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Feasibility assessment of political-security convergence Between Iran and Afghanistan during the Taliban Era

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Abstract

In today's world, convergence between countries, especially neighboring countries, is of fundamental importance. Iran and Afghanistan have long lived as a unified land under the name of "Greater Khorasan". These two neighboring Muslim countries have multiple cultural, religious, linguistic, historical, and racial ties with each other after independence, and these multiple commonalities have led the two countries to prioritize expanding their relations with each other and to constantly strive to improve and deepen their relations despite ups and downs. The main question of this research is to explore the potential convergence or divergence between Iran and Afghanistan during the Taliban era in the tumultuous Middle East region. By using the theory of convergence and focusing on political convergence, and drawing on the theories of thinkers in this field such as Jacob, Thuen, and Tuscany, and using the content analysis method, the research information has been analyzed. The results show that Iran and Afghanistan share a common border, language, and similar cultures, and have many common regional interests. However, the Taliban's control over the Afghan government in 2021 has created new challenges for these relations. These challenges include access to Afghan rivers, border issues, a large number of Afghan refugees in Iran, and the spread of illegal drugs to Iran.

Keywords: Iran, Afghanistan, political-security convergence, Middle East, neighboring.

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Introduction

The neighboring countries of Iran and Afghanistan have always had fluctuating political and security relations in the crisis-ridden and tense Middle East region, as well as the successive developments in Afghanistan. These fluctuations make it necessary to study the possibility of political and security convergence between the two countries because despite having a shared history and civilization, Iran and Afghanistan have not reached the unity and strategic relationships they should have in the political and security fields. Security challenges undoubtedly affect the bilateral economic and trade relations and ultimately lead to divergence between the two countries. In fact, the new phase of human life, which is living in a global community based on interaction, makes the necessity of neighboring countries' communications self-evident. However, the low and insignificant balance of trade between these two countries and the undesirable level of trade and commerce exchanges has a long way to go to achieve desirable relations between the two countries. Alongside these issues, the role of regional rivals and their significant and effective presence in Afghanistan's markets is a warning sign for the future of relations between the two countries. This, along with crisis-generating challenges and issues such as the tumultuous borders and crisis-prone areas of the two countries, transit and drug trafficking, border forests, and the Hirmand range crisis, as well as illegal immigration of Afghan nationals to Iran, can have undesirable and destructive effects on the above-mentioned relations. Accordingly, the present study seeks to examine the possibility of political and security convergence between Iran and Afghanistan by examining the political-security conditions of the two countries. To better advance this research, it is necessary to review studies conducted on this subject to clarify differences with another research. Since the re-emergence of the Taliban in Afghanistan, not much time has passed, and it is self-evident that during this time, the literature presented is not very voluminous.

Lipson (2012), Believes that Engaging Iran as one of Afghanistan's key neighbors as US and international forces withdraw would enhance prospects for a peaceful exit, and for productive Afghan-Iran relations once foreign forces are gone.

Successful engagement with Iran – in multilateral or bilateral fora – would necessarily address Iran’s legitimate security interests on its eastern frontier, as well as its broader economic and political interests in Afghan stability. After Pakistan, Iran is the most important neighbor of Afghanistan and has the capacity to influence long-term stability there. Its priorities are principally in the areas where its interests are most acute; on its border and in areas of northwest Afghanistan where the demographic ties of religion, language, and ethnicity are strongest. Iran also feels a gravitational pull to preventing dominance of Afghan national politics by the Pushtun plurality. Koepke (2013), Believes that Iran’s policy on Afghanistan over three decades has been broadly constructive and often generous, albeit not consistently transparent. Its Afghanistan strategy is complex and multifaceted but also adaptable and quite pragmatic. over the past two decades Iran’s strategic approach, embedded in early post-revolutionary ideals, has begun to crystallize in the form of a pragmatic interest in supporting a democratic and multi-ethnic Afghanistan. Having invested heavily in Afghanistan over the last 34 years, Iran will undoubtedly seek to maintain, if not strengthen, its political, cultural and social influence over its eastern neighbor in order to secure its own national security and geopolitical position. Bijan et. al. (2017), argue that Afghanistan socially textured mosaic of ethnic, sectarian groups are numerous. Internal developments in Afghanistan and the rise of the Taliban and the presence of trans-regional states in the country's developments and considerations to the interests of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Iran linked. Accordingly, any success or failure in advancing the process of nation-building in the country requires attention to the threat posed by the Islamic Republic of Iran's National Security developments that may in the future be faced with certain risks. Therefore, to follow the developments related to restructuring and brokers in Afghanistan and gradual formation of a new political system, Afghanistan has intensified the process of transformation of the environment and the multiple effects at all levels (local, regional and international) and fields (soft and hard) is created. Tookhy (2022), argue that with the Taliban’s takeover of Afghanistan, Iran will most likely see a diminishment of its political, economic and cultural influence in the country. Iran’s chief concern is that

political instability and economic fragility in Afghanistan might help strengthen the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), a group that Iran views as a more potent security threat than the Taliban. The dilemma facing Iranian leaders is that their short-term policy choices vis-à-vis Taliban-dominated Afghanistan may carry long-term risks for them. Iran's policy of engagement with the Taliban might facilitate the group's consolidation of power. It could also boost the position of Iran's regional rivals in Afghanistan. Authors seek to analyze, in brief, the drivers and implications of Iran's response to the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan.

Through reviewing the literature, it can be stated that each of the aforementioned studies only examined one aspect, specifically related to the possibility of political-security convergence between Iran and Afghanistan, and were unable to comprehensively present a clear picture of this issue. The difference of this present study with other studies is that it aims to demonstrate the possibility of political-security convergence between Iran and Afghanistan during the period when the Taliban re-established their rule in Afghanistan. The emergence of the Taliban in Afghanistan and fundamental changes in Iran and Afghanistan's policies towards each other during this period can bring an innovative aspect to the existing research.

