


# PRACTICES AND IMPLICATION OF INTERNATIONAL POLICIES: AN OVERVIEW OF AFGHANISTAN AND IRAN RELATIONS FROM 1971 TO 2021

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## Abstract

*The purpose of this study is to find out how the relations between Afghanistan and Iran have been after the Islamic Revolution in Iran. Through this article, I have first examined the relations between Iran and Afghanistan at the time of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, at which time Iran did not have friendly relations with the Russian puppet communist government due to greater convergence with the Afghan Mujahideen. Then, I investigated the relations between Afghanistan and Iran during the Mujahideen government and the Taliban Emirate, due to the civil war in the country and the Taliban's dominance over Afghanistan, during which period, the Islamic Republic of Iran tried to maintain its relations with the Mujahideen government despite the Taliban's dominance over Afghanistan. Recently, Afghanistan's relations with Iran have improved after the fall of the Taliban, the presence of foreign forces, and the establishment of democracy in Afghanistan. It was examined here that during this period, Iran's policy towards Afghanistan has had ups and downs, which have briefly been explained in each section.*

**Keywords:** Afghanistan, Iran, relations, revolution, foreign policy.

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Praise be to God, who created us as wise Muslims, and peace and blessings be upon the great Prophet of Islam and his family and companions, who with their great and tireless efforts saved us from the pitfalls of misfortune. This article is titled (Afghanistan-Iran relations from 1978 to 2021) has used reliable sources to help others who require reliable information about the topic.

It goes without saying that due to the existence of undisguised cultural, political, geographical, and economic connections between Afghanistan and Iran, there have been continuous relations between the two countries throughout the years. However, among all the levels in which the relations between the two countries have been ongoing, relations at the political level have been largely dependent on the role and presence of external factors, that is, great powers with regional or extra-regional presence. Considering the "peripheral" position of the two countries Iran and Afghanistan in the international system, it is obvious that it is impossible to examine the process of political relations between the two countries without paying attention to the role of the great powers that are in the "central" position in the world system.

## 2.0 BACKGROUND

The two countries have had their unique types of relationships. That is, they have something in common, like history. Once in history, both countries were ruled by the same dynasty, so their political relations date back thousands of years. Afghanistan and Iran did not have close and formal relations in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The only notable case is in 1857 and the Treaty of Paris between Iran and England, in which it was emphasized that Britain had the right to mediate and the right to the final vote over relations between Iran and Afghanistan. The political relations between the two countries reached a stable stage after the independence of Afghanistan and the beginning of the kingdom of Amanullah Khan. In the documents from the era of Amanullah Khan, there is no evidence indicating the existence of any type of problems in the relations between the two countries due to border violations or the decrease of water in the Hirmand river flowing to Iran. Perhaps the reason for this, apart from the fact that it is related to the friendly relations between the two countries, is also because the drought that reduced the water flow of the Hirmand River did not occur during this period. The warmth and coldness of the relations between the two countries were mostly related to the climatic conditions of the winter season of the year, and the amount of rainfall in the mountains (Najmpour, 2016, p. 45).

Iran-Afghanistan relations are among the issues that have received less attention in the media and expert circles compared to Iran's relations with other neighboring countries. One of the reasons for this lack of attention might be the recent developments in Tehran's relations with the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf, Turkey, and the West, which to some extent has removed from the agenda of Iranian experts the development of Iran's eastern neighbors, including Afghanistan (Hojatzadeh, 2021, p. 32).

### **2.1 Relations between Afghanistan and Iran after the Iranian Islamic Revolution**

A fundamental change in Iran's foreign policy began after the Islamic Revolution in Iran. The country's foreign policy moved away from the West and moved towards the movement of non-commitment, to the Third World, and anti-imperialist strategy. The basis of Iran's foreign policy in this period has been the lack of a relationship with the capitalist and socialist systems and the adoption of populist economic policies (Pourakhandi, 2000, p. 62).

