

CUBAN MEDIATION IN THE IRAQ–IRAN WAR

SÁNDOR ROLAND KRAJCSI

Universidad Eötvös Loránd, Budapest, Hungary

Date of receipt: 13/01/2025

Date of approval: 01/11/2025

Abstract: The aim of this study is to present an aspect of Cuba's internationalist foreign policy when the island nation tried to help a third world state resolve a local conflict through mediation instead of the military support. Cuba's role as a mediator in the 1980-1988 war between Iraq and Iran was an example of this. This form of intervention of the island nation was not unprecedented, because it had already attempted to mediate between the opposing Ethiopia and Somalia in 1977, as in the case of the border dispute between Afghanistan and Pakistan. However, Cuba made a much greater effort to bring the participants to the negotiating table in the aforementioned Iraq–Iran war. But what exactly was behind this, what goals the island nation was pursuing and what efforts it made to achieve them? These are the questions what we would like to answer in this article.

Keyword: Cuba, Iraq, Iran, Internationalism, War mediation.

1. Introduction

The question of Cuban mediation in the Iraq–Iran war has been addressed in English by J. Damien Fernandez (Fernandez 1988) and Domingo Amerchastegui (1999), and in Spanish by Álvarez Acosta and María Elena (2023), but only in a descriptive and partial way. In fact, these authors have embedded the theme of the island nation's mediator role in the Iraq–Iran war in their comprehensive works on the history of relations between Cuba and the Middle East. Reversing this method, the present paper focuses on a detailed analysis of Cuban mediation, while at the beginning of the paper we only present briefly the island nation's relations with the Middle East (in particular, its relations with Iran and Iraq), at the level of providing the basic information necessary for understanding the events. In addition, to understand the motivations behind Cuban mediation, the paper also provides insights into the island nation's broader foreign policy ambitions and its alignment with Soviet interests.

This paper was motivated by the lack of a more in-depth study of this issue and the presentation of another aspect of the history of the Iraq–Iran war, as well as by the rich archival sources on Cuban mediation in the war in the National Archives of Hungary (*Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár Országos Levéltára*, MNL OL). The MNL OL holds several ambassadorial and foreign ministerial reports on the Cuban mediation

attempt during the early stages of the war (1980-1981), which were almost regular reports to the Hungarian Foreign Ministry, thanks to the close diplomatic relations between the two countries during the Cold War which based on a common ideology. These Hungarian documents also provide a detailed insight into the work of Cuban Foreign Minister Isidoro Malmierca, who was in charge of conciliation, and the development of the mediation process. In addition to the Hungarian sources, contemporary Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) reports and documents on the Iraq–Iran war, Cuban mediation in the war and relations between the two countries at war and Cuba were also used as a source of Control. Moreover, we have used relevant contemporary press sources (relevant issues of the *Middle East Journal* and *Népszabadság*) too, as well as literature directly or indirectly related to the subject and to the research.

2. Cuba and the Middle East

Damian J. Fernandez, in his book *Cuba's Foreign Policy in the Middle East* (1988), defined the relationship between Cuba and the Middle East in a five-phase sequence for the post-revolutionary period, but one of these (1986-87) in our opinion is a subset of the fourth phase. In this chapter, we will present four of these five subdivisions in such a way that the last two stages are considered as a single unit. The presentation of this periodisation is really important to understand Cuba's relations with Iraq and Iran and its role in mediation.

The first phase, the period from 1959 to 1973, was essentially characterised by Cuba's support being mainly rhetorical and partially practical, for the various liberation movements (in particular the Palestine Liberation Organisation – PLO) and for certain governments opposed to the United States and imperialism (Fernandez 1988). This coincides with the period of the island nation's post-revolutionary internationalist foreign policy from 1959 –and more strongly from 1962– to the turn of the 1960s and 1970s. During this period, Havana actively supported guerrilla movements and various struggles for independence in the Third World, especially in Latin America (Anderle 2004, 131-139). Cuba's aim was to break out of the isolation created by the United States and to reduce dependence on the Soviet Union after the 1962 Cuban missile crisis¹.