1. Theoretical Framework

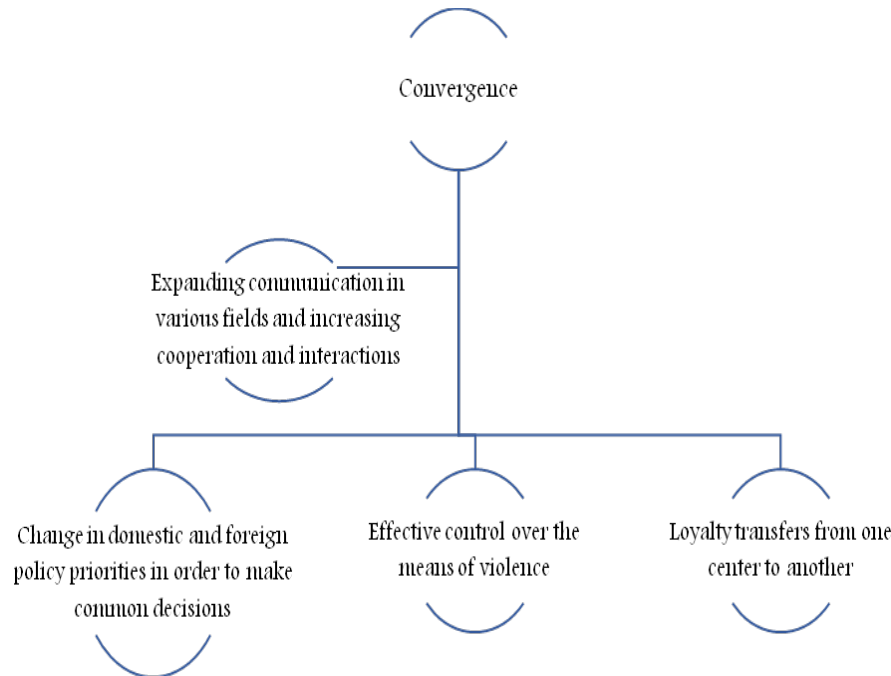
The disastrous consequences of the two World Wars led advocates of global governance and world peace to suggest changes in the international system's structure to prevent conflicts and violence. In this regard, various theories have been introduced to address cooperation and interactions between countries. One of these theories is convergence, which is primarily derived from the experiences of European societies. Following the success of European countries in developing technical and economic relations, many third world countries have considered using it as a strategy for growth (Koolai, 2000: 155).

Regarding the theory of convergence, various thinkers and scholars have focused on defining and categorizing this theory. However, each has had a particular aspect or perspective on the

phenomenon of convergence and its realization among nations. Therefore, there are multiple definitions of convergence, and the following table highlights the most prominent theorists of this theory.

Ernst Haas	Convergence is a process by which political leaders of various countries are convinced and willing to direct their loyalty, expectations, and political activities towards a new center that is empowered by legal authority or aspiring for such authority and the vote of national governments (Saifzadeh, 1995: 229).
Amitai Etzioni	Convergence is a state in which a political community's possession of effective control over the means of violence is one of the criteria for measuring the level of convergence. Such a community has a decision-making center that allocates resources and rewards and forms the main political identity for a vast majority of politically aware citizens (Doherty, 2014: 668).
Leon Lindberg	The process in which nations turn a blind eye to their major desires and the power of independent guidance in foreign and domestic policies, and instead strive to make joint decisions or delegate decision-making to new central agencies is called convergence (Doherty, 2014: 668).
Karl Deutsch	Communication plays a significant role in bringing communities closer together, and the more communication there is in areas such as transportation, tourism, postal services, trade, and migration, the closer these communities become to each other. Instead of conflict, they cooperate and form secure communities (Kazemi, 1991: 38).
Donahd Puchala	A chain of processes that leads to the creation and maintenance of a coordinated system at the international level" (Duarti, 2014: 668).

Based on the many definitions presented about the theory of convergence, the common aspect of the definitions can be seen in the following indicators.



1.1. Political Convergence

In the study of convergence theory, it can be classified into several levels, with the most prominent being political, economic, social, and cultural. In this section, we will only discuss political convergence, depending on the topic of research. The concept of political convergence refers to the integration of two or more independent political units into a new independent unit. Political theorists have presented different views on the concept of political convergence. Jacob, Teune, and Tascano consider political convergence as an internal relationship within a society, a sense of identity, and self-awareness.

Accepting assumptions such as the right to independence and the sovereignty of countries, thinkers and intellectuals from ancient Greece to the present day have depicted political convergence as a solution to achieving more sustainable peace. Many factors that are necessary for the formation of nations and the existence of their governments, and provide the grounds for national cohesion and unity, include factors such as race, religion, language, and national interests. These factors may act as effective factors in the process

of political convergence. In fact, political convergence is a process that depends on many factors and reasons, some of which are related to the history and formation of society over time, and some to the characteristics of the international community. The following are some of these reasons and factors:

Geography: The geography factor and territorial contiguity, if there are common government interests between nations and neighbors, can strengthen the strands of unity.

Language: Since language is the tool for the spread and promotion of culture and social behavior and the most important means of communication and message transmission, it is one of the most important factors in the convergence of nations.

Religion: The history of the development of religions shows that one of the factors that has played an effective role in the integration and convergence of nations and countries is religion and religious beliefs.

Elites: One of the effective factors in the process of convergence is the elites who shape the policies in the formation and collapse of various unions.

Common interests and common threats: It can be argued that throughout history, most unions and collaborations have been formed on the basis of common interests or common threats.

2. History of Iran-Afghanistan Interaction

Iran is a close neighbor and has extensive cultural, historical, and linguistic relations with Afghanistan that date back to the geopolitical relations between the two countries. Iran also has ideological and religious ties with the Shiite minority group in Afghanistan (Tabatabaei, 2021). However, Tehran has never directly intervened in Afghanistan's internal affairs, even in response to the suppression of Shiite minority groups or the mass killing of Hazaras (Mir Baloch, 2021). Iran has been an active power in the Afghanistan war since 2001, while its interests and concerns about Afghanistan date back to before 1979 (Sharan and Watkins, 2021).

