



## The Security Implications of the Collapse of the Afghan Nation-State for Iran's Eastern Border Security

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### **Abstract**

The collapse of the Afghan government in August 2021 was not merely a regime change, but a comprehensive structural, political, and security breakdown that created a power vacuum and paved the way for the Taliban's return to power. This transformation has had far-reaching implications for the security of Iran's eastern borders. Since understanding these implications and identifying appropriate countermeasures are crucial for safeguarding national security, managing migration, preserving natural resources, and sustaining border livelihoods, the present study aims to analyze the effects of Afghanistan's state collapse on the military, economic, social, and environmental security of Iran's eastern borders, and to propose relevant policy responses. The central research question of this paper is: What are the security consequences of Afghanistan's state collapse for Iran's eastern borders? The main hypothesis posits that the post-collapse power vacuum and ensuing instability have intensified military, economic, social, and environmental threats along Iran's eastern frontier. This qualitative and document-based research relies on library resources, scholarly articles, international reports, and credible media sources. Data were analyzed through textual content analysis and multidimensional security analysis. The findings reveal that the post-collapse period has witnessed the proliferation of terrorist groups, increased narcotics and human trafficking, migration waves, water disputes, and political instability under the Taliban — all of which have created multidimensional threats for Iran. In response, Iran has employed various measures including border security policies, regional diplomacy, and management of water resources and border livelihoods.

**Keywords:** *State Collapse; Border Security; Taliban; Migration; Iran's Eastern Borders*

## 1. Introduction

The collapse of the Afghan state in August 2021 cannot be merely interpreted as a regime change or a routine political power shift in Afghanistan. Rather, this event represented a multidimensional structural breakdown that went far beyond the fall of a government or the transfer of authority from one political faction to another. In the literature on fragile and failed states, the collapse of a nation-state occurs when the fundamental pillars of statehood—namely territorial control, monopoly over the means of coercion, capacity to regulate social and economic relations, and political legitimacy—disintegrate simultaneously, rendering the state incapable of performing even its minimal sovereign functions.

What transpired in Afghanistan in 2021 epitomized a complex instance of the concurrent failure of governance institutions, the disintegration of the army and security forces, the breakdown of social order, and the absence of political will to resist collapse. This phenomenon not only generated a profound power vacuum within Afghanistan's internal political structure but also paved the way for the swift resurgence and dominance of the Taliban as a non-state actor endowed with both military and ideological capacities.

From this perspective, the Taliban's ascendance to power was not the outcome of a conventional political transition but the direct consequence of a comprehensive state failure—one rooted in the fragile foundations of two decades of post-2001 state-building, deep ethnic divisions, systemic corruption, excessive dependence on foreign aid, and the inefficiency of administrative and security institutions. Typically, regime change refers to a reallocation of power among political elites within a relatively stable institutional framework; state collapse, however, denotes the total disintegration of governance structures, the erosion of administrative and security capacities, and the emergence of a pervasive power vacuum. Therefore, Afghanistan in 2021 did not merely experience a regime change; it underwent a full-scale state collapse with profound regional and transregional ramifications.

One of the most significantly affected domains by the collapse of the Afghan state has been the security of Iran's eastern borders—areas that have historically constituted some of the most vulnerable zones within the Islamic Republic's security geography. In this study, border security is interpreted not merely in its military sense, but across four interrelated dimensions: military-security, economic, social, and environmental. The collapse of Afghanistan's national government and the subsequent power vacuum in its eastern regions have intensified instability, expanded the activities of non-state actors, and led to the effective abandonment of border control mechanisms. These consequences have exerted both direct and indirect effects on Iran's national security, thereby magnifying the importance of systematic investigation into the issue.

Given these dimensions, the core question of this paper is: What are the security implications of the collapse of Ashraf Ghani's government for Iran's eastern borders? The importance of this inquiry lies in the fact that post-collapse Afghanistan has transformed into a fragile state with minimal governance capacity, compelling Iran to manage its eastern border security within a new and more complex strategic framework. The transformation of threats—from conventional military risks to transnational and hybrid challenges—underscores the necessity of a nuanced and comprehensive analysis for Iran's national security policymaking. Furthermore, the scarcity of integrated academic studies addressing the implications of Afghanistan's collapse for Iran highlights the significance of the present research endeavor.

The overarching objective of this study is to provide a comprehensive explanation of the security consequences of Afghanistan's state collapse for Iran's eastern borders and to develop a multidimensional analysis of Iran's evolving security environment following the Taliban's takeover. This analytical framework seeks to equip Iranian policymakers with a clearer understanding of the emerging threats, opportunities, and imperatives shaping border security. In response to the central question—how and to what extent has the collapse of the Afghan nation-state in 2021 affected the security of Iran's eastern

borders?—the paper advances the following hypothesis: the collapse of the Afghan state and the ensuing power vacuum have increased the vulnerability and multidimensional threats to Iran's eastern border security by enabling the proliferation of non-state actors, the expansion of smuggling networks, the escalation of terrorist activities, worsening social and migratory crises, and the deterioration of environmental conditions.

Thus, the Afghan state collapse represents not merely a domestic transformation but a geo-strategic shift with direct implications for Iran's national security. A rigorous academic analysis of this phenomenon is essential for understanding the future of regional security, formulating effective border policies, and confronting emerging transnational threats in an increasingly volatile geopolitical landscape.

## **2. Literature Review**

A review of the major studies and reports addressing the consequences of Afghanistan's state collapse in August 2021 reveals that the existing body of specialized literature can be broadly categorized into several thematic clusters: analyses of the causes of collapse and governance capacity; assessments of regional security implications (including terrorism and power vacuums); examinations of smuggling dynamics and the informal economy; and studies on humanitarian and migratory repercussions. However, comprehensive and multidimensional studies that integrate all these dimensions in direct connection with Iran's eastern border security remain scarce.