It is important to emphasise that between 1959 and 1973 Cuba also maintained good relations with Israel, because the two countries had much in

¹ This was really important for Cuba because, after the solution of the Caribbean crisis, Fidel Castro felt betrayed, as he was not invited to the meeting between John F. Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev that had settled the situation. Furthermore, the Soviet side ignored Cuban interests in the negotiations. In response to this, Havana developed a new foreign policy, centred on revolutionary internationalism (Anderle 2004, 128-129, 131).

common: they were newly created small states with great ambitions, exposed to hostile attacks by their neighbours, a focus on agriculture, special military installations on their territory and societal reforms (Sweig 2009, 117; Szarka 2014).

However, the friendly relations between the two countries took a turn for the worse after the Six-Day War in 1967, when Fidel Castro condemned Israel for the attack in order to favour the Arab side. But Havana, not wanting to lose its relations with the Jewish state completely, blamed the United States and imperialism for starting the war (mentioning Israel's name as little as possible). Castro also criticised the Arab countries for their failure to fight to the end and because they had given up the fight against Israel too soon (Metz 1993, 114, 119). With this shuttlecock policy, Cuba wanted to become a kind of balance in order to gain a leading role in the Third World. However, in the eyes of the Arab States, this political attitude proved inadequate, and at the conference of the Non-Aligned Movement held in Algiers on September 7, 1973, the island country received a lot of criticism, including that Cuba is not a real non-aligned country (Metz 1993, 121). As a result, "at the meeting, Fidel Castro announced that Cuba would break diplomatic relations with Israel in solidarity with the Arab countries" ("Befejeződött az algíri..." 1973, 1). Cuba put this decision into practice after the Yom Kippur War in October of that year, when it announced in an official statement that it was breaking diplomatic relations with Israel (Metz 1993, 121-122).

The second phase of Cuba's relations with the Middle East was the period from 1973 to 1977. This was a period of transition, as from this time it began to pursue a clear anti-Israel policy, e. g. support for the United Nations, UN resolution of November 10, 1975, which equated Zionism with racism and to expand its bilateral relations with Arab countries (Metz 1993, 121). Cuba had good relations with Syria during this period and restored relations and economic cooperation with Libya in 1974. Havana also increased its military and civilian cooperation with the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (Amerchastegui 1999; "Kubai Köztársaság..." 1976, 4). This was continued in the third phase (1977–1980), when the island nation tried to further develop its relations and increase its political activity in the region (Fernandez, 1988). Cuba's northern neighbour, the United States, which had focused its foreign policy on the other major issues (e. g. the Vietnam War, 1965-73), overshadowed the question of the island nation (Anderle 2004, 154; Lehoczki 2019, 26). Thus, in addition to armed and humanitarian internationalist assistance (e.g. Angola, Ethiopia, Nicaragua, Grenada), Cuba was able to expand and develop its traditional bilateral relations.

The fourth phase of the Cuba's relations with the Middle East lasted from post-1981 until the late 1980s, when it reduced its political activity in the region and instead focused more on socio-economic cooperation with the (Arab) countries there (Fernandez 1988).

3. Cuba's relation with Iraq and Iran (1959-1980)

In order to understand why it became important for Cuba to play a mediating role in the 1980-88 Iraq–Iran war, we need to briefly describe the Island nation's relationship with the two Arab countries.

