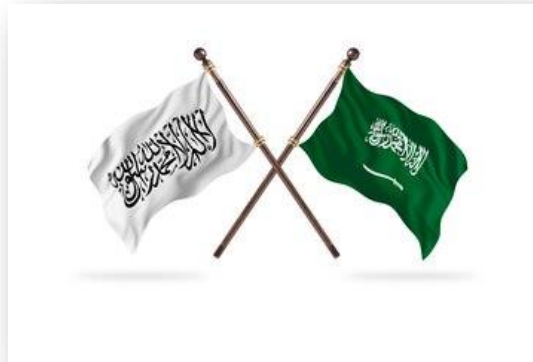


# WEEKLY ANALYSIS

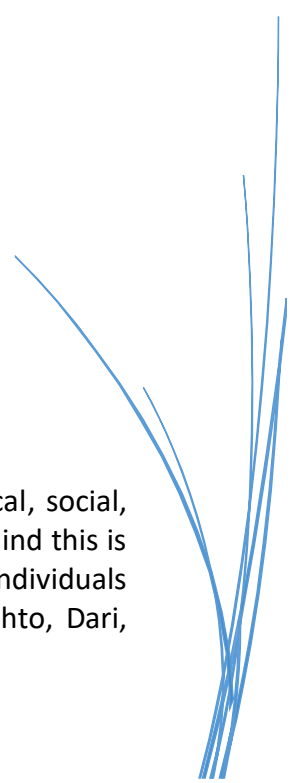
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**A LOOK AT THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE ISLAMIC EMIRATE OF AFGHANISTAN AND SAUDI ARABIA**

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Weekly Analysis is one of the CSRS publications analyzing significant weekly political, social, economic, and security events in Afghanistan and the region. The prime motive behind this is to provide strategic insights and policy solutions to decision-making institutions and individuals in order to help them design better policies. Weekly Analysis is published in Pashto, Dari, English and Arabic languages.



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## A LOOK AT THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE ISLAMIC EMIRATE OF AFGHANISTAN AND SAUDI ARABIA

### Introduction

In recent months, we have seen two high-ranking officials from the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan visit Saudi Arabia: first, Khalifa Sirajuddin Haqqani, a key leader and the Minister of Interior, followed by Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi, the Minister of Foreign Affairs. While the official reason given for these visits was to perform Umrah, the timing and context suggest that there may be deeper dimensions to these trips. Notably, Saudi Arabia had recently reopened its embassy in Kabul, which could indicate a shift in its approach toward the Islamic Emirate.

When the Islamic Emirate returned to power, relations between the two countries had cooled significantly. Saudi Arabia closed its embassy in Kabul, and in response, the Islamic Emirate also appeared to show little interest in renewing ties. However, recent developments—including the reopening of the Saudi embassy and the visits of these senior Afghan officials to the Kingdom—suggest that both sides are now seeking to rebuild and expand their engagement.

This shift raises important questions: What does this change in relations signify? What new interests or incentives have emerged that are encouraging both parties to pursue closer ties?

It appears that several factors are contributing to this renewed interest in cooperation, which this article aims to explore. However, before delving into those reasons, it is essential to briefly review the history of the relationship between the two countries and examine the key issues that once led to their diplomatic chill.

### THE HISTORY OF RELATIONS BETWEEN THE ISLAMIC EMIRATE AND SAUDI ARABIA

In the mid-1990s, Saudi Arabia became disillusioned with Afghanistan's internal situation. After heavily supporting the Afghan Mujahideen during the jihad against the Soviets, Saudi leaders were disappointed to see the Mujahideen groups turn against one another in a brutal civil war. They lost interest in engaging further. It was during this time that the Taliban movement, led by Mullah Mohammad Omar Mujahid, emerged.

The Taliban quickly gained control over large parts of southern Afghanistan, bringing relative stability to areas that had been torn apart by infighting. Their swift military advances, particularly toward Kabul, caught Saudi Arabia's attention. As a result, Saudi Arabia extended its support to the Taliban. After the Taliban captured Kabul and established the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, along with the United Arab Emirates and Pakistan, officially recognized the new government. This marked a clear and direct endorsement of the Taliban by Saudi Arabia at the time.



