



საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობების კვლევის ფონდი
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**The Interests of Turkey and Iran in Afghanistan:
Threats and Challenges**


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In the summer of 2021, as the U.S. withdrew from Afghanistan, the balance of power in the country changed rapidly, and by August 15, the Taliban was able to capture the capital, Kabul, almost without a fight.¹

On September 7, the Taliban formed a new "government" steered by Sharia Law.² The Taliban also renamed the country, and, according to them, Afghanistan is now called the "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan."³ There are no women or members of the Shiite minority in the new government.⁴ Of the 33 members of the still-incomplete government, only three belong to ethnic minorities.



SEEKING INFORMATION

SIRAJUDDIN HAQQANI

DESCRIPTION

Aliases: Siraj, Khalifa, Mohammad Siraj, Sarajadin, Cirodjiddin, Seraj, Arkani, Khalifa (Boss) Shahib, Halifa, Ahmed Zia, Sirajuddin Jallaloudine Haqqani, Siraj Haqqani, Serajuddin Haqqani, Siraj Haqqani, Saraj Haqqani	
Date(s) of Birth Used: Circa 1973 - 1980	Place of Birth: Afghanistan/Pakistan
Hair: Black	Eyes: Brown or Black
Height: 5'7"	Weight: 150 pounds
Build: Medium	Complexion: Light with wrinkles
Sex: Male	Citizenship: Unknown
Languages: Arabic	Scars and Marks: None known

REWARD

The Rewards For Justice Program, United States Department of State, is offering a reward of up to \$5 million for information leading directly to the arrest of Sirajuddin Haqqani.

Sirajuddin Haqqani, wanted by the FBI

¹ The Taliban are back - what next for Afghanistan? <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-49192495>

² Afghanistan: Taliban announce new caretaker government, <https://www.dw.com/en/afghanistan-taliban-announce-new-caretaker-government/a-59113329>

³ Taliban announces new government in Afghanistan, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/9/7/taliban-announce-acting-ministers-of-new-government>

⁴ Yaroslav Trofimov, Taliban Unveil New Afghan Government, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/taliban-crack-down-on-protest-led-by-women-in-kabul-11631014019>

Interestingly, the four new "ministers" of the country are former inmates of Guantanamo Bay, having served time there for organizing terrorist activities. Sirajuddin Haqqani, the "Minister of Internal Affairs" of the new "government" of Afghanistan, is still wanted by the FBI on the same charges. A reward of \$5 million is being offered for his capture.⁵

There is already the threat of a humanitarian catastrophe (food shortages), and instability (internal strife) in Afghanistan. Tens of thousands of Afghans are fleeing their homes, many of them heading to Iran and Turkey. This poses a number of threats and challenges to these countries, especially since they have their own interests in Afghanistan.

Interests, threats and challenges – Turkey

As Turkey began to pursue an active and ambitious foreign policy, its areas of interest began to extend not only to its immediate neighborhood, but also as far away as Afghanistan.

Ankara aims first and foremost to create a stable situation in Afghanistan⁶ to prevent new influxes of refugees into the country.

There are still millions of Syrian refugees in Turkey, posing a number of additional problems to a country already facing economic hardship. The influx of Syrian refugees has already cost the state \$40 billion; crime has increased, as has human and drug trafficking; illegal employment increased, precipitating the loss of jobs for Turkish citizens; anti-government and nationalist sentiments are on the rise; radical religious tendencies are gaining ground; cases of involvement in terrorist organizations have increased; the demographic picture has changed in many regions, and more.

In addition to the Syrians, there are between 200,000 and 600,000 Afghan refugees already living in Turkey.⁷ The exact number cannot be determined, as most of the refugees are there illegally. It is also a fact that, as the Taliban occupied new territories in Afghanistan, the number of Afghan refugees in Turkey increased even more. Recently, between 500 and 2,000 refugees have been crossing the Iran-Turkish border illegally every day.⁸

⁵ Taliban name all-male Afghan cabinet, including minister wanted by FBI, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/sep/07/taliban-name-afghanists-new-government>

⁶ Turkey has an interest in stabilizing Afghanistan - former Canadian attaché, <https://ahvalnews.com/turkey-afghanistan/turkey-has-interest-stabilising-afghanistan-former-canadian-attache>

⁷ Afghan refugees are reaching Turkey in greater numbers, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2021/07/31/afghan-refugees-are-reaching-turkey-in-greater-numbers>

⁸ Dorian Jones, Turkey Faces Dilemma as Afghan Refugees Start Arriving, <https://www.voanews.com/europe/turkey-faces-dilemma-afghan-refugees-start-arriving>



In just one day, 300 illegal Afghan refugees were detained in Turkey, who were being transported from the eastern part of the country to the west by truck.

