

Policy brief

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Missing the Target: examining the causes of the conflict on the Afghanistan-Iran Border in May 2023

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Purpose

This policy brief shares key findings and implications for policy from a forthcoming XCEPT study on the escalation in violence along the Afghanistan-Iran border on 27 May 2023. The study addresses the misconception that this conflict was concerned solely – or even primarily – with the distribution of water between the states along the Helmand River and growing tensions over upstream water diversion by Afghanistan. Combining the results of geospatial, meteorological data, and in-depth interviews (see box on methodology on page 4), the research shows that the conflict was caused by disputes over territory and border management, which intensified after the Taliban takeover in August 2021. It documents how this outbreak in violence prompted improved communications by the Iranian Border Guards and the Afghan Border Police, as well as the Taliban to act to curb cross-border smuggling.

Context

This research examines the outbreak of violence along the Afghanistan-Iran border on 27 May 2023 and resulted in two reports: one assessing the causes and implications of the cross-border violence and another analysing efforts by both the Afghan and Iranian governments to retain and divert water in the Helmand River Basin through various construction efforts, including dams and canals. This brief summarises findings from the first report.

The conflict on the Afghan-Iranian border in May 2023 was viewed by many as an example of how pre-existing disputes over transboundary water flows can be exacerbated by climate change and potentially result in increasing levels of violence, an issue of particular concern in the sensitive tri-border area where Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan meet.¹ Cross-border skirmishes, especially in the Kang and Zaranj districts of Nimroz Province in Afghanistan and in Sistan and Baluchestan Province in Iran,

¹ Ruchi Kumar, (2023) On the Afghanistan-Iran border, climate change fuels a fight over water, Science, August 4, 2023, <https://www.science.org/content/article/afghanistan-iran-border-climate-change-fuels-fight-over-water>.

increased in the wake of Tehran's construction of a border wall and fence in 2012. Some incidents included the exchange of gunfire between Iranian and Afghan forces, a function of the mistrust between border guards, ongoing territorial disputes, and overzealous law enforcement efforts.

However, in May 2023, the tensions between Iranian and Afghan forces escalated into widespread violence, with both sides resorting to the use of heavy weaponry, including tanks and rockets. Media coverage highlighted Taliban fighters crossing into Iran and taking over an Iranian border post while Iran shelled the Afghan city of Zaranj, injuring civilians. The fighting resulted in multiple deaths and injuries, raising concerns about the risk of a larger conflict. It took several days for officials in Tehran and Kabul to quell the violence.

Most explanations for the cross-border conflict focused on long-standing disagreements between Iran and Afghanistan over water flows from the Helmand River.² Tensions had already arisen in the summer of 2022, shortly after the Taliban took power. At that time, there was a public argument between senior Iranian and Afghan officials. The Iranian President and former Foreign Minister accused the Taliban of ignoring the 1973 Helmand water treaty and restricting water flows to Sistan and Baluchestan.

With new dams planned in Afghanistan, and with climate change increasing the likelihood and frequency of drought, many posited that the violence in May 2023 reflected the risk of an extended 'water war'³ between the two countries. Contrary to this explanation, our research pointed to a conflict that finds its roots in a local dispute over how the border is managed and the recalibration of cross-border relations following the Taliban takeover in 2021.

Key findings

The events that led to the conflict in May 2023 relate directly to how the border is managed and to the challenges of recalibrating cross-border relations following the collapse of the Afghan Republic and the subsequent Taliban takeover.

The rhetoric from Tehran and Kabul over the

long-standing dispute over water flows from the Helmand River heightened the tension between the two countries, but was not the cause of the outbreak of violence. This was primarily a local conflict between those deployed on Iran and Afghanistan's borders in Nimroz, not between the governments in Kabul and Tehran. It began in an area where the border populations do not even share common water sources, and where there is a long tradition of cross-border smuggling. Tensions between the governments in Kabul and Tehran played little role in what unfolded (see Figure 1).

It was the differences in the way the Iranian and Afghan forces policed the border, its proximity to Afghan villages and farmlands, and particularly the Taliban's tolerance and regulation of the drug trade following its takeover, that increased border tensions and directly led to the outbreak of violence. Reduced water flows from the Helmand River to Iran played only an indirect role in the violence. Deprived of sufficient water for their lands due to reduced surface water in the Helmand River Basin, border communities have seen their income from hunting, fishing, livestock, and agriculture disrupted over the last two decades and increasingly turned to cross-border smuggling, to the ire of Iranian Border guards.

With the collapse of the Republic, the arrangements and relationships between the Iranian Border Guard and their counterparts in the Afghan Border Police collapsed, increasing the potential for cross-border violence. The Afghan Border Police under the Republic responded more passively to Iran's aggressive cross-border management. They had established communication lines and reached formal and tacit agreements about the cross-border movement of people and goods. However, as former insurgent fighters, inexperienced in border management, many of those recruited by the Taliban as Afghan Border Police lacked discipline and were unfamiliar with lines of command. They had no lines of communication with Iranian forces and, compared to those who served under the Republic, were less tolerant of Iranian Border Guards shooting into Afghan territory to target smugglers and farmers who got too close to the border and would return fire.

