

Iran Formalizes Ties with the Taliban

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Brief Analysis

The two governments have been engaging for months on standard diplomatic issues, but the new embassy handover may prove more worrisome given that they are both rogue regimes capable of coordinating against U.S. interests in the region.

On February 26, Iran officially handed over the Afghan embassy in Tehran to diplomats from the Taliban—a big step in formalizing and deepening their ties. Relations between the two governments will not start from scratch, as ties have been developing in a number of areas over the past year and a half. The Taliban previously operated consulate-generals out of Mashhad and Zahedan, while Iran never formally closed its embassy in Kabul following the group’s 2021 takeover in Afghanistan. The situation is notably different from the tensions that characterized the first iteration of the Taliban’s “Islamic Emirate,” when Tehran had deep security concerns about the group due to its mistreatment of Afghanistan’s Shia Hazara community and its 1998 killing of Iranian diplomats at the Mazar-e Sharif consulate. Indeed, the embassy handover is another accomplishment in the Taliban’s slow but persistent push for [legitimacy \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/looking-legitimacy-taliban-diplomacy-fall-kabul\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/looking-legitimacy-taliban-diplomacy-fall-kabul) and full [international recognition \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/turkey-calls-recognition-talibans-islamic-emirate\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/turkey-calls-recognition-talibans-islamic-emirate), even if the latter has yet to happen.

Before and After the Fall of Kabul

Although Tehran was standoffish toward the Taliban for many years after the 1998 incident, America’s long involvement in Afghanistan helped thaw relations between the two regimes given their mutual enmity toward Washington and desire for U.S. withdrawal. Hence, the years leading up to the 2021 fall of Kabul saw increasing reports of Iran providing weapons to the Taliban, and their ties would only widen and accelerate afterward.

Tehran’s first publicly announced diplomatic engagements with the new Taliban regime began in early October 2021; three months later, officials from the group were invited for meetings in Tehran. Since then, they have held

sixty-seven meetings, the fourth most among the fifty-eight countries that have engaged the Taliban diplomatically, trailing only China, Turkey, and Qatar. Moreover, just four of Iran's engagements were multilateral, illustrating the depth of their connections. The Taliban was even invited to attend multiple festivities last month related to the anniversary of Iran's Islamic Revolution—not only in Afghanistan but also in Qatar.

Thus far, most of the meetings between the two have focused on a well-defined set of issues: border security (the massive narcotics trade in particular); investment opportunities in sectors such as energy production, mining, agriculture, and railways; Taliban concerns over the treatment of millions of Afghan refugees in Iran; and the group's quest to improve its systems back home by gaining expertise in different fields, especially the health sector. Beginning in May 2022, these meetings became more substantive and less like the two sides were feeling each other out. This growing comfort level has resulted in a number of bilateral deals and discussions about cooperation on various issues, and the embassy handover will likely deepen this cooperation even further. Notable moments include:

- **May 13, 2022:** The Taliban's Ministry of Defense and a delegation from Iran reach a border security deal to curb human trafficking and drug smuggling. A joint committee is created to help coordinate each other's border patrols.
- **May 29:** The Taliban's deputy minister of technical affairs and Iran's deputy minister of public works lead a joint technical team in reviewing the numerous problems with development of the Abu Nasr Farahi Highway, identifying steps to move the project along.
- **July 16:** Taliban foreign minister Amir Khan Muttaqi and Iran's ambassador at the time, Bahadur Aminian, agree to set up joint delegations that will hold regular meetings to streamline future trade talks.
- **July 23:** Representatives from Afghanistan's state oil and gas company, Da Afghanistan Bank, the Norms and Standards Agency, and the Ministries of Finance, Foreign Affairs, and Trade visit Tehran to sign a contract for importing 350,000 tons of Iranian oil. They also agree to extend the existing pipeline between the two countries and set up joint refineries.
- **August 10:** Taliban minister of energy and water Abdul Latif Mansoor reaffirms his government's commitment to the 1973 Helmand River Water Treaty in a meeting with Iranian energy minister Ali Akbar Mehrabian. The move stems from a dam built by the previous Afghan government, which Iran viewed as harmful to its Hamoun Wetlands ecosystem.
- **August 14:** Iranian Foreign Ministry official Alireza Bikdeli tells the Taliban's foreign minister that Iranian consulates in Afghanistan will begin providing visas again, with the goal of alleviating illegal migration and getting a better grasp on who is crossing the border.
- **August 20:** Taliban health minister Qalandar Ebad meets with Ambassador Aminian to discuss the completion of hospitals in Bamyan and Kabul as well as Iranian technical training on cancer treatment. In early September, Ebad visits Iran to better understand its healthcare system and implement lessons learned back home.
- **August 20:** Ambassador Aminian invites the Taliban's minister of higher education, Abdul Baqi Haqqani, and a technical team to tour Iran's higher education system.
- **September 4:** Iranian deputy ambassador Hassan Mortazavi tells the governor of Afghanistan's Nangarhar province that Tehran is ready to cooperate in the reconstruction of the local airport so that more Afghans with visas can fly to Iran.
- **November 15:** Taliban minister of industry and commerce Nooruddin Azizi and Iranian special envoy Hassan Kazemi Qomi discuss launching a private-sector dialogue to better coordinate opportunities for joint projects. They also note the necessity of increasing Afghan exports to Iran, facilitating the transit and trade of goods through Chabahar Port, and expanding Iranian investments in Afghanistan.

- **December 13:** The first of the planned private-sector dialogues is held in Kabul, with Iranian businessmen pledging to invest \$100 million in production factories and expand these efforts if successful.
- **February 14, 2023:** Hassan Kazemi Qomi (by this point Iran's new ambassador) tells Taliban minister of mines and petroleum Shahabuddin Delawar that Iran wants to establish a joint free economic zone straddling the border, with the goal of creating jobs for both populations and improving exports and imports.

Interestingly, none of these meetings appears to have covered the Islamic State's Khorasan Province (ISKP), a jihadist branch based in Afghanistan. This omission is surprising given that Iran suffered a **deadly ISKP external operations attack** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/islamic-state-attacks-islamic-republic>) in Shiraz last October, then broke up two of the group's cells this January as they were planning further operations.

Potential Worries in Washington

From a security perspective, the embassy handover will raise alarms in Washington. After all, new al-Qaeda leader Saif al-Adel is based in Iran, and when former leader Ayman al-Zawahiri was killed by a U.S. airstrike last July, he had been living in a home owned by a top aide to Taliban interior minister Sirajuddin Haqqani. Tehran and Kabul have far wider bilateral interests than anything related to al-Qaeda, of course, and their numerous public engagements thus far seem like standard diplomatic affairs. Yet the embassy in Iran will provide yet another platform to potentially coordinate their responses if Washington decides to press harder on either regime regarding support for terrorism.

Aaron Zelin is the Richard Borow Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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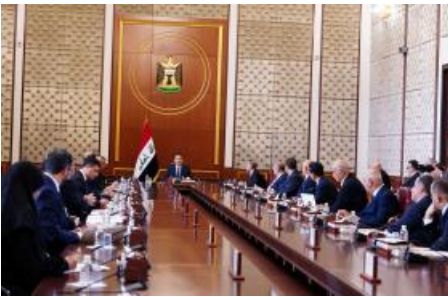
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