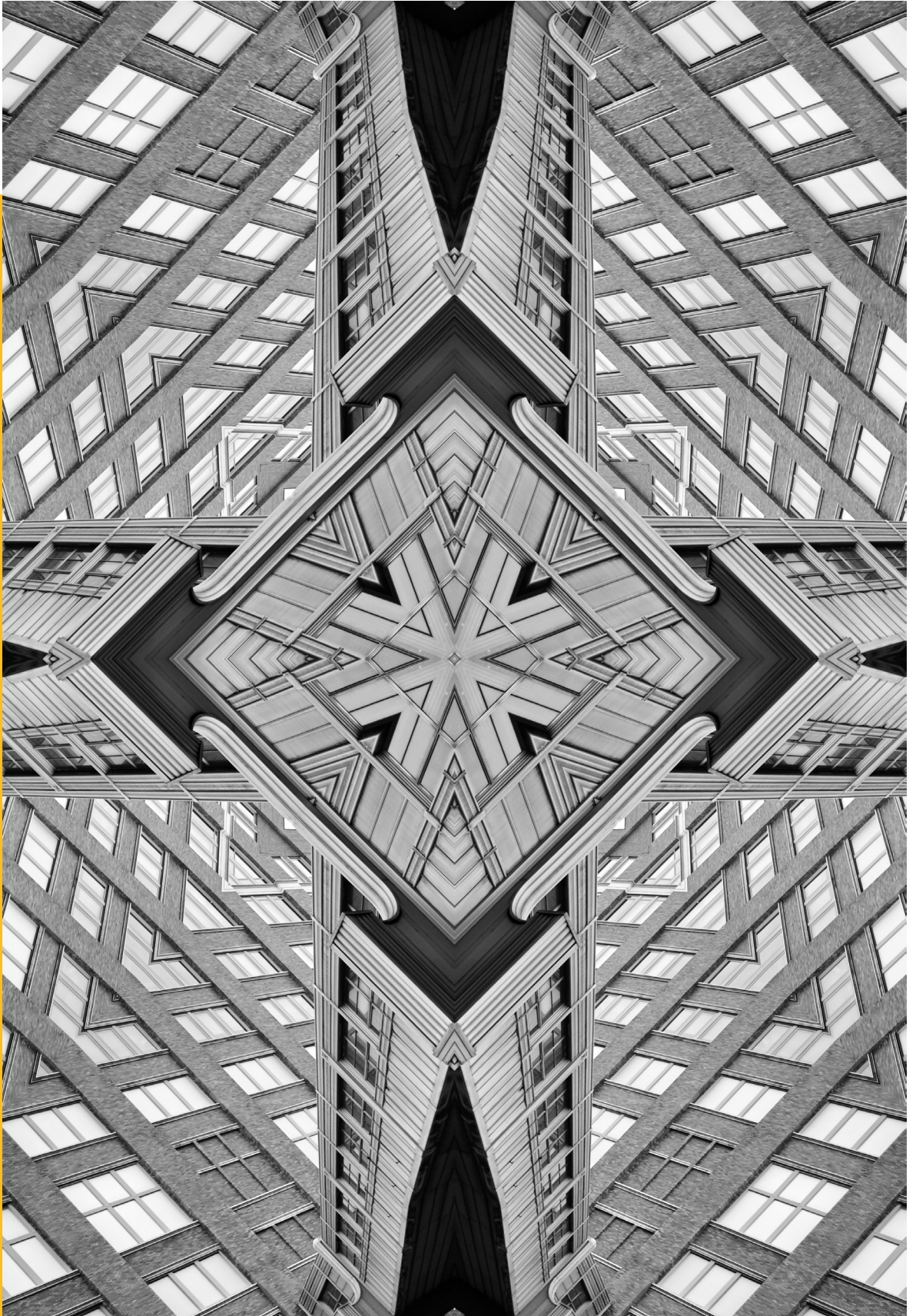


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Middle Powers in the Gulf: Navigating the Return of the Taliban in Afghanistan

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Abstract

Amid the ongoing fundamental changes in the international order, such as the growing bipolar competition between the US and China and the promotion of multipolarity, middle powers may take more ownership of conflict points such as Afghanistan. To comprehend this possibility, it is important to trace the evolution of middle powers in the Persian Gulf. This paper looks at the complexities of the Gulf middle power states, with Afghanistan as the theatre of 'new' geopolitical contestation following the US's exit and the Taliban's return to power in August 2021.

