



AFGHANISTAN IN US-IRAN RELATIONS IN THE 1990S

*Veselina Uzunova*¹


In the rising new world order, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, confrontation and partnership alternated between US and Iranian policies on the situation in Afghanistan. It was viewed by both US and Iranian governments as a tricky, delicate and potentially turbulent zone of international relations. The present study examines the relations between the administrations of G. Bush, Bill Clinton and G.W. Bush and Iranian Presidents Rafsanjani and Khatami during the Afghan Civil War, the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent operation to overthrow the Taliban. In the light of the American troops withdrawal from Afghanistan announced by the US State Department earlier this year, the article offers a review of the US and Iranian policies in Afghanistan in the 1990s.

Key words: international relations, Afghanistan, Iran, United States, Middle East, Six-Plus-Two Dialogue

JEL: N45, F50

1 INTRODUCTION

The policies and national doctrines of the United States and Iran since the late 20th century have often led to confrontation between the two states. The clash came from the perceptions and methods of conducting policies in the Middle East and the mutually intolerable visions of the two nations regarding one another's role in the political order of the region. The US, being a world superpower, pursued a “destroy-and-rebuild” policy, while the regional power Iran relied on religious and cultural obsession and transformation. The sense of mutual misunderstanding and antagonism between the two

¹ Veselina Uzunova, PhD., Institute for Historical Studies, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Shipchensky Prohod 51, 1113 Sofia, Republic of Bulgaria, e-mail: vesselinauzunova@gmail.com.
 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5058-3820>

Veselina Uzunova is a PhD graduate from the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. Since 2019 she has started working in the Regional Museum of History in Haskovo and since 2021 she has become a part-time assistant-professor in the Institute for Historical Studies in the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. She is the author of 4 books and over 20 studies and articles on US-Iranian relations, conflicts in the Middle East, Bulgarian modern history 1944 – 1989 with focus on the specifics of the totalitarian regime, economic history, communist ideology, propaganda and human rights.

countries has been particularly acute in their Afghanistan and Iraq policies since 1979² (Carter Library 2023). The United States has been considering the Middle East as a region of paramount strategic and economic importance. Iranians have traditionally been regarded as the leader everyone adhered to, but ever since 1979, Tehran has had the ambition to unite Shī‘a minorities in Middle Eastern countries, to nurture irredentism in them, to make revolutionary changes in Muslim societies that would break their centuries-old ties with the West. The Islamic Republic, as a state structure, was an unprecedented innovation that no one could trust. Its aggressive and intolerant demeanour towards the rest of the Middle Eastern countries, in pursuance of its imperial policy, was a clear precondition for the creation of an anti-Persian front dedicated to isolation of Iran, neutralisation of its foreign policy instruments and encapsulation of all pro-Shī‘a formations working for the Iranian interests abroad (Paul 1999). Those new circumstances displaced the traditional strata in most of the Middle Eastern states and required the elaboration and development of new and adequate political doctrines (CIA Archives 2023).

The chaos in the international relations since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989 put American politics in need of a general revision of Washington’s relations with the Middle Eastern states. President Bush who took office in 1989 approached carefully and even passively the dynamics in international relations, leaving some countries on the periphery of the crumbling Soviet empire to go with the flow. Such was the US policy toward Afghanistan where Washington relied on its old allies Pakistan and Saudi Arabia to establish a Western-friendly regime in Kabul and fill in the vacuum created by the withdrawal of the Soviet troops.

However, this was not how Iranians saw the future of their neighbour. In the 1980s, their relations with Pakistanis and Saudis deteriorated sharply due to the numerous sectarian conflicts between Sunnis and Shī‘a in the Middle East and Riyadh’s efforts to isolate Iran from the international political scene and to eliminate its influence among Shī‘a religious groups in the Persian Gulf. For the early 1990s conservative and cumbersome Iranian policy, there came a time of waiting and holding the existing line after a particularly traumatic period, which ended with the collapse of the Soviet empire. Undoubtedly, the protracted Iran-Iraq War left painful marks in the minds of the Iranian society. What united them as a nation also succeeded in showing how high the cost of human life was in a reckless and destructive war.