In the 1970s, Iran was afraid of the spread of communism in the region and the Soviet Union's influence in Afghanistan. The security situation in Afghanistan was very important for Iran. Nearly nine Shia resistance groups who were fighting against the

Soviet-backed Afghan government were supported by the Iranian government. The groups were divided among themselves. Some of them followed the Islamic teachings and sermons of Imam Khomeini, whose goal was to promote Islamic politics throughout the region. Others supported Ayatollah Khomeini's ideology of not pursuing any Islamic pan-ambitions (Sharan and Watkins, 2021). Iran only provided logistical and financial assistance to the first camps of these groups (Koepke, 2013).

After the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, Iran's tense relations with the United States severely affected Iran's relations with Afghanistan. The Taliban killed nine Iranian diplomats in Mazar-i-Sharif, Afghanistan, in 1998, which undermined Iran's relationship with the Taliban regime (Tabatabaei, 2021). Iran's dynamic political changes led it to support NATO's mission in Afghanistan in 2001, which aimed to stabilize the country and remove the Taliban from power. Since the 1990s, Iran has seen Afghanistan as a refuge for Sunni extremists.

The Taliban ruled Afghanistan until the United States and NATO intervened in 2001 and took control from Afghan warlords in the mid-1990s. The Taliban returned after their defeat in the Afghan civil war. The US intervention encouraged Iran to take its own initiative to combat the Taliban and terrorism in Afghanistan. It should be noted that when George W. Bush, the US President, imposed sanctions on Iran along with Iraq in 2002, Iran feared a possible US attack. That is why it supports the Taliban to fight against the US occupation, such as providing them with explosives (Aman, 2021a).

Iran's economic relations with Afghanistan are particularly strong. Iran and Afghanistan are major trading partners due to their extensive border in the region. Trade between the two countries has gained momentum after the fall of the Taliban in 2001. Afghanistan exports more agricultural products to Iran, which amounted to over \$20 million in 2019. Iran exports more oil and its derivatives to Afghanistan, which amounted to over \$2.9 billion in 2018 (Iran resumes fuel, 2021). In recent years, Afghanistan has been a significant source of cash for Iran due to US sanctions and the blocking of foreign reserves in the country. US sanctions have lowered the value of Iran's rial, making Iranian products more

affordable for Afghans and pushing Iran to prioritize Afghanistan as a market. Therefore, Afghanistan is the largest destination for non-oil Iranian products (Batmanghelidi, 2021). During the 1980s, Afghanistan emerged as a leading producer of opium in the region. Then, drug traffickers smuggled a significant amount of Afghan opium products to Iran and then to Europe via Iran (Calabrese, 2007). This trade has led to Iranians being addicted to drugs and opium trafficking. Despite several decades of effort to create a concrete barrier along the Iran-Afghanistan border, Iran has not been able to stop the flow of drugs into the country (Aman, 2021b).

2.1. Iran's relations with Afghan national, political, and military leaders

Iran has increased its influence among various leaders and national figures in Afghanistan. The country hosts many warlords and ethnic leaders who have the ability to control strategic parts of the country, including warlords and militias operating outside of Kabul. For example, former warlord Ismail Khan, who was previously the de facto ruler of Herat, has been reported to have strong relations with Iran (Lucas, 2021). Ismail Khan was captured by the Taliban during their takeover of Herat, but it was later reported that he was in the province of Mashhad. There have been reports that Tehran may support Ismail Khan, but there has been no confirmation or denial of these claims by Iran (Lucas, 2021).

Iran has also hosted Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the leader of one of the warring factions in Afghanistan's civil war (Mashal, 2012). The Taliban, which emerged after the civil war in 1996, promised to put an end to factional fighting and political tensions in the country. Hekmatyar tried to fight the Taliban, who were supported by Islamabad at the time. He eventually fled to Iran and lived there until Tehran expelled him in 2002 (Mashal, 2012). Hekmatyar also opposed the interim government of Afghanistan, which was formed at the time under the leadership of Hamid Karzai, supported by the United States. This movement was apparently a gesture to Karzai's visit with Iranian officials in early 2002. Hekmatyar's anti-Shia views also angered Tehran. Iran facilitated Hekmatyar's return to Afghanistan by expelling him from its soil (Aman, 2015).

2.2. Iran's current policies towards Afghanistan involve engaging with the Taliban

The collapse of the Afghan government and the return of the Taliban to power in August 2021 has left Iran in an ambiguous position on how to react to the new situation in its eastern neighbor. The consolidation of power by the Taliban presents Iran with different circumstances, such as a return of Afghanistan to another period of civil war or the strengthening of Sunni extremist groups (ISIS) in that country. Iranian leaders favored the preservation of the previous political arrangements in Afghanistan, which were laid out during the United Nations talks in Bonn, Germany, in 2001. Iran preferred to reform the post-Bonn structures rather than giving a share of power to the Taliban by recognizing them as "part of the Afghan reality." Iranian officials have rejected the February 2020 Doha agreement between the United States and the Taliban to some extent, as they interpreted the agreement as the beginning of deviating from the political order established in Bonn (Entekhab, 2021).

Iran is unhappy with the Taliban's monopoly on power in Afghanistan. However, there is concern that the current situation in Afghanistan may lead to the strengthening of ISIS and other Sunni extremist groups on its eastern borders. It appears that countering this threat is currently Iran's main priority in Afghanistan. Iran's relations with the Taliban in recent years and its response to the group's return to power in Kabul can be understood as part of a calculated move, primarily designed to confront the ISIS threat (Tookhy, 2022: 2). The invasion of Afghanistan by the United States in 2001 had desirable results for Iran. The Taliban - a Sunni extremist group with anti-Shia tendencies and a history of confrontation with Iran - was ousted from power and replaced with a government that had significant influence from groups close to Iran. Iran was concerned about the US military presence on its eastern borders, especially after the US attack on Iraq and Washington's occasional and persistent calls for regime change in Tehran. During the two decades of US military presence in Afghanistan, Iran was able to increase its political, economic, and cultural influence in the country.

