

## Iran and the United States in Afghanistan: An International History, 1996-2002

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*As Iran and the United States each engage in negotiations with the Taliban in 2019, it is worth recalling a period not so long ago when the Iranian and American governments coordinated military and diplomatic policy on Afghanistan based on their common security interests in 2001. This paper explores Iranian and American engagement in Afghanistan from 1996, with the advent of the Taliban, to the unprecedented, albeit brief, period of Iran-US cooperation in Afghanistan following the September 11 attacks. The primary source research brings together UN and US government documents along with interviews and memoirs offered by the participating American and Iranian diplomats, to analyze the domestic political environments of Iran and the US, as well as the broader international dimensions that enabled and motivated the two countries to work together.*

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The September 11 attacks opened an unprecedented window for a thaw in Iran-US relations. The tragic events propelled the governments in Tehran and Washington to temporarily set all other issues aside and coordinate policies based on their common security concerns in Afghanistan. Recognising the increased likelihood of a US military campaign against the Taliban, which provided protection to Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda network, Iran offered its assistance to the US in overthrowing the Taliban and creating a post-Taliban political order in Afghanistan. Iran itself nearly went to war with the Taliban three years prior, following the 8 August 1998 Taliban siege of the Iranian consulate in Mazar-e Sharif, a city in northern Afghanistan. The September 11 attacks thus revealed a coincidence of interests between Iran and the US in Afghanistan: the desire to hold influence in a stable Afghanistan free of the Taliban and radical Islamist terrorism.

Tehran and Washington used the already functioning United Nations 6+2 group on Afghanistan as cover to launch a bilateral dialogue on seeking avenues of cooperation. The UN group meetings began four years prior in 1997 and narrowed to substantive, bilateral talks between Iran and the US with the objective of coordinating military policy against the Taliban following the September 11 attacks. While deliberations were limited by the respective governments in Tehran and Washington to focus exclusively on Afghanistan, the emergence of this Iran-US dialogue represented a remarkable period of Iran-US relations, when the foreign policy and security interests of the Islamic Republic and the US overlapped.

While the evolution of this unprecedented period of Iran-US cooperation will be the focus of this essay, it is important to note that common interests between Iran and the US in Afghanistan had existed long before the rise of the Taliban and threat of international terrorism. For example, both the US and the recently installed Iranian provisional revolutionary government made efforts to cultivate a dialogue on Afghanistan in 1979, even before the Soviet invasion. During the initial period following the revolutionary transfer of power in Iran, Mehdi Bazargan, Iran's new Prime Minister, was suspicious of

Soviet intentions toward Iran given the vulnerable state of the transitional government in Tehran, as well as the Soviet Union's heavy presence in Afghanistan, Iran's eastern neighbour. In the summer of 1979, Abbas Amir-Entezan, one of Bazargan's aides, reached out to US diplomats in Tehran to request intelligence on developments in Afghanistan and other activities relevant to Iranian national security.<sup>1</sup>

Declassified documents from US President Jimmy Carter's administration indicate that Washington responded positively to Bazargan's offer to establish a collaborative intelligence-sharing channel on Afghanistan. They also demonstrate the necessity of such a channel from the American intelligence perspective. In response to the rapid developments occurring within the newly established, Soviet-backed government in Kabul, a 17 September 1979 Top Secret National Security Council memorandum asked, "What are the Soviets doing in Afghanistan?" In a candid start to the memo, National Security Council member, Thomas Thornton, admitted, "Simply, we don't know."<sup>2</sup> Lacking reliable Afghan sources, it was clear the US needed a partner with superior regional knowledge. Thus, during the summer of 1979, Iran and the US both recognised the potential advantages of sharing intelligence on their mutual Afghan security dilemma. However, declassified evidence – or rather a lack thereof after 6 November 1979 – suggests that communication on an Iran-US Afghan channel came to an end with the advent of the Iran hostage crisis, which also expedited the collapse of the Bazargan-led provisional government in Iran. The hostage crisis poisoned any potential for a normalisation of Iran-US relations during this time, let alone a resumption of intelligence sharing on Afghanistan.

Furthermore, Iran-US mutual security interests in Afghanistan emerged yet again during the secret arms dealings of the Iran-Contra Affair. Iran-Contra was the infamous political scandal that dominated the second term of President Ronald Reagan from August 1985 to March 1987. At the core of the affair was a scheme devised by Reagan White House officials to covertly sell arms to Iran via Israel in hopes of securing the release of American hostages held by Shiite groups in Lebanon. The US then routed the funds from the arms sales to the anti-communist "Contras" in Nicaragua.

Buried among the tens of thousands of government documents on Iran-Contra are references to potential Iran-US cooperation in Afghanistan. While a comprehensive review of the Afghan connection to Iran-Contra is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to note that declassified US government documents reveal how both Iran and the US pointed to their shared security interests in Afghanistan as a rationale for their secret arms dealings. The memoranda and testimony even confirm that Iran agreed to revert some of the US-supplied weapons to the Iranian-backed *mujahideen*, who

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<sup>1</sup> Shaul Bakhash, *The Reign of the Ayatollahs: Iran and the Islamic Revolution* (New York, NY: Basic Books, Inc., 1985), 69-70.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Thornton to Zbigniew Brzezinski, memorandum, "What Are the Soviets Doing In Afghanistan?," 17 September 1979, National Security Council, DNSA Collection: Afghanistan.

were fighting the Soviet forces in Afghanistan during this time.<sup>34</sup> Iran-US cooperation in Afghanistan was not the motivation nor the key objective of the Iran-Contra affair dealings. At the time, Iran was concerned with a more pressing challenge on its other border: the Iran-Iraq War, which began when Iraq invaded Iranian territory on 22 September 1980, and lasted eight long, devastating years. From the US perspective, Iran-Contra was intended to secure the release of the American hostages in Lebanon. The Afghan component of Iran-Contra should not be exaggerated given the parties' other pressing priorities. However, it is nonetheless critical to explore how both Iran and the US considered their mutual interests in Afghanistan when participating in the Iran-Contra negotiations.

These brief periods of potential Iran-US cooperation during the twentieth century offer important historical context to the period of concrete cooperation between the two countries in the twenty-first century. How and why Iran and the US found themselves on the same side in Afghanistan, engaging in successful military and diplomatic coordinated efforts against the Taliban and al-Qaeda, will be the focus of the subsequent pages.

This project draws upon various areas of scholarship including literature on the US-Iran relationship, foreign policy determinants of both states, and coverage of the twenty-first century wars in Afghanistan. Separately, these three subjects frequently appear in news headlines and political scholarship alike. However, little attention has been paid to the nexus between the Iran-US relationship and their common security challenges in Afghanistan.

The forty-year estrangement between Iran and the US has inevitably attracted a plethora of scholarly attention. Most of this literature has been written by Western experts, predominantly from the American perspective, which often lacks an understanding and appreciation of Iranian policy decision-making. While a significant number of these authors offer an uncritical perspective on the US role in the deterioration of Iran-US relations, there are some Western accounts on the history of Iran-US relations that move beyond the "Great Satan" and "axis of evil" tenor and provide a more balanced understanding on the dynamics of the Iran-US relationship. Barbara Slavin, a former senior diplomatic correspondent, who has traveled to Iran and interviewed high-profile Iranian officials, for example, argues that both governments have overlooked a series of missed opportunities to repair relations since 1979.<sup>5</sup>

A pair of American authors, Flynt and Hillary Mann Leverett, offer a scathing critique of US policy towards Iran and contend that the US should make a Nixon-China-like *détente* overture to Tehran. Not surprisingly, their work is controversial. However, Hillary Mann was one of a few Americans who engaged in diplomatic discussions with Iranian officials on Afghanistan as part of her role at the US delegation to the UN Security Council. I have therefore decided to use the book sparingly where I believe its analysis is useful in understanding the dialogue that transpired between Iranian and

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<sup>3</sup> "Release of American Hostages in Beirut," Top Secret memorandum, 4 April 1986, National Security Council, DNSA collection: Afghanistan. Memo suggests that some weapons being sold to Iran be diverted to Afghan Rebels.