The Taliban seized power in Afghanistan in August 2021, marking the end of the US's longest-running military campaign in history, which began in the aftermath of the September 2001 terror attacks.¹ The Taliban, a predominantly Pashtun-led militia group, was founded in the early 1990s. It first came to power in 1996 after years of civil war following the invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union in 1979 and its eventual retreat in 1989. The US invasion in 2001 was anchored in the quest to capture or kill al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, the mastermind of the September 2001 terror attacks and who had been given refuge in Afghanistan by Mullah Omar, the founder and first leader of the Taliban.²

Between 2001 and 2021, the US and its allies constructed a security bubble across the Afghan landscape, but the area had a long history of resilience against foreign powers and intra-tribal conflicts. The US was a superpower waging a war surrounded by a host of regional powers that had dealt with both Afghanistan and the Taliban in different ways and for different purposes, both strategically and tactically. Notably, the US, with the help of Pakistan and Saudi Arabia,^a had supported the mujahideen in Afghanistan in their fight against the Soviets, a policy that began under the Jimmy Carter presidency in 1979 and expanded further under his successor, Ronald Reagan.³

Today, the international community is struggling to accept the reality of the Taliban being back in control of Afghanistan. Outreach and acceptance by the international community have arguably been one of the Taliban's top priorities since coming back to power. While Pakistan, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Saudi Arabia—all regional powers—were the only countries to recognise the Taliban regime in 1996, no state has officially done so as of January 2024, although some others, such as China, Russia, Uzbekistan, and the UAE, have allowed the group to take over Afghan embassies in their home countries.

The Taliban's existing political structure has placed members of the notorious Haqqani Network in power. The Haqqani Network, a brutally

a The Saudi support was largely in the form of funding.

violent arm of the Taliban insurgency, was founded by warlord Jalaluddin Haqqani during the Soviet occupation. As part of the Taliban, it was also supported by Pakistan's intelligence agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI).⁴ The network is now run by Haqqani's sons, Sirajuddin and Anas, along with his younger brother Khalil,⁵ who all hold senior positions in the Taliban's new political and governmental architecture.⁶ Even as traditional Taliban members from the south of the country, informally known as the Kandaharis, have taken the top political ranks of Amir al-Mu'minin (supreme leader, currently Haibitullah Akhundzada) and acting prime minister (Mullah Mohammad Hasan Akhund), the Haqqanis have stamped their tactical authority on Kabul by controlling the pivotal Ministry of the Interior and Ministry of Refugees. Notably, Mullah Yaqoob, the son of Omar and deputy leader of the Taliban, heads the Ministry of Defence. Former Pakistani ISI chief Faiz Hameed likely brokered this fragile power-sharing during his visit to Kabul in September 2021.⁷ This makes Pakistan Afghanistan's most important neighbour, interlocutor, and influencer, despite the subsequent strife between the two countries, especially over the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan and its agenda^b against the Pakistan government and the country's armed forces.