2 Michael Scollon, 2023, Iran And Afghanistan's Taliban Clash As Water Dispute Boils Over, Radio Free Europe, 30 May 2023 <https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-taliban-water-dispute-/32435442.html>; Center for Information Resilience, 2023, The water rights dispute behind rising Afghan-Iran tensions, Afghan Witness, 2 June 2023 <https://www.afghanwitness.org/reports/the-water-rights-dispute-behind-rising-afghan-iran-tensions->.

3 Natasha Turak, 2023, Water wars: Afghanistan and Iran's deadly border flare-up spotlights scarcity crisis, CNBC news, June 19 2023, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/water-wars-afghanistan-irans-deadly-border-flare-spotlights-scarcity-c-rcna90035>; Lynne O'Donnell, 2023, The Water Wars Are Coming to Central Asia, Foreign Policy, 2 August 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/07/31/afghanistan-uzbekistan-water-war-central-asia/>.

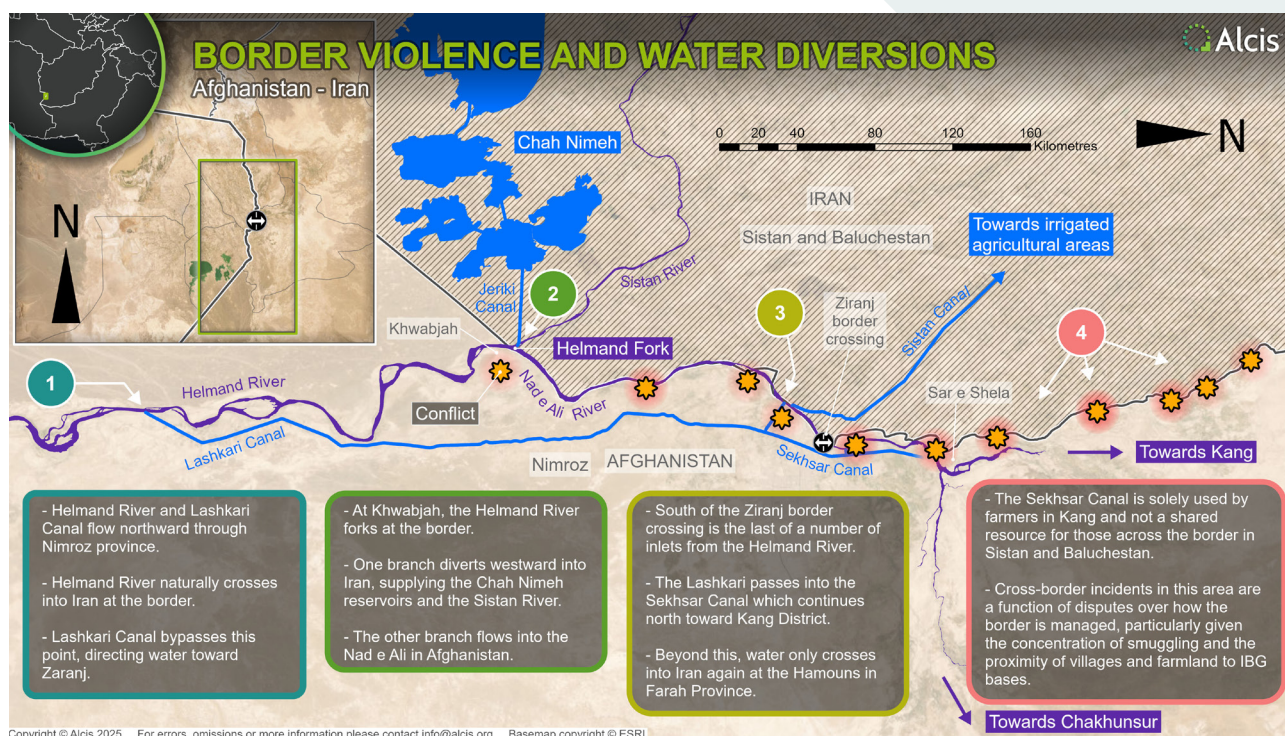


Figure 1. Proximity of border violence to water diversions on the Helmand River.

The Taliban's tolerance of the cross-border drug trade following its takeover increased the likelihood of cross-border fighting between the two border forces, directly leading to the fighting in May 2023. The Taliban's failure to act against the illegal drug trade put the Iranian Border Guard in a particularly difficult position. Without a viable interlocutor in their efforts to curb drug trafficking into their country, and with both mistrust and poor cross-border communications between the forces, there was an increased risk that the Iranian Border Guard would act unilaterally and fire across the border when they saw smugglers operating with impunity so close to their border. Ultimately, this combination of factors prompted the outbreak of fighting on 27 May.

