

SECURITIZING SHARED WATERS: A THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF IRAN- AFGHANISTAN HYDROPOLITICS OVER THE HELMAND RIVER BASIN

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Abstract

This paper investigates the securitization of the Helmand River Basin by analyzing Iranian and Afghan media narratives from January 2021 to August 2023. The conflict over water between Afghanistan and Iran dates back to the 19th century and has remained a source of tension in the relations between the two riparian states. This conflict has become particularly pronounced in the context of the recent water crisis in Iran and the construction of dams and infrastructure in Afghanistan. Drawing on securitization theory and Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis, this study analyzes how both countries frame water as a political and security issue. A dataset of 70 news stories from three leading Iranian newspapers (ISNA, IRNA and Tehran Times) and three Afghan outlets (Tolo News, The Kabul Times, and Pajhwok) reveals three dominant securitizing themes: 'legal rights and treaty compliance', 'water infrastructure development', 'environmental and human security'. The findings demonstrate that while Iran emphasizes legal compliance and environmental catastrophe from reduced water flows, Afghanistan frames dam development as essential to national sovereignty and survival under drought conditions. These competing narratives obscure opportunities for cooperative engagement and escalate bilateral tensions, particularly following the Taliban's August 2021 takeover. This study concludes with an argument that de-securitization and transnational water governance mechanisms are critical for regional stability in the context of climate change and water scarcity in the region.

Keywords: Helmand River, Hirmund, Transboundary waters, Hamouns, Hydropolitics

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Introduction

Afghanistan and Iran share two water basins: the Helmand¹ and Harirud. The Helmand River Basin (HRB) is the only transboundary river for which Afghanistan has a treaty with its neighbors.² Given the water situation in the region, this basin holds profound ecological, political and economic significance for both countries. However, asymmetric water availability, competing hydro infrastructure development, and accelerating climate change have transformed it into a hydro-political security complex over the past 150 years.³

For Iran, water scarcity is driven by an increasing population, urbanization, traditional agricultural practices, and inadequate water management. Drought poses a significant challenge nationwide, but the Sistan-Balochistan province, faces acute water scarcity. For this marginalized and politically unstable region with a predominantly ethnic Baloch population, Helmand River serves as the sole reliable water source. The region has endured 40% reduction in precipitation alongside rising temperatures⁴ and its transboundary wetlands, known as the *Hamouns*, depend on the Helmand River's water to sustain the ecosystem: support livelihoods of 7 million basin inhabitants, and endangered species habitats. The environmental, socio-economic, and political factors converge to heighten the securitization of water in Iran. On the other hand, Afghanistan is also facing acute water shortages due to political instability and inadequate water management. With 80% of the population depending on agriculture⁵ water infrastructure has become critical to post-conflict state building and economic recovery.

The dispute between the two neighbors over this shared water resource escalated dramatically after the Taliban's takeover in August 2021, coinciding with severe droughts across the region. According to the World Resources Institute (WRI), Afghanistan and its surrounding regions will

¹ Helmand river is called the *Hirmand River* in Iran.

² Matthew King and Benjamin Sturtewagen, "Making the most of Afghanistan's river basins: Opportunities for regional cooperation", (USA: The East West Institute, February, 2010).

³ Michael Schulz. "Turkey, Syria and Iraq: A hydropolitical security complex". In *Hydropolitics: conflicts over water as a development constraint*, ed. Leif Ohlsson (London: Z books, 1995), 91-122.

⁴ Alex . Dehgan, Lara. Jean. Palmer-Moloney, and Mehdi . Mirzaee, "Water Security and Scarcity: Potential Destabilization in Western Afghanistan and Iranian Sistan and Baluchestan due to Transboundary Water Conflicts," in *Water and Post-Conflict Peacebuilding*, ed. Erika Weinthal, Jessica Troell, and Mikiyasu Nakayama (London: Routledge, 2014), 305–26.

⁵ Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), "Agriculture and Food Security in Afghanistan," Where We Work: Central Asia, accessed June 20, 2026, <https://the.akdn/en/where-we-work/central-asia/afghanistan/agriculture-and-food-security-afghanistan>.

encounter a severe water crisis by 2040.⁶ Iran has accused Afghanistan of manipulating water supplies by reducing the downstream flow through the construction of dams and weirs, thus violating the 1973 Helmand River Treaty. Afghanistan, however, claims that Iran has been utilizing more than its legal share under the 1973 Treaty, i.e., 22 cubic meters per second (m³/sec) to each nation in normal years, plus an additional four m³/sec. Afghanistan argues that the severe drought and climate change necessitates prioritizing domestic needs and that the water infrastructure is crucial for post conflict development and irrigation. Border skirmishes in May 2023 between the two riparian states directly coincided with the longstanding water disputes, signaling how securitization transforms hydro-geopolitical issues into existential bilateral tensions.

This article contributes to scholarly literature on water securitization and transboundary hydro politics. It examines how media and political discourses frame water as an existential threat requiring exceptional measures. A thematic analysis of 70 news stories from three leading Iranian and Afghan newspapers reveals three dominant securitizing themes: ‘legal rights and treaty compliance’, ‘water infrastructure development’, ‘environmental and human security’. The findings demonstrate that while Iran emphasizes legal compliance and environmental catastrophe from reduced water flows, Afghanistan frames dam development as essential to national sovereignty and survival under drought conditions. The thematic analysis of the selected corpus of data reveals that logic of securitization while reflecting genuine human security and environmental concerns, simultaneously intensifies zero-sum conflict framing and forecloses diplomatic pathways. This study argues that understanding these discursive patterns is essential for informing de-securitization strategies and designing inclusive water governance mechanisms suited to regional climatic realities. The article concludes with concrete governance recommendations aimed at supporting more cooperative and sustainable transboundary water management between the two riparian states.

