



The Taliban and the Future of Iran-Afghanistan Relations

Asif Shuja

Series Introduction

The Afghanistan Crisis: Anxieties and Trigger Points

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan has prompted a geopolitical free-for-all situation in the country, with regional, if not, extra-regional implications. It ceded the country swiftly to Taliban control, with China, Russia, and Iran all poised to forge close relationships with the new Afghan government.

International players like Qatar, Turkey and Pakistan, which have had functional relations with the Taliban, have sought constructive engagement with the new government, to the extent of opening a pathway for them into the international system. Others, particularly the Central Asian states, the UAE and

Saudi Arabia, are disquieted by security concerns, terrorism-related or otherwise. In Europe, the immediate impact of events in Afghanistan is having to manage a massive refugee crisis.

This series of *Insights* examines the implications of the US disengagement from Afghanistan, ranging from strategic openings in interstate relations to ground-level anxieties.

Cover photo: Iran's then Foreign Minister Javad Zarif (second from right) holding a meeting in Tehran on 31 January 2021 with the Taliban's Mullab Abdul Baradar (second from left), who has since become deputy leader of Afghanistan's new government. Tasnim News Agency/AFP.

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Asif Shuja*

Notwithstanding its past sectarian and other differences with the Taliban, Iran, in the midst of deteriorating relations with the United States, particularly over the nuclear issue, was compelled to see the Islamist movement as a lesser evil than the continued presence of US troops in Afghanistan. Thus, Iran's ties with sections of the Taliban had improved even before the group's recent return to power. With ISIS being a common threat to both Tebran and the Taliban, a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan could potentially be a part of Iran's extended "Axis of Resistance".

While most part of the world was shocked by the rapid turn of events in Afghanistan in mid-August 2021, for Iran it brought mixed news. The ideal situation for Iran would have been total US withdrawal from Afghanistan, followed by the establishment of a stable and friendly Afghan government short of total Taliban control. Instead, only half of its wishes were fulfilled, with its arch enemy, a superpower, giving way to a much smaller enemy, the Taliban, albeit one that can barely control the country. Nonetheless, Iran had astutely been preparing for this probable scenario since the US withdrawal from Afghanistan appeared a reality by the end of 2014. Thus, the Taliban's

sudden return to Afghanistan did not cause undue disarray in Tehran and affect its ability to articulate a strategy to deal with the new government in its neighbourhood.

Iran's stand on a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan was unambiguous, as reflected by the statement of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei. In his first meeting with the cabinet of the newly elected president, Ebrahim Raisi, on 28 August 2021, Khamenei laid out his approach to Taliban-ruled Afghanistan by conditioning Iran's relations with Afghanistan on reciprocity, "The nature of our relations with other governments depends on the nature of their relations with us."¹ Since Iran's Supreme Leader has the ultimate word on both domestic and foreign policy, this article aims to assess Khamenei's views on the Taliban, as reflected in his own statements as well as those transmitted through his close associates, and use them as a basis to extrapolate the likely course of Iran-Afghanistan relations.

Iran's Shifting Approach towards the Taliban

When Iran welcomed the US involvement in Afghanistan in 2001, the Iranian nuclear issue had not come to the fore yet. Iran's opposition to the staunchly anti-Shi'i Taliban at that time resulted in its rare cooperation with the United States to dislodge the Islamist movement from Afghanistan. Iran provided crucial support, including military and intelligence support, to US forces in their initial operations against the

¹ Website of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, "We Support the Nation of Afghanistan; Governments Come & Go", 28 August 2021, <https://english.khamenei.ir/news/8661/We-support-the-nation-of-Afghanistan-Governments-come-go>.

Taliban in 2001.² Further, Iran played an important diplomatic role at the 2001 Bonn conference, supporting the efforts of the United States and the United Nations in managing the Afghan crisis.³ However, such cooperation effectively ended when the Bush administration in January 2002 denounced Iran as part of the “axis of evil”.

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Iran’s clandestine nuclear programme came to light only in August 2002. As the US involvement increased in Afghanistan, so did the Iran-US standoff on the nuclear issue. As US opposition to the Iranian nuclear programme became relentless, Iran began to fear the prospect of a US strike on its nuclear installations.⁴

Amid deteriorating US-Iran relations, reports started emerging on the intensification of Iran-Taliban ties, especially in the wake of the US-Afghan long-term partnership agreement signed on 1 May 2012, when Iran reportedly allowed the Islamist group to open an office in its

² Alex Vatanka, “The Afghan Bridge in US-Iranian Ties”, Middle East Institute, 18 February 2014, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/afghan-bridge-us-iranian-ties>.