<sup>4</sup> US-Iranian Contacts and the American Hostages, Top Secret internal paper, 20 November 1986, National Security Agency, DNSA collection: Afghanistan.

<sup>5</sup> Barbara Slavin, *Bitter Friends, Bosom Enemies* (New York, NY: St Martin's Press, 2007).

American diplomats following the September 11 attacks.<sup>6</sup>

These accounts chronicle the possible areas for cooperation between Iran and the US that have arisen throughout their forty-year period of estrangement, including brief references to the focus of this paper: the potential for broader cooperation in Afghanistan following the September 11 attacks. However, these authors have neglected the significance of the consistent pattern of shared security interests between Iran and the US in Afghanistan in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

In addition to the aforementioned secondary literature, I draw upon various textual and oral primary sources to gain insight on the issues dominating the debates in the Iranian and American foreign policy development circles. To make sense of American foreign policy towards Iran and Afghanistan, I will use recently declassified US government documents found in the National Security Archives in Washington, D.C. Moreover, this essay will hear firsthand from American government officials who contributed to US policy towards Iran and Afghanistan: Ambassador James Dobbins, who engaged in direct dialogue with Iranian diplomats as representative of the US delegation at the UN-sponsored Bonn Conference on Afghanistan in December 2001, and Gary Sick, principal White House National Security aid for Iran during President Carter's administration. I will also draw from the memoirs of Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, an American diplomat born in Afghanistan, who participated in the Bonn Conference alongside Dobbins. Khalilzad's knowledge of Persian allowed him to engage in more conversations with the Afghan and Iranian delegates present at the UN conference. His memoir thus provides further detail on the cooperation between the Iranian and American delegations at Bonn.<sup>7</sup>

As a balance to the aforementioned American accounts, I will also draw upon various textual, Iranian primary sources, such as excerpts from Iranian newspapers and testimony from Iranian diplomats who participated in the formulation of Iranian foreign policy towards the US and Afghanistan: Ambassador Seyed Hossein Mousavian, head of the Foreign Relations Committee on Iran's Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), 1997-2005; and Ambassador Mohammad Javad Zarif, Iran's current Minister of Foreign Affairs, who represented the Iranian delegation at the Bonn Conference where he worked closely with US Ambassador Dobbins. Ambassador Zarif's memoirs provide insight into Tehran's responses to US foreign policy in Afghanistan, as well as the motivations behind Iran's participation at Bonn.

By pairing UN and US government documents with interviews and memoirs of the Iranian and American diplomats engaged in the bilateral dialogue on Afghanistan, this paper seeks to provide a more balanced, comprehensive account of the post-9/11 Iran-US cooperation in Afghanistan, and thus fill an important gap in the historiography on the nexus between Iran-US relations and their external engagement in Afghanistan. To provide a thorough understanding of this period of cooperation, I will first offer

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<sup>6</sup> Flynt Leverett and Hillary Mann Leverett, *Going to Tehran: Why America Must Accept the Islamic Republic of Iran* (New York, NY: Picador, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> Zalmay Khalilzad, *The Envoy: From Kabul to the White House, My Journey Through a Turbulent World* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2016).

an overview of the coincidence of interests between Iran and the US in Afghanistan, beginning with an examination of the Iranian and American responses to the advent of the Taliban in the late 1990s. Next, I will demonstrate how these security interests materialised into successful military campaigns against the Taliban, followed by a collaborative diplomatic channel on Afghanistan's political reconstruction. The end date of this paper, mid-2002, corresponds with the beginning of the end of Iran-US cooperation in Afghanistan.

### **A Coincidence of Interests, 1996 - 2001**

Beginning with an analysis on the initial policies pursued by Iran and the US in response to the rise of the Taliban in the late 1990s, this section will assess Iranian and American engagements in Afghanistan during the turn of the century. Throughout its investigation, this section will emphasise the relevant internal political developments in Iran and the US, as well as the changing international dimensions, which propelled the two states to eventually engage in a dialogue on Afghanistan as early as 1998.

On 26 September 1996, Taliban forces captured the Afghan capital city of Kabul and declared their establishment of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan a day later. The Taliban is a predominantly Pashtun Islamist group that emerged in Pakistan in the early 1990s following the collapse of the Soviet-supported government in Afghanistan.<sup>8</sup> With financial and military support from Pakistan, the Taliban militia achieved repeated territorial gains during the previous two years of fighting, before seizing Kabul in September 1996.

The advance of the Taliban in Afghanistan yielded different reactions from Iran and the US. The subsequent section will analyze the initial policies pursued by the two states in response to the rise of the Taliban in the late 1990s. In its investigation, it will emphasise the changing international dimensions, which propelled the two states to initiate a bilateral dialogue under the aegis of the UN on the security threats emanating from Afghanistan. This dialogue set the stage for the post-9/11 cooperation that materialised as coordinated military policy against the Taliban in October and November of 2001, followed by effective diplomacy on the political reconstruction of a post-Taliban Afghanistan in December 2001.

### **American Response to the Rise of the Taliban**

On 27 September 1996, the same day the Taliban proclaimed Afghanistan an Islamic Emirate, the US spokesman for the State Department, Glyn Davies, announced, "We hope very much and expect that the Taliban will respect the rights of all Afghans and that the new authorities will move quickly to restore order and security and to form a representative government on the way to some form of national reconciliation."<sup>9</sup> The absence of US representatives in Afghanistan since 1992 forced the official US response, which lacked any policy direction, to rely exclusively on second- and third-hand reports.

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<sup>8</sup> Barnett R. Rubin, *The Search for Peace in Afghanistan: From Buffer State to Failed State* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 25-28.

<sup>9</sup> Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan and Bin Laden, From the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (London, UK: Penguin Books, 2004), 15.

Davies' statement was followed by similarly passive remarks, as well as contradictory statements, by US officials. Immediately after the Taliban's rise to power, Madeleine Albright, then US ambassador to the UN, condemned the Taliban's new edicts as "impossible to justify or defend."<sup>10</sup> Speaking before the UN Security Council a few weeks after Albright's denouncement of the Taliban, Robin Raphel, Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs, defended the Taliban's political legitimacy and argued for engagement: "The Taliban control more than two-thirds of the country; they are Afghan, they are indigenous, they have demonstrated their staying power [...] It is not in the interests of Afghanistan or any of us here that the Taliban be isolated."<sup>11</sup>

While the US never officially recognised the Taliban's government in Afghanistan, they did offer engagement on several occasions, with a particular objective to work with the Taliban to "expel all terrorists and those who support terrorism" from Afghanistan.<sup>12</sup> The Taliban's Islamic Emirate was only recognised by Pakistan on 26 May 1997, with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates following suit.

### **Iranian Response to the Rise of the Taliban**

The minimal protest raised by the US coupled with Pakistani and Saudi recognition of the Taliban's Islamic Emirate aroused suspicion in Iranian foreign and security policy circles. "The Taliban capture of Kabul was designed by Washington, financed by Riyadh and logistically supported by Islamabad," reported *Jomhuri Islami*, a hardline Iranian newspaper.<sup>13</sup> Already preoccupied with the growing influence of Pakistan and Saudi Arabia in the region, Iranians became increasingly concerned with what they interpreted as an American endorsement of Taliban rule in Afghanistan.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 engendered international competition over the oil and gas market in Central Asia and the Caspian region. Iran hoped to become the transport hub for a pipeline linking the former USSR's energy sources to the Persian Gulf. The US, however, had kept Iran under sanctions since the 1979 hostage crisis and proposed alternative routes, which eventually led to the construction of the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline through Turkey.<sup>14</sup> Iran perceived America's passive response to the Taliban's rise along with its aims in the new Central Asian oil and gas market as US engagement with the Taliban in order to promote the construction of pipelines that bypass Iran. The advent of the Taliban in Afghanistan thus exacerbated Iran's already-established concerns of encirclement by the US-Pak-Saudi troika in Afghanistan.

