



An Afghan Perspective: A New Phase in Afghanistan-Iran Relations

OE Watch Commentary: Iran-Afghanistan relations are historically fraught. Much of Western Afghanistan—the Herat, Nimruz, and Farah provinces—were Iranian territory until the settlement ending the 1856-1857 Anglo-Persian War assigned them to Afghanistan. The issue is not simply historical or military, but also diplomatic and cultural. Afghans resent the condescension and arrogance with which Iranians view and treat them. Millions of Afghans have experienced Iranian abuses and discrimination while living as refugees or temporary workers inside the Islamic Republic.

In the attached account from Afghanistan’s main news site of record, chief editor Wahid Payman reports an incident in which Iranian border guards allegedly threw into a border river and drowned several Afghan workers and migrants seeking to enter Iran. Iranian diplomats in Afghanistan initially denied the incident, but Payman reports both eyewitness accounts and



The Zur al-Faqr border region between Iran and Afghanistan.

Source: BaharNews.ir, <http://www.baharnews.ir/images/docs/000215/n00215101-b.jpg>

subsequent investigations corroborate reports by Afghans who survived the encounter. Payman reports that the Afghan government reacted in an unprecedented manner by swiftly appointing a delegation to investigate the incident and issuing harsh statements. He points out that this is unprecedented, and claims that this signals “a new phase in Afghanistan-Iran relations.”

The incident highlights the obstacles Iranian leaders will face even as they try to influence the elected Afghan government in Kabul and perhaps also serve as a mediator between Kabul and the Taliban following any US withdrawal (see: “Iran Talking to the Taliban,” *OE Watch*, June 2020). Part of this tension rests with President Ashraf Ghani’s annoyance that Iranian officials have not more openly sided with him against challenges to his legitimacy by former Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah who held a competing inauguration. Also of interest are reports included in Payman’s overview of Iran-Afghanistan ties that both Tehran and Kabul have quietly expelled diplomats from each other’s missions over the past year without publicly saying why.

The major obstacle Iran will now face in asserting its influence in Afghanistan, however, will be public opinion. Tehran might have sought to sweep the abuse of Afghans at the border under the carpet, but statements issued both by Ghani and Acting Foreign Minister Atmar suggest that both are more keenly attuned to Afghan public opinion and anger than leaders have been for the past half century when chaos and war precluded Afghanistan’s diplomats from effectively advocating for and protecting its citizens living and working abroad. Simply put, Iran might seek to reassert itself in Afghanistan and balance Pakistani influence, but until Iran addresses what Afghans perceive as Iranian racism, it will be difficult for Iran to win hearts-and-minds or, at a minimum, be viewed with anything other than disdain. (See also: “Increased Attacks in Afghanistan Post US-Taliban Peace Deal” in this issue.) **End OE Watch Commentary (Rubin)**

“Iranian border police did not allow local residents to rescue the drowning.”



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Source: Wahid Payman, “Faz-e Tazeh dar Ravabet-e Afghanistan va Iran (A New Phase in Afghanistan-Iran Relations),” *Hasht-e Sobh*, 6 May 2020. <https://8am.af/a-new-phase-in-relations-with-afghanistan-and-iran/>

A New Phase in Afghanistan-Iran Relations

The Afghan government is investigating allegations made by a number of Afghan workers. These workers claimed on Friday [1 May] that they had been arrested by Iranian police after crossing the border illegally and then thrown into the river. In response, the Afghan Foreign Ministry appointed a delegation to investigate the incident. The results of the investigation have not yet been officially announced, but the Arg [Presidential Palace] and the Foreign Ministry have both issued strong statements in connection with the incident.

With the publication of these statements, it can be inferred that the death of a number of Afghan workers on the border between the two countries has started a new phase in Afghanistan-Iran relations. Two statements issued by the Presidential Palace of Afghanistan and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs have a very strong tone condemning the act, the killing of a number of Afghan job seekers in the Zur al-Faqr border region. The Presidential Palace called the incident a “crime” and an “inhumane” act, and “unforgivable.”

President Ghani’s spokesperson, Siddiq Siddiqui tweeted in response to the killing of a number of Afghan job seekers on the border with Iran:

“The brutal and inhumane acts that martyred a number of our oppressed citizens on the border with Iran are unforgivable crimes. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan is seriously pursuing this unfortunate event in order to ensure justice....”

[Acting Foreign Minister Hanif] Atmar’s tweet reads: “This grief is our common grief. We assure our compatriots that we will pursue this unforgivable crime with all the diplomatic means of the country until we achieve justice and fairness.”

We do not recall any such statements from the Afghan government in the past decade in response to any case. From time to time, some relatively sharp statements from the government’s address have been limited in response to some Pakistani political-security actions....

At least three factors can be analyzed for the Afghan government’s quick response to the incident.

Factor One: Identification of the realities of this event

Narratives published from the addresses of survivors and eyewitnesses are “astonishing” and “sad.” Eyewitnesses spoke to the media about how the incident took place. Some claimed that in addition to dumping workers in the river, Iranian border police did not allow local residents to rescue the drowning. The Afghan government has been in contact with eyewitnesses for four days. Eyewitnesses to the incident may have provided evidence to the Afghan Investigative Committee and the Afghan government...

Factor Two: The Recent History of Relations between the two countries

Relations between the Afghan government and Iran have been strained for the past six weeks. The unrest began when no representatives of the Iranian embassy in Kabul attended the inauguration of the President of the Republic of Afghanistan. When Iranian President Hassan Rouhani invited Mohammad Ashraf Ghani to attend his inauguration in 2017, Mr. Ghani went to Tehran as a senior guest. Two months ago, when Mr. Ghani’s inauguration took place in Kabul, no representatives, even at small levels, attended Mr. Ghani’s inauguration. However, the difference between Mr. Rouhani’s swearing-in ceremony and Mr. Ghani’s swearing-in ceremony was that two swearing-in ceremonies were held in Afghanistan at the same time....

The Third Factor is the Policy of Diplomatic and Political support

... In Afghanistan, the policy of protecting the interests of citizens and diplomatic support for Afghan citizens outside Afghanistan has been limited in the last 50 years. The main reason was the consequences of the war and the lack of codified policies and programs in foreign policy. Afghanistan has been largely embroiled in internal strife for the past five decades. On the first day of his tenure, Afghan Foreign Minister Hanif Atmar promised to protect the rights of Afghan citizens in other countries as well....