

Iran Sets Its Eyes on Afghanistan

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Brief Analysis

As it deploys more military forces along the border, Tehran is no doubt mulling various options for securing its interests next door, whether by waging proxy warfare, intervening directly, working with the Taliban, or trying to preserve the status quo.

The Afghan government's worsening security situation and serial loss of ground to the Taliban appear to have Iran on edge. Yet the Islamic Republic might also see the latest developments as an opportunity to increase its local influence and score points against the United States. On July 7-8, the Iranian Foreign Ministry hosted delegations from the Afghan government and Taliban in a bid to quickly fill the diplomatic gap created by departing U.S. forces while also communicating its security concerns.

In addition to diplomacy, Tehran has been bolstering its military deployments on the Afghan frontier. Cellphone videos recently posted on social media show columns of equipment from the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and national armed forces (Artesh) being transported to the border, including main battle tanks, armored personnel carriers, surveillance systems, and support assets. Moreover, the air force has reportedly put some of its eastern-based fighter jets on high alert.

Although the Artesh has held defensive responsibility for the 945-kilometer border with Afghanistan since 2018, Tehran might also be exploring its offensive options there. Any major campaign inside Afghanistan would be spearheaded by better-equipped IRGC units, supported by Qods Force elements already believed to be operating there.

Iran's Complicated History in Afghanistan

Iranian activities in Afghanistan tend to be shrouded in ambiguity, with goals that have seemingly ranged from interfering with the coalition presence to containing the Taliban. The U.S. and Afghan governments, among other actors, have accused the Qods Force of encouraging the Taliban to impose more casualties and material losses on coalition forces and speed up a U.S. withdrawal, in line with Iran's wider strategy of pushing America out of the region entirely.

This goal has required Tehran to play the delicate game of both working with and deterring the Taliban, especially in Herat, Farah, and Nimruz provinces. On one hand, the Qods Force has likely explored potential cooperation with the Taliban on issues such as altering local governance and hurting U.S. interests. On the other hand, Qods personnel have apparently been asked to manage deconfliction with Taliban units in order to avoid the likes of the 1998 Mazar-e Sharif incident (see below).

On January 27, Ali Shamkhani, the head of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, met with Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, the Taliban diplomatic chief who traveled to Tehran from his office in Qatar. Although Shamkhani praised the group for its steadfastness in battling the United States, he also noted that Tehran would not recognize any Afghan faction that takes power by force. To ease such concerns, Baradar offered to help Iran secure its border with Afghanistan. Another participant in the January meetings, Iranian foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, voiced support for a broad "Islamic government" in Kabul encompassing all ethnicities and religious branches.

Indeed, Iranian leaders are keen on protecting (and, by extension, controlling) Shia Muslim communities in Afghanistan, especially now that the Sunni Taliban captured their first two Shia towns in the Bamyan province earlier this month. Although sectarian data is difficult to pin down in Afghanistan, an estimated 15 to 29 percent of the population is Shia (mostly the Twelver sect that dominates the Islamic Republic, but also some Ismaili Shia).

Ethnographic maps indicate

(https://gulf2000.columbia.edu/images/maps/Afghanistan_Religion_summary_lg.png) that these Shia are fairly concentrated in the center of the country, with smaller pockets in the north, west (particularly Herat), and southwest.

The potential for friction cannot be dismissed given how close Iran and the Taliban have come to open warfare in the past. In 1998, the group massacred eight Qods Force operatives and a reporter at the Iranian consulate in Mazar-e Sharif, which nearly led Tehran to launch a retaliatory military incursion. According to a plan drawn up by the late Qods Force commander Qasem Soleimani in cooperation with Afghanistan's Northern Alliance, Iranian forces were to capture Herat and draw Taliban resources there, enabling the Alliance to take Kabul and then link up with the Iranians in Herat. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei reportedly gave Soleimani a forty-eight-hour window to achieve this goal and quickly withdraw, but the operation was eventually mothballed for various reasons, including logistical and political concerns.

Current Iranian Intentions and Scenarios

At present, Tehran appears to be exploring three main options for avoiding dangerous destabilization in Afghanistan and furthering its interests there: (1) covertly or overtly supporting a Taliban takeover while reaching tactical and strategic agreements with the group in order to contain its activities, (2) waging a proxy war against the group, or (3) intervening directly.