There are many parallels between the 1990s Taliban regime and the current dispensation. Despite a much more open and well-marketed 'objective' approach by the Taliban towards the international community, using the Doha Agreement^c as a springboard, it has not compromised substantially on matters of theology and ideology.⁸ That the Taliban continue to allow the education of girls and women and set up an inclusive and representative political framework was a crucial demand of the West and almost all of Afghanistan's neighbours. However, the internal fissures within the Taliban on these issues soon manifested openly as it attempted to formulate a policy that balanced the demands of the 'international order' with its need to 'rule by the word of God'.⁹ "A mujahid will graduate from a madrasa. A Karzai will graduate from a school," Akhundzada had said

b The Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan seeks to impose Muslim sharia law across Pakistan and to liberate the areas adjoining Afghanistan from Islamabad's rule. It is responsible for innumerable attacks and bomb blasts in Pakistan, claiming hundreds of lives.

c The Doha Accord was a peace settlement signed between the US and the Taliban, signed in February 2020 in Doha, Qatar, by which the US agreed to withdraw NATO forces from Afghanistan, marking the end of its war against the Taliban.

in Pakistan's Balochistan, not long before becoming the supreme leader.^{d,10} Turning his back on such ideations would be problematic.

A comparison of the 1996-2001 Taliban regime and its current iteration highlights that most of the debates around the group and its political control existed in the 1990s as well. Women's rights have always been a contentious issue between the international community and the Taliban, sparked mainly by the brutalities of Taliban insurgents as part of their interpretation and implementation of Sharia law even before coming to power. For the Taliban, moving away from traditional ideological framings on issues such as women's rights would, in theory, challenge the fundamentals established by Omar.¹¹ It is crucial to remember that many Taliban elders who are deciding these matters today also served directly under Omar and continue to carry his ideological anchoring. Making big compromises may be seen by some as a continuation of the pandering to Western agendas the previous regime engaged in, which could eventually lead to infighting and the collapse of the current quasi-political structure of an insurgency attempting to transition into a government.¹² The Taliban also faces internal threats from the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), along with steadily increasing border friction with Pakistan, Iran, and Tajikistan.^{13,14}

d 'Karzai' refers to former Afghan President Hamid Karzai, seen as a notable leader from the country's foreign-educated classes and not from the Islamic education system of madrasas. Karzai was educated in Himachal Pradesh, India, between 1979 and 1983.

Enter the Middle Powers

The Soviet Union and the US were direct interventionists in Afghanistan, and their actions failed. However, alongside, many regional or ‘middle’ powers in the West Asia, Central Asia, and South Asia regions have also often latched themselves to the intervening superpowers as satellite states for their own strategic goals and national interests. Today, both Russia and the US have withdrawn from Afghanistan, leaving the middle powers to mitigate future risks from the Taliban’s political and geopolitical intentions. Despite China making strategic inroads with the new Taliban regime, its influence over security matters is small compared to that of countries in Afghanistan’s immediate neighbourhood.¹⁵

It is important to examine what the approach of these middle powers will be in the absence of a larger Western security umbrella and with a non-traditional political and security actor such as the Taliban in charge of Afghanistan. As the US withdrew from the country in August 2021, US President Joe Biden said, “Let me be clear. We will continue to support the Afghan people through diplomacy, influence, and international aid. We’ll continue to push for regional diplomacy and engagement to prevent violence and instability”.¹⁶ This implies that the US has handed over the onus of security in Afghanistan to the middle powers. While the Taliban’s relations with states such as Iran and Pakistan have been much discussed, its relationship with the Arab middle powers—especially Qatar, which helped the US achieve the Doha deal—has not received much attention.

Defining a middle power is not easy. Conceptually, the idea is centuries old. One of the earliest definitions can be traced to the fifteenth-century Italian mayor Giovanni Botero, who termed it an “actor (i.e. country) with sufficient strength and authority to stand on its own without the need of help from others”.¹⁷ This definition is, at best, only a fundamental construct. The ideation of middle powers as a geopolitical construct developed between the Napoleonic Wars and the Second World War.¹⁸ For instance, Mackenzie King, Canada’s prime minister during the Second World War, used the term to explain Ottawa’s position of non-involvement.¹⁹ The term is evoked when smaller political entities, whether states or kingdoms, look to consolidate power while avoiding getting locked in bipolar political constructs. Many states in Asia, Africa, and South America, often those with

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colonial histories, have described themselves and justified their political positions as thus. During Russia's ongoing war with Ukraine, for instance, some middle powers have used this status to resist the West's attempts to construct a global response condemning Russia's actions.²⁰

India is an interesting example. Despite having a US\$3.3 trillion GDP and a population of over 1.4 billion, India is still often seen as a middle power.²¹ As such, there is still no clear understanding of what exactly middle powers are and how their influence is best quantified. Military strength (the capacity to use the military for political action in the neighbourhood and beyond), economic power, and the population-to-economy-to-military ratio are some of the metrics used to define middle powers.

