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Iran's new approach to Afghanistan's Taliban

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There are different views and analyzes about the nature of the likely relationship between Iran and Afghanistan's Taliban movement, which has recently controlled all the Afghan territories, following the dramatic US withdrawal from the country.

However, the general feature of Iran's strategy towards Afghanistan during the Taliban's earlier reign (1996-2001) and the US occupation of the country (2001-2021) was the "cautious but flexible" intervention, according to political and security developments and transformations, to protect Iranian interests, specifically its national security, against any negative effects resulting from the rapid transformations there, especially following the two-decade US occupation of Afghanistan in 2001 in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks in the United States.

During the earlier reign of Taliban rule (1996-2001), the relationship between Iran and the movement was mainly confrontational, which was about to develop into a direct war, prior to the American invasion of Afghanistan, due to Iranian support for the "Northern Alliance", led by Ahmad Shah Massoud and the Shiite Hazara, before the Americans overthrew the Taliban regime and established a US-loyal government that was also unfriendly to Iran.

However, the relationship between the two parties (Iran and the Taliban) later changed against the backdrop of activating the confrontation with the American occupation forces, as the Iranians then supported the Taliban forces and engaged in secret political negotiations with them, which turned into public talks later, after Taliban boosted its political and field presence amid a clear retreat of almost all its opponents, including the Shiites.

In this context, several media reports have revealed that an agreement was concluded by General Qassem Soleimani, the late Iranian commander of the Quds Force, with Taliban, a few years before the former's assassination in an American raid in early 2020.

A report by the Iraqi writer Suadad al-Salhy in the London-based Middle East Eye website quoted well-informed sources in Baghdad and Kabul as saying that [Qassem Soleimani](#) personally concluded agreements with the Taliban movement in 2015, stipulating that the movement protect the Shiite

minority in Afghanistan, in return for receiving funding, training, and consultation from the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, as well as allowing them (Taliban) to set up camps and safe havens for the movement's leaders within the Iranian borders.

Also according to Soleimani's deals with Taliban, Tehran would prevent the return home of "Fatimiyoun Brigade", an Afghan Shiite militia sent by Soleimani to fight in Syria along with the forces of Bashar al-Assad against the armed factions of the Syrian opposition.

Iranians divided over the position on Taliban

In the aftermath of the post-US withdrawal from Afghanistan, two different views emerged in Iran regarding the future relationship with Taliban.

Despite the apparent Iranian welcome of the American withdrawal from the Afghan territory, the political decision-maker was in a worrying situation for several reasons, including: The previous experience of the movement's control over the reins of power in Afghanistan portends many dangers and challenges to Iranian interests in that country, in addition to the likeliness of formation of chronic trouble spots close to the Afghan-Iranian border, with multiple economic and security repercussions.

The Taliban's dominance of joint border crossings with Iran has doubled Iranian political and security concerns, despite recent moves by the movement to reassure neighbors, including Iran. But Tehran is still suspicious of Taliban, probably due to the fact that the Afghan movement adopts an ideology that is rivaling its own.

Therefore, Iranian views about how to deal with the new developments in Afghanistan have been divided into two main attitudes:

- 1) A trend that supports the idea of rapprochement with Taliban, and seeking ways to deal with the movement as a status-que reality,
- 2) Another trend that is completely opposed to the idea, and calls for taking a position against Taliban and its control over Afghanistan.

However, the idea of rapprochement with Taliban has dominated Iranian decision-making centers, where proponents of this approach argue that Taliban enjoys some form of legitimacy and remarkable

social representation in Afghanistan, emphasizing the qualitative transformation in the nature of the movement.

Besides, some decision-making institutions in Iran showed a sympathetic stance towards Taliban. Ahmad Naderi, a member of the Iranian Parliament's National Security Committee, declared in October 2020 that Tehran needs to reconsider its positions on Taliban, given that it is an inherent movement with a broad social base. Also, a military commander at the Revolutionary Guards referred to the common interests between Taliban and Iran, that is opposition to the American presence in the region.

The Iranian Kayhan newspaper, linked to the office of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, has highlighted the qualitative development in the nature of the Taliban movement, stressing that the movement is no longer the same extremist movement that had controlled the country before, pointing to positions indicative of this development. For example, the Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid announced, in an interview with the Iranian Tasnim news agency, close to the Revolutionary Guards, that the movement "guarantees that the Shiite brothers will not be subjected to discrimination," indicating that Taliban has changed its orientations, and is witnessing a fundamental development compared to its situation in the year 2000.

