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# Navigating Influence in Afghanistan: the Cases of Qatar and Pakistan

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Brief Analysis

**After capturing Kabul, the Taliban announced that they were seeking good relations with their neighbors—China, India, Iran, Russia, Pakistan, and the Gulf Arab states. Yet given Pakistan and Qatar’s extant relations with the Taliban, the two countries appear to be the main winners in this shifted balance, and whichever one is chosen as the primary mediator will have a significant role in shaping regional policies towards Afghanistan going forward.**

**B**oth Pakistan and Qatar have built their own relations with the Taliban; Qatar has hosted the Taliban political office for eight years, while Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) is understood to be the principle founder of the Taliban. Pakistan’s influence in Afghanistan and among the Taliban is largely a matter of security-intelligence support, while Qatar’s influence focuses on the mediation and prestige that this relationship brings in the eyes of world powers and international organizations. What remains to be seen—and what Arab countries will eagerly watch—are the opportunities and challenges that will unfold, and which of the two countries the Taliban itself—and interested regional observers—will focus on when forming bilateral ties.

Qatar’s position as mediator with the Taliban has developed over the past decade, specifically when Doha became the U.S. choice to open a political office for the Taliban. The office opened in 2013, after failed direct negotiations between the Taliban on the one hand and the former Afghan and NATO representatives on the other led to the realization that there needed to be a clear channel opened with the Taliban. In 2009, an attempt to establish talks between the Afghan government and a man who claimed to be Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansour

fell apart when the latter—who turned out to be an **imposter**—took the money given to him to facilitate the ties and disappeared.

U.S. support for Qatar as a mediator in peace talks with the Taliban has provided it a platform for a wider role in Afghanistan's future developments. Even after the 2020 talks in Doha between the Taliban and the former Afghan government collapsed, Western governments and international organizations in particular have accepted Qatar's legitimacy as a point of contact with the Taliban, with the German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas traveling to Qatar for consultations and **praising** Qatar's role in keeping Kabul Airport open. British, Dutch, and Italian Foreign Ministries and U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin have likewise all traveled to Qatar highlight the importance of Qatar as a mediator in Afghanistan compared to Pakistan, China, or Russia. Moreover, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres stated recently that “dialogue with the Taliban is essential.”

### **The Approach of Arab Countries**

While there is international interest in navigating relations with the Taliban to avoid an economic collapse in Afghanistan, the approach of Arab countries is different. Generally speaking, the Arab countries in North Africa and the Levant have showed little interest in the developments in Afghanistan when compared with the Arab countries of the Gulf. The former group of countries is physically farther from Afghanistan and is navigating its own share of economic uncertainties and conflicts. However, if a collective response to developments in Afghanistan from Arab countries is needed, most Arab League members will likely support Qatari positions and interests in the country over Pakistani ones.

But when it comes to the Gulf states of Saudi Arabia and the Emirates, viewing Qatar as the prime mediator is more complicated. The sensitivity of the Arab countries toward Afghanistan and its developments is closely related to the sensitivities of the international community regarding this country. In line with these concerns, Arab League countries fear a rise in political Islam and the strengthening of terrorist groups in Afghanistan. They are also concern about the influx of refugees to Arab countries and emerging competition between China, Russia, Iran, and Pakistan in Afghanistan.

Saudi Arabia **closed** its embassy after the Taliban occupied Kabul and has not expressed a desire to reopen it and recognize the new government. Yet Riyadh cannot remain indifferent to developments in Afghanistan for long, especially given its prior history of relations with the Taliban. Saudi Arabia was one of only three countries to recognize the group when it controlled Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001. Moreover, while the situation between the Taliban and Iran is complicated, allowing Afghanistan to move into Iran's zone of political influence would be an unacceptable outcome for Riyadh. Therefore, Saudi Arabia will likely attempt to diminish Iran's influence in the country, particularly in the wake of foreseeable instability.

Saudi Arabia shares a close religious affinity to Afghanistan given its control of Mecca and Medina, and it has the **capacity to influence the Taliban** on these grounds. Simultaneously, Saudi leadership intends to preserve an image of **moderate Islam** favorable to the international community. By doing both, Saudi Arabia could play its own role in navigating relations with Afghanistan. Saudi Arabia is encouraged by Pakistan's assistance to this end, and appears to favor Pakistan over Qatar as a partner in dealing with Afghanistan. This is especially the case given the lingering tension between Saudi Arabia and Qatar over Qatari support for Islamist groups and the Muslim Brotherhood, which

constitute Riyadh's red line.

Notably, both Saudi Arabia and its Emirati neighbor previously emerged as direct competitors to Qatar's mediating role with the Taliban. Saudi Arabia repeatedly tried to convince the Taliban to continue negotiations on Saudi soil, but the Taliban were pessimistic about the neutrality of Saudi rulers and preferred the Qataris. According to a report leaked to the New York Times, the UAE had likewise competed with Qatar to host the Taliban political office. This rivalry continued; in 2018, Abu Dhabi hosted a round of talks between the Taliban and U.S. officials.

Abu Dhabi also hosted hundreds of Afghan refugees after the Taliban captured Kabul and took an active role within Afghanistan by sending more than 100 tons of humanitarian aid to Afghanistan. Beyond Afghanistan, the UAE rivals Qatar in the Persian Gulf and has likewise criticized Qatar for its financial and political support for Muslim Brotherhood groups in the region. For this reason, and because the UAE has relatively close ties to Russia and China, it may support Pakistani influence in the Afghan theatre.

### **Role of Pakistan**

If Saudi Arabia and the UAE lean towards relying on Pakistan as a medium of influence, they will be joining China. Moreover, although Pakistan was left out of the Afghan peace talks, Pakistan's deep influence over the Taliban and their intelligence and logistical guidance have helped Pakistan, to some extent, restore its mediating position in Afghanistan—especially for China. Afghanistan is considered of major strategic interest to Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative, and China also has interests with regard to Afghanistan's rare earth mineral mines, and maintaining calm in the Wakhan corridor, where China is particularly sensitive to attacks from Uyghur separatists.

But privately, the Chinese appear wary of relying too heavily on Pakistani influence. Chinese workers in Pakistan have been killed in terrorist attacks, which could presage a rough ride in Afghanistan, and the Taliban prefer isolation to roads and dams that could serve to loosen their control on the population. China is counting on Pakistan to serve as its facilitator in Afghanistan, said Sajjan Gohel, International Security Director of the Asia-Pacific Foundation in London. "The Chinese appear confident that they will be able to secure more security guarantees from the Taliban," Gohel said, "because of their mutual ties with Pakistan."

Even the Europeans can't ignore the role of Pakistan, and the American view has not stopped other Western powers from knocking on Pakistan's door. Just as numerous countries have visited Doha to engage with the Taliban, foreign ministers from Britain, Italy Germany have visited Islamabad. European diplomats appear to believe—or at least hope—that Pakistan still holds some sway over the Taliban. They also fear that shunning Pakistan risks encouraging the country even further into the warm embrace of China.

On the other hand, Pakistan is not known for its ability to temper extremist groups, and has been criticized for failing to change the Taliban's behavior, and sheltering the Taliban after the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan.

If the Taliban wants international legitimacy and recognition by the international community, it will have to resort to Qatari diplomatic influence and mediation power in the international arena. The new Taliban government needs to be recognized by the international community; they do not want to be isolated as they were between 1996 and 2001. Moreover, the Taliban urgently needs Qatari investment. The United States has frozen around \$9.5 billion in assets in Afghanistan's central Da Afghanistan Bank.

Given Pakistan's widespread influence in Afghanistan, while Islamabad may be neglected at the outset of global engagement with Afghanistan, it is likely to gradually show its political and geopolitical importance. As this occurs, the international community will likely realize that without engagement with Pakistan on this issue, policies in Afghanistan will not continue. Chosen for its neutrality, Qatar has little real influence over the Taliban, which has led to some criticism of Doha for failing to guarantee the terms of the February 29, 2020 peace talks. According to the now-collapsed [peace talks](#), the Taliban were not to seize Afghanistan by force, and were obligated to enter into negotiations with the Afghan government. Qatari Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al Thani claimed in an August 22 interview with [Fox News](#) that Qatar has no influence over the Taliban, and if it did, "We could have reached a peace agreement between them and the Afghan government. Qatar is just a 'neutral mediator.'"

Likewise, Qatar's emphasis on neutrality contrasts with Pakistan's real influence over the Taliban. The ideological foundations of the Taliban were formed in the Pakistani religious schools of Quetta and Peshawar, and the two have deep cultural, ethnic and religious ties. Moreover, Pakistan has direct and deep influence over some Taliban leaders and fighters.

Pakistan's military, particularly the ISI, [retains](#) considerable leverage over the Taliban despite the militant group's significant territorial gains in Afghanistan. Members of the Taliban's leadership council (shura) safely reside in Pakistan, including in Quetta, in Balochistan Province. The Taliban can freely move men and materials into Afghanistan, use Pakistani hospitals to treat their wounded fighters, and communicate with their operational commanders in Afghanistan; in some instances, they have even used Pakistani passports to travel abroad. They also reportedly own lucrative real estate holdings and have significant business interests in the Pakistani cities of Karachi, Peshawar, and Quetta.

The winner will also be [determined](#) by another contest currently unfolding, this one within the Taliban itself. Although the group is headed by a supreme leader, Hibatullah Akhundzada, it is far from a monolithic actor. Qatar is aligned with the political faction led by Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, who headed the Doha office and is now deputy leader of the new Taliban government and conducted a secret meeting with CIA director William Burns. In contrast, Pakistan is backing the military wing, marshaled by the likes of the new defense minister Mohammad Yaqoo—the son of former supreme leader Mullah Omar—and interior minister Sirajuddin Haqqani, head of the U.S. designated terrorist group Haqqani Network and who remains on the FBI's most wanted list. However, it should not be forgotten that it is the Akhundzada's shura (council) that holds the main power. The highest decisions are made in this shura, in which the military wing has the upper hand.

With major attacks by ISIS on Shia mosques in Afghanistan over the last several weeks, the Taliban will have to reckon with how it will handle Islamist groups such as ISIS and its affiliate, The Islamic State Khorasan Province, ISK or Daesh (ISIS) or how it will confront anti-Taliban movements such as those in the Panjshir Valley. Likewise, the Arab countries' fears of terrorism are being realized, which indicates that they will cooperate with the international community—who shares this fear—to discuss how to reduce the possibility of a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan becoming a training ground for terrorist groups.



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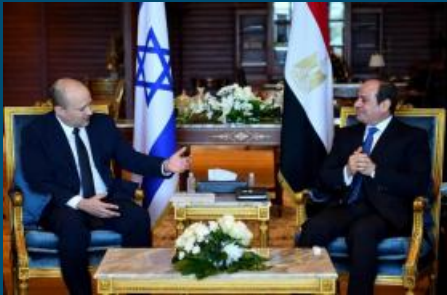


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