

# Iran's Policy in the Situation of the Afghan Crisis After 2021

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**Abstract.** The article is devoted to the policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran towards Afghanistan. An overview of Tehran's relations with Afghanistan is given, including ties between the two countries in the political, cultural, economic and humanitarian spheres. The main ways of Iran's influence on the situation in Afghanistan are shown. Iran's policy towards Afghanistan and the development of relations after the Taliban<sup>1</sup> came to power in August 2021 is analyzed.

**Keywords:** Iran, Afghanistan, Taliban, international relations

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## Introduction

The turbulent events of the past four decades in Afghanistan testified to the role of both external players and regional international forces in them. One of the main factors that contributed to the continuation of the Afghan crisis can be considered precisely the external interference, rivalry and conflict of interests of competing states that turned this country into the arena of their proxy wars. To a greater extent, it was a rivalry between international interventionist forces such as the United States and NATO, and regional powers such as Iran, which have a historical commonality with Afghanistan based on

<sup>1</sup> \*The organization has been recognized a terrorist organization by the Russian Supreme Court. Unified federal list of organizations, including foreign and international organizations, recognized as terrorist in accordance with the legislation of the Russian Federation (as of June 25, 2023). Available from: <http://www.fsb.ru/fsb/npd/terror.htm> (accessed: 25.06.2023);18+

geographical, demographic and civilizational ties, and, as a result, pursue their own legitimate interests in this country, since instability, insecurity and foreign interference in the affairs of Afghanistan immediately affect the interests, security and internal political stability of such states due to their geographical proximity and demographic ties with this country. Iran is considered as one of the actors that, based on its geopolitical, geocultural and geo-economic capabilities, in addition to direct influence on Afghanistan, can play a decisive role and influence the influence of other states on this country<sup>2</sup>. For this reason, questions of Iran's support or opposition to regional and international alliances on the future of Afghanistan and instability after the re-emergence of the «Taliban»<sup>3</sup> (such as the migration crisis, drug transit and terrorism), as well as the transformation of this country into a center of activity for extremist and terrorist groups, like «ISIS»<sup>4</sup> and «Al-Qaeda»<sup>4</sup>, are of great importance. In this article, this topic is analyzed from the point of view of Iran's policy towards the Afghan problem.

The author involved for the preparation of the article research authors in Persian: Rahimi Sardar Mohammad, Hakpanah Jafar, Taniwal Mohammad Zarif, Amin Hamidulla, Sajjadi Abdul Qayyum, Uruzgani Maseh, Buzan Barri, Hakpanah Jafar [1–6]. As well as articles by authors in English: David Steven, Haghpanah Jafar, Tisheyar Mandana, Mohammed S. Mahmood [7–9]. The works of these authors made it possible to determine the scientific novelty of the study.

## Materials and Methods

Theoretical works of Iranian and foreign researchers, materials of periodicals and news agencies, statements and speeches of officials of the Islamic Republic of Iran were used as materials. The study was carried out using system analysis, synthesis and system-structural approach. The main approaches of Iranian policy to the Afghan problem were identified, which made it possible to formulate hypotheses about the concept of Iranian foreign policy in the Afghan direction.

<sup>2</sup> Rahimi S M., Hakpanah J. The geopolitics of Afghanistan and the transformation into a Working Asia, Tehran. Imam Sadegh University, «Imam Sadegh», 2021:12 [In Persian].