Theoretical Framework

In the evolving global security landscape and shifting discourses, the concept of security transcends traditional military frameworks and encompasses a broader array of non-traditional threats that states face,

⁶ Andrew Maddocks, Samuel Young, and Paul Reig, “Ranking the World's Most Water-Stressed Countries in 2040,” *World Resources Institute*, (August 26, 2015), <https://www.wri.org/insights/ranking-worlds-most-water-stressed-countries-2040>.

including environmental, human, food, health, and societal security. Water security, along with the associated environmental and societal threats, aligns seamlessly with this expanded understanding of security. Securitization involves removing an issue from the realm of everyday politics and justifying exceptional measures to protect the referent object. Buzan, Wæver, and De Wilde's securitization theory posits that security is not an objective condition rather a socially constructed outcome of speech acts and discursive practices. A securitization move involves: i- identifying a threat to a referent object (e.g., state, environment, population, economy, civilization etc.); ii- labelling the threat as existential and requiring exceptional measures that would violate the established rules; and iii- securing acceptance from the audience for emergency actions.⁷ Water securitization refers to framing water as an object of concern that affects the survival of the referent object. Hussam Hussein argues that water scarcity, particularly in arid and semi-arid regions, is the primary driver for water securitization⁸. Christiane Fröhlich argues that in a shared river basin, asymmetric power dynamics and strategic control of water resources can intensify water securitization⁹. Fischhendler's typology for the securitization of water delineates 'strategic securitization' (framing water resources as national and existential security issues for the riparian states) and 'tactical securitization' (linking low-level security concerns to high-level politics). Her typology identifies three mechanisms for the securitization of water: linguistic, structural, and institutional and proves invaluable for analyzing how Afghanistan and Iran and deploy distinct strategies for securitizing waters.¹⁰

Thierry Balzacq's revised framework for securitization proposes three levels of analysis: agent (the securitizing actor), context (historically situated social conditions enabling securitization, and acts (both discursive and non-discursive practices), including the linguistic aspects of the securitization discourse and the resulting policy outcomes.¹¹ This triadic

⁷ Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998).

⁸ Hussam Hussein, "Understanding Water Scarcity in Arid Regions: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Water Scarcity in the Case of Jordan," in *Proceedings of the 7th International Conference on Water Resources and Arid Environments (ICWRAE 7)* (Riyadh: King Saud University, 2016), 204-203.

⁹ Christiane J. Fröhlich, "Security and Discourse: The Israeli–Palestinian Water Conflict," *Conflict, Security & Development* 12, no. 2 (2012): 125, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14678802.2012.688290>.

¹⁰ Itay Fischhendler, "The Securitization of Water Discourse: Theoretical Foundations, Research Gaps and Objectives of the Special Issue," *International Environmental Agreements: Politics, Law and Economics* 15, no. 3 (2015): 245-255. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10784-015-9277-6>.

¹¹ Thierry Balzacq, "Enquiries into Methods: A New Framework for Securitization Analysis," in *Securitization Theory: How Security Problems Emerge and Dissolve*, ed. Thierry Balzacq (London: Routledge, 2010), 31.

approach proves superior to Copenhagen School frameworks when analyzing transboundary disputes, as it allows to analyze how securitizing actors operate within specific historical, geopolitical and climatic, contexts while simultaneously engaging in policy implementation. For the analysis I will use Buzan et al., and Balzacq's framework to analyze how the shared waters of Helmand River have been increasingly framed as a security issue rather than a normal political agenda. The securitization of shared waters has justified the use of exceptional measures, including threats, diplomatic confrontations, and border skirmishes.

Research Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach to examine how water security is discursively constructed in Afghan and Iranian news media. The primary data for this study comprises stories published online in Afghan and Iranian newspapers. Corpus drew from The Afghan newspapers *Tolo News*, *The Kabul Times*, and *Pajhwok*. Similarly, online Iranian newspapers included *Iranian Student News Agency (ISNA)*, a semi-government news agency, *Islamic Republic of Iran News Agency (IRNA)*, and *Tehran Times*. These outlets were selected because of their editorial prominence within their respective domestic media landscapes and the accessibility of their English-language online archives.

The data set is restricted to the time frame from January 2021 to August 2023. It mainly covers the relations between the two riparian states since the Taliban took control of Kabul in August 2021. This time frame allows an analysis of securitization patterns on both sides after the regime change in Kabul. It also coincides with the worst recorded droughts in the region's recent history and record fall in precipitation level 70% below normal.¹²

The data set contain statements of government officials from both sides. The data was collected by systematic advanced searches on the official websites of these newspapers. The phrases 'Helmand River', 'Hirmund River' (for Iranian newspapers), 'Afghanistan' (for Iranian newspapers), and 'Iran' (for Afghan newspapers) were used in the search engine. These phases are not linear but iterative. I read through all the retrieved article's headlines and the first paragraph to determine the securitizing/ enunciating actors. In total, 120 news stories were gathered, of which, after filtering out the duplicates, the final data corpus was left with 70 news stories. The final dataset achieves a

¹² "Afghanistan: Drought - 2021-2026", Relief Web, accessed May, 25, 2026. <https://reliefweb.int/disaster/dr-2021-000022-afg>.

reasonable balance between Afghan (48%, n=34) and Iranian (52%, n=36) sources supporting a critical reading of the security concern in the speech acts.

For data analysis the study employed Braun and Clarke's thematic Analysis which involve a six-sept process: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, constructing themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report.¹³ All the 70 articles were first read and re-read for familiarization with data. Notes were taken to record recurring patterns, actor positions and rhetorical strategies. In the next step the data was coded using labels such as 'treaty violation', 'legal right', 'Hamoun dessication', drought' 'dam as sovereignty' producing some 140 initial codes. The coding process was reflexive with an attention on what these codes and themes reveal about how water is being constructed as a security object, and what political interests and assumptions are embedded in those constructions. The codes were then clustered into themes by examining patterns of similarity and shared meaning. The themes were then clearly defined and named to convey their theoretical significance before the analytical narrative was to be presented in the 'Findings' section. For ensuring reliability two research assistants trained in coding process and thematic analysis gave a separate reading of the corpus and generated codes and themes to ensure an inter coder reliability.

Historical Perspective (150 years of Dispute)

The dispute over the *Helmand River* between Afghanistan and Iran dates back to 1872 when a British colonial officer Fredrik Goldsmid, delineated the primary branch of the *Helmand River* as the natural border between Iran and Afghanistan inadvertently creating asymmetric water distribution. The main irrigated areas and major populations remained on the Iranian side, while the supply canals that fed these irrigated lands and populations were located on the Afghan side of the border. Failing to propose an effective water division, Goldsmid suggested that no work should be conducted on either side of the area, potentially disrupting the essential water supply for irrigation along the banks of the Helmand¹⁴. For the next 30 years, in the absence of an effective dispute resolution mechanism regarding the Helmand River, residents on both sides addressed the issue locally and cooperated in water sharing. In 1903, Sir Henry McMahon, a British officer, arbitrated the conflict and divided the river water equally between the two

¹³ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77-101, <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>.