In the domain of state collapse analysis and its internal and external determinants, extensive reports by international organizations and U.S. oversight institutions have provided a strong empirical foundation. The Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) report, for instance, offers a detailed assessment of the principal factors contributing to Afghanistan's governmental collapse, emphasizing the simultaneous impact of institutional failure, the withdrawal of international forces, and the Afghan government's weak political perception of the consequences of troop departure. The report explicitly demonstrates that the 2021 collapse was not a mere regime change, but rather a cumulative breakdown of institutional and structural foundations (SIGAR website, May 15, 2024).

In the realm of transnational security implications and terrorist threats, international think tanks and research institutions have highlighted the resurgence and reorganization of groups such as ISIS-Khorasan (IS-K) and the potential expansion of transregional threats following 2021. Reports by the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) and European institutions such as the International Crisis Group (ICG) underscore the renewed activities of terrorist organizations and their implications for neighboring states. These sources collectively emphasize the importance of continuously updating security threat analyses, particularly in relation to border regions and cross-border instability (CFR website, June 2024).

In the domain of narcotics trafficking and the informal economy, reports by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and a range of political-security analyses have closely monitored the dynamics of narcotics production and trade in Afghanistan. These reports reveal that shifts in cultivation patterns, Taliban drug policies, and evolving regional market structures may collectively lead to the reconfiguration of smuggling networks, producing direct consequences for neighboring states. While these studies offer valuable insights at the national and regional levels, few have specifically examined the routes and immediate implications for Iran's eastern border regions (UNODC website, February 2024).

Similarly, research conducted by the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) under the auspices of the United Nations on the migratory and humanitarian consequences of Afghanistan's collapse indicates that population displacement and migration flows have significantly increased since 2021. This escalation has imposed substantial socio-economic pressures on neighboring border communities. However, existing

analyses predominantly focus on the general dimensions of migration and displacement rather than on the spatial, social, and security-specific impacts observed along Iran's eastern borders (Mixed Migration Centre website, July 2025).

Domestic research conducted in Iran—such as the works of Zarquani (2006), and Parsai et al. (2022)—has also examined the issue of security along Iran's eastern borders. However, most of these studies were either completed before 2021, focusing primarily on the geographical and environmental stability of border regions, or have addressed Iran–Taliban relations at a descriptive or political level. There remains a notable absence of studies that incorporate empirical border data and provide an integrated analysis of the military, economic, social, and environmental dimensions of security in the post-collapse period.

Broadly speaking, three major research gaps justify the formulation of the present study.

First, there is a lack of comprehensive, interdisciplinary analyses that simultaneously address the military-security, economic, social, and environmental dimensions of Afghanistan's state collapse and its impact on Iran's eastern borderlands.

Second, there is a scarcity of field-based and locally grounded research, relying on direct empirical data from border communities and security zones.

Third, the literature lacks a hybrid analytical framework capable of modeling the interconnections among state and non-state actors, environmental transformations, and Iran's border management policies as an integrated system. These gaps collectively hinder the development of evidence-based strategic and policy recommendations.

Accordingly, this study seeks to fill these voids by employing credible international sources alongside the analysis of national and local datasets, in order to construct a comprehensive and evidence-based understanding of the multidimensional security implications of Afghanistan's state collapse for Iran's eastern borders. Such an approach contributes both to the advancement of scholarly knowledge and to the development of reality-oriented, empirically informed border policies that better align with Iran's evolving security environment.

### **3. Methodology**

In terms of its nature, this study constitutes applied-analytical research within the domains of security studies and international relations. Given the complexity of the phenomenon under examination—which encompasses military, economic, social, and environmental dimensions—the research employs a qualitative methodology based on the integration of documentary and analytical data. This approach enables a systematic exploration of macro-level trends, political-security developments, and the multidimensional consequences of Afghanistan's state collapse at both the regional and border levels.

The type and orientation of the research are descriptive-analytical. In the descriptive section, the study outlines the process of Afghanistan's state collapse, the emergence of the power vacuum, the Taliban's return to power, and the evolving border dynamics along Iran's eastern frontier between 2021 and 2024. In the analytical section, the study examines the implications of these developments for Iran's border security by applying theoretical frameworks of “fragile statehood,” “insecure borders,” and “multidimensional security.”

Data collection primarily relies on documentary and primary sources, including reports by international organizations, official documents from Iranian governmental and border agencies, as well as

secondary sources such as scholarly articles in both Persian and English. To identify recurring patterns within reports and datasets, the thematic analysis method has been employed. The main themes extracted include: military and border insecurity, illicit economy and smuggling, migration and demographic pressures, social threats, water and environmental crises, and the geopolitical implications of regime change.

Data analysis was conducted through a comparative-trend analysis, enabling the comparison of Iran's eastern border security across two distinct periods — the era of Ashraf Ghani's government and the post-collapse phase marked by the Taliban's reinstatement. This comparison illustrates which security indicators have experienced intensified threats or undergone structural transformations, thereby highlighting the evolving nature of border vulnerabilities and threat dynamics.

#### **4. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework**

The collapse of the Afghan state can be analyzed through an integrated theoretical framework that interlinks three major conceptual domains: the Fragile State Theory, the Transnational Threats Theory, and the Border Security Theory. This integrative approach enables the study to interpret the security implications of Afghanistan's state collapse for Iran's eastern borders not merely as a political crisis or regime change, but as a structural transformation with multidimensional repercussions.

According to Fragile State Theory, a fragile state is one that lacks fundamental capacities in three core domains: territorial control, political legitimacy, and the provision of public goods (Rotberg, 2003: 43). From this perspective, the collapse of Ashraf Ghani's government in 2021 was not simply the downfall of a ruling administration, but rather the culmination of a prolonged process of institutional erosion, the signs of which had been visible for years — including systemic corruption, concentration of power, heavy dependence on foreign aid, inability to exert effective authority over peripheral regions, and deep ethnic fragmentation (Majlis Research Center, 2020: 5). Building on this theoretical foundation, post-2021 Afghanistan represents a case of complete fragile state failure, characterized by the breakdown of governance institutions, the disintegration and reconfiguration of armed forces, and the emergence of a capable non-state actor — the Taliban. This condition generates a destabilizing spillover effect that directly influences the security environment of neighboring countries, particularly Iran.