The events in neighbouring Afghanistan in the early 1990s raised Tehran’s well-founded fears of a new neighbourly conflict, in which Iran could not remain indifferent. After the withdrawal of the Soviet Army in 1989, tensions between Iran and Pakistan

² The Hostage Crisis that took place on November 4, 1979 and held 64 American hostages for 444 days unleashed an unprecedented strain in relations between Washington and Tehran, leading to a breakdown in diplomatic relations between the two countries that has lasted to this day. (January 2008; Sick 1985).

escalated and the struggle for influence in the occupied and subsequently almost destroyed Middle Eastern state got underway. The Pakistani-backed Taliban regime was aggressive and cruel to the Afghan Shias. It pursued a completely one-sided policy, unpredictable and provocative towards Iran and its sensitive nationalist aspirations. That was the legacy of the Cold War in the region, which the Iranians were to reconsider well in order to prevent a new war and a new arms race. As some analysts pointed out, Tehran's policy toward Kabul over the past 30 years was dictated by the external factors rather than by the domestic ones (Carter 2010). We could add that Iranian policy was the same for all Middle Eastern countries in the scope of its foreign policy interests. For countries that had survived wars and occupations, such as Iran and Afghanistan, it was impossible to simultaneously fight for economic recovery whilst pursuing a timely and adequate foreign policy in the dynamically changing world of the new Realpolitik (Uzunova 2016).

2 IRANIAN-AMERICAN RELATIONS AT A CROSSROADS

The Afghan Civil War that followed the 1979 Soviet invasion marked the end of the Cold War and the exhaustion of the duopoly in international relations. It initiated the beginning of a new chapter in the Middle Eastern history and called for a review of existing policies, national priorities and alliances. The new factor on the international stage – militant, radical Islam – was a supranational-cause unifier of countries that only until recently had been separated by Cold War global division. Such a clash of civilisations came up completely unexpectedly for the world, which for almost 100 years had been subject to ideological conflicts between capitalism, totalitarianism, authoritarianism, communism, etc. Such a development of international relations seemed “completely natural and timely”, as the American analyst Samuel Huntington stated in the early 1990s, the unification of the entire world Muslim community against the military intervention of one or another external force in the internal affairs of a Muslim country (1979 invasion into Afghanistan), and the intervention into a conflict between two sovereign Muslim countries (1991 Iraqi War), demonstrated not merely the depletion of the Bilateral model, but also the need for new, more tolerant and ethical international relations (Huntington 1996).

At the end of the Cold War the Middle East was torn apart by numerous regional conflicts. Iran's fears about the fate of Afghanistan after the withdrawal of the Soviets were well-founded and raised fears among Iranians of deepening sectarian conflicts between the regime in Tehran and the one that would succeed the pro-Soviet government in Kabul. The collapse of the USSR was traumatic enough for most countries in the Middle East, and a more aggressive US policy in the region could easily bring new troubles and destruction. Therefore, while Washington welcomed Gorbachev's decision to withdraw Soviet troops from Afghanistan, Iran was restrained and hesitant, fully aware that they were not ready to take responsibility for their neighbour's future. However, the Americans suspected that Tehran supported the Russians' efforts to reach a political

outcome to the war, only to remove the Saudis from their influence in Afghanistan after the war. A November 1989 report by the CIA Director showed that US intelligence did not view the reduction in Soviet commitment to the Afghan government as a result of Gorbachev's intentions to begin a withdrawal. There was barely a hint of the recent fall of the Eastern Bloc, which began in Europe with the fall of the Berlin Wall, and no prediction of what Soviet politics would look like in the post-Cold War era. Director Webster's report was drafted at the request of a hearing in the Congress on the future US position in Afghanistan. (CIA Archives) Washington decided to maintain its policy of observer in Afghanistan and confirmed its support for Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, regardless of the advisability in the new world order. The main debate in America in the early 1990s was about Washington's future commitments as a legacy of the Cold War. Many agreed with Senator Harris Wofford's famous slogan: "America, come home," calling on the State Department to turn its attention to domestic policy after Reagan's huge arms spending at the end of the Cold War (Lugar 1994). Fluctuations in the White House were not well received by the American allies, especially those in the more troubled parts of the world. On the threshold of the New World Order, America was pursuing its foreign policy chaotically, without any clear doctrine. Similar policy continued to be carried out by the next elected President Bill Clinton throughout his first term in 1993 – 1997 and had a particularly dramatic effect on events in Afghanistan, which the United States left completely in the hands of Pakistanis and Saudis.