Although, for many Afghans, the ultimate goal is to reach Europe, naturally, most of them fail to do so, and instead try to establish themselves in Turkey.⁹ This results in the same problems mentioned vis-à-vis the Syrian refugees.

In response, Ankara, with the financial assistance of the European Union, began the construction of a so-called “security wall” along the Iran-Turkish state border and strengthened the border guard force.¹⁰ However, the example of the wall built on the Turkish-Syrian border illustrates that it will likely only partially solve the problem: Following its construction, aimed at preventing illegal border-crossings, a number of new alternatives to overcoming the obstacle swiftly emerged (stairs, tunnels, bribing the border guards, etc.). In other words, the problem persists.

⁹ Metin Gurcan, Afghan refugee influx stokes tensions in Turkey, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/07/afghan-refugee-influx-stokes-tensions-turkey>

¹⁰ Metin Gurcan, Afghan refugee influx stokes tensions in Turkey, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/07/afghan-refugee-influx-stokes-tensions-turkey>



Construction of a so-called "security wall" along the Turkish-Iranian border

It is expected that in the event of instability and continued economic hardship, more of the 40 million population of Afghanistan will leave the country (N.B. the population of Afghanistan was only 20 million in 2000, meaning the country's population has doubled in the last twenty years as a result of a demographic boom),¹¹ creating more problems for neighboring countries and Europe.

The EU has taken into account the prospect of such a scenario and has indicated to the Turkish authorities that it will make material assistance available, provided that Afghan refugees remain in Turkey and are not allowed to cross into Europe (a similar agreement on Syrian refugees was signed in 2016 between the EU and Turkey).¹²

¹¹ <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/afghanistan-population/>

¹² Afgan sığınmacıları AB'den uzak tutması için Türkiye'ye 'para yardımı' planı, <https://ahvalnews.com/tr/afghanistan/afgan-siginmacilari-abden-uzak-tutmasi-icin-turkiyeye-para-yardimi-plani>

However, anti-immigration sentiments are strong in Turkey. Many citizens believe that migrants deprive them of jobs. Therefore, in the run-up to the 2023 elections, the Turkish authorities are openly declaring that they will no longer accept new refugees.¹³

Another issue of concern for Ankara related to Afghanistan is the possible management of Kabul Airport by the Turkish side.

As early as June 14, 2021, during the Biden-Erdogan meeting within the framework of the NATO Summit in Brussels, the Turkish side expressed its readiness to ensure the security of Kabul Airport with its own armed forces after the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan.¹⁴

By taking control of Kabul Airport, Turkey would gain access to the air route connecting Afghanistan and its government to the outside world, which would be a serious leverage for Ankara to strengthen its influence.

At the same time, by establishing control over Kabul Airport, Ankara wants to become a "useful" partner for Washington, with which it had accumulated many problems recently (Ankara's purchase of Russian-made S-400s and Washington's imposed sanctions over it; Washington's recognition of the Armenian genocide; differences on the issues of Syria, Iran, Israel, etc.). As such, this opportunity would give some positive impetus to the bilateral relations.

At first, the Taliban categorically opposed the idea of Turkish control of Kabul Airport.¹⁵ However, in early September, the organization's spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid said that they were working with the representatives of Turkey and Qatar so as to resume operations at the airport.¹⁶ Naturally, the Taliban requires connection with the outside world, but without the necessary technical knowledge to operate an airport, they thus require foreign help to do so.