Under conditions of state collapse, borders lose their institutional functionality, allowing various transnational threats—including terrorism, extremism, narcotics trafficking, irregular migration, communicable diseases, and organized crime—to flow fluidly across frontiers. According to this theoretical perspective, threats in such contexts are carried by “borderless actors,” and security is no longer confined within the territorial boundaries of a single state (Tayebi, 2018: 43).

With the disintegration of Afghanistan's formal governance structures and the subsequent transfer of power to the Taliban, conditions became conducive to the intensification of smuggling networks, the empowerment of extremist groups such as ISIS-Khorasan, the surge of uncontrolled migration, and the expansion of the informal and shadow economy within border regions. These transformations have generated threats that are not solely military in nature but also economic, social, and environmental, exerting direct influence on the security of Iran's eastern frontier.

Border Security Theory rests on the principle that a border is not merely a geographic demarcation line, but rather a socio-political system. Stable border security is contingent upon three conditions: the presence of effective governance on both sides of the boundary, efficient physical control, and bilateral cooperation in crisis management (Najafi, 2015: 72). The collapse of Afghanistan's nation-state has undermined all three conditions. Weak territorial control, the Taliban's fragmented governance structure, the absence of international recognition, and the regime's acute economic dependency have collectively

transformed the Afghanistan–Iran border into a fluid and high-risk zone. Within this framework, the security of Iran’s eastern borders is not solely a function of Iran’s internal capacity, but is directly linked to the degree of order and institutional functionality within Afghanistan itself.

By conceptually integrating the three aforementioned theories, an interconnected analytical framework emerges. According to this model, the collapse of the Afghan state (as explained by Fragile State Theory) generated a power vacuum, which in turn facilitated the proliferation of transnational threats and the weakening of formal border governance. These transnational dynamics subsequently eroded the border security system, placing multidimensional pressures—military, economic, social, and environmental—on Iran’s eastern borders.

Within this analytical structure, the collapse of the Afghan state is treated as the independent variable, Iran’s eastern border security as the dependent variable, and transnational threats as the mediating variable that transmits the effects of state failure to border insecurity. This model demonstrates that border security is not a direct consequence of state collapse per se, but the result of transnational processes and spillover dynamics emanating from it.

## **5. *The Collapse of the State in Afghanistan***

### **5.1. The State Structure Established by the Bonn Conference**

To analyze the causes and underlying conditions of Afghanistan’s state collapse in August 2021, several structural and historical factors must be considered.

Following the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001, a new political order was established under the 2004 Constitution, which had its roots in the Bonn Conference of 2001. This political architecture was built upon a highly centralized presidential system, granting the president extensive authority over the cabinet, security forces, foreign policy, and executive institutions (Rubin, 2004: 25). Between 2001 and 2021, Afghanistan—supported by the United States, NATO, and international organizations—attempted to construct modern state institutions, including the Afghan National Army, National Police, judiciary, taxation system, and a wide-ranging administrative apparatus (Byrd & Noorani, 2017: 13).

Despite substantial international assistance, the state’s structure remained plagued by fundamental weaknesses such as systemic corruption, failure to monopolize the legitimate use of force, financial dependency on foreign aid, the persistence of a war economy, and the pervasive influence of local power brokers (Giustozzi, 2019: 77). The World Bank’s Governance Indicators consistently ranked Afghanistan among the “weakest states” during the 2001–2021 period (World Bank, 2020).

As Barnett Rubin aptly described, Afghanistan’s post-2001 government was essentially a “theatrical state”—an institutional façade that outwardly mimicked modern statehood but lacked genuine administrative efficiency, social legitimacy, and effective governance capacity (Rubin, 2020: 54). The security architecture was likewise dependent on the presence of U.S. and NATO military forces. Without Western intelligence, air power, and logistical support, the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces were unable to sustain independent operations or long-term resistance (SIGAR Report, May 15, 2024).

### **5.2. Factors Behind the Collapse of the Ashraf Ghani Government**

From a political perspective, several interrelated factors contributed to the premature collapse of the Ashraf Ghani administration.

First, a legitimacy crisis and elite fragmentation within the National Unity Government (2014–2019) severely undermined political cohesion. The 2014 disputed presidential election produced a power-sharing arrangement, rather than a stable democratic outcome. The enduring rivalry between Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah entrenched factionalism among ruling elites, weakening the institutional integrity of the state (Johnson, 2016: 45). The 2019 elections again deepened this legitimacy crisis, further eroding public confidence.

Second, structural corruption and weak governance were endemic. Afghanistan consistently ranked among the most corrupt countries in Transparency International's global indices, and corruption within the army, police, and civilian bureaucracy created "ghost soldiers," budget embezzlement, and widespread loss of public trust (Transparency International, Afghanistan Country Report, 2020).

Third, political centralization and exclusionary governance exacerbated internal fractures. Ghani's highly technocratic and centralist approach marginalized key ethnic leaders, former jihadist commanders, and local power brokers—actors who had constituted the foundational pillars of the post-2001 Afghan political order (Mukhopadhyay, 2014: 32). This exclusion weakened the state's social and political support base, especially in peripheral provinces.

From a security perspective, several critical dynamics further accelerated the state's disintegration.

First, the resurgence of the Taliban and the protracted war of attrition played a decisive role. Since 2005, the Taliban gradually reconstituted their organizational capacity with the backing of regional networks—most notably Pakistan—and regained territorial control in the south and east (Jones, 2010: 42). What ultimately facilitated the 2021 collapse was the Taliban's encirclement strategy after 2018, which systematically fractured the cohesion of Afghan security forces (SIGAR Report, May 15, 2024).