Nearly a decade later the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States prompted Americans to pursue a tougher, more direct, and more aggressive policy in the Middle East. In the preparations and consultations for the invasion, Washington and Tehran found themselves on the same boat. The Iranians were well aware that the attacks had seriously harmed the America's international reputation, and that Taliban-backed al-Qaeda most definitely had to pay the piper the high price for this humiliation. President Mohammad Khatami was using the situation to destroy the radical Sunni regime on his eastern border and secure his regime from the east. For the moderate (Islamist) Khatami (1997 – 2005), working with the United States was also a great opportunity to improve bilateral relations and lift sanctions on Tehran. During his term, Iran took historic steps to warm up its relations with the United States and other Middle Eastern countries, and break out of isolation after the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

3 THE CLINTON-ALBRIGHT TANDEM AND „MINI-DÉTENTE“ IN US-IRANIAN RELATIONS

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the US public has been severely divided over the topic of Iran. Some more conservative circles were using the "Iranian card" to bring back memories of the Hostage Crisis and to materialise the masses' fears of anti-American revanchism. And this was not very difficult to achieve. The emotional charge of past events helpfully supported the efforts of all enemies of the idea of warming US-Iranian

relations. However, while America had plenty of enemies in the chaos of the post-bilateral world order, the then Middle East looked like a real "wasp nest." It was no coincidence that President Bill Clinton's attention was drawn to the region's "bullies" such as Iraq and Afghanistan, whom he accused in supporting and arming dangerous terrorist organisations with an anti-Western orientation. Nevertheless, the attention to the Taliban and the terrorist activities they supported, came only after the bombing of the US embassies in Dar es Salaam and Nairobi in August 1998, when 200 people lost their lives. With an official statement from the US State Department, in 1998 the United States took serious action against the regimes of Saddam Hussein and the Taliban in Afghanistan.

On the other hand, the United States needed Iran's approval for future military action. Successful retaliation against the Taliban required a strong and natural ally in the region, such as neither Pakistanis were at the time, nor were the Saudis. The Taliban regime was profoundly Salafist and chauvinistic, and posed an immediate threat to the Shia Islamic population. The reoccurring persecutions of Shi'a escalated in 1998 when 10 Iranian diplomats and a journalist were executed in the Afghan city of Mazar-e-Sharif. That incident brought the two regimes to the brink of war (Takeyh 2011). Moreover, in the chaos and uncertainty of the new world order, the intensified US policy towards Iran in the second half of the 1990s showed Washington's necessity and interest to attract Tehran again as their ally in the region.

The historic step towards warming relations between Tehran and Washington came in the autumn of 1998, when a "Six-Plus-Two" dialogue on the future of Afghanistan was held as part of the regular session of the UN General Assembly. The US side was led by Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, who strongly stood the position taken by the Department in terms of conducting the talks, although only Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Mohammad Zarif appeared from the Iranian side. The meeting was preceded by a long-awaited address to the UN General Assembly by the newly elected Iranian President Mohammad Khatami, who condemned Washington's continuing ambitions for sole world domination, calling them "nothing more than illusions of an unpopular leader" (Myers 1998). Khatami was taking advantage of Washington's need of Iran in the fight against the Taliban regime. The common enemy of both countries appeared to be an enemy of a completely new generation – unpredictable and anti-American, pro-Islamist, but also anti-Iranian. Clinton and Albright saw the Taliban and al-Qaeda as an unprecedented threat to the Middle East's future, in which the rule of law would have been disregarded and the inviolability of established state borders would be easily overcome by international terrorism.

