



Missing the target: Examining the causes of the conflict on the Afghanistan-Iran border in May 2023

David Mansfield
and Alcis

March 2025

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Acknowledgements

David Mansfield was responsible for the design and management of the research and the primary author. David has conducted research on rural livelihoods and cross-border value chains in Afghanistan and on its borders since 1997. David has a PhD in development studies and is the author of '*A State Built on Sand: How Opium Undermined Afghanistan*'. He has produced more than 80 research-based products, many for the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, working in partnership with Alcis Ltd. Working through local partners, his work has also included extensive research on irregular migrants travelling from Afghanistan to Europe.

Alcis designs and deploys online geospatial platforms, along with high-resolution imagery and geospatial analysis. Alcis provides world-class geographic information services (GIS) to enable better understanding, decisions and outcomes for its 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 governments of the United Kingdom, United States, Australia, Denmark, and Afghanistan; the Asian Development Bank, the United Nations, academia, think tanks, and NGOs. Over this period, it has 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.

Contacts

For this research:
Mette Bastholm Jensen,
mjensen@xcept-research.org

About XCEPT

This publication is a product of the Cross-Border Conflict Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT) research programme, funded by UK International Development from the UK government. XCEPT brings together leading experts to examine conflict-affected borderlands, how conflicts connect across borders, and the drivers of violent and peaceful behaviour, to inform policies and programmes that support peace. For more information, visit www.xcept-research.org or contact us at info@xcept-research.org.

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Key findings

This research explores the conflict that broke out between Iranian and Taliban forces in May 2023, in an effort to better understand the underlying tensions on the Afghanistan–Iran border and the risk of further, more protracted outbreaks of violence in the future. Explanations at the time suggested that the cross-border fighting broke out as a result of a historical dispute over transboundary water rights and growing tensions between Tehran and Kabul over Afghanistan's completion of a major dam on the Helmand River and the subsequent impact on water flows downstream. The protracted nature of the fighting and use of heavy weaponry led several media outlets to argue that this was a precursor of future conflict, and that with rising temperatures, falling precipitation, and the Taliban intent on building further dams on their riverways, it was a warning of the potential 'water wars' to come.

Leveraging a combination of in-depth interviews, high-resolution satellite imagery, and both geospatial and meteorological data, this research offers a different explanation of the cause of the fighting, where disputes over transboundary water flows played a minor role. Instead, this research shows that the conflict was steeped in disagreements over territory and how the border is managed, which were heightened following the Taliban takeover in August 2021. It documents a local dispute shaped by precedent and more cordial cross-border relations under the Afghan Republic, and the subsequent renegotiation of that relationship by battle-worn Taliban fighters in Afghanistan's south-west province of Nimroz. The evidence points to a relationship that was particularly fractious following the collapse of the Republic. This has been tempered by improved cross-border communication and the Taliban's shift in policy towards the illegal drugs trade in July 2023, when they began to curb cross-border smuggling rather than tolerate and tax it, as had been the case earlier. Temporary but perhaps intermittent in nature, this conflict tells us more about how easy it is to be distracted by the rhetoric of senior government officials when looking for an explanation for violence, and the risks of missing the actual cause, which can be more local and mundane, but also more pervasive.

Key findings include:

- **The events that led to the conflict in May 2023 relate directly to how the border is managed and the challenges of recalibrating cross-border relations following the collapse of the Afghan Republic and the Taliban takeover.** The rhetoric from Tehran and Kabul over the long-standing dispute over water flows from the Helmand River heightened 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 and not between the governments in Kabul and Tehran.
- **The differences in the way the Iranian and Afghan forces policed the border, and in particular the Taliban's tolerance and regulation of the drugs trade following its takeover, 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 past two decades and have increasingly turned to cross-border smuggling.
- **With the collapse of the Republic, the arrangements and relationships between the Iranian Border Guard (IBG) and their counterparts in the Afghan Border Police (ABP) collapsed, and the potential for cross-border violence increased.** The ABP under the Republic took a more passive response to aggressive cross-border management by Iran and had established lines of communication, reaching both 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 into the ABP by the Taliban lacked discipline and were unfamiliar with lines of command. They had no lines of communication to Iranian forces, and compared with those that served under the Republic, were less tolerant of IBG soldiers shooting into Afghan territory to target smugglers and farmers who got too close to the border, and who would return fire.

► **The Taliban's tolerance of the cross-border drugs trade following its takeover increased the likelihood of cross-border fighting between the two border forces.**

The Taliban's continued support for the illegal drugs trade put the IBG in a particularly difficult position. Absent a viable interlocutor in their efforts to curb drug trafficking into Iran, and with both mistrust and poor cross-border communications between the forces, there was an increased risk that IBG soldiers 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 2023.

- **Cross-border tension had eased by late 2024, as a result of the Taliban's efforts to restrict cross-border smuggling in late 2023 as well as the Afghan and Iranian authorities' desire to avoid a repeat of the outbreak of violence in May 2023.** A new equilibrium was reached once Iranian and Taliban border forces had established lines of communication and protocols to mitigate the risk of incidents escalating into wider violence as they did in the 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 and the likelihood of conflict. In particular, the Taliban's increased efforts to curb the trade in drugs since the summer of 2023 has reduced incidents of cross-border shooting by Iran and, therefore, the risk of escalation. There is also the possibility that the Taliban's actions in 2023, especially crossing into Iran at Makiki, acted as a deterrent and curbed the IBG's excesses, which were more prevalent during the Republic.

- **Despite evidence that the direct cause of the fighting lay in differences over how the border was managed, and a breakdown in cross-border relations following the Taliban takeover, it is important not to completely dismiss the underlying friction between the two governments over the flow of water from the Helmand River and how it increases the potential for an outbreak of violence between the two states.** Tension is growing between Tehran and Kabul as they both jostle to divert and store more significant amounts of water in a river basin impacted by climate change and reduced water flows. Some of the investments in infrastructural works made by Afghanistan and Iran have had dramatic effects on water flows to downstream populations on either side of their respective borders, fuelling tensions between the two states and the war of words that erupted in the days before the fighting in May 2023. Kabul's commitment to construct more dams in the Helmand River Basin will further strain relations. Substantial volumes of groundwater are also being extracted on both sides of the border as a direct result of reductions in the amount of surface water available, in part due to climate change but also due to state efforts to retain and redirect surface water. There are already signs of a significant fall in the level of groundwater across the Helmand River Basin in Afghanistan; 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 were groundwater reserves to fail and result in increased outmigration.

1. Introduction

This report is an output of a larger research initiative examining the cause of the outbreak of violence on the Afghanistan-Iran border in May 2023. The conflict was viewed as a possible example of a climate change-induced conflict and a potential precursor of further, perhaps more protracted violence in this sensitive tri-border area between Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan. The violence began on 27 May 2023 and lasted for more than a week. It was just one of many border skirmishes that have become common for those straddling the border in the districts of Kang and Zaranj in Nimroz in south-west Afghanistan and Sistan and Baluchistan Province in south-east Iran. Many incidents involve Iranian and Afghan forces exchanging small-arms fire. They are often prompted by efforts to suppress cross-border incursions by smugglers, general mistrust between guards on opposing sides of the border and ongoing territorial disputes.

In contrast, the cross-border conflict in May 2023 led to Iranian and Afghan forces deploying heavy weaponry, including tanks and rocket-propelled grenades. The story gained national, regional and international coverage in the media. Video footage showed Taliban forces crossing into Iranian territory and occupying an Iranian Border Guard (IBG) post. At the same time, the Iranians shelled the border city of Zaranj, the capital of Nimroz province, injuring several civilians.¹ The fighting led to multiple deaths and injuries among both Iranian and Afghan border guards, and there were concerns that the scale of troop deployments that followed the initial outbreak of violence signalled the potential for a wider conflict between the two countries. Ultimately, it took the authorities in Tehran and Kabul several days to halt the violence.

The question of water

At the time, most explanations attributed this cross-border conflict to long-standing disagreements between Iranian and Afghan authorities over the distribution of water from the Helmand River, which had already surfaced in the summer of 2022, less than a year after the Taliban had taken power.² Further suggested proof was found in the public argument that broke out between high-ranking Iranian and Afghan officials in the days that preceded the outbreak of violence on the border. These arguments began with the Iranian president and the foreign minister accusing the Taliban of disregarding the water treaty between the two countries and withholding water from the population in Sistan and Baluchistan.³ This took place against a backdrop of a worsening drought, and indications that the Taliban would continue the Afghan Republic's plans to dam some of the major rivers that flow into Iran.⁴

The allegations from Tehran, and the Taliban foreign minister and deputy foreign minister's response,⁵ alongside the more provocative retorts of low-ranking Taliban officials on social media,⁶ led many analysts to suggest that the cause of the conflict was transboundary water issues. With additional dams planned upstream in Afghanistan and the likelihood that climate change will lead to further water shortages and drought, many argued that the outbreak of violence in May 2023 was a precursor to a more protracted conflict between the two countries,⁷ a forewarning of what some have referred to as 'water wars'.⁸

Challenging accepted wisdom

The overall research initiative was designed to interrogate this accepted wisdom and identify the direct causes of this outbreak of widespread fighting, the role that climate change and state and

1. Al Jazeera, 'Taliban fighters clash with Iranian border guards' [Video], 28 May 2023, YouTube, [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com).