Second, the structural weakness of Afghanistan's security apparatus rendered it highly dependent on external support. The Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) lacked independent air capabilities, a unified command-and-control system, and effective intelligence structures. For years, they relied on U.S. and NATO support, and the withdrawal of foreign troops exposed these vulnerabilities in full (Cordesman, 2021: 16).

Third, the penetration of jihadist networks and non-state armed actors—including ISIS-Khorasan, the Haqqani Network, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's forces, and other militant groups—intensified insecurity and further eroded the authority of the central government (Clarke, 2020: 25).

Collectively, these political and security failures created a perfect storm of state fragility, in which the collapse of institutional legitimacy, elite cohesion, and coercive capacity converged—culminating in the rapid disintegration of the Afghan Republic in August 2021.

In addition to domestic weaknesses, external and international dynamics played a decisive role in accelerating the downfall of the Ashraf Ghani administration.

First, the Doha Agreement of 2020, signed between the United States and the Taliban without the participation of the Afghan government, critically undermined the morale of Afghan security forces and emboldened the Taliban as a government-in-waiting. According to the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), Taliban offensives significantly increased after the signing of the accord, while the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) came to believe that Washington had effectively withdrawn its political and military commitment to their defense (SIGAR Report, May 15, 2024).

Second, the rapid and poorly managed withdrawal of U.S. forces further destabilized the fragile security equilibrium. The Biden administration's decision to implement a swift exit left the Kabul government abruptly deprived of critical logistical, air, and intelligence support. As General Austin S. Miller noted, Afghan forces lacked "sustainable operational capability" in the absence of U.S. backing (Miller, 2021: 31). The vacuum created by this withdrawal not only demoralized Afghan troops but also signaled to regional actors and insurgent groups the imminent collapse of state authority.

Third, the role of Pakistan and regional patrons of the Taliban was pivotal in sustaining the insurgency. Extensive research has documented the long-standing nexus between the Taliban, Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), and the Haqqani Network, providing the movement with vital intelligence, financial assistance, and logistical infrastructure (Rashid, 2010: 15). These networks offered Taliban forces strategic depth, safe havens, and cross-border mobility that the Afghan government could neither counter nor replicate.

Collectively, these international factors—a diplomatically exclusionary peace process, an abrupt military disengagement, and sustained regional sponsorship of insurgent groups—acted as external catalysts that transformed Afghanistan's internal fragility into full-scale state collapse in August 2021.

### **5.3. The Security Situation of Afghanistan's Borders After the 2021 Collapse**

The fall of the Ashraf Ghani government and the establishment of the Taliban's Islamic Emirate fundamentally redefined the nature of Afghanistan's border security. The Afghanistan–Iran frontier represents one of the most geopolitically sensitive boundary lines in the region, and the events of 2021 generated multiple and complex repercussions for Iran's eastern border security.

First, there was a shift in border security actors. Prior to 2021, the official control of most border segments in Nimruz, Herat, and Farah provinces was exercised by Afghanistan's state border forces. After the collapse, control shifted to the Taliban, who lacked experience in state-based border management, standardized customs administration, and professional control mechanisms (International Crisis Group, December 2022). This transition replaced an institutionalized, albeit fragile, border regime with an ad hoc system governed by non-professional and often localized Taliban commanders.

Second, there was a marked increase in transnational threats. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), drug trafficking from Afghanistan to Iran rose by nearly 30 percent following the Taliban's takeover, as new smuggling routes operated by Taliban-linked networks emerged. At the same time, local armed groups expanded their operations in the security vacuum left by the collapsing state (UNODC Report, February 2024). These developments transformed the border into a hub of transnational illicit economies and non-state violence.

Third, military tensions and cross-border clashes became more frequent. Between 2022 and 2023, several armed confrontations occurred between Iranian border guards and Taliban forces in the Helmand, Kang, and Milak areas (Al Jazeera, August 2022). These incidents were largely driven by historical disputes over the Helmand River's water allocation, the Taliban's non-recognition of formal border demarcations, and the presence of inexperienced local commanders on both sides of the frontier.

Fourth, the migration crisis and its socio-economic consequences have emerged as significant dimensions of post-collapse insecurity. Since the fall of Kabul, more than one million new Afghan migrants have entered Iran (UNHCR, September 2023). This massive influx has exerted pressure on Iran's health and education infrastructures, intensified labor market competition, increased border security and surveillance costs, and raised concerns about potential infiltration of ISIS-K or Taliban-affiliated elements disguised as migrants.

Fifth, environmental and water-related threats have become intertwined with border security concerns. The collapse of the Kabul government interrupted Iran–Afghanistan negotiations over the Helmand River water-sharing treaty. The Taliban’s water policy, characterized by a lack of commitment to the 1973 Helmand Water Treaty, has exacerbated water scarcity and environmental degradation in the Sistan region (Majidiyar, 2022: 65). Environmental crises have thus evolved from background vulnerabilities into direct components of Iran’s multidimensional border security threats.

Collectively, these dynamics illustrate how the post-2021 collapse of the Afghan state has transformed the Afghanistan–Iran border from a politically managed frontier into a fluid, hybrid, and securitized space—where military, transnational, humanitarian, and environmental insecurities converge and reinforce one another.

## **6. *The Consequences of State Collapse in Afghanistan***

From the perspective of this study, the collapse of the Ashraf Ghani government in 2021 has produced a wide range of consequences for Iran’s eastern border security. These consequences can be observed across multiple dimensions, the first and most immediate of which concerns the expansion of terrorist activity in Afghanistan and its borderlands.

### **6.1. Expansion of Terrorist and Transnational Armed Groups**

Following the breakdown of the central state in August 2021, the ensuing power vacuum in Afghanistan created fertile ground for the resurgence and operational expansion of transnational terrorist and militant groups.

