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Middle East Protagonists and Power Shifts in Afghanistan

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Abstract

The political developments in Afghanistan over the past decades have clearly revealed the link between this country's internal order and the key security agendas in the Middle East. U.S. and coalition forces attacks on Afghanistan to oust the Taliban and advance state-building via the Bonn Agreement have resulted in relative political stability in Afghanistan, which lasted until 2021. The 2021 Doha Agreement between the US and the Taliban on the one hand and the Taliban and new emerging Post-Arab Uprising Middle Eastern powers on the other hand paved the way for the Taliban's return to power. So, A key question concerns the relationship between power relations within the Middle East regional order and Afghanistan's internal developments. The hypothesis holds that the role of the Middle East's major powers in Afghanistan's domestic affairs is largely shaped by the regional balance of power and directed toward mutual containment. Afghanistan's internal developments appear to be profoundly influenced by regional and transregional power relations. This study will examine the relationship between the internal developments in Afghanistan and the regional order in the Post-Arab Uprising Middle East. Employing an analytical-descriptive method and grounded in balance-of-power theory, the study examines the link between Afghanistan's internal developments and the Middle East regional order.

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Afghanistan, security, regional order, Middle East, balance of power.

Introduction

Over the past four decades, international actors have directly or indirectly influenced Afghanistan. Afghanistan's political geography was significantly impacted by the former Soviet Union's 1979 Red Army invasion, which aimed to support the ruling communist government and led to conflicts between international and regional powers. Afghanistan has since played a crucial role in global changes. The presence and negative actions of major international and regional powers resulted in a decade of violent conflict, reflecting the Cold War competition between the Eastern and Western blocs. This conflict came to an end when Mikhail Gorbachev ordered the withdrawal of Soviet forces on February 15, 1989. Following the collapse of Dr. Mohammad Najibullah Ahmadzai's government, a civil war erupted in Afghanistan. Despite the internal struggles, the victorious faction, Mujahedeen, failed to establish a stable and inclusive government accepted by all parties (Samad, 2023: 416-7; Hakimi & Price, 2022).

The Taliban first seized power in Afghanistan between 1996 and 2001, exploiting state inefficiencies, a power vacuum, and the support of foreign states such as Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and the United Arab Emirates. Although this government effectively controlled most of Afghanistan, it was not recognized by the United Nations. However, after the 9/11 attacks by Al-Qaeda on the World Trade Center, the United States shifted its Middle East policy to the "War on Terrorism" and launched attacks on Afghanistan with coalition forces in October. Following the collapse of the Taliban government due to US and coalition attacks, a transitional government was established through the Bonn Agreement, with the participation of all political groups in Afghanistan. With the support of prominent international and regional actors, this government remained in power for two decades (2001-2021). However, the inefficiency of the emerging modern Afghan government, ethnic conflicts, and terrorist activities by the Taliban and Al-Qaeda hindered the establishment of a strong and stable government within

the short twenty-year period. Eventually, major international and regional powers recognized that negotiating with and accepting the Taliban as part of Afghan politics was the solution for Afghanistan (Ahmed et al., 2021).

Intensive negotiations took place in Doha, Qatar, between US and Taliban leaders to bring peace to Afghanistan, although without an official representative from the Afghan government. An agreement was finally reached on February 29, 2020, mediated by Qatar. The agreement included three main clauses: the complete withdrawal of American and NATO forces from Afghanistan, the Taliban's commitment to halt Al-Qaeda activities in their controlled regions, and negotiations between the Taliban and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (IRA). This agreement, which also satisfied other international and regional actors such as Russia, China, Iran, and Pakistan, led to the collapse of the IRA and the Taliban's recapture of most Afghan territories, returning to power after two decades (Farhadi, 2023: 2). These brief remarks clearly indicate that the Taliban could not have returned to power in 2021 without the agreement of international and regional powers. And the alteration of the power equation by regional and international actors paved the way for the Taliban's rise to power. Therefore, the main question concerns the relationship between emerging powers in the Middle East and Afghanistan's internal developments regarding the recognition of the Taliban as the primary actor in Afghanistan's domestic politics. This will be investigated according to every element of the modern Middle East order influenced by the Arab uprising and the balance of power theory.

1- Literature Review

A review of the literature shows that no independent study has thus far examined the role of the Middle East's great powers and the changing balance of power in Afghanistan in a manner that comprehensively examines the emerging Middle Eastern regional order within the context of Afghanistan's internal developments. Individually, however, several researchers have examined aspects of the Middle Eastern powers' role in Afghanistan's internal developments.