³ Seyed Hossein Mousavian, “Engage with Iran in Afghanistan”, *The National Interest*, 30 May 2013, <https://nationalinterest.org/commentary/engage-iran-afghanistan-8528>.

⁴ Alireza Nader et al., “Iran’s Influence in Afghanistan: Implications for the US Drawdown”, RAND Corporation, 2014, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR600/RR616/RAND_RR616.pdf.

eastern city of Zahedan by the end of that month.⁵ About a year later, in June 2013, Iran's semi-official Fars News Agency reported that a delegation of Taliban officials had made a trip to Tehran to meet with Iranian officials.⁶

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Iran was none too pleased with the modalities of the initial plan for the US withdrawal from Afghanistan arising from the signing of the Bilateral Security Arrangement between the US and the Afghan governments on 30 September 2014: the plan provided for the retention of 10,000 US troops in Afghanistan after the end of the international combat mission on 31 December 2014. While other regional players supported the continued presence of Western troops in Afghanistan, Iran opposed that idea as it did not consider their presence to be conducive to regional security. Criticising the plan, Iran's state-run Press TV noted on 30 September 2014: “Germany and Japan provide excellent examples of how the number of American bases mushroomed in these countries under the pretext of fighting the Cold War.”⁷

⁵ Maria Abi-Habib, “Tehran Builds on Outreach to Taliban”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 31 July 2012,

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10000872396390444130304577560241242267700>.

⁶ The Guardian, “Afghan Taliban Send Delegation to Iran”, *The Guardian*, 3 June 2013,

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/03/afghan-taliban-send-delegation-iran>.

⁷ Charles Recknagel, “Explainer: Key Points in US-Afghan Bilateral Security Agreement”, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 30 September 2014,

Therefore, as the US drawdown increasingly became a reality, Iran intensified its engagement with the Taliban. It started cultivating ties with Tehran-friendly factions of Taliban, a policy that was further strengthened in 2015, following the rise of the Islamic State in Khorasan (IS-K), seen by the Iranians as a bigger threat than the Taliban, and in which Tehran and Taliban saw a common enemy. The Obama administration's outreach to Tehran through the role it played in pushing for the signing in 2015 of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (or JCPOA) — the nuclear deal with the UN Permanent 5+1, which gave Iran some relief from international sanctions — obviously did not change Iran's intent to insure itself against the prospect of the Taliban returning to power. In June 2015, *The Wall Street Journal* published a comprehensive report, claiming that Iran was backing the Taliban with cash as well as arms and was also recruiting and training its fighters.⁸

“Iran started cultivating ties with Tehran-friendly factions of Taliban, a policy strengthened following the rise of the Islamic State in Khorasan, seen by the Iranians as a bigger threat than the Taliban.”

Convinced that Iran-Taliban ties were getting increasingly strong, the United States launched a drone strike against Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansour in May 2016 when he returned to

<https://www.rferl.org/a/explainer-bsa-afghan-us-security-agreement-bsa/26613884.html>.

⁸ Margherita Stancati, “Iran Backs Taliban with Cash and Arms”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 11 June 2015, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/iran-backs-taliban-with-cash-and-arms-1434065528>.

Pakistan after a reported month-long stay in Iran.⁹ According to a *New York Times* report, Mullah Mansour's visit to Iran may have been due to the "dangerously widening rift with his Pakistani sponsors" and his "outreach to Iran was also aimed at getting the Taliban out from under Pakistan's thumb."¹⁰

The highest level of Tehran-Taliban engagement came in January 2021, when a Taliban delegation led by Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, the deputy head of the group's political bureau who has since become the new government's deputy leader, visited Tehran and held talks with senior Iranian officials, including then Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif.¹¹

Changing Discourse

Iran's shifting approach to the Taliban brought about a change in the official Iranian discourse on the Islamist group, spearheaded by the office of the Supreme Leader. When the Taliban still ruled Afghanistan before the US invasion of 2001, the group was viewed as an enemy of Iran primarily because of its persecution of the Shi'i people of Afghanistan and particularly its killing of Iranian diplomats in 1998, an

⁹ Miriam Berger, "Iran Cheers US Withdrawal from Afghanistan — But Fears What Could Follow", *The Washington Post*, 10 July 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/07/10/iran-taliban-afghanistan-us-troop-withdrawal/>.

