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<https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-iran-prisoners-released/32348801.html>

The Taliban government is compiling a list of Iranian nationals imprisoned in Afghanistan for possible release following Tehran's recent handover of hundreds of Afghan prisoners. Taliban Prosecutor-General Shamsuddin Pahlawan met with Iran's deputy ambassador to Afghanistan, Hasan Mortazavi, in Kabul on April 3 to discuss the ongoing prisoner-release efforts. The development comes amid increased diplomatic activity between the Taliban government and Tehran.

Earlier this year, representatives of the Taliban Prosecutor-General's Office visited Tehran, resulting in the release of 857 Afghan prisoners held in Iran, according to Iran's semiofficial Mehr news agency. During the follow-up meeting in Kabul, Pahlawan said that the Taliban government was reviewing the cases of Iranian nationals imprisoned in Afghanistan and will soon complete a list of those suitable for release. Those prisoners would then be handed over to Iran's judicial authorities. It is unclear how many Iranian nationals are currently imprisoned in Afghanistan.

In January, the Taliban said it was seeking international recognition of Afghanistan's seat in the United Nations, which is currently held by the former government led by ex-President Ashraf Ghani.

Comments

Background

On March 6 & 7, journalists flooded twitter with #hotoffthepress announcements on Iranian authorities handing over 857 Afghan prisoners to the Taliban regime, with many marking this a historical decision while some expressing deep shock pointing towards Taliban's worsening human rights record.[1] This was a follow up to another explosive event, when Taliban dispatched a seven-member delegation of experienced diplomats, under the leadership of chargé d'affaires to Tehran (two months ago) to formally assume responsibility of the IEA's diplomatic mission.[2]

[1] Iran Wire. 2023. "Iran, Taliban Discuss Release of Iranian Citizens from Afghan Jails." Iran Wire, April 4, 2023. <https://iranwire.com/en/news/115197-iran-taliban-discuss-release-of-iranians-from-afghan-jails/>.

[2] Ariana News. 2023. "IEA Envoy Takes over Tehran Embassy." Ariana News, February 27, 2023. <https://www.ariananews.af/iea-envoy-takes-over-tehran-embassy/>.

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This was a follow up decision to Tehran officially handing over the Afghanistan embassy (manned by erstwhile Ghani regime then), making it the latest in the list of countries accepting Taliban-appointed diplomats without recognising the 19-month regime. The world also witnessed a spectacle display of brotherhood by the Taliban, when it released an Iranian border guard hours after his custody, after his alleged unintentional entry into Afghan territory.[3] Have regional nations altered their priorities reflecting a regional consensus for a continued engagement-based approach with Kabul?

This seems to be (all the more) probable with Uzbekistan hosting the Second quadrilateral meeting of Iran, Russia, China, and Pakistan on Afghanistan, on side-lines of fourth meeting of Afghanistan's neighbouring countries (hosted on April 13, 2023 in Samarkand) with one of the key agenda's being building an inclusive and broad-based governance system.[4]

To summarise, Iran-Taliban relationship can be termed that of love & hate.[5] In the first Taliban takeover of Kabul (1998), they were responsible for killing a dozen Iranian diplomats and a journalist after making a seize of the Iranian consulate in Mazar-e-Sharif.[6] This was followed by a soured bilateral relationship, where we witnessed Tehran extending assistance to the US led coalition during the early months of Operation Enduring Freedom.[7] Since then, the extent of sorting out differences between Tehran (Shi'ite Muslim) and Taliban (Sunni Muslim) was only witnessed as an academic discord.[8]

[3] AMU TV. 2023. "Iranian Border Guard Crosses into Afghanistan While Punching Truck Driver." AMU TV, February 28, 2023. <https://amu.tv/en/37890/>.

[4] AIR NEWS. 2023. "Second Quadrilateral Meeting of Iran, Russia, China, and Pakistan on Afghanistan Being Held in Samarkand, Uzbekistan on Sidelines of Fourth Meeting of Afghanistan's Neighboring Countries." All India Radio, April 13, 2023. <https://newsonair.com/2023/04/13/second-quadrilateral-meeting-of-iran-russia-china-and-pakistan-on-afghanistan-being-held-in-samarkand-uzbekistan-on-sidelines-of-fourth-meeting-of-afghanistans-neighboring-countries/>.

[5] McLean, Kevin. 2017. *Crossing the River Kabul*. University of Nebraska Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1p6jhvp>.

[6] Akbarzadeh, Shahram. 2014. "Iran's Policy towards Afghanistan." *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* 1 (1): 63-78. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48601768>.

