



Iran Factor in the Reconstruction of Afghanistan

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Abstract: The reconstruction of Afghanistan has attracted wide attention in the international community. Many countries want to play a role in the reconstruction of Afghanistan as a way to promote their own economic development and international standing. Other countries are forced to help Afghanistan achieve social stability in order to make their own surroundings more conducive to their own development. Iran, a regional power and neighbor of Afghanistan, is also playing an important role in Afghanistan's reconstruction. Iran is also participating in Afghanistan's political reconstruction, economic reconstruction and cultural reconstruction. As for Iran's role in Afghanistan's reconstruction, it is still very important for the Taliban government in Afghanistan.

Keywords: Afghanistan and Iraq; Political Reconstruction; Economic Reconstruction; Cultural

Reconstruction

As for the study of the Iranian factor in the reconstruction of Afghanistan, scholars at home and abroad have conducted in-depth research on this issue from different angles, and have made some achievements, and also put forward many views, conclusions, solutions and phased results. For example, in his book *Iran's Foreign Policy in Post-Taliban Afghanistan*, Kehan Bazegar argues that since 2001, Iran has sought to establish security and stability while promoting regional cooperation in Afghanistan. The only way to manage conflict in the post-exit era is for the West to accept the legitimacy of enhanced regional cooperation, including Iran's participation.^[1] For example, in his book *Iran's Foreign Policy in Post-Taliban Afghanistan*, Kehan Bazegar argues that since 2001, Iran has sought to establish security and stability while promoting regional cooperation in Afghanistan. The only way to manage conflict in the post-exit era is for the West to accept the legitimacy of enhanced regional cooperation, including Iran's participation.^[2] Wang Shida's *The Great Change in Afghanistan: The Evolution of the Geopolitical and Security Pattern* gives a detailed analysis of the connotation and direction of the changes in Afghanistan, on this basis, analyzes the adjustment direction of the geopolitical pattern in Afghanistan, and looks forward to the evolution trend of the regional security situation in the future.^[3] Wang Xueyu and Li Fuquan's *The Evolution and Prospect of the Relations between Iran and the Afghan Taliban* sorted out the different stages of the relations between Iran and the Afghan Taliban, analyzed the reasons for the change of Iran's attitude toward the Afghan Taliban, and discussed the factors affecting the relations between the two countries and the prospect of the relations between the two countries after the Afghan Taliban came to power.^[4] Han Jiwei's *Analysis of Iran's Influence and Role in Afghanistan's Reconstruction* explores Iran's influence and role in Afghanistan's reconstruction from three aspects: Iran's performance in Afghanistan's reconstruction, the reasons why Iran plays an important role in Afghanistan's reconstruction, and Iran's policy prospects in Afghanistan's reconstruction.^[5] Economic and economic factors are: Cao Chong, Ji Kaiyun's "Analysis of Iran's influence in Afghanistan" focuses on Iran's participation in Afghanistan's infrastructure construction, is committed to the establishment of an "economic sphere of influence" in Afghanistan analysis of Iran's influence in Afghanistan, of course, culture and other aspects are also mentioned.^[6] Neda Boloch, *Iran's Strategy in Afghanistan: With the Taliban Pragmatic Engagement* also discusses, primarily from an economic perspective, that Tehran will engage pragmatically with the Taliban government to preserve and advance its national security strategy as the Taliban takes over the country following the withdrawal of U.S. and

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NATO forces.^[7] The Repatriation of Afghan Refugees from Iran: A Shelter Profile Study by Mitra Nasser, Miriam Potoki, Paul Stewart, and Sarah Pezeschke highlights the value of access to shelter as a pull factor for ending forced displacement by comparing the housing situation of Afghan refugees in Iran with that of returnees in Afghanistan.^[8] Cultural factors include: Hamid Sedighi, Mitra Nasser, Mariam Raffal and passionilea's "Afghan Refugee Children in Iran Feel Educated: A Structured review of Policies briefly examines and summarizes policies related to the education of Afghan children in Iran through a structured review, which also calls for a reconsideration of restrictive higher education policies for Iranian-Afghans.^[9] Farhat Easar, Hadia Azizi, Khudaynazar Rahmani, Maitaba Moradi, Rajab TaiebS and Wasal Naser Faqiryar's Education in Afghanistan since 2001: Evolution and Regression seeks to explore and understand the trajectory of education in post-2001 Afghanistan to the present day, through an examination of four key themes, namely formal and non-formal educational institutions in Afghanistan and the examines four key themes of educational progress and challenges in the post-Bonn interim government and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan up to the coup d'état in an attempt to explore and understand the trajectory of education in post-2001 Afghanistan to the present day.^[10] Using an interpretive case study approach, Susan Wardak's Leadership for Change; Teacher Education in Afghanistan: The Challenges of the Decade of Reconstruction, Reform, and Modernization in a Post-Conflict Society focuses on the story of rebuilding the national education system in Afghanistan, which was devastated by decades of conflict, and chronicles the challenges and progress of preparing sufficient and qualified teachers for the country.^[11] Some researches of domestic and foreign scholars may be limited by specific background and environment, and their applicability needs to be further verified. Some viewpoints and conclusions may lack sufficient material support, and the materials used can hardly help modern scholars to study the current situation with the changes of The Times. There has been a lot of research on the reconstruction of Afghanistan before 2021. There has been little progress in the reconstruction of Afghanistan since the Taliban government returned to power in 2021. Therefore, this paper will analyze the role played by Iran in the reconstruction of Afghanistan from three factors: politics, economy and culture, combined with the new dynamics of Iran and the Taliban in Afghanistan after their return to power.