Cuba established diplomatic relations with Iraq on April 5, 1960, and Cuba's aim with this rapprochement was to buy arms (tanks, artillery and light weapons) from the Arab country, but this endeavour failed (Acosta and Elena 2023, 105). In 1962, the small Caribbean country accredited an ambassador to Baghdad. From 1968, the two states cooperated in the training of guerrillas. In context with Fernandez's periodisation, Cuba-Iraq relations began to strengthen and intensify from the mid-1970s: the military cooperation between the two countries being established in 1976. As a result, 150 Cuban advisers arrived in Baghdad to help train and reinforce the members of the People's Militia and provide political education to the armed forces (Fernandez 1988). Moreover, in the second half of the 1970s, the socio-economic cooperation between Cuba and Iraq grew stronger, from construction to medicine. In 1978, as part of this cooperation, Cuba sent 378 healthcare workers to Iraq and the two countries signed a 53 million USD housing contract in 1979. In addition, Cuban guest workers arrived in Iraq to help with the construction of highways (Fernandez 1988). Another very important point in the revitalisation of relations was the one-day official visit to Iraq by Fidel Castro in 1973, where he met then President Ahmed Hassan Al-Bakr (1968-1979) and his Vice-President Saddam Hussein. In 1978, Hussein visited Havana at the invitation of Fidel Castro. In September the following year, Hussein as the Iraqi head of state (1979-2003), arrived in Cuba for the Havana meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), where he also met Castro (CIA 1978, 10; Acosta and Elena 2023, 106; "Iraq: Dr. Fidel Castro..." 1973). As a result, Iraq became one of Cuba's strongest allies in the region since the 1970s.

In 1953, when Mohammed Reza Pahlavi Shah (1941-1979) overthrew the country's legitimately elected prime minister, Mohammad Mosaddegh (in office 1951-1953) with the help of the CIA, he became of the full-power ruler of the state, and he built an autocracy system in Iran². After that Iran pursued a pro-US and pro-Western foreign policy, and as a result, until the 1979 revolution, Fidel Castro's Cuba did not have a close relationship with Iran. From the mid-1960s, Cuba's relationship with Iran was also hampered by Havana's links with the anti-Shah Tudeh Party's³ radical left-wing group, the Revolutionary Organisation, and the Iranian People's Mujahedin Organisation, which sympathized with the Cuban and Latin American revolutions and guerrilla fights (Padilla 2019, 84-85). In 1967, 12 members of the

² Mohammed Reza Pahlavi Shah originally came to power in 1941 as a young monarch after his father abdicated from the throne by the pressure of Soviets and British because he refused that allies use the Iranian railway lines to transport war materials.

³ It was a catch-all party in Iran with social-democratic, socialist and Marxist attitude.

People's Mujahedin Organisation attended an 8-month training course in guerrilla warfare in Cuba as a part of the *Operación Ramadan* and then returned to Iran through Prague with false passports (Padilla 2019, 85-86; Zourek 2015, 91).

Iran and Cuba established diplomatic relations in November 1975, but these were not long lived, because these relations were served on April 7, 1976. The reason for the break-up was that Cuba maintained good terms with the banned and illegally working Tudeh Party, whose aim was to overthrow the Shah's regime. In this context, the Tudeh Party's General Secretary, Iraj Eskanderi (1970-1979)⁴ and Fidel Castro met in Moscow in March 1976 at the 25th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Padilla 2019, 83-84). But this was only one component of the reason why Tehran broke the relations with Havana. Another contributing factor to the short-lived relationship between the two countries was that Cuba also supported (between 1966 and 1976) the Dhofart rebels, whose fought for a liberated Dhofari territory from Oman during this period (Padilla 2019, 83-84; Shamsunahar 2018). While the Iranian Shah supported, with soldiers and weapons, the Omani sultan, Said bin Taimur (1932-1970) who wanted to defeat this revolution (Shamshiri 2002). The importance of this Iranian support was that Reza Pahlavi Shah was afraid of the anti-Shah persons and political forces influenced by the Dhofari revolution. In addition, the Cuban embassy in Tehran distributed revolutionary propaganda, such as the *Tricontinental* magazine⁵, which also weakened the Iranian-Cuban relations (Padilla 2019, 83-84).

