

## **Ties with Iran Boosted**

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Tehran opens diplomatic mission in Mazar where nine Iranians were killed by Taleban forces.

In a significant development that points to the changing nature of political relationships throughout the region, Iran in February opened a new consular office in the northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif.

It was five and a half years ago that nine Iranians – eight officials and a journalist – were killed here by Taleban forces when they took over the city from members of the Northern Alliance.

The new Iranian consulate is located just north of Mazar-e-Sharif's famous shrine of Hazrat Ali, which has a special meaning for Shia Muslims, the predominant sect in Iran.

Mohammad Reza Bahrami, Iran's ambassador to Afghanistan, said his nation had decided to reopen its offices here because "the security situation in the north of the country is improving day by day".

Emphasising Iran's commitment to the country, he said, "Our experience of the past is that lack of security in Afghanistan not only harms Afghanistan itself, but hurts neighbouring countries as well."

Bahrami made no mention of Iran's well-documented support of Northern Alliance forces during the civil war against the Taleban. Iran was known to be a major supplier of money and weapons to those who fought against the Islamic militia in the late Nineties.

In August 1998, during the Taleban's assault on the city, nine Iranians were killed at the consulate. At the time, Tehran claimed to have evidence that Mullah Omar, the Taleban leader, had personally ordered the attack on the consulate.

Iran has also been home to millions of Afghan refugees over the past two decades – the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimates that more than a million remain there today – and many people still want to go to Iran for work so they can send money back home to their families.

Afghans also visit the Muslim shrine at Mashad in northeast Iran.

At the official opening of the consulate, Bahrami noted that Iran had pledged 560 million US dollars of aid for reconstructing Afghanistan over a five-year period.

Projects included a bridge in the southwest of Afghanistan near the Iranian border, a main electricity supply line from Iran to Herat, and a vocational training centre in the southwest Afghan city of Zaranj.

Iran has also donated 50 buses to the Afghan ministry of transport, said Bahrami.

Lutfullah Zakiri, who will serve as Iran's consul general in Mazar-e-Sharif, noted that "when we arrived in

Mazar, we also presented a large [number] of books, amplifiers, computers and photocopying machines to the head of Balkh University in the city”.

The dean of the university, Engineer Habibullah Habib, is also acting governor of Balkh province.

Many, especially those engaged in trade with Iran, applauded the opening of the consulate, saying it will save them time and eliminate the inconvenience of having to travel to another city to obtain the required documents.

An Afghan trader, Sayed Hussain Alawi, said “The opening of the Iranian consulate in Mazar has helped traders a lot. In the past we had to go to Kabul or Herat to get our visas, but now we can get them in Mazar, which makes going to Iran much easier.”

But some complained that it was still difficult to acquire the required visa.

“My son had a serious motor accident in Iran, and I want to go immediately,” said Ghulam Sakhi. “But I have already been applying for a visa for the past three days, and I have no idea how my son is at the moment.”

Ali Dad, who was waiting outside the consulate, complained that, “My mother is in Iran, and she wants to see me. I also want to go to bring my family back from Iran. But I too have been waiting three days for a visa.”

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