¹⁰ The New York Times, "Taliban Leader Feared Pakistan before He Was Killed," *The New York Times*, 9 August 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/09/world/asia/taliban-leader-feared-pakistan-before-he-was-killed.html>.

¹¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Iran, "Taliban Delegation Meets Foreign Minister Zarif in Tehran", 31 January 2021, <https://en.mfa.ir/portal/newsview/626461>.

episode that took Iran to the brink of war with its neighbouring country. However, as the US withdrawal became imminent, Iran's hedging strategy in Afghanistan included a new discourse of a changed Taliban. For instance, in June 2021, *Kayhan* newspaper, which is considered to be close to the Supreme Leader, stated, "The Taliban today is different from the Taliban that beheaded people".¹²

"The new Iranian discourse on the Taliban included the insertion of conspiracy theories and an effort to differentiate between the Taliban and ISIS."

The new Iranian discourse on the Taliban included the insertion of conspiracy theories and an effort to differentiate between the Taliban and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Thus, addressing the 35th International Islamic Unity Conference in Tehran on 23 October 2021, the speaker of Iran's Parliament, Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, referred to "recent incidents in Afghanistan" — evidently the attack on a Shi'i mosque in Kandahar a week earlier — as the handiwork of the United States and Israel. He claimed the two states intended to create regional insecurity by dividing Muslims on ethnic and religious lines, something that, in his view, would push the region to civil wars and fratricide.¹³ The conference is an annual event organised by Iran to promote sectarian unity in Islam. At the same event a day later, Ayatollah Khamenei said,

¹² Miriam Berger, "Iran Cheers US Withdrawal from Afghanistan".

¹³ Fars News, "Iranian Speaker Warns of Fomenting Insecurity in Region by 'Hidden Hands'", Fars News, 24 October 2021, <https://www.farsnews.ir/en/news/14000802000215/Iranian-Speaker-Warns-f-Fmning-Insecrity-in-Regin-by-%E2%80%9CHidden-Hands%E2%80%9D>.

“Today, the words Shi’a and Sunni have entered the American political literature though they are opposed to the principle of Islam. ... The recent unfortunate and heart-breaking explosions in the mosques of Afghanistan against Muslims and worshipers are among these incidents that ISIS carried out, and the Americans had explicitly stated that they created ISIS.”¹⁴ A Taliban spokesman was reported to have welcomed the remarks of the Ayatollah on the unity of the Sunnis and Shi’a, promising to stand together with Iran to thwart conspiracies against the two sects.¹⁵

Developments since the Taliban’s Capture of Power

Evidently, there has been a consistent view on the Taliban, right from the level of the Supreme Leader and permeating through all institutions in the Islamic republic, one that is reflected in recent developments in the relationship between the two countries. Thus, Tehran’s change of heart towards the Taliban was reflected in its reactions to events following the US withdrawal. On 15 August 2021, the day the Taliban captured Kabul, Iran did not rush to close its embassy in Afghanistan; instead, it just scaled down diplomatic activities at its consulates. Notwithstanding this decision, there were still uncertainties, given the memory of the killing of Iranian diplomats in Mazar-i-Sharif during the

¹⁴ Official Website of Iran’s Supreme Leader, “The Primary Indicator for the Unity of Muslims is the Issue of Palestine”, 24 October 2021, [https://www.leader.ir/en/content/25340/On-the-blessed-birth-anniversary-of-the-Prophet-Muhammad-\(PBUH\)](https://www.leader.ir/en/content/25340/On-the-blessed-birth-anniversary-of-the-Prophet-Muhammad-(PBUH)).

¹⁵ Tehran Times, “Taliban Welcomes Ayatollah Khamenei’s Remarks on Shia-Sunni Unity Politics”, *Tehran Times*, 26 October 2021, <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/466379/Taliban-welcomes-Ayatollah-Khamenei-s-remarks-on-Shia-Sunni-unity>.

previous rule of the Taliban. Perhaps to allay such concerns, a senior Taliban official was reported to have announced two days later that “Taliban members have been ordered at all levels to ensure that we don’t disrespect any country’s presence in Afghanistan.”¹⁶ Consequently, that same day, Iran announced that its embassy in Kabul would remain open and fully functional.