Iran's perception of the Taliban as a threat to its national security also stemmed from the Taliban's anti-Shia and anti-Iran dogma. Since 1996, the Taliban provided sanctuary to *Sepah-e Sahaba Pakistan* (SSP), a Sunni militant group founded in Pakistan,

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<sup>10</sup> Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 338.

<sup>11</sup> Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 335.

<sup>12</sup> "Ambassador Meets the Taliban: We Are the People," US Confidential cable, 12 November 1996, Embassy Islamabad, DNSA: The Taliban File.

<sup>13</sup> *Jomhuri Islami* was formerly affiliated with the Islamic Republic Party, which was disbanded in May 1987. Quote found in Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia* (London, UK: I.B. Tauris, 2000), 202.

<sup>14</sup> Barnett Rubin, "US and Iran in Afghanistan: Policy Gone Awry," MIT Center for International Studies, October 2008.



to counter Iranian-supported Shia activism following the 1979 Iranian revolution.<sup>15</sup> SSP recruited fighters from Iran's minority Sunni population in Khorasan and Sistan provinces. It frequently targeted Iranian interests throughout Pakistan and Afghanistan and is suspected to have participated in the August 1998 massacres against Iranians and their Hazara allies in Mazar-e Sharif, which will be discussed more thoroughly in the subsequent section.

Moreover, when fighting in Afghanistan re-commenced following the fall of the Soviet-backed Afghan government in 1992, the Iranian-supported *Hezb-e Wahdat* (Islamic Unity Party), which held representation in the new Rabbani-led Afghan rebel government, endured a series of attacks by its erstwhile Sunni mujahideen allies. In the wake of these aforementioned new threats facing both Iran and its allied groups in Afghanistan, the Islamic Republic pursued a two-track approach in Afghanistan: cultivate a strong military resistance to the Taliban while concurrently searching for diplomatic solutions to the protracted Afghan conflict. Iran began to broaden its roster of Afghan proxies beyond the Shia mujahideen groups they had helped cultivate during the Afghan-Soviet War (1979-1989). Iran extended its support to several disparate militias within Afghanistan's Tajik and Uzbek groups and played a key role in uniting its Shia Hazara groups with its new non-Pashtun Sunni allies into a grand anti-Taliban coalition.

This multi-ethnic, multi-religious coalition comprised of disparate militias from various Tajik, Uzbek, and Hazara groups, was called *Jebhe-ye Mottahed-e Eslami-ye Melli bara-ye Nejat-e Afghanistan* (United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan), also known as the Northern Alliance or United Front.<sup>16</sup> With financial and military support from Iran, along with Russia and India, the Northern Alliance became operational soon after Kabul fell to Taliban forces in September 1996. Iran, which posed "the strongest opposition to [Taliban's] ascendancy," continued to collaborate with its local and international allies to advance the Northern Alliance's military capabilities against Taliban forces.<sup>17</sup> Under the leadership of Ahmad Shah Massoud, the Northern Alliance's military forces continued to fight the Taliban on the ground, inflicting heavy losses and achieving steady territorial gains.

On the diplomatic front, Iran hosted an Afghanistan peace conference in Isfahan in December 1997, in which various anti-Taliban Afghan representatives participated. At the conference, Iranian Foreign Minister, Kamal Kharazi, advocated for a diplomatic solution to the conflict. According to Kharazi, this diplomatic process would need to include intra-Afghan negotiations in order to form a broad-based government in Kabul.<sup>18</sup> That same month, Tehran convened the eighth Islamic Summit Conference, where newly elected Iranian President, Mohammad Khatami, echoed Kharazi's promotion of a

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<sup>15</sup> Rashid, *Taliban*, 203. SSP was renamed Ahl-e Sunnah Wal Jamaat in 2003.

<sup>16</sup> Within the Northern Alliance, the Tajik faction was led by Ahmad Shah Massoud's Jamiat-e Islami, the Uzbeks were led by Jombesh-e Melli Islami's Abdul Rashid Dostum, and the Hazaras predominantly came from Karim Khalili and Haji Mohammad Mohaqiq's Hezb-e Wahdat. Some of the alliance's members joined from Hekmatyar's Hezb-e Islami.

<sup>17</sup> Mohsen Milani, "Iran's Policy Towards Afghanistan," *Government and International Affairs Faculty Publications*, paper 106 (2006): 244.

<sup>18</sup> Bruce Koepke, "Iran's Policy on Afghanistan: The Evolution of Strategic Pragmatism," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (September 2013): 8.

diplomatic over military solution in Afghanistan. At the summit, Khatami asserted the necessity to restore “peace to Afghanistan through negotiation.”<sup>19</sup> The following section will chronicle the series of events in August 1998 that aligned the Afghan policies of Iran and the US.

### August 1998

On 1 August 1998, Taliban forces seized Mazar-e Sharif, the fourth largest city in Afghanistan and interim capital of the Northern Alliance. In the days that followed, the Taliban militia carried out a systematic massacre of male Shia Hazara. Directed by their local Pashtun guides, Taliban militia searched the homes of Mazar-e Sharif and executed hundreds of Hazara men and boys, seemingly to eradicate any potential resistance to Taliban rule. Moreover, it is estimated that over four hundred Hazara women and girls were raped and abducted.<sup>20</sup> With an aim to cleanse the city of Shias, Taliban forces also targeted Iranians during the massacre. Led by Mullah Dost Mohammed, a small Taliban force, along with militants from *Sipah-e Sahaba*, stormed the Iranian consulate and executed ten Iranian diplomats and one journalist. The Taliban never accepted culpability, but following international protests, confirmed the deaths of the eleven Iranians and claimed “renegade Taliban” carried out the attack.<sup>21</sup>

The massacre in Mazar-e Sharif left the Iranian foreign and security policy circles divided on how to respond. According to Ambassador Seyed Hossein Mousavian, head of the Foreign Relations Committee on the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) between 1997 and 2005, the prevailing position in Tehran advocated for “a military invasion of Afghanistan to root out the Taliban.”<sup>22</sup> In the days following the attacks, Iran deployed more than seventy thousand additional troops to its border with Afghanistan, but ultimately decided against a military response. According to Mousavian, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei refused to sanction the SNSC recommendation to use military force. Deputy Foreign Minister Mohsen Aminzadeh later expounded on the Islamic Republic’s conclusion that military intervention might drag Iran into a long and permanent war in Afghanistan. Rafsanjani reported, “Afghanistan is like a swamp; anyone who has entered has not been able to exit gracefully.”<sup>23</sup>

In place of military intervention, the Islamic Republic pointed to the Taliban’s serious breaches of international humanitarian law in Mazar-e Sharif in their unceasing pleas to the international community to confront the situation in Afghanistan. According to deputy Foreign Minister Mohsen Aminzadeh, despite the “negligible reaction” from the international community to previous attacks against Iranian interests by the Taliban, al-Qaeda, and the Mujahideen-e Khalq, Iranian policy makers reasoned the Mazar-e Sharif massacre would surely “attract more attention” and provide Iran with an opportunity “to initiate collaboration with the international community to confront such incidents

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<sup>19</sup> Koepke, “Iran’s Policy.”

<sup>20</sup> Koepke, “Iran’s Policy.”

<sup>21</sup> Koepke, “Iran’s Policy.”