The Six Plus Two Dialogue brought together Afghanistan's neighbours Iran, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Pakistan, along with Russia, China and the United States. Madeleine Albright urged Tehran not to resort to military intervention in Afghanistan because of the brutal and demonstrative massacre of Iranian diplomats earlier that year. Following that bloody incident, Iran had sent an army of 200,000 on its

border with Afghanistan and was conducting military manoeuvres in the area. The US message of refraining from military intervention reached Khatami, who had already achieved his goal, which was to provoke Washington's interest in warming their bilateral relations after two decades of sharp confrontation. Madeleine Albright also heard the direct call from Iran: "The problem in Afghanistan could not be solved by another war" (Myers 1998).

The Clinton-Albright tandem's interesting and logical line with Iran was a cautious but completely unequivocal acknowledgment of the Persian-centricity of the Middle East. A closed and politically isolated Iran had left the region without a sufficiently reliable and recognised leader. In response, the United States took cautious and deliberate steps toward dialogue with Tehran as early as 1995, when it touched on the Iranian public's sensitive issue of the CIA operation that toppled the government of the popular nationalist Mohammad Mossadeq in 1953. Officially Washington's apology had not yet been made, but attention was drawn to the complex US-Iranian relations. This unilateral gesture was followed by the payment of compensation to Iran for the 254 victims of the unintentionally brought down Iranian jet by the Americans in 1988, the lifting of some sanctions and easing of trade, cooperation in culture and sports. At the same time, the United States was not abandoning its 1979 Dual Containment policy, which allowed it to manoeuvre between Saddam Hussein's pro-Soviet regime and the Islamic Republic's hostile anti-American policies. With the end of the Cold War, the end of the Iran-Iraq War, the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan and the death of the radical Iranian leader Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989 – all good preconditions for easing tensions between Washington and Tehran in the mid-1990s – the State Department initiated a reconciliation process (Nazir 2015).

As early as the beginning of 1990s Iran's relations with the West, and in particular with the United States, dominated the domestic political life of the Iranian society. Washington did not look favourably on the popular Iranian President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989 – 1997) who was one of the Fathers of the Islamic Republic and a close ally to the former Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini. Conservative Islamist Rafsanjani was pursuing an active domestic policy to restructure the country's economic life, aimed at restoring the Iranian economy and joining the global economy. To achieve these goals, Tehran needed more stable relations with the West and the United States. US policy recognised Iran's active regional policy in the Middle East, but remained firm against rapprochement between Washington and Tehran.

The conflict between the two countries escalated again during the 1991 US invasion of Iraq, which the Iranians claimed led to a severe humanitarian and refugee crisis. The Clinton Administration maintained its predecessor's policy toward Iran and increased pressure on Rafsanjani by imposing economic sanctions on the country in 1995. Under both Bush and Clinton, the US anti-Iranian rhetoric did not address Tehran's specific actions, but rather expressed their personal disapproval to Rafsanjani and a desire

to see a reformist president at the helm of Iran. The victory of the moderate Islamist Khatami in the 1997 election gave hope to a large number of Iranians for long-awaited changes in Tehran's foreign policy and an overall improvement in living standards. The enthusiasm of the masses, however, contrasted sharply with the harsh political reality in the country. Although Khatami's reformers had a majority in the Majles, the right of veto of the conservative pro-Islamist Spiritual Council managed to limit the president's actions. For example, while parliament gave more freedom to the media, conservative reactionary forces managed to arrest and imprison some of the most vocal critics of the regime. The same was happening in the government's foreign policy: Khatami's aspiration for *Détente* with the West met the harsh anti-Western rhetoric of some senior Iranian clergy on national and international media. Such "one step forward and two steps backward" game discouraged the Iranian public and dampened the enthusiasm of Western leaders for a more recent rapprochement with Tehran (Rasmussen 2009).