2. Michael Scollon, 'Iran and Afghanistan's Taliban clash as water dispute boils over,' *Radio Free Europe*, 30 May 2023, [rferl.org](https://www.rferl.org).

3. 'Raisi sternly warns Taliban over water rights,' *Tehran Times*, 19 May 2023, tehrantimes.com; 'Iran's President Warns Islamic Emirate to Take Water Issue Seriously,' *Tolo News*, 18 May 2023, tolonews.com; x.com/Amirabdollahian

4. 'Afghanistan: construction of Bakhshabad Dam on Helmand River resumes amid tensions over Iran's water rights,' *Euronews*, 22 May 2023, [parsi.euronews.com](https://www.parsi.euronews.com).

5. Mohammad Farshad Daryosh, 'Iran gives Afghanistan one month to resolve Iran's water rights issue,' *Tolo News*, 20 May 2023, tolonews.com.

6. General Mobin Khan Official, 'نوکربغ ناخ نیبم لارنج د هت وربخ رشمس لو ناری د' [Video], YouTube, 18 May 2023, [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com).

7. Osama Ahmad, 'Water conflict between Iran and Afghan Taliban stirs sectarian tensions,' *Terrorism Monitor*, Volume 21, Issue 16, 8 August 2023, [jamestown.org](https://www.jamestown.org).

8. Natasha Turak, 'Water wars: Afghanistan and Iran's deadly border flare-up spotlights scarcity crisis,' *CNBC news*, 19 June 2023, [cnbc.com](https://www.cnbc.com); Lynne O'Donnell, 'The water wars are coming to Central Asia,' *Foreign Policy*, 2 August 2023, [foreignpolicy.com](https://www.foreignpolicy.com).

community responses played in this event, and the potential for further conflicts in the future. However, empirical evidence documented a more local conflict, steeped in disagreements over territory and how the border should be managed, which were heightened following the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021. It refutes the narrative that attributes the fighting in May 2023 directly to decisions in Tehran and Kabul, and historic disputes over transboundary water rights; and suggests the conflict was the direct result of efforts to recalibrate cross-border relations primarily by Taliban border officials who were less accepting of their counterparts propensity to fire across the border than had been the case during the Afghan Republic, but also the IBG's frustration at the Taliban's tolerance, if not regulation, of the cross-border drugs trade.

“The dramatic increase in the exploitation of groundwater across south-west Afghanistan since 2019, reports of substantial yearly drops in the water table, and the livelihoods of as many as 3.65 million people at risk.

As this conflict was not one rooted in the effects of climate change, the research results are divided into two separate but linked reports. While this first report examines the outbreak of heavy fighting between Afghan and Iranian military forces on the Afghanistan–Iran border in May 2023, a complementary report - *Digging an Ever Deeper Hole: The Response to Climate Change in the Helmand River Basin*⁹ - focuses on the Helmand River Basin and documents efforts by successive Afghan and Iranian governments to divert water flows in their favour, including through major infrastructural works, such as dams and canals. Drawing on substantial empirical data from satellite imagery and in-depth interviews, this second report suggests that debates over the ongoing and deteriorating dispute over transboundary water rights between Tehran and Kabul are a distraction from what is likely to be a far more significant crisis: the dramatic increase in the exploitation of groundwater across south-west Afghanistan since 2019, reports of substantial yearly

drops in the water table, and the livelihoods of as many as 3.65 million people at risk. This pending crisis can be directly attributed to the effects of climate change.

2. Methodology

This research was conducted as part of a larger project examining the cause of the conflict on the Afghanistan-Iran border in May 2023, which was designed to better understand underlying tensions and the risk of further, more protracted outbreaks of violence in the future. The overall research project explores the cause of the conflict using a genuinely mixed-methods approach that combines the results of geospatial and meteorological data as well as high resolution satellite imagery and in-depth interviews.

The methods employed offered valuable data, each with significant advantages. However, by combining these datasets, we could triangulate results and explore different lines of enquiry as they emerged. In particular, integrating geospatial analysis throughout the research process supported the verification of findings, the extrapolation of results over a larger geographic area than we could cover with in-depth interviews, and the mapping and quantification of the population impacted by phenomena or events. While more resource-intensive, this mixed-methods approach offers a more robust assessment of the factors that led to this particular outbreak in violence, as well as the role that climate change and community and government responses to it might play in future conflicts.

Two reports

This first report draws on geospatial analysis, high-resolution satellite imagery, and open source data which allowed us to identify specific locations where events took place; infrastructure and geographic features critical to better understanding the Afghanistan-Iran border; the specific areas where water resources are shared; and, ultimately, the causes of the conflict in May 2023 (see Figure 1). It also draws on in-depth interviews with those residing along the border.

The second report from the wider research project involved a detailed analysis of developments along the length of the Helmand River. Geospatial analysis,

9. David Mansfield and Alcis, *Digging and ever deeper hole: The response to climate change in the Helmand River Basin*, XCEPT (2025).