The Iranian factor in the political reconstruction of Afghanistan

Iran's relations with the Afghan Taliban have been rocky. When the Afghan Taliban first rose to power, it was supported by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia because of conflicting religious beliefs. Iran has refused to recognize the Taliban regime while providing support to the rival Northern Alliance. Shortly after the Taliban took power in Afghanistan in 1996 and the Mazar-i-Sharif massacre in 1998, Iran announced that it would take decisive measures against the Taliban in Afghanistan to protect the interests of the country and the nation, and mobilized some 200,000 troops to conduct large-scale military exercises in the border area with Afghanistan^[12] After America's war on terror, the Taliban were driven into hiding in the mountains. After the United States launched the Iraq War, the Taliban got a reprieve. At this time, Iran was in "secret contact" with the Taliban for the same political goal - against the United States.^[13] After 2011, Iran's contacts with the Taliban became explicit, spurred by a series of policies, including the withdrawal of the U.S. government from Iran's nuclear program.

Ties between the two countries have increased since the Taliban returned to power. After the Taliban came to power in 2021, Iran was among the countries that maintained its embassy in the Afghan capital Kabul and communicated with the new authorities in four consulates in major Afghan cities.^[14] Unlike Iran, most Western embassies were closed. Iran's attitude when the Taliban came to power was in stark contrast to that of other Western countries. In combination with the above, Iran engaged in contact with the Taliban after 2011, indicating that Iran and the Taliban government may have reached a consensus on some aspects during the period of contact from 2011 to 2021. Or perhaps, during the decade of engagement, the Taliban government's behavior or attitude met Iran's expectations of it. Otherwise, Iran would not have communicated with Afghanistan in such a chaotic situation and not closed its embassy. Iran also named Hasan Kazemi Qomi as its new ambassador to Kabul. Hasan Kazemi Qomi was appointed Special Representative of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi to Afghanistan in October 2021.^[15] Afghan government spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid welcomed the new ambassador. "We expect the ambassador to play an important role for the benefit of both countries," he said.^[16] It seems that the relations between Afghanistan and Iran are developing in a good direction. The status of Iran's ambassador shows the importance that Iran attaches to the Taliban government in Afghanistan. And shortly after the Iranian ambassador took office, he met with senior Afghan government officials, led by acting Prime Minister Mohammad Hassan Akhund.^[17] All this, it seems, has an overture to the Taliban government. After all, Hasan Kazemi Qomi is a special man. So soon after taking office to get to meet with the Taliban government's top officials is not without high profile. It seems to prove that Iran wants to actively participate in and play an important role in the reconstruction of the Taliban government in Afghanistan.

However, Iran's high profile does not stop there, so Tehran's first public announcement of diplomatic contacts with the new Taliban regime began in early October 2021. Three months later, officials from the organization were invited to Tehran for a conference. Since then, the two countries have held 67 meetings, ranking fourth among the 58 countries that have diplomatic contacts with the Taliban, after China, Turkey and Qatar.^[18] On February 26, 2023, Iran officially handed over the Afghan Embassy in Tehran to Taliban diplomats, a major step forward in formalizing and deepening

relations between the two countries. The Taliban previously had consulates general in Mashhad and Zahedan, while Iran never officially closed its embassy in Kabul after the group took over Afghanistan in 2021.[19] The situation is markedly different from the tensions that prevailed during the first iteration of the Taliban's "Islamic emirate." Indeed, the transfer of the embassy is another achievement in the Taliban's slow but protracted struggle for legitimacy and full international recognition, even if the latter has not yet been achieved. Both the transfer of the ambassador from Iran and the transfer of the embassy became an important part of the political reconstruction of Afghanistan. After the return of the Taliban to power, the international and domestic environment is much more severe than the previous administration. At least three countries, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates, had diplomatic relations with the Taliban when they first came to power. More than two years after taking power in Afghanistan, the current Taliban has not gained international recognition or established diplomatic relations with any country. So these Iranian actions are very important for Afghanistan. It seems to have given the Taliban government in Afghanistan a glimmer of hope.

