

**IN THE NAME OF GOD,  
THE COMPASSIONATE AND  
THE MERCIFUL:**

**IRAN AND AFGHANISTAN**

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**AN OVERVIEW OF POWER STRUCTURE IN AFGHANISTAN**

Afghanistan separated from Iran in 1747. Ahmad Khan, an Abdali chief who gained a high post in Nadir Shah's army established the first central government in the country. Over the past 250 years, the Pashtuns have dominated Afghan governments, with the exception of a nine-month reign of Habibullah Khan in 1929 and the short-lived government of former president Burhanuddin Rabbani.

The monopoly of power in Afghanistan has always been a major source of internal strife among the various Pashtun tribes, in some cases leading to major conflicts for control of the political mainstream.

During the reign of Mohammad Yusof (1963), the country began to experience a period of modernist thoughts. In fact, the 1960s mark the emergence of new political parties and Islamic movements that were mainly influenced by external Islamic movements such as the Ikhwan al-Muslimin of Egypt. Many political observers believe that the spread of Islamic thought as introduced by the Ikhwan laid the foundation of Islamic fundamentalist movements such as the Islamic Party of Hikmatyar, the Yunis Khalis group and finally the Taliban. The main characteristics of these Islamic parties were their campaigns to guarantee Pashtun preponderance in the power structure and to proclaim Sunni Islam the sole official religion.

Soviet influence expanded in Afghanistan and, in 1973, Mohammad Daoud overthrew the king in a coup and declared Afghanistan a republic. The military coup and the end of the monarchy was a period characterised by increasing conflicts and successive military coups with devastating consequences for the Afghan people. Nur Muhammad Taraki, Hafizullah Amin, Babrak Karmal and Muhammad Najibullah undertook military coups after Daoud and these were a continuation of the power struggle between the Pashtuns and other ethnic groups.

The Soviet-supported communist governments were unable to resist the Mujahidin forces. Following the withdrawal of Soviet forces in 1989, the Mujahidin intensified their operations against Najibullah's government and this led to the collapse of the communist government in Afghanistan and formation of an Islamic government in 1992. Following a meeting in Peshawar, Sebghattollah Mojadadi became the first post-Soviet Afghan president and he was succeeded by Burhanuddin Rabbani.

However, the Islamic government failed to overcome internal conflicts and the chaos of civil war, and finally, in September 1996, the Taliban took Kabul and scored sweeping military victories with the help and support of foreign forces.

## IRAN'S POSITIONS TOWARDS AFGHANISTAN

Iran's foreign policy before the Islamic Revolution's victory was based on the development of relations and interactions with all Afghan tribes and ethnic groups through the central government. The strong central government in Afghanistan played a key role in enhancing relations between the two countries. Some of the achievements of the enhanced relationship were:

- Having secured peaceful and stable boundary lines, the conclusion of the 1972 treaty on the division of the water of the Hirmand River and the 1974 agreement on making Iran a transit route for Afghanistan;
- Iran's efforts to reduce tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

During this period, Afghanistan used Iran's financial assistance to develop its economic and industrial infrastructures, and the Pashtuns considered Iran a close partner in dealing with external challenges. However, Iran's entry into some regional alliances resulted in a closer relationship with Pakistan, and that caused Afghanistan to develop ties with the East Bloc.

## THE SOVIET OCCUPATION

Supporting the Afghan people during the Soviet occupation was a foreign policy priority of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Iran consistently condemned the occupation and, on the principle of respect for Afghanistan's sovereignty and territorial integrity, called for the withdrawal of foreign forces.

Despite the post-revolutionary problems and external pressures the Islamic Republic of Iran faced, particularly the imposed war, we never compromised the interests of the Muslim people of Afghanistan with the big powers. Moreover, Iran continued its moral and material support while hosting millions of Afghan refugees who had fled the country during the occupation.

## MUJAHIDIN'S VICTORY

The Islamic Republic of Iran welcomed the Mujahidin forces' take over of Afghanistan on the Soviet's withdrawal from the country. Iran widely supported the formation of an Islamic government in Afghanistan, and started to build and develop principled and logical ties with all Afghan parties and jihad groups, never tending to side or sympathise with any of them against others. Iran's approach was entirely bent on strengthening the central government and so:

- 1) Speed up the process of the refugees' return to Afghanistan;
- 2) Pave the way to deal with banditry on borders and illegal border crossings;
- 3) Guarantee equal rights for all Afghan ethnic groups and minorities;
- 4) Raise the hope of rebuilding the war-torn country following a decade of destructive civil war;

5) Reduce the influence and intervention of foreign players.