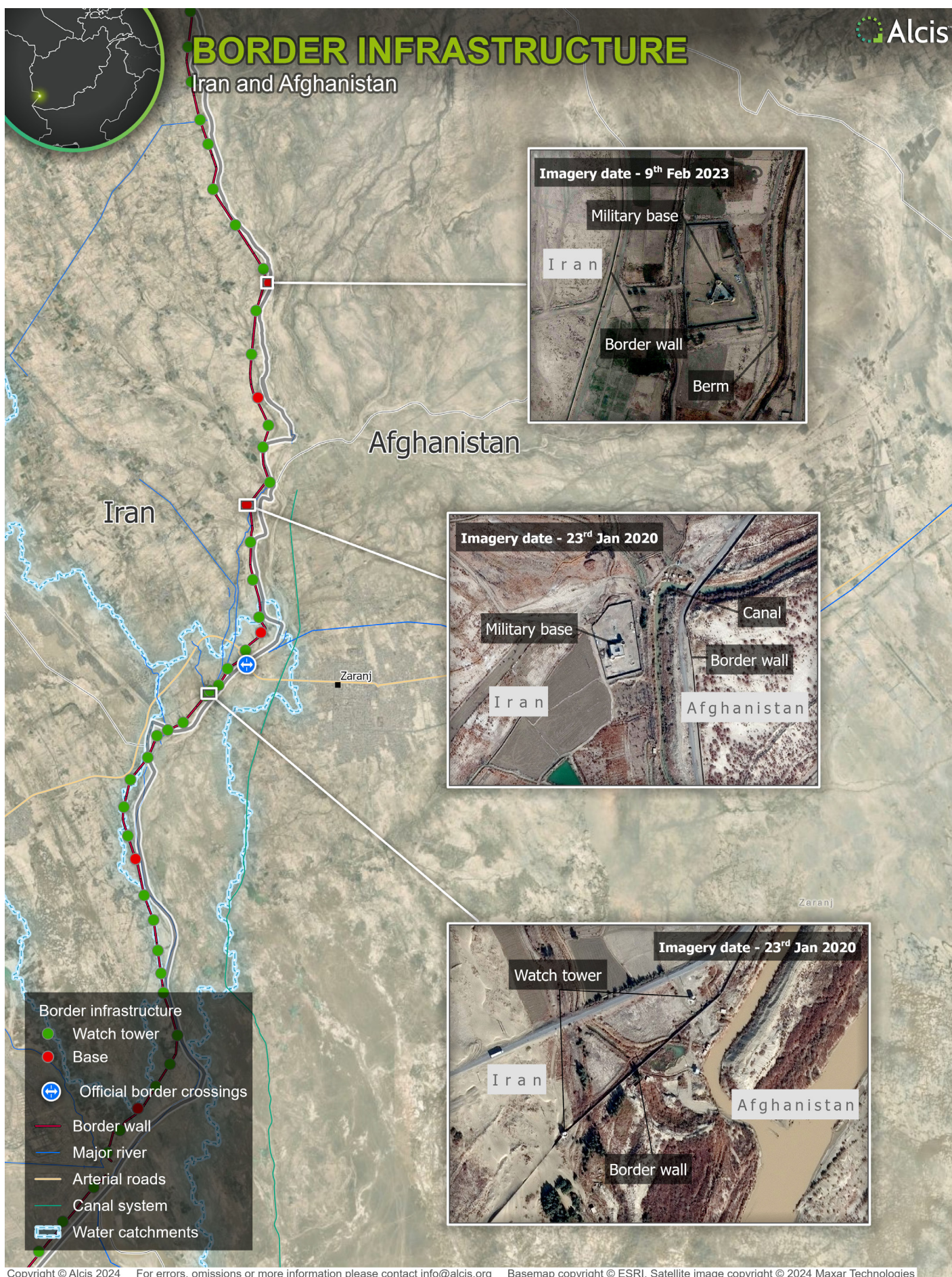


Figure 1: Afghanistan-Iran border infrastructure – examples from 2020 and 2023

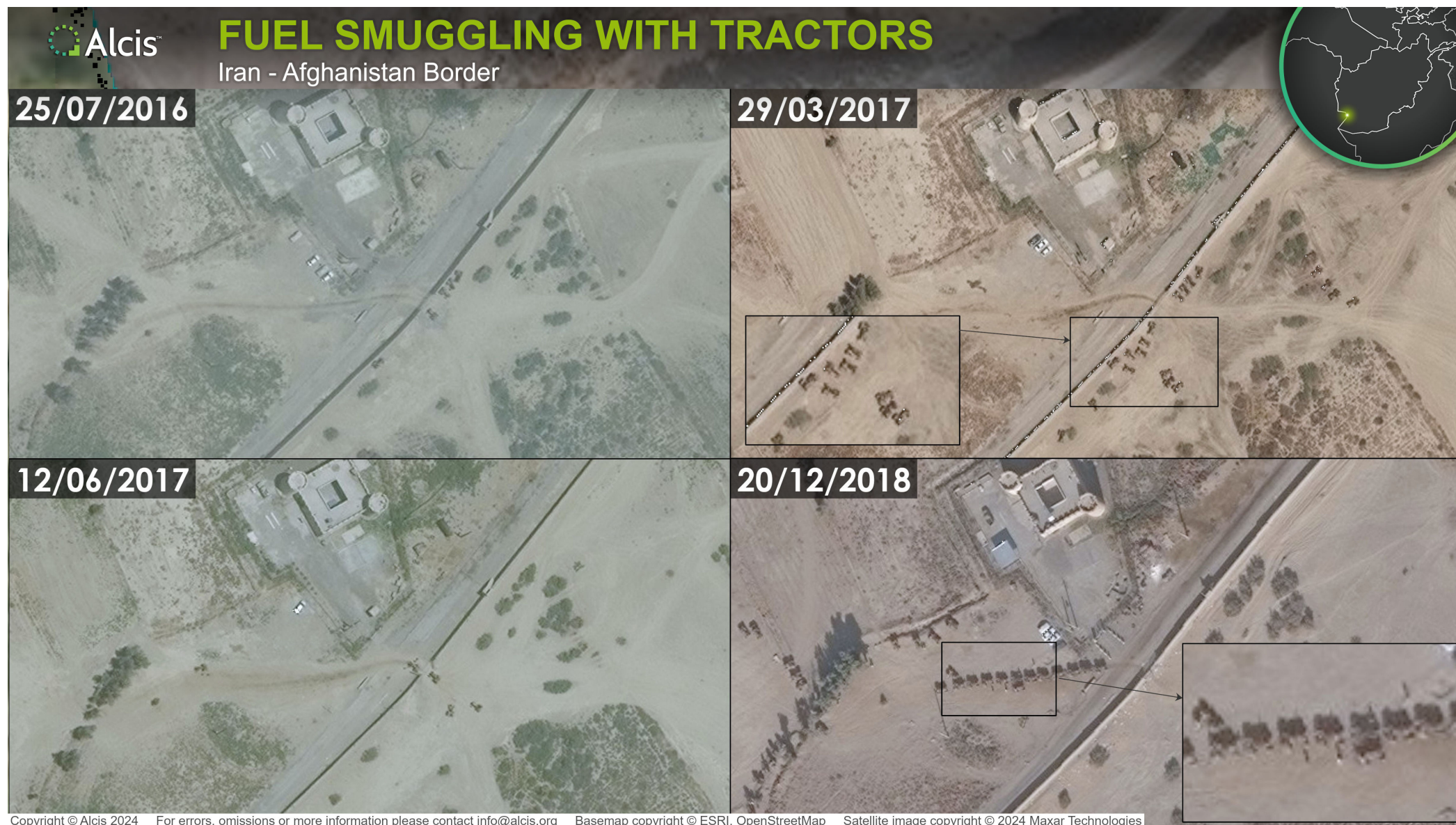


Figure 2: Fuel smugglers' tractors queuing to cross the border (2016 to 18)

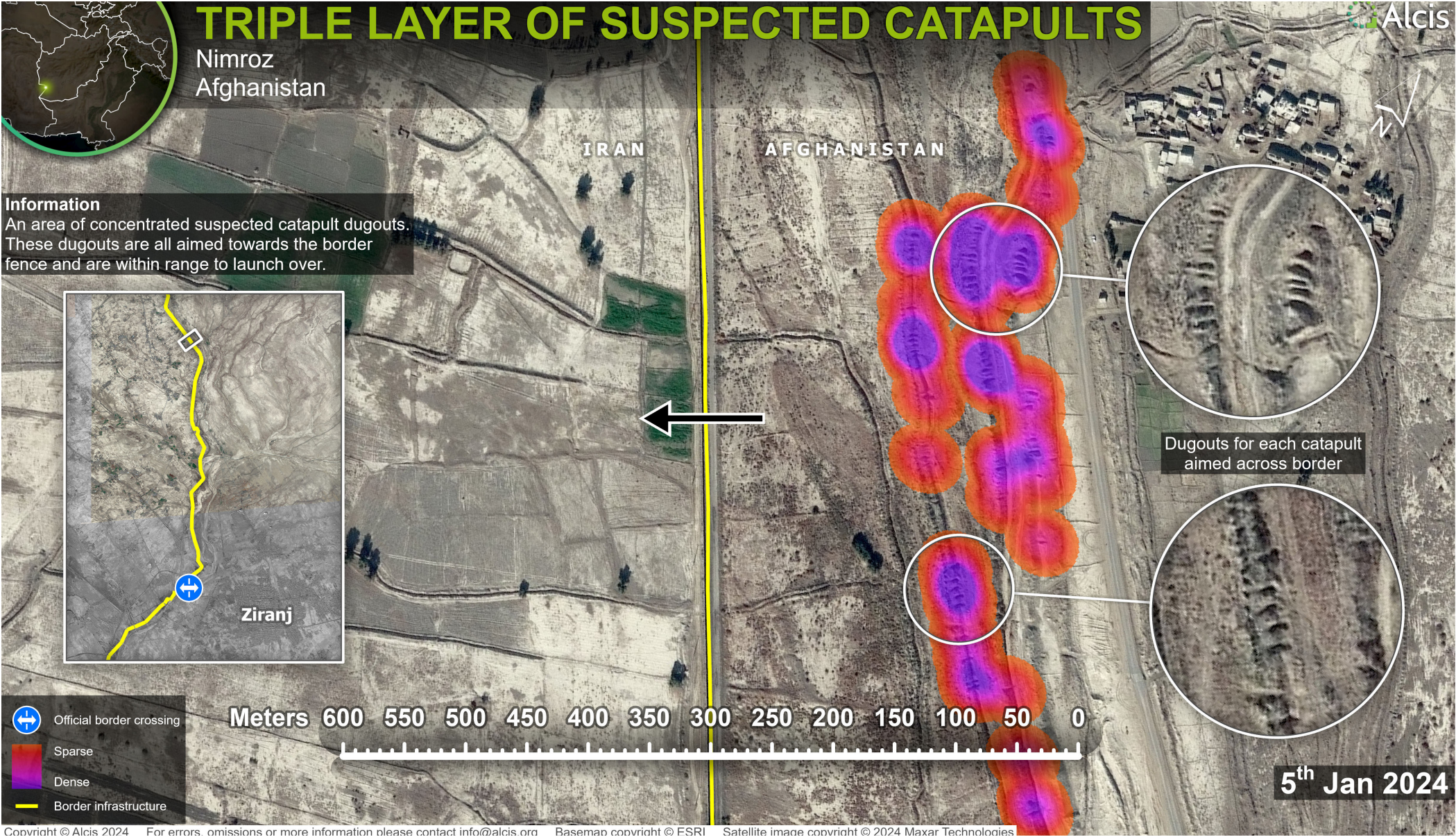


Figure 3: Distribution of suspected catapults along the Afghanistan-Iran border (2024)

Smugglers and farmers

The financial opportunities for those deployed to the gates and posts are significant. For example, an estimated US\$19.2 million of fuel was smuggled through the gates of Kang in 2021, earning the six ABP posts in Kang around US\$137,000 in bribes.²¹ Those staffing these posts are estimated to have earned a further US\$209,000 a year from rents on the cross-border drugs trade.²²

“For civilians in Afghanistan, the Iranian border fence brought inherent inequalities that fuelled resentment.

