting Iran as a state adversary. Iran has been portrayed as an antagonist towards Sunni Muslims, as well as a representation of Shi'a power. The Islamic State carried out its inaugural assault on Iranian soil on 7 June 2017,

aiming at the Majles-e Shor aye Eslami, Iran's Parliament, and the mausoleum of Ayatollah Rohollah Khomeini, leading to a casualty count of at least 17 fatalities and 50 injuries.¹⁶ A video released by Amaq News one day later featured a statement from a Kurdish-speaking militant suggesting that the attacks marked the start of a sustained campaign. The militant declared, "This message is from the Islamic State soldiers in Iran, the initial brigade of the Islamic State in Iran, and hopefully, it will not be the final one." Subsequent events proved that the attack by the Islamic State in Iran was not the final one. ISKP has the capacity to augment the Islamic State's attacks in Iran through Afghanistan, allowing the group to expand its influence by carrying out external operations.¹⁷ In contrast, the Taliban, after the US withdrawal, have established the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) and appear keen on advancing their own narrative, disregarding global evaluations of the ISKP's danger.¹⁸

While Central Asian militants have been implicated in attacks in Afghanistan, ISKP seems to be urging sympathizers from the diaspora living abroad to support ISKP's efforts to carry out attacks across borders. After the attack in Kerman, Iran, on 3 January and the attack in Istanbul, Turkey, on 28 January investigations by both governments concluded that the cells responsible for the two attacks were connected to ISKP's wider network. According to authorities, the attackers in Iran had travelled to Turkey and Afghanistan, with one being a Tajik national and the other two having backgrounds from Tajikistan and the Russian Northern Caucasus. A recent report from the United Nations Security Council also highlighted the presence of a larger Tajik network in Turkey with ties to ISKP in Afghanistan, claiming that Tajik individuals were involved in fundraising and providing logistical support between Turkey, Afghanistan, and neighbouring countries.¹⁹

Conclusion

It is premature to forecast the future course of Iranian-Afghan relations, given the volatile nature of the region and the presence of geopolitical

rivalries and jihadist terrorism. The shared threat posed by ISKP could lead to increased collaboration in intelligence and law enforcement.²⁰ Nevertheless, border conflicts and disagreements over water resources continue to strain Iran-Taliban relations. Internally, Iran's conservative and reformist factions have differing opinions on engaging with the Taliban in the long term. Despite this, the Iranian government seems to prioritize broader geopolitical goals over certain negative aspects of its ties with Afghanistan. Consequently, interacting with the Taliban has become a practical necessity for Iran to further its interests and uphold stability in the area.

Iran's recent gestures towards the Taliban demonstrate its strategy of exploring alternatives to the US-dominated global order and its pragmatic approach to achieving specific goals in Afghanistan. Iran's stance towards the Taliban appears to be guided by a practical belief that the new Taliban administration may be more moderate and less harmful than its predecessor.²¹ This cautious engagement aims to promote regional stability, with both parties looking for ways to strengthen their newfound relationship. However, consistent communication and cooperation are crucial to address potential misunderstandings and obstacles.

Notes and References

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