¹⁴ Mohsen Nagheeby and Jeroen Warner, "The 150-Year Itch: Afghanistan-Iran Hydropolitics Over the Helmand/Hirmand River," *Water Alternatives* 15, no. 3 (2022):559, <https://www.water-alternatives.org/index.php/current-issue?view=article&id=364:issue15-3&catid=1913:vol15>

parties. Later, in 1905, he declared that two-thirds of the Helmand water should be allocated to Afghanistan, and the remaining share going to Iran. This arbitration, however, overlooked the needs of the Hamoun wetlands. Granting a larger share to Afghanistan while ignoring the ground realities of the basin was a political maneuver against the backdrop of the ‘Great Game’ between Russia and the British Empire in the region. It served as a political tool to protect Britain’s interests in the so-called Crown Jewel, ‘India’¹⁵. For Iran, which refused to accept the decision, this represented a threat to its national security and sovereignty. Thus, the Great Game and colonial intervention transformed the Helmand River Basin (HRB) into a hydro-political security complex.¹⁶

In the postcolonial states, the asymmetric and interdependent socio-economic relations, along with the willingness of the independent states to politicize water as a matter of sovereignty and their commitment to modernize through water development programs, determined the relations between the two riparian states.¹⁷ In 1939, a treaty was concluded between the Iranian government of Raza Shah Pahlavi and Zahir Shah’s Afghan government, which provided for equal distribution of all waters of the Helmand River, which reaches Band-e Kamal Khan (30 miles) from the border inside Afghan territory, between Iran and Afghanistan. However, the treaty was not ratified by Afghanistan.

In 1945, the transboundary waters of the Helmand River were securitized as a result of the US-funded Helmand-Arghandab Valley Authority (HAVA) project, which proposed constructing of canals and diversion dams in Afghanistan. Viewing this move as a national security threat, Iran urged the UNSC to resolve the dispute.¹⁸ Later in 1948, Iran and Afghanistan established a three-member commission to investigate the matter and propose a solution. The commission recommended that Iran’s share of the Helmand waters be 22 m³/sec.¹⁹ However, Iran rejected the report and demanded a larger share. In 1973, following a severe drought in the downstream areas of the Helmand River Basin (HRB), the two parties signed the Helmand River Treaty. The treaty allocated 22 m³/sec along with an additional four cubic meters per second. In exchange, Iran agreed to grant

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Mohsen Nagheebay and Jeroen Warner, “The Geopolitical Overlay of the Hydropolitics of the Harirud River Basin,” *International Environmental Agreements: Politics, Law and Economics* 18, no. 6 (2018): 8439-60. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10784-018-9418-9>

¹⁸ Nagheebay and Warner, “The 150- Years Itch.”

¹⁹ Fatemeh Aman, “Water Dispute Escalating between Iran and Afghanistan,” *Atlantic Council Issue Brief*, August 2016.

Afghanistan access to its ports at Bandar Abbas and Chahbahar²⁰. However, this treaty was never ratified or fully implemented due to political unrest and regime changes in both countries, including the coups in Afghanistan in 1973 and 1978, as well as the revolution in Iran in 1979.

Following the Taliban takeover in 1996, tensions over the Helmand River Basin intensified. Various factors contributed to this, including the sectarian differences between the Wahabi Taliban government and Shia Iran, the massacre of Shia Hazaras in Afghanistan by the Taliban, the capture and murder of Iranian diplomats at the Consulate General in Mazare Sharif, and the decision of Taliban government to cut off water flows in the Helmand River amidst the 1999- 2001 drought²¹. Consequently, the *Hamouns* (lakes) in Iran dried up, and sandstorms devastated farmlands and villages²². This period established the discursive precedent of framing water as a weapon of political coercion.

Under the US-backed Afghan government that followed, water continued to be securitized but in an explicitly developmental register. Given the situation in Afghanistan after a long war, water was the only leverage in its bilateral relations. At the inauguration of Kamal Khan Dam, President Ashraf Ghani stated, “Each drop of Afghanistan’s water will be more valuable than our neighbours’ oil”.²³ While such developmental projects were expected to bring socio-economic benefits to Afghanistan, they caused alarm in Iran. Increased agricultural activity in Afghanistan was considered a need of the time to feed the rising population and to serve as an alternative strategy of livelihood against the growing opium economy. Iran feared that these projects would further affect the downstream water flows, affecting agriculture and the livelihoods of people and destabilizing the Sistan–Baluchistan region. After August 15, 2021, when the Taliban returned to power in August 2021, initial optimism about the improved bilateral relations between the two neighbors proved faulty; water disputes remained contentious, escalating and coinciding with severe drought conditions affecting both nations and 2023 border skirmishes.

²⁰ Vincent Thomas and Mahmood Monshipouri Varzi, “A Legal Licence for an Ecological Disaster: The Inadequacies of the 1973 Helmand/Hirmand Water Treaty for Sustainable Transboundary Water Resources Development,” *International Journal of Water Resources Development* 31, no. 4 (2015).499-518. DOI: 10.1080/07900627.2014.1003346.

²¹ Nagheebay and Warner, “The150- Years Itch.”

²² Dehgan et al., “Water Security and Scarcity.”

²³ Nagheebay & Warner, “The150- Years Itch.” Also see “Ashraf Ghani: Our Water Is More Valuable than Our Neighbours’ Oil,” *BBC Persian*, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/persian/afghanistan-47342918>.