<sup>22</sup> Seyed Hossein Mousavian, *Iran and the US: An Insider’s View on the Failed Past and the Road to Peace* (London, UK: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014), 155.

<sup>23</sup> Milani, “Iran’s Policy,” 244.



in Afghanistan.”<sup>24</sup> As will become apparent below, Iran’s calculation proved accurate as Iran began to work diplomatically with Afghanistan’s five other neighbours – China, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan – together with the US and Russia to confront the security problems emanating from Afghanistan.

A day before the Taliban capture and massacre of Mazar-e Sharif, two teams of suicide bombers detonated bombs at the US embassies in the African capital cities of Nairobi and Dar es Salaam. The two explosions, which struck almost simultaneously on the morning of 7 August 1998, killed 224 people and wounded five thousand more. These attacks were carried out for the first time by international al-Qaeda sleeper cells and directed by Osama bin Laden from Taliban-protected safehouses in Afghanistan.<sup>25</sup>

In formulating a response to the terror attacks, the US first sought to determine the terrorist group responsible for the attacks and ascertain whether or not it had received support from any foreign government. From the beginning of the deliberations, it became apparent that bin Laden, who “contracted with Pakistani intelligence” and “colluded with the Taliban,” was the architect of the attacks.<sup>26</sup> Unlike the discussion within Iran’s SNSC following the Mazar-e Sharif massacre, there was no serious debate in Washington over the merits of a military versus diplomatic response to the terrorist attacks. Instead, the US launched dozens of cruise missiles on 20 August at suspected targets in Afghanistan and Sudan “intended to disrupt bin Laden’s future operations.”<sup>27</sup> The targets in Afghanistan were decided based on CIA intelligence indicating bin Laden’s attendance at a meeting at the Zawhar Kili camp in eastern Afghanistan. The missile attacks in Sudan targeted a chemical factory in Khartoum and aimed to hurt bin Laden’s financial network and prevent his followers from acquiring chemical and biological weapons.<sup>28</sup>

In August 1998, the US thus began to align closely to Iran vis-à-vis its policy towards Afghanistan. Following the attacks in Mazar-e Sharif, Iran’s support to the anti-Taliban coalition, the Northern Alliance, significantly increased. Beginning in 1998, Iranian intelligence transferred “plane-loads of arms” to Kuliab, Tajikistan, the location of one of Massoud’s Northern Alliance military bases.<sup>29</sup> Massoud also began to frequent Tehran. While a direct pipeline of US aid to the Northern Alliance never emerged during this time, communication lines between Massoud and the CIA had existed since 1996.<sup>30</sup> By the summer of 1999, Washington also relayed to Iran (and Russia) that the US “had no objections to the covert arms *those* countries supplied Massoud.”<sup>31</sup>

The White House even vacillated securing a direct line of US aid to the Northern Alliance, albeit towards the very end of the Clinton administration. Five days after the

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<sup>24</sup> Milani, “Iran’s Policy.”

<sup>25</sup> Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 406.

<sup>26</sup> Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 407.

<sup>27</sup> Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 411.

<sup>28</sup> Oriana Zill, “The Controversial US Retaliatory Missile Strikes,” Frontline, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/binladen/bombings/retaliation.html>.

<sup>29</sup> Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000), 203.

<sup>30</sup> Gary C. Schroen, *First In: An Insider’s Account of How the CIA Spearheaded the War on Terror in Afghanistan* (New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 2005), 57.

<sup>31</sup> Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 464.

inauguration of President George W. Bush, Richard Clarke advised the new National Security Advisor, Condoleezza Rice on “pending time sensitive decisions” on al-Qaeda that were deferred to the Bush administration.<sup>32</sup> The memorandum asked: “Should we provide the Afghan Northern Alliance enough assistance to maintain it as a viable opposition force to the Taliban/al Qaeda?”<sup>33</sup> Clarke recommended US support to Massoud’s Northern Alliance forces, emphasising, “If we do not [...] the Northern Alliance may be effectively taken out of action this Spring when fighting resumes after the winter thaw.”<sup>34</sup> Clarke further warned, the US would “make a major error if [it] underestimated the challenges al Qaeda poses.”<sup>35</sup> The new Bush administration dismissed Clarke’s warnings, claiming he only offered “an assessment of Al Qaeda’s history, not a warning of impending attacks.”<sup>36</sup> Clarke’s recommendation of assisting the Northern Alliance forces against the Taliban was not pursued by the US until the aftermath of the September 11 attacks.

### **Bilateral Dialogue Begins**

Beginning in 1998, Iran and the US recognised their aligned interests in Afghanistan and accordingly began to engage in ministerial-level meetings under the aegis of the United Nations 6+2 Group on Afghanistan. Originally proposed by Islam Karimov, President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, the UN 6+2 Group on Afghanistan was formed in October 1997 by Lakhdar Brahimi, then UN Special Envoy for Afghanistan, in order to find a peaceful solution to the conflict in Afghanistan and assist in the formation of a broadly representative and multi-ethnic Afghan government. The group was an informal coalition of Afghanistan’s six neighbours plus Russia and the US. The 6+2 representatives met in New York with the objective of finding a diplomatic peace settlement in Afghanistan. Also on the sessions’ agendas was drug trafficking, combating terrorism, and the extent to which outside powers should support the various Afghan factions.<sup>37</sup>

Before the commencement of these UN-sponsored ministerial sessions, Assistant Secretary of State for South Asian Affairs, Karl Inderfurth, outlined the potential benefits of such meetings for the US to Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, in a memorandum on 16 September 1998. In his summary of “what can be accomplished,” Inderfurth proposed how the UN 6+2 group can demand an international investigation into the Mazar-e Sharif massacre, press for protection of the human rights of both civilians and combatants in Afghanistan, particularly the Shia, and formulate an international mandate on the dangers posed by Osama bin Laden and Afghanistan-based terrorist organisations. Inderfurth concluded:

“The image of you [Albright] and the Iranian Foreign Minister, across the

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<sup>32</sup> Memorandum for Condoleezza Rice from Richard A. Clarke, “Presidential Policy Initiative/Review – The Al-Qaeda Network,” National Security Council, 25 January 2001.

<sup>33</sup> Memorandum, “Presidential Policy.”

<sup>34</sup> Memorandum, “Presidential Policy.”

<sup>35</sup> Memorandum, “Presidential Policy.”

<sup>36</sup> Kurt Eichenwald, “The Bush White House Was Deaf to 9/11 Warnings,” *New York Times*, 10 September 2012.

<sup>37</sup> Raji Mohammad Mehdi, *Aqa-ye Safir: Goftegu ba Mohammad-Javad Zarif, Safir-e Pishin-e Iran dar Saze-man-e Melal-e Mottahed* (2013), 158.

table and joined by colleagues from Russia, China, and the Central Asian States would present a powerful message that the world community is steadfastly opposed to Taliban policies.”<sup>38</sup>

These 6+2 meetings represented the first communication between Iranian and American officials since the secret Iran-Contra dealings in the 1980s and the first official, high-level government contact between the two states since the 1979 Iranian revolution.

In his memoirs, Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Javad Zarif, explains how an unofficial goal of these UN-talks “was also to provide a framework for Iran-US cooperation.”<sup>39</sup> During these UN sessions, the Iranian and American delegations began to meet on a bilateral, ministerial basis with Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, leading the US team, and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Kamal Kharazi, leading the Iranian delegation.