The breakdown of order after the fall of Kabul to the victorious Taliban signals a return to the previous state of affairs when the Taliban were in power. Even worse for Iran, the Taliban are now a more organized, better equipped, and much stronger group than they were in 2001, and the political-military groups supported by Iran that fought against the Taliban in the 1990s have now almost disappeared from the Afghan political scene (Tookhy, 2022: 2).

In addition, the withdrawal of Western forces and aid and the widespread contraction of the Afghan economy will deal a blow to Iran's economic interests in the country. Iran has become Afghanistan's largest exporter by benefiting from floods of financial aid to its neighbor in recent years, surpassing China and Pakistan. In the decade following 2011, Afghanistan has almost always been among the top five destinations for Iranian non-oil exports. From March 2020 to March 2021, Iran's exports to Afghanistan amounted to \$2.3 billion, which accounted for 6.7% of the country's total non-oil exports and increased 15 times compared to its exports in 2002, which were \$150 million (Abbasi, 2011: 221). However, in June, Iranian officials announced a 40% decrease in Iran's exports to Afghanistan compared to last year (Islamic Republic News Agency, 2022).

The new political-economic reality in Iran's eastern neighborhood undermines Iran's efforts to become a regional trade center by offering alternative trade routes to Afghanistan. Iran is developing its Chabahar port with the support of India and Japan, which will be integrated with the north-south international transport corridor that connects India to Central Asia and Russia via Iran by road and rail. The railway and road projects will link Chabahar to the Afghan border and provide India with access to Afghanistan and an alternative route to sea routes. In July 2020, the Asian Development Bank reported that about 70% of Afghanistan's transit trade is conducted through Iran, while traditionally Pakistan acts as the main conduit for access to the country by landlocked sea routes. Under the Taliban's control in Afghanistan, Iran is likely to lose a significant portion of its economic and trade achievements (IRNA English, 2020; Khamenei, 2021).

In response to the Taliban's takeover of Kabul, Iran has adopted a flexible policy towards this group, with its main elements being non-confrontation, pragmatism, necessary cooperation, and

opposition to rapid identification. About two weeks after Kabul's fall, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's supreme leader, expressed Iran's policy towards the Taliban: "Regarding Afghanistan, we support the Afghan people. Governments come and go... the nature of our relations with governments depends on their relationship with us." (Khamenei, 2021).

In early September, Ismail Qaani, the commander of the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), said in a closed session of the Iranian parliament that Iran seeks to resolve the situation in Afghanistan without resorting to war and in a way that allows all Afghan ethnic groups to participate in the country's governance (Kayhan, 2021).

Regional actors in Afghanistan do not have the same goals or a unified vision for the country. Afghanistan will continue to be a venue for regional and global competitions, as it has been in the past. As far as Iran is concerned, the country prefers a political order where Shiite and Persian-speaking groups close to the Islamic Republic have a significant role in Afghan government structures. Given the current positions of the Taliban, this is not entirely certain. In the meantime, Iranian officials will seek to use the issue of recognition as an official tool for bargaining in their dealings with the Taliban.

What factors drive Iran's policy towards the Taliban? Iran is focused on maintaining and possibly expanding its economic ties with Afghanistan, given its own dire economic conditions. In addition to economic considerations, it appears that two geopolitical factors have influenced Iran's stance towards the Taliban: the fight against ISIS and the fact that Iran does not consider Afghanistan as part of its strategic depth (Tookhy, 2022: 5).

Non-confrontational response of Tehran to Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan is rooted in the fact that Iran does not consider Afghanistan as a part of its strategic depth. In the past few decades, Iran's strategic focus has been on the Arab Middle East at its western and southern borders to counter Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Israel. Afghanistan has almost always been of secondary importance in Iran's strategic calculations. The country's leadership was caught off guard when the Taliban first came to power in 1996

- a fact that some Iranian analysts attribute to a lack of interest and expertise in Afghanistan in the country's foreign policy apparatus at that time.

In a situation where tensions between the Islamic Republic and Western powers and some regional countries over Iran's nuclear program and its missile program have increased, Tehran authorities are even more weary than being caught in their eastern neighborhood. Iran is concerned that under Taliban rule, Afghanistan could serve as a safe haven for ISIS and other Sunni extremist groups. Its strategy for engaging with the Taliban is designed to some extent to counter this threat.

Overall, Iran's policies towards Afghanistan can be classified as "contradictory." Its fluctuating interactions with the United States and the Taliban have directly shaped its approach to Afghanistan. Iran's relationship with Afghanistan is also influenced by Afghan semi-military groups under the Fatemiyoun Brigade, which the United States considers a terrorist group. The Fatemiyoun Brigade was established by Shia Afghan militants who fought against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s. At that time, the group also participated in the Iran-Iraq War and resisted the Taliban in 1996. In 2014, the Fatemiyoun Brigade reappeared as part of the military forces in Syria. According to reports, 30,000 to 60,000 Fatemiyoun fighters are young, most of them in their 20s. The former Afghan government stated that the Fatemiyoun Brigade did not pose any direct threat to the security and stability of Afghanistan. Iran has continued a "constructive engagement" in Afghanistan since 2001, although it has not been directly involved militarily. This country has mostly participated in national and international conferences on Afghanistan and regional anti-drug initiatives, as well as political participation (Koepke, 2013). Tehran's close ties with the Taliban in recent years have worried both the US and the former Afghan government. Afghan and US officials suspected that the Iranian Quds Force, which had activated the Fatemiyoun Brigade in the 1980s, was indirectly encouraging the Taliban and undermining US interests in Afghanistan (Nadimi, 2021). This also harmed Iran's interests in Afghanistan: Tehran's close relationship with the Taliban diverted its attention from defending the Shia minority group in Afghanistan. The Fatemiyoun fighters criticized Tehran for ignoring the blood of the Hazara

martyrs who were killed in Taliban attacks (Abdi, 2021). It is said that the Iranian government has provided significant military equipment to the Taliban for the occupation of Afghan territories that border Iran (Omar, 2021). The reason for this support apparently stems from Iran's historical dispute with the former Afghan government over water (Askari, Bashardost, 2021).