The relationship between the Islamic Emirate and Saudi Arabia remained steady until the tragic events of September 11, 2001. Following the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia completely cut off its ties with the Taliban. With the fall of the Islamic Emirate and the establishment of a new republic, Saudi Arabia began engaging with the new Afghan government.

During the two decades of conflict that followed, as the Taliban waged an insurgency against the U.S. presence and the Afghan government it supported, Saudi Arabia stood firmly with the United States and the republic government. It had no formal engagement with the Taliban and even took actions against them. One significant example was hosting a conference of Islamic scholars, where a religious ruling (fatwa) was issued declaring the war in Afghanistan as forbidden (haram). This move angered the Taliban deeply.

After the withdrawal of U.S. forces and the return of the Islamic Emirate to power, many expected that the historical ties between Saudi Arabia and the Taliban would quickly resume. However, the opposite occurred. Relations between the two remained distant and cold. Even though Riyadh offered a \$30 million aid package in what appeared to be an effort to rebuild ties, the gesture did little to improve its standing in the Taliban's foreign policy priorities.

It seems that the Islamic Emirate did not give enough attention to Saudi Arabia, which may have led Riyadh to shut down its embassy in Kabul in late 2022, citing security concerns.

#### **SAUDI ARABIA'S POSITIVE SIGNALS TO WIN THE ATTENTION OF THE ISLAMIC EMIRATE**

When the Islamic Emirate unexpectedly returned to power in Afghanistan, it came as a surprise to many countries, including Saudi Arabia. Over time, the Emirate steadily strengthened its control across the country and began expanding its ties with regional countries—some of which are known rivals of Saudi Arabia. Given this context, it was understandable that Riyadh would not be comfortable being left out of the picture. As a result, Saudi Arabia began making efforts to rebuild its relationship with the Taliban.

Like many other countries, Saudi Arabia has approached the new reality in Afghanistan with caution. However, it has also taken several meaningful steps to show its willingness to engage. One of the most notable gestures was the invitation extended by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to Mullah Mohammad Yaqoob Mujahid, the Taliban's acting Defense Minister, to attend a special reception held during the annual Hajj pilgrimage. At this event, Mullah Yaqoob was treated as an official guest alongside high-ranking representatives of other Islamic countries.

Although the gathering took place during a religious event, the formal hospitality extended to a senior Taliban leader was widely seen as a clear sign of Saudi Arabia's openness to establishing closer ties with the Islamic Emirate.

Another major step by Riyadh was the reopening of its embassy in Kabul in late 2024 (Hijri year 1443). This move sent a strong message that Saudi Arabia did not want to fall behind other nations that had already engaged with the new Afghan authorities. The tone of the official statement issued by the Saudi government further reinforced this intention. It stated: *"In line with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's desire to provide all services to the brotherly people of Afghanistan, it has been decided that the Saudi diplomatic mission in Kabul will resume its operations starting from December 22."*

### THE ISLAMIC EMIRATE'S POSITIVE RESPONSE TO SAUDI ARABIA'S SIGNALS

Although it has become common for officials of the Islamic Emirate to travel to Saudi Arabia for the Hajj pilgrimage since their return to power, the recent visits by two high-ranking Taliban leaders suggest more than just religious obligations. These visits can be interpreted as a positive response to the signals Riyadh has been sending to rebuild ties with Afghanistan's new rulers.

Soon after the reopening of the Saudi embassy in Kabul, a significant diplomatic gesture followed: in February 2025 (Dhul-Hijjah 1443), Khalifa Sirajuddin Haqqani, a key leader of the Islamic Emirate and acting Minister of Interior, traveled to Saudi Arabia. While he had previously visited the Kingdom in the spring of the same year for the Umrah pilgrimage, this more recent visit appears to have had broader political and diplomatic purposes, particularly in the context of improving bilateral relations.

Following Haqqani's visit, Amir Khan Muttaqi, the acting Foreign Minister, began the New Year (1444 Hijri / 2025 Gregorian) with his trip to Saudi Arabia. Though this visit was officially described as a religious pilgrimage, the surrounding developments suggested deeper diplomatic intentions. According to official sources, the trip aimed to strengthen bilateral ties, explore opportunities for economic cooperation, address the situation of Afghan migrants in Saudi Arabia, and discuss regional and broader Islamic world issues.