Testimony from both American and Iranian diplomats highlights the progress of Iran-US cooperation during these talks, particularly on counter-narcotics and counter-terrorism initiatives in Afghanistan. Zarif commended the UN Afghan group, especially the US, on its contributions to narcotics trafficking. Moreover, Zarif shared how the UN sessions “provided an opportunity for Iran to be present in the [Afghanistan sphere of operations]” and “brought the representatives of Iran and the US [...] together regarding Afghanistan.”<sup>40</sup> In describing the positive impact of Iran-US communication during these pre-9/11 talks, Zarif claims, “negotiations with America began in this realm, which formed the core of the [post 9/11] Bonn summit [on Afghanistan’s political reconstruction].”<sup>41</sup>

A confidential State Department memorandum on 1 March 2000 corroborated Zarif’s assessment. In the memo, Inderfurth shares how Iran “took the unexpected step” to formally nominate the US to lead the counter-narcotics initiative and subsequently “thanked the US for starting the process.”<sup>42</sup> Inderfurth further relays Zarif’s assessment on the importance of such an initiative. “[Zarif’s] key point,” Inderfurth writes, “is that narcotics trafficking helps fuel the war in Afghanistan and finances terrorism.”<sup>43</sup> In his summary on Iran-US cooperation during the UN 6+2 group meetings, Inderfurth concluded, “I was struck by the efforts of Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Mohamed Javad Zarif to signal a positive and open approach to the US”<sup>44</sup>

While the initial 6+2 group meetings in New York primarily focused on the aforementioned narcotics and terrorism initiatives, subsequent meetings in Geneva and Paris began to shift attention to the future of Afghanistan’s political system. According to Zarif, this “Geneva initiative provided the framework for the discussion of political developments in Afghanistan which continued after September 11 more seriously.”<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> “Afghanistan: Organizing a Ministerial Six Plus Two in New York,” Secret memorandum, US Department of State, 16 September 1998.

<sup>39</sup> Raji, *Aqa-ye Safir*, 158.

<sup>40</sup> Raji, *Aqa-ye Safir*, 157-159.

<sup>41</sup> Raji, *Aqa-ye Safir*, 159.

<sup>42</sup> “Iran Makes Positive Gestures to US on Afghanistan,” Confidential memorandum, US Department of State, 1 March 2000.

<sup>43</sup> “Iran Makes Positive Gestures.”

<sup>44</sup> “Iran Makes Positive Gestures.”

<sup>45</sup> Raji, *Aqa-ye Safir*, 159.

The four coordinated terrorist attacks in the US on the morning of 11 September 2001, opened a window for “the most significant of all cases of potential cooperation between [Iran and the US].”<sup>46</sup> Within two weeks, the US officially connected the attacks to bin Laden and his al-Qaeda network, which maintained a significant presence in the Taliban’s Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. The Taliban’s persistent refusal to comply with international demands to dissolve al-Qaeda bases in Afghanistan and extradite bin Laden elicited retaliation in the form of US-led military action in Afghanistan. Drawing upon testimony from Iranian ambassadors Javad Zarif and Seyed Hossein Mousavian, as well as this author’s interview with Ambassador James Dobbins, Zarif’s American counterpart at the December 2001 Bonn Conference on Afghanistan, the remaining pages will examine the cooperation that transpired between Iran and the US in Afghanistan between September 2001 and mid-March 2002.

### **Iran-US Military Cooperation**

The final sections of this paper will show how the already-established Iran-US dialogue on Afghanistan materialised into effective military strategies against the Taliban, followed by a collaborative diplomatic channel on Afghanistan’s post-Taliban political reconstruction. In its analysis, this section continues to use testimony from Ambassador Zarif and Mousavian to determine Iran’s motivations and objectives in its post-9/11 cooperation with the US on Afghanistan. I likewise draw upon my interview with US Ambassador Dobbins to form a complete picture of the cooperation that transpired between Iran and the US during this time. After chronicling this period of military and diplomatic cooperation on Afghanistan, this paper will end by considering the events that occurred between Iran and the US immediately following the Bonn conference, which led to the collapse of the Iran-US collaborative dialogue on Afghanistan.

Following the September 11 attacks, the US joined an existing international coalition comprising Iran, India, Russia and their Afghan allies in the Northern Alliance to overthrow the Taliban’s Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Moreover, Tehran and Washington used the bilateral channel already established through the UN to continue their sessions on potential cooperation in Afghanistan. Post 11 September, however, these talks intensified and shifted attention to the exclusive objective of coordinating military tactics against the Taliban.

The meetings were held in Geneva and Paris. The Iranian team was comprised of Ambassadors Reza Ziari, Zargar Yaghoobi, and Mohammad Ebrahim Taherian.<sup>47</sup> The US team was led by Ambassador Ryan Crocker, who speaks Persian and had previously lived in Iran. For precautionary reasons, state representatives from Germany and Italy were also present at the sessions. “In the event the meetings were leaked to the media, both Iran and the US could deny direct contacts between them. Later, the Germans and Italians disappeared and talks became one-on-one,” Ambassador Mousavian explained.<sup>48</sup> The respective heads of governments in Tehran and Washington were aware of these meetings,

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<sup>46</sup> Gary Sick, personal interview, 9 February 2018.

<sup>47</sup> Raji, *Aqa-ye Safir*, 160.

<sup>48</sup> Mousavian, *Iran and the US*, 165.

and expressed no objections, “provided that they were focused on Afghanistan.”<sup>49</sup>

During these meetings, the Iranian and American delegations laid the groundwork for the military campaigns against the Taliban launched in October 2001. In support of the US-led invasion of Afghanistan, Iran “promised the full cooperation of their Afghan ally, the Northern Alliance, in bringing down the Taliban and rooting out the Al-Qaeda terrorism.”<sup>50</sup> According to Hillary Mann Leverett, a US representative who also participated in these talks, Iran permitted the use of Iranian territory by US military personnel to conduct search-and-rescue missions, in addition to opening a path for the flow of humanitarian relief supplies into Afghanistan.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, the Iranians offered valuable intelligence on the roles and capabilities of the various Afghan groups, as well as the location of Taliban targets. In describing Iran’s contributions to the planning of the October 2001 military campaign in Afghanistan, Crocker stated:

“During those [discussions], the Iranian thrust was, you know, what do you need to know to know their blocks off? You want their order of battle? Here’s the map. You want to know where their weak points are? Here, here, and here. You want to know how we think they’re going to react to an air campaign? Do you want to know how we think the Northern Alliance will behave? Ask us. We’ve got the answers; we’ve been working with those guys for years.”<sup>52</sup>

On 7 October 2001, the US-led coalition launched Operation Enduring Freedom, the official name used by the US government for the war on terror in Afghanistan. A campaign of air operations, involving a combination of cruise missiles and fighter missiles strikes were launched from US and British ships as Northern Alliance troops, assisted by Coalition special forces, fought the Taliban on the ground.<sup>53</sup> The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), a branch of Iran’s armed forces, significantly assisted in the planning of the Northern Alliance operations to free the cities of Herat and Kabul from Taliban control. The capital fell to Northern Alliance forces on 13 November 2001.<sup>54</sup>

The remaining Taliban and al-Qaeda forces retreated south to Kandahar, which was captured by coalition forces on 7 December, closely followed by the fall of its neighbour, Zabul Province, on 9 December. The fall of Zabul Province effectively drew the military campaign to overthrow the Taliban in Afghanistan to a close.<sup>55</sup> After the Taliban’s defeat, Iran arrested around five hundred al-Qaeda members and extradited them to their

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<sup>49</sup> Mousavian, *Iran and the US*.

<sup>50</sup> Mousavian, *Iran and the US*, 166.

<sup>51</sup> Leverett and Leverett, *Going to Tehran*, 76.

<sup>52</sup> Ambassador Ryan Crocker, “Speech on Afghanistan,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 17 September 2012.

<sup>53</sup> Tim Youngs, “Afghanistan: The Culmination of the Bonn Process,” House of Commons Library (26 October 2005): 10–11.

<sup>54</sup> Zachary Laub, Kevin Lizarazo, and Jeremy Sherlick, “The US War in Afghanistan 1999–2019,” Council on Foreign Relations, 6 March 2019.