First, the Islamic State–Khorasan Province (IS-K) capitalized on the post-collapse security vacuum and ideological rifts with the Taliban to intensify its attacks, assassinations, and suicide operations. The group demonstrated its capacity to sustain and even expand cross-border operations, remaining one of the leading sources of high-casualty terrorist incidents in Afghanistan and the broader region (U.S. Counterterrorism Center Report, December 2024).

Second, Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), previously confined largely to Pakistan’s tribal frontier, benefited significantly from Afghanistan’s post-2021 environment. The Taliban’s return to power and the emergence of ungoverned border spaces allowed TTP to reconstitute its operational capabilities, relaunch attacks against Pakistani targets, and utilize Afghan territory as a logistical and sanctuary zone (Brookings, 2022: 21).

Third, regional extremist and separatist networks—most notably Jaish al-Adl and other militant Salafi groups—exploited weak border control and overlapping smuggling routes to conduct asymmetric attacks against Iranian border guards and civilian targets. Operating intermittently from sanctuaries in Pakistan or unstable Afghan border zones, these groups have conducted low- and mid-intensity attacks that prompted Iranian retaliatory strikes and escalated bilateral tensions (Voice of America Report, June 2024).

Consequently, the collapse of the Afghan state—which had at least maintained limited administrative and security structures prior to 2021—expanded the operational space available to radical non-state actors and transnational criminal networks. These actors have effectively become “beneficiaries of state failure,” leveraging the absence of governance to advance ideological, financial, and territorial objectives.

For strategic and policy analysis, it is critical to differentiate the varying degrees of affiliation, dependency, and operational overlap between these groups, the Taliban, and regional smuggling or intelligence networks. Such differentiation enables the design of targeted, coordinated, and evidence-

based border security responses—an essential component of Iran’s evolving counterterrorism and border management strategy.

## 6.2. The Surge in Narcotics and Human Trafficking

The collapse of Afghanistan’s central government and the Taliban’s limited capacity to exert effective control over borders and legal institutions have dramatically expanded transnational trafficking networks. In the absence of coherent state regulation, both drug smuggling and irregular migration routes have become increasingly active and lucrative.

According to recent reports by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Afghanistan remains the world’s principal source of opiate production and transit to regional and global markets. Iran’s eastern frontier—owing to its extensive length, rugged topography, and porous terrain—continues to serve as a critical corridor in this transnational flow. Domestic Iranian data indicate that in the past year alone, approximately 440 metric tons of narcotics were seized along the Afghanistan–Iran border (Iran Border Guard Command, 2022: 12). This figure underscores the escalation of smuggling activity following 2021 and reflects the reactivation of long-dormant trafficking routes.

Simultaneously, human trafficking and irregular migration have intensified. Research and field reports reveal that after the Taliban’s return to power, the number of Afghan refugees and migrants entering Iran rose sharply. Many lack formal documentation or legal status, rendering them highly vulnerable to exploitation by human traffickers (Strategic Studies Research Institute, 2020–2023: 11). Smuggling networks have increasingly targeted Afghans seeking employment or security, channeling them through clandestine routes across the eastern border. Beyond its humanitarian and ethical dimensions, this phenomenon poses serious internal security challenges for Iran, as it facilitates the infiltration of organized crime groups, trafficking syndicates, and potentially radicalized individuals under the guise of migration.

From a security perspective, the convergence of narcotics trafficking and human smuggling has generated a series of structural threats for Iran:

1. Erosion of border security – Iran’s eastern frontier has become increasingly susceptible to illicit crossings, while geographic and logistical constraints make sustained surveillance and enforcement extremely difficult.
2. Expansion of the informal economy – Drug and human trafficking have invigorated *shadow economic networks* closely linked with corruption, unemployment, and rural impoverishment, thereby undermining formal governance.
3. Pressure on Iran’s security and social systems – The combined rise in addiction, crime, and social vulnerability demands greater institutional resources for law enforcement, surveillance, rehabilitation, and welfare provision (Zarghani, 2006: 22).

Consequently, the collapse of the Afghan state and the ensuing power vacuum since 2021 have not only produced an internal governance crisis within Afghanistan but have also profoundly affected the stability and security of Iran’s eastern borderlands. Addressing these transnational threats requires a comprehensive and cooperative regional strategy, encompassing enhanced border management capacity, joint intelligence mechanisms, preventive social programs, and long-term development initiatives aimed at reducing the structural drivers of smuggling and irregular migration.

## 6.3. The Unprecedented Wave of Afghan Migration to Iran

The extensive power vacuum resulting from the collapse of the Afghan state triggered an unprecedented wave of population displacement toward neighboring countries—most notably Iran.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), within just six months following the fall of Kabul, over one million new Afghan nationals entered Iran, many of whom crossed the eastern borders irregularly and without official documentation (UNHCR, September 2023). This massive influx exerted substantial pressure on Iran's border infrastructure, internal security apparatus, and social service systems. Irregular crossings through rugged and poorly monitored terrain significantly increased the risk of infiltration by human- and drug-trafficking networks (UNODC, December 2022). Moreover, the concentration of undocumented migrants in Iran's border provinces—particularly Sistan and Baluchestan—has contributed to heightened social tensions, rising unemployment, and additional strain on healthcare and education services (Felbab-Brown, 2021: 12).

From a security standpoint, this unprecedented migration surge has introduced complex challenges for Iran's border and law enforcement agencies. Beyond population control, potential threats stemming from the presence of armed groups, smuggling syndicates, and criminal fugitives among migrant flows have necessitated expanded surveillance operations and stronger security deployment along the frontier (Mansfield, 2019: 17). The influx of irregular migrants has also placed additional strain on identity registration systems, refugee management mechanisms, and social integration programs, potentially heightening Iran's long-term economic and societal vulnerabilities.