Among the works most closely related to the present study is Zvi Mazel's article "*After Afghanistan: The impact on the Middle East.*" Mazel explores the Taliban's relations with other Islamist groups, including the Palestinian movements Hamas and Islamic Jihad. After the Taliban regained control of Afghanistan, leaders of these groups contacted Taliban leaders to congratulate them on their victory over the United States, while the Taliban, in turn, stressed the need to end Israel's occupation of Palestine and voiced support for the Palestinian people. In Mazel's view, the Taliban's return to power has emboldened other Islamist groups. The article further discusses the cooperation extended to the Taliban by Iran, Qatar, Turkey, and others, underscoring the attention that Middle Eastern regional powers are directing toward Afghanistan (Mazel, 2023).

The article "*Saudi Arabia and Qatar are cooperating with the Taliban. But their approaches to Afghanistan are different.*" by Leonardo Jacopo and colleagues, argues that Saudi Arabia and Qatar have exerted substantial influence in Afghanistan following the Taliban's takeover. International terrorist organizations such as the Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP) have exploited the country's security vacuum and worsening humanitarian conditions to pose both direct and indirect security threats to the Arab countries bordering the Persian Gulf. Saudi Arabia, once entangled in the political complexities of its past support for al-Qaeda and the Taliban, has under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman shifted toward a more humanitarian approach. Qatar, by contrast, owing to its role in the Doha Agreement and favorable ties with the Taliban, has made significant contributions to the international community's evacuation of military personnel and their affiliates, thereby maintaining broadly positive relations with global actors. Qatar has thus pursued a diplomatic strategy in Afghanistan (Maria Mazzucco & Alexander, 2023).

Building on these observations, the present study aims to address an often-overlooked dimension of the issue: the relationship between Middle Eastern regional actors and the transfer of power in Afghanistan. The study's innovation

lies in its analysis of how major Middle Eastern regional powers—including Iran, Saudi Arabia–UAE, and Qatar–Turkey—have influenced Afghanistan’s internal developments (a country outside the Middle East), within the context of their competing hard-power strategies. The central research question concerns how the new poles of power in the Middle East relate to Afghanistan’s internal developments, particularly in light of the Taliban’s acceptance as the dominant political actor. This issue is examined through the lens of each constituent element of the emerging Middle Eastern order—shaped by the Arab uprisings—and analyzed within the framework of balance-of-power theory.

2- Power Redistribution in the Contemporary Middle East; Balance of Power

The inclination of protagonists in the region to align with the Taliban in the second round of seizing power was largely due to the key international players’ tendency to solve their problems with this group. In other words, great powers in the region figured out the situation in order to not lag behind other rivals and get along with the Taliban. This process occurred on two levels. First, they wanted to be a part of the major plane in which key international actors were leaders. Second, the new emerging power poles in the Post-Arab uprisings era sought power redistribution in the contemporary Middle East via the balance of power.

State behavior is a function of objective law rooted in human nature. According to the basic realism theory, the balance of power conception is heavily influenced by Hobbes’ ideas about human nature. He believes that human beings are thirsty for dominance, power, and glory. Individuals are only satisfied by long-term material possessions and have similar desires based on which they fight. Humans are instinctively selfish and could sacrifice others for their own survival. Since they need to be alive to do anything in the first place, survival is the primary concern for humans. Survival is the most important personal goal since it is the prerequisite for other purposes, and states behave according to this

principle (Mearsheimer, 2018, 8; Levy, 2004: 32). The balance of power system was developed to sustain trust and confidence in any state that, if it decides to invade, will face an invincible coalition. Morgenthau has presented one of the most influential theories of power balance based on the historical reconstruction of the three centuries between the Peace of Westphalia (1648) and the end of World War II (1945). His view is a land and strategy-oriented one that, like classic to late realists, is based on the conceptualization of power. He believes that the balance of power is based on two fundamental assumptions: First, the elements in need of balancing are essential for society or have a right to exist. Second, without balance, one element prevails over others, encroaches on their interests and rights, and may ultimately destroy and replace others. However, since the goal is to preserve as well as stabilize all elements in the system, the balance must be aimed at preventing one element from dominating others (Morgenthau & Thompson, 2014: 187).

Despite not being the primary actors, small powers can play a strategic role in the balance of power by cooperating in a buffer state's alliances, non-alliances, and neutrality. Large powers are the main threat to the survival of small states and are guided based on the balance of power theory. To adapt to the balance of the power system and survive, small powers should leave the contemporary political equation for large powers. The balance of power is based on the three famous principles of realism, namely 1) statism, or recognition of the state as the leading actor with an absolute internal rule; 2) survival, or trying to survive and provide security by any means necessary, and 3) self-help, or trying to ensure one's security without relying on others, even if it leads to the insecurity of others or security dilemmas (Lecomte, 2013: 2).