In 1979, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (1979-1989) came to power as the supreme ruler of the country following the victory of the Iranian revolution. After that Iran began to pursue an anti-US policy. This led to the re-establishment of diplomatic relations between Cuba and Iran on August 8 of that year, in the framework of which Iran gave strong rhetorical support to Cuba, underlining their common anti-imperialist, that is, anti-US attitude (Acosta and Elena 2023, 107). In return, Cuba also supported Iran in international organisations – e.g. UN, Non-Aligned Movement (Brun 2020, 270). In addition, Iran hoped that Cuba would act as a bridge between Tehran and Latin America as well as between Tehran and Moscow. The re-establishment of relations, however, did not mean an immediate upturn in economic relations, which only progressively began to improve between the two countries (Fernandez 1988).

⁴ Iraj Eskanderi (1907-1980) was an Iranian lawyer and Marxist politician. In 1946 he was the Minister of Trade, Crafts and Arts in Iran. After 1949, he lived in exile. In 1970 he became the secretary of the Tudeh Party for 9 years. He died in Leipzig, East Germany in 1985.

⁵ The *Tricontinental* was a left-wing quarterly magazine which first released after the Tricontinental Conference (held by Cuba in 1966). This periodical has published many anti-imperialist analysis, essays and interviews. It also included a poster supplement, placed in the middle of the magazine, which also conveyed anti-imperialist messages. Printing of *Tricontinental* ceased in 2019 (Mor 2019, 43).

4. The reason of the mediation

In this chapter, we will describe the reasons that led Cuba to take on the role of mediator in the Iraq–Iran war in the autumn of 1980. These reasons can be grouped into four main categories. The first of these was Cuba’s good relations with the two warring countries – as we described above. While Cuba had developed an excellent and important economic cooperation with Iraq by the 1980s, it had barely normalized relations with Iran, which were developing slowly but steadily. Moreover, Iran’s opposition to the US was a huge victory for the island nation, as it added another ideological ally on the international arena. In addition, the island nation did not want to choose sides among its warring allies because, before the Iraq–Iran war, Cuba chose side in the conflict between Somalia and Ethiopia (Cuba also had good relations with these two countries) and it burned itself by siding with Ethiopia. In response, in November 1977, Somalia expelled the Cuban experts who were there and served diplomatic relations with the small Caribbean country (Makai 1985, 198). Therefore, Cuba had to take care not to repeat this situation. Furthermore, the island nation had had a military presence in Angola since 1975, so the Cuban economy, which had been on a steep downward trend by 1980, could not take another hostile engagement.

The other important reason for Cuba’s involvement as a mediator in the Iraq–Iran war was to restore and strengthen its authority in the Third World and thus in the Non-Aligned Movement. This was necessary because Cuba supported the Soviet Union in its invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 (CIA 1980a, 6.), while the NAM opposed this action which represented that the large part of the movement supported (Cuba refused) the UN resolution of January 1980, which condemned the Soviets’ action in Afghanistan (Bain 2005, 773). All of the above, as a CIA report of the time reveals, “has reduced Cuba’s effectiveness as chairman of the Non-aligned Movement [the island nation held this position since June–July 1979 – K. S. R.]” (CIA 1980b, 7). So Fidel Castro had to admit “that its international ambitions are likely to remain frustrated as long as the Afghanistan problem continues” (CIA 1980b, 7). That is why mediation in the Iraq–Iran war offered an excellent opportunity for Cuba to turn the situation in a positive direction. “In addition, Castro believes he would gain considerable prestige as a peacemaker in the Third World [...]” (CIA 1980c, 4).

With the mediation, Cuba also had the opportunity to try to distract Non-Aligned from the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. By taking this step the island nation was also representing Moscow interests. Moreover, the Soviet Union also took a neutral stance on the war. For the Soviets, neither Iran nor Iraq victory would have brought political, diplomatic or economic benefits. The former brought the strengthening of Islamic fundamentalism, which would have affected the Muslim population in the Soviet territories. While the latter would have resulted in the severing of relations with Iran for Moscow and losing a potential anti-US ally (CIA

1982a, 10; CIA 1982b, 8). Thus, the best result for the Soviet Union was for neither side to win that is to maintain the *status quo* between the two countries. Beside, “in the Soviet view, no country –neither great powers or other– should interfere in the conflict” (FRUS 1980). Moscow added that the best way to resolve the conflict between the two Arab countries would be for Non-Aligned Movement or Islamic countries to bring the opposing participants to the negotiating table (FRUS 1980). The former Cuba had actually acted accordingly by not taking sides in the war and, as president of the NAM, taking on mediation duties in order to end the fighting as soon as possible.