The mass exodus of millions of Afghans to Iran has created a humanitarian crisis, with refugees facing unfavorable conditions (Bhatnagar, 2021). They are limited in their mobility, assets, employment, education, and healthcare access (Shavazi, 2017; Shavazi, 2008; Shuja, 2012). They face difficulties both inside Iran and at the Iran-Afghanistan border. This issue has long clouded the relations between Afghanistan and Iran and heightened tensions between Kabul and Tehran. With the current surge of Afghan refugees in Iran and Iran's unwillingness to accept new asylum seekers, the issue of Afghan refugees and their basic rights will remain a contentious issue in Iran-Afghanistan relations post-2021.

Tehran's policies have also affected the fate of the peace process in Afghanistan. Its growing relationship with the Taliban has been concerning for the United States, which has sought to keep Iran out of the peace process. However, Iran has intensified its relationship with the Taliban by hosting Taliban officials and engaging with them in Doha and Kuwait (Aman, 2021). Regarding the Doha agreement in February 2020, Iran argued that the United States had put the former Afghan government under its shadow by making statements and commitments on its behalf. Iran is the only regional player that has openly objected to the bilateral security agreement or the Doha agreement. Tehran has also tried to influence the security and stability of Afghanistan and use it as a potential threat to the United States, as Iran's future approach to Afghanistan largely depends on the US withdrawal and how it maintains its future relations with the Afghan government and its security forces (Sharan and Watkins, 2021). When Kabul fell to the Taliban on August 15, 2021, Iran was preoccupied with issues related to the transfer of power to its new president and officials were unable to quickly formulate a stance towards the newly established Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Initially, Iran welcomed the US withdrawal from Afghanistan (Takeyh, 2021). Iranian officials view this retreat

as a score for the Taliban – an achievement for the Iranian government that sees it as a justification for its investment in its regional network of proxy groups (Fathollah-Nejad and Azizi, 2021). However, Tehran has recently criticized the Taliban due to their formation of a cabinet that ignores the need for an inclusive government (Mehdi, 2021).

The fall of Kabul has harmed Iran and Afghanistan's economic and trade relations. Afghanistan is currently facing dire economic conditions and heightened political insecurity. As cash is almost inaccessible, consumer demand for Iranian goods among Afghan households has decreased. The international community's blockade of Afghanistan's monetary system has also prevented the flow of cash from Afghanistan to Iran. The reduction in bilateral trade between the two partners, in turn, affects the income of the Islamic Republic (Batmanghelidi, 2021).

Like other regional powers, including China, which has criticized the United States for its "irresponsible" exit from Afghanistan, Iran also criticizes the United States for its unstable exit. Tehran has criticized the United States for failing to address post-withdrawal challenges in Afghanistan. Iranian officials called for the United States to leave Afghanistan in a more stable condition. For example, Iran would be happy to support a comprehensive government in Afghanistan after an agreement. However, the expansion of Taliban power in Afghanistan affects Iran in many aspects of international relations and international security, including border stability. Human rights, religious freedom, and democracy, despite their extraordinary importance to other countries present in Afghanistan, are not a major concern for Tehran. They value regional stability, especially as Iran is afraid of the possibility of al-Qaeda operations in the region. The Iranian government does not want Afghanistan to become an exporter of extremism. They fear that their Baloch minority groups will take energy if the Taliban choose to collaborate with other regional insurgent groups (Yazdan Panah, 2021). Another issue that needs to be resolved between the Taliban government and Iranian officials is the water crisis. Sistan and Baluchistan, located along the border with Afghanistan, are two impoverished provinces of Iran that have been struggling with water shortages due to frequent droughts and mismanagement of water resources. In 1973, Iran and

Afghanistan signed a treaty according to which a certain amount of water from the Helmand River in Afghanistan flows into Iran. However, Afghanistan later built the Kamal Khan dam on the Helmand River, which is also on the border with Iran. Iran claims that Afghanistan has violated its water rights and that the dam prevents a significant amount of water from flowing into Iran (DW, 2021).

In March 2021, then-President of Afghanistan Ashraf Ghani, after the opening of the Kamal Khan dam, said in a televised speech that Afghanistan will no longer give free water to anyone and if Iran wants more water, it must give oil to Afghanistan in return. According to Iranian media, more water has been flowing into Iran since the Taliban came to power. It is said that the Taliban have built new outlets in the Kamal Khan dam, although neither Tehran nor Kabul has confirmed this (Gul, 2021).

3. Factors Affecting the Convergence or Divergence of Two Countries

The neighboring of Iran and Afghanistan has created a certain degree of interdependence and destiny between the two countries. In this section, we will examine the factors and issues that affect the convergence or divergence between the two countries.