Support for Taliban takeover. Many in Iran view Taliban control as Afghanistan's only feasible political option—or, at least, the only option for a friendly Islamic state. This attitude may explain why Iranian weapons have a long habit of showing up across the border. Many such weapons have been confiscated from the Taliban over the years, and although Tehran may or may not have supplied them directly, at least some of them bear strong lineage to those found among Shia groups in Iraq during their 2005-2011 insurgency (e.g., the explosively formed penetrators that

the Taliban call “Dragon”).

Tehran respects the Taliban’s resilience, and notwithstanding their ideological differences, they have a lot in common, including their radical views and hostility toward the United States. This affinity could pave the way toward future strategic cooperation, provided the Taliban is willing to give credible guarantees for safeguarding the interests of Afghan Shia.

Absent such understandings, Tehran likely fears that a full Taliban takeover would give a freer hand to even more extremist Sunni elements in Afghanistan—most notably, Salafist factions could openly attack Shia communities, triggering a major flow of refugees to Iran. Yet Iranian and Taliban officials may decide to limit these concerns by sustaining de facto deconfliction and cooperating on the tactical level.

Waging a proxy war. Capitalizing on its experience in Iraq and Syria, Tehran might instead use militias to prevent full Taliban control. It already has one effective weapon for this scenario: the seasoned **Fatemiyoun Brigade** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-afghan-and-pakistani-proxies-syria-and-beyond>), a militia composed of Afghan fighters who were recruited, trained, and equipped by the Qods Force for fighting in Syria beginning in 2012. Other militias could conceivably be formed inside Afghanistan by organizing and training the thousands of locals desperately looking for employment of any kind. Such groups would presumably be placed under the command of Fatemiyoun veterans, Qods Force officers, and former Northern Alliance warlords.

Direct intervention. If Iran’s goal is to support Afghanistan’s central government, place a protective umbrella over the Shia population, and/or maintain the status quo by preventing a complete Taliban victory, it may opt for more direct military action. For instance, it could launch an operation focused on quickly capturing the provincial capital of Herat, a traditional stronghold for Iran. Yet any such action could ultimately prove quite costly, as it would require Iran to establish a substantial military presence and depend on long, vulnerable supply lines. More likely, the regime would attempt to create a buffer zone on the Afghan side of the border and establish land bridges to Shia areas, presumably using Fatemiyoun units supported by heavy IRGC artillery, armed drones, loitering munitions, and precision missile fire.

Conclusion

Iran’s recent military movements on the Afghan border may just be a precautionary defensive measure; alternatively, they could constitute preparations for a cross-border incursion. Serious consideration should also be given to the possibility that Tehran envisions the “Syrianification” or “Iraqification” of Afghanistan, perhaps by using proxy militias to set up a Shia safe haven in Herat province and elsewhere. Over time, such a strategy could produce a powerful, Iranian-supported military force in parallel to the Afghan security forces, much like **what has happened with Iraq’s al-Hashd al-Shabi** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/honored-not-contained-future-iraqs-popular-mobilization-forces>). Therefore, any transfer of Fatemiyoun forces from Syria to Afghanistan should be monitored closely.

To be sure, attempting to expand Iranian influence in Afghanistan could draw money and resources away from the regime’s other regional operations. Yet it would also serve Tehran’s strategic objective of becoming a regional hegemon.

Regarding the possibility of attacks on U.S. targets, Iranian elements could take advantage of the chaos in Afghanistan by launching or sponsoring operations against U.S. embassy facilities or diplomats in Kabul or elsewhere. The Taliban’s July 13 massacre of twenty-two U.S.-trained Afghan special forces in Faryab province also highlighted the continuing need for direct military support. In particular, a persistent air and drone campaign originating from U.S. Central Command bases could help the Afghan army push back and degrade Taliban forces across the country.

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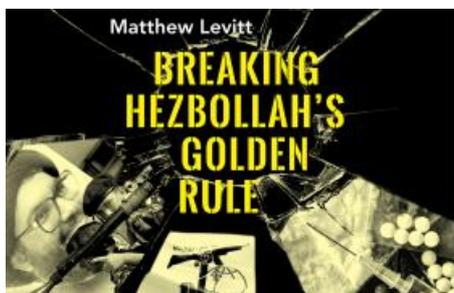
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