

Iran-Afghanistan Border Security Dilemmas: An Ethnocentric Viewpoint

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Introduction

Linked by historical trauma, shared borders, ideological and religious backdrop, and economic and political interconnectedness, Afghanistan and Iran are the two sides of the same coin. Found at the junction of the greater Khorasan region, the two neighboring states have witnessed periodic bouts of tension and ambivalent partnerships. Nonetheless, a common denominator of uncertainty between Iran and Afghanistan is the geopolitics of the region which serves as a launching pad of great power rivalry since the dawn of time. In this view, Iran has kept strategic foresight by formulating its foreign policy based on the relevant rules-based order in Afghanistan to achieve its divergent stakes. For this very reason, Iran has supplanted social, political, and economic influence in Afghanistan to protect its national security and stanch the plethora of challenges such as narcotics trafficking, illegal immigration, Shiite persecution, hydro-political disputes, terrorism (threats from ISIS-Khorasan). Therefore, this article unpacks the intricate affairs of Iran and Afghanistan under the lens of ethnocentrism by comprehending the former's cross-border security challenges in light of the adversities exported by the latter.

Insights on Ethnocentrism

In-group favoritism and out-group bias have been a dominant discourse in explaining concepts such as racism, colonialism, and xenophobia. In this regard, ethnocentrism embarks on the same stereotypical behaviour explaining that one's culture, religion, language, values, and beliefs are superior to people from other backgrounds. The inherent pride and contempt for other cultures i.e. '*ethnocentrism*' was first accounted for by Austrian Sociologist Ludwig Gumplowicz, and later polished by American social scientist William G. Sumner.¹ Their observation was centered on cultural relativity which is evident in the Iran and Afghanistan cross-border relations. Cultural homogeneity and Iran's geo-political, economic, and strategic influence in Afghanistan have revolutionised its ethnocentric behavior towards its Eastern neighbor. It has prioritised its national interest by shaping security policies and attitudes in terms of

managing refugee and migrant issues (their assimilation in Iran concerning work and labour), cross-border terrorism (ensuring stringent border controls), minority, i.e., Shiite Hazara, narcotics trafficking, and the general Iranian perception of the Afghans.

Historical Context of Iran-Afghanistan Relations

A precursory glance through history indicates that diplomatic outreach between Iran and Afghanistan was satisfactory for the better part of 20th century, but momentous political events such as the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the Iran-Iraq war 1980-1988, Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan 1979-88 diverted their attention from sustainable partnership. The emergence of the Taliban in Afghanistan in 1994 marked a paradigm shift in Iran's foreign policy. It was subdued on two fronts, i.e., inception of the Taliban (Sunni brand of Islam) and the increased US meddling. Rather than siding with one state, it balanced its covert interests via pro-Taliban or US-supported Northern Alliance. The restive status quo quickly evaporated in 1998 when the Taliban attacked and killed Iranian diplomats and a journalist in Mazar-i-Sharif, which compelled Iran to re-evaluate its strategy towards Afghanistan and heighten its security towards its Eastern borders.²

Iran's policy post-Taliban ouster from 2001 to 2021 did not witness a dramatic change as it continued to channel its influence to keep the United States out of the loop by assisting either the central Afghan government or the resistant Taliban factions. Political alliances were furthered in Afghanistan, thus signaling Iran's expansive agendas. Moreover, economic and regional connectivity incentives were explored in Afghanistan through cross-border trade and infrastructural projects such as the Khaf-Herat railway and the Chabahar Port.³

Present-day realities represent a rational approach of Iran towards the Taliban regime. Iran has adopted *constructive engagement* in Afghanistan (subsistence to pro-Iranian factions) as a means to deepen its influence and counter hegemonic stakeholders.⁴ On the other end, it has donned a security lens to assess

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Afghanistan, as an unstable neighbor that is doomed to export conflictual elements (illegal migration, drug trafficking, and terrorism) thereby ensuring measures that would prevent doing so.

Iran's Influence in Afghanistan - Indirect Elements Affecting Cross-Border Security

Iran's influence in Afghanistan is directly linked to securing its border as regional peace is proportional to domestic harmony. In this case, Iran's pivotal role manifests ethnocentric ideals that have promoted Iranian cultural, political, economic, and geo-strategic priorities.