The US-led war on Afghanistan brought together varied interests that played out over two decades. The initial aim was simple: to hunt down al Qaeda operatives and bin Laden. This was finally achieved in May 2011, when bin Laden was killed in a US special operation strike in Abbottabad, Pakistan, over 500 km away from the mountains of Tora Bora (in Afghanistan), where he was widely believed to be sheltering. This is important to show how Pakistan, a professed ally of the US in its war on terror, often played a deceitful role in the war to achieve its own strategic goals in Afghanistan, which differed from those of the US. For Pakistan, the aim was regional, largely based on the containment of Indian influence in Afghanistan, and not one led by a narrative of international security or US goals of counterterrorism. This view in Pakistan had been reinforced after it lost East Pakistan, now known as Bangladesh, in 1971, following its defeat in a war with India.²²

Under the bonnet of the Afghan war, middle powers from South Asia and the Gulf were pursuing their own complicated—and often independent—aims. Operating in the shadows of the great powers, or within constructs of great power rivalries, these middle powers arguably had more room to manoeuvre and secure their own interests without getting directly involved in kinetic conflicts in Afghanistan, whether militarily or economically. There is little overlap of interests between the Gulf states and the South Asian states when it comes to Afghanistan and, specifically, the Taliban. For instance, while Saudi Arabia, along with the US and Pakistan, aided the

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mujahideen against the Soviets, India and regional actors such as Tajikistan and Iran stepped in only after the leadership structure formed in the wake of the Soviet withdrawal fell, and the Taliban took over in 1996. These countries supported the resistance to the Taliban regime led by Ahmad Shah Massoud and the Northern Alliance,^e with military analyst Thomas Withington terming them the “early anti-Taliban team”.²³ The Northern Alliance operated out of Afghanistan’s mountainous northern Panjshir Valley region.^f Today, China is perhaps the only state directly dealing with the Taliban. However, China’s outreach is that of a big power and not a regional one,²⁴ involving only Pakistan as a regional partner state.

The big powers and the middle ones all agree on the need to cooperate in providing humanitarian and developmental aid to Taliban-held Afghanistan. But on issues such as the kind of role the Taliban should be allowed to play as a political actor, their positions vary widely depending on their geopolitical, ethnic, and strategic requirements. This makes it increasingly hard to reach any regional consensus over the Taliban. It also makes creating secure borders and a stable environment for its long-term survivability challenging for the Taliban itself. How the Taliban will deal with multilateral institutions such as the United Nations (UN) is to be seen, as is its capacity to manoeuvre in the complex regional geopolitical landscape. It has called for ‘good’ relations with all countries, but this remains an undefined and vague policy.²⁵

Since August 2021, Afghanistan has become a playground for middle powers jostling for influence. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Iran, and Türkiye are all in the game, even as they try to manage their theological and ideological fallout. This is particularly true of Saudi Arabia, given its religious significance in Islam, and its history with Afghanistan and the Taliban alike.

e This was a military alliance of the United Front, which had been in power in Kabul after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989 and which was ousted by the Taliban in 1996, along with various other groups and warlords opposed to the Taliban, which fought the Taliban from 1996 to 2001 (when the US invaded).

f Massoud’s son has tried to revive the resistance in Panjshir Valley following the Taliban’s second coming.