3.1. The border between the two countries and the challenges ahead

Iran and Afghanistan share a 572-mile border, which begins at three points in northwestern Afghanistan with Turkmenistan and ends at three points in the south with Pakistan. In 1872, this border was mostly drawn by the British. In that year, a committee led by British government official Sir Frederic Goldsmid was requested by Iranian Shah Naser al-Din Qajar to determine the border after a series of conflicts between Iran and Afghanistan (Balland, 2000). This border demarcation has been generally accepted since then, but tensions still persist in some areas. The region along the border is mostly dry, except for the Lake Hamun area near the Zabol-Zaranj border in the southern region, which has some settlements. There are three main border crossings, including Islam Qala in the northern area, Abu Nasr Farahi in the middle area, and Zaranj border crossing in the southern Baluchistan region. The Zaranj

border crossing is the most important crossing. Most goods and products are imported into Afghanistan through the Zaranj crossing, and most Afghan refugees also enter Iran through this point. This region, which includes eastern Iran, western Afghanistan, and parts of Central Asia, is known as Khorasan in Persian and was established as a region during the Sassanid dynasty (224-651 AD) - the last Iranian dynasty before the advent of Islam. This region is important in Iranian mythology and plays a fundamental role in Iranian legends (Farr, 2022: 1).

Herat, a major city in western Afghanistan, is over 100 miles away from the border and Mashhad, a major city in eastern Iran, is approximately 130 miles away from the border. Zaranj, the only city in Afghanistan near the border, has a population of over 100,000. Zaranj, a city in Afghanistan located in the Murghab desert in the southern region, has little political and economic significance. This location is more known as a place for smugglers to escape to and from Iran. Despite its remoteness, the Zaranj border crossing has significant traffic. Goods passing through the border include building materials, oil, and food, most of which travel from Iran to Afghanistan. Afghanistan earns a significant amount of revenue from the taxes on imported goods. However, perhaps the most important and controversial exports to Iran are refugees and illegal drugs.

Western borders of Afghanistan were established around 150 years ago with the declaration of Herat's separation from Iran in the Paris Agreement of 1857. At least the current western part of Afghanistan, like some other parts of Iran, was under the supervision of the central government of Iran during its peak of power and was managed separately during the decline of central power. From a security and military perspective, these borders have been a place of conflict and attack on Iran throughout history. In the northeast axis of Iran, 61 attacks have taken place inside Iran throughout history.

In the past two decades, Afghanistan has experienced instability, civil war, and foreign competition, which have resulted in various consequences such as insecurity, refugee influxes, and related issues. The wave of human trafficking, particularly in rural areas that have even reached cities like Torbat-e Jam and Torbat Heydariyeh, has consumed a significant portion of the time and

resources of both the people and the government of Iran. Since the political relations between the two countries were subject to the colonial policies of Russia and Britain in the nineteenth century, according to the Paris Treaty, the path to establishing the current borders of Iran and Afghanistan was paved through four arbitrations, three by Britain and one by Turkey.

Afghanistan's involvement in the tripartite division of Baloch land, located on both sides of the Helmand River, has made Iran vulnerable. Although the struggles of ethnic minorities in the region do not continue in this direction, they are part of the Middle Eastern ethnic groups that have not been successful in creating a serious, stable, and united political movement. In this regard, any solution to the Baloch issue, while detrimental to Pakistan's territory and interests, also seriously harms Iran's territorial integrity. Iran and Pakistan's relations, which are always heavily influenced by the Afghan factor, are vulnerable to their own Baloch separatist provocations by the Afghans. (Fuller, 1998: 254).

Kohen believes that in South Asia, Pashtunistan is a potential gateway and Balochistan is a separatist gateway. Gateway countries play a new role in connecting different parts of the world by facilitating the exchange of people, goods, and ideas. They have limited land and population and are often located along key access routes. (Kohen, 2009: 110).

The Baloch people who live in this region are also linguistically related to Iranians and Pashtuns. The dominant culture in Afghanistan, at least in the past three decades, has emerged from the Pashto languages, which are highly tribal and dynastic. They live in a triangle of land across three countries. Therefore, the instability and dissatisfaction of the Baloch people pose a potential threat to the territorial integrity of the three countries, which could lead to regional tensions.

On the other hand, one of Afghanistan's desires is to break free from its landlocked position and find a way to the sea, which often causes dissatisfaction with Iran. This route passes through Balochistan. This situation will strengthen the bond between Afghan and Pakistani Baloch people, thus strengthening the Baloch as a national element. This is an event that Iran will certainly not be

happy about. Therefore, Iran was not just a spectator during the turmoil caused by Pakistan's internal ethnic conflicts.

This vulnerability has also affected Iran today. Despite strengthening the security of the region, Iran has been prompted to focus on the reconstruction of the Chabahar port and the construction of an eastern transit route to connect Afghanistan and provide a base for goods entering Afghanistan. The presence of high-ranking officials from Afghanistan at the inauguration of this transit route signifies its importance for Afghanistan, as it is one of the projects related to Iran's participation in the reconstruction of Afghanistan. Although the aforementioned ethnic divide is intertwined with the Sunni-Shia religious divide, the Shia population of Sistan has been able to mitigate the consequences of this divisive trend to some extent.

With the return of the Taliban, the policies of Iran and Afghanistan regarding borders have become slightly different. On July 3, 2022, Iranian border officials and Taliban border guards clashed at the Iran-Afghanistan border in the province of Baluchistan, resulting in the death of one Afghan. Iran claims that the clash occurred because Taliban forces attempted to wave their flag "in an area that is not Afghan territory" (Reuters, 2022). While this clash may be minor compared to war in other regions, it demonstrates increasing tensions. On August 14, 2022, an Iranian delegation arrived in Kabul to discuss border issues with Afghanistan, especially the escalating disputes between the two nations regarding water rights and refugees. This coincided with a clash in July in the Darwish Walsalai area of Kang district in Nimruz province, Afghanistan, in which at least one Taliban soldier was killed (Eqbal, 2022).

3.2. Afghanistan and the issue of hydropolitics

Afghanistan, which has relative advantage compared to its neighbors in terms of water resources, has gained the least benefit from this advantage so far, taking into account various factors including decades of war. Afghanistan's water infrastructure, such as dams, water reservoirs, irrigation and water supply networks, water measurement and meteorology stations, sanitation systems, and water information collection and processing systems, is limited and inefficient. According to the 2008 statistics, out of

approximately 8 million hectares of cultivable land, only 2 million hectares are being cultivated, and its forest cover is insignificant and limited to 3% of the country's land. Access to electricity, even in major cities, is limited, and similarly, people's access to safe water in both urban and rural areas is limited.