Socio-Cultural Elements

Linguistically, both countries have significant Persian-speaking populations fostering easier cultural communication. Dari-speaking ethnic Tajik populations residing in Western and Eastern Afghanistan feel a strong cultural association with Iran. In this regard, Iran has promoted Farsi language education prompting its broader efforts to further Iranian cultural influence. Moreover, Iran has spread its ideological and religious control over the approximately 10-15 per cent Shiite population of Afghanistan including the Hazara, Qizilbash, Farsiwan, and Sayyeds.⁵ Iran has made a remarkable breakthrough in introducing Shiite faith into the Afghan social fabric via organisations and cultural centers (Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation), funding of religious activities (Day of Ashura), and training of Shiite scholars (facilitation of religious advocates to study Shiite Islam in Qom or Mashhad, Iran).⁶

The Shiite Persecution

The oppressed ethnic minority, i.e., the Shiite Hazara has received Iranian support after years of sequential wars, systematic persecution, social discrimination, physical abuse, and detention by the Taliban and ISIS has given them no other option but to reside in Shiite safe havens across the border.⁷ The onset of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan has vowed to accommodate Shiites in their political and social landscape to promote inclusivity but reports of targeted killings, forced relocation (e.g. Daykundi, Uruzgan, Kandahar, Helmand, and Balkh provinces), exclusion from bureaucracy and extra judicial killings are still persistent.⁸

Political Influence

Iran has long since maintained authority and affected decision-making in Afghanistan's government. Iranian interests have been previously regulated within Afghan governance and politics through influential Shiite leaders (Karim Khalili, former Afghan Vice President 2004-

2014), Iranian-backed figures (Ismail Khan, former commander of the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance) and important religious authority (Asif Muhsini). Iran's recent call for inclusivity in Afghanistan's power structure by incorporating non-Pashtun minority group's hints at strengthening their foothold in its political power structure while fostering regional stability, a key criterion for securing its Eastern borders.

Economic Influence

Bilateral trade and substantial economic engagement with Afghanistan has always been in the cards for Iran. Its aim of becoming an active transit hub for essential goods and services between the Persian Gulf and Afghanistan, Central Asia, India, and China will aid in economic development and regional connectivity. Furthermore, Iran's investment and development in infrastructural projects, roads and bridge construction, agriculture, administrative units, healthcare, and power generation in the three Afghan border provinces, i.e., Herat, Farah, and Nimroz provide a security buffer in the name of development while also securing Iran's secret service activities against potential spoilers such as the United States.⁹

Geo-Strategic Influence - The Fatemiyoun Brigade

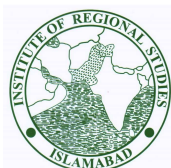
Iran, like other political players has leveraged its influence in Afghanistan for the sole purpose of achieving its broader Persian civilisational axis and battling traditional adversaries such as the US and the ISIS-Khorasan faction. It has been consistent in protecting its borders from hostile forces which is why it has been dependent upon proxy forces such as the *Fatemiyoun Brigade* which was founded by Shiite Afghan militants in the 1980s to counter Soviet occupation in Afghanistan.¹⁰ Later on, the militia re-emerged in 2014 under the banner of IRGC's expeditionary force to Syria and Iraq.¹¹ In this case, mostly Afghan refugees in Iran were recruited in the brigade in return for legal protection, financial assistance, and citizenship for them and their families. Iran has deployed thousands of *Fatemiyoun* fighters in Afghanistan to counter Sunni-extremist actors, i.e., ISIS-K and to mobilise its network in defending Shiite interests within Afghanistan.¹²

Iran's Border Security - Direct Security Threats

These threats pertain to direct challenges to Iran's border security from Afghanistan.

The Refugee Crisis

Afghan refugees, mostly Tajik and Shiite Hazara have gradually migrated from Afghanistan since the



Soviet Invasion of 1979. A report by the UN Refugee Agency estimates that 2.6 million registered and 500,000 unregistered Afghans were living in Iran in 2021.¹³ The registered refugees are given some semblance of freedom, but the undocumented refugees are scrutinised as their illegal smuggling mostly via the Southern border near Zaranj has led to security problems for Iran. The Afghans living there are faced with multifaceted problems as most of them are exploited to take up low-paying jobs, mainly in the agriculture and construction sector. A relative atmosphere of *Afghanophobia* is persistent as local Iranians view them as a blight to the society and a strain on their economic resources.¹⁴ In this case, ethnocentric values and cultural stereotypes are adopted where the refugees are labeled as Taliban and criminals, while also marking them as those lacking competence or skill.¹⁵