The New Afghan Reality: Saudi Arabia, UAE, and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation

Much has changed since the 1980s when Saudi Arabia was a staging ground for Arabs going to Afghanistan to fight alongside the mujahideen against the Soviets. Saudi Arabia's role in strengthening the mujahideen is widely regarded as an add-on to US policies against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. However, the Arabs who went to fight in Afghanistan—collectively called 'Arab Afghans'—constituted an independent movement of people spurred by their Islamic ideology, and not necessarily state strategy. As West Asia expert Thomas Hegghammer notes, "the view of the 1980s Arab Afghans as active state supported is a widespread misconception that has given rise to the popular "blowback theory," according to which Arab Afghans (and, by extension, the al Qaeda) were a US-Saudi creation that later turned against its patrons...Arab Gulf states and Western governments acquiesced to foreign fighter recruitment, but they did not organise or pay for it. The foreign fighters were funded by private donors and the nongovernmental Islamic charitable sector".²⁶ Indeed, historian Michael Rubin wrote in 2002 that Arab volunteers often raised the ire of local Afghans, and while their fundraising was appreciated, their presence on the battlefield was viewed as "nuisances".²⁷

Today, the political and ideological trajectories of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) of Saudi Arabia, and Prince Mohammed bin Zayed²⁸ of the UAE—following the rise of Dubai and Abu Dhabi as financial hubs since the 1990s—have changed the nature of strategic thought in the region. The UAE has given permanent refuge to Afghanistan ex-President Mohammed Ashraf Ghani and his family.²⁹ Yet, despite the close connections between the US, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, it was Qatar that was chosen as the venue for the first phase of official negotiations between the US and the Taliban in 2013. The same year, the Taliban also opened its official political office in Doha, which played a critical role as a bridge between the US and the Taliban leadership, the latter being largely stationed in Pakistan, and not Afghanistan.³⁰

At first, the UAE did view its Gulf neighbour's success in hosting the Taliban talks as a challenge to its position within the Gulf Cooperation Council, as also to its primacy in Washington. It reportedly hauled up its then ambassador to the US, Yousef al-Otaiba, over Doha's success in

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hosting the Taliban’s political office.³¹ Even earlier in 2011, leaked e-mails published by *The New York Times* had highlighted Abu Dhabi’s unhappiness over the decision to house the Taliban’s political office outside the Emirates.³² It has also sought to bolster its US ties by initiating, along with Bahrain, a peace deal with Israel in the form of the Abraham Accords signed in September 2020.³³ But both the Saudis and the Emiratis have taken a cautious approach to Afghanistan since the fall of Kabul, even as some senior Taliban leaders and their families are known to live in these countries as private citizens. For both, engagement akin to the 1990s is no longer an option.

In 2017, the UAE ambassador to Afghanistan, Juma Mohammed Abdullah al-Kaabi, was killed in a terrorist attack at the governor’s compound in Kandahar, where he was visiting along with a delegation.^{g,34} The Taliban blamed “internal local rivalry” and “covert intelligence circles” as it tried to pacify a furious UAE.³⁵ However, after this incident, the UAE scaled back its diplomatic presence in Kabul significantly. The Saudis also acted in parallel, meeting Afghanistan’s national security adviser only once over two years. The UAE is known to have zeroed in on the Haqqani Network for the Kandahar attack, and intended to announce this publicly, but later chose to engage directly with Pakistan on the issue. The outcome, however, was a disappointment for the UAE. As such, it is no surprise that, while the UAE was unprepared for the pace at which Kabul collapsed in August 2021, it was disappointed that the Haqqanis laid claim to the capital first.³⁶

Since then, the UAE and Saudi Arabia have preferred a multilateral approach to the Afghanistan issue. Though they have had cautious bilateral engagements with the Taliban, both have endorsed the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) as the ideal regional body to reach out to the interim government.³⁷ This has enabled them to keep their distance, considering their recognition of the previous Taliban regime is now regarded as a historic diplomatic blunder. The US also has tacitly pushed the OIC to take a leading role as a theological outreach by the Islamic world to the Taliban in parallel with the UN, which has positioned itself as a gateway for critical humanitarian intervention in the country.

g Five other UAE diplomats were also killed.