<sup>3</sup> \*The organization has been recognized a terrorist organization by the Russian Supreme Court. Unified federal list of organizations, including foreign and international organizations, recognized as terrorist in accordance with the legislation of the Russian Federation (as of June 25, 2023). Available from: <http://www.fsb.ru/fsb/npd/terror.htm> (accessed: 25.06.2023);18+

<sup>4</sup> \*The organization has been recognized a terrorist organization by the Russian Supreme Court. Unified federal list of organizations, including foreign and international organizations, recognized as terrorist in accordance with the legislation of the Russian Federation (as of June 25, 2023). Available from: <http://www.fsb.ru/fsb/npd/terror.htm> (accessed: 25.06.2023);18+



## Results

### “Omnibalancing”: the concept of Iranian foreign policy in Afghanistan

Iran has a 950-kilometer water and land border with Afghanistan and is considered the shortest and safest route connecting this landlocked country with open waters<sup>5</sup>. Iran's strong influence in Afghanistan is formed by: long-standing linguistic, religious and confessional ties with the majority of the Persian-speaking Muslim population, especially with the Hazara minority, the experience of supporting Mujahideen parties and groups during the Soviet military stay, close ties with most of the ethnic, religious and political elites of this country and the forty-year presence in Iran of more than five million Afghan forced refugees<sup>6</sup>. Iran's economy complements and responds to the needs of Afghanistan. The volume of trade between the two countries before the fall of the republican regime exceeded \$2.5 billion and, despite the ongoing instability, remains the same to this day thanks to the railway and transit network and connections with the ports of Bandar Abbas and Chabahar, the Persian Gulf and the Sea of Oman. Despite not recognizing the «Taliban»\* government, Iran continues to meet Afghanistan's economic needs for fuel, energy, and help complete some small infrastructure and industrial projects. The people of Afghanistan have a good relationship with Iran due to the fact that Iran provides food, medical and educational services. The combination of geopolitical, geocultural and geo-economic advantages has allowed Iran to become the only regional power that has maintained simultaneous contacts with all parties and groups, political, religious and ethnic elites of Afghanistan over the past years and is able to establish balanced relations with the armed power that has established itself in the country<sup>7</sup>.

This suggests that Iran's policy towards Afghanistan has ideological foundations and, in the words of Barry Buzan, is based on the idea of the “sovereignty of the system”<sup>8</sup>. This is support for Islamist movements, the desire for independence, the denial of the domination of world powers, support for the oppressed and the ruling regime, which gives Iran's foreign policy a strong idealistic and ideological character. Of course, along with idealism, there are pragmatic and realistic components necessary to ensure national interests, counter security threats and acquire economic benefits.

Based on the same concept, Iran uses its geographical advantages to create a safe transit for Afghanistan's trade with the world and Iran's opposition to coalition building and unilateral actions of competing powers.

<sup>5</sup> Taniwal Mohammad Zarif, Amin Hamidullah. The economic geography of Afghanistan. Kabul: Kabul University, 2003:30 [In Persian].

<sup>6</sup> Sajjadi Abdul Qayyum. Afghanistan's Foreign Policy, Kabul: Sobh-e Umid, 2020:339 [In Persian].

<sup>7</sup> Uruzgani M. Afghanistan. Rainbow of nations. Kabul: Khorasan Educational and Publishing Center, 1995:28 [In Persian].

<sup>8</sup> Buzan B. People, states and fear. Tehran: Research Institute for Strategic Studies, 2010:130 [In Persian].

This concept can be called omnibalancing. The neorealist theorist Stephen David's interpretation of this term will help explain Iran's foreign policy. Such concepts of the school of realism as etatism, the principle of survival and self-help mean the creation by regional powers of a balance between internal and external threats and their refusal to act independently to repel external threats at the regional level.

This theory explains the ability of regional powers to act independently of the international system to ensure their own interests and repel regional threats. How the principle of balancing is applied in foreign policy depends on how leaders perceive the nature of their power; dynamics of stable and unstable events and threats in the world system<sup>9</sup>.