The Helmand River Basin

HRB encompassing 41,500 square kilometers, is shared by Afghanistan (89%), Iran (9%), and Pakistan (2%).²⁴ Originating in the Hindu Kush mountains, approximately 40 km west of the Kabul River, the river flows southwest through the Dashte Margo and forms a part of the Afghan-Iranian border for 45 kilometers, eventually draining into the Sistan depression in eastern Iran. The average annual water availability in the HRB is 9,552 Mm³ with substantial variability: the driest years produce approximately 3,000 mm³ while wet years exceed 15,000 mm³, a four-fold differential reflecting climate vulnerability.²⁶

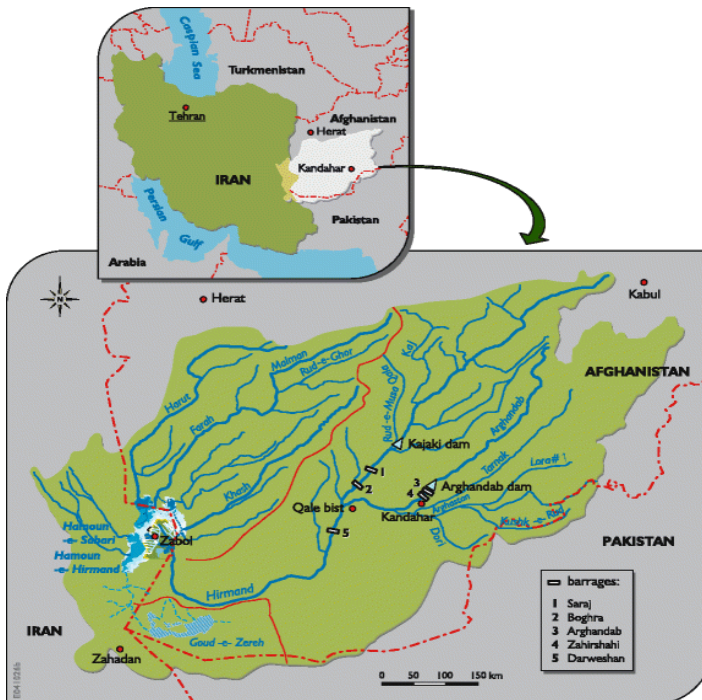


Fig 1: Contributing River basins Sistan inland Delta²⁷

²⁴ Ameneh Mianabadi et al., “International Environmental Conflict Management in Transboundary River Basins,” *Water Resources Management* 34, no. 11 (2020):3445–3464, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11269-020-02576-7>.

²⁵ King and Sturtewagen, “Making the most of Afghanistan’s river basins.”

²⁶ Thomas and Varzi, “A Legal License for an Ecological Disaster.”

²⁷ Eelco van Beek, Babak Bozorgy, Zoltán Vekerdy, and Karen Meijer, “Limits to Agricultural Growth in the Sistan Closed Inland Delta, Iran,” *Irrigation and Drainage Systems* 22, no. 2 (2008): 131–143, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10795-008-9045-7>

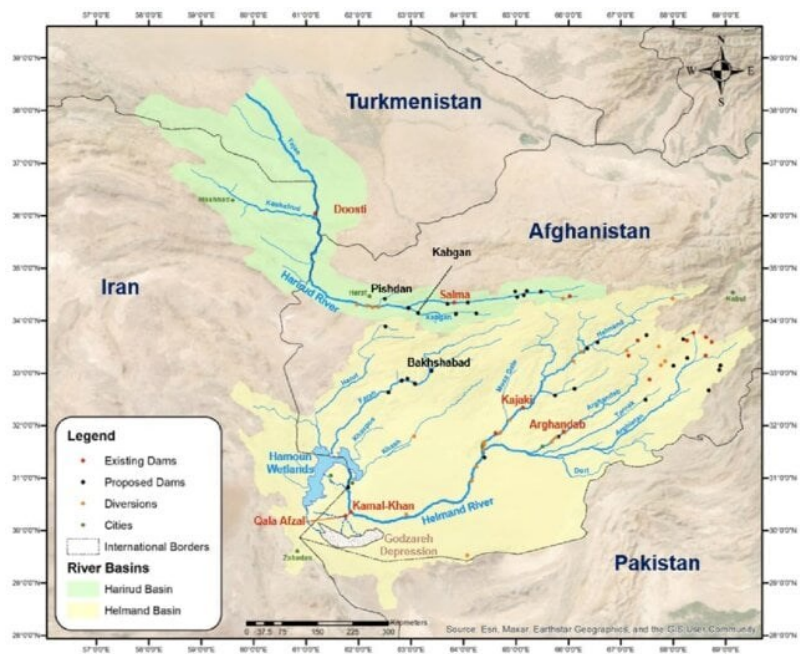


Fig2: The Helmand and Harirud River Basins and their main infrastructures²⁸.

The Sistan Depression consists of a complex of three interconnected and transboundary wetlands: Hamoune Puzhak, Hamoune Sabri, and Hamoun-e-Helmand, comprising approximately 1,250 square kilometers when fully inundated. Hamoun-e-Puzhak lies entirely within Afghanistan, Hamoun-e Helmand/Hamoun-e Hirmand is situated solely in Iran, while Hamoun-e-Sabri is located along the border between the two countries.²⁹ On the Iranian side, this extensive wetland complex has been designated under the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands³⁰ and recognized as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve. Historical evidence indicates the presence of a civilization along the shores of the Hamouns for 5,000 years. The Hamouns hold special

²⁸ Paria Mamasani, Milad Jafari, Behnam Andik, Hojjat Mianabadi, Bahareh Arvin, and Seyedeh Zahra Ghoreishi, “Relative Deprivation, a Silent Driver in Hydropolitics: Evidence from Afghanistan–Iran Water Diplomacy,” *Water Alternatives* 17, no. 2 (2024): 555–585. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/380376380>.

²⁹ Dehgan et al., “Water Security and Scarcity.”

