



PERSPECTIVES

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Afghanistan May Be a Bellwether for Saudi-Iranian Rivalry

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Boasting an almost 1,000-kilometer border with Iran and a history of troubled relations between the Iranians and Sunni Muslim militants, including the Taliban, Afghanistan could become a bellwether for the future of the rivalry between the Islamic Republic and Saudi Arabia.

Had the US withdrawn from Afghanistan several years earlier than it did, chances are that Saudi Arabia would have sought to exploit military advances by the Taliban in far less subtle ways than it may do now.

Saudi Arabia was still channeling funds in 2017 to anti-Iranian, anti-Shiite militants in the Iranian-Afghan-Pakistani border triangle and further south on the Pakistani side of the frontier despite Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman's efforts to distance the kingdom from identification with austere interpretations of Islam that shaped the country's history and that it shared with the Taliban.

"The [Taliban is a religious extremist group](#) which is no stranger to extremism and murder, especially murdering Shiites, and its hands are stained with the blood of our diplomats," noted an Iranian cleric, referring to the 1998 killing of eight Iranian diplomats and a journalist in Afghanistan.

Outgoing Iranian FM Muhammad Javad Zarif outlined the potential tripwire Afghanistan constitutes for Iran.

"If Iran doesn't play well and makes an enemy out of the Taliban soon, I think some Arab countries in the Persian Gulf and the US would attempt to finance and direct the Taliban to weaken Tehran and divert its attention away from

Iraq and other Arab countries. The biggest threat for us would be the formation of an anti-Iran political system in Afghanistan,” Zarif said.

It is tempting to compare the potential problems for Iran of an Afghanistan controlled by the Taliban or a neighboring country at war with itself to Saudi Arabia’s Houthi troubles in Yemen. Saudi Arabia was, before the 2001 US invasion of Afghanistan, one of only three countries to recognize the Taliban’s control of the country. At the time, it saw virtue in stirring the pot on Iran’s borders.

Much has changed, not only in the last two decades but also in the last few years. Both Saudi Arabia and some Trump administration officials, like national security advisor John Bolton, toyed with the idea of attempting to spark ethnic insurgencies inside Iran. But Afghanistan is not Yemen, and the Taliban are not the Houthis.

The Taliban have sought in recent weeks to assure Afghanistan’s neighbors that they seek cooperation and will not support militancy beyond their country’s borders. Iran recently hosted talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government that ended with a joint statement calling for a peaceful political settlement and declaring that “war is not the solution.”

It has been war ever since.

From the Saudi perspective, this would [not be the first time the Taliban said one thing and did another](#), including its alleged promise prior to 9/11 that Osama bin Laden would not be allowed to plan and organize attacks from Afghan soil and subsequent refusal to hand over the Saudi national.

All of this is not to say that Afghanistan could not emerge as a venue for Middle Eastern rivalries involving not only Saudi Arabia and Iran, but potentially also Turkey and Qatar. It would probably be one in which battles are fought less through proxies and more economically and culturally, and in which alliances look significantly different from those of the past.

A crucial factor in how the rivalries play out will be the Taliban’s attitude toward non-Pashtun ethnic and religious groups.

“If Afghanistan returns to the situation before September 11, 2001, when the Taliban were at war with the Shiite Hazara and the Turkic Uzbeks, then Iran and Turkey will almost inevitably be drawn in on the other side—especially if Saudi Arabia resumes support for the Taliban as a way of attacking Iran... Ideally, a regional consensus could successfully pressure the Taliban to respect the autonomy of minority areas,” said Eurasia scholar Anatol Lieven.

Supporting the Taliban, a group that is identified with violation of women's rights, could prove tricky for Prince Muhammad as he seeks to convince the international community that the kingdom has broken with an ultra-conservative strand of Islam that inspired groups like the Afghan militants.

It would also complicate the crown prince's efforts to project his country as a beacon of a moderate and tolerant form of the faith and complicate relations with the US.

Moreover, Prince Muhammad's religious soft power strategy may be working. In a sign of changing times, Western non-governmental organizations like Germany's Konrad Adenauer Foundation look to Saudi Arabia as a model for the Taliban.

"The way Saudi Arabia has developed in the past 10, 20 years is remarkable. I have seen with my own eyes how much (they) have reconciled modern life, women's rights, women's education, work life, and still guarding [their] Islamic values. This could be a certain role model for the Taliban," said Ellinor Zeino, the Foundation's Afghanistan country director, in a webinar hosted by the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies (KFCRI).

Saudi steps so far to moderate the Taliban and facilitate a peaceful resolution of the Afghanistan conflict are unlikely, however, to have ingratiated the kingdom with the Taliban. A Saudi-hosted [Islamic Conference on the Declaration of Peace in Afghanistan](#) in the holy city of Mecca in June attended by Afghan and Pakistani Islamic scholars and government officials condemned the recent violence as having "no justification" and asserting that "it could not be called jihad."

Fueling the fire, Yusuf bin Ahmed Uthaymeen, secretary-general of the 57-nation, Saudi-dominated Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), told the conference that the Taliban-led violence amounted to "genocide against Muslims."

The rhetoric notwithstanding, conservative Iran's inclination to accommodate the Taliban as President-elect Ebrahim Raisi takes office could, in a twist of irony, see the Islamic Republic and the kingdom both backing a group with a history of fire-breathing anti-Shiism if it comes to power in Kabul.

Said Mehdi Jafari, an Afghan Shiite refugee in Belgium: The Iranians "have much more to gain from the Taliban. Hazaras are a weak player to choose in this war. Iran is a country before it is a religious institution. They will first choose things that benefit their country before they look at what benefits the Shiites."

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