Afghanistan shares a land border of 978 km with Iran. Iran is an important sea crossing for Afghanistan, and Afghanistan is Iran's gateway to Central Asia and China. After the victory of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, relations took different forms, and Iran's presence in Afghanistan's politics increased.

Afghanistan has been one of the hot issues in Iran's foreign policy since the country's establishment of the Islamic Republic system. Afghanistan's position and importance, however, have not remained the same. Rather, due to national, regional, and international developments, it has undergone changes. In some cases, Afghanistan has been a dilemma of significance for Iran's foreign policy. The invasion of the US-led international coalition forces into Afghanistan and then the fall of the Taliban in December 2001 was one of those historical events. Although this incident is not considered a "foreign policy crisis" for the Islamic Republic, it has created a regional and international crisis in its surrounding security environment and has severely affected the security and national interests of Iran (Firouzabadi, 2006, p. 56).

### **2.2 Relations between Afghanistan and Iran during Afghanistan's war with the Soviet Union (1979-1989)**

In 1979, the Soviet Union, the world's second superpower, attacked Afghanistan for reasons such as the historical fear of being encircled in the south, confronting the US, having access to the Indian Ocean, etc., and Afghanistan's president, Hafizullah Amin, who was not in a good mood with the Soviet Union, was mysteriously killed. They appointed his puppet, Babrak Karmel, as the ruler of Afghanistan (Bakhtiari & Qasim, 2002).

From the very beginning of the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan, they faced the strong resistance of the faithful and zealous people of Afghanistan, who, relying on their faith and beliefs and having minimal war facilities, were able to fight the world's superpower for ten years, and as a result, soviet troop shamefully experienced defeat. The policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran has experienced ups and downs in relation to the developments in Afghanistan in this period. The nationalists who were ruling in Iran until 1981 defined their goals and roles as national and were not very committed to religious and Islamic duties, so their orientation towards Afghanistan was non-interference in the country's affairs (Shafii, 2005, p. 87).

The only reaction of the nationalists to the Soviet attack on Afghanistan was the condemnation of the Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan. The presence of the Islamic Republic of Iran became more colorful towards the developments in Afghanistan since 1981 when the Islamic Republic came to power. Islamists believed in transnational goals and duties and regarded their role as leaders of the world's liberation movements as well as calling for a revolution. Thus, it is clear that they did their utmost to support the Afghan Mujahideen and did not support and cooperate with the Soviet-led puppet governments in Afghanistan. An organization called the Movements Unit was formed by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps and headed by Sayed Mahdi Hashemi to support and sponsor the movements in globally as much as possible. The organization formed the Liberation Front for the Afghan Islamic Revolution. All Shiite groups in Afghanistan were taken the membership (Shafii, 2005, p. 87).

Iran's support was mostly focused on the Shiite Mujahideen. The Movements Unit first took steps towards the unity of the Shiite groups. However, after they did not make it, they took another policy. They concluded that they should strengthen those who agree with them and weaken and destroy those who are in the opposite direction of their thoughts. They established the Afghan Islamic Guards and strengthened the Nasr Organization. And they concluded that in the central region of Afghanistan, which is the seat of the majority of Shiites in Afghanistan, they should first create intellectual unity, leadership unity, and organizational unity, and then start the fight against the Russian aggressors. The strong barrier they saw in front of this plan was the existence of parties such as the Revolutionary Council of Islamic Events and the Islamic Movement of Afghanistan. First, they directly designed and launched civil wars to overthrow these two organizations. After a while, due to the mistakes and wrong policies of the Movements Unit, "Afghanistan Support Headquarters" was formed. Since those in charge did not have sufficient familiarity with Afghanistan's issues, the same policies continued for some time, but their performance concerning Afghanistan has been better than that of the Movements Unit. After the victory of the Islamic revolution in Iran, the ruling body often set a policy for Iran to become the center of Islam and the capital of the Islamic World. In any way, Iran's efforts to grow and develop

the Iranian revolution and make it a model for Islamic countries, issuing the revolution based on the theory of religious authority in the Islamic World has continued (Shafii, 2005, p. 87).