In addition to diplomatic dialogue, because Iran and Afghanistan's domestic minorities are also Shia Islam. Iran, which believes it has a responsibility to protect all Shia Islam in the world, has been pressing the Taliban government in Afghanistan to include minorities and build an inclusive government. Afghanistan's Taliban government has responded to Iran's request. In September 2021, the interim government of Afghanistan announced a new acting cabinet that was almost entirely composed of Taliban members, with no other political factions, ethnic minorities, or women. The cabinet list announced in the first round of the Afghan interim government is basically Pashtuns, Afghanistan's majority ethnic group, and non-Pashtuns only three cabinet members, and no Hazaras. However, in the cabinet list of the second round of the Interim Government, both in terms of organization and ethnic representation, there is a certain inclusiveness, and the inclusiveness of the Hazara people is enhanced.[20] In particular, a small number of non-Taliban personnel served as heads of ministries such as trade and health; The representation of ethnic minorities has increased, with a total of ten ethnic minorities in the Cabinet. If the Taliban government is to embrace minorities, it will first have to change the Pashtuns' ideological hostility to them. Judging by the Taliban Government's latest interim Government cabinet list, Iran's positive appeals have had an effect. But whether it is in response to Iran's active help in the reconstruction effort, or the Taliban government has been forced to make changes under international pressure. Or is it that the Taliban government has begun to rethink its conduct and examine whether its governing side can achieve its goal of establishing a "true Islamic state"? This gives us a glimpse of the sincerity of the Taliban government in Afghanistan.

The Iranian factor in Afghanistan's economic reconstruction

Iran is also playing a huge role in Afghanistan's economic development. Afghanistan's poverty is well known. Because of its special geographical location, Afghanistan has always been a battleground for soldiers. From the 1973 coup d'état in Afghanistan, the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the rise of the Taliban in 1994, to the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, Afghanistan hardly stopped. Afghanistan's economy has never recovered from years of war and bad government decisions. The world has been providing humanitarian assistance to the Afghan people. However, for various reasons, the rescue fund is less than 25%[21]. In the absence of rescue funds, only their own efforts to improve the level of their own economy can now change the plight of their people and the weakness of their country. So the Taliban, back in power, are working hard to develop the country's economy. The Taliban government's efforts have to be said to be partly due to the lessons learned from its first failure to govern. The construction of roads in the Mohammad Aga district of Logar Province, the completion of the administrative building in the Garziwan district of Faryab Province and the opening of the second phase of the completion of the Kushtepe Canal Project I are all evidence of the efforts of the Afghan Taliban in economic construction.[22] Senior officials of the Taliban government were involved in the completion and opening of these projects. And most of the construction is funded by Afghan businessmen. It can be seen that Afghanistan is taking the lead of the government, and domestic businessmen invest in construction to supplement the active development of the national economy. But the level of poverty in Afghanistan has been very slow to develop through Afghanistan's own efforts. Outside powers are needed, and the help of Iran, one of Afghanistan's neighbors and a regional power, is all the more important at this time.

Of course, Iran has its own reasons for actively helping Afghanistan rebuild. Iran's need to stabilize Afghanistan as soon as possible, or to ease the pressure on its own economy by allowing Afghan refugees in Iran to return to Afghanistan as soon as possible, also has to help Afghanistan's economy recover. From November 15, 2022, Taliban Minister of Commerce and Industry Nuruddin Aziz and Iranian envoy Hasan Kazemi Qomi discussed the opportunity to launch a private sector dialogue to better coordinate joint projects. They also noted the need to increase Afghan exports to Iran, facilitate the transit and trade of goods through Chabahar port, and expand Iranian investment in Afghanistan.[23] It seems to be only a dialogue between the political leaders of the two countries, but it is not difficult to see that the purpose of both countries is to coax their neighboring countries in order to stabilize their surrounding environment and achieve rapid development of their domestic economic construction. That would be a good start for both economies. Hassan Kazemi Qomi, Iran's new ambassador to Afghanistan mentioned above, told Taliban Mining and Petroleum Minister Shahabuddin Delawar on February 14, 2023, that Iran wanted to establish a joint free economic zone across the border, with the goal of creating jobs for the people of both countries and improving exports and imports.[24] Since Iran has

played a role in Afghanistan's political reconstruction, economic cooperation between the two countries has also increased. Regardless of whether these projects have made any real progress, Iran's actions have sent a signal to its businessmen that there are plenty of opportunities in Afghanistan. Such signals promote positive cooperation between businessmen of the two countries and bring simultaneous benefits for the development of both countries. It also expresses Iran's attitude towards the Afghan Taliban to the nations of the world and provides impetus for the development and recognition of the Taliban.

