



[Border Clash between Iran and Afghanistan May Lead to Wider Conflict](#)

A deadly clash between Afghan and Iranian guards at the Milak-Zaranj border crossing has raised fears of a new conflict between the two countries. Both sides accuse each other of initiating the fighting that led to the death of at least 2 Iranian and one Afghan guard. The violence has been linked to a decades-old dispute over the Helmand River waters. This is the latest example of what Iranian officials have called a disregard by the Taliban for international laws and border protocols since their takeover of Afghanistan 2 years ago. In 1973, a treaty was reached, but sporadic fighting continued. “In recent years, this treaty has not been adhered to by Afghanistan’s rulers, including the Taliban,” said the Center for International Policy’s Sina Toossi, adding that Kabul has delivered only “a fraction of the agreed amount”. “It has been exacerbated by Iran’s worsening drought conditions, making the water issue increasingly critical,” he explained. Afghanistan is in the process of damming the Helmand River to generate electricity and irrigate agricultural land.

In the past, border clashes between Afghanistan and Iran have not led to wider conflicts, however, with the introduction of the Taliban to the mix, this may change. The Taliban is still relatively inexperienced in governance, especially on the international stage. Many former fighters who have been in government roles have also expressed disdain for their currently bureaucratic roles, wishing to return to their fighting role in the Taliban. It is unclear how deep this sentiment runs throughout the Taliban. This underlying desire to return to fighting makes the Taliban a more volatile neighbor than the former Afghan government.

Thus far, both sides have indicated that they wish to solve the conflict through diplomatic channels. Neither side would benefit from a conflict. This recent clash may be the jolt both sides need to reaffirm past agreements and expand diplomatic relations. Amir Khan Muttaqi, the Taliban administration’s minister of foreign affairs, actually met with Iran’s top diplomat, Hassan Kazemi Qomi, to discuss the water dispute the morning of the clash. This meeting indicates a willingness on both sides to work towards a resolution through diplomatic means.

Wars over the ever-shrinking supply of water and other natural resources will likely increase in frequency and scale in the Middle East and Africa. This conflict offers a glimpse into the future. Wars over limited resources are as old as time itself, and climate change, corruption, and increasing inequality is currently exacerbating. Droughts will become more frequent, leading to food and water shortages in already unstable regions. Authoritarian regimes currently active in the region will continue to compound this growing shortage, masking their corruption by scapegoating neighboring countries.

There are multiple ways to reduce the risk of conflict in both the Afghan-Iranian border and in future conflicts. The first is to address climate change that increases the frequency of shortages of water and other natural resources. Doing so will eliminate or at the very least minimize the number of conflicts related to scarce natural resources. The second and more immediate way is for the international

community to promote and facilitate diplomatic negotiations. It is important to punish bad actors, but also important to acknowledge and reward actors who work to avoid conflict. The United States will not be able to do either unilaterally because of the poor relationship it has with both Iran and Afghanistan. China would be the most likely country to broker a deal, as they have worked with Iran before and do not have any serious qualms with Afghanistan. China has also been showing interest in filling the void left in the Middle East by the United States.