Moreover, according to the publication *Middle East Eye*, a Turkish technical group is already on the ground. The Turkish specialists arrived at Kabul Airport on September 1 and have already started working. According to the same publication, a Turkish security group is providing them the necessary protection.¹⁷

In the current situation, many in Turkey believe that Ankara's ambition to establish control over Kabul Airport poses serious risks, the main one being security issues. A terrorist strike

¹³ Turkish people reject Afghan refugees after Taliban takeover, <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/34668/turkish-people-reject-afghan-refugees-after-taliban-takeover>

¹⁴ Zurab Batiashvili, "How did the Biden-Erdogan meeting end?", <https://www.gfsis.org/ge/publications/view/2987>

¹⁵ Zurab Batiashvili, "How did the Biden-Erdogan meeting end?", <https://www.gfsis.org/ge/publications/view/2987>

¹⁶ Afghanistan: Turkish technical team begins work at Kabul airport, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/afghanistan-turkey-kabul-airport-technical-team-work-begins>

¹⁷ Afghanistan: Turkish technical team begins work at Kabul airport, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/afghanistan-turkey-kabul-airport-technical-team-work-begins>

near Kabul Airport on August 26, by terrorist group IS-K, affiliated with the so-called “Islamic State”, illustrates that a serious vacuum of governance has been created in Afghanistan, which can be easily exploited by various terrorist groups targeting foreign military troops (more than 170 people, including 13 American soldiers, were killed in this terrorist strike¹⁸).

The airport is actually located in the city center, and, therefore, is easily accessible to terrorists. Neutralization of the threat is possible only with full control of the city of 4.6 million, which Turkey is not able to do.

No less important is the international context. Turkey has pragmatic cooperation with Russia, China, Iran, India, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan. These countries will not openly oppose the aforementioned aspiration of Turkey. However, it is clear that some of them will be dissatisfied with the prospect of strengthening Turkey's positions in the region.

Logistical issues are also important to consider. The distance from Ankara to Kabul is 2690 km.¹⁹ In case of an emergency, in which the Turkish military contingent in Afghanistan may find itself, this distance can be covered in a few hours. However, Iran's position, which is situated between the two countries, is still unclear. If Tehran does not open its airspace to Turkey, getting to Kabul Airport will be much more costly and time consuming.

Since the Kabul Airport control mission carries quite serious risks, there are some speculations that Turkey could send jihadist fighters of the Syrian opposition to Afghanistan, as it did in the case of Libya.²⁰ However, such a decision may provoke a negative reaction from the international community.

Interests, threats and challenges – Iran

Tehran has always closely monitored the ongoing military-political processes in neighboring Afghanistan. It is in Iran's vital interests to protect the rights of the several million Shiite minority (mostly ethnic Khazars) living in Afghanistan, who are often harassed by the Sunni Taliban,²¹ as well as to maintain and deepen trade relations. Iran has long been the number one trading partner for Afghanistan,²² and this fact is important for Iran, which is being constrained by tough economic sanctions.

¹⁸ Afghanistan: US drone strike 'eliminates airport bomb threat', <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58372458>

¹⁹ <https://www.distance.to/Kabul/Ankara>

²⁰ Fehim Tastekin, Will Turkey use Syrian mercenaries in Kabul?, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/07/turkey-likely-use-syrian-mercenaries-kabul>

²¹ Bobby Ghosh, No Joy for Iran Over the Taliban Romp Next Door, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2021-07-11/iran-knows-the-triumphant-taliban-in-afghanistan-will-not-be-good-neighbors>

²² <https://wits.worldbank.org/countrysnapshot/en/AFG/textview>

To achieve these goals, it is necessary to maintain stability in Afghanistan, as any unrest almost automatically leads to a new influx of refugees into Iran²³ and a reduction in bilateral trade.

As the Taliban acquired power, Iran sent additional manpower and military equipment to the Afghan border, which has a total length of 945 km. However, this had little effect on the influx of Afghan refugees.²⁴

There are already more than 3 million Afghan migrants living in Iran, whose stay is associated with large sums of money.²⁵ This issue is highly sensitive, as there are already serious problems in the Iranian economy as a result of the sanctions. And the economic problems, as the experience of previous years shows, have repeatedly resulted in political protests.