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The Saudis have maintained an even greater distance from the happenings in Afghanistan this time than the UAE. In the 1980s and 1990s, they had provided, along with the US's Central Intelligence Agency, an estimated US\$1 billion to the Afghan mujahideen. The money was not exclusively earmarked for fighting the Soviets but also for building political bridges among Afghan warlords and the various warring factions through economic projects. But the latter objective proved elusive. For instance, the Saudis sought to woo warlords like Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the leader of Hezb-e-Islami and former Afghan prime minister. But despite taking their political and financial help, Hekmatyar, who had earned the title of 'Butcher of Kabul' for allegedly killing thousands of civilians, publicly supported Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, which Saudi Arabia opposed. This led to the Saudis stopping funding programmes for the mujahideen and focusing on humanitarian matters instead.³⁸ Ironically, Hizb-e-Islami, which tacitly supported a return of the Taliban, is now being forced to close its offices, while its members face attacks in Afghanistan's rural provinces.³⁹

Under MBS, the Saudis now want to orchestrate fundamental changes in their country, opening up their economy to diversify away from a reliance on oil and taking a more moderate stance that deviates from traditional postures of conservative Islam. Navigating such change is a precarious exercise, culturally, societally, and politically. Internal pushback in the form of radicalisation remains a threat, and external factors, such as the return of the Taliban in Afghanistan, bolster such pressure points.⁴⁰ Any organic rise of support for groups such as the Taliban and al Qaeda would be detrimental to the future political and economic designs of the Saudi kingdom and, by extension, of the wider Gulf region. With the Taliban victory being celebrated by the likes of Hamas, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and—perhaps more importantly for Riyadh and Abu Dhabi—by the political wing of Jordan's Muslim Brotherhood (which congratulated the Taliban for the "defeat of the brutal American occupation"⁴¹), radicalisation becomes a bigger threat.

In December 2021, the OIC appointed Tarig Ali Bakheet, Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian, Cultural and Social Affairs, as the consortium's special envoy for Afghanistan. The first OIC meeting on Afghanistan the same month ended without any pledge of aid. The

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reason behind negotiating through the OIC is an attempt by both Saudi Arabia and the UAE to avoid being seen either as too supportive of or too hostile to the Taliban.⁴² They realise that the two countries closest to the happenings in Afghanistan are Pakistan and Qatar, the former more so than the latter. Bypassing Islamabad and Doha would require deploying significant diplomatic and even military capacity to build an authoritative presence on the ground in Kabul.

The UAE reopened its embassy in Kabul in September 2021; however, it mostly facilitates humanitarian assistance and supports continuing people-to-people contacts.⁴³ It could easily do so as it already had a limited presence in Kabul in the preceding years. In November 2021, Saudi Arabia also reopened its consular services but in February 2023, it abruptly suspended operations and evacuated staff to Pakistan following an intelligence tip-off of a potential attack on its premises.⁴⁴ The abrupt Saudi departure can be attributed to regional rivalries and factional fights, with some terming it a “successful coup” by Iran-backed interests in the country.⁴⁵

Saudi Arabia has also initiated a bilateral approach with the Taliban, and has held meetings with its representatives. The Taliban requested Saudi Arabia to send Islamic scholars to Afghanistan, but the requests were received with caution. Riyadh is ready to engage with the Taliban, but wary of its lack of internal cohesion. If the Taliban shows signs of changing, Saudi Arabia and the UAE would be willing to strengthen ties. Till then, the OIC is tasked with approaching Afghanistan as a humanitarian crisis in which global interest is already flagging amid other geopolitical flash points such as Ukraine and the Gaza Strip. The OIC is also attempting a theological outreach to persuade sections of the Taliban to accept global demands that it permits women’s education and increase women’s rights.⁴⁶ However, here as well, it is Qatar that has the greatest access to Akhundzada and his inner circle.⁴⁷

Qatar remains at the forefront of international engagement with the Taliban regime. Its global stature has also been enhanced following the outcome of the blockade of Qatar between June 2017 and January 2021, which was orchestrated by Saudi Arabia and strongly backed by the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt.⁴⁸ During that time, Qatar improved its strategic ties with Türkiye, and the two are often seen working together on Afghanistan. However, in Afghanistan, Doha and Ankara have divergent interests, views, and playbooks.