For most states, hierarchical political authority has been replaced by anarchy. Even rogue and inefficient states typically provide security to defend their populations' lives and property, and this, in turn, somehow reduces the pressure to replace international governance with the international state of nature. Therefore, it is expected that the international anarchy will continue regardless

of the strong tendency of states and their citizens toward independence (Donnelly, 2022: 23). Neorealism literature, represented by Waltz, Walt, and Mearsheimer, assumes the international system as a certain thing and considers the balance of power a mechanism to preserve this prefabricated world. However, none of them addresses how this order was created in the first place. On the contrary, Morgenthau and Bull looked at how international reality is constructed and how it changes over time. Moreover, they both agree that balance of power thinking has been historically crucial for creating and recreating the international order. However, understanding this role requires going beyond the concept of the international system and analyzing the concepts of the international society, cooperative security, and balance of power (Emmers, 2003: 1).

Given the intersectional nature of developments in Afghanistan, this research adopts a neo-realist perspective, emphasizing that power dynamics fundamentally shape states' political and security policies. This dimension of power often intersects with the interests of internal, regional, and international actors. Furthermore, understanding this dynamic necessitates an appreciation of ongoing developments and significant historical events, which elucidate how states continuously shape and reshape their policies. This paper thus aims to illuminate the relationship between the key historical event known as the Arab Spring and the developments in Afghanistan since 2001. By examining this relationship, the paper also seeks to provide a deeper understanding of how historical events influence state behavior and policy formation in a complex and interconnected geopolitical landscape, such as Afghanistan and the Middle East.

3- The Triple Axis of Regional Order in the Middle East Post-Arab Uprisings

Given the significant role of Middle Eastern states in the Taliban's resurgence to power, this section will introduce power dynamics in the Middle East by briefly discussing the characteristics of regional order over the last two decades.

Contrary to neorealism theorists, international order is not a concept that transcends history. In other words, it is not possible to provide a unified explanation of international order considering the anarchy that has existed throughout history. International orders develop, persist, and decline within the context of a major social structure. Due to numerous wars and revolutions following the First World War, the Middle East has seen various regional orders, the most recent of which corresponds to the period following the Arab uprisings (Lawson, 2021: 221; Dihstelloff & Lohse, 2020: 29; Kamrava, 2018: 5; Hinnebusch, 2014: 7-8).

Over the past two decades, two systems of order have emerged in the Middle East. Wars and revolutions mark the beginning and end of international orders, and a new phase of regional order began with the 2003 US and UK invasion of Iraq to remove the Saddam Hussein regime. This order focused on two power blocs, namely the Axis of Resistance and Pax Americana. With fundamentally different perspectives on life philosophy, these two blocs aimed to defeat each other and impose their ideal order. The Axis of Resistance included Iran, Iraq, Syria, and non-state actors such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Palestine. Led by the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) and still active today despite changes, this bloc aimed to establish a region free of foreign influences, actors loyal to Islamic ideology, and the liberation of Palestine from Israeli occupation. Meanwhile, the Pax Americana bloc comprised the United States, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, and small Persian Gulf countries. This bloc, indifferent to the role of Islamic doctrine in Muslim countries and unconcerned about Israel's occupation of Palestinian territory, aimed only to maintain a security balance with Iran through American support. Despite their support for the ideals of a Palestinian nation and opposition to Israeli occupation, Turkey and Qatar were allies of the Pax Americana bloc (Pala & Al-Jaber, 2022: 100).

The regional order has shifted since late 2010 and evolved into a triple order. This occurred when the crisis spread from North Africa into the Middle East, with the exception of Iran, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). As a

result, some actors (e.g., Egypt, Syria, and Iraq) were removed from the list of influential elements in the region due to the uprisings and replaced by others (e.g., Turkey, Qatar, and the UAE). This new order, sometimes referred to as the Trilateral Order, includes Iran, Saudi Arabia-UAE, and Turkey-Qatar. In this new scenario, Iran continues to pursue its previous agenda, with the exception that Iraq and Syria are no longer considered influential actors in Iran's regional objectives, while Ansarullah in Yemen is a relatively new non-state partner for Iran (Almahfali, 2022: 193; Orkaby, 2021: 6).