Mohammad Khatami's two terms revealed the potential of US-Iranian relations in the post-bilateral world order. His measured and reserved, but at the same time open and somewhat friendly policy towards the "Great Satan" (as Khomeini called the United States), was appreciated in time by the Bill Clinton administration. Yet in 1997, Khatami refrained from a formal apology for the 1979 Hostage Crisis, but a high-level dialogue was initiated, the tone was softened and talks on rapprochement continued until 2003. Clinton's policy towards Iran was sharply criticised in the US Congress as an unnecessary manifestation of weakness in a period of rising American hegemony around the world. But for Clinton and Albright, the Middle East was not the same as it had been before 1989, and the challenges posed by radical regimes such as those in Iraq and Afghanistan had the potential to change it and make it a much more unsafe place. In this new war between civilisations, the United States again chose to partner with Iran. At the same time, and as if on cue, the scandalous charges of the White House trainee Monica Lewinsky against Clinton entailed some serious criticism of the President's morale, and what followed eventually was an impeachment procedure. Despite all the successes of US foreign policy, the resumption of official diplomatic relations between the United States and Iran did not take place.

4 NOT A CLOSED-DOOR, BUT A "CLOSED-EYE" POLICY

US policy toward Kabul could be characterised by unprecedented caution bordering with passivity. Inherited from the Nixon Doctrine, it was a recognition of American realism and a reflection of their strategy to build a network of allies, i.e., "clients" of American armaments, to take care of their wards. Since the outbreak of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Iran's role as a leading partner and client of US arms in the region had been taken over by the Saudis in the Gulf and the Pakistanis in the Middle East. Washington had long pursued a "closed-door policy" toward Afghanistan and its inconsistency, immanent disinterest, and proxy diplomacy could be defined as a "closed-

eye policy." A 2001 Amnesty International report once again warned that there were no institutions in the country to promote and protect human rights. The organisation said mass executions of civilians from certain ethnic groups had been taking place in Afghanistan for the past 22 years following the Taliban invasion of cities. Neighbourhoods, schools and hospitals were bombed and assaulted, and more than 25,000 civilians were killed in Kabul between 1992 and 1995 alone. A little later, the International Committee of the Red Cross reported that between 1998 and 2000, 2,812 civilians, half of them children, were killed by mines and unexploded ammunition (Amnesty International 2001).

The partition of Afghanistan began soon after the withdrawal of Soviet troops. The struggle for power severely fragmented Afghanistan's population, setting clear borders: ethnic – between ethnic groups, sectarian – between Sunnis and Shī'a, and political – between supporters of Iran or Pakistan. The Pashtuns who make the largest ethnic group in the country, established their own Taliban sect. It based its principles on the rule of Salafism and Sunni Islamic fundamentalism, established morally and financially supported by the governments of Pakistan, the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Their militias were trained by the Pakistani Army. Between 1996 and 2001, the Taliban controlled more than 75% of Afghanistan's territory, which they called the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan – an entity officially recognised as a State only by Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Turkmenistan and the UAE. The other ethnic groups united behind former President Burhanuddin Rabbani (1992 – 1996 and 2001), a Tajik by origin (Newell 1989). He was forced by the Taliban to flee the country and since 1996 until 2001 he was acting as a President of Afghanistan in exile, as well as a leader of the United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan also known as the Northern Alliance. Rabbani was an undisputed and recognised leader among all non-Pashtun communities. He was also backed by Iran, Russia and China and disapproved by the Americans, who indirectly continued to support the Taliban through their partnership with Pakistan. Rabbani's closest allies, Ahmad Shah Massoud and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, were the leaders of the Mujahidin during the Soviet occupation and later, in the course of the 1992 – 1996 Civil War, they became the backbone of the opposition within the Northern Alliance (Milani 2006).

Upon Rabbani's forced departure, Ahmad Shah Massoud became the head of the Northern Alliance and in the eyes of the opposition he represented the legitimate government forces. Massoud held a degree in engineering from the Kabul University and was recognised by many international analysts as the most respectful representative of the Afghan opposition. The "Panjira Lion", as he was called because of his successful efforts to hold off the Taliban invasion of the provinces of Panjira and parts of Parvan and Tahar during the Civil War, Massoud had a long and remarkable career in politics, diplomacy and armed struggle. His attempts to stop the war and call for a political dialogue and democratic elections met with the Taliban aggression. In 1995 his efforts

succeeded in drawing the attention of the international community to the harsh humanitarian situation in the country (Tarzi 1991). Amnesty International's report condemning the Taliban's numerous human rights abuses, supported his cause and despite the US reluctance to declare their regime unacceptable, some researchers were openly pointing to the Taliban as a cover for Pakistan's interests.