<sup>55</sup> Laub, Lizarazo, and Sherlick, “US War in Afghanistan.”

respective countries.<sup>56</sup> In recalling the cooperation between Iran and the US during these military operations in Afghanistan, Crocker expounded: “this was an unprecedented period since the revolution of, again, a US-Iranian dialogue on a particular issue where we very much had common interest and common cause.”<sup>57</sup>

### **Iran-US Diplomatic Cooperation**

Following the overthrow of the Taliban, attention shifted to Afghanistan’s political reconstruction. International engagement in Afghanistan at this time was particularly concerned with creating a “broad-based government that reflected the various ethnic, political, and religious factors within Afghan society and the extensive exile community.”<sup>58</sup> To this end, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1378 on 14 November 2001, which called for a UN-sponsored conference for Afghanistan’s political leaders “to establish a new and transitional administration leading to the formation of a broad-based, multi-ethnic government.”<sup>59</sup> This resolution led to the convening of the International Conference on Afghanistan at Hotel Petersberg in Bonn, Germany on 27 November 2001. The conference ended on 5 December 2001, with the signing of the Bonn Agreement, which established the post-Taliban interim administration (AIA) led by Hamid Karzai, who also won the subsequent Afghan presidential elections in 2004.<sup>60</sup>

Led by UN Special Envoy for Afghanistan, Lakhdar Brahimi, the Bonn conference invited twenty-five prominent Afghan leaders along with all external states with influence on the Afghan parties. Representatives from these states lived and worked in the same facility as the Afghans, but were unable to participate in the formal negotiations between the Afghans and UN team. As Ambassador James Dobbins explained, the external representatives “nevertheless [had] ample opportunity to follow the proceedings and lobby the various Afghan factions on the margins of their formal sessions.”<sup>61</sup> It was in this context that a diplomatic channel between the Iranian and American delegates emerged.

### **The US Delegation**

A veteran in post-conflict reconstruction, Ambassador Dobbins was a US diplomat who had served as a special envoy to Kosovo, Bosnia, Haiti, and Somalia. Although he had no professional experience in Afghanistan or any knowledge of Persian, Dobbins was “perhaps the US government’s most knowledgeable expert on state and nation-building.”<sup>62</sup> As will become apparent below, central to Dobbins’ strategy at Bonn was establishing a dialogue with the Iranians, regardless of the US official policy towards Iran. Assisting Dobbins at Bonn was Zalmay Khalilzad, a first generation Afghan-

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<sup>56</sup> Leverett and Leverett, *Going to Tehran*, 76.

<sup>57</sup> Crocker, “Speech on Afghanistan.”

<sup>58</sup> Youngs, “Afghanistan,” 12.

<sup>59</sup> UN Document S/1378, 14 November 2001.

<sup>60</sup> “Bonn Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan Pending the Re-establishment of Permanent Government Institutions,” Afghanistan, S/2001/1154, 5 December 2001.

<sup>61</sup> James Dobbins, “Negotiating with Iran: Reflections from Personal Experience,” *Washington Quarterly* (2010): 151.

<sup>62</sup> Zalmay Khalilzad, *Envoy*, 117.



American, who at the time, was serving as an official at the US Department of Defense.<sup>63</sup> According to Dobbins, “Khalilzad was an invaluable addition to the US team because he had firsthand knowledge of [Afghanistan] and could speak to the Afghan and Iranian leaders in their own language.”<sup>64</sup>

Before travelling to Bonn, Dobbins received instructions from Washington to support the formation of a broad-based, moderate Afghan regime. His mission was twofold: “to find Pashtun leaders who retained credibility in their community and who had not been contaminated by collaborating with the Taliban, and then to persuade the Northern Alliance leadership to share power with these figures.”<sup>65</sup> Even before the Bonn conference began, Dobbins recommended establishing communication with the Iranian delegation. According to Dobbins, “talking with one’s adversary is more productive than not.”<sup>66</sup> Dobbins also shared this suggestion to his Pakistani counterparts. “Putting Afghanistan back together was going to be hard,” Dobbins reasoned, “as long as its neighbours squabbled over its future.”<sup>67</sup> Dobbins’ extensive experience overseeing international nation-building efforts convinced him that he would not achieve the US mission at Bonn “if Afghanistan’s two most powerful neighbours remained at loggerheads.”<sup>68</sup>

During my interview with the Ambassador, I asked how the policymakers back in Washington responded to his professional recommendation to directly communicate with his Iranian counterparts. Dobbins explained how he had secured permission to talk to the Iranians from Secretary of State Colin Powell before leaving for Bonn. “I could talk to anyone about anything as long as it contributed to my task,” Dobbins shared.<sup>69</sup> From the beginning, the leader of the US delegation thus advocated for establishing a working diplomatic channel between the Iranians and Americans at Bonn. In the days preceding Bonn, Dobbins relayed to conference-convener, Lakhdar Brahimi, that he “hoped to be able to work with the Iranians and asked him to pass along [Dobbins’] expectation.”<sup>70</sup>

## The Iranian Delegation

The Iranian delegation at Bonn was led by Ambassador Zarif, then Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs who had served as a member of the Iranian delegation to the United Nations since 1982. Assisting Zarif at Bonn was Mohammad Ibrahim Taherian, the Iranian ambassador to the Northern Alliance. According to Khalilzad, Taherian was one of the most informed delegates on Afghanistan who was prepared to work with the Americans at Bonn.<sup>71</sup> Like Dobbins, Zarif recognised the importance of communication with the Americans: “Relations with America or any country is a tool and must be

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<sup>63</sup> Zalmay Khalilzad, *Envoy*, 119.

<sup>64</sup> James Dobbins, personal interview, 8 February 2018.

<sup>65</sup> James Dobbins, *After the Taliban: Nation-Building in Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2008), 20.

<sup>66</sup> Dobbins, *After the Taliban*, 48.

<sup>67</sup> Dobbins, *After the Taliban*.

<sup>68</sup> Dobbins, *After the Taliban*.

<sup>69</sup> Dobbins, interview, 8 February 2018.

<sup>70</sup> Dobbins, “Negotiating with Iran,” 151.

<sup>71</sup> Khalilzad, *Envoy*, 121.

employed for national interest,” Zarif contended.<sup>72</sup> He strengthened his argument in favour of a dialogue with the Americans by explaining that Iranian jurists do not consider relations with the U.S as neither obligatory nor forbidden. “Of course, in today’s interconnected world, two important actors such as Iran and the US are interacting anyway, whether they want to or not.”<sup>73</sup> He listed the post-9/11 cooperation between Iran and the US as an example of such interaction.

In his memoirs, Zarif also outlined Iran’s motivations at Bonn. He emphasised Iran’s principal goal of preventing the political return of Zahir Shah, the former Afghan king who had reigned from 1933 until his cousin, Daoud, deposed him in 1973. Some of the European delegates at Bonn advocated for Zahir Shah to return to Afghanistan and lead the post-Taliban government. According to Zarif, the return of the monarchy in Afghanistan was “a fundamental concern” and “considered a major problem for the Islamic Republic of Iran.”<sup>74</sup> Instead, the Iranian delegation’s objectives at Bonn were to ensure the installment of a broad-based, democratic government in Afghanistan that recognised the Shia religion and rights of Afghan Shia. Moreover, Zarif stressed the importance of dealing with the Taliban threat more seriously. “For [Iran], the fight against terrorism meant the fight against the Taliban.”<sup>75</sup> Before his departure for Bonn, Zarif secured the backing of both the president and foreign minister on engaging with the Americans. Zarif highlighted how “all of this happened during the time of Mr. Khatami’s government” which allowed for more “maneuvering and flexibility on these issues.”<sup>76</sup> Testimony from both Zarif and his American counterpart, Dobbins, thus identified the alignment of interests between Iran and the US on Afghanistan at Bonn.

