

IRAN AND THE TALIBAN

GADEN JAMES

In recent months, there has been consistent dialogue and cooperation between the Iranian government and their Taliban counterparts. This easing of tension comes after decades of animosity between the two groups, resulting in uneasiness among Western politicians and scholars. Iran and the Taliban should fundamentally not get along based on their natures and shared history, yet they have found considerable common ground. Talks have included the possibility of Iran recognizing the legitimacy of the Taliban's government, a far cry

scale.

Before the United States invaded Afghanistan in 2001, the Iranian government had actively been trying to undermine the Taliban's regime for the better part of a decade. Iranians viewed the Taliban as "a zealot and wild group, alien from the enlightened teaching of Islam and ignorant of the general rules of the world." Animosities between the two date back to 1992, well before the Taliban reigned in Afghanistan; at the time, the Taliban were an Islamist rebel group who would not consent to rule under an Islamist

form of Islamic government should be the model for religious rule.² Ayatollah Khomeini tasked his Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps with supporting and supplying Afghan anti-Taliban rebel groups, particularly one known as the Northern Alliance.¹ The Iranian government hoped that the religiously diverse Northern Alliance, in concert with other regional militias, would be able to overthrow the Taliban and institute a government representing both Sunni and Shia interests. The Iranian government was especially concerned about the treatment of Shia minorities in Afghanistan, particularly the Hazara Shia who numbered some 1 million people. To the dismay of the Iranian clergy, the Hazaras were seen as religious dissidents and ruthlessly persecuted under the Taliban, to the point that many sought refuge in Iran.² In the eyes of the Iranian government and people, the Taliban posed a serious threat to their interests, and Iranian officials acted accordingly.

Iran carried out a shadow war against the Taliban in the mid-1990s by supplying, equipping, and training Afghan rebels in the hopes of toppling the regime. Tensions came to a head in 1998 when 11 Iranian diplomats were executed by Taliban forces during the Afghan Civil War. Following these high-profile executions, word spread that an estimated 4,000 Hazara Shia had been slaughtered by Taliban forces as well.³ Iranians were outraged. Their army amassed a quarter of a million soldiers along the border with Afghanistan and appeared ready to launch an all-out assault against the Taliban. Conflict was narrowly avoided through United Nations mediation, but the deaths of innocent diplomats would serve as a backdrop to years of subsequent conflict.⁴

from the late 1990s, when the two groups were on the brink of direct military confrontation. While the current state of affairs may appear to be entirely antithetical to diplomatic precedence, it is in fact the result of consequential changes in Iran's strategy and domestic climate, regional politics, and global power shifts. Iran is a rational actor making decisions based on its desire to improve conditions for its citizens while simultaneously attempting to become a power broker on a global

coalition supported by the United States and Iran. From 1992 to 1995, they slowly gained more ground and became the strongest anti-government coalition, finally gaining control over Afghanistan as a whole in 1996.¹

Theologically, having the Taliban in power was a worst-case scenario for Iran. The radical Sunni Taliban viewed Iran's Shia government as heretic, with both nations claiming to espouse the true Islamic ideology and maintaining that their



In the wake of 9/11, the United States held the Taliban largely accountable for American civilian deaths for aiding and abetting al-Qaeda in planning the attacks. They subsequently invaded Afghanistan with the goal of overthrowing the regime, and Iranian loathing of the Taliban even went so far as to push the Iranians to provide support to the United States in its early post-9/11 incursions into the region. The U.S. had been Iran's greatest foe since the 1979 revolution, yet they hailed the opportunity to ease tensions and welcome the U.S. into the pre-existing anti-Taliban coalition. As stated by Former Ambassador to Afghanistan James Dobbins during Congressional testimony:

“There is a popular perception in the United States that in the aftermath of 9/11, the United States formed a coalition and overthrew the Taliban. That is wrong. In the aftermath of 9/11, the United States joined an existing coalition, which had been trying to overthrow the Taliban for most of a decade. That coalition consisted of India, Russia, Iran, and the Northern Alliance. It was with the additional assistance of American air power that [the] coalition succeeded in ousting the Taliban.”

U.S. forces were welcomed into this force and would not have been successful without Iranian intelligence and logistical support. An Iranian official went so far as to offer “unconditional cooperation to the United States.”⁵ Iran made the choice to support the U.S., its ideological enemy, in order to bring

about the demise of its strategic foe, the Taliban.

Evidently, Iran's primary regional goal for the better part of a decade was the unequivocal destruction of the Taliban's leadership in Afghanistan. They went to every length conceivable to realize their goal, ultimately succeeding. Iran hoped to see a religiously diverse governmental system established in Afghanistan and even contributed considerable resources to make that happen. Iranians were unsettled by the concept of such a volatile and ideologically conflicting neighbor as well as the resultant insecurity they were exposed to. Their actions leading up to 2001 were born from a desire for safety and security, which could not be achieved with the Taliban in power.

Fast forward to the spring of 2022, when the Taliban and Iranian government officials are now participating in open and cooperative talks. Iran has indicated that if the Taliban includes Shia representation in the new government, it would be prepared to officially recognize their government as legitimate. This is a 180 degree change from just twenty years ago, when Iran was willing to do whatever was necessary to topple the Taliban. It begs the question: why do the Iranians want to normalize relations with the Taliban?