³⁰ Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, *The Annotated Ramsar List: Islamic Republic of Iran* (Gland, Switzerland: Ramsar Convention Secretariat, 2009), www.ramsar.org/cda/en/ramsar-pubs-annolist-annotated-ramsar16557/main/ramsar/1-30-168%5E16557_4000_0

significance in Persian and Zoroastrian literature.³¹ These wetlands provide habitats for a wide variety of birds and fish. However, since 1998, these Hamouns have experienced catastrophic desiccation: with wetland area declining from 3,000 square kilometers in the 1990s to fewer than 300 square kilometers by 2023.³²



Fig 3. The Hamouns (Source: David Mansfield and Alcis, 2025)

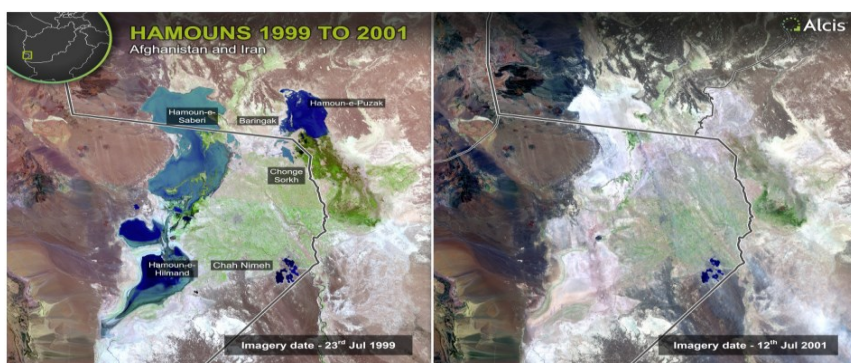


Fig 4. Hamouns 1999-2001 (Source: David Mansfield and Alcis, 2025)

³¹ Aman, "Water Dispute Escalating."

³² Rasoul Kharazmi et al., "Monitoring and Assessment of Seasonal Land Cover Changes Using Remote Sensing: A 30-Year (1987–2016) Case Study of Hamoun Wetland, Iran," *Environmental Monitoring and Assessment* 190, no. 6 (2018): 356, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10661-018-6726-z>.

Over 7 million individuals reside in the Helmand River Basin; the population distribution reflects asymmetric development patterns. On the Afghan side, approximately 4.2 million inhabitants, primarily concentrated in Helmand, Nimroz, Kandahar, and Badghis provinces, depend primarily on irrigated agriculture for their survival.³³ Rural poverty affects 67% of HRB population on Afghan side. On the Iranian side, the river is life line for the 2.6 million inhabitants of the Sistan-Balochistan province, a region characterized by extreme marginalization with highest poverty rate nationally and highest unemployment.³⁴ The predominantly ethnic Baloch population has historically experienced systemic discrimination, drug trafficking and separatist tensions. In this context the upstream water infrastructure development in Afghanistan and the subsequent water scarcity has become integral to Iran's internal security concerns.

Despite being renewable, Helmand waters face severe sustainability challenges. Afghanistan has constructed multiple dams and diversions (including Kamal Khan and Bakhshabad dams) while Iran has built four Chahnimeh reservoirs redirecting water to Zahedan and Zabol cities.³⁵ Climate change has also amplified scarcity: precipitation across the basin declined from 225 millimeters to 200 millimeters while temperatures rose by 10°C during 1990-2024.³⁶ These combined pressures have created conditions where securitization discourses increasingly dominate policy discussions.

Findings and Discussion

Barun and Clarke's Reflexive thematic analysis of the data set generated three themes— Legal Rights and Treaty Compliance, Water Infrastructure, Development, and Sovereignty, and Environmental and Human Security. Together these three themes describe the dominant contours of the discourse of water securitization between Afghanistan and Iran.

Theme 1: Legal Rights and Treaty Compliance

Legal water rights serve as a predominant framework in the water securitization discourse. Both countries have faced a prolonged legal controversy regarding the HRB. In 1973, both nations signed the Helmand River Water Treaty, which consists of 10 articles and stipulates the supply of an average of 22 m³/sec, with an additional 4 m³/sec per second in a normal

³³ Dehgan et al., "Water security and scarcity."

³⁴ "Iran's Sistan-Baluchestan Province Is Country's Poorest," *Iran International*, October, 1, 2023, <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202310019374>

³⁵ David Mansfield and Alcis, *Digging an Ever-Deeper Hole: The Response to Climate Change in the Helmand River Basin* (London: Alcis, 2025). https://www.xcept-research.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/2025-05-21_XCEPT-Public_-_Report_Digging-an-ever-deeper-hole.pdf

³⁶ Mansfield and Alcis, "Digging an ever-deeper hole."

year.³⁷ The treaty made it obligatory that Afghanistan will prevent polluting the water of the river to the extent that it became unsuitable for agriculture. Article 5 of the treaty stipulates that any water management projects affecting downstream flows require prior notification and consultation.³⁸ Despite the goodwill and collaborative spirit, the treaty could not be ratified until 1977 due to political instability in Afghanistan.

Iranian official and media statements use legal frameworks as a primary vehicle to construct water as a security issue. Afghanistan's violation or noncompliance with the treaty is portrayed as an existential threat to both the treaty and Iran's water rights, particularly those concerning the Hamoun. Iran's Parliament Speaker, Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf said: The complete and accurate implementation of the agreement on the Hirmand water right guarantees the mutual interests of Iran and Afghanistan".³⁹ The framing is instructive as implementation of treaty is presented not as a bilateral negotiating process but as a guarantee, a legal certainty that Afghanistan is continuously violating. Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian and President Ebrahim Raisi stressed that there would be 'no compromise on this crucial issue' ⁴⁰positioning legal rights as a matter beyond negotiation and perfecting the 'point of no return' in the securitizing move.

Iran claims to have received less than five percent of its entitled share, a claim which Afghan authorities have repeatedly denied asserting that Iran has consumed significantly more water than its rightful share over the last 50 years⁴¹. Iran considers water rights 'as a yardstick of the Tehran-Kabul interaction'.⁴² Iran demands that the Taliban take practical measures to ensure

³⁷ In the 1973 Treaty A normal water year was defined as a year during which the total flow of water measured at Dehrawoud hydrometric station at the upstream of the Hirmand River, is 5661.715 million cubic meters. See Nagheebay & Warner, "The 150-year itch."

³⁸ Paula Hanasz, "The Politics of Water Security between Afghanistan and Iran," *Strategic Analysis Paper* (Nedland, Australia: Future Directions International, November 10, 2011).

³⁹ "Iran's Parliament Speaker Warns Afghanistan against Hirmand Water Right," *ISNA*, May 21, 2023. Accessed from <https://en.isna.ir/news/1402023119994/Iran-s-Parliament-Speaker-warns-Afghanistan-against-Hirmand-water>.