The fourth reason for Cuba’s neutrality and attempted mediation aligned with mainstream international politics. Indeed, the war was opposed by most of the major and important international organisations: the United Nation (UN), the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), the Arab League, the Islamic Conference, the European Economic Community (EEC), etc. Moreover, a significant number of countries in the world, led by the United States, also condemned the war. These organisations and states were not only opposed to the war, but also wanted a ceasefire between the warring parties as soon as possible and for their disputes to be settled peacefully and at the negotiating table (Sánchez 1990, 151). Furthermore, many of these international organisations attempted to mediate in the war, largely unsuccessfully (FRUS 1983). On the war between Iraq and Iran, it is important to mention the position of the USA, which, like the Soviet Union, did not want to take sides, but for very different reasons than Moscow. Washington wanted to withdraw from the war because it did not have good relations with any of the warring countries. It means that the USA would not have benefited politically from the victory of either country. The United States was in favour of a diplomatic solution to the conflict, thus Washington encouraged a UN Security Council (UNSC) meeting (FRUS 1980).

Cuba, seeing this situation, decided to use mediation in Iraq–Iran war as an opportunity to gain sympathizers and possible supporters in international organizations, who could later support the island nation on the issue of the US embargo. Moreover, Havana could steer the tides towards easing its increasingly strained relations with Washington since 1979 (support for the Grenadian revolution, Nicaraguan Sandinistas, the Iranian revolution, etc.) This was also necessary because, before 1979, from the middle of the decade onwards, relations between the two countries had apparently begun to soften: suspension of fielding spy planes, lifting of the ban on US citizens visiting Cuba, the Fishing Agreement in 1977 and conclusion of a treaty to set up a bureau of representation of the USA in Havana⁶, release of some political prisoners in Cuban in 1978, etc. (Anderle 2004, 154-155).

⁶ It was a really important step from the two countries because Cuba and United States broke the diplomatic relations in 1961 and USA closed his embassy of Havana during this time.

5. The Cuban mediation (1980-1982)

The main reason of the war between Iraq and Iran was the control over the Shatt-el-Arab river, which is the border between the two countries. The river is a very important trade route, as its use to transport oil from refineries goes back to the 19th century (Grenville 2000, 919). But, in 1937 the issue was settled in such a way that, with the exception of the sections touching the Iranian cities of Abadan and Khorramshahr, Iraqis had control of the river. However, problems with control of Shatt-el-Arab recurred in the late 1960s, resulting in border conflicts between Iraq and Iran, but in 1975, the Treaty of Algiers agreed that the Parties “shall establish their river boundaries in accordance with the river-bed” (Lugosi 1989, 446). In 1979, following the victory of the Iranian revolution and the rise of Saddam Hussein as Iraqi president, the issue of control of the river was again on the agenda. This situation was exacerbated by Iraq’s desire to unite the Arab world in the name of Arab nationalism. While Iran announced the export of its revolution in order to promote the emergence of Islamic fundamentalist regimes similar to its own in the region. As a result, in April 1980 there were different border incidents between the two countries (Karsh 2002, 7-8; J. Nagy 2009, 185-186). Cuba tried to help settle this situation by sending a delegate to Tehran in May of that year. However, this proved to be an unsuccessful attempt by Cuba, as the conflict between the two Arab states escalated and the war erupted on September 22 when Iraq attacked Iran (“Tájékoztató Malmierca...” 1981, 1).