As part of omnibalancing, combining idealistic and ideological approaches with realism and pragmatism, the Islamic Republic of Iran pursued a policy towards Afghanistan in 2020-2021, which is being implemented with some changes after the return to power of the «Taliban»\*:

- balancing between ethnic, linguistic and religious groups, strengthening the positions of the Shiites-Khazaras and Tajiks and preventing the ethnic domination of other groups;
- a political balance between secular political, intellectual tendencies and a Western-oriented elite, influenced by the United States, with the support of traditional mujahideen groups and elites;
- Balancing and countering the threat of religious extremism brought by «ISIS»\* and «Al-Qaeda»\*, with the support of the central government and anti-«ISIS»\* groups, including the «Taliban»\* groups that have competed and antagonized Iran in the past;
- creating an economic balance in relations with competing regional and world powers through active joint participation in the reconstruction of Afghanistan with an emphasis on energy, transit and trade.

This policy is carried out through: the construction of the Mashhad-Herat railway, the strengthening of border exchanges through the creation of small border bazaars, as well as cooperation with such an interested power as India, which in 2016 led to the conclusion of a trilateral agreement between Tehran, Kabul and Delhi for the development of the port Chabahar in southeastern Iran.

From 2002 to 2021, this policy was carried out in the form of simultaneous cooperation with most parties, organizations, elites and media, from the elites associated with the central government in Kabul to the leaders of the mujahideen parties and critics of the governments of Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani. Despite understanding that the Afghan governments, and especially Ashraf Ghani's cabinet, are puppets and dependent on Washington, Tehran officials supported the central government. Even after the Doha agreement between Zalmay Khalilzad and Mullah Baradar and the U.S. decisive shift from supporting the political regime in Kabul to a deal with the «Taliban»\*, Tehran officials have not stopped cooperating with Ashraf Ghani's team, according to former Iranian

<sup>9</sup> David S. Choosing Sides: Alignment and Realignment in the Third World. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991.

ambassador to Kabul Bahador Aminian. According to the same Aminiyan, until the last days of the fall of Kabul, he was personally in contact with First Vice President Amrullah Saleh and National Security Advisor Hamdullah Mohib and informed them of Tehran's readiness to provide all kinds of assistance and become an intermediary between the government and the «Taliban»<sup>10</sup>.

One of the unclear points in Iran's foreign policy in Afghanistan is related to the content of contacts or possible Iranian support for the «Taliban»\* in the 2010s. and at present. Western, and especially American, media, as well as Ashraf Ghani's team, have always accused Tehran of supporting the «Taliban»\* and argued that Iran's ties with the «Taliban»\* were the reason for the coming to power and legitimization of this group. In response to this, Aminian notes that this accusation by the United States and Ashraf Ghani's team is put forward in order to justify and hide their own inefficiency and wrong policies, which led to the fall of the republican system, since at that time Iran had only informal contacts with the moderate wing. «Taliban»\*. These contacts became official in 2020 during the visit of Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar to Tehran and his meeting with the then Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif. Said visit and other contacts with the «Taliban»\* were generally reported to officials in Kabul, and Hamdullah Mohib, national security adviser to Ashraf Ghani's government, was informed of this during meetings with his Iranian counterpart, Ali Shamkhani<sup>11</sup>. And this was despite the fact that White House officials reached an agreement in advance with the «Taliban»\* in Doha (Qatar) and, in addition to giving official status to the «Taliban»\* and accepting its demands, including the release of five thousand dangerous prisoners from among the members of this movement, completely excluded government under their control in Kabul from the process of negotiations and agreements.

Currently, Iran's relationship with the «Taliban»\* is based on the notion that the «Taliban»\* are an integral reality of traditional Afghan society and have a desire for independence, opposition to Western culture and American dominance, that is, those features that are more or less similar to the approach that prevails in foreign policy. Iran. In addition, this movement is trying with all its might to disengage from extremist movements and «ISIS»\*.