Empirical evidence suggests that most Afghan migrants have been driven from their homeland by poverty, economic collapse, and security threats, often facing exploitation and abuse by human traffickers along the route (UNODC, December 2022). Consequently, this phenomenon constitutes not merely a humanitarian crisis, but a transnational security challenge requiring coordination among border authorities, law enforcement agencies, and international organizations.

In sum, the unprecedented migration flow into Iran has generated multidimensional repercussions across the security, social, and economic spheres. Effective mitigation demands a comprehensive and cooperative approach that combines international support, enhanced border management capacity, evidence-based migration governance, and inclusive social integration programs. Such measures are essential to safeguard Iran's national security and domestic social stability amid the evolving regional landscape.

#### **6.4. The Helmand River Water Dispute and Environmental Implications for Iran**

The Helmand River, whose basin lies predominantly within Afghan territory, represents one of the most vital water sources for Iran's Sistan and Baluchestan Province. Following the Taliban's return to power, bilateral water resource management between Iran and Afghanistan has deteriorated sharply. Under Taliban governance, Afghanistan has expanded its control over upstream water infrastructure—most notably through dam construction and diversion projects—and, at times, has failed to fully observe Iran's treaty-based water rights, thereby exacerbating hydropolitical tensions between the two countries (Majidyar, 2022: 27).

Expert analyses indicate that the decline in the Helmand River's flow has accelerated the desiccation of the Hamoun wetlands and other interconnected aquatic ecosystems. The Hamoun complex, once a crucial habitat for endemic aquatic species and migratory birds, also served as a lifeline for local livelihoods and agriculture across the Sistan plain (UN Environment Programme, April 2021). Its drying has triggered a cascade of environmental consequences, including the intensification of dust and sandstorms, soil degradation, shortages of potable water, and threats to food and livelihood security.

From a security perspective, the reduced access to Helmand water has heightened social and communal tensions in Iran's border regions. Reports suggest that local populations, faced with deepening economic and livelihood pressures, are increasingly turning to illicit activities such as smuggling and

unauthorized resource extraction—dynamics that complicate the security landscape of Iran’s eastern frontier (Majidyar, 2022: 31).

Moreover, the long-term environmental ramifications of water scarcity and wetland depletion include the loss of biodiversity, collapse of agriculture and horticulture, and accelerated rural-to-urban migration, all of which contribute to mounting demographic and socio-economic pressures in Iran’s urban centers (World Bank, 2021: 5).

In essence, the collapse of the Afghan state and the absence of effective transboundary water governance mechanisms have led to the neglect of Iran’s water entitlements, producing far-reaching environmental and security repercussions. This situation underscores the urgent need for robust regional cooperation frameworks, legally binding water-sharing treaties, and international monitoring mechanisms aimed at mitigating tensions, ensuring equitable water allocation, and safeguarding both environmental sustainability and national security.

### **6.5. Taliban Political Instability and Border Clashes with Iran**

Following the collapse of the Ashraf Ghani government in August 2021, the Taliban assumed power and declared the establishment of the “Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.” However, the Taliban’s political structure has been characterized by significant internal fragmentation and instability. Various factions within the movement—including the Haqqani Network, regional commanders, and ethnically defined subgroups—often pursue divergent objectives and agendas, resulting in persistent divisions in decision-making and a lack of cohesion within the central leadership (Rashid, 2022: 42).

This political incoherence has translated into heightened instability along Afghanistan’s borders with Iran, where fragmented chains of command and competing local authorities have undermined consistent governance. The Iran–Afghanistan border, long and topographically challenging, remains particularly difficult to manage, and the Taliban’s limited administrative and security capacity prevents full control of these territories (UNAMA Report, February 2023). Consequently, border skirmishes and localized clashes—including small-arms fire exchanges, cargo seizures, and confrontations with local armed groups—have increased markedly (Center for Strategic Studies of the Presidency, 2020–2022: 7).

Moreover, the presence of autonomous militant entities and transnational networks such as ISIS–Khorasan (IS-K) and Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) near Iran’s eastern frontier has further exacerbated insecurity. These groups exploit the power vacuum and Taliban’s governance deficiencies to conduct military and terrorist operations, intensifying the volatility of Iran–Afghanistan border dynamics (UNDP Report, 26 June 2025).

From a security perspective, this situation poses several critical challenges for Iran.

First, it has led to an escalation of military and security threats in the border provinces, compelling Iranian border forces to maintain heightened presence and surveillance to prevent infiltration and armed incidents.

Second, it has strained migration management and border control, as Taliban instability has facilitated increased cross-border movement of people and goods, necessitating additional logistical and financial resources.

Third, it has complicated political and diplomatic relations, as disputes over border governance and the activities of armed non-state actors risk aggravating tensions between Tehran and the Taliban authorities.

In sum, the Taliban's internal instability and lack of cohesive state control across Afghanistan's eastern borderlands have generated a multidimensional security threat for Iran. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive strategy that combines enhanced border surveillance, regional diplomacy, and cooperation with international institutions to mitigate risks emanating from Taliban instability and recurring border confrontations.

### **6.6. Intensifying Economic Insecurity and the Erosion of Borderland Livelihoods**

The Taliban's return to power, in addition to its military and security repercussions, has significantly exacerbated economic insecurity along Iran's eastern frontier. Iran's borders with Afghanistan stretch across the underdeveloped and sparsely populated provinces of Sistan–Baluchestan and South Khorasan, where local livelihoods rely heavily on agriculture, livestock, and cross-border trade (Majidyar, 2022: 32). Following the collapse of the Afghan state and the proliferation of armed groups and smuggling networks, both formal and informal trade across the border have been severely disrupted. The illegal movement of goods and narcotics through border routes has not only driven up prices but also restricted access to essential commodities, undermining the already fragile local economy (Felbab-Brown, 2021: 22).

Compounding these challenges, the drying of the Hamoun wetlands and the reduced flow of the Helmand River have devastated agricultural productivity in the region. Water scarcity and recurrent droughts have diminished arable land yields, weakened livestock production, and heightened pressure on scarce natural resources (World Bank Report, 2021: 3).