Drug Trafficking

Opium production in Afghanistan has encouraged cross-border narcotics smuggling which has not only impacted Iran's national security but its economic security too. Therefore, the social impediments arising from drug consumption are manifold in Iran's border regions as it has led to societal degradation and extremist behaviours in the youth. Owing to the rising problem, Afghanistan under the Taliban government has issued a decree banning opium production and cultivation of which a 95 per cent reduction has been witnessed as per United Nations estimates.¹⁶ Despite these developments, Iran views its neighbour with skepticism which is evident through its strict border controls and surveillance mechanism along the border.

Terrorism and the ISIS-K

Non-state actors such as the ISIS-K have cashed on Afghanistan's chaos-ridden state which has deeply compromised the internal and external security dynamics of Iran. There has been an uptick in terrorism in the bordering regions and mainland Iran since the emergence of the ISIS-Khorasan faction in 2015.¹⁷ The intricacy of attacks on Iran by the ISIS-K is rooted in ideological differences as their Salafi faith and rigid adherence to the Sharia law is in direct contradiction to the Shia Islam, prevalent in Iran. Therefore, to secure its vulnerable Eastern and Western borders, Iran has prompted Afghanistan to engage in counter-terrorism initiatives to prevent the group from gaining a foothold along its borders. The Taliban government has extended its assurances of preventing the ISIS-K from operating from its soil and protecting its minority Shiite community, but Iran is still apprehensive of any practical approach. The

January 2024 attack in Kerman and similar incidents unfolding in October 2022 and August 2023 in Iran underscore its previous fears.

The Hydro-Politics Issue

Water insecurity is a prevalent issue between Iran and Afghanistan due to shared border rivers, i.e., the 'Helmand' and 'Harirud'. The paucity of the situation has inflicted drastic environmental challenges for Iran. The drying up of the *Hamun Wetland* has posed severe water scarcity issues for the residents of the southwestern Iran.¹⁸ Water is not being released from the *Helmand River* (Afghanistan) due to the building of the Kamal Khan Dam by Afghanistan, thus violating Iran's water rights under the 1973 treaty.¹⁹ Adding on, the *Harirud River* controversy still prevails as the construction of *Salma Dam* by Afghanistan has reduced water flow to Iran.²⁰ These long-standing water disputes have set Iran and Afghanistan's relationship on the back burner, preventing productive collaboration between the two.

Iran's Border Management Policies

Iran has doubled its border security and surveillance infrastructure since the Taliban's return to power to counter the growing surge of refugees, cross border drug trafficking and terrorism. In this view, recently, the Iranian National Security Council has given a go ahead on the building of a 74-kilometer concrete wall and border fence in Central Khorasan.²¹ For this purpose, €3 billion (\$3.3 billion) have been allocated to secure the border over the next three years.²² Iran believes that such measures may thwart perceived threats to its national security. Adding on, Iran has also carried out deportation drives which indicates that around 485,000 in 2022 were deported, with the number increasing to 651,000 Afghans an estimated 36 per cent increase in 2023.²³ Regardless, these bulging statistics are overshadowed by the 400,000 Afghans crossing back to Iran due to instability in Afghanistan.²⁴

Conclusion

Alongside the 978 km border between Iran and Afghanistan, strategic rivalry has been evident in their historical, cultural, political, and economic relations.²⁵ Iran's nuanced objectives concerning its ethnocentric ideals in Afghanistan are dependent upon security and stability in the domestic and regional arena. The geopolitical edge obtained by Afghanistan as being the golden duck sitting at the precipice of Central Asia and the Middle East has lured great powers to mark their strongholds in Afghanistan. This has resulted in long-standing rivalries, which has impacted the domestic

landscape of Afghanistan while exporting conflictual elements to neighbouring states such as Iran, making border regions insecure. Moreover, it has complicated its relationship with Iran whose influential status has been impacted in Afghanistan due to spoiler forces dominating policies. Grappling with the uncertainty emanating from

the resurgence of the Taliban, Iran has centered its policy posture of constructive engagement with Afghanistan with a special focus on border security. Its collaborative gesture has been responded to in kind by the Taliban, still, it remains to be seen how future relations will unfold between the two countries.

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