“Afghanistan is our brother country, with the same language, religion and culture. We support the Afghan nation. Governments come and go. It is the Afghan nation that will remain. The nature of our relations with other governments depends on the nature of their relations with us.”

Ayatollah Khamenei

Khamenei’s imprint on these decisions could be inferred by the fact that the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan and the decision to retain the embassy in Kabul happened at a time when Iran was undergoing its own domestic political transition. The presidential election had concluded on 18 June 2021 and the newly elected Raisi and his cabinet were only slated to take office sometime in mid-August 2021. On 28 August, the approach that had so far been implicit was clearly articulated by Ayatollah Khamenei, when, during his first meeting with the Raisi

¹⁶ Reuters, “Taliban Order Fighters to Respect Foreigners in Afghanistan”, Reuters, 17 August 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/taliban-order-fighters-respect-foreigners-afghanistan-official-2021-08-17/>.

cabinet, he laid out Tehran's approach to Taliban-ruled Afghanistan by saying, "Afghanistan is our brother country, with the same language, religion and culture. We support the Afghan nation. Governments come and go. It is the Afghan nation that will remain. The nature of our relations with other governments depends on the nature of their relations with us."¹⁷ Following this indirect endorsement of the Taliban by Khamenei, on 4 October 2021, an Iranian trade delegation met with the Islamist group in Kabul and the two sides agreed on enhanced coordination on trade, tariffs and road infrastructure.¹⁸

However, the biggest challenge to the Iran-Afghanistan relationship emerged soon afterwards, when a series of massacres targeted at the Shi'i community in several Afghan cities and at Shi'i mosques took place. While these attacks were largely blamed on the IS-K, Taliban special forces were reported to have helped the victims. Ayatollah Khamenei's aforesaid linking of the attacks to the United States and its supposed role in creating ISIS would have comforted the Taliban. Amid these developments, President Raisi appointed Hassan Kazemi Qomi, a former head of Iran's consulate in the Afghan city of Herat, as Iran's special envoy for Afghanistan affairs, illustrating Tehran's resolve to keep the relationship with the Taliban going despite the prevailing challenges.¹⁹ Soon after his appointment, Kazemi Qomi

¹⁷ Website of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, "We Support the Nation of Afghanistan".

¹⁸ Samya Kullab, "Taliban Meet with UK, Iran Delegations amid Economic Woes," AP News, 6 October 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/amnesty-international-taliban-afghanistan-race-and-ethnicity-439f65acf0eb04772f5e7c2d4fd59e22>.

¹⁹ Mehr News Agency, "'Kazemi Qomi' Appointed Iran Special Envoy for Afghanistan," Mehr News Agency, 17 October 2021, <https://en.mehrnews.com/news/179800/Kazemi-Qomi-appointed-Iran-special-envoy-for-Afghanistan>.

claimed that “interaction and establishing dialogue with the Taliban shows the art of diplomacy by the Islamic Republic.”²⁰

Outstanding Issues

That art of diplomacy would have to be deployed in managing some of the interests that Iran and Afghanistan have in common, which could potentially introduce irritants. Two such issues are the need to curb drug trafficking and cooperation on water sharing. Kazemi Qomi indicated in October 2021 that Iran and the Taliban were likely to reach agreements over these two issues.²¹

Drug trafficking

As of 2018, Afghanistan was reportedly the world’s largest producer of opium, with Iran being a primary destination for opium originating from Afghanistan.²² Drug abuse is said to be significantly high in Iran by world standards, and Iranian officials have attributed the increase in methamphetamine use in their country to the influx of cheap supplies from Afghanistan.²³ Iran’s efforts to curb the drug menace may be

²⁰ *Tehran Times*, “Raisi Appoints Special Envoy to Afghanistan”, *Tehran Times*, 18 October 2021, <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/466165/Raisi-appoints-special-envoy-to-Afghanistan>.

²¹ Iran International, “Iran Special Envoy for Afghanistan Speaks of Relations with Taliban”, 22 October 2021, <https://www.iranintl.com/en/20211022325409>.

²² David Zucchini and Najim Rahim, “In a Village of Widows, the Opium Trade Has Taken a Deadly Toll”, *New York Times*, 27 December 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/27/world/asia/afghanistan-iran-opium.html>.

²³ European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, “EU4MD Special Report: Methamphetamine Developments in South Asia: The Situation in Iran and the Implications for the EU and its Neighbours”, April 2021,

greatly helped if Tehran and the Taliban have effective collaboration on this front.