⁴⁰ "Iran Not to Compromise on Its Water Rights to Hirmand River: FM," *IRNA*, (April 17, 2023), <https://en.irna.ir/news/85085964/Iran-not-to-compromise-on-its-water-rights-to-Hirmand-River>

⁴¹ "Commission Says 1973 Treaty is Best Solution for Helmand River Dispute," *TOLO News*, May 28, 2023, <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-183557>.

⁴² "Iran voices discontent over Kabul's lack of cooperation on Helmand," *IRNA*, May 10, 2022. Accessed May 15, 2022 <https://en.irna.ir/news/84747422/Iran-voices-discontent-over-Kabul-s-lack-of-cooperation-on-Helmand>

the legal rights of Iran and Afghan authorities permit visits by Iranian water experts. However, those requests were declined. Late President Ibrahim Raisi using unmistakably coercive language warned the Afghan authorities: “[I caution you] to take my words very seriously so that you will not complain later”⁴³ signaling that securitization of legal rights was shading into a diplomatic threat.

Afghanistan’s legal narrative is constructed around a different set of premises. Afghanistan claims that Iran does not want a diplomatic solution to the problem and is politicizing the issue by threatening Afghanistan. The Islamic Emirate’s spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid said.

“We still prefer negotiation in this regard, but threats and using inappropriate words is not benefitting either”.⁴⁴

The chargés d’affaires of the Taliban in Islamabad expressed his government’s desire to keep the water issue from deteriorating the bilateral relations with Iran: “The Afghan Taliban never wants its relations with its neighbors to be influenced (by other issues), and according to the Islamic principles, we will not take any steps to violate the rights of our neighbor Iran”.⁴⁵ In a statement, Zabihullah Mujahid, acknowledged legal obligations explicitly : “Iran’s water rights have been fully accepted, and according to the 1973 treaty, we will definitely give Iran water because this is a commitment, but the need and necessity in Afghanistan should also be considered”.⁴⁶ This framing reveals that acceptance of legal rights is coupled with a condition of domestic necessity that functions as an escape clause under exceptional circumstances.

The legal securitization theme reveals the interpretative divergence in the narrative of both countries. Iran holds the treaty as a binding legal instrument and a guarantor of its legal rights and national security and accuses Afghanistan of serious violations of the treaty. For Afghanistan, treaty is only a baseline agreement that must be qualified by domestic needs and climate realities. This divergent interpretation of the legal rights discourse/ dimensions is not in line with hydro climatic variability demands in the HRB.

Theme 2: Water Infrastructure Development

The development of dams and water management infrastructure is the second major securitization theme discussed in media narratives from both

⁴³ “Afghanistan committed to 1972 Water Treaty with neighboring Iran,” *The Kabul Times*, May 21, 2023, <https://thekabultimes.com/afghanistan-committed-to-1972-water-treaty-with-neighboring-iran/>

⁴⁴ Mohammad Farshad Daryosh, “Islamic Emirate Reacts to Remarks of Iranian President,” *Tolo News*, (May 19, 2023), <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-183429>.

⁴⁵ “Taliban will never violate Iran’s rights: Envoy” , IRNA, (May31, 2023), <https://en.irna.ir/news/85127985/Taliban-will-never-violate-Iran-s-rights-Envoy>

⁴⁶ “Envoy Says Iranian Experts Allowed to Visit Helmand River,” *Tolo News*, (June 17, 2023), Accessed June 26, 2023 at <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-183814>

Iran and Afghanistan. Both sides frame the meaning of water infrastructure in their discourses in diametrically opposed ways. While this theme overlaps with legal water rights and environmental security, its prominent presence in media, and consequently in public discourse and political rhetoric, warrants its consideration as a distinct category.

The construction of dams and irrigation infrastructure, such as irrigation canals for agriculture on the Helmand River and other transboundary water sources, is framed as an existential concern in both Iranian and Afghan media. While emphasizing adherence to the 1973 water-sharing treaty, Iranian media repeatedly highlight what they describe as “excessive irrigation and dam construction in Afghanistan” (mentioned in four stories) as a violation of the treaty and, at the same time, a reason for water scarcity in Iran. In May 2023, *IRNA* reported: “Iran’s share of the water has steadily dwindled in recent years due to excessive irrigation and dam construction in Afghanistan, despite terms of a water-sharing treaty between the two neighboring countries that was signed in 1973.”⁴⁷ The use of adjective ‘excessive’ in the discourse is a deliberate choice. It implies that the scale of irrigation and dam construction in Afghanistan exceeds what is necessary or desirable. Consequently, the construction of the dam and irrigation is portrayed not only as a violation of the water-sharing treaty but also as unnecessary for Afghanistan. The passive construction—Iran’s share has dwindled—attributes agency to Afghan actions while obscuring the role of climate change and Iran’s own water management in reducing downstream flows.

Additionally, Iran’s securitization of dam development frames Afghanistan’s water management infrastructure projects as a unilateral act that disregards the historical treaty of 1973. Iranian official Ghasem Taghizadeh Khamesi, the Deputy Minister of Energy for Water and Wastewater Affairs articulated this legal – security linkage explicitly: “Afghanistan should have obtained Iran’s approval to build the dam, as stipulated in the article 5 of the 1973 treaty.”⁴⁸ The use of a strong modality of obligation ‘should have obtained’ positions any unilateral water management project as a direct breach of the treaty. Implicitly, any unilateral dam development project initiated by Afghanistan is portrayed as a zero-sum security concern for Iran. This discourse denies recognition of Afghanistan’s claims about development needs as legitimate.

⁴⁷ “Water, a recurring nightmare in Iran’s Sistan region,” *IRNA*, (May 15, 2023), <https://en.ima.ir/photo/85112647/Water-a-recurring-nightmare-in-Iran-s-Sistan-region>.