For civilians in Afghanistan, the Iranian border fence brought inherent inequalities that fuelled resentment. Symbolic of this is that ever since the wall had been constructed, Iranian farmers were allowed to cross the border by tractor (typically carrying smuggled fuel) and access their farmland on the other side of the fence. In contrast, Afghan farmers were prohibited from doing the same. While the amount of Afghan land on the Iranian side of the fence is admittedly much less, this uneven treatment reflects the fact that the fence is Iranian, and the IBG decides who can pass and who cannot.

The border infrastructure has also given the Iranian authorities a tactical advantage over their counterparts in the ABP and the Afghan civilian population. People in villages on the Afghan side of the border accuse many in the IBG of adopting a rather generous interpretation of what constitutes Iranian territory and pursuing an aggressive stance in its defence. As such, communities in multiple locations cite examples of Afghan villagers being fired on, injured and even killed for getting too close to what the Iranians consider the ‘zero point’, despite being some distance inside Afghanistan and away from the Iranian fence (Figure 4).

Cross-border incidents

Table 1 documents a multitude of cross-border incidents and their causes at different locations in the Zaranj and Kang districts. In some cases, these incidents were a function of disputed territory and

disagreements over where the border lies and whether land beyond the fence is in Afghanistan or Iran. This is particularly the case in the village of Barichi in Afghanistan, on the border between Zaranj and Kang, where a long-standing land dispute has led to repeated conflicts between Afghan and Iranian border officials, so much so that much of the agricultural land has been left fallow for many years (see Figure 5).

In other cases, cross-border shootings were either the result of a nervous IBG soldier overreacting to people getting too close to the border fence, believing that they were involved in cross-border smuggling, or of overzealousness and the belief that much of the area surrounding the wall is Iranian territory. Either way, this makes cross-border conflicts inevitable, particularly in the district of Kang, where the Iranian fence runs alongside Afghan villagers’ agricultural land and the canal which irrigates much of their land. In the village of Makiki, for example, where the May 2023 conflict broke out, houses and farmland sit only 60 metres from the wall of the IBG base (see Figure 6).

Land vs water and land with water

Table 1 also shows that some of these cross-border incidents may be over land containing water channels and ditches, but where the conflict is about territory rather than cross-border water rights. For example, IBG soldiers have shot at farmers in Kang while they were cleaning a canal or fixing an intake. However, they do not share a common water source with Iran. In fact, the Helmand River does not run along the Afghanistan–Iran border in Kang, as it does in the district of Zaranj, but diverts eastwards into Chakhansur at Sar-e-Shela to the south of the district.

Rather, farmers in Kang receive most of their irrigation water from the Sekshar Canal, which is fed by the Lashkari Canal further south. Afghan farmers exclusively use water from the Sekshar Canal, while farmers in neighbouring Sistan and Baluchistan Province in Iran receive their irrigation supplies from inlets on the Helmand River further to the south of the city of Zaranj, and, more importantly, from artificial reservoirs built by Iran — the Chah Nimeh - located near Khwabgah, where the Helmand River forks at Jariki (see Figure 7).

21. Alcis, David Mansfield and Graeme Smith, 'How we have calculated revenues: annex to the report "War gains: how the economic benefits of the conflict are distributed in Afghanistan and the implications for peace"', August 2021, www.alcis.org.

22. Alcis et al., *How we have calculated*.

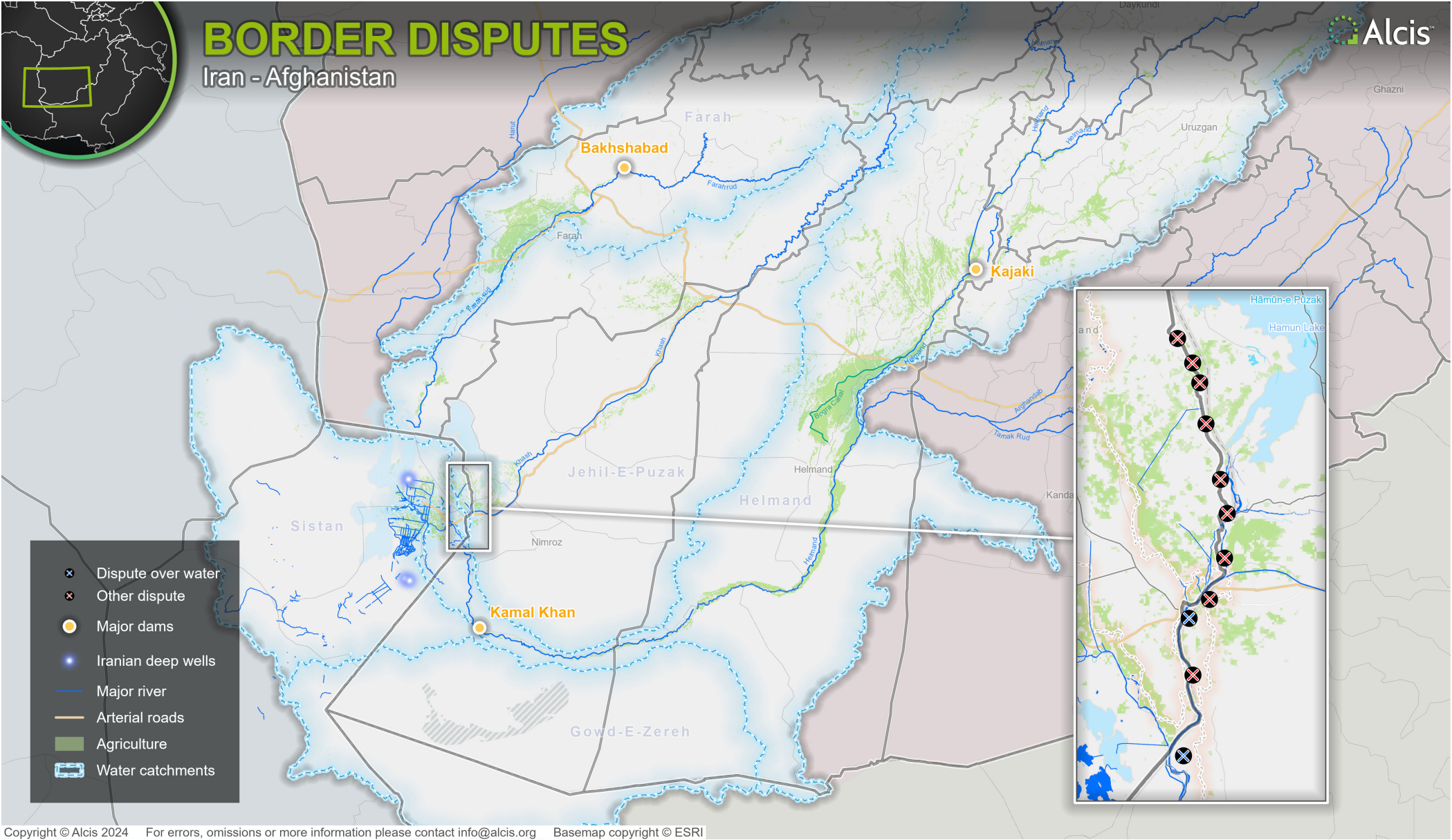


Figure 4: Location and typology of conflicts along the Afghanistan-Iran border (2024)