Water sharing

Owing to the shortage of water in both countries, Iran and Afghanistan have historically found themselves in conflict over water supply.²⁴ The issue is particularly critical for Iran as its water-scarce eastern provinces are dependent on waters that flow from rivers in Afghanistan. Lack of clear understanding between the two countries on water sharing is a potential source of conflict. A case in point is the Helmand River, which originates in the Hindu Kush mountain range near Kabul and flows into the Iranian province of Sistan-Baluchistan. Afghanistan has long considered the 1973 treaty with Iran regulating the sharing of water from this river to be inadequate, and the treaty was never consistently enforced.²⁵ Afghanistan's construction of hydro-electric dams on the river has further aggrieved downstream Iran. In February 2021, under the government of President Ashraf Ghani, Iran and Afghanistan agreed on a roadmap towards reaching an understanding on water sharing from the Helmand River.²⁶ With the new government in place, the two countries may have to rework this aspect of their cooperation.

https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/system/files/publications/13703/EU4MD_Methamphetamine-situation-in-Iran_final.pdf

²⁴ Alireza Nader et al., "Iran's Influence in Afghanistan: Implications for the US Drawdown".

²⁵ Future Directions International, "The Politics of Water Security between Afghanistan and Iran", 1 March 2012, <https://www.futuredirections.org.au/publication/the-politics-of-water-security-between-afghanistan-and-iran/>.

²⁶ Deutsche Welle, "Iran-Afghanistan Water Dispute to Test Tehran's Ties to Taliban," Deutsche Welle, 9 September 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/iran-afghanistan-water-dispute-to-test-tehrans-ties-to-taliban/a-59112469>.

Prospects

Notwithstanding irritants in the Iran-Afghanistan relationship, the stability of Afghanistan is important for Iran, not least because the two countries share a long boundary. Iran is also home to millions of Afghan migrants and refugees. The IS-K attacks on Shi'i Muslims in Afghanistan, which are largely seen as aimed at discrediting the Taliban, have created an opportunity for Iran to work on enhancing unity between the Shi'a and Sunnis.

It is pertinent to note here that Iran does not consider the Sunni-Shi'i divide to be in its interests, with Ayatollah Khamenei blaming it on the handiwork of Iran's enemies. IS-K, which is the most active among the Sunni Muslim extremist groups in Afghanistan, has in the past targeted not only the Shi'a, US and NATO forces, international agencies, and the Afghan political and security establishment, but also the Taliban itself.²⁷ Thus, it would not be difficult for Iran to find common ground with the Taliban. Such cooperation could conceivably include the use of Iran's "Fatemioun Division", which, according to the US Treasury Department, is an arm of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' Quds Force that "preys on the millions of undocumented Afghan migrants and refugees in Iran, coercing them to fight in Syria under threat of arrest or deportation."²⁸ In this context, it may be recalled that Iran's then foreign minister, Javad Zarif, had said in an interview in December 2020, apparently alluding to the potential role of the Fatemioun Division, that, "The Afghan government is fully informed

²⁷ BBC News, "Afghanistan: Suicide Attack Hits Kandahar Mosque during Prayers", BBC News, 16 October 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58925863>.

²⁸ US Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Designates Iran's Foreign Fighter Militias in Syria along with a Civilian Airline Ferrying Weapons to Syria", 24 January 2019, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm590>.

that we are prepared to help the Afghan government regroup these forces [Afghan migrants and refugees in Iran] under the leadership of the Afghan National Army in the fight against terrorism.”²⁹

“Iran does not consider the Sunni-Shi’i divide to be in its interests.”

Iran has a stake in seeing the establishment of an inclusive government in Afghanistan since about 10 percent of Afghans are Shi’a. Many of the Shi’a of Afghanistan belong to the Hazara community, which is the third largest ethnic group in Afghanistan. While the Hazaras have historically been persecuted on ethnic grounds, the growing tide of Sunni extremism has seen the Shi’a being increasingly targeted for persecution on the grounds of being heretics.³⁰ Thus, on 8 November 2021, while answering a question on Iran’s stance on recognition of the Taliban, an Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman underlined the importance of an inclusive government in Afghanistan: “We cannot talk now about the legitimacy of the governing body of Afghanistan. An inclusive government, including all groups and ethnicities in Afghanistan, is what the international community is waiting for.”³¹

²⁹ TOLONews, “Transcript of TOLONews Interview with Iran’s Javad Zarif”, TOLONews, 21 December 2020, <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-168674>.