In 1994 and 1995, the Taliban suffered heavy losses in Herat when Massoud sent troops to help the city's pro-Iranian governor Ismail Khan. After the convincing victory of the Northern Alliance, many believed that the end of the war was near and the Taliban was defeated. Many Pashtuns also wanted peace and a political dialogue between the warring parties. However, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia disagreed and in 1995 Islamabad sent troops to support the Taliban's military offensive financed by Riyadh. With the conquest of Kabul on 27 September 1996, the Taliban won the war and Ahmad Shah Massoud fled the country. Tens of thousands of Afghans sought refuge in the Northern Alliance controlled territories to escape the Taliban massacre. There were also thousands of refugees who fled to the neighbouring countries.

In exile, Massoud remained active. In early 2001, he addressed the European Parliament on the new radical Islam – a creation of the Taliban, Pakistan's interference in Afghanistan, and warned Americans of the danger of a terrorist attack just a few days before the 9/11 Attacks. A few days after his public speech, Massoud was killed in a terrorist attack in Takhar province by al-Qaeda mercenaries.

Following the 9/11 Terrorist Attacks, the United States changed its policy toward the Middle East, replacing the vision of Clinton's one-sided superpower with aggressive and popular Cold War rhetoric to "protect the values of freedom." For a decade, the US failed to find its clear and definite place in the new world order and Bush made a U-turn to the "realism" known to Americans with his morally outdated practices of ultimatums and pre-emptive blows. Putting the "principles before the national interest" but only on paper, failed to deceive the international community for a long time. While the political responsibility for the September 11 Terrorist Attacks has never been assumed by anyone, the administration of George W. Bush consistently prepared for the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq in the spirit of an obsolete "Cold War", i.e., without any clear and realistic plans for the future of those two countries.

5 THE 9/11 TERRORIST ATTACKS RAISED THE PRICE OF THE IRANIAN COOPERATION

The day that changed America – September 11, 2001 – was the day that the former Bill Clinton administration had previously attempted to prevent. The war on international terrorism, let be by the newly elected President George W. Bush, was declared shortly after: "This is a difficult moment for America. Today we've had a national tragedy. Two planes have crashed into the World Trade Centre in an apparent terrorist attack on our country" (The Telegraph 2001). To the great surprise of the Americans, the Iranian people showed solidarity with America on the darkest day in their

history. On September 11, 2001 thousands of Iranians marched through the squares of Tehran with lighted candles to condemn terrorism and express their support for the families of the victims.

On October 7, 2001, the United States and Britain launched Operation “Enduring Freedom” after secret consultations with Iran. They were later joined by the Northern Union, a union of political opposition and paramilitary groups. The Taliban refused to extradite al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, and President Bush justified military intervention in Afghanistan by the grounds that the Taliban regime did not represent the legitimate government in the country. The operation was followed by the Bonn Conference held on December 5th, where representatives of the Afghan opposition negotiated the restoration of statehood and elected Hamid Karzai to head the transitional government. Within the next few months, the Taliban's totalitarian regime was overthrown and the United States and NATO, working closely with Iran and leaders of Afghanistan's various opposition factions, adopted a Roadmap – a strategic plan to rebuild the country and create a new constitution.

However, the success of the US-Iran co-operation was short-lived. Shortly after the Bonn Conference, the two countries began to compete again, supporting their favourites among the various factions of the Northern Alliance. The Americans continued to support the Pashtuns, including the Pakistani-trained and funded Taliban. For Tehran, the American position was unacceptable, and they accused Washington of being responsible for the tragic situation in Afghanistan through its arrangements with the Pakistanis. Behind Islamabad's aggression, in the face of the Taliban regime, were its interests in uniting Pashtunistan – a territory inhabited by Pashtuns and divided by the Durand Line back in 1893 into Afghan and British parts. Half a century later, a new state named Pakistan emerged on the former British part (Hyman 2002).