### **The Evolution of the Iran-US Channel**

The US team arrived in Bonn two days ahead of the conference’s opening. Almost immediately upon his arrival, Dobbins received an invitation from the Iranian delegation to meet. “This did not come as a complete surprise,” Dobbins recalled, as he had previously asked Brahimi to relay to Tehran his wish to work with the Iranian delegates at Bonn.<sup>77</sup> Dobbins and Khalilzad met with Taherian before the conference convened (Zarif did not arrive until the following day). During this initial meeting, which lasted approximately one hour, the delegates discussed their respective goals for the conference. It was at this meeting that the Iranians first suggested Hamid Karzai, a Durrani Pashtun, to lead the post-Taliban government of Afghanistan. Despite Iran’s close ties to the predominantly non-Pashtun Northern Alliance, the Iranian delegates recognised the importance of including Pashtuns and all other Afghan factions in the leadership of Afghanistan’s new government. They shared this awareness with Dobbins and Khalilzad at the pre-conference meeting. “We knew that the Americans tended to

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<sup>72</sup> Raji, *Aqa-ye Safir*, 153.

<sup>73</sup> Raji, *Aqa-ye Safir*, 155.

<sup>74</sup> Raji, *Aqa-ye Safir*, 160.

<sup>75</sup> Raji, *Aqa-ye Safir*, 162.

<sup>76</sup> Raji, *Aqa-ye Safir*.

<sup>77</sup> Dobbins, interview, 8 February 2018.

Karzai,” Zarif further explained.<sup>78</sup> The objectives of the Iranian and American delegations at Bonn on the future governance of Afghanistan were thus largely concurrent. This preliminary meeting between Dobbins, Khalilzad, and Taherian laid the foundation for sustained Iran-US cooperation throughout the conference.

The delegates from Iran and the US had coffee together every morning. At these casual morning gatherings, Dobbins, Khalilzad, Zarif, and Taherian would deliberate on the progress achieved at Bonn thus far and the challenges that lie ahead. One morning, after reading the first draft of the conference’s resolution, Zarif raised problems with the document “that caused the Americans to become surprised.”<sup>79</sup> Zarif asserted to Dobbins, “the text makes no mention of democracy or elections. Don’t you think that the new Afghan regime should commit to hold democratic elections?”<sup>80</sup> In his memoirs, Zarif stated the Americans were “embarrassed” that the Iranians had “taught them a lesson on democracy.”<sup>81</sup> As the delegates continued to read the document, Zarif also stated that “the draft makes no mention of terrorism. Should the new Afghan regime be committed to cooperate with the international community to combat international terrorism?”<sup>82</sup> In using words like “democracy” and “terrorism,” ubiquitous in US political rhetoric, it became apparent to Dobbins that Zarif “was having a bit of fun at [his] expense.”<sup>83</sup> Political humor aside, Zarif found several missing elements of the draft on Afghanistan’s future governance. All of Zarif’s suggestions on democracy and counterterrorism efforts were incorporated into the final Bonn Agreement.<sup>84</sup>

The informal dialogue between the Iranian and American delegates also provided an opportunity to cultivate personal relationships. According to Dobbins, the Iran team was “very professional, quite agreeable, and always delivered on their promises.”<sup>85</sup> When recalling his one-on-one conversations with Zarif, Dobbins shared, “Zarif was easy to talk to and quite a humorous interlocutor.”<sup>86</sup> Khalilzad especially appreciated the conversations he had with Taherian. “Without these coffees, I never would have come to know the depth of Taherian’s knowledge about Afghanistan,” Khalilzad recounted.<sup>87</sup> The daily informal get-togethers created an amicable environment for the diplomats to also touch on more sensitive topics like the future of Iran-US relations. “At Bonn [the Iranians] actually told me they wanted to extend the cooperation beyond Afghanistan,” Dobbins shared.<sup>88</sup> Zarif and his team thus used the dialogue at Bonn “as a way to test cooperation with the Americans.”<sup>89</sup> Although the American diplomats did not reciprocate the Iranians’ invitation for broader cooperation while participating in the

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<sup>78</sup> Raji, *Aqa-ye Safir*, 161.

<sup>79</sup> Raji, *Aqa-ye Safir*, 163.

<sup>80</sup> Dobbins, “Negotiating with Iran,” 152.

<sup>81</sup> Raji, *Aqa-ye Safir*, 163.

<sup>82</sup> Dobbins, “Negotiating with Iran,” 152.

<sup>83</sup> Dobbins, “Negotiating with Iran.”

<sup>84</sup> “Bonn Agreement.”

<sup>85</sup> Dobbins, interview, 8 February 2018.

<sup>86</sup> Dobbins, interview, 8 February 2018.

<sup>87</sup> Khalilzad, *Envoy*, 120.

<sup>88</sup> Dobbins, interview, 8 February 2018.

<sup>89</sup> Mousavian, *Iran and the US*, 165.

Bonn conference, Dobbins remembers the relations between the Iranian and American delegates as “always cordial and without any tension.”<sup>90</sup>

The trickiest moment during the conference appeared early in the morning during the final deliberations on the Bonn agreement. At the negotiation table were representatives of the four main Afghan factions: the Northern Alliance, Rome Group, Cyprus Group, and Peshawar Group.<sup>91</sup> By this point, there was already agreement on Karzai as the interim leader of the new administration and the foundation of an interim constitution. However, there was no consensus on who would hold ministerial positions in the various government agencies. Yunis Qanooni, the Northern Alliance representative, argued that since the Northern Alliance bore the greatest sacrifices fighting the Taliban, his faction should not only retain the ministries of defense, foreign affairs, and interior, but also maintain control over seventy-five percent of the total ministerial positions.<sup>92</sup>

Qanooni’s demands were unacceptable to the other Afghan factions, who were also lobbying for representation in the broad-based, multi-ethnic government. By four in the morning, the impasse had yet to break. At Dobbins’ suggestion, Brahimi assembled the willing (and awake) national envoys in an attempt to convince Qanooni to compromise. The improvised meeting included delegates from the US, Iran, Germany, India, and Russia. After several hours of failed efforts, Zarif gestured for Qanooni to join him in the corner. According to Dobbins, the whispers between Zarif and Qanooni lasted “for no more than a minute” before Qanooni returned to the table willing to give up two ministries.<sup>93</sup> While in the corner, Zarif whispered, “this is the best deal you will be able to get,” according to Ambassador Mousavian.<sup>94</sup> The deal was finally brokered just before the closing ceremony of the conference. The new interim government was composed of twenty-nine ministries, with sixteen of the positions retained by members of the Northern Alliance.<sup>95</sup>

Iran’s relations with the Northern Alliance thus proved invaluable to the success of the conference. Moreover, the cooperation between the Iranian and American diplomats helped alleviate disputes between the various Afghan factions and paved a productive course that led to the passing of the Bonn Agreement on 5 December 2001, which established the interim administration in a post-Taliban Afghanistan. Most remarkably, the diplomatic dialogue on Afghanistan established in Bonn opened an unprecedented window for broader Iran-US cooperation. The extent to which these collaborative relations continued will be the focus of the final pages of this essay.

## Beyond Bonn

The Bonn summit was followed by several international pledging conferences to raise funds for Afghanistan’s further political reconstruction. At a donors’ conference in

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<sup>90</sup> Dobbins, interview, 8 February 2018.

<sup>91</sup> Raji, *Aqa-ye Safir*, 166.

<sup>92</sup> Dobbins, “Negotiating with Iran,” 153.

<sup>93</sup> Dobbins, “Negotiating with Iran,” 154.

<sup>94</sup> Mousavian, *Iran and the US*, 166.

<sup>95</sup> “Bonn Agreement.”

Tokyo on 21-22 January 2002, an Iranian official approached Dobbins offering Iran's commitment to continue cooperation with the US on Afghanistan. At the same conference, the Iranians extended a backchannel to Paul O'Neill, US Treasury Secretary, via Sadako Ogata, head of Japan's development assistance agency. Ogata relayed to O'Neill the Iranians' desire to launch a channel "covering all of the issues that divided the two countries."<sup>96</sup> Dobbins and O'Neill relayed the Iranians' overtures to Washington, "where no one evinced any interest."<sup>97</sup> The lack of interest in the White House and State Department alike resulted in the US government offering no private reply to Iran's proposals. However, in a very public response, one week later, President Bush grouped Iran, along with Iraq and North Korea, into an "axis of evil" in his State of the Union address on 29 January 2002.<sup>98</sup>

Within Bush's speech, there was no mention of Iran's contribution to the US intervention in Afghanistan. Instead, Bush declared: "by seeking weapons of mass destruction, [Iran] poses a grave and growing danger."<sup>99</sup> Officials in Tehran predictably felt betrayed. In a public television interview, Mohammad Ali Abtahi, Khatami's Vice President, expressed:

"The very least expectation we had at the height of our struggles for real reform was not to be branded like this. Politically it was an odd thing to do. We helped overthrow the Taliban. Instead of opening a path for even greater cooperation, they turned to this slogan: axis of evil. That was Mr. Bush's biggest strategic and political blunder."<sup>100</sup>

Despite Iran's inclusion in the "axis of evil," Tehran extended subsequent overtures to Washington in an attempt to continue the bilateral cooperation on Afghanistan.

At another donors' meeting in Geneva in March 2002, Iranian officials once again approached Dobbins with a proposition. Gathered at a café in the Geneva Intercontinental Hotel, an IRGC general, who had commanded the Northern Alliance operations against the Taliban during the US-led intervention in Afghanistan, proposed: "My government is prepared to participate in an American-led programme of support to the new Afghan Army. Specifically, Iran is prepared to build barracks for and train up to 20,000 troops as part of the larger effort under your leadership."<sup>101</sup> Dobbins admitted he was "struck" after hearing the Iranian general's "unexpected offer."<sup>102</sup> He found the idea "problematic in detail but promising in its overall implications."<sup>103</sup> Although the sharing of training duties between Iran and the US might lead to incompatibilities within the

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<sup>96</sup> Dobbins, "Negotiating with Iran," 155.

<sup>97</sup> Dobbins, "Negotiating with Iran."

<sup>98</sup> "Bush State of the Union Address," CNN, 29 January 2002.

<sup>99</sup> "Bush State of the Union Address."

<sup>100</sup> Mohammad Ali Abtahi, *Frontline: Showdown with Iran*, October 2007.

<sup>101</sup> Dobbins, "Negotiating with Iran," 156.

<sup>102</sup> Dobbins, "Negotiating with Iran."

<sup>103</sup> Dobbins, "Negotiating with Iran."

new Afghan army, the proposal represented the most extraordinary opportunity for the broadening of Iran-US cooperation in Afghanistan. The proposal for a US-led, joint military programme in Afghanistan was extended by an officer in the IRGC, meaning elements of Iran's intelligence and military branches were unified with Iran's ministry of foreign affairs and office of the president in their objective to expand the cooperation between Iran and the US in Afghanistan. This overture thus demonstrated that the Islamic Republic possessed a coordinated, government-wide policy in support of continued Iran-US cooperation in Afghanistan.

Upon his return from Geneva, Dobbins immediately conveyed Iran's offer to his boss, Colin Powell. "Very interesting," Powell responded, "you need to talk to Condi [Condoleezza Rice]."<sup>104</sup> Rice subsequently scheduled a meeting of the relevant National Security Council members. On the meeting's agenda was Iran's proposal, among other matters of US national security. At the meeting, Dobbins recounted his experience in Geneva with the Iranian officials, but received no questions or comments in response to his report. "After a long pause, seeing no one ready to take up the issue, Rice moved the meeting on to the next item on her agenda," Dobbins affirmed.<sup>105</sup> This was the second major overture on Afghanistan Iran extended to the US to which they received no response. "The US just literally did not respond other than listing Iran as part of the axis of evil," Dobbins shared.<sup>106</sup> When I inquired about why Iran's proposals were never seriously considered by Washington, Dobbins explained how there was still "significant animus" towards Iran, particularly within the Department of Defense.<sup>107</sup> Furthermore, he continued, "Washington's priorities were already shifting to Iraq."<sup>108</sup>

Despite complete US disregard for Iran's overtures, dialogue between the two governments continued, albeit less enthusiastically, during the lead up to the US invasion of Iraq in March 2003. The Iranians hoped to use the post-9/11 framework established between Iran and the US on Afghanistan as a model for broader regional cooperation. The US consistently ignored Iran's offers, and instead pointed to Iranian behavior vis-à-vis nuclear proliferation, the Arab-Israeli peace process, and human rights violations as obstacles to any kind of Iran-US cooperation.<sup>109</sup> By mid-2002, the Iran-US collaborative channel, which emerged in 1998 and evolved into substantial military and diplomatic cooperation in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, had effectively drawn to a close.

## Conclusion

To appreciate the significance of the post-9/11 Iran-US dialogue on Afghanistan, it is important to consider the cooperation in the broader history of overlapping interests between Iran and the US in Afghanistan. While the preceding analysis emphasised the military and diplomatic cooperation that transpired in response to Iran-US mutual

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<sup>104</sup> Dobbins, "Negotiating with Iran," 157.

<sup>105</sup> Dobbins, "Negotiating with Iran."

<sup>106</sup> Dobbins, interview, 8 February 2018.

<sup>107</sup> Dobbins, interview, 8 February 2018.

<sup>108</sup> Dobbins, interview, 8 February 2018.

<sup>109</sup> Dobbins, interview, 8 February 2018.



security concerns over the threat of international terrorism, common interests of Iran and the US in Afghanistan have existed long before the rise of the Taliban and al-Qaeda, particularly during the Cold War with the advent of the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan (1979-1989), and again, during the secret Iran-US dealings of the Iran-Contra Affair (1985-1987). However, as demonstrated by former White House National Security aid for Iran, “Captain” Gary Sick, the Iran-US post-9/11 dialogue on Afghanistan represented the most unprecedented period of Iran-US cooperation since 1979:

“This was the most significant of all the cases of potential cooperation between [Iran and the US]. The US was actually benefiting directly and unequivocally from Iranian support and it was being done so in a person-to-person basis, which had not happened since [Iran’s] revolution. This was *the outstanding* case. This was *the most obvious* case. And the one which almost everybody finds difficult to understand why the US simply shut off this potential opening with Iran, which was *so big* and *so real* and *so obvious*. On the surface of it, it just doesn’t make any sense.”<sup>110</sup>

This brief period of Iran-US cooperation on Afghanistan in 2001 led to a series of successful military operations and political achievements in Afghanistan to the benefit of both Iranian and American national security interests. Tehran sought to broaden this cooperation with the US and accordingly extended overtures for further diplomatic and military collaboration on Afghanistan. However, the US, which had already shifted its attention to Iraq, ignored Iran’s proposals for sustained cooperation on Afghanistan. The potential for broader cooperation in Afghanistan following the September 11 attacks is thus yet another missed area for Iran-US cooperation in the long catalogue of missed opportunities. Common interests between Iran and the US have been overshadowed by the animosity between the two governments since the 1979 Iranian revolution and subsequent hostage crisis. The estrangement preventing further cooperation on Afghanistan has been to the detriment of Iranian, American, and Afghan security interests, while directly advancing the interests of the Taliban and al-Qaeda.

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110 Gary Sick, interview, 9 February 2018.