One of Cuba’s first reactions to the war was to withdraw its military advisers from Baghdad in order to confirm its neutrality because it did not want to take sides between the warring nations (Amerchastegui 1999). In addition, Fidel Castro instructed his foreign minister, Isidoro Malmierca Peoli (1976-1992), to establish contact with both Iraq and Iran and to try to resolve the conflict peacefully (Castro 1980). In *Granma*, the central newspaper of the Cuban Communist Party (Partido Comunista de Cuba, PCC), Castro expressed the island nation’s official position on the war as followed: “We are firmly convinced that a solution to the war that today pits these two sister nations against one another must and can be found [...]” (Castro 1980).

5.1. The I. Stage (1980)

In 1980, Isidoro Malmierca travelled a total of 9 times to Iraq (5 times) and Iran (4 times) with the aim of mediating between the warring parties and bringing peaceful resolution on to the existing conflict. The Cuban Foreign Minister’s travels began on September 26, 1980, four days after the war erupted. His first stop was in Baghdad. Here he held conversation with Iraqi President Saddam Hussein. At the

meeting, Malmierca suggested to the Iraqi head of state that he settle his conflicts with Iran through negotiations. This possible negotiation would be hosted by a third Non-Aligned country. The Cuban politician also suggested that Iraq make an immediate ceasefire with its neighbour. Hussein accepted these proposals and stated that Iraq has no territorial claims against Iran, besides he said that his country was ready for the immediate ceasefire. The Iraqi president only asked that Iran recognize Iraq's sovereignty ("Tájékoztató Malmierca..." 1981, 1, 2). It means that Iraq wanted to restore its pre-1975 borders and wanted to have full control of the Shatt-el-Arab River, with the exception of the section involving the two Iranian cities which we mentioned earlier.

On October 4, 1980, Malmierca arrived in Tehran, where he was received by Iranian President Abolhassan Bani-Sadr (1980-1981). The Cuban Foreign Minister introduced to him the proposal for a peaceful solution to the war and also presented the Iraqi position about ceasefire. Bani-Sadr agreed that negotiations between the two countries should take place under the supervision of the Non-Aligned Movement, but this solution he subjected was not without conditions: first, Iraq had to withdraw its troops from occupied Iranian territories, then establish a ceasefire, and after these demands were met, Tehran was willing to come to the negotiating table. In addition, the Iranian president has stated that Iran insists on keeping the borders established in the 1975 Algiers Treaty ("Tájékoztató Malmierca..." 1981, 2, 4).

Following the conversation in Tehran, Foreign Minister Malmierca returned to Baghdad on October 10, that he informed Saddam Hussein on Teheran's position of the peace. The Iraqi president responded that the withdrawal of Iraqi troops "is possible after Iran, through the country's Supreme Military Council, determined what the agreement should be based on" ("Tájékoztató Malmierca..." 1981, 3). And if the resulting conditions were appropriate for Iraq, the conversations about details of troop withdrawals could begin. Hussein added that "any ceasefire agreement between the two countries must include complete freedom of river navigation in the Gulf and the strait of Hormuz [...]" ("Tájékoztató Malmierca..." 1981, 3).

On October 19, Malmierca met with Bani-Sadr in city of Dezful where the Cuban Foreign Minister presented the information which he received from Saddam Hussein. But Bani-Sadr only confirmed his country's previous position: it is only willing to agree to a ceasefire and negotiations if Iraq withdraws its troops from Iran first. Furthermore, he also reaffirmed their insistence on keeping the 1975 borders ("Tájékoztató Malmierca..." 1981, 3, 4).

In the halftime of the first stage of the mediation, Isidoro Malmierca went back to Cuba, and he informed Fidel Castro about the details of his Iraqi and Iranian diplomatic missions. According to Castro, the result of the meeting "[...] inspired us to continue these efforts" ("Tájékoztató Malmierca..." 1981, 4). On October 26, the Cuban President entrusted Malmierca with continuing the mediation. After that, on October 30, Foreign Minister Malmierca visited Baghdad again, where he was

informed by Saddam Husein that it “[...] will not be possible to finalize the withdrawal from the territories occupied by Iraq before negotiations begin until Iran has expressed through its highest competent authority what the border between the two states is” (“Tájékoztató Malmierca...” 1981, 5). Furthermore, the Iraqi President reaffirmed his position that the negotiations should take place under the supervision of the Non-Aligned Movement.