Qatar, Türkiye, and Their Influence in the ‘New’ Kabul

Saudi Arabia and the UAE’s differences with Qatar have often been openly expressed. “I don’t think it is a coincidence that inside Doha you have the Hamas leadership, you have the Taliban embassy, you have the Muslim Brotherhood leadership. Why they do that, we don’t have an answer,” said Yusuf al Otaiba, the UAE’s ambassador to the US, during an interview with a prominent American television network in 2017. “We would like to see more secular, stable, prosperous, empowered, and strong governments (in the region). Our disagreement is about what the future of the Middle East should look like, and that’s not something we have been able to square with the Qataris for a long time,” he added.⁴⁹

The jury is still out on whether the blockade of Qatar achieved any of its aims or ended up strengthening Qatari resolve. It certainly led to Qatar reinforcing its ties with Türkiye, which sent its military reinforcements as a show of support.⁵⁰ Qatar also opened new channels with Iran, Saudi Arabia’s regional foe.⁵¹ It continued to host talks between the Taliban and the US as an “impartial” mediator on Afghanistan. It aimed to increase its influence both in the Gulf and the West alike, which it seems to have achieved to a certain degree. In March 2022, the US called it “a major non-NATO ally,” the only country in the region to be described as thus.⁵²

The Taliban’s Doha office enabled its representatives, such as Mullah Baradar, Sher Mohammed Abbas Stanekzai, and Suhail Shaheen, to build a global image and work towards international acceptability via negotiations and by portraying themselves as more ‘moderate’ than the Omar regime had previously ruled Afghanistan. It gave the Taliban legitimacy, enabling it to travel to countries such as Norway to hold ‘peace’ talks, allowing it to position itself as an accepted and legitimate political actor in Afghanistan, and not just an insurgent militia. *Al Jazeera*, Qatar’s globally renowned media organisation, also regularly provided the Taliban a platform to air its views. As the Taliban took over Kabul in August 2021, *Al Jazeera* ran almost uninterrupted live coverage from the ground.^h

^h Notably, Al Jazeera’s ‘provocative’ coverage of the Arab Spring and the Palestine issue has been one of the major drivers of Saudi and the UAE’s tensions with Doha.

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The Qatar blockade did give Türkiye invaluable space to wedge itself into the Gulf between the UAE-Saudi power duopoly as an alternative Sunni power in the region, being the only Islamic country that is a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), but the Afghanistan crisis has proved too complicated for it to enhance its position. Its economic problems have also significantly curtailed its geopolitical ambitions.⁵³

Türkiye’s ties with Afghanistan are cultural and demographic, spanning centuries. Türkiye established the first-ever diplomatic mission in Kabul in 1921. In March 2021, the two countries celebrated 100 years of diplomatic relations. On the eve of the centenary, when the US-backed Ghani regime still ruled Afghanistan, Türkiye’s then-ambassador to the country, Oguzhan Ertugrul, had said: “Turkey has always been advocating an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process. In this regard, we are ready, as long as our help is needed, to support our Afghan brothers with a view to contributing to efforts for achieving a sustainable peace embraced by all segments of the Afghan society and by regional and international actors.”⁵⁴

Türkiye did not recognise the earlier Taliban regime in 1996, but still maintained a diplomatic presence in Kabul. During the civil war, it had supported the Northern Alliance against the Taliban, specifically its military leaders such as Abdul Rashid Dostum, who was given refuge by Ankara in 1996 and in 2021. Türkiye’s historic links with ethnic Turkic populations in Afghanistan give it unbridled access to the intricacies of ethnic and tribal politics in the country, and has enabled it to operate within governmental systems both under the Ghani presidency and that of his predecessor, Hamid Karzai. Türkiye was indeed better placed than Qatar during that period. But the Taliban had been noncommittal towards Türkiye’s role beyond humanitarian aid and potential diplomatic recognition.

