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A TALIBAN-IRAN THAW?

Relations between Shi'ite Iran and the Sunni Taliban have long been fraught, and the two-and-a-half years since the Islamist movement swept back to power in Kabul on the heels of a hasty U.S. withdrawal have been punctuated by tense border and political ties. But now, the two ideological rivals appear to be moving toward some form of rapprochement. The Taliban recently announced plans to invest around \$35 million in Iran's southeastern port of Chabahar in what amounts to a significant expansion of trade between Kabul and Tehran.

The new Iran-Taliban trade deal is part of a larger regional picture – one with significant strategic implications. Since the Taliban's return to power, international efforts to isolate the extreme Islamist movement have slowly started to give way to trade (and even political) normalization. Thus, last year, Afghanistan's trade with India surged by nearly 50%, to \$570 million, according to the World Bank. And China recently accepted the diplomatic credentials of the Taliban's official envoy to Beijing – becoming the first world power to formally do so.

All of this has resulted in another trend as well: a diminution of Taliban reliance on its traditional regional ally, Pakistan. Pakistani lawmakers estimate that bilateral trade with Afghanistan, which once hit a high of \$4 billion annually, now accounts for less than a quarter of that a year. It is a trend that India is eager to exploit. "As a competitor of Pakistan, India cooperates with any government in Kabul if its relations with Islamabad are tense," says Nasrullah Stanikzai, an Afghan political expert. (*Radio Azadi*, March 15, 2024)

ISRAEL'S OTHER PALESTINIAN PROBLEM

Israel's war against Hamas in the Gaza Strip, launched in the wake of the terror group's bloody October 7th assault on southern Israel, is now in its fifth month, and looks set to continue for some time to come. However, international calls for a strategic plan to manage Gaza on "the day after" the current conflict have steadily grown louder, and many parties – including the Biden administration – have floated the idea of the Palestinian Authority (PA), which currently runs the West Bank, extending its ambit over the Gaza Strip as well. For its part, Israel has signaled that such an option would not be acceptable absent major structural reform to the PA. A new expose by Israeli newspaper *Ma'ariv* provides a compelling reason for this rationale.

The *Ma'ariv* report, citing data from Israeli NGO "Regavim," outlines that every two weeks, on average, a member of the PA's official security apparatus has been involved in an incident of extremist violence directed at the State of Israel. All told, the paper details, at least 78 PA security personnel have been officially identified in connection with anti-Israel violence in recent years. Moreover, according to Regavim, the true number is likely much higher, because its data is culled from the official statements of the Palestinian Authority, which can be assumed not to disclose every incident. (*Ma'ariv*, March 8, 2024)

10/7 AS EXTREMIST INSPIRATION...

Three years ago, the Biden administration's hasty retreat from Afghanistan – and the Taliban's return to power in Kabul – provided fresh inspiration for a new generation of *jihadists*. In much that same way, the campaign of terror carried out by Hamas on October 7th has breathed new life and vitality into extremist Islamic factions. "Both al-Qa'ida and ISIS, inspired by the HAMAS attack against Israel, have directed their supporters to conduct attacks against Israeli and U.S. interests," Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines recently told the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. "The HAMAS attack is encouraging individuals to conduct acts of antisemitic and Islamophobic terror worldwide and is galvanizing individuals to leverage the Palestinian plight for recruitment and inspiration to conduct attacks." (SSCI, February 5, 2024)

...AND AN OPENING FOR ISLAMISTS IN AFRICA

Africa is the world's youngest continent, and arguably its most important. By 2050, buoyed by robust birth rates, its current population of 1.2 billion is projected by the United Nations to swell to nearly 2.5 billion – or fully one quarter of the world. But massive disparities in resources, economic opportunity and state functioning have created enormous volatility, and led to a "stark" operating environment for the United States. These factors, coupled with a cascade of recent military coups, "are giving space to Violent Extremist Organizations (VEOs) and our strategic adversaries," Gen. Michael Langley, head of the United States Africa Command, told the Senate Armed Services Committee in March 7th testimony. "In East Africa, al-Shabaab and ISIS bring violence to peoples already struggling with inter-ethnic clashes and climate-related food and water shortages. Conflict and climate challenges also loom over the vast populations and natural resources of Central Africa, while Southern Africa faces economic and energy shortfalls, combined with an ISIS insurgency in Mozambique." (SASC, March 7, 2024)