This expanding economic fragility has led to forced migration, increased reliance on informal and illicit markets, and a rise in human vulnerability to exploitation by human and drug traffickers. Such dynamics have intensified the social and security challenges in Iran's eastern borderlands (International Crisis Group Report, February 2021). Moreover, the deterioration of local economic conditions and the erosion of livelihood security have undermined social trust in state and security institutions, potentially sowing the seeds of localized unrest and social tension. Experts caution that if the economic distress of border communities remains unaddressed, it may trigger higher rates of crime, smuggling, and community-level instability (Majidyar, 2022: 32).

In essence, the collapse of the Afghan state and the ensuing border instability have produced a cascade of economic insecurity and livelihood disruption for Iran's frontier populations. Addressing these challenges necessitates targeted support policies, regional economic development initiatives, and cross-border cooperation mechanisms—supported by international assistance—to mitigate the socio-economic repercussions of Afghanistan's collapse on Iran's eastern borderlands.

## **7. *Iran's Response to the Threats Arising from the Collapse of the Afghan State***

In response to the multidimensional crisis triggered by the collapse of the Afghan government, and in an effort to mitigate its adverse effects on national security, the Islamic Republic of Iran adopted a range of strategic and operational measures. The most significant of these responses are outlined below.

### **7.1. Reassessment of Border Security Strategy**

Following the fall of the Kabul government, the Islamic Republic of Iran—given the critical sensitivity of its eastern border regions, particularly the provinces of Sistan and Baluchestan, South Khorasan, and Razavi Khorasan—was compelled to redefine and strengthen its border security strategy.

The main components of this strategic recalibration included:

1. Enhancing physical border control through the deployment of additional border guard units, establishment and reinforcement of outposts and checkpoints along major crossing routes, and the expansion of surveillance and monitoring systems, including cameras and electronic sensors, aimed at preventing the illegal movement of migrants, human trafficking, smuggling of goods, and narcotics trade.
2. Revising visa and entry regulations for Afghan nationals by tightening the issuance procedures and strengthening identity verification mechanisms, in order to distinguish between legal migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and undocumented entrants.
3. Expanding regional security coordination, including intelligence-sharing and cross-border collaboration with Afghan counterparts and neighboring states, alongside pragmatic engagement with the Taliban and local powerholders to jointly manage border flows and maintain minimal stability along frontier zones.
4. Utilizing diplomatic channels and regional mechanisms to assert Iran's interests, particularly in claiming its Helmand River water rights, combating transnational smuggling, and reinforcing border security cooperation within multilateral or regional security frameworks.

This revised framework—rooted in Iran's historical experience in managing border insecurities with Afghanistan, migration crises, and transnational trafficking networks—has been intensified and institutionalized since the political transformation of Afghanistan in 2021.

## **7-2. Engagement or Tension with the Taliban**

Iran's relations with the Taliban have become increasingly complex and multifaceted since 2021. On the one hand, Tehran has found it necessary to establish at least a degree of security engagement with the Taliban—particularly concerning border management, water resources, and migration—since the complete absence of such cooperation would leave Iran's borders exposed to transnational threats. On the other hand, persistent tensions remain over water disputes, ideological differences, the presence of other extremist groups on Afghan soil, and the Taliban's growing proximity to Iran's regional rivals. In many instances, Iran has been compelled to engage in cautious and pragmatic security and border cooperation with the Taliban. International reports indicate that Tehran has demanded a sustained commitment from the Taliban to curb the movement of smugglers and armed groups across the border. Should the Taliban fail to maintain control over these frontier areas, Iran is expected to adopt a policy of stringent border enforcement and stricter measures to prevent illegal migration.

## **7-3. Iran's Security, Border, and Military Measures**

Although no official or public statistics have been released regarding the number of personnel, budget allocations, or border operations since 2021, field observations and media reports reveal several significant indicators. First, there has been a recorded increase in narcotics seizures and smuggling interceptions along Iran's eastern frontier, suggesting intensified patrols and stricter border control measures. Second, numerous reports have documented the arrest of traffickers, human smuggling networks, and illegal migrants, as well as efforts to prevent armed groups from entering Iranian territory—evidence of active border patrols, enhanced intelligence measures, and coordination with local or border security forces from Afghanistan and Pakistan. Third, at various points—particularly during periods of heightened tension, such as mass migration risks or increased terrorist activity—there have been reports of an expanded military and border guard presence in sensitive frontier zones.

Beyond direct military and border measures, Iran has also pursued what can be described as a “domestic security consolidation” strategy, emphasizing internal stabilization of border regions. This policy aims to strengthen local economies, regulate labor markets, and create employment opportunities

to reduce the social and economic incentives for illegal migration and smuggling networks to integrate into local communities (Abrar Contemporary International Studies and Research Institute Report, 2016–2023: 8).

#### **7-4. Leveraging Diplomatic Capacities**

One of the most significant dimensions of Iran's response to the collapse of the Afghan state has been the issue of hydrogeopolitics. Through diplomacy, media engagement, and international pressure, Iran has sought to compel the Taliban to uphold their water-related commitments under existing agreements. Furthermore, Tehran has attempted to securitize the water issue—framing it as a regional environmental-security concern—by mobilizing regional alliances and cooperating with influential neighboring states, so that neither the Taliban nor other regional actors can easily disregard it. Concurrently, Iran has likely coordinated with neighboring countries such as Pakistan and Turkmenistan to control irregular migration and smuggling flows and to jointly secure shared borders (National Defense Research Institute, 2023: 12).