Table 1: Typology of conflicts on the Afghanistan-Iran border

		Location			Conflict
Regime	Date	District	Village	Type	Details
Former Afghan Republic	May 2019	Zaranj	Khwaja Sultan	Smuggling	IBG soldiers crossed into Afghanistan, pursuing someone trying to cross into Iran illegally. The ABP attempted to apprehend the IBG soldiers, resulting in a cross-border firefight.
	Summer 2019		Hajji Abdul Hamid	Water	IBG soldiers and labourers crossed into Afghan territory to divert water from the Helmand River.
			Khwabjah		IBG soldiers crossed into Afghanistan to widen the Jariki Canal.
	November 2019	Kang	Makiki	Private	In a private dispute over a debt, an ABP soldier intervened and attempted to hold an Iranian national prisoner, resulting in crossfire from the IBG.
	Winter 2019		Barichi	Territorial	IBG soldiers erected an Iranian flag in Afghan territory.
	July 2020		Deh Rais	Smuggling	IBG soldiers crossed into Afghanistan pursuing a smuggler, resulting in cross-border shooting.
Zaranj		Din Mohammed	IBG soldiers fired at people smugglers and migrants, resulting in the ABP returning fire.		
Taliban	November 2021	Kang	Makiki	Water	IBG soldiers openly displayed their weapons at the border, resulting in cross-border fire from Taliban border guards.
	February 2022		Barichi	Territorial	IBG soldiers fired at Afghans farming land near the zero point.
	March 2022		Derwishuk		IBG soldiers fired at Afghan farmers cleaning a canal; Taliban returned fire
	March 2022		Deh Rais	Water	Afghan villagers supported by Taliban prevented an Iranian farmer from pumping water from the Sekhsar Canal when he had crossed to farm his land on the Afghan side of the border; the IBG closed the border in retaliation.
	Summer 2022	Zaranj	Khwaja Sultan	Unknown	Armed clash between IBG soldiers and Taliban border guards; reason unknown.
	March 2023	Kang	Haji Aminullah	Territorial	IBG soldiers fired at shepherds and livestock who strayed close to the zero point.
	May 2023		Derwishuk		IBG soldiers attempted to erect an Iranian flag on the Afghan side of the border fence.
				Makiki	Smuggling
	June 2023	Zaranj	Din Mohammed	Taliban approached the zero point, attempting to arrest migrants, resulting in IBG soldiers firing and leading to cross-border fire.	
	Summer 2023		Hajji Sultan Khan	Territorial	IBG soldiers fired at a Taliban vehicle as it drove close to the border fence.
January 2024	Kang	Telai	IBG soldiers constructed a fence on the Afghan side of the border and the Taliban instructed them to stop; there was no shooting.		

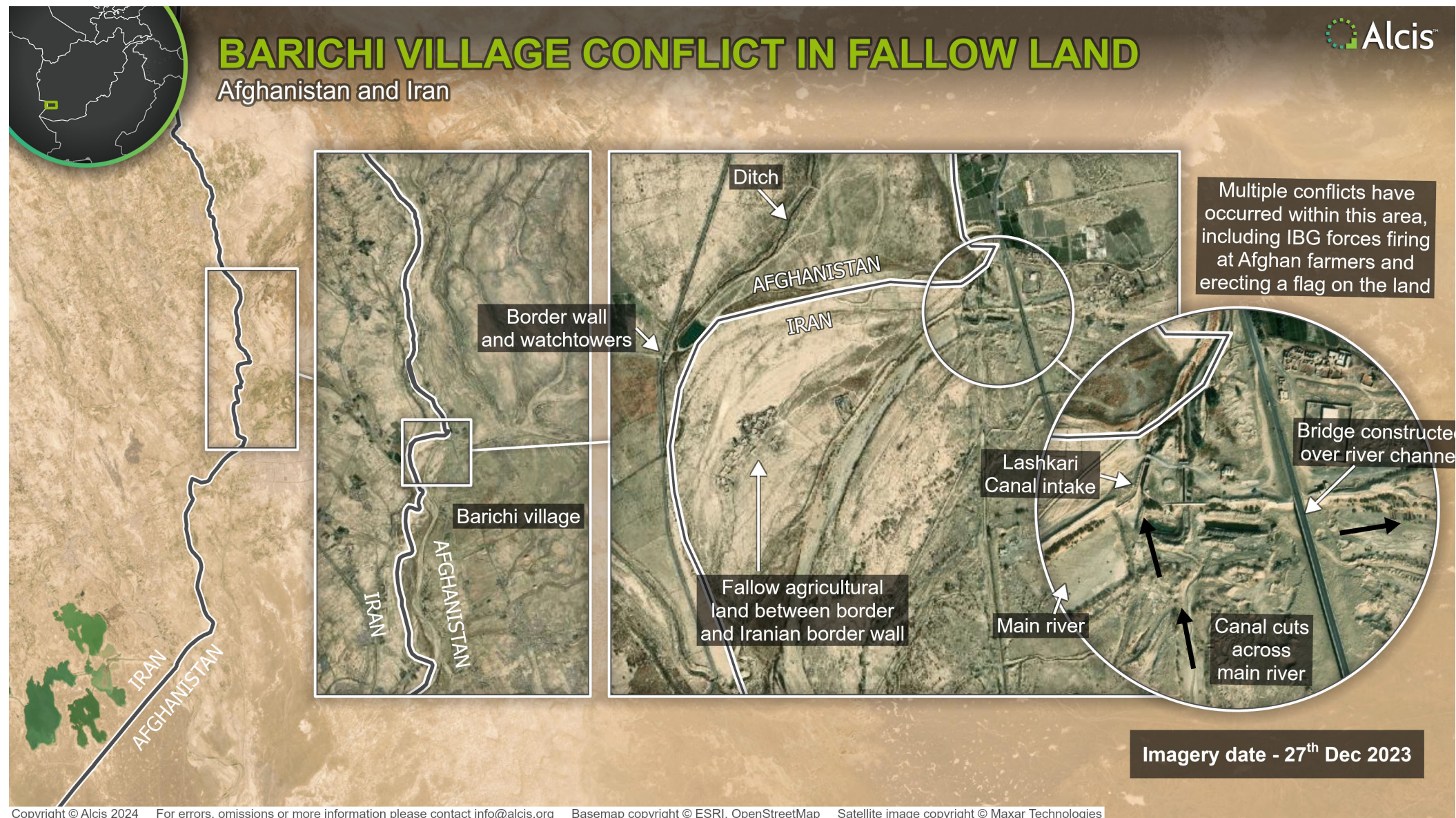


Figure 5: Barichi village and fallow agricultural land on the Iran border (2023)

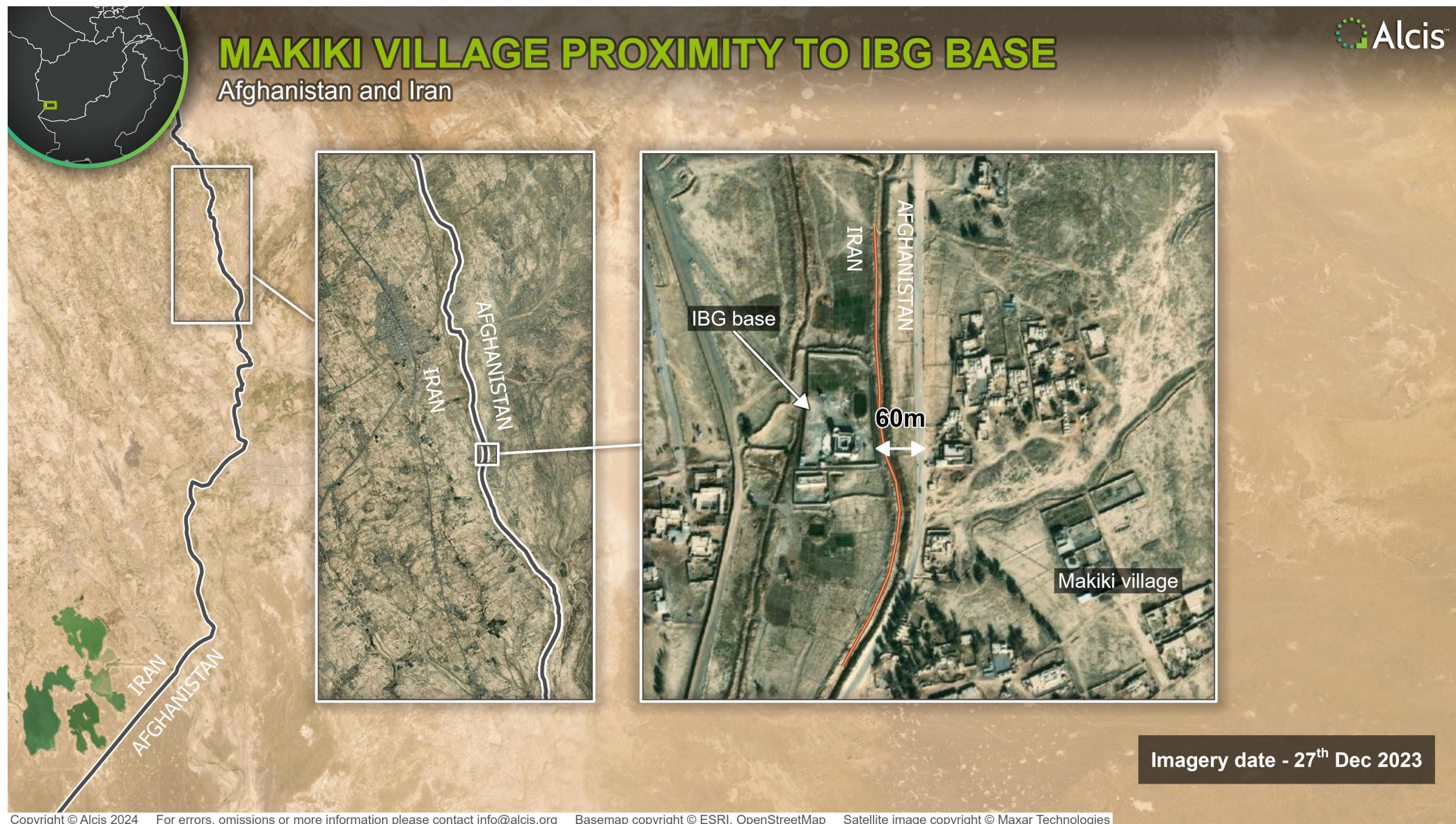


Figure 6: Proximity of farmland to Afghan border posts and Iranian border gates near Makiki village (2023)