Türkiye’s military deployment in Afghanistan was part of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in 2001. It assumed command of the ISAF in 2002; however, throughout the conflict, it concentrated on non-combat operations, largely around the security of Kabul. It carefully calibrated its involvement, so as not to be seen as an armed interventionist despite being part of the US-led coalition. It had joined the ISAF mainly to win the confidence of European countries, which it hoped would help

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its longstanding efforts to be accepted as a full member of the European Union (EU).

The long duration of the Afghan war also saw upheavals in Türkiye’s relations with the US and the EU. Türkiye blamed US interests for having supported the failed coup attempt against Turkish President Recep Erdoğan in July 2016. A few months before the fall of Kabul, Biden had tried to give Türkiye a bigger role vis-à-vis talks with the Taliban, hoping to use the opportunity to reconcile with Erdoğan and maintain a NATO footing with the processes around engagements with the Taliban.

Türkiye proposed to take over the security of the Kabul airport. However, the Taliban maintained that any forces remaining behind in Afghanistan after the US pullout would be treated as “occupiers,” against whom it would wage “jihad”.⁵⁵ Today, it is the Taliban itself that handles Kabul airport security, while Abu Dhabi-based company GAAC handles all ground operations.⁵⁶ In November 2023, FlyDubai, also UAE-headquartered, became the first international carrier to restart Kabul flights.⁵⁷ Sharjah-based Air Arabia is expected to restart flights as well. Neither Turkish Airlines nor Qatar Airways are in the picture. This showcases the level of competition for influence over the Taliban among Arab states.⁵⁸

“With Russia and the US having withdrawn from Afghanistan, the middle powers must now mitigate future risks from the Taliban’s political and geopolitical intentions.”

i Afghan airlines such as Kam Air and Ariana have continued to fly to the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, and India.


Middle powers, specifically those in West Asia, want to exert much more influence in a rapidly evolving global order. From the G20 to BRICS Plus, newer institutions are developing largely to hedge against an incoming bipolar contest between the US and China.⁵⁹ In September 2023, China became the first country to appoint a new ambassador to serve in Kabul under the Taliban leadership.⁶⁰ Interestingly, Tom West, US Special Representative for Afghanistan, has predicted that there will be no large-scale financial push by China into Afghanistan while adding that the US would have no objection to it.⁶¹

Regional powers in West Asia, South Asia, and Central Asia do not have overlapping interests in Afghanistan. Even within the context of terrorism and security, there are divergences as states pressure the Taliban to address their concerns about terrorism. The US recently complimented the Taliban's efforts to counter both al Qaeda and the ISKP, while others highlighted other more specific terror ecosystems beyond these two groups.⁶²

The larger West Asian states, despite their quiet approach to the Taliban until now, will be wary of the country once again becoming an incubator of Islamist terrorism.⁶³ MBS has acknowledged Saudi Arabia's dubious legacy (most of the September 2001 hijackers were of Saudi origin) and also reiterated that al Qaeda's targets had included the Saudi monarchy as well. One of the main areas of Saudi-Qatari contestation is Doha's support for political Islam in the region.⁶⁴

However, as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and others align with the US in dealing with the new Taliban dispensation as a new and accepted political reality, the underlying thinking remains that the best way to do so would be through Pakistan. This raises concerns at multiple levels, as it gives Pakistan the space to leverage its use of terror groups. It allows the Pakistani deep state to negotiate with the world as a nuclear state as well.

Conclusion

Finally, recent diplomatic *détentes* in the region, from the Abraham Accords to the normalisation of Saudi-Iran ties, open the possibility of issues such as Afghanistan being viewed through the lens of common security concerns. Keeping the Taliban within a manageable reality can be seen as a near-term aim for the Gulf states. However, the persisting undercurrents of political Islam, Islamist linkages, and extremism will position regional states as major stakeholders in Afghan security in the future. 

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