Despite their agreement on some issues, Saudi Arabia-UAE is another axis of the current regional order whose relations are marred by a few major differences. For example, they agree on Iran's security threats, the dangers posed by the empowerment of Islamists affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood in regional countries, and the suppression of any unrest in the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Aden. However, these countries have been at odds in recent years over issues such as the (mis)use of political Islam, boundary disputes, and viewing each other as potential regional political-economic rivals based on the ambitious plans of their young leaders in less than a decade (Mason, 2023: 90).

Finally, as the last emerging axis in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings, the Turkey-Qatar bloc has been developed to support Sunni Islam and Arab liberation movements. This bloc was formed in light of Turkey's assistance to Qatar between 2014 and 2017, when diplomatic connections between Gulf States and Qatar were suspended. In addition to providing food to Qatar during this embargo, Turkey sent forces and established a military base as the first step in forming a new bloc (Yeşilyurt & Yetim, 2020: 152). Despite their differences with Iran, these countries do not see Iran as a formidable enemy since they are united on two issues: the role of political Islam and the defense of Palestinian ideals. However, their primary differences lie with the Saudi-UAE axis, which are evident not only in their proxy war in Libya but also in countries destabilized by the Arab uprisings of the last decade (Jabbour, 2022: 8).

Note that these developments are also happening in a larger international context. Some indicators of regional order shifts in West Asia include the Saudi-

Iran rapprochement mediated by China, the UAE's refusal to sever ties with Iran and Syria at the request of the US, both actors, i.e., Saudi Arabia and the UAE, rejecting US oil policies in OPEC+, the history of conservative US actions regarding its reluctance to attack Syria due to the use of chemical weapons in the country, despite former US President Barack Obama's explicit declaration, and the withdrawal of US forces from the region over the last decade. In other words, the region will see less American presence and involvement, and China will likely have a more significant political-economic role in the future.

4- Triple Middle-Eastern Axes and the New Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan

This is a brief overview of the power structure in the Middle East following the Arab uprising. The relationship between any axis in the contemporary Middle East with the NIEA and its internal developments will be addressed separately below.

4-1- Iran

Iran has played a crucial role in Afghanistan's development as an independent regional actor. Due to their linguistic, racial, cultural, and historical commonalities, Iran significantly influences Afghanistan more than other prominent Middle-Eastern actors. As mentioned earlier, Iran reached an agreement with the Taliban upon the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan to establish a new regional order. This agreement was based on their shared hostility towards the US. Consequently, cooperation between the Taliban and the Iranian government, including the handover of the Afghan embassy to Taliban diplomats, marked a new chapter in their bilateral relations. Additionally, the Iranian government has collaborated with the Taliban to contain the rise of terrorism in Afghanistan, counter the emergence of ISIS as a potential threat to Iran's interests, and support Afghan Shias against ISIS attacks (Thomas, 2021: 25; Fathollah-Nejad & Azizi, 2021).

The National Resistance Front of Afghanistan (NRFA), which is essentially a remnant of the old Northern Alliance, has traditionally had a deeper

relationship with Iran due to linguistic and cultural connections. However, Iran sacrificed this relationship to gain advantages from governing the Taliban. When the Taliban captured significant portions of Afghanistan and eventually took over Kabul on August 15, 2021, the NRFA, led by Ahmad Massoud, declared war on the Taliban. Iran's role in the initial period of resistance in Afghanistan and its special relations with Ahmad Shah Massoud, the father of Ahmad Massoud, were expected to continue into the second period. Nonetheless, Iran facilitated a meeting between Ahmad Massoud and Amir Khan Muttaqi, the Taliban's foreign minister, in Tehran on January 10, 2022, but the parties failed to reach an agreement on forming a condominium. The handover of the Afghan embassy in Tehran to the Taliban strained Iran's relations with the NRFA. Subsequently, on February 27, 2023, the NRFA published a statement criticizing the Iranian government's strategy as potentially hazardous and openly hostile to Afghan culture, civilization, beliefs, values, and Afghan refugees in Iran (Ahmadi, 2023; Al-Monitor, 2023).

In August 2021, when the Taliban regained power in Afghanistan, Iran convened a regional conference with the foreign ministers of six countries bordering Afghanistan and Russia. At this conference, all parties agreed to work together to establish an inclusive government and promote peace and stability in Afghanistan. For over four decades, Iran's regional competitors have sought to undermine the IRI's interests by exploiting the security vacuum in Afghanistan. The regional rivalry between Middle Eastern actors in Afghanistan dates back to the 1980s when Iran and Saudi Arabia supported the Mujahedeen and later forces known as Al-Qaeda, respectively. This rivalry has persisted through their backing of preferred groups (Tadjbakhsh, 2013: 38; Steinberg & Woermer, 2013: 2).