Iran has had cultural, lingual, historical, racial as well as religious ties with Afghanistan. However, the relations between the two countries have not been extensive enough! The most important reasons for the non-expansion of relations between the two countries can be found in the competition between East and West in the past, to limit the role of Iran in regional affairs and Afghanistan, especially after the victory of the Islamic Revolution and the "homogeneity of the economy of Iran and Afghanistan" (Haqshanas & Yousefi, 2010, p. 11).

Also, at the time of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, there were about eight political and jihadi parties supported by Iran, which were fighting each other for a while. For example, the party of Nasr and Pasdar openly started armed fighting against the Attifaq Shura (Unity Council) and the Islamic Movement of Afghanistan party. After the destruction of the Attifaq Shura, these two parties came together again with the financial and military support of Iran, and the two parties combined and established a single one by name of the Islamic Unity Party of Afghanistan, which later branched into four parties such as Khalili's Wahdat Party, Mohaghegh's Wahdat Party, Akbari's Wahdat Party, and Mostafa Kazemi's Wahdat Party (Cordoves & Selig, 2000, p. 89).

Overall, during this period, the Islamic Republic of Iran provided relatively better assistance, including spiritual and material aid and support, such as weapons, etc., to the Mujahideen, but due to lack of experience, insufficient knowledge of the situation in Afghanistan, etc., it was not as reachable as expected. The Islamic Republic could have created more unity and cohesion between the Shia and Sunni groups. For the reasons mentioned, it not only failed to create unity between the jihadist groups, but, intentionally or unintentionally, it caused division among jihadist groups.

### **2.3 Relations between Afghanistan and Iran during the 5-year period of the Taliban (1995-2001)**

Internal disputes and civil wars have left the people of Afghanistan wandering and they have a negative view of the Mujahideen, so many of them longed for a savior who could save them from the difficult and miserable situation brought by the Mujahideen in the country. In 1994, Taliban forces entered Afghanistan and captured the city of Kandahar on November 21. At the beginning of the Taliban's arrival in Afghanistan, they were relatively welcomed by the people of the country since they were tired of war and insecurity. Thus, they thought that the Taliban would be able to end the civil war and bring peace and security as well as prosperity to the country. On the other hand, the people of Afghanistan, who are strictly bound by the religion and orders of the Holy Sharia, had thought that the Taliban, who claimed to be students of knowledge and demanded the implementation of Sharia laws in the country, supported the Taliban in their rapid advance to control the power in the country. The Islamic Republic of Iran did not show a significant reaction to the Taliban at the beginning of the Taliban's arrival in Afghanistan. But after some time, the Islamic Republic felt threatened, so it decided to have a remarkable presence in the country and provided the official government of Afghanistan with some support and assistance (Bakhtiari & Qasim, 2002).

The tension between Iran and the Taliban reached its peak after the Taliban attacked the Iranian Consulate in Mazar-e-Sharif, resulting in the killing of Iranian diplomats and journalists. The possibility of Iran's attack on Afghanistan and direct military intervention was expected, and Iran was fully prepared to react. This dark relationship continued for some time, and the Islamic Republic cut off all its relations with the Taliban until the interests of Iran demanded that it be close to the Taliban to some extent; otherwise, Afghanistan would become the cradle of Iran's rival, namely Pakistan. Therefore, a delegation of the Taliban headed by the head of the Taliban chambers of commerce traveled to Iran and as a result of their visit, the transit route to Islam Qala was opened. This unexpected action of Iran caused astonishment at the international level. Some experts considered it another reason for Iran's lack of planning regarding Afghanistan, but in reality, this action by Iran was a very strong economic blow to Pakistan, which had exclusive control over Afghanistan's market before. Iran never recognized the Taliban during their five-year ruling period because supporting the Taliban was not compatible with Iran's material and moral goals and interests. Iran shares a 950-kilometer border with Afghanistan, and any insecurity and chaos in Afghanistan could harm its security. According to some experts, Afghanistan is not a source of wealth for Iran as well as for its national security, but monitoring and controlling at least the border areas with Afghanistan is of security importance (Hedayati Imam Chayi, 2018, p. 4).