Tehran, for its part, probably saw an opportunity to get what it deserved from Afghanistan by stepping up its support for pro-Iranian factions in the Northern Alliance. They financed the construction of hospitals, schools and infrastructure and armed separatist groups, political parties, etc., which came under the command of a Quds Force division in Mashad, just 150 km from the city of Herat (Carter 2010; Milani 2006). Pakistan and its ally, the United States, could not accept such a solution because it would change the ethnic map of Afghanistan and lead to mass migration and possibly new bloodshed. Moreover, for the Pakistanis, there can be no fair division of Afghanistan, as its population was dominated by the Pashtuns and they believed that Afghanistan rightfully belonged to them. Washington also disagreed with a solution that would have created larger state of Pakistan and whose loyalty they continued to test. However, with the election of a Pashtun, Hamid Karzai, the Americans reaffirmed their confidence in Islamabad and Riyadh.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, US foreign policy in the Middle East continued to brace its previous line: supporting Israel, securing oil supplies, and

maintaining a balance of power and the status quo. Although seemingly inconspicuous, the balance was lost in the early 1990s, with the provocation of Saddam Hussein, and the United States conducted a key military intervention in Iraq. From there on, there was no balance of power and international order in the Middle East, as the former Western bloc faced its new enemy, the phenomenon of Islamic fundamentalism. The Bill Clinton administration was experiencing the first clashes with this hidden in the shadows, unpredictable and especially insidious enemy. Washington's foreign policy went through some important updates, and in addition to the initiated peace process with Palestine and economic interests, the United States' attempts to return to active leadership in the Middle East were added to the active support for Israel. This inevitably led to unprecedented anti-American protests and resistance among some countries in the region, for whom stepping back to the imperial policies of the Great Powers of the early twentieth century meant trampling on democratic practices, sovereignty, and international law. That is why Clinton abandoned the policy of "double restraint" towards Iran and Iraq and sought ways, through diplomacy, to attract Iran as its ally and executor of pro-Western policy in the Middle East. The sense of need for such an ally increased dramatically after the 9/11 Terrorist Attacks. Five months after the successful joint operation against the Taliban in Afghanistan, President G. W. Bush changed tactics towards Iran and declared it part of the "Axis of Evil", together with Iraq and North Korea. Behind this historic step, which marked the beginning of the latest period in US-Iran relations, were the assurances of stable cooperation between Israel, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Jordan, etc., with which Bush sought to build a new balance of power in the Middle East and to promote America's widely proclaimed campaign in protection of the "world peace".

6 CONCLUSION

Since 1979 Iran's objectives in Afghanistan have changed (Noor 2021). Its foreign policy which went through sharp confrontation to partnership, from isolationism to openness, sought the country's new place among the leaders of the region until its inconsistency led to the unpleasant result of Iran sharing Afghanistan with Washington-backed Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. The spheres of influence of the two warring parties fighting for supremacy have been gradually destroying even the smallest hopes for a recent peace, although they all openly admit that the stability of the entire region depends upon peace in Afghanistan.

Between the relatively long period of 1979 – 2001, the vacuum created by the advent of the Islamic Revolution in Iran was filled by the US's new primary Muslim allies in the region, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. The transitional period that marked the end of the Cold War and at the same time the end of the long-standing partnership between Washington and Tehran came to an end. International relations in the Middle East entered a new stage of development – a new Bilateral model, in which forces were redistributed around the world leaders – the USA on one side, China and Russia – on the other. The

multiple regional conflicts in Afghanistan, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and last but not least the smoldering Israeli-Palestinian conflict fueled by the turbulent relations between the Great Powers affected the security of Europe, as they created real conditions for the escalation of the migrant flow from Asia to the countries of The European Union – a problem they are still struggling to deal with today.

