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SHORT COMMENTS

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Hope and Fear

By Associate Professor Ali Omid

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Taliban's Reconquest of Afghanistan and Iran's Hope and Fear

By Dr. Ali Omidi, Associate Professor, Department of Political Sciences, University of Isfahan, Isfahan, Iran

On August 15th, 2021 Taliban captured Kabul and almost all major cities of Afghanistan, except Panjshir province, in a lightning strike without resistance from the Afghan National Army (ANA). The international community has also accepted this bitter reality, although it is still astonished at the speed of these developments. In the meantime, understanding Iran's real policy towards Taliban is of interest to analysts and Governments.

Regardless of the bitter experience of the previous Taliban rule (1995 - 2001), Iran has shown a fear and hope response to these developments. Some Afghan and US officials have repeatedly accused Iran, especially the Revolutionary Guards, of providing financial and weapons to Taliban. The main reason for the start of security cooperation between Iran and the Taliban stems from their common enmity with the United States. Following the rise of ISIS in Afghanistan in 2015, Iran increased its imperceptible cooperation with Taliban to protect its borders. At the time, Taliban controlled parts of the two countries' border areas. This covert cooperation also led to the expansion of diplomatic relations between Iran and the Taliban through Qatar mediating. Improving Taliban – Iran ties became clear when the group's leader, Mullah Akhtar Mansour, was killed in a US drone strike when he returned to Pakistan from Iran in May 2016; although Iran stated that it had no information of his presence on Iranian soil.

Iran first acknowledged in late 2018 that it had hosted Taliban envoys. According to Tehran's officials, the Afghan Government was also briefed of the meetings and stated that the talks aimed to "resolve security problems in Afghanistan." "The Taliban is definitely part of Afghanistan's future, but not all of it," Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif told a news conference in India in January 2019. Also in February 2021, a Taliban political delegation headed by Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar arrived in Tehran to meet with the Iranian Foreign Minister and Mohammad Ibrahim Taherian Fard, Iran's Special envoy for Afghanistan. One of

the goals of the Islamic Republic in negotiating with the Taliban and disclosing it was to remind other rival and enemy countries (the United States) that Iran's role and interests in Afghanistan should not be ignored.

With the Taliban taking control of Afghanistan from August 15th, 2021 onwards, the conservative-affiliated media in Tehran turned a positive tone on Taliban. Tasnim News Agency has not only referred to the Taliban's moderate character, but has also published interviews by senior members of the group in which they condemned sectarianism in Afghanistan. For example, Taliban's Spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid told the news agency, "We promise our Shiite brothers that no discrimination will be imposed on them, and we will not allow that to happen anymore." The Kayhan newspaper, in which the managing director is appointed by Ali Khamenei, claimed before the Taliban's conquest of Kabul that this entity has changed and had nothing to do with the beheading as before. Meantime, the newspaper chose its August 16th, 2021 headline as the "The US was forced out of Afghanistan and 85 % of Afghanistan is under Taliban rule," expressing actually its contentedness with current situation. Iranian state television (IRIB) also broadcasts numerous reports on Taliban-controlled security in Kabul and interviews with Taliban officials on the necessity of national reconciliation and cooperation with neighbors.

Taliban have also adopted a conciliatory tone towards Iran. In an interview with Iranian Labour News Agency (ILNA), Zabihullah Mujahid said that the civil war and lack of experience prevented the group from establishing good relations with Iran during its rule in Afghanistan before 2001. According to him, Taliban is "changing its behavior" and is now very different from 2000. An Iranian official says Iran has resumed exports of oil, gasoline, and petrochemicals to Afghanistan following a Taliban demand to Tehran. Taliban reduced fuel import tariffs from Iran by 70%. Taliban also declared that its leader made a "public pardon" and the Afghan army soldiers who had previously taken refuge in Iran had returned to Afghanistan with their military equipment and vehicles. Mohammad Ismail Khan, a former warlord of Herat, Afghanistan, and an outstanding anti-Taliban figure, has been released by Taliban through Iran's mediation.

Although it is not easy to outline the future perspective of Iran and Taliban ties because of the uncertainty of the future, it is clear that Tehran is preparing itself for a neighbor, where the Taliban is an undeniable reality. Ayatollah Khamenei, while scapegoating the United States for the current chaotic situation in Afghanistan, took a cautious stance on the Taliban's domination of Afghanistan and the future of Iran - Taliban relations. He claimed "This is the work of America, and the US is responsible for the hardships they [Afghan people] are going through. In any case, we are in favor of the Afghan people. Governments come and go. What remains are the people of Afghanistan," adding "the nature of our [future] relationship with Governments [Taliban] depends on the nature of their relationship with us." In other words, Khamenei has sent the message that Iran is following the developments in Afghanistan with fear and hope. Ebrahim Raisi, Iran's new President described the withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan as "an opportunity to restore life, security and lasting peace in Afghanistan," expressing in fact a positive approach of the new developments in Afghanistan. But on the future of Afghanistan, he reiterated on the state TV, "A Government should be established there, which is elected by the votes and the will of the people." Saeed Khatibzadeh, the Spokesman for the Iranian Foreign Ministry, was content to say that "Taliban is not and will not be all of Afghanistan. It is part of Afghanistan and part of the future solution of Afghanistan and what is important for us is to form a comprehensive Government with the presence of all Afghan groups in order to reach a peaceful and lasting solution in this country."

What is clear is that the Islamic Republic of Iran is ideologically and strategically pleased with the new developments in Afghanistan; because, the anti-American policy is the main part of Iran's foreign policy identity. In Tehran's view, Taliban's rise to power will ultimately is in favor of strategic alliances within the anti-American axis, namely Russia, China, and Iran. It seems that if Taliban keeps its promises to form an all-inclusive Government with its anti-American attitude, it will be perfectly desirable for Iran. Also, Iran's porous border with Afghanistan, due to the passage of Afghan immigrants, drugs, armed groups, etc., makes Taliban attractive to Iran, if they stabilize the joint border security.

Two important rivers enter Iran from Afghanistan, i.e. Helmand and Harirud River. The efforts of the Karzai and Ghani Governments to develop dam infrastructure have brought about an environmental threat to Iran. Kamal Khan Dam is one of these projects, which was built on the Helmand River and inaugurated in March 2021. At the opening ceremony, Ashraf Ghani proudly said that if Iran wants water, it must pay back oil for it. In this regard, the humiliating escape of Ghani from Afghanistan did not make Tehran unhappy. Therefore, although Iran is content with the withdrawal of US troops and the fall of the US-led Government in Afghanistan, given the future uncertainty and whether the Taliban are committed to their promises to establish an inclusive Government and good neighborliness with Iran, Tehran looks at the developments in Afghanistan with fear and hope.



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