Currently, the main internal Taliban factions are divided into two branches: the Kandaharis, led by Mullah Hibatullah and Mullah Baradar, and the Haqqanis, led by Sirajuddin Haqqani. Iran and Saudi Arabia are attempting to leverage this division for their own benefits due to the opposing strategies of these factions. While the Kandaharis are aligned with the Iranian government, the Haqqanis

branch is closely affiliated with Saudi Arabia. Former Iranian foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif invited Mullah Baradar to Tehran for negotiations on establishing an inclusive Afghan state and the withdrawal of American forces on January 31, 2021. Additionally, on April 12, 2023, in Samarkand, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian emphasized the importance of establishing an inclusive administration in Afghanistan during a meeting with the Taliban's Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi (Rahmati, 2023). This emphasis on shaping an inclusive government suggests that Iranian policymakers are concerned about the new administration in Afghanistan leaning towards its all-Sunni regional counterparts.

The recent visit of Abbas Araghchi, Iran's foreign minister, to Kabul signals a major shift in bilateral relations. The Iranian Foreign Ministry's spokesperson noted that this was the first minister-level meeting in years and has already yielded substantial progress. The two sides discussed key issues, including Iran's water rights from the Helmand River—which the Taliban pledged to honor—the status of Afghan migrants, and counter-terrorism efforts. Afghan officials expressed appreciation for Iran's decades of hospitality and underscored the need to resolve the problem of undocumented migrants. The economic delegation accompanying the minister also explored new avenues of economic cooperation (Islamic Republic News Agency, 2025). In a historic meeting with Afghan authorities, Araghchi emphasized expanding economic and cultural ties. This first visit by an Iranian foreign minister to Kabul in recent years may prove a watershed in bilateral relations. Both parties stressed leveraging their historical and cultural bonds to broaden relations, increase trade, and bolster regional security. The meeting occurs as both countries seek to consolidate good-neighborly relations and safeguard mutual interests (Amiri, 2025). Moreover, it can be argued that, in light of Bashar al-Assad's fall in Syria and Iran's "Look East" policy, Afghanistan has assumed greater importance in Tehran's strategic outlook.

Iran has adopted a conservative approach towards the Taliban. Despite

indirect border disputes between Iran and the Taliban, Iran continues to prioritize negotiations to prevent violence. This approach indicates that Iranian officials are cautious about avoiding an unforeseen conflict with the Taliban in the East. Iran's focus on water-related negotiations with the Taliban further underscores its diplomatic priorities. Despite fluctuations in tensions between the IRI and Western and regional countries over Iran's nuclear and missile programs, Tehran has refrained from engaging in conflicts along its eastern frontiers. Iran is wary of threats posed by ISIS and other terrorist groups in Afghanistan, as the current Afghan government's strategy involves leveraging such groups to improve relations with other countries (Lawson & Legrenzi, 2024: 1-2; Tookhy, 2022: 9). Generally, Iran views the Taliban as a means to achieve its regional goal of US withdrawal. While Iran has sought to establish contact with the current iteration of the Taliban, it aims to maintain a balance of power internally and internationally with other competitors as long as the Taliban does not compromise its national and regional interests. With recent Saudi-Iranian normalization mediated by China, regional security and stability could be achieved by recognizing the Taliban as an acceptable actor for all parties, including Iran.

According to balance-of-power theory in international relations, Iran—by adopting a cautious yet active stance toward Afghanistan—seeks to create a strategic equilibrium in the region. On the one hand, by drawing on historical and cultural commonalities with Afghanistan and maintaining ties with the Kandahari faction of the Taliban, Tehran aims to preserve its influence there; on the other, by organizing regional summits and engaging with actors such as Russia, it counters the influence of regional rivals like Saudi Arabia (which is linked to the Haqqani faction of the Taliban) and the Turkey–Qatar axis. Iran has wisely avoided direct confrontation with the Taliban and has emphasized diplomacy, for in its present situation—facing multiple international challenges—it cannot risk conflict along its eastern borders. This strategy reflects Tehran's effort to balance against security threats (such as ISIS) and regional rivalries, while using Afghanistan as a lever to pressure the United

States, advance its geopolitical objectives in West Asia, and underscore the resilience of the Islamic Resistance.

4-2- Saudi Arabia and the UAE

Due to their shared Arab identity and Iran-related security concerns, Saudi Arabia and the UAE cooperate in the new regional order. During the Taliban's first administration (1996-2001), Saudi Arabia, alongside the UAE and Pakistan, recognized the group. Nevertheless, it seems that the relationship between these actors and the Taliban has changed since the Taliban's return to power in 2021. Previously, the Taliban shared an ideological bloc with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, but the current Taliban's affiliation with Iran has led these countries to be wary of the group's intentions. It appears that the relationship between Saudi Arabia and the UAE with the Taliban within two rounds of taking over power results from the U.S. grand strategy toward Afghanistan (Mason, 2023: 125-139), which reveals the weakness of these actors claiming to be regional powers.