In addition to emphasizing this fundamental change, the trend that supports the need to soften the Iranian position towards Taliban and cooperate with it, cites various reasons for opening up to the Afghan movement, coordinating and cooperating with it, including: preventing the rise of ISIS near the Iranian borders, boosting the Iranian project of evacuating Afghanistan from any American presence, and investing the relationship with the movement in settlement of some outstanding contentious issues between the two neighboring countries.

However, there is another trend in Iran that rejects any rapprochement with Taliban, and calls for acting with extreme caution with the Afghan movement , a trend that resonates with the government and the Revolutionary Guard alike.

Some prominent figures in Iran's diplomatic corps argue that cooperation with Taliban remains difficult.

The Iranian "Joan" newspaper has criticized the position of the government of former President Hassan Rouhani in opening up to the Taliban movement, including hosting an official Taliban delegation at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Tehran.

Pir Mohammad Molazehi, Iranian analyst and expert on Afghan affairs and the Indian subcontinent, believes that the first trend in Tehran - including part of the government and groups close to the conservatives - believes that Taliban expelled the United States from Afghanistan because of its fighting and resistance against it, and that it has positions similar to Iran's against global arrogance, which allows Iran to deal with it.

As for the second trend - represented by those close to the reformists - they believe that the Taliban is nothing but a Salafi group, and that Iran should not deal with it to limit its monopoly on power in Afghanistan. Those adopting this view believe that Iran should seek establishment of a balanced force in Afghanistan that can be compatible with Iran's security requirements, with participation from various components, such as Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, Persian speakers, and others.

Malazhi also pointed out that Taliban's relationship with Iran will depend on the movement's future behavior, and whether it will respect the rights of the Shiite minority under the 2001 constitution as well as the Persian-speaking citizens. He believes that the developments in Afghanistan will remain vital and significant to Iran, whether because of the common border between the two countries (about a thousand kilometers), or because of the cultural and historical commonalities, in addition to the wide-range relations with the Afghan people and the fact that about three million Afghan refugees are present in Iran.

Jalil Rahimi Jahanabadi, member of the Iranian Parliament's National Security and Foreign Policy Committee, believes that Iran has several concerns about how Taliban will rule Afghanistan. In his view, these concerns are reflected in several points:

First, the fact that that Afghanistan is considered a center for drug production in the world, where one of the drug routes from it to Europe passes through Iran, in addition to concerns about security and social damage; therefore, Tehran is waiting for Taliban's behavior on the ground.

Second, the issue of extremist and separatist groups operating on the border areas between the two countries, with Iranian demands from Taliban not to support these groups.

Third, respecting the rights of different religious races and cultures, on the part of Taliban, to avoid tension of relations between the two parties.

Fourth, the rise of ISIS in the region, where the terrorist organization feeds on central government weakness everywhere, thus harming security and sustainable development in the Middle East.

Fifth, the issues of joint borders and rivers between the two countries and agreements and commitments between Tehran and the Government of Afghanistan and how far Taliban will be committed to them.

In this context, Ebrahim Raisi, the new Iranian President, has stressed that the Afghan government should be broad and comprehensive and should express all nationalities and political actors in Afghanistan, considering that the government emanating from a particular nationality or political group cannot solve the country's problems.

The Iranian president also emphasized that the Afghan issue should only be resolved by the Afghan people, in cooperation with neighboring countries related to this issue, stressing that "the presence of terrorists there is not a threat to Afghanistan alone, but to the whole region," he said, adding, "The Americans are the ones that created ISIS and backed its terrorist acts in Iraq and Syria, and they also wanted this organization to settle in Afghanistan." Raisi also called for the eradication of everything that would contribute to the rise of terrorism in Afghanistan, stressing Iran's rejection of any movement that could allow the presence of terrorist groups in that country.

Conclusion

Just as the Iranians seek to protect their national security and vital interests in Afghanistan and ward off the dangers arising from Taliban's control of the country, the Taliban movement seems to seek avoidance of any political, military or religious conflict with neighbors or Western countries, in the hope of gaining regional and international recognition of the movement that has recently formed an interim government in the country.