Where we can see substantial progress between the two countries is the trial operation of the first train between Iran and Afghanistan on the Herat-Haf railway on May 9, 2023.[25] The train was carrying more than 600 tons of cargo, including supplies and equipment for the construction of The Haf-Herat railway line. At the same time, an Iranian delegation also arrived in Herat by rail on the same day to discuss rail transport issues.[26] The opening of the railway will give Afghanistan easy access to Iranian ports at Chabahar and Bandar Abbas. Iran also said that it is building Chabahar port and will continue to build the port's infrastructure, land and sea transport routes and road projects such as Mahjund Farah to help Afghanistan improve transportation conditions.[27] In fact, the special geographical location of Afghanistan is its development advantage and disadvantage. Afghanistan itself is mountainous and underdeveloped, which restricts its development. Moreover, due to its unique strategic location, it often becomes the strategic target of other countries and falls into the war, lacking the right conditions for development. Deep in the interior of South Asia, coastal trade can only depend on countries such as Iran and Pakistan. The opening of the Herat-Haf railway is therefore crucial for Afghanistan, both in terms of trade and transport. In addition, the April 2022 Tunxi Initiative of Afghanistan's Neighbors in Support of Afghanistan's Economic Reconstruction and Practical Cooperation shows that Iran is providing substantial assistance to Afghanistan in many areas. In the field of humanitarian assistance, Iran has provided more than 30 batches of food, medicine, health supplies and other humanitarian assistance to people in various parts of Afghanistan, and is coordinating with Afghanistan to deliver more aid. In the economic and trade field, Iran has expanded bilateral economic and trade exchanges through various channels such as the development of border trade markets, and continued to remove trade obstacles between the two countries through various means such as negotiating with Afghanistan to reduce the existing tariff level. Iran also expressed its willingness to assist Afghanistan in the exploration and exploitation of mineral resources in many areas, including the border areas between the two countries, and to provide corresponding technical assistance and joint investment in Afghanistan. [28] We can also see the efforts of the Taliban government in these two years. But it can also be seen that the efforts of Afghans alone are very slow to develop. Afghanistan has had to enlist the help of countries such as Iran. When international humanitarian aid funding was not forthcoming, and even the threat of aid money was used to try to change the ban on women imposed by the Taliban government in Afghanistan. That makes it all the more important for Iran to help in all aspects of Afghanistan's reconstruction. It is clear that both the political and economic reconstruction of Afghanistan will have to mention Iran's role in it. Judging from the comparison between Afghanistan's own efforts and Iran's help, it is only when Afghanistan finds its own development path that its own economic development can become more viable. But this development is very slow and does not fit the current situation in Afghanistan. Perhaps with the help of external forces, it is more suitable for Afghanistan to explore its own development path while developing.

Iranian factors in cultural reconstruction in Afghanistan

Iran shares the Islamic faith with Afghanistan but belongs to different strains of Islam. Iran is Shia, Afghanistan is Sunni. The two factions are hostile, which has led to frequent clashes between the two countries. On August 19, 2021, Taliban security officials visited the Shia mosque in Kabul to participate in Ashura mourning and delivered a speech apologizing for the actions of some Taliban personnel, saying that the Taliban did not want to offend Shia brothers and wanted everyone to live in the city like brothers. Stressing that no one has the right to interfere in the religious activities of any sect in Afghanistan from now on.[29] Changing attitudes toward Shias is partly a way of letting go of stereotypes about the different cultures of the same sect. The conflict of religious beliefs has been one of the main causes of the internal struggle in Afghanistan and the persecution of the Hazara people in Afghanistan. The struggle between Shiites and Sunnis has been primarily about who is the true successor to Islam. If the Taliban government can do what it says: "want everyone to live like brothers in this city", then the restoration of stability in the country will help the Taliban government strengthen the national cohesion.