⁴⁸ “Iran pushing to secure water share rights to Helmand,” *IRNA*, (July, 29, 2022), <https://en.ima.ir/news/84837289/Iran-pushing-to-secure-water-share-rights-to-Helmand>

On the other hand, Afghan media presents a contrasting narrative. In Afghanistan, the construction of dams and water storage projects is framed as a fundamental step towards achieving national self-sufficiency, economic growth, and agricultural sustainability. Given Afghanistan's historical challenges with water scarcity, inconsistent irrigation, and underdeveloped agricultural infrastructure, dam development is portrayed as an urgent national priority. To make a case for dam construction, Afghan policymakers and media emphasize that despite having significant annual water resources, Afghanistan has one of the lowest water storage capacities in the world, which is concerning for long-term water security of the country. As one-story line mentioned: "Though Afghanistan, with its billion cubic meters of annual water, has been said to be a self-sufficient water country, but it is on paper, as it has the lowest capacity of water reservoir in the world".⁴⁹ Afghan reports often highlight projects such as the Kamal Khan Dam, the Bakhshabad Dam, and other significant hydroelectric and irrigation initiatives as symbols of progress, resilience, and national sovereignty, post-conflict reconstruction rather than geopolitical maneuvers.

Afghan government officials argue that Iranian concerns regarding decreased water flow are secondary, as Afghanistan itself is facing water shortages. As stated by Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid: "Water is not at the level where it can reach Iran. Afghanistan is also suffering from a drought. Everywhere across the country, water levels have dropped. We can see that in Helmand, Badghis, Nimroz, and other provinces, people do not have water to drink".⁵⁰ The reduced downstream flows are attributed to low precipitation and drought, not to water management and infrastructure development choices of Afghanistan, a framing severing the causal chain that Iran's legal securitization depends upon. According to an Afghan government statement: "Whenever a normal year is disrupted by a lack of rainfall and there is an imbalanced situation in the amount of water in the Helmand River, the right of water of Iran also decreases".⁵¹ Afghan government claims that the water of the Helmand River does not even suffice for the hydration of the locals inside Afghanistan, while the most important part of the treaty is the sufficiency of water and its surplus.⁵²

A security commander Abu Ehsan, assigned to protect one of the dams in Afghanistan underscoring military/ security dimension of the discourses stated: "We will not allow any internal or external enemy to create

⁴⁹ "Water treaty committed, improper statements harmful," *The Kabul Times*, (May 21, 2023), <https://thekabultimes.com/water-treaty-committed-improper-statements-harmful/>

⁵⁰ Mohammad Farshad Daryosh, "Iran Gives Afghanistan One Month to Resolve Iran's Water Rights Issue," *Tolo News*, (May 20, 2023). <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-183441>

⁵¹ Daryosh, "Islamic Emirate Reacts to Remarks of Iranian President."

⁵² Water treaty committed, improper statements harmful," *The Kabul Times*, (May 21, 2023), <https://thekabultimes.com/water-treaty-committed-improper-statements-harmful/>

any problem for the dam”.⁵³ By naming and framing the ‘internal and external enemy’ as existential threat, the discourse in Afghanistan transforms water infrastructure development into a matter of national security, legitimatizing exceptional measure for protection of these infrastructures.

The competing narratives on dam infrastructure reveal that both sides securitize the same physical object — ‘dam’—simultaneously as a legal rights violation (Iran’s discourse) and a national security imperative (Afghanistan’s discourse). The competing narratives reflect the positioning of the securitizing actor within the basin. Until this interpretative gap is bridged through a joint commission or an inclusive multilateral dialogue, the water infrastructure development will continue to fuel the conflict between the two riparian states.

Theme 3: Environmental and Human Security

The third theme encompasses the environmental and human security dimensions of the dispute, though its geographic distribution across the corpus is markedly asymmetric. Iranian discourse foregrounds the desiccation of the *Hamoun* wetlands as a civilizational threat. Afghan discourse centers on drinking water scarcity, farmer vulnerability, and climate-driven migration within the country.

On the Iranian side *Hamoun* wetlands play a significant role in the socio-economic, cultural, political, and environmental life of the Sistan Plain. The HRB serves as a crucial resource for sustaining the transboundary Hamoun wetlands, which are an important part of the river delta. In the data set, Iran’s Sistan and Balochistan region is considered the ‘Paradise Lost’ of nature tourism. The province boasts unparalleled natural and historical attractions, and with the geostrategic Chabahar Port, it is also home to a 5000-year-old civilization.⁵⁴ Additionally, the region holds significance for Zoroastrians, who believe that Homoun Lake preserves the seed of Zarathushtra.⁵⁵

People living in the delta on both sides of the HRB engage in farming. However, when these wetlands become inundated, they shift to fishing, bird hunting, or reed harvesting. There is a lack of consensus on both sides regarding the desiccation of the *Hamouns*. Iran asserts that anthropogenic activities, including upstream water diversion for irrigation and the construction of dams and weirs by Afghanistan, have caused water flows to

⁵³ “Basin at Newly Built Kamal Khan Dam is Full,” *Tolo News*, (Jan 22, 2022), <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-176434>

⁵⁴ “Sistan and Baluchestan province: Paradise Lost of nature tourism,” *IRNA*, (Sep 27, 2020), <https://en.irna.ir/news/84054895/Sistan-and-Baluchestan-province-Paradise-Lost-of-nature-tourism>.

⁵⁵ Mianabadi, “International Environmental Conflict.”

decrease significantly below the designated share outlined in the 1973 treaty.⁵⁶ In 2002, Sistan-Balochistan Governor-General Hossein Modarres Khiabani stated: “The four Chah Nimeh lakes supply the majority of the Sistan region’s water needs, but they had lost 75 percent of their water reserves”.⁵⁷ Water irrigation schemes in Afghanistan’s Nimroz, Helmand, and Kandahar have further lowered the water levels in these lakes. The drought and lesser water availability for irrigation have affected Iranian farmers on a similar scale. Furthermore, in 1983, the Iranian authorities introduced a non-native species of fish species that depleted all the reeds in the Hamouns and have contributed to wetlands degradation. The draining of international wetlands has worsened the intensity of cyclones and dust storms in the region.⁵⁸ Although the strong winds, locally known as ‘*Bade sad o Beest rouz*’ or 120-day wind, blow annually during the drought, the duration of the wind-generated sandstorms has been longer than usual. These dust storms create a haze phenomenon and severe health crises in Iran due to pollution, leading to an increase in respiratory diseases among the local population⁵⁹. These environmental consequences are real and serve as powerful resources in the securitization discourse for justifying exceptional political measures, including the threat to repatriate Afghan refugees residing in Iran as leverage over the Taliban government.

