

Not so Quiet on the Western Front: The Snowball Effect in Afghanistan

Not so Quiet on the Western Front: The Snowball Effect in Afghanistan

Morwari Zafar

The deteriorating security in western Afghanistan may soon be worsened by a water crisis. A snowballing militancy, desiccating wetlands, and environmental migration create a trifecta of challenges to test the mettle of the Afghan government and complicate its already-tense relations with Iran.

In western Afghanistan, intense and increasingly frequent skirmishes between armed groups and the Afghan forces reflect a decidedly stronger militancy. At least three distinct militant groups operate in the area: the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), the Islamic State (IS), and the Taliban. Although they maintain divergent interests, they cooperate to fight against the Afghan security forces. In 2015, the northwestern provinces of Afghanistan began showing signs of distress as the Taliban sprung up in Faryab, Jowzjan, and Sarépul. In three years, the Taliban have ventured further south to Farah and Herat, taking key areas along a strategic corridor for both Afghanistan and Iran.

The incidents in Farah province are crucial to accurately analyzing the security situation in Afghanistan. Anar Dara, in Farah province, was on the verge of collapse in March 2018 before the Afghan forces repelled the Taliban. Less than 200 kilometers south of Anar Dara lies Hamouné Puzak, a parching lake and a source of livelihood for the local communities. It is part of three bodies of water plagued by drought – one entirely in Iran (Hamouné Helmand), another partly in Afghanistan (Hamouné Saberi), and Hamouné

Puzak, which is mostly in Afghanistan. The water shortage has strained life in the already-harsh desert environment and compelled the communities to migrate to less arid areas.

A [recent Science magazine article](#) described the situation in the villages around Hamouné Puzak in Farah as “one of the biggest human security challenges we face in south or west Asia.” Internal displacement and loss of livelihoods has made the population vulnerable to recruitment by insurgent groups and drug traffickers. At a time when the Taliban are pressing further southwest, environmental migrants in search of work in Farah city are pushing north. The space where they collide could have a lasting impression on the politics, security, and culture of the area. According to the International Organization on Migration, one in six people in Farah (among other provinces) are either returning refugees or internally displaced persons (IDPs). Such a vulnerable population amid a burgeoning crisis cannot go unheeded.

From a political perspective, the calculus of power in the region may ultimately rest with Iran. The country’s ongoing frustrations over water rights with Afghanistan could factor into its policy decisions. Iran’s material support to the Taliban is more than an open secret in Afghanistan – it strengthens the Taliban at a time when the Afghan government is desperately trying to bring the insurgent group into the fold. The cooperation is a calculated attempt at maintaining control in an area of strategic importance to Iran. A water agreement signed in 1973 stipulates water-sharing rights between the two countries, but Afghanistan’s recent economic development projects include the establishment of a dam that will cauterize the water flow into the Hamouné Helmand. Iran has stood vehemently against such plans, but the Afghan government insists that Iran’s water shortage is due to Iran’s own failure to effectively manage their resources. The finger-pointing is consequential, as the lack of a resolution threatens both economic

development in Afghanistan and regional cooperation – the two key pillars upon which Afghanistan’s national security strategy is based.

Iran’s incongruous alliance with the Taliban also portends an uneasy future for the much-anticipated Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India (TAPI) pipeline. When the project finally broke ground last February, the Taliban vowed to protect the infrastructure, a move that is not surprising if one recognizes that the Taliban believe they will inherit the 1,130-mile pipeline and its \$400-million projected revenue. The pipeline runs through Farah and is considered a key asset for the Afghan government. Its significance renders it all the more susceptible to being hijacked by competing interests. If Iran can influence the Taliban in Farah, it controls, at least tangentially, a lifeline of the Afghan government.

Caught in the dust storms of barren wetlands and the westward sweep of violence, the local populations are at their most vulnerable. The Afghan government has promised to deploy the army’s 207th Zafar Corps to Anar Dara to bolster security, but a question mark hangs over the fate of residents. How will this unfolding resource conflict in the midst of a political battle affect the communities that depend on little but the land? The answer appears as elusive as the very water itself. The Afghan government must act decisively to both understand and respond to the needs of such populations. If it does not, militant and other armed groups will.