Cross-border tension eased by late 2024 due to the Taliban's restrictions on smuggling and the desire of authorities on both sides to avoid escalation. Border communities cite a new equilibrium once Iranian and Taliban border forces established lines of communication and protocols following the violence of summer of 2023. Efforts to reduce cross-border smuggling of fuel, livestock, and drugs have also reduced the potential for misunderstandings between the two forces. In particular, the Taliban's increased efforts to curb the trade in drugs since the cross border conflict in May 2023 have reduced the incidents of cross-border shooting by Iran and, therefore, the risk of escalation. There is also the possibility that the Taliban's aggressive

pushback against cross border firing by the Iranians in 2023, especially in crossing into Iran at Makiki (see Figure 2) acted as a deterrent and curbed the excesses of the Iranian Border Guard that had been more prevalent during the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (2004-2021).

Although it was not the primary reason for the outbreak of heavy fighting in May 2023, water remains a source of cross-border friction and potential violence. Tension is rising between Tehran and Kabul as both states jostle to divert and store more water in a river basin impacted by climate change and reduced water flows. Infrastructure investments by both countries have dramatically affected water flows to downstream populations along the border. Kabul's commitment to constructing dams in the Helmand River Basin will further strain relations. Substantial volumes of groundwater are also being extracted on both sides of the border due to diminished availability of surface water, partly due to climate change but also resulting from state efforts to retain and redirect surface water. There are already signs of significant falls in groundwater across the Helmand River Basin in Afghanistan, and continued unregulated extraction poses a significant threat to the livelihoods of an estimated 3.65 million people. This could, in turn, increase border tensions and the risk of conflict, especially if this groundwater fails and increases outmigration.



Figure 2. The proximity of Afghan villages and agricultural land to the Iranian border resulted in regular cross-border shootings from the Iranian Border Guards base.

Policy implications

The findings from this study highlight several implications for national governments, de facto authorities, regional bodies, and donor programming:

- **While improved border infrastructure, such as border walls and fences, can play some role in deterring cross-border movement, it can also increase the risk of conflict.** The construction of a border wall or fence is often done unilaterally, giving the side that funded and built it an advantage in the demarcation of the border and its management. Its construction usually denotes unequal power relations, which central and local authorities of neighbouring states may tolerate when the wall is first built. Still, it may be resisted by the local population and a future government when it gains power. Border skirmishes and conflict are almost inevitable in these circumstances, particularly when a more nationalist or populist party takes power. The potential for conflict is heightened even more when contrasting regulatory regimes are pursued on either side of the border, as in the case of the Taliban, who initiated, regulated and taxed, then tolerated the cross-border drug trade. Governments and donors should not overreact, but they can play a role in encouraging the two parties to improve cross-border communications and procedures through technical assistance and funding, where appropriate.

- **While more resource-intensive, a mixed-methods research approach that includes geospatial analysis will provide more robust evidence for policymakers.** What are often believed to be the most obvious explanations for events are not always the most accurate, and it is important to consider the body of evidence that research products draw on, particularly the degree to which they draw on primary data and geospatial analysis. Secondary data has limits, especially when it is mainly anecdotal, drawn from the media, and is not backed up with a detailed understanding of how the population, border infrastructure, and important resources such as water and land are distributed. Mixed-method research should be given greater weight as a source of information for policy and funding, particularly where an event or phenomenon potentially has significant geopolitical or economic implications.

Methodology

This project employed a mixed-methods research approach, combining satellite image analysis with qualitative interviews and open-source data collection. Layering these data sets supported triangulation of results and iterative enquiry.

About the authors

Dr David Mansfield is the primary author, responsible for designing and managing the research. David has been conducting research on illicit economies in Afghanistan and on its borders since 1997. David has a PhD in development studies, is the author of “A State Built on Sand: How opium undermined Afghanistan” and has produced more than 80 research-based products on rural livelihoods and cross-border economies, many for the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, working in partnership with Alcis Ltd. This work has included extensive research on irregular migrants travelling from Afghanistan to Europe.

Alcis provide world-class data-driven evidence in fragile and former conflict-affected states to enable better understanding, decisions and outcomes for their clients and beneficiaries. Alcis has worked continuously in Afghanistan since 2004, providing in-depth analysis and GIS to a wide range of donors, including the UK, US, Australian, Danish and Afghan Governments, ADB, UN, academia, think tanks and NGOs. Over this period, they have patiently curated the most comprehensive and sophisticated geospatial database for Afghanistan, building a range of unique web-based geographic data visualisation and analysis platforms for different clients with differing needs that enable the viewing, querying and annotation of bespoke geospatial data.

About XCEPT

The Cross-Border Conflict Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT) research programme brings together world-leading experts and local researchers to examine conflict-affected borderlands, how conflicts connect across borders, and the drivers of violent and peaceful behaviour. Funded by UK International Development, XCEPT offers actionable research to inform policies and programmes that support peace. The views expressed in this material do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies.

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