The significance of this visit was underscored by the high-level reception given to Muttaqi by Saudi officials, complete with full diplomatic protocol and formal hospitality. The warm welcome, along with the important topics discussed, made it clear that both sides are eager to move past the coolness that had defined their relationship over the previous three years. These developments point toward a mutual desire to deepen engagement and bring their diplomatic relations to a more official and active level.



## MUTUAL INTERESTS BEHIND THE RENEWAL OF RELATIONS BETWEEN KABUL AND RIYADH. FROM

### Kabul's Perspective

For the Islamic Emirate, building a strong and broad relationship with Saudi Arabia is not just important—it is essential, and for several reasons.

First, as a relatively new and unrecognized government, the Islamic Emirate needs to establish diplomatic ties with countries around the world, especially with influential ones like Saudi Arabia. Gaining recognition on the international stage remains a top priority, and Saudi Arabia, as a key player in the Muslim world and a powerful voice within the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), could play a vital role in accelerating that process.

Second, Saudi Arabia has long been a major destination for Afghan migrant workers. In recent years, however, their situation has been largely overlooked. The Islamic Emirate sees an opportunity to revisit this issue and push for new agreements that could lead to the organized and legal dispatch of Afghan laborers to the Kingdom. This could not only improve the livelihood of many Afghan families but also help ease unemployment at home.

Third, there's the economic dimension. While Afghanistan presents attractive investment opportunities for Saudi Arabia, the Emirate also sees Saudi support as crucial for its own economic goals. Attracting investment from countries with strong financial capacity. Like Saudi Arabia, it requires close engagement. The Islamic Emirate has prioritized foreign investment in its policy agenda, and strong ties with Riyadh could help turn that vision into reality.

Lastly, Saudi Arabia holds a unique position in global and regional politics. Its close relationship with Western countries, particularly the United States, means that it could potentially serve as a mediator or a diplomatic bridge between the Islamic Emirate and the West. If Kabul can build a warm and trusting relationship with Riyadh, it might help soften the stance of Western countries, especially the U.S., toward the current Afghan government.

In short, for the Islamic Emirate, renewing and strengthening ties with Saudi Arabia is not just about religion or tradition; it's about diplomacy, economic opportunity, and international legitimacy.

### B. from Riyadh's Perspective

While this article generally suggests that the Islamic Emirate was initially not strongly inclined to establish close relations with Riyadh, due to a range of contextual factors, this should not be interpreted as hostility toward Saudi Arabia or a complete lack of interest in maintaining ties. Rather, it seems the Islamic Emirate was expecting Saudi Arabia to take the first step in re-engagement.



Over the past two years, Riyadh has come to recognize that distancing itself from Afghanistan has not helped advance certain regional political and economic goals. As one of the major powers in the region, Saudi Arabia understands that, given the complex challenges facing the Middle East and the broader Muslim world, achieving several of its strategic objectives is not possible without some level of engagement with Afghanistan.

There are several key dimensions to this realization. First is the regional competition Saudi Arabia faces from countries such as Iran, Qatar, Turkey, and even the United Arab Emirates. All of these states have established warm and active relationships with the Islamic Emirate, while Saudi Arabia found itself increasingly isolated from regional developments centered on Afghanistan. This absence weakened Riyadh's diplomatic influence and visibility in Afghan-related regional dynamics. As a result, Saudi Arabia felt compelled to re-enter the Afghan political landscape to maintain its status as a central actor in regional affairs.

Another important factor is economic. While Saudi Arabia traditionally aligns its economic strategies with Western powers on a global scale, it cannot afford to ignore the economic opportunities emerging within its immediate region, particularly in Central and South Asia. The growing economic potential of Afghanistan, especially under a relatively stable political structure, has opened the door for large-scale regional projects. For Saudi Arabia to secure a meaningful role in this evolving economic environment, it was essential to initiate positive engagement with the current Afghan government.

In short, Riyadh's renewed interest in reestablishing relations with the Islamic Emirate is shaped by a blend of geopolitical competition, regional economic aspirations, and the recognition that isolation from Afghanistan may hinder its broader strategic interests.