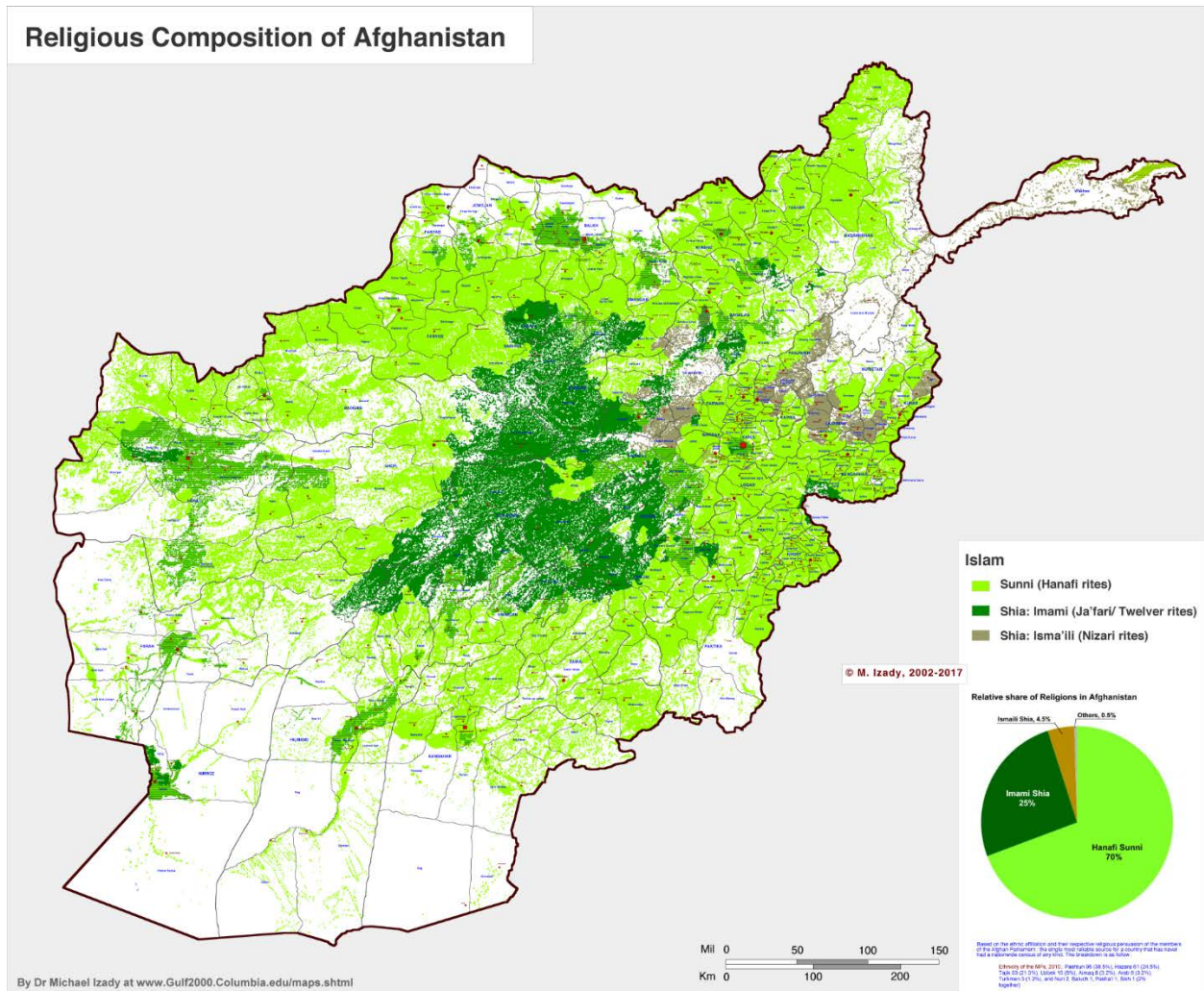
Tehran is also worried about an expected increase in Afghan opium inflows into the country, which has been one of the Taliban's main sources of revenue for years. Afghans could increase its production amid the deteriorating economic situation. It is noteworthy that despite the strict measures taken by Tehran, Iran has one of the leading positions in the world in terms of citizens addicted to the drug.²⁶

²³ Farzin Nadimi, Iran Sets Its Eyes on Afghanistan, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iran-sets-its-eyes-afghanistan>

²⁴ Farzin Nadimi, Iran Sets Its Eyes on Afghanistan, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iran-sets-its-eyes-afghanistan>

²⁵ Iran and Russia move to fill diplomatic vacuum in Afghanistan, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jul/09/iran-and-russia-move-to-fill-diplomatic-vacuum-in-afghanistan>

²⁶ Bobby Ghosh, No Joy for Iran Over the Taliban Romp Next Door, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2021-07-11/iran-knows-the-triumphant-taliban-in-afghanistan-will-not-be-good-neighbors>