Overall, an assessment of current trends suggests several plausible scenarios for the future of Iran–Taliban relations:

1. **Conditional Cooperation Scenario:** Iran and the Taliban may enter into a framework of limited diplomatic and border cooperation, contingent upon guarantees of border security, control of smuggling and migration, and adherence to Iran's water rights. If sustained, this scenario could yield a degree of relative border stability.
2. **Strict Border Control and Barrier Scenario:** Should the Taliban fail to manage internal and border-related challenges, Iran is likely to intensify its border fortification efforts—expanding fencing, physical surveillance, and migration control measures—which could escalate into diplomatic tensions.
3. **Multilayered Crisis Scenario:** A convergence of issues—migration, trafficking, water disputes, and the presence of armed groups—could transform border regions into volatile zones, potentially inviting regional or international intervention.
4. **Regional Cooperation with International Consensus Scenario:** Supported by institutions such as the United Nations or the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), Iran might promote the establishment of a regional framework for border security, water management, and migration governance. However, the success of this approach would depend heavily on the political will and cooperation of Afghanistan and its neighboring states.

Estimating the likelihood of each scenario remains challenging, given that much of the border security information is classified and official governmental reports are scarce. Consequently, analyses must rely primarily on open-source data and credible media reporting. Nonetheless, it is evident that engagement with the Taliban entails political, security, and identity-related risks for Iran. While cooperation could affect Iran's regional and international legitimacy, stringent border enforcement might, in turn, lead to humanitarian pressures on migrants, potential human rights violations, and significant social costs within Iran.

## **8. Conclusion**

This study has focused on the security implications of the collapse of the Afghan state in August 2021 and its impact on the security of Iran's eastern borders. The analysis demonstrated that the fall of Afghanistan's government was not merely a political regime change but rather a structural collapse that generated a profound power vacuum, diminished central authority, and enabled the Taliban's re-emergence as the dominant governing actor. This transformation produced multidimensional repercussions—security, economic, social, and environmental—for Iran's eastern frontier.

The findings of this research reveal that the collapse of the Ashraf Ghani government directly and indirectly created five major areas of threat to Iran's national and border security:

1. **Expansion of Terrorist and Militant Activity:** The resurgence of groups such as ISIS-Khorasan (Daesh-K), Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), and other regional opportunistic actors, exploiting both the Taliban's limited governance capacity and the weakened border surveillance, poses a serious threat to Iran's eastern borderlands. The operations of these groups not only risk direct cross-border attacks but also facilitate smuggling networks and illegal migration.
2. **Escalation of Narcotics and Human Trafficking:** The erosion of central authority and instability under Taliban rule have reactivated major transit routes for opium trafficking and illegal migration. Evidence indicates a significant increase in drug seizures and unauthorized migrant entries into Iran since 2021—factors that have imposed heavy economic, social, and security burdens on Iran's border communities and enforcement agencies.
3. **Unprecedented Afghan Migration:** The state collapse and ensuing insecurity have triggered a new wave of both irregular and legal migration from Afghanistan to Iran. This influx has strained public services and created humanitarian and socioeconomic pressures, particularly in border provinces. Irregular migrants remain highly vulnerable to human trafficking, exploitation, and security risks.
4. **Water Disputes and Environmental Consequences:** Mismanagement of water resources in the Helmand River basin, coupled with reduced water flow into Iran, has led to the drying of wetlands, intensification of dust storms, and increased pressure on agriculture and livelihoods in Iran's border regions. These conditions have heightened social tensions and environmental insecurity across eastern Iran.
5. **Taliban Political Instability and Border Conflicts:** Persistent internal divisions within the Taliban, the presence of independent armed factions, and weak border governance have collectively produced both direct and indirect threats to Iran's border security and regional stability.

In sum, the collapse of the Afghan state has transformed Iran's eastern frontier into a zone of hybrid security challenges—where terrorism, trafficking, migration, and environmental stressors intersect. The findings underscore the need for integrated policy responses combining security measures, regional diplomacy, and socio-economic stabilization to mitigate the multifaceted threats emerging from post-2021 Afghanistan.

The central hypothesis of this research posited that the collapse of Afghanistan's national government and the ensuing power vacuum have exacerbated security, economic, social, and environmental threats along Iran's eastern borders. The findings fully confirm this hypothesis. The state collapse has not only intensified traditional security challenges—such as the proliferation of armed groups and smuggling networks—but has also generated mounting economic pressures, irregular migration, restricted access to water resources, and damage to local livelihoods in Iran's frontier regions.

Based on the analytical outcomes of this study, mitigating the threats stemming from Afghanistan's state collapse requires Iran to pursue multidimensional and strategic policy responses:

1. **Strengthening Border Security and Surveillance:** Enhance border protection through modern technologies, expanded security personnel deployment, and the establishment of early-warning systems to counter smuggling, infiltration, and militant activities.
2. **Active Regional Diplomacy:** Engage in proactive diplomatic dialogue with the Taliban and neighboring states to develop cooperative frameworks for border and water security, including negotiations over the Helmand River water rights and the joint management of shared natural resources.
3. **Migration Management and Border Community Support:** Implement policies to regulate migration, support border populations, and provide legal facilities for Afghan migrants, while

simultaneously investing in the economic development of frontier regions and expanding social and educational services to mitigate social vulnerabilities.

4. Water Resource and Environmental Governance: Restore degraded wetlands, utilize regional water treaties and mechanisms, and promote sustainable water management to reduce environmental stress and prevent the escalation of eco-political tensions.
5. Regional and International Coordination: Establish cross-border anti-trafficking networks and cooperative security mechanisms with neighboring states and international organizations to respond to multilayered threats emanating from Afghanistan's instability.

Long-term stability in Iran's eastern borderlands requires a comprehensive strategy grounded in regional cooperation, sustainable resource governance, and the integration of security, livelihood, and environmental priorities. This study underscores that safeguarding Iran's national security and advancing sustainable development in its border regions depend on adopting a hybrid, multilayered approach that simultaneously addresses the interconnected dimensions of security, socio-economic welfare, and environmental resilience.

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### **Conflict of interest**

Authors declared no conflict of interest

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