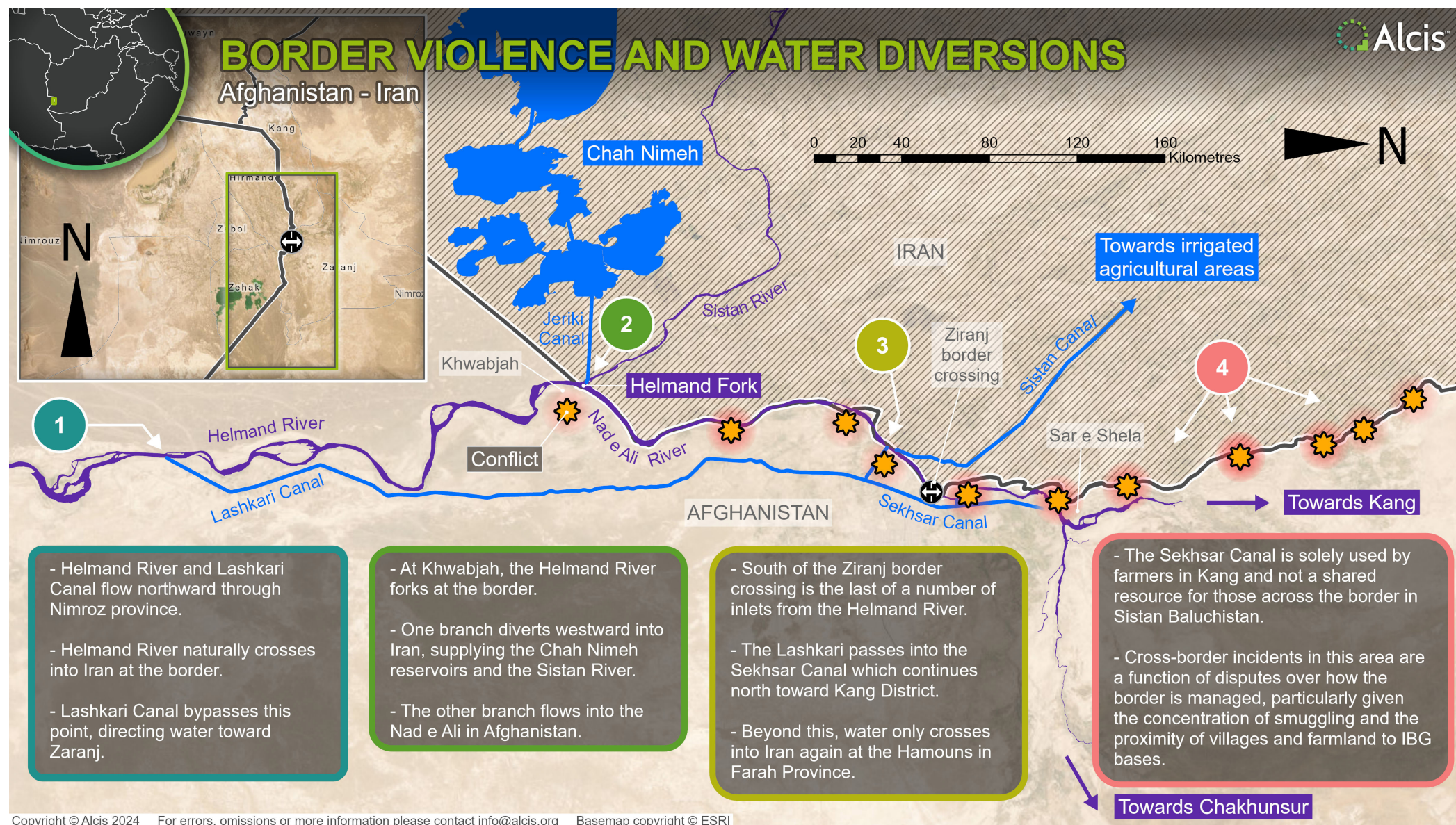


Figure 7: Water flows on the border from Kamal Khan to Kang

Movements of and on the border

As such, the reason for IBG soldiers firing at farmers in Kang is because the farmers are believed to have strayed too close to the fence, not because they are accused of diverting water. In Zaranj, the situation is different, as the Helmand River straddles the border and communities on both sides of the border draw on it for irrigation; however, conflicts over water are infrequent.

A common view among Afghans living in these areas is that the reason for these cross-border conflicts is that the Iranian authorities are trying to intimidate the local population into abandoning their villages, so Iran can acquire the land and move the border further east. Others argue that the IBG wants to create a no man's land with a clear line of sight so it can police the area more effectively.

Some noted a marked shift in how the border is policed immediately following the regular rotations of IBG personnel. Those newly appointed are accused of taking a more aggressive stance, including with civilians approaching the border, as they look to present themselves as disciplinarians and negotiate better terms with cross-border smugglers. Consequently, immediately after their appointment, the number of shots fired across the border can increase, with the risk that the situation might escalate if Afghan forces return fire.

Ultimately, the border fence and accompanying infrastructure changed the dynamics for those on both sides of the Afghanistan-Iran border and, in doing so, increased the likelihood of conflict between the two states. By demarcating the border in such an unambiguous and permanent way, disputes over territory that had once been local became national. The territory near the border fence therefore also became 'sensitive' and a matter of 'national security'; anyone who approached the border, including those farming their land or tending livestock, was viewed as a potential threat. Finally, the proximity of a civilian population to this territory, and the prevalence of cross-border smuggling as a common livelihood strategy, increased the risk of cross-border fighting, especially where common procedures and clear lines of communication had not been agreed between Afghan and Iranian forces.

5. Renegotiating cross-border relations: The Taliban takeover

Following the Taliban takeover in August 2021 and the replacement of ABP staff with former Taliban fighters, the arrangements and relationships between the IBG and their counterparts in the Afghan Republic which underpinned the management of the border simply evaporated. This included both formal and tacit agreements on the cross-border movement of people and goods and reports of the Republic's more passive approach to aggressive border management by the IBG.

In fact, there were several incidents under the Republic where the ABP did not react to Iranian aggression, including where members of the IBG crossed into Afghan territory and physically assaulted civilians. Many of those residing along the border suspect those in the governor of Nimroz's office during the Afghan Republic of having close ties to the Iranian state and capitulating to their interests.

Established lines of communication between ABP and IBG commands and opposing posts on either side of the border also helped manage individual incidents of cross-border fire and mitigated the risk of return fire and escalation.

Changing of the guard

After the Taliban takeover, cross-border relations became more tense. While some of this can be attributed to the anxiety of the Iranian authorities at the rise of the Islamic Emirate, locally there is also evidence of a lack of discipline among Taliban personnel, poor cross-border communications, and the inherent problem associated with the Taliban's policies on what had been 'smuggled goods' under the Republic but were regulated by the Taliban, especially opiates.

Most notable was a lack of professionalism among those appointed to the ABP under the Taliban. These were former insurgent fighters, inexperienced in border management, who were more likely to return fire when IBG soldiers shot into Afghan territory.

There is no doubt that many, battle-worn fighters, enthused by their victory against the Afghan Republic and its allies, were less tolerant of any signs of imperiousness by the Iranian authorities at the border. As can be noted, those residing in Kang chart a marked uptick in the frequency of incidents of Taliban ABP firing back at their counterparts in Iran, including the incident which sparked the border conflict in May 2023.

The drugs trade

Another feature of the Taliban takeover, especially in the period prior to July 2023, is the de facto authority's tolerance, if not regulation, of the drugs trade. In fact, in contrast to Amir Haibatullah's announcement of a comprehensive drugs ban in April 2022, the Taliban allowed the standing poppy crop to be harvested and the trade to continue. The Taliban even regulated the industry through the collection of taxes, including duties, some of which were collected at the checkpoint in Sar-e-Shela, the most southern point in Kang, on the route to the city of Zaranj.