#### **DOMESTIC AND REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS OF CLOSER TIES BETWEEN KABUL AND RIYADH**

Given Afghanistan's current circumstances, both the absence and the establishment of close relations between Riyadh and Kabul carry significant positive and negative consequences for Afghanistan and the broader region. On the positive side, it is evident that a close bilateral relationship could be mutually beneficial. The Islamic Emirate could leverage Riyadh's capacities and resources to advance a range of its objectives, particularly in areas outlined earlier. Conversely, for Riyadh, deeper engagement with the Islamic Emirate offers strategic advantages. As previously discussed, such engagement could support Saudi Arabia in achieving specific political and economic goals.

However, this is only one aspect of the situation. The other, often overlooked, dimension concerns the potential negative consequences for Afghanistan arising from a closer Saudi-Afghan relationship. Chief among these risks is the possibility of intensifying geopolitical



rivalries, particularly with states that view Saudi Arabia as a competitor. Riyadh is currently engaged in varying degrees of competition with regional powers such as Iran, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and even Turkey. There is a real possibility that elements of this rivalry could play out on Afghan soil.

The reverse is also true: Saudi Arabia's deepening ties with the Islamic Emirate may provoke rival states, especially Iran, to respond in ways that could destabilize Afghanistan. Such dynamics have occurred in the past and have had detrimental effects on the country's internal affairs. In light of these challenges, the Islamic Emirate must act with strategic foresight to ensure that Afghanistan does not once again become an arena for the proxy struggles of foreign powers.

That said, the Islamic Emirate has, over the past three and a half years, largely succeeded in maintaining a balanced foreign policy. Preserving this equilibrium will be critical as Afghanistan navigates the complex implications of increased engagement with Saudi Arabia.

## CONCLUSION

Saudi Arabia, once a staunch supporter of the Islamic Emirate, severed its ties following global and regional shifts concerning Afghanistan. In alignment with international sentiment at the time, largely opposed to the Islamic Emirate, Riyadh sought to delegitimize the Emirate's struggle by portraying it as religiously unjustified. After the reestablishment of the Islamic Emirate, Saudi Arabia was unable to secure a significant position within its foreign policy priorities. However, with the Islamic Emirate now consolidating its authority across Afghanistan, Riyadh appears to have reassessed its position and is moving toward re-engagement.

While Saudi Arabia's primary motivation lies in advancing its political, economic, and security interests, this rapprochement presents an important opportunity for the Islamic Emirate as well. Leveraging Riyadh's international standing—both politically and economically—could yield significant benefits for Afghanistan. Given Saudi Arabia's evident interest in rebuilding ties, as reflected in its recent diplomatic behavior, the Islamic Emirate should seek to make optimal use of this emerging opportunity.

Although the Emirate's current diplomatic posture toward Riyadh appears measured and appropriate, maximum advantage must be taken of the evolving circumstances. Nonetheless, caution must prevail. The Islamic Emirate should remain vigilant to ensure that Afghanistan is not once again exploited as a battleground for the geopolitical rivalries of regional powers—particularly Saudi Arabia's competition with other states. Such dynamics have historically been detrimental to Afghanistan's stability.





## RECOMMENDATIONS

Considering the analysis presented, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. The Islamic Emirate should capitalize on the emerging diplomatic space between Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia to expand bilateral political and economic relations.
2. Greater attention must be paid to the conditions of Afghan migrants and laborers residing in Saudi Arabia, and formal agreements should be established to facilitate the legal deployment of Afghan workers to the kingdom.
3. The Islamic Emirate should strategically utilize Saudi Arabia's influential position within the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to gain political legitimacy among Islamic nations.
4. Through closer engagement with Riyadh, the Islamic Emirate may explore opportunities for Saudi Arabia to mediate a shift in the stance of Western countries, particularly the United States, toward Afghanistan.
5. Finally, the Islamic Emirate must exercise extreme caution to avoid becoming a tool in the regional power struggles between Saudi Arabia and its rivals. Ensuring Afghanistan's neutrality and sovereignty in these geopolitical contests is essential.

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