The proximity of the Taliban to Pakistan, which is Iran's main rival in Afghanistan affairs, and the anti-Shiite ideology of the Taliban, which was evident from the massacre of Shiites in Afghanistan, are signs of the Taliban's opposition to Iran's goals and interests. Therefore, the recognition of the Taliban and its support of them was against the goals, interests, and role of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Therefore, during this period, the Islamic Republic always provided both material and spiritual support to the official government of Afghanistan and the United Front so that they could defeat the Taliban group and remove it from power in Afghanistan. Although in some cases Iran's interests have required it to establish relations with the Taliban, these relations have been exclusively commercial (Shadan, 2012, p. 5).

### 3.0 RELATIONS BETWEEN AFGHANISTAN AND IRAN AFTER THE FALL OF THE TALIBAN GOVERNMENT AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF DEMOCRACY IN 2001

Therefore, after five years of Taliban rule, the US felt that it did not pay attention to its demands and could not provide for its interests. Therefore, the attack of September 11, 2001, happened, which was designed by the United States, as an excuse to attack Afghanistan, and after a short time, with the help of the Northern United Front, the US managed to remove the Taliban from power and occupy the country (Shadan, 2012).

The Bonn Conference was held under the pressure of the West. Hamid Karzai was elected as the president of the transitional government of Afghanistan after the completion of the transitional period. Then, after six months, he was again retained in his position by the Loy Jirga. In 2005, the first elections in the history of Afghanistan were held and finally, Hamid Karzai, the candidate supported by America and the West, was re-elected as the president of Afghanistan and took power. The policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran on Afghanistan in this period can be examined from various directions and dimensions, which is discussed and reviewed separately in four sections and from four angles (Shadan, 2012).

#### 3.1 *The Type of Government and the Rulers in Afghanistan*

During this period, the Islamic Republic of Iran has been interested in the type of government in Afghanistan as its system, the Islamic Republic, so it struggled so that the rulers of Afghanistan should be Islamists or Mujahideen members. Finally, with the support of Islamic scholars and Mujahideen as well as Iran's support, Afghanistan's government system is named the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, which Iran welcomed and achieved its goal (Shadan, 2012).

Iran has always emphasized and negotiated with Hamid Karzai that the Mujahideen should have an active presence in the cabinet of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. However, Iran has not achieved its goal fully since it long wanted one of the Mujahideen, especially a Persian speaker should at the head of the power. Although the Islamic Republic has always tried to have a warm relationship with Karzai on the surface, it considered him a puppet of America and not the people's choice (Shadan, 2012).

#### 3.2 *Afghanistan's Reconstruction Process*

Afghanistan lost all its economic infrastructure during the 25 years of war. However, after the Taliban, when there was relatively established peace, everything had to start from zero, so Afghanistan was in need of the international community's support and aid. The Islamic Republic of Iran has provided some good aid by which some important projects were conducted (Hedayati Imam Chayi, 2018).

Afghanistan has good capacity to attract investment, export technical services, etc. Having proper modern knowledge, Iran could use these capacities well and expand its trade and export relations in various fields. Unfortunately, Iran has not paid much attention to investment and exports to Afghanistan, and instead of being the first trading partner, it took 10th place (Shadan, 2012).

#### 3.3 *US Military Presence in Afghanistan*

After the fall of the Taliban, American forces and their allies entered Afghanistan, and their presence has been increasing. The US military presence and the establishment of military bases for the long term in Afghanistan are certainly against Iran's interests because the US government is considered one of the main enemies of Iran. As Mansoor Farhang, professor of politics at New York University, says, "Iran's main concern in relation to Afghanistan is that the US can build a permanent air base near Iran's borders." This way, Iran will be surrounded by a US military presence from the east and the south (Shadan, 2012, p. 7). Therefore, the Islamic Republic of Iran has always struggled to create challenges to the military presence of the West, especially the United States, in Afghanistan. The West has always accused the Islamic Republic of Iran of supporting and providing assistance to the armed opponents of the Afghan government.