On November 8, Foreign Minister Malmierca presented the Iraqi position to President Bani-Sadr in Tehran, who still agreed that Non-Aligned countries should supervise the negotiations and specifically emphasized Algeria’s participation in this committee (“Tájékoztató Malmierca...” 1981, 6). The reason of this was that Iran wanted to restore the 1975 borders which –as we mentioned earlier– were accepted in Algeria.

In addition, the Cuban Foreign Minister presented Havana’s plan for a ceasefire. “According to it, the participants would fix the former borders before the ceasefire, and question of Shatt-el-Arab would be decided at subsequent negotiations” (“Kubai közvetítés” 1980, 1). In this regard, however, the Iranian President on the recommendation of the Supreme Military Council, made four requests and addition: 1. the Cuban plan for the ceasefire unconditionally had to include the 1975 Algiers Agreement on Shatt-el-Arab. Furthermore, Bani-Sadr asked Cuba to clarify the point of his proposal concerning the former borders. 2. Cuba was to determine the exact process and duration of the withdrawal of Iraqi troops and acting according to it had to be complete and unconditional. 3. Knowledge of the exact implementation of the ceasefire, but that they should not be UN units. He asked that the Non-Aligned Movement should create such a force for this purpose (“Kubai közvetítés” 1980, 1). 4. “Iraq should acknowledge the hostile nature of the attack on Iran and accept responsibility for its consequences” (“Tájékoztató Malmierca...” 1981, 8). Bani-Sadr stated that the answers to these conditions would enable Iran to decide whether to accept the ceasefire proposal developed by Cuba. However, Isidoro Malmierca could not clearly guarantee these requests at the time, because he also had to consult with Iraq about this (“Kubai közvetítés” 1980, 1).

On November 15, Foreign Minister Malmierca arrived in Iraq, where he presented the Cuban ceasefire plan (including the Iranian supplements) to Saddam Hussein. However, the Iraqi president has continued to insist on his own position on the issue. As a result of the failure of this visit to Iraq, Havana had to admit by the second half of November that Cuba would not achieve the results it hoped for from the September and October talks in mediating the Iraq–Iran war. Thus “the Cuban leadership did not expect and does not expect any meaningful results in its activities as president of Non-Aligned Movement” (“Kubai közvetítés az iráni-iraki...” 1980, 1) – said a member of the foreign minister’s encourage. According to Cuba, this was due to the warring parties believing that they still had a chance to win the war (“Kubai közvetítés” 1980, 2).

Fidel Castro informed the Non-aligned Movement about the current situation, and he said that the conditions between Iraq and Iran were not appropriate for negotiations (“Tájékoztató Malmierca...” 1981, 10). But Castro did not give up hope for a successful mediation. On November 30, Malmierca visited Tehran again with very ambitious plans. Here, the Cuban foreign minister told the Iranian leaderships that he agreed with the creation of a peacekeeping army. And he added, this army was to be created by the NAM. The peacekeeping army would have executed the following tasks: controlling the ceasefire and the withdrawal, separate the army units, border control, and police role over the disputed areas. The composition, funding and the length of service of this army would have been determined by the Non-Aligned Coordinating Bureau, Iraq and Iran. In addition, Cuba and the NAM wanted to establish a Permanent Ceasefire Monitoring Commission, led by the Chairman of the Coordinating Bureau, and the peacekeeping army was to be subordinate to this Commission. However, the Cuban foreign minister did not receive a response from the Iranians (“Tájékoztató Malmierca...” 1981, 12).

On December 6, Isidoro Malmierca visited Baghdad where he informed Saddam Hussein about the conversation between the president of Iran and him. The Iraqi president in his response, confirmed his earlier position on