Of course, all this does not mean complete unanimity and the absence of serious disagreements in the principles of governance or the absence of rivalry and problems between Tehran and Kabul. Despite the agreement of the parties to continue border economic exchanges in the field of energy, fuel transit and mining, cooperation in the field of education and Iran's constant support for Afghan refugees, as well as joint efforts to protect border security, the behavior of the «Taliban»\* towards the Shiite religious minority and their educational politics are very far from the views of the Iranian side. The parties did not come to a solution to the problems associated with forced refugees, border rivers and wetlands, as well as Iran's water use on the Girmānd River, the implementation of economic agreements in the field of mines, transterritorial agriculture, exports and imports. In

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Bahador Aminian, former Iranian Ambassador to Afghanistan. Kabul: ToloNews, декабрь 2022. Available from: <https://tolonews.com/fa/must-see-videos-177521>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

such a situation, Iran's general policy will continue to be to continue sporadic and limited cooperation with the «Taliban»\* without their recognition, and the activities of the Afghan embassy in Tehran, as well as consulates in Mashhad and Zahedan, will be carried out without official recognition of the «Taliban»\*<sup>12</sup>. This means that Tehran will keep its distance and, at the same time, continue contacts with the leaders of the opposition groups to the «Taliban»\*, who, despite the lack of a strong base inside the country, the fragmentation and weakness of the organization and leadership, put forward the slogan of overthrowing the «Taliban»\*.

Another complex and contentious aspect of Iran's policy in Afghanistan has to do with the country's opposition to US goals and actions in Afghanistan. This is due to the strategic rivalry and ideological contradictions between Iran and the United States. In general, Tehran sees the presence and influence of Washington in the peripheral regions of the Middle East as an existential threat.

Anti-Americanism is one of the foundations of the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic and is important for its identity<sup>13</sup>. To the extent Iran's policy can be considered suffering from anti-Americanization so much that it overshadows even normal relations between the two neighboring countries.

From this point of view, Iran regards the change of power in Afghanistan in 2021 as a shameful expulsion of US forces and a failure of US plans in the region and, compared to the threats associated with the US presence in Afghanistan, considers possible problems with the «Taliban»\* to be less serious and manageable. One of the incentives for Iran's cooperation with the «Taliban»\* will be to create maximum distance between this group and America and its allies.

From the same point of view, Iran's cooperation with Russia and other powers that have great influence in Afghanistan should be considered. One can predict increased cooperation with US competitors such as Russia and China, which are exposed to threats from Afghanistan, such as the spread of extremism, the rise of «ISIS»\*, drug smuggling and other forms of organized crime.

## Conclusions

The return of the «Taliban»\* to power in Afghanistan can be seen as a combination of opportunities and threats for the Islamic Republic of Iran. From the perspective of officials in Tehran, the opportunities now outweigh the threats and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. Meanwhile, the period of stabilization and institutionalization of relations and cooperation with the «Taliban»\* has taken a long time, and during the long-term transition, things will not go beyond limited cooperation without recognition of the «Taliban»\*. In terms of recognition, Iran will not be the first country to recognize the

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Hakpanah J. Kurds and the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Tehran: Abrar Center for International Studies, 2008:190–193.

«Taliban»\* and will follow in line with international decisions regarding the «Taliban»\*. The expansion of bilateral relations, as well as the recognition of the «Taliban»\*, will depend on the fulfillment of Tehran's preconditions, which include such important internal transformations in Afghanistan as the formation of an inclusive government and ensuring the rights and security of Shiites, ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities, obstructing the activities of terrorist groups and preventing Afghanistan from becoming a base for anti-Iranian activities of rival states, as well as solving problems related to the border wetlands and rivers of the two countries.

Regarding the chronic problem of forced migration and the presence of about 8 million Afghan refugees, Iran will also continue its assistance and hospitality, despite the lack of support from the world community<sup>14</sup>. Another important point is Tehran's regionally oriented approach to the crisis in Afghanistan, joint efforts to establish cooperation and security of regional states, which can be continued within the framework of the SCO and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Iran's excellent geographic location and transit advantages, soft power can serve as a basis for regional cooperation to help Afghanistan overcome the current challenges and ensure the security, stability and well-being of the people of Afghanistan and the countries of the region.

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## Contribution of the author

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