The conditions were so favourable for the drugs trade that the number of catapults in Kang increased following Haibatullah's announcement of the drugs ban, and smugglers operated them openly during the day close to Taliban border posts (see Figure 8). In fact, it was not until July 2023, two months after the heavy fighting between Afghanistan and Iran, that the Taliban eventually began to put pressure on the cross-border trade, seizing catapults and arresting some of the traders.

Conflict erupts

Prior to July 2023, the Taliban's continued support for the drugs trade put the IBG in a difficult position. Absent a viable interlocutor in their efforts to curb drug trafficking into Iran, and with mistrust and poor cross-border communications between the forces, there was an increased risk that IBG soldiers would act unilaterally and fire across the border where they saw smugglers operating with impunity so close to the border. Ultimately, this combination of factors underpinned the outbreak of fighting on 27 May.

Locally, accounts on the border in Kang differ on the precise location of the initial outbreak of violence. Some argue that it was Dewishuk, while others say it was 3.5 kilometres to the south of Makiki. There are also different accounts of what the initial cause was. In Dewishuk, it is alleged that the fighting was provoked by IBG soldiers crossing the border and trying to raise an Iranian national flag; in Makiki, the cause is attributed to the IBG shooting and killing a drugs smuggler who was using a catapult.

“The intensity of the conflict was such that many people fled Makiki with their families.

There is no such disagreement about what followed and the decision by the Taliban to open fire on their counterparts from all the ABP bases straddling the border in both Kang and Zaranj. Locally, there is consensus that what began as a single cross-border incident then escalated into wider violence involving the whole border area, with the heaviest fighting concentrated in the area around Makiki, where the Taliban appear to have crossed the border and overrun an IBG base (see Figure 6).

The intensity of the conflict was such that many people fled Makiki with their families. Some report having been unable to cross the river into Zaranj at Sar-e-Shela due to fighting and having to divert to the district of Chakhansur instead. Houses in the village were destroyed, and there were repeated reports of the city of Zaranj being mortared by the IBG. The conflict continued for up to seven days before the authorities in Kabul and Tehran called a truce and instructed their respective forces to cease fire.

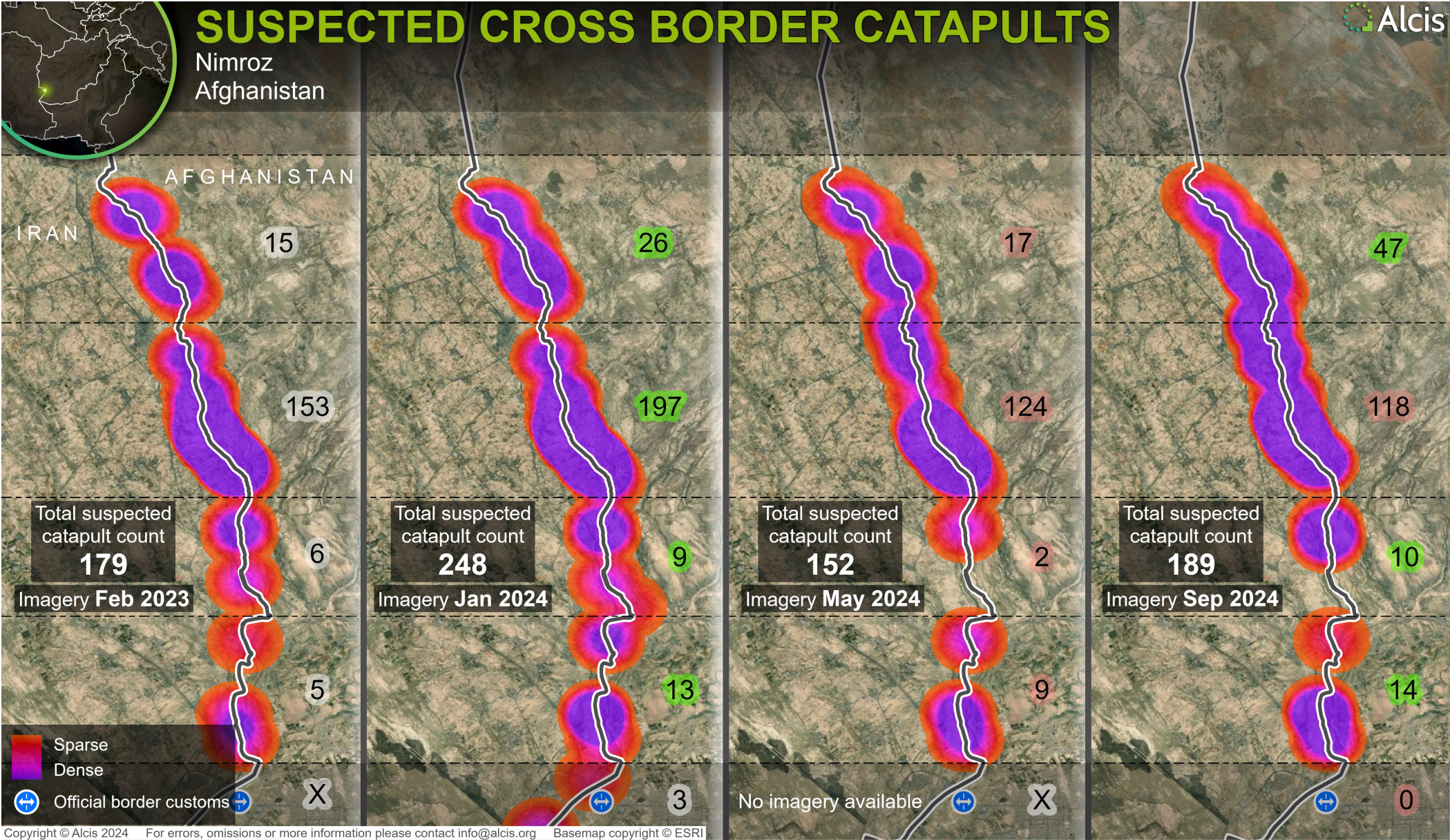


Figure 8: Change in the number of catapults following the drugs ban (2023 to 2024)

6. Conclusion: Confusing correlation with causality

This research has shown that in contrast to the meta-narratives about water disputes and shortages, local explanations for the widespread fighting in May 2023 focus on the border and how it is managed, particularly following the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan. Some reasons that led to the widespread fighting in May 2023 are inherent: a function of the wall, what it represents, and how the IBG understand its role and the territory it is tasked to protect. The prevalence of cross-border smuggling in this region, particularly the trafficking of drugs, is a further factor that heightens the risk of cross-border conflict, especially where there are poor lines of communication between border forces. Other causes of the conflict relate directly to the Taliban takeover and friction between the two forces, initially as they worked through a new understanding of how the border would be managed, but also while the Taliban regulated and encouraged the cross-border trade in drugs.

New balance

Since the events of May 2023, a relative calm has emerged, and many of those residing on the border say a new equilibrium has been reached.

They argue that following the fighting, both Afghan and Iranian border forces sought to improve cross-border communications and avoid direct conflict. In Telai, to the north of Kang, villagers cite an example of IBG soldiers crossing the border to strengthen Iranian border defences and erect a razor wire fence in Afghan territory. Despite the intrusion and allegations that the Iranians attempted to redraw the border, the Taliban are said to have dealt with the situation amicably and instructed the soldiers to cease their construction, which the Iranians did (see Figure 9).

In part, cross-border tensions may not only have eased because of the Afghan and Iranian authorities' desire to avoid a repeat of the May 2023 conflict, but also due to the reduction in cross-border trade through Kang. For example, since March 2024, the Taliban have prohibited the smuggling of livestock

from Afghanistan to Iran, which had often been transported through the border gates at Kang, in an attempt to control domestic meat prices, especially in the run-up to the religious festival of Eid al-Adha.²³ In April, the Iranians moved to restrict the volume of smuggled fuel they allowed to cross into Afghanistan, prohibiting tractors from passing through the border gates and only allowing handcarts to be used.

Perhaps most importantly, the Taliban increased its efforts to curb the drugs trade, thereby further reducing the number of incidents that could provoke cross-border shooting and a confrontation between Afghan and Iranian border forces.

Storing up tensions

However, restrictions on this cross-border trade have made the border even more challenging for the communities living there. Most had become accustomed to cross-border shootings and intermittent interruption of trade, but border tensions and the Taliban's move to ban the drugs trade have significantly increased the risks and costs of cross-border smuggling (see Figure 16).