On the other hand, the environmental and human security discourse in Afghanistan is framed differently. Afghan sources emphasize the suffering of farmers and rural communities as a legitimacy for exceptional measure, i.e., allowing a reduced downstream flow against the treaty provisions. In the Afghan causal framing the reduction in the water flows downstream is due to drought and declining precipitation in the recent years and that farmers and residents in Afghanistan have the primary claim to usage. As a consequent of water shortages farmers are forced to purchase water and use pumps and have urged the Islamic Emirate not to raise the issue of water rights with the Iranian government. Tolo News reported that a farmer in Helmand, appealed to the government: “We ask that they [*Iran*] not be provided water because the crops, gardens, and wheat in Helmand are all thirsty”.⁶⁰ Chakhansour District Chief Aminullah reported that some farmers lost their livestock due to the drought and migrated to Iran. A farmer shared: “we cultivated our lands and got decent yield, but now we left our land due to drought and migrated, we have a difficult life and even our people are deprived of drinking water, we

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ “Iran pushing to secure water share rights”

⁵⁸ Aman, “Water Dispute Escalating”

⁵⁹ “Water dispute affects Afghanistan-Iran ties: Researcher,” *IRNA*, (June 20, 2026), <https://en.irna.ir/news/84744458/Water-dispute-affects-Afghanistan-Iran-ties-Researcher>.

⁶⁰ “Afghan Farmers: Helmand Should Receive Water First.” *Tolo News*, (April 20, 2023), <https://tolonews.com/business-183161>

want a fundamental solution to this issue.”⁶¹ These testimonies of displacement, livestock loss, and the payment of 700–800 Afghanis per 1,000-litre water tanker provide the human texture that grounds Afghan securitization in lived experience rather than abstract treaty obligations.

Climate change and water scarcity have led to migration and population displacement across both sides of the basin. Due to financial losses, farmers abandon their farmlands and relocate to urban areas for improved livelihoods.

On the Afghan side of the basin, farmers grow wheat, corn, melons, and watermelons; however, because of water scarcity, they are shifting towards opium cultivation. Poppies are drought-resistant and provide high profitability. Afghanistan is the world’s largest producer of opium poppies, which are trafficked through Iran to Central Asia and Europe.⁶² As a result, environmental issues have also contributed to the collateral problem of drug trafficking in the region.

Conclusion: Desecuritization and Regional Cooperation

The geopolitical dynamics and soaring demand for water in Afghanistan and Iran have resulted in the securitization of the shared waters of the Helmand River. The longstanding dispute between these riparian states has become a significant irritant in bilateral relations since the Taliban took control in August 2021. Three analytical insights emerge from a reflexive thematic analysis of discourse surrounding the securitization of water— the theme of legal rights, water infrastructure development, and ecological concerns. Iran attributes its water troubles to Afghanistan, accusing it of manipulating water supplies by reducing downstream flow and jeopardizing environmental and human security. Meanwhile, Afghanistan has framed the shared waters as crucial for development and irrigation while also emphasizing human security and legal rights in its discursive struggle over the contested resource. For Iran, Afghan dam construction represents a violation of 1973 treaty obligations and a national security threat for Iran given the socio-political dynamics of the Sistan – Balochistan region which entirely depends upon Helmand River. Afghanistan acknowledges Iran’s legal rights but considers water infrastructure as a primary domestic need, a sovereign development right and crucial for national survival. Neither framing admits the legitimacy of the other side.

Securitization discourse on both sides deploys existential language and implicit threat construction that escalates the tensions beyond what

⁶¹ Shima Sediqi, “Iran demands water when we are dying of thirst: Nimroz residents,” *Pajhwok Afghan News*, (May, 29, 2023), <https://pajhwok.com/2023/05/29/iran-demands-water-when-we-are-dying-of-thirst-nimroz-resident/>.

⁶² Aman, “Water Dispute.”

rational resource negotiation would warrant. Iran's 'no compromise' declarations and threat of refugee repatriation, and the Taliban's military protection of dam infrastructure reveal how the existential language transforms an issue from a purely management problem into a security issue with incompatible sovereign claims. Once the security register is employed, the issue is brought beyond the bounds of normal politics and diplomacy: the political cost of appearing to concede becomes prohibitively high for leaders on both sides. The securitization pattern contributes to foreclosing the institutional mechanisms—joint technical committees, shared hydrological monitoring, adaptive allocation frameworks—that might accommodate the basin's climatic variability. Thus, securitization outcomes themselves intensify regional instability.

From the analysis some policy implications/ suggestion follow: Desecuritization, i.e., reframing the water resource not as vulnerability or an existential threat but as a shared resource requiring transnational governance, offers the most promising path forward. As projected the climate change will further intensify water scarcity due to droughts and reduced precipitation in the coming years, hence de-securitization is not merely a desirable framing but necessary. Operationally, it would require: the establishment of a joint expert/ technical commission; transnational ecosystem restoration programmes targeting the Hamouns, jointly commissioned hydrological and climate-scenario studies that acknowledge shared vulnerability; scenario-based water allocation frameworks capable of responding to hydro climatic variability; and confidence-building measures that address Afghanistan's legitimate development needs while guaranteeing baseline water security for the Sistan-Balochistan region in Iran.

Limitations and a note on Reflexivity

There are several limitations of this study that need to be acknowledged here. First, the findings reflect a mediated account of securitization of water as the study is based on the analysis of media discourse rather than diplomatic negotiations, policy documents or interview with the policy makers. Second, the findings are based on the story lines of six leading newspapers in Iran and Afghanistan. Although these are influential news outlets, they do not capture a diversity of regional, local and social media narratives surrounding this case study. The third limitation is the specificity of time limit for this study which reflects the dynamics of securitization during that timeframe rather than generalizability for longer-term historical shifts. However, these limitations do not undermine the significance of this study and give a lead to future research.

Consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic analysis, this study recognizes that the themes do not emerge objectively and are a result of author's interpretative engagement with the data set. Coding process was informed both by the theoretical framework and multiple close readings of the data set. The findings do not claim interpretive neutrality. Codes were

revisited iteratively to ensure they are not predetermined by theoretical expectations and remain grounded in empirical data. Particular attention was paid to avoid the risk of privileging one national perspective over the other and to ensure transparency and balancing Afghan and Iranian media narratives.

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