[7] Carter, Stephen. 2010. "Iran's Interests in Afghanistan and Their Implications for NATO." *International Journal* 65 (4): 977-93. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25762052>.

[8] Author's interaction with Tehran University based scholar

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Mapping Tehran's influence: From political stakeholders to warlords

Mapping a timeline from Iranian Revolution of 1979, Tehran's interests in Afghanistan can be summarised to five key principles:[9]

- (a) Iran as the key actor in the region,
- (b) Counterweight against Pakistan, the West, & Taliban influence,
- (c) Control (dominate) flow of illegal migrants and drug trade,
- (d) Ensure continued flow of water from Helmand River,
- (e) Prevent Afghanistan to become an anti-Shia sentiments state

Tehran has pursued the aforementioned principles through both soft and hard power. Since 1979, their spread of political influence runs deep into Afghan civil societies through donations (using NGOs) and scholarship opportunities (for the elite civil groups) while forming alliances with militant factions of key tribes including Sunni Tajiks & Shiite Hazaras. [10]

Iran played a host to Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the leader of Hezb-e-Islami during the civil war, a staunch rival of Ahmad Shah Massoud, backed by Islamabad during that time.[11] He lived in Tehran until 2002, before being expelled for his staunch anti-Shi'a sentiments, resulting in Hekmatyar's return to Afghanistan. Before the fall, Iran had established vital relationship with key political stakeholders and warlords, from all factions of the ethnic based Afghan society. It played a host to warlords (ethnic varieties) with the intent to influence/exercise control over strategic facets of the society, especially those warlords operating on the outskirts of Kabul. Tehran was known to staunchly support the warlord Ismail Khan, the de-facto ruler of Herat. After the fall of Herat on August 13, Ismail Khan was seen with an armed escort in the Mashhad Province of Iran.[12]

A new foreign policy?

The change in Tehran's Afghan policy can be attributed to its decision for re-calling Bahador Aminian, the then Iranian Ambassador to Afghanistan, after his strong worded email (calling Taliban has the biggest disaster happened not just for Afghanistan, but for entire regions of the world) to Tehran, which was leaked by a hacktivists group.[13]

[9] Ignatiev, Pavlo. 2014. "Afghanistan: Balancing between Pakistan and Iran." *Indian Journal of Asian Affairs* 27/28 (1/2): 43–62. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43857991>.

[10] Author's interaction with Sar-e Pol based expert

[11] Akbarzadeh, Shahram. 2014. "Iran's Policy towards Afghanistan." *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* 1 (1): 63–78. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48601768>.

[12] Author's interaction with Tehran based expert

[13] Iran International. 2022. "Iran Appoints New Envoy In Afghanistan Following Controversial Spat." *Iran International*, December 18, 2022. <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202212181252>.

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Source: New lines Institute

Although the Iranian embassy rejected the rumours, Tehran appointed Hassan Kazemi Qomi, formerly Iran's presidential envoy to Afghanistan, as its Ambassador in Kabul. He rose to prominence in Tehran when he proposed to establish a joint committee with the IEA counterparts on intelligence with the aim of combatting terrorism.[14] On one account he also urged Afghanistan neighbours to train the IEA security establishments, exchange information and strengthen their operational apparatus.[15]

With the ambassadorial appointment of Hassan Kazemi Qomi, Tehran has altered its foreign policy towards the Islamic Emirate. After taking over the appointment, the Ambassador met with the Taliban Foreign Minister, Amir Khan Muttaqi and discussed on expanding relations between the two countries with Iran's water share from the Helmand River, second from the top in priority.[16] This was followed by a phone call between the Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian and the IEA FM Amir Khan Muttaqi where, FM Abdollahian strongly condemned the attack outside the Taliban's Foreign Ministry.[17] According to a Kabul based scholar, Abdollahian made a comparison between the Kabul attack and the one in Shahcheragh holy Shrine, terming them as carried by a single faction, proposing for a response through a unified strategy to counter terror.[18] With Tehran's altering stance, it joins the club of nations with realist policy that nationally prioritises its relations with IEA by assisting the group in consolidating its grip in Kabul. That said, regionally Tehran's support has not wielded economies to develop a consensus or a regional response to deal with Taliban. With change in stance, Tehran joins the regional powers in a hedging competition, which will result in increased sufferings of local Afghans and islamists factions utilising this as a driving factor to forge local alliances and possible recruitment opportunities.