It is not just the treatment of minorities that has made the Taliban government notorious. The ban on women imposed by the Taliban government has been condemned by many countries. Countries are even trying to leverage humanitarian aid funds against the Taliban government's ban on women. The Taliban government has long banned female education, but about 500 Afghan female refugee teachers have been accredited and trained in Iran.[30] The goal is to provide Afghan women with the skills and knowledge they need, provide quality learning for displaced Afghan children living in Iran, and ensure that they continue their education until they can return to regular schools. The quality education and support provided by these highly trained teachers will indirectly benefit around 9,000 primary school students in Iran.[31] In addition, there are plenty of exceptions to the Taliban's ban on girls' education: some provincial authorities ignore the ban, and the provision of after-school tuition is often ignored. The survey found that the percentage of girls between the ages

of 13 and 18 enrolled in school fell from 23 percent before Taliban rule to 13 percent after, and did not fall to zero as the ban implied. The Taliban also allowed thousands of girls to take university entrance exams in the fall of 2022, as universities continue to teach women.[32] Enforcement of the Taliban ban has been softened by international humanitarian calls and calls from countries such as Iran. For example, girls' secondary schools in six to nine of Afghanistan's 34 provinces have gradually reopened since the 18 September decree.[33] Perhaps these changes by the Taliban government are not enough by international standards. But if the history of the Taliban government is anything to go by, it is at least a crucial first step. If the Taliban government were as strict as the ban implies, the proportion of girls in school would not be 13 per cent. These girls are also unlikely to have the opportunity to take exams, even after the decree was issued to reopen girls' secondary schools. Although the Afghan female teachers were given the right to train and work in Iran, the female teachers themselves are Afghans, and most of the students she teaches are Afghan, and some are Iranian children. The knowledge and culture that these Iranian children have learned from their Afghan female teachers has the potential to influence Iranians. It will also affect the cultural exchanges between the two countries. These female Afghan teachers may one day return to their homeland. Iran, for its part, plans to accept more female students from Afghanistan while it wants the Taliban government to guarantee women's right to education.[34] It may seem that Iran has not made any real progress in changing the education of women in Afghanistan. However, it can be seen that Iran has done everything within its power to ensure the right to education of Afghan women in Iran. To a certain extent, it also has a positive impact on the development of Afghanistan. Afghan women who have been educated in Iran have a certain amount of knowledge that will be more helpful to Afghanistan's development when they return to Afghanistan than Afghans who are not educated at home.

Not to mention the impact of these female teachers. The fact that girls continue to attend school suggests that the Taliban's ban on female education may also be softening. Cultural construction is not as immediately visible as political and economic construction is in Iran's support for the Taliban in Afghanistan. Cultural construction is a work that takes a long time to produce results, and whether it is effective needs to wait for time and the world to slowly test it. The thinking of the leaders of the Taliban government in Afghanistan has been shaped over a long period of time by environmental and other influences, although the international community has been calling on the Taliban government to change its attitude toward women and minorities and urge it to build an inclusive government. Just as bad habits are not formed in a day, they can't be broken in a day either. As for the Taliban government, change is likely to be slow. We need to give them time. Considering Iran's role in the reconstruction of Afghanistan, it has played a certain role in promoting political and economic construction. On both fronts, the two countries have made some substantial progress. It is very valuable for Iran to help Afghanistan in such a difficult time. Even so, Iran is unlikely to be entirely altruistic in Afghanistan's reconstruction. And it's not just the Afghan government that benefits.

Results and Discussion

Iran's role in Afghanistan's political reconstruction, economic reconstruction and cultural reconstruction is very large. There is much that the Taliban in Afghanistan are not doing right now. For example, the culture of women's education and work has not changed much. But his willingness to make concessions to the feuding Shias suggests that all this may change in the future. Other regimes, large and small, exist in Afghanistan, but there is no suitable force to confront the Taliban. At present, it is a foregone conclusion that the Taliban will take power in Afghanistan, if the Taliban does not follow the old path, but can change its way of governing on the basis of history, establish an inclusive government and change its attitude towards women, and correct its ideological mistakes. It is also possible for the Taliban government to change the international situation against it and gain international recognition. And Iran's desire for a stable neighbor is achievable. To sum up, while Iran's reconstruction work in Afghanistan is having an effect, it should not be blindly optimistic that Iran will take a big step in the reconstruction work in Afghanistan in the future. Some of the things mentioned in this article simply indicate that Iran is sending a signal that it wants to cooperate. But Iran and Afghanistan have other problems of their own, so the extent of Iran's involvement in Afghanistan's reconstruction remains to be seen. Of course, there is no denying that these friendly signals from Iran are now crucial to the development of the Taliban government in Afghanistan.

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