#### 3.4 *Drugs*

Although Afghanistan has many potential resources and talents, it is currently considered one of the poorest countries in the world, because the 25-year war has destroyed all of its infrastructure. Therefore, some people in Afghanistan have turned to drug cultivation for their livelihoods. During this period, the production of narcotics has been increasing, so that 95% of the world's narcotics are produced in Afghanistan. Until then, the international community has not been able to help the weak government of Afghanistan in counter-narcotics (Hedayati Imam Chayi, 2018).

One of the countries that has suffered the most damage from drug production in Afghanistan is the Islamic Republic of Iran, which has caused many social problems and social anomalies for Iran, since the Islamic Republic of Iran shares a 950-kilometer border with the country. Iran is one of the few countries that has seriously fought against this evil phenomenon. According to Ahmadi Moghadam, head of Iran's police force, the world organizations and developed countries have spent 6 million dollars on the fight against drugs, while Iran alone has spent over 600 million dollars annually (Hedayati Imam Chayi, 2018).



It seems that instead of spending huge amounts of money on the fight against narcotics, the Islamic Republic of Iran should have spent more of that money or a large part of it to prevent drug cultivation and by cooperating more with the Afghan government and the international community, encourage its alternative. But some of the things that have been proposed as alternatives are under Iran's monopoly. Among them is saffron, for which the international community provides good assistance to the government and farmers of Afghanistan. However, Iran refuses saffron exportation to the country (Hedayati Imam Chayi, 2018, p. 9).

### **3.5 Immigration**

After the Soviet attack on Afghanistan, some Afghans were forced to leave their homes and homeland and migrate to neighboring countries, including Iran, which continued during the civil wars. During Afghanistan's war with the Soviet Union, the Islamic Republic almost opened its doors to Afghan refugees, which had some political, economic, and cultural consequences for Iranian society (Farhang, 2009).

The Islamic Republic of Iran is one of the few countries where Afghan refugees have lived together with the native people due to the initial enthusiasm for welcoming them as a friendly and brotherly nation and the lack of facilities for accommodation in camps. The ideological ties of the Iranian government to the Islamic world were accompanied by encouraging and inviting Afghans to settle in Iran and integrate them into Iranian society, which is known as the "open door" policy. Expressions such as nation of friend and brother inspired many Afghans, especially the Hazaras, who sought refuge in Iran from the war and occupation of their country by the Soviet as well as the ethnic discrimination in Afghanistan (Farhang, 2009).

Yet, at the end of the Iran-Iraq war, this policy was also changed, and particularly in the ninth government, it was totally opposed to the first procedure. The US invaded Afghanistan in 2002 and the new government came to power in the country, which took the policy of returning Afghans to their country as one of the solutions to many economic problems. In this way, the ideological policy of "open doors," which used to be in the early years of the revolution, gave way to a completely opposite approach known as the "closed doors" policy. Although after the death of Khomeini, the return of refugees has always been on the agenda of the post-war governments, the situation of the period known as the construction and the employing of Afghans as one of the cheapest ways of labor required that these policies should be milder. After President Khatami took office, the policy of repatriating Afghans became more intense and serious, as it also involved the president himself. However, this policy during the presidency of Ahmadinejad, especially when he came to power in 2005, was not only contrary to the provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Refugees, which Iran had signed in 1976, but also completely ignored the resources spent on integrating refugees into Iranian society and raising their level of education as well as their human and social capital (Farhang, 2009).

A major initiative for the return of Afghan refugees was started in 2001 by one-year and two-year agreements between the governments of Iran and Afghanistan and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. The restricting measures that the government has implemented since 2004 have resulted in reducing the level of administrative and social services to Afghans living in Iran, increasing education, health, and urban costs, preventing a large number of Afghan children from accessing education without permission, lack of work permits, etc. (Farhang, 2009, p. 7).