³⁰ BBC News, “Afghanistan: Suicide Attack Hits Kandahar Mosque during Prayers”.

³¹ Fars News, “Senior Cleric Warns of US Plots after Withdrawal from Afghanistan”, Fars News, 12 November 2021, <https://www.farsnews.ir/en/news/14000821000387/Senior-Cleric-Warns-f-US-Pls-afcr-Withdrawal-frm-Afghanisan>.

Owing to the high stakes involved, Iran has been actively involved at various international platforms to resolve the challenges afflicting Afghanistan under Taliban rule. The most important platform for such engagement is that under the rubric of the “Meeting of Foreign Ministers of Afghanistan’s Neighbouring Countries + Russia”, under which the foreign ministers of Afghanistan’s neighbouring countries — Iran, China, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan — along with Russia, have met twice so far. The first such meeting was held in Pakistan in September 2021, followed by the second meeting in Tehran on 27 October.

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Following the latter meeting, the participants approved a joint ministerial statement noting that “an inclusive and broad-based political structure with the participation of all ethno-political groups is the only solution to Afghanistan issues.”³² Iran also later participated in a similar meeting, the “Delhi Regional Security Dialogue on Afghanistan”, convened on 10 November by India and attended by most of Afghanistan’s neighbours except Pakistan.

³² Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in Singapore, “Joint Ministerial Statement of the Second Meeting of Foreign Ministers of Afghanistan’s Neighbouring Countries”, 27 October 2021, http://www.chinaembassy.org.sg/eng/jrzg/202110/t20211028_10348756.htm.

Evidently, Iran is proving to be a crucial enabler of the process of mainstreaming the Taliban, and the reconciliatory gestures of Iran are expected to serve well in deepening Iran-Afghanistan ties in the near future. On 11 November, the Iranian Foreign Ministry's director general for West Asia, Rasoul Mousavi, underlined the regional consensus reached through these three dialogues, calling on the Taliban to seize the opportunity to resolve the Afghan crisis.³³

“Despite the inherent virtues of an inclusive government, and Iran’s continued insistence on that ... the Islamic republic would be the last country to seriously expect such a government to be established under the Taliban.”

A Taliban spokesman welcomed all the three regional meetings, terming them as illustrative of the importance of Afghanistan to the region and intended to benefit the country.³⁴ Such welcome remarks were under the expectation that these efforts would help the Taliban gain recognition as the legitimate rulers of Afghanistan.

Nonetheless, an inclusive government in Afghanistan appears highly unlikely. On 11 November, the Taliban's acting foreign minister,

³³ Fars News, “Iran: Regional Consensus Good Opportunity for Taliban to Save Afghanistan”, Fars News, 12 November 2021, <https://www.farsnews.ir/en/news/14000821000217/Iran-Reginal-Cnsenss-Gd-Opnrniy-fr-Taliban-Save-Afghanisan>.

³⁴ Reuters, “India Hosts First Regional Meeting on Afghanistan since Taliban takeover”, Reuters, 10 November 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/india-hosts-first-regional-meeting-afghanistan-since-taliban-takeover-2021-11-10/>.

Amir Khan Muttaqi, claimed that Afghanistan already had an all-inclusive government under the Taliban.³⁵

Despite the inherent virtues of an inclusive government, and Iran's continued insistence on that, it would be safe to assume that the Islamic republic would be the last country to seriously expect such a government to be established under the Taliban. Iran's open calls for establishing an inclusive government and participation in these forums should be seen as more geared towards remaining engaged in the process of normalising the Taliban government.

“Given that the Islamic State in Khorasan serves as a common enemy to both Tehran and the Taliban, a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan may well soon become a part of Iran's extended “Axis of Resistance” against the US-led Western bloc.”

The return of the Taliban is clearly a lesser evil for Iran than the continued presence of US troops in Afghanistan. Even though the Taliban comes with a set of new challenges, Iran appears better equipped to deal with them. Given that the IS-K serves as a common enemy to both Tehran and the Taliban, a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan may well soon

³⁵ Anadolu Agency, “Taliban Have All-Inclusive Government in Afghanistan, Claims Acting Foreign Minister,” Anadolu Agency, 12 November 2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/taliban-have-all-inclusive-government-in-afghanistan-claims-acting-foreign-minister/2419061>.

become a part of Iran's extended "Axis of Resistance" against the US-led Western bloc. ◆

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