Developments after the establishment of the Afghan Government not only weakened a central authority in Kabul, but also gave way to the pervasive warlord-politics in the country. The situation was further exacerbated by foreign interventions, adding to internal problems and devastation. The unabated internal conflicts also created numerous problems for Iran and other neighbouring countries. The flow of Afghan refugees as a result of the escalation of the civil war, a dramatic increase in illicit crop and narcotic drugs production, and mounting drug trafficking into neighbouring countries were part of the problems besetting our country and the region.

Apart from the refugee problems, the Islamic Republic of Iran had to mobilise a considerable amount of its resources to crack down on drug smugglers who used Iran as a transit route to Europe for narcotic drugs produced in Afghanistan. Campaigns against drug trafficking deeply affected the economic, security and social conditions in the Islamic Republic of Iran and became the main preoccupation of Iran's policymakers in dealing with this global scourge.

The government of the Islamic Republic of Iran, however maintained its policy of supporting and recognising the Islamic government of Afghanistan for its domestic, regional and international legitimacy until the collapse of the Taliban and the formation of an interim government in that county.

#### THE TALIBAN'S TAKE OVER

With the Taliban in power, supported financially and militarily by its allies, the Islamic Republic of Iran, based on its principles and realistic policy approaches, announced openly its rejection of the new ruling group in Afghanistan.

The Islamic Republic of Iran denounced the Taliban because of its introduction of a perverted Islam that contradicted religious norms and beliefs prevailing in the region and in Afghanistan.

The Taliban's attitudes became a major concern for all countries, particularly the violation of individual rights (especially women's rights) and the depiction of a horrendous picture of Islam, symbolising fanaticism and ignorance. The continuation of this sinister trend alarmed most countries in the region, and they gradually realised the serious threat originating from the Taliban's zeal and rigid fanatical perception of Islam. The spread of illicit drugs and drug trafficking in the region was a heinous crime the Taliban committed against humanity as a way of raising internal revenues. During the reign of the Taliban, production of narcotic drugs rose to 4,600 tons per year. Since the Taliban regime considered Iran a major obstacle to achieving its goals, it used every means to target Iran's national interests. The Taliban demonstrated its deep hostility in 1998 when its forces broke into one of Iran's diplomatic premises in violation of internationally recognised treaties and conventions, and brutally murdered nine Iranian diplomats including a journalist from the Islamic Republic News Agency. However, we have never stopped our efforts to maintain our deeply rooted ties and cultural bonds with all Afghan ethnic and religious groups. Nothing has ever disheartened us in our efforts to relieve the pain and the plight of the Afghan people. All through this tragic period, we kept our borders open to promote business transactions and transit goods from Afghanistan.

The Islamic Republic of Iran also made tremendous efforts with continued material and moral support to host over 2.5 million Afghan refugees, despite all the risks involved. Even after the assassination of Ahmad Shah Masood and the fear of the Taliban bringing the entire country into its grip, we did not desert the Afghans. Instead we undertook measures to boost popular resistance against the Taliban until its collapse in the aftermath of the 11 September attacks.

#### WHAT IRAN EXPECTS FROM AFGHANISTAN

The problems highlighted here reflect only a meagre portion of what we have experienced over the past two decades. Rampant insecurity, border banditry, drug trafficking, goods smuggling, the influx of refugees and the Taliban's introduction of a fanatical approach to Islamic teachings were our primary concerns for all these years. According to some rough estimates, during this period, the Islamic Republic of Iran suffered \$6 billion in damages every year.

Our experiences in the past years attest to the fact that so long as Afghanistan does not have a broad-based popular government, the sufferings and anguish of the people will continue and even spread to affect all segments of the Afghan population. Such a government must respect the recognised regional and international norms of conduct as well as the legitimate rights of its neighbours.

We recognise that the establishment of such a government in Afghanistan would be in accordance with the national interests of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and we will spare no effort to support its realisation, thereby aiding the economic and political development of the country.

Our active participation in regional and international forums for conflict resolution in Afghanistan, our consistent presence in all UN-sponsored meetings and in initiatives such as the 6+2 Mechanism represent the commitments and understanding Iran's foreign policy planners have developed towards such critical conditions. Even before the latest developments, Iran actively participated in all the Geneva meetings of the UN Secretary-General's special representative on Afghan affairs. Such meetings, in my opinion, greatly contributed to the shaping of the agreements reached in Bonn.

The Islamic Republic of Iran will continue its policy of support for the full implementation of the Bonn Agreement and for the Afghan interim government. We will also remain committed to our pledge to help construction efforts in Afghanistan.

It is our hope and desire to see that the international obligations of the countries that participated in the Tokyo meeting will be translated into real efforts to rebuild the war-torn country and its crippled national economy. It is the task of the international community to complete the process that has been started world wide to end the sufferings of the Afghan people and bring hope to the heart of a nation for a better future free from war, hatred and hostility.