The challenge for the communities straddling the border is that they turned to cross-border smuggling partly due to the loss of livelihood opportunities, primarily caused by climate change and then by the direct responses of both Afghanistan and Iran to reduced water flows in the Helmand River. With the Taliban and Iranian forces curbing the cross-border trade in livestock, fuel, and drugs, these communities find their last remaining income opportunities under threat. While imagery analysis shows that in 2024 there were some signs of a reprieve for the area, with increased agricultural yields and a greater area under irrigation, it is far from clear how sustainable this might be. This is especially notable given growing climatic pressures on the Helmand River Basin, and how communities and governments on both sides of the border are responding by extracting ever greater volumes of groundwater. Consequently, while the risk of a further outbreak of cross-border fighting between Iranian and Afghan border guards in Nimroz has been tempered by better lines of communications with their counterparts, and improved command and control in the Taliban ranks, the livelihoods of those residing on the border in the districts of Kang and Zaranj are at significant risk.

23. The smuggling route is alleged to have shifted south to remoter parts of the district of Charburjak in Nimroz.

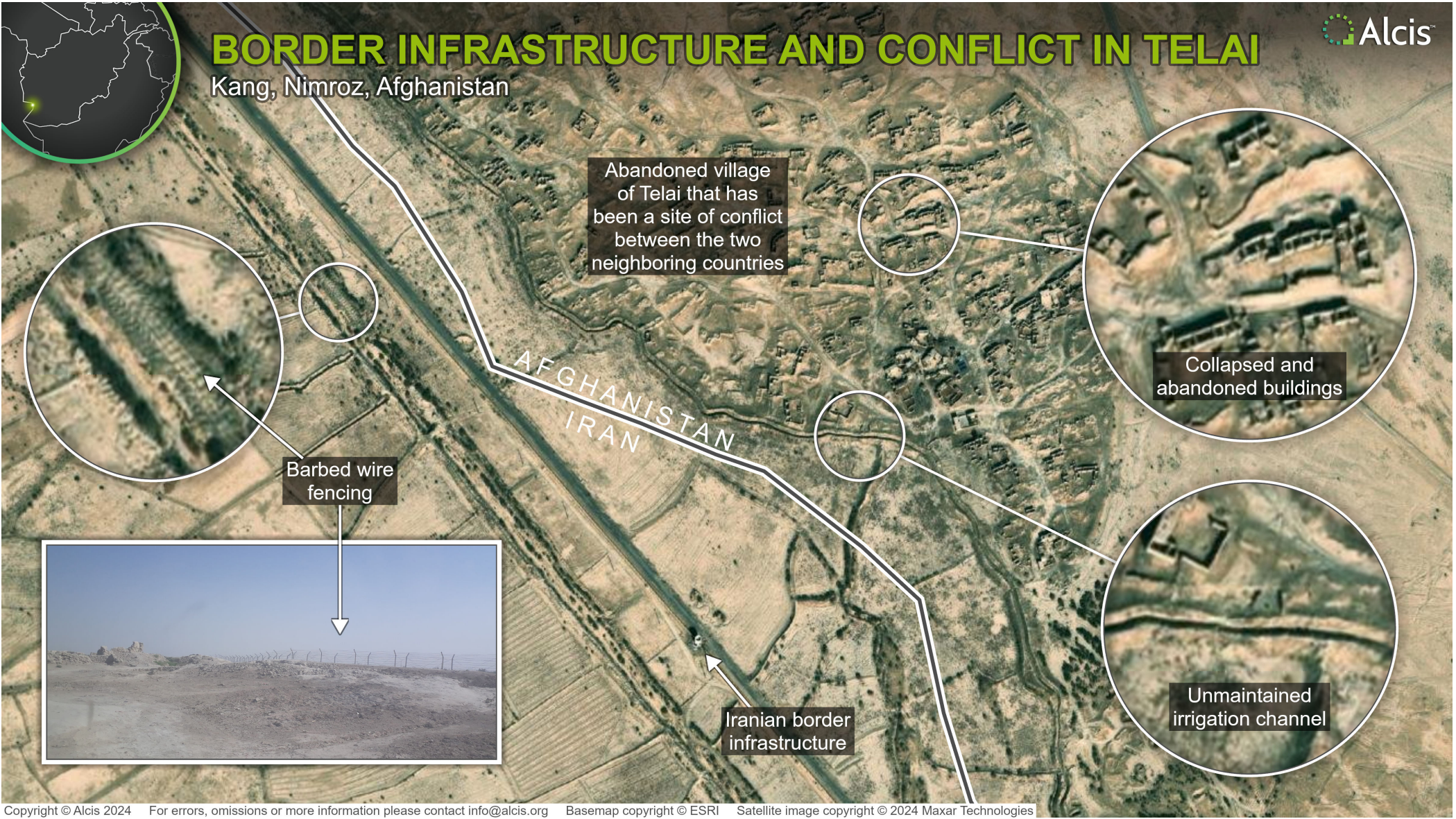


Figure 9: Border infrastructure in the Telai area.

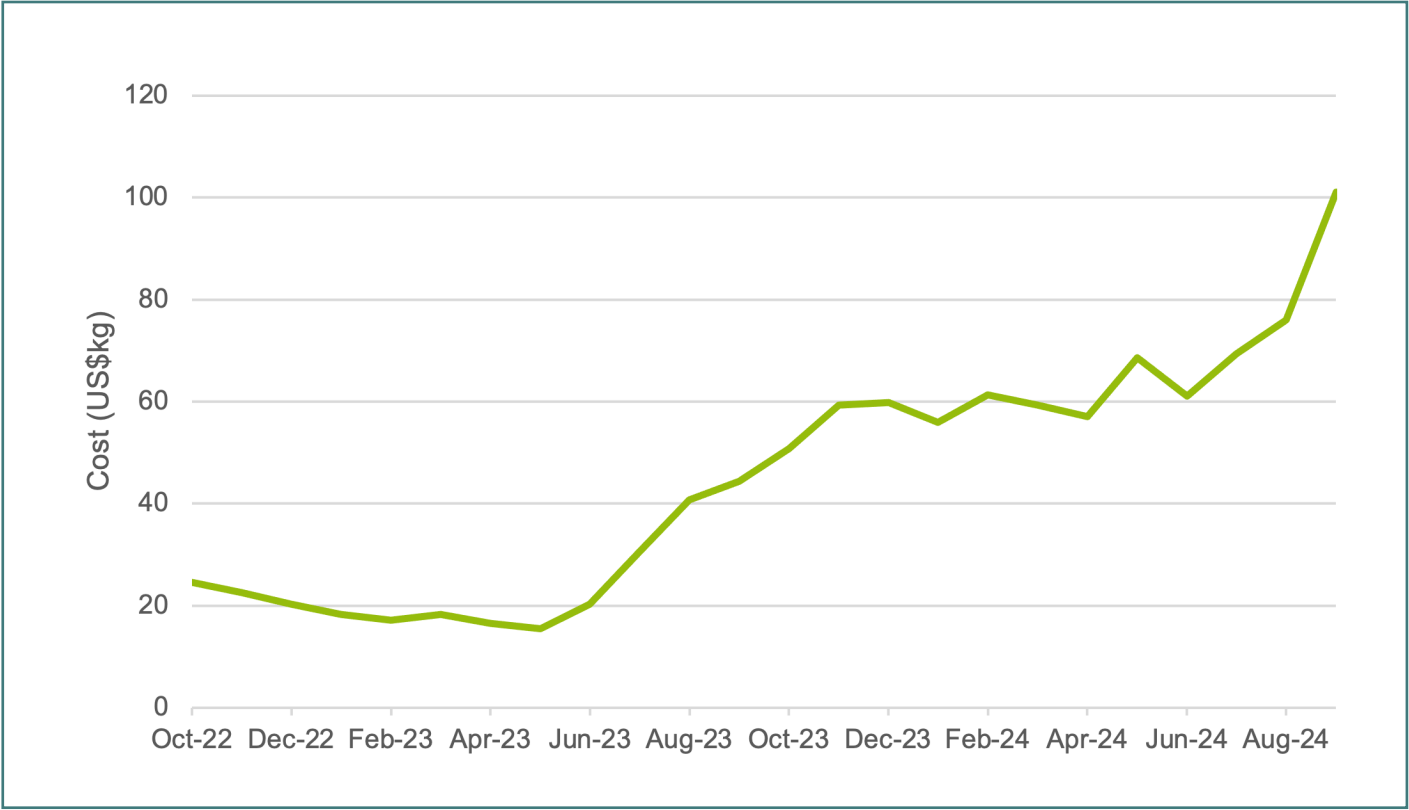


Figure 10: Cost of cross-border smuggling of opium between Kang in Afghanistan and Zahedan in Iran (US\$/kg) (2022 to 2024)

