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Recent Developments between Afghanistan and the GCC States

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The Doha Agreement of 2020 was the result of Qatar-mediated negotiations between the United States and leaders of the Taliban. It led to an agreement on the withdrawal of U.S. troops in exchange for a guarantee that Afghanistan would not provide sanctuary to terrorist organizations and that the government would work to rebuild the country while preserving the basic human rights of the Afghan people.

Since then, the Taliban have reneged on many of their promises, particularly in terms of re-instituting harsh domestic laws and restrictions for its population. They have implemented authoritarian policies making it difficult for people to find work, access healthcare and education, heightening food insecurity, and reducing a majority of the population to poverty. The deteriorating situation is worsened by the leadership's inability to provide basic government services, lack of financial resources, and vast economic isolation.

In February 2022, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) held its first meeting with Afghanistan's de facto rulers, where the humanitarian crisis was the main issue. Although there are concerns about the future of the leadership in the country, the GCC states maintain a general consensus that it is for the benefit of the entire region that there be national reconciliation, secure and sovereign unity in Afghanistan, and that combatting terrorism and drug trafficking are of supreme importance.

In a statement issued by the Ministerial Council of the GCC on September 7, 2023, it was emphasized that "... [the importance of] restoring security and stability in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and reaching a consensual political solution that takes into account the interest of the Afghan people..." is an ongoing priority for the Council in strengthening joint Gulf action.

Political and Economic Cooperation

Since the takeover of power by the Taliban, only half of the GCC countries have offered any semblance of recognition for the Kabul leadership. In many ways, the Gulf countries seek to maintain peace out of security concerns that turmoil within the country could eventually spill over their borders. Additionally, the Gulf countries are focused on building their own national agendas and Visions, with little desire to become entangled in the political unrest that is going on in Afghanistan. It also behooves the Gulf states to maintain some degree of open channels of communication in order to protect security interests and humanitarian concerns.

Concerns about regional security are paramount to the hesitation to establish diplomatic ties with Afghanistan's de facto rulers. The misalignment with the human rights situation is a further obstacle that will need to be addressed before any type of proper diplomatic relationship can be built. The GCC is committed to supporting the peace-building effort through enhancing foreign aid and facilitating talks between the Taliban and other partners, like the U.S., but continues to stop short of offering formal recognition. Additionally, there are fears that extremist groups could use Afghanistan as a launch pad for committing terrorist attacks. Until that risk is mitigated by the Taliban leadership, there will continue to be a high degree of distrust that stands in the way of moving forward with building more concrete diplomatic ties.



In that context, Gulf states investment and trade with Afghanistan has primarily been in the form of humanitarian aid. During the Ministerial Meeting in Support of the Humanitarian Situation in Afghanistan, chaired by UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, UAE Minister of State Ahmed Ali Al Sayegh stated the country's pledge of \$50 million USD in humanitarian projects for Afghanistan focused on food supply, healthcare, housing, education, and sanitation sectors for women and children. Saudi Arabia announced its grant to the Afghanistan Humanitarian Trust Fund (AHTF) in June 2022, worth more than \$30 million with funds allocated for health, education, water, and food security. Director of Resources and Investment for King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief, Dr. Samer Al-Jetaily stated that the money would be given directly to the AHTF. Qatar has been providing relief aid to Afghanistan for years, but most recently the Qatar Charity and Qatar Red Crescent Society sent, in April 2023, 60 tons of educational materials, and humanitarian and food aid. As of December 2022, Kuwait had provided humanitarian aid to Afghanistan totaling over \$92 million. Oman and Bahrain offered support in many forms, including sending aid and supplies after the deadly earthquake that shook Afghanistan in 2022 and again in September and October 2023.

Outside of the humanitarian dimension, and in its attempt to gain legitimacy and to de-isolate itself from the rest of the world, the Taliban opened a bid to contract the operation of its Kabul airport, with Qatar, the UAE, and Turkey vying for the opportunity. Ultimately the UAE won the bid, securing a contract to fully run the airport, with a promise to employ Afghan nationals in the running of security and ground handling services. The contract was signed in March 2022 to manage ground handling at key airports in Afghanistan and in September 2022 between the Taliban and Abu Dhabi-based GAAC Solutions to provide flight services and manage plane landing and take-off.

Outlook

Though Qatar, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia have maintained a rather neutral position towards Afghanistan, they have yet to recognize the Taliban as a legitimate governing body. Qatar has been the staunchest advocate of dialogue with the Taliban for the sake of maintaining peaceful engagement. In a recent interview, Maed Al-Ansari, spokesperson for the Foreign Ministry of Qatar stated that "...we fully understand that the situation in Afghanistan is not easy for the international community to engage with...but complete isolation ...will not work." Yet since the Taliban takeover, many of the promises of the Doha Agreement have also been left unfulfilled. As a result, relations between Afghanistan and the GCC states remain ambivalent, a situation that is unlikely to change in the short term.

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