A simple answer is that they have both developed an odium for the West. Iran and the U.S. have been at loggerheads since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, albeit with brief interludes, and not without reason. The U.S. has long instituted a strict set of sanctions against Iran, weakening its economy and isolating it from the rest of the world. This adds to a list of grievances accumulated over decades of American interference in Iranian affairs. Concurrent-

ly, America is largely responsible for the toppling of the Taliban's government, even driving its leadership into hiding in the wake of 9/11. One could see how their mutual experience with the United States and its allies would lead Iran and the Taliban to start seeing eye to eye. Finding common ground in a common enemy is a logical answer, but that would be an overly simplistic view of why the two nations are inching closer. There are in fact several distinct factors, largely the result of shifts in Iran's grand strategy, that have caused this change in the nation's policies towards the Taliban.

The Taliban of 2022 is emphatically not the same as the Taliban of the 1990s and early 2000s. They are less brutal in their application of Sharia Islamic law, more welcoming of foreign dignitaries, and have committed fewer extrajudicial killings than in the past. The Taliban communicates on social media, takes part in international trade talks, and is even discussing minority representation in government.⁶ Men freely walk the street in Western style garb and women are allowed in public; in fact, the Taliban has begun allowing women to work in certain segments of the economy and has promised that secondary education for all girls will commence in the coming weeks.⁷ These changes mark fundamental shifts in the Taliban regime: they are more modern and more savvy. The Taliban's leadership recognizes that their brutal repression of the Afghan population the last time they were in power did them no favors in terms of political stability. They seem to be looking for a balance between Sharia law and a modern Islamic state that still respects their ideology but does not create a disloyal citizenry. The relaxation

of the most draconian of measures the Taliban instituted in the 1990s makes them a more defensible ally for Iran. With less of an emphasis on a medieval form of Sunni Islam, the Taliban can be brought into the fold of the anti-Western coalition in the Middle East.

Iranian leaders also face domestic crises that threaten their national stability. Iran has a drug problem with Afghanistan as its supplier; Iran is currently experiencing one of the worst opioid epidemics globally, with close to 6% of their adult population suffering from addiction.⁸ Afghanistan is the world's largest opium producer and virtually their entire crop is exported through Iran to Eastern Europe and the rest of the world.⁹ Historically, local warlords have been the proprietors of drug smuggling in Iran, unstoppable by government forces. The mountainous border between Iran and Afghanistan offers the perfect hiding place for such organized crime networks, and the Iranians require assistance on the other side of the border.¹ In the past, the Taliban has publicly condemned the cultivation of opium-bearing poppy flowers, but more recently gave its support to poppy farmers. They have stated that since Muslims are not the ones consuming opium, it is not Haram, or forbidden.¹⁰ Their stance neglects the reality that millions of Shia Iranians are in fact regular users of the drug. Iranian officials may hope to form an anti-trafficking coalition in order to reduce the rampant flow of opium, as is the current state of affairs.⁹ A cross-border military presence coupled with condemnation of poppy cultivation would offer a real solution to Iran's addiction troubles, and friendly cooperation with the

Taliban may yield such an outcome.

Iran's regional stance has also shifted over the past two decades. Its government recognizes its role in the international community as a regional power broker, holding vast petrochemical resources, a sizable population, and fearsome military capabilities. Iran is no longer content with merely being the center of the Shia civilization, having grander international ambitions as a Pan-Islamic power that will defend Muslim causes on the global stage.¹¹ Iranian leaders recognize that the path towards that goal requires regional cooperation and action against Israel's regional influence.¹² Iranian strategists want to offset what they see as Israel's pro-Western role in regional power dynamics. Iranian relations with Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq are at the strongest they have been in recent memory, giving the nation a stronger weight in regional affairs. Iran heads the so called “Axis of Resistance,” consisting of Iran, Iraq, Syria, Hezbollah, Hamas, and more recently, Afghanistan under the Taliban.¹³ This coalition has gained ground through the U.S. withdrawal from the Middle East and seeks to combat Western influences in the region. Collectively, the Axis controls massive fossil fuel reserves, considerable military force, as well as hundreds of millions of citizens. They hold considerable bargaining power because of the aforementioned resources and will play a large role in shaping the region's future. Afghanistan's inclusion further legitimizes the group's grievances against the West and proves to be a useful ally, bringing Sunni and Shia together under one banner.

By expressing a willingness to

recognize the Taliban as legitimate, Iran joins China and Russia as the only nations that have articulated such a possibility. This follows Iran's signing of an official cooperation agreement with the two nations last year.¹⁴ Iran is sidling up to China and Russia as they form an anti-West power bloc. In the case of Taliban recognition, it appears that the three nations are trying to show a unified front, legitimizing any government that aligns with their anti-Western ideology. Iran's leadership views the crippling set of sanctions today as just another event in a long line of humiliations carried out by Western powers. By joining China and Russia, the nation has the ability to redress what it views as historical wrongs resulting from foreign interference in Iran during the 20th century.¹⁵ In the words of Iran's Foreign Policy Committee, “In the new world order, a triangle consisting of three powers—Iran, Russia, and China—has formed. This new arrangement heralds the end of the inequitable hegemony of the United States and the West.”¹⁴

The geopolitical state of affairs in the Persian Gulf seems to be further confounded by Iran's new partnership with Afghanistan under the Taliban, but it is in reality just another event in line with regional trends. The shifting political and ideological environments in the region mean that the old order is slowly becoming obsolete. Western activities in the region have created countless new enemies who are now presenting a unified front. The nations in question are sending a profound message to the world: the West is no longer welcome.