There are many clues for the weak presence of Saudi Arabia and the UAE after the Taliban's ascent to power in Afghanistan, some of which will be briefly introduced in the following. In the ensuing power transition, the Saudi government evacuated all of its diplomats from Afghanistan in August 2021, allowing only limited consular activities by returning some of the diplomats in November. Meanwhile, in early 2023, there were reports on the closure of the Saudi embassy in Afghanistan. This was due to terrorist threats on one hand, and major differences between the new Saudi rule and mainstream governance in Afghanistan on the other hand. The Saudi government is concerned about the emergence and revival of Al-Qaeda and extremism in Afghanistan. Since Saudi Arabia's crown prince attempts to portray a more moderate image of his country, Taliban policies such as human rights violations and barring women from education and careers have strained relations between Saudi Arabia and the Taliban government. Saudi Arabia has distanced itself from the Taliban by pursuing a semi-open anti-Taliban strategy. Riyadh attempted to follow a "leading from behind" policy in Afghanistan, owing to its leadership role in the

Organization of Islamic Cooperation and the Islamic Development Bank (Maria Mazzucco & Alexander, 2023).

Amir Khan Muttaqi, the Taliban's acting foreign minister, after meeting with Saudi Arabia's new ambassador in Kabul, described relations with Riyadh as "highly valuable" and stressed the need to expand cooperation and exchange delegations between the two countries. The meeting comes as Saudi Arabia, after a more than three-year suspension, has reopened its embassy in Kabul and resumed consular services and humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan. Afghan officials welcomed the move, calling it a step toward legitimizing the Taliban government and broadening diplomatic relations. Given the countries' historical and religious ties, cooperation could expand in areas such as the placement of Afghan workers in Saudi Arabia and Saudi investment in Afghanistan (Islami, 2025).

After the September 11 attacks, the presence of two Emirati nationals on the terrorist team and the replacement of the UAE's leader in the second half of 2000 altered the country's stance toward political Islam and its relations with such political movements. In this regard, UAE played a more prominent role than other Gulf States during the US coalition's 2001 attacks on Afghanistan, which weakened its relations with the new Taliban government. In negotiations with the Taliban coordinated with Saudi Arabia on August 11, 2021, the UAE proposed a power transition plan for Afghanistan, which was rejected by the Taliban. After the fall of Kabul in August 2021, the UAE granted Afghan ex-president Ashraf Ghani asylum. Nonetheless, this country strives to preserve its influence in Afghanistan to counteract other regional prominent actors' presence. The visits of Taliban Defense Minister Mullah Ya'qoob and Mullah Baradar to the UAE and the granting of contracts for the Kabul airfield to an Emirate company demonstrate the Taliban's concession to the UAE (Cornwell, 2022). It is consistent with the strategy of getting concessions from the Taliban in exchange for hosting Ashraf Ghani.

As the US continued to reduce its presence in West Asia, Saudi and Emirati governments considered the US drawdown from Afghanistan an essential step in

their isolation. During the transition in Afghanistan, the Saudis and UAE asked Pakistan to prevent Afghanistan from aligning with Iran in new regional dynamics or joining the Qatar-Turkey coalition. Pakistan acts as a buffer state between states located south of the Persian Gulf generally and Saudi Arabia specifically. The Saudis have never considered Pakistan's geopolitical dominance in Afghanistan as a threat, albeit the Saudi government's tendency towards India, Pakistan's arch-rival, has concerned Islamabad in recent years. The Saudi-Iranian rivalry in Afghanistan will undoubtedly force the Saudis and Emiratis to use Pakistan to manage their affairs (Cafiero, 2023).

As to the Taliban's internal power dynamics, the Haqqanis, a group affiliated with Saudi Arabia, have a minor role in the government. As mentioned earlier, the Kandaharis are more closely aligned with Iran than with Saudi Arabia. This situation and the internal split in the Taliban have raised the ire of the Saudi Arabia-UAE bloc since, unlike the first Taliban government (1996-2001), these countries have a lower hand in Afghanistan's domestic affairs. Alongside their failure in the Yemeni civil war and pushing their agenda to overthrow Bashar al-Assad in Syria, this situation has changed their larger orientation in the new Middle East order and led them to seek relations with China, Japan, and Russia to fill the void left by the US. All of these incidents have pushed the region into a new period.