### **3.6 Secret Intelligence Information**

As a wealthy country in the region, Iran uses its vast oil revenues for its ideological and political purposes. This is a part of the intelligence of the Islamic Republic of Iran, called foreign intelligence, that operates in two ways, overt and covert. Overt in the sense that it operates openly in the framework of Iranian embassies in the host country in order to have communication with the officials. One of the basic tasks of foreign intelligence is to collect information about Afghanistan. They secretly communicate in different circles to gain access to specific information. This department has a special place in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan, the Ministry of Interior, Defense, Energy, Water, and Finance and in our western provinces. Iran's Minister of Intelligence has high qualifications at the level of religious jurisprudence. From the point of view of the regulations, those who are in high positions of this ministry must be among those who participated in the revolution and are appointed by the Supreme Leader of Iran (Mojdeh, 2010, p. 95).

In general, the political, social, economic, and cultural developments in Afghanistan, under any circumstances, will have a direct and indirect impact on Iran's national security since this country is located in the cultural-civilization area of Iran and the two countries share long borders, which are difficult to protect due to their geographical features and will not be fully implemented at very high costs. Peace and stability in Afghanistan and the formation of an inclusive government, consisting of all ethnic groups, can lead to the stabilization of security in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Iran has been facing many problems on its eastern borders for the past few decades, and instability and internal chaos in Afghanistan have been one of the main causes of these problems. The new state-building process in Afghanistan has brought different issues to the eastern borders of Iran, which have had many threats and opportunities for the Islamic Republic of Iran (Haqshanas & Yousefi, 2010, p. 18).

## 4.0 FINDINGS

Relations between Afghanistan and Iran before the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan have had ups and downs. Due to greater convergence with the Afghan Mujahideen after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and when the Islamic revolution led by Khomeini took power in Iran, the country did not have good relations with the puppet Russian communist government in Afghanistan. During the reign of the Mujahideen and the Taliban Emirate, due to the civil war and the Taliban's dominance over Afghanistan, Iran has tried to maintain relations with the Mujahideen government despite the Taliban's dominance over Afghanistan. After the fall of the Taliban Emirate and the presence of foreign forces and the establishment of a democratic system in Afghanistan, relations between Afghanistan and Iran have had ups and downs due to the presence of American forces in Afghanistan.

### 4.1 Conclusion

It is generally said that the relations between Afghanistan and Iran have had ups and downs since the start of the Islamic Revolution in Iran until now. Iran has the following goals in its relations with Afghanistan:

Ensuring Iran's economic, political and security interests in Afghanistan, since Afghanistan is now a battleground for gaining influence in Central Asia. It should be noted that Afghanistan is under support of Iran in case the country aims to play a regional role in the region since the Arab countries are strongly against Iran's influence, and if Iran turns to the east, Afghanistan will be a support or cornerstone for Iran.

For economic interests, Afghanistan is considered one of the best consumers of Iranian goods and products for the following reasons: Because of similarities and cultural proximity, Iran's trade with Afghanistan has skyrocketed from 10 million dollars in 2001 to 1 billion dollars in 2008.

The fight against drug trafficking constitutes the priority of Iran's national interests in relation to Afghanistan. One third of drug production, i.e., 2,500 tons, is smuggled from Iran. According to Antonio Costa, Executive Director of the United Nations Program to Combat Narcotics, Afghanistan has the largest production in the world with 8,200 tons per year, and Iran was the largest consumer of the production.

Preventing the disintegration of Afghanistan and the formation of Balochistan and Pashtunistan governments. According to the plan that was presented in the American Militarist magazine in 2006 as a plan for the Middle East and a new map of the Middle East, according to this plan, it predicted the division of several countries and the formation of Baluchistan, Kurdistan, and some other new states would be established in the region. In relation to the bilateral relations between Afghanistan and Iran, Afghan officials have repeatedly spoken of friendly relations and good neighborliness with Iran. But to answer these questions, what kind of policy Iran will take towards Afghanistan in the coming years is something that goes back to the later actions that the Islamic Republic of Iran will take towards Afghanistan.

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