A map depicting religious groups in Afghanistan. Areas inhabited by Shiites are marked in dark green

The stability of Afghanistan has always been a priority for Tehran. This is also evident from the fact that, unlike in Iraq and Syria, pro-Iranian forces have never attacked US military bases in Afghanistan.²⁷

It is noteworthy that Iran was monitoring the Taliban's rise in Afghanistan and attempted to initiate negotiations as early as the summer of 2021. On July 7-8, 2021, the Iranian Foreign Ministry hosted delegations from the then-Afghan government and the Taliban in order to

²⁷ Ruslan Trad, For Iran, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan is a problem, <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/analysis/iran-us-withdrawal-afghanistan-problem>

prepare the ground for reaching an agreement on certain issues. However, this meeting did not yield any real results.²⁸

In September, it became clear that the gap between Tehran and the Taliban had grown significantly wider. Iran was irritated by the strengthening of Sunni Pakistani positions in Afghanistan, which was most clearly manifested in the refusal to include Shiites in the process of forming a new "government". Official Tehran has already expressed dissatisfaction with this fact²⁹ as well as with Pakistan's participation in the attack on the defiant Panjshir Valley.³⁰

As relations deteriorate, some form of military intervention by Iran cannot be ruled out. But in such a case, most likely, the priority will be not a direct military intervention, but rather a fight through so-called proxies (local proponents). Tehran uses such forces in Syria, where units comprised of Afghan refugees living in Iran actively fight to strengthen its positions.³¹ Indications of a similar military intervention in Afghanistan have already appeared in Tehran's pro-government media.³² It should also be noted that Iran used such tactics during the previous wars in Afghanistan.

Conclusions

- Amidst the wrestling of interests between local and foreign forces in Afghanistan, there is no general agreement amongst the parties on almost any issue. This creates a volatile situation, which is a precondition for even more instability. Such a situation, in turn, further increases the threats and challenges for both Afghanistan and its neighboring countries;
- It is clear that Afghanistan will not stabilize any time soon, and this process will be delayed, creating a threat of the migration of even more people;
- The problem of Afghan refugees will become even more urgent for Turkey and Iran, as well as for Europe;
- In case of an influx of refugees, problems will increase in these countries, including a possible increase in crime rates, trafficking, drug trafficking, illegal employment,

²⁸ Afghan gov't delegation meets Taliban in Iran, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/7/8/afghan-govt-delegation-meets-taliban-in-iran>

²⁹ Iran slams Taliban government formation in Afghanistan, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/iran-slams-taliban-government-formation-in-afghanistan/2359024>

³⁰ Iran strongly condemns recent attacks on Panjshir, <https://en.isna.ir/news/1400061510904/Iran-strongly-condemns-recent-attacks-on-Panjshir>

³¹ Bobby Ghosh, No Joy for Iran Over the Taliban Romp Next Door, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2021-07-11/iran-knows-the-triumphant-taliban-in-afghanistan-will-not-be-good-neighbors>

³² Afghanistan condemns Iranian claim that a pro-Shiite group is formed, <https://iranintl.com/en/world/afghanistan-condemns-iranian-claim-pro-shiite-group-formed>

- nationalistic and anti-government sentiments, activities of terrorist organizations, radical religious sentiments in society, etc.;
- Iran and Turkey have their own interests in Afghanistan and they will try to maximize a favorable outcome, including through deals with other countries as well as with the Taliban. However, much will depend on the situation in Afghanistan itself;
 - In the near future, we may see a new regrouping of countries interested in Afghanistan. At this stage, outlines of an Iran-India-Tajikistan (possibly Russia) alliance are emerging, along with a Taliban-Pakistan-China-Turkey-Qatar alliance. However, this configuration may change in the future);
 - At this stage, Georgia is not a priority country for Afghan refugees heading to the west (Iran-Turkey-Europe). However, if they are met with an unfavorable situation in Turkey and Iran, Georgia may be considered as one of the alternatives;
 - The reinvigoration of radical religious sentiments and ideologies may also become problematic. As the case of Syria has shown, these issues have the potential to spread to Georgia as well;
 - It is expected that along with the strengthening of the Taliban in Afghanistan, international drug trafficking will intensify, and this problem will become relevant not only for its immediate neighbors, but also for relatively distant countries, including Georgia.