[14] Author's interaction with Isfahan based expert

[15] Author's interaction with Herat based expert

[16] Author's interaction with Tehran based expert

[17] Ministry of Foreign Affairs. 2023. "Iran FM Holds Phone Talks with Amir Khan Muttaqi." Islamic Republic of Iran, January 12, 2023. <https://en.mfa.ir/portal/newsview/707184/Iran-FM-holds-phone-talks-with-Amir-Khan-Muttaqi>.

[18] Author's interaction with a Kabul based expert

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Iran's Regional Dilemma

Iran may have altered its Afghan foreign policy, but the change in stance will prove of greater value to its regional rivals. Tehran's pragmatic engagement will be of great value to Pakistan. For decades, Tehran & Islamabad have been careful on making comments towards certain issues – especially when they share mutual interest in curbing the Baloch separatism within their territories and Pakistan relying on Iranian electricity and energy supply.[19] But their interest deviates on the context of Afghanistan. To begin with, they were supporting opposing forces during the civil war. This is further reflected during the meeting of President Raisi with Pakistan's then Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi, about two weeks after the fall of Kabul, where Raisi criticised on Pakistan's pattern to seek Western support as counter-productive to the interest of bringing peace and stability in Afghanistan.[20]

To that extent, Tehran's lack of continued support to the Tajiks and Hazaras has opened space for intra-regional actors – such as Turkey – to engage with Turkmen, Uzbek & Tajik tribes in the northern provinces of Afghanistan.[21] This can be attributed to a small meeting of former Afghan military and political leaders at the residence of Uzbek leader Abdul Rashid Dostum reportedly joined by key political members from Ankara last May, to announce a High Council for uniting national resistance against the Taliban.[22] Are we looking at a grand Turkish entry into Afghan affairs especially in the north which has greater Iranian influence? It is too early to predict.

Mapping economic interests

On February 6 & 7, Iran played a host to the second Iran-Afghanistan Business Forum and Conference, which was held at the Tehran's Olympic Hotel.[23] The session witnessed more than 70 Afghan business and witnessed the attendance of[24]:

- a) Hossein Salimi, Chair, Iran-Afghanistan Chamber of Commerce,
- b) Abdul-Qayum Soleimani, Ambassador of Afghanistan to Iran,
- c) Alireza Yavari, Deputy Head of Iran Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines and Agriculture for international affairs,
- d) Ahmad-Reza Allaie Tabatabaei, Deputy Head of Trade Promotion Organization

[19] Arab News. 2023. "Pakistan, Iran Finalize Agreement to Supply 100MW Power to Gwadar Port City." Arab News, March 13, 2023. <https://www.arabnews.pk/node/2267816/pakistan>.

[20] Author's interaction with Tehran based expert

[21] Author's interaction with Nimroz based expert

[22] Author's interaction with Ankara based expert

[23] News Agency. 2023. "Iran, Afghanistan Hold Biggest Business Forum in Capital Tehran." Taghrib News Agency, February 9, 2023. <https://www.taghribnews.com/en/news/583461/iran-afghanistan-hold-biggest-business-forum-in-capital-tehran>.

[24] News Desk. 2023. "Tehran Hosts Key Iran-Afghanistan Business Forum." Ariana News, February 9, 2023. <https://www.ariananews.af/tehran-hosts-key-iran-afghanistan-business-forum/>.

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The sessions included detail discussions on investment opportunities for Tehran based businessmen in Afghanistan's industry and mining sector, while identifying and removing trade & investment barriers between the two nations. The discussions called for Tehran to expand business and trade opportunities with Kabul, while creating lucrative environment for cooperation and investment of Iranian businessmen currently living in Afghanistan. To that end, the Ambassador Soleimani mentioned special conditions on the cooperation of foreign investors, which gives a special consensus to Iranian business.

This conference (a second edition) provides both the nations to expand "economic diplomacy" with an intent to benefit people to people connectivity through business relations and reinforce economic cooperation. This is reflected from Kabul businessmen voicing for greater access to Chabahar Port, which holds immense economic significance, especially when the goods transported from Afghanistan to Iran (using the port) takes just under 12 hours.[25] With six under-utilised border markets between Iran & Afghanistan, Chabahar port is not just significant but holds vital importance for Iran and Afghanistan trade to flourish.[26]

Kabul voicing for more access to Chabahar Port will open the door of complex political entanglement as the port is not only used by Afghanistan and Pakistan to trade with Iran but also by India for the delivery of humanitarian assistance for the Afghan people.

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[25] Author's interaction with Isfahan based expert

[26] News Desk. 2022. "Iran's Chabahar Port Crucial for Landlocked Afghanistan Trade." Asian News International, September 17, 2022. <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/irans-chabahar-port-crucial-for-landlocked-afghanistan-trade20220917123909/>.