REFERENCES:

1. AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL. (2001): Annual Report. [Online.] In: *Amnesty International*, 2001. [Cited 29. 1. 2024.] Available online: <<https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/124000/asa110122001en.pdf>>.
2. CARTER LIBRARY – Letter from President Carter to Pakistani General Zia. (1978): National Security Affairs, Brzezinski Material, President's Correspondence with Foreign Leaders, Box 15, Pakistan, 2/78-7/79.
3. CARTER, S. (2010): Iran's Interests in Afghanistan and Their Implications for NATO. In: *International Journal*, 2010, 65, 4, pp. 977-993. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002070201006500423>
4. CIA ARCHIVES (1979): Iran: Shia Revolution and Iran's Neighbors. General CIA Records [Online.] In: *CIA Archives*, 1998. [Cited 10. 10. 2023.] Available online: <<https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp81b00401r000500100031-5>>
5. CIA ARCHIVES. (1989): National Intelligence Estimate, SNIE 37-89, doc 0005564725. [Online.] In: *CIA Archives*, 1989. [Cited 10. 10. 2023.] Available online: <<https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/0005564725>>.
6. HUNTINGTON, S. (1996): *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*. New York: Simon & Shuster, 1996. 368 pp. ISBN 978-1-4516-2716-9.
7. HYMAN, A. (2002): Nationalism in Afghanistan. In: *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 2002, 34, 2, pp. 299-315.
8. JANUARY, B. (2008): *The Iranian Revolution*. Minneapolis: Twenty-first century books, 2008. 160 pp. ISBN 978-0-8225-7521-4.
9. LUGAR, R. G. (1994): American Foreign Policy in the Post-Cold War Period. In: *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 1994, 24, 1, pp.15-27.
10. MOHSEN, M. (2006): Iran's Policy Towards Afghanistan. In: *Middle East Journal*, 2006, 60, 2, pp. 235-256. <https://doi.org/10.3751/60.2.12>
11. MYERS, L. (1998): Albright, Iran Minister Meet. [Online.] In: *APNews*, 1998. [Cited 10. 10. 2023.] Available online: <<https://apnews.com/article/488a93df59d83d4644b00a819edf486d>>.

12. NAZIR, H. (2015): US-Iran Relations: Issues, Challenges and Prospects. In: *Policy Perspectives*, 2015, 12, 2, pp. 29-47. <https://doi.org/10.13169/polipers.12.2.0029>
13. NEWELL, R. S. (1989). Post-Soviet Afghanistan: The Position of the Minorities. In: *Asian Survey*, 1989, 29, 11, pp. 1090-1108. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2644731>
14. NOOR, S. (2021): The Taliban's Ascendance in Afghanistan: Implications for Pakistan. In: *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, 2021, 13, 4, pp. 14-18.
15. PAUL, L. (1999): Iranian Nation' and Iranian-Islamic Revolutionary Ideology. In: *Die Welt Des Islams*, 1999, 39, 2, pp. 183-217. <https://doi.org/10.1163/1570060991588551>
16. RASMUSSEN, K. B. (2009): The Foreign Policy of Iran: Ideology and Pragmatism in the Islamic Republic. [Online.] In: *Danish Institute for International Studies*, 2009. [Cited 10. 10. 2023.] Available online: <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep13162>>.
17. SICK, G. (1985): *All Fall Down: America's Fateful Encounter with Iran*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985. 468 pp. ISBN 978-1-8504-3009-4.
18. TAKEYH, R. (2011): *Guardians of the Revolution. Iran and the World in the Age of the Ayatollahs*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. 208 pp. ISBN 978-0-1997-5410-6.
19. TARZI, S. M. (1991): Politics of the Afghan Resistance Movement: Cleavages, Disunity, and Fragmentation. In: *Asian Survey*, 31, 6, 1991, pp. 479-95. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2645078>
20. TELEGRAPH, The. (2001): George W. Bush delivers his first public speech after 9/11 attack. [Online.] In: *The Telegraph*, 2001. [Cited 10.10.2023.] Available online: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QP1K84iRZPo>>.
21. UZUNOVA, V. (2016): *USA and Iran – Cooperation and Confrontation in the Cold War*. Haskovo: Selekt Print, 2016. 416 pp. ISBN 978-619-90666-0-7.