Based on balance-of-power theory, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have adopted a cautious, strategically calculated approach toward the Taliban government. Having been principal supporters of the movement during its first rule (1996–2001), the two states have now distanced themselves somewhat owing to regional geopolitical shifts and security worries—including a potential revival of al-Qaeda and broader extremism. Saudi Arabia, while reopening its embassy in Kabul, pursues a policy of behind-the-scenes leadership through Islamic institutions and remains concerned about the consequences of granting the Taliban full legitimacy. The UAE, despite hosting Ashraf Ghani and making certain investments in Afghanistan, maintains a dual relationship with

the group. These behaviors indicate both countries' efforts to counterbalance the expanding influence of Iran—linked to the Kandahari faction of the Taliban—as well as Pakistan's role in Afghanistan. In addition, the enduring Saudi–Iranian rivalry has turned Afghanistan into an arena for indirect contestation. Pakistan serves as an intermediary, and Riyadh hopes thereby to prevent the Taliban from aligning fully with the Iran–Qatar–Turkey axis. Overall, the Saudi and Emirati stance blends caution, strategic patience, and diplomatic maneuvering, aimed ultimately at averting a shift in the balance of power that would favor regional rivals.

4-3- Turkey and Qatar

Turkey and Qatar are emerging regional actors that cooperate based on shared principles of Sunni Islam and support for liberation movements. After over a decade of interacting with various forces in Afghanistan, Qatar has taken significant steps toward creating diplomatic goodwill in the region. Doha played a regional role by acting as a mediator to third parties seeking a point of entry to Afghanistan. With much less political baggage than other Arab countries in the Persian Gulf basin, Qatar sees Afghanistan as a stepping stone. To promote its specific approach to diplomacy, it facilitated and hosted the US–Taliban negotiations that led to the Doha Agreement in 2020 and cooperated in the airlifting of thousands of foreign troops and civilians from Afghanistan in mid-2021. Qatar's cooperation with the Taliban started in 2013 with the establishment of a Taliban political office in Doha (Ulrichsen, 2014: 23-24; Khatib, 2013: 429). Qatar's essential role in Afghanistan has made some of its competitors concerned. The hacked emails of the Emirati ambassador to the United States, Yousef Al Otaiba, suggest that other actors, including the UAE, are envious of Qatar's role in this area. Qatar's Afghanistan policies have had different results, allowing this country to establish its position as a leading regional power and mediator. So far, Qatar's orientation toward the moderate political Islam of the Muslim Brotherhood has prevented it from obtaining major concessions from the Taliban. At the same time, after the Taliban seized Kabul, US forces were forced

to leave Afghanistan, and Qatar could not have a significant impact (Risch, 2022: 7-8).

Turkey has a long history of presence in Afghanistan. Over the last decade, Turkey started humanitarian acts such as building schools aimed at establishing a foothold for itself as a regional actor. In the meeting between the Turkish president and Taliban leaders after the power transition, this country's statespersons sought to continue the presence of their soldiers and diplomats in Afghanistan to mediate between the two parties as the representative of NATO. Given the Muslim Brotherhood tendencies governing its relations, Ankara has so far managed to influence the new political structure in Afghanistan as desired by aligning itself with the Taliban's moderate stances. As such, Turkey publicized its unofficial dialogue with Pakistan and the Taliban - likely to justify its relations with the Taliban to the Turkish public (Estelle et al., 2021:1-5).

Conversely, Turkey, by terminating the missions of diplomats appointed by Afghanistan's former government, has cleared the way for the Taliban to name its own representatives. Ankara announced that, despite the termination of the former diplomats' assignments, it will keep its embassy and consulates in Afghanistan operational. The Taliban described the change as routine diplomatic procedure (Fraser, 2025). These measures signal Turkey's decision to engage with the Taliban. Because Taliban opponents—among them Marshal Dostum and other members of the Supreme Council of Resistance—reside in Turkey, Ankara, like the UAE, leverages its relations with the movement to keep dissidents at a distance; in return, the Taliban government has allowed Turkish schools to operate in Afghanistan. Two days after the Afghanistan embassy in Iran was handed over to the Taliban, Turkey transferred Afghanistan's embassy and consulate in Istanbul to the Taliban while the Turkish embassy in Afghanistan was reopened. It seems Iran's initiatives made up Turkish politicians' minds about the Taliban administration. Based on these actions, Turkey has decided to work with the Taliban. Since the Taliban's opponents, such as Abdul Rashid Dostum and other members of the Supreme Resistance

Council, reside in Turkey, like the UAE, this government is seeking to get concessions from the Taliban for keeping their opponents away, such that the Taliban has allowed Turkish schools to continue in Afghanistan (Afghanistan International, 2023; Daily Sabah, 2022).

The developments following the Arab uprisings suggest that as a new emerging regional power, Turkey has defined an extensive list of interests with footprints in most countries bordering Iran. Turkey competes with Iran in Syria and Iraq and intervenes in the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh. With its military bases in Qatar and Kuwait, as well as, Turkey is present on the southern border of Iran. Ankara seems to be strengthening its presence in Afghanistan to completely surround Iran. Therefore, Turkey's Afghanistan policy is part of Turkish expansionism in the region. It is seeking to become a hegemon power and aims to stay in Afghanistan to develop its national interests while countering its other regional axes. However, due to their different views toward the role of political-social Islam in society and the relationship between their governance model with the modern world, Turkey and Qatar could hardly have the upper hand in current Afghanistan's domestic power relations.

Regarding the regional competition to influence post-Taliban Afghanistan, it is worth noting that after the failed Turkey-Qatar negotiations with the Taliban for managing and securing Kabul airport in 2022, the UAE had a network for influencing the Ministry of Foreign Affairs under the leadership of Sirajuddin Haqqani. The UAE obtained the license to manage and secure Kabul Airport without creating a contract reservation. Therefore, the UAE beat other competitors (Qatar and Turkey) in the contract to transfer the security of Kabul airport (Latifi, 2022; Krieg, 2022). In this regard, the Haqqani network's relationship with the Saudi Arabia-UAE bloc was very influential.

In line with balance-of-power theory in international relations—which emphasizes preventing any single actor from dominating others and advocates forming alliances to counter a prevailing power—Turkey and Qatar, as emerging regional players, have sought, through engagement with the Taliban and a diplomatic presence in Afghanistan, to balance larger regional powers such as

Iran and the Saudi Arabia–UAE axis. Drawing on diplomatic networks, mediating in international negotiations, and providing humanitarian assistance, the two states have attempted to carve out space in Afghanistan that both establishes them as regional intermediaries and curbs the growing influence of their rivals. Qatar, by hosting the Taliban–United States negotiations and offering mediation, has consolidated its position as an influential actor in Afghanistan, yet it has failed to secure major concessions from the Taliban. Turkey, for its part, by cautiously engaging with the Taliban and maintaining humanitarian and diplomatic missions, seeks to preserve its influence, act as NATO’s representative, and complete Iran’s geopolitical encirclement. Nevertheless, their failure to secure management of Kabul Airport in the face of Emirati advances, along with their limited access to power within the Taliban structure—dominated by factions aligned with the Iran and Saudi Arabia–UAE blocs—shows that, within this balance of power, Turkey and Qatar have not yet achieved a decisive role in Afghanistan; constraints arising from weak direct leverage over powerful local groups leave them in a comparatively disadvantaged position vis-à-vis their competitors.

Conclusion

Throughout history, Afghanistan's political regimes have experienced significant changes due to the influence and intervention of regional and international powers seeking to protect their interests and control their rivals. The country's geopolitical importance and vast natural resources have attracted attention from various actors. However, religious and ethnic conflicts, weak governance, and challenges in nation-building have led to instability and damage to Afghanistan's political and economic structures over the past four decades. This has created opportunities for regional and global powers to exploit the situation, as seen in the recent US withdrawal and the Taliban's return to power through political agreements with regional actors. Following the Arab uprising, key Middle Eastern players have sought to maintain a regional balance of power by engaging

with the new Afghan government. Individual countries like Iran, as well as regional coalitions such as Saudi Arabia-UAE and Turkey-Qatar, have established relations with the Taliban. These efforts aim to secure their interests and counter the influence of other regional powers. The power dynamics in the Middle East post-Arab Uprising have led to complex relationships between the NIEA and regional powers, with Iran showing more positive engagement with the Taliban compared to other actors. The Saudi Arabia-UAE axis has limited influence due to internal disagreements, while Qatar and Turkey are emerging as regional players hoping to build trust between the Taliban and the international community. Qatar's involvement in US-Taliban talks and the Doha peace treaty reflects its aspirations to become a regional power despite its size and population limitations. Overall, regional actors and international powers are cooperating to contain security threats in Afghanistan. The country's security vacuum has made it a breeding ground for terrorist groups, posing risks to major powers. Regional actors supporting the power transition in Afghanistan may be motivated by the Taliban's promises to combat terrorism and provide basic security. The international community's desire to shift responsibility for Afghan security to local actors reflects a shared goal of reducing the burden on global powers.

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