Iran considers itself a stakeholder in two water basins that it shares with our country in its western neighborhood. One of them is the Helmand water basin, which Iranians call Hirmand. Based on the 1351 treaty, the specified water rights have been considered for Iran's Sistan from this basin (Akbari, 2020: 27). The second one is the Harirod River that flows into the sea. In the early 1980s, Iran and Turkmenistan jointly built the Dosti Dam in the Sarakhs region to control seasonal waters and floods without the agreement of Afghanistan and use its water resources jointly (Akbari, 2020: 28).

The Helmand River starts as a branch of the HinduKush Mountain range in northeastern Afghanistan and passes through southern Afghanistan, including the city of Lashkargah, before ultimately feeding into Lake Hamun at the southern borders of Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. The primary source of water for the Sistan Basin is in southwestern Afghanistan and southeastern Iran. Lake Hamun is a collection of shallow lakes, wetlands, and marshes, mostly located in Iran. It has no outlet, so the water that flows into the lake stays there (or evaporates). It is Iran's largest freshwater lake and is important for the economy and environment. Lake Hamun is located in Sistan and Baluchestan Province, Iran's poorest province. From 1999 to 2001, a severe drought in the region led to a decrease in water supply. In some areas, the lake completely dried up. The Iranian government estimates that 25 to 30 percent of the region's population has left the area over the past two decades due to the water shortage and relocated to the outskirts of major Iranian cities in the region (VonHein 2021). In 2016, UNESCO designated Lake Hamun as a biosphere reserve with the aim of preserving its ecological, cultural, and economic importance. Helmand water is vital for farmers on both sides of the border, and recently there have been disputes over who should control the water. Throughout the years, Afghanistan has constructed a series of dams to control the flow of water from the Helmand River for irrigation and hydroelectric power. These dams

have limited the amount of water that flows into Iran and have caused increasing unrest in Iran.

Thus, Afghanistan's water resources that cross over into Iran, which have become a water issue between the two countries, can be divided into three areas: Helmand, Hamun, and Hirmand.

3.2.1. The Role of the Helmand River in the Relations between the Two Countries

Since 1857 when Afghanistan was separated from Iran by the Paris Treaty, there has been a dispute between the two countries over the water of the Helmand River. The Helmand River originates from the mountains around Kabul and runs for approximately 1450 kilometers until it flows into the Hamoun Lake. If we consider the issue of the Helmand River from a security perspective in the eastern part of the country, we can say that it is not only a vital lifeline for Sistan but also a national and security issue (Setareh, 2014: 48). Along the long course of the Helmand River to the Hamoun Lake, several Afghan provinces and the Iranian province of Sistan are located, and the survival of all of them depends on the water of this river. The issue of the Helmand River's ownership, which forms part of the eastern borders of Iran with Afghanistan, has been one of the stable sources of conflict between the governments of Iran and Afghanistan since at least 1872. This problem has caused diplomatic crises between the two countries many times, and nearly 30 bilateral and direct negotiations or acceptance of arbitration have been attempted to resolve it (Akhbari, 2020: 30).

3.2.2. The importance of Lake Hamoun for the two countries

Sistan and Baluchistan province and the Hamoun basin, as the largest province of the country with a dry climate and water scarcity, have taken various forms since ancient times. The drinking and sanitary water of the province's cities is currently supplied through surface and underground water sources. In recent years, the increasing population growth, urban expansion, and increased water extraction have created an unfavorable situation for the quantity and quality of groundwater resources. Given the increasing need of the province's cities for reliable water resources and the importance of water supply in all areas of growth and

development, the annual supply of approximately 80 million cubic meters of drinking and sanitary water to the province's cities is essential. Hamoun Lake is the seventh international wetland in Iran. This lake, with an area of four thousand square kilometers, was once the largest lake in the world and the only freshwater lake in Iran. The amount of water entering the Sistan and Baluchistan region and Hamoun Lake depends on the amount of water entering from the Helmand River, which originates from the Babai Mountains in central Afghanistan, with a length of 1050 kilometers. (Setareh, 2014: 49).

3.2.3. The Hariroud and its Impact on Relations between the Two Countries

The Hariroud River is 850 kilometers long, of which 560 kilometers run inside Afghanistan, and 110 kilometers form the common border between Iran and Afghanistan. About 130 kilometers of the common border between the two countries have been taken from this river. In recent years, neighboring countries Iran and Turkmenistan have disregarded the needs of the Afghan people for these waters and, without concern for the risk that if the Afghan government takes steps to develop and control its surface water by resuming the construction of the Salma Dam and similar projects, no extra water will remain in Hariroud, wasted in the deserts or flooded. They have conspired together and built dams for their own benefit. They consider these waters and any kind of occupation of them as their right and even do not feel obliged to disclose relevant information about their water yield and usage. If we consider Hariroud as a boundary river, all its branches are also recognized as part of a unified river system and are subject to a specific legal regime. Iran has controlled all the branches of Hariroud inside its territory by constructing various dams and water facilities and prevents their water from flowing into Hariroud. Iran had the least dependence on seasonal flows of Hariroud in recent years before the construction of the "Dosti Dam," and its dependence on Hariroud was very limited and in remote rural areas. Therefore, the construction of the Salma Dam on the path of Hariroud was considered a routine matter inside Afghanistan in the 1950s and has never faced any negative reaction or opposition from that country.

There are various reasons for the non-implementation of the water-sharing agreements between Iran and Afghanistan. However, the instability of the political and social situation and the disruption of security within Afghanistan have been the main reasons for the non-implementation of these agreements. In recent years, the Iranian government has faced more complicated problems in supplying water to Sistan due to lawlessness and disorder in Afghanistan. Farmers around the Helmand River took advantage of the instability in Afghanistan and, by taking more water than their share, caused the drying up of the Hamoun Lake in Iran and a significant reduction in the water supply to the Iranian part of Sistan. During the Taliban's rule, the Helmand River water to the Iranian side was completely cut off, leading to an environmental disaster. The Taliban were accused of deliberately preventing the flow of water to Sistan due to their conflict with Iran. Although the Taliban used drought as an excuse, it seems that Iran did not buy their excuse (Dehbashi, 1379: 30-129).

The main issue of disagreement between Iran and Afghanistan is the construction of the Kamal Khan Dam in Afghanistan at the lower Helmand River, about 60 miles southeast of Zaranj, about 60 miles from the border. The construction of the dam began in 1996, but due to the war in Afghanistan and the lack of technical expertise, the project was suspended. The project resumed in 2014 and the dam was officially inaugurated in March 2021. Iran has expressed concerns about the dam because it is afraid that the dam will cut off or significantly reduce its water supply to this dry region. In 1973, Iran and Afghanistan signed an agreement that gave Iran the right to use 22 cubic meters per second of water with the possibility of an additional 4 cubic meters per second (VonHein 2021). Iran believes that this is not a fair agreement and should receive more water. On August 3, 2022, Mujib Rahman Omar, the deputy minister of energy and water of the Taliban, said that the Taliban government will not give Iran the extra water agreed upon in this treaty.

Currently, without diplomatic relations between the two countries (Iran does not recognize the Taliban government), and with no one to talk to in Kabul about this matter, there is little chance of achieving a fairer agreement. In addition, Iran claims that Afghan farmers are digging channels for extra water, and armed clashes have erupted between the Iranian army and Afghan farmers over this right to water (Ramachandran 2022).

3.3. Refugees

Another issue that has caused tension between Afghanistan and Iran is the growing number of refugees. During 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 586,000 have been accepted with passports and visas (Rich, 2022). There is no accurate count of unregistered refugees, their place of residence, or their occupation. However, although refugees come from all regions of Afghanistan and represent all ethnic groups, it is generally believed that they are mainly Tajik (Persian-speaking) or Hazara (Shiite Muslims who are persecuted in Afghanistan). Most of the Afghan refugee population in Iran is concentrated in the outskirts of major cities where they try to find low-skilled jobs in the construction industry (Sawhney 2020).

Afghan refugees who have officially registered in Iran have some support. Their children are allowed to attend school, they are eligible for medical services, and Afghan men are allowed to marry Iranian women. However, for those Afghans who have not registered officially in Iran, the situation may not be as good. With the Taliban's takeover, the number of Afghan refugees fleeing to Iran has increased significantly. In 2021, the Norwegian Refugee Council estimated that 4,000 to 5,000 Afghans were fleeing to Iran daily (Jazeera, 2021). Most of them attempted to enter Iran illegally around the southern border near Zaranj. Reports describe Zaranj as full of Afghans seeking to smuggle into Iran (France24, 2022). Iran has also deported unregistered refugees back to Afghanistan. It is estimated that more than one million Afghan refugees who were in Iran were returned to Afghanistan in 2021, mainly after the Taliban takeover. In many cases, returning refugees easily disappear and try to flee back to Iran (Omid, 2021).

The situation of refugees has caused friction between Iran and Afghanistan. Videos showing Iranian border guards mistreating Afghan refugees have been broadcast on Kabul TV, causing anger among Afghans. In Kabul, protesters demonstrated in front of the Iranian embassy and threw stones at the Iranian consulate in Zaranj (Khan, 2022). With more Afghans trying to flee and Iran returning them, this issue is likely to intensify for refugees.

Conclusion

Iran and Afghanistan share a common history, a long border, and a common language and culture. However, they have been

involved in conflicts over water rights, refugees, drugs, and other issues. At the time of writing this article, the Taliban have been in power in Afghanistan for a year, and Iran is still trying to determine whether they can cooperate with the Taliban or not. Despite the current proximity, mistrust, tension, and instability are likely to characterize Iran-Taliban relations in the future. There are several potential sources of tension between the two sides. Ultimately, Iran's Shia political and ideological stance is opposed to the Taliban. In fact, a major dilemma for Iran is how to deal with the threat of ISIS without legitimizing the Taliban or facilitating their success. The behavior of the Taliban towards Afghan Shi'as could darken relations with Iran, although it is unlikely that Iran will confront the Taliban on this issue. Iranian leaders will continue to be concerned about the production of opium in Afghanistan and its smuggling and consumption in Iran. The influx of Afghan refugees and migrants to Iran will be another source of conflict, a problem that could worsen given the collapse of Afghanistan's economy and the Taliban's repressive policies on the one hand, and Iran's own economic problems on the other. Given the fact that Iran is a downstream country in two transboundary rivers that originate from Afghanistan, water sharing disputes will also test Iran's relations with the Taliban. Iranian officials have accused the Taliban of violating Iran's water rights by refraining from opening the gates of the new Kamal Khan dam on the Helmand River that flows into Hamoun Lake in Iran's Sistan and Baluchestan province. Iran believes that the Taliban's position on the water-sharing issue will be one of the influential factors in Iran's interaction with the ruling group in Afghanistan. With the worsening water crisis in the region, tensions over water rights between the two countries are likely to increase in the future and overshadow Iran's relations with the Taliban.

However, at present, it seems that Iranian officials have calculated that their safest bet is coexisting with the Taliban while waiting to see how the situation in Afghanistan unfolds. Some Iranian analysts have warned that the Islamic Republic's decision to confront the Taliban is a strategic mistake. Regardless of how Iran's new policy in Afghanistan may be implemented, one thing is certain: given the new strategic environment at its eastern borders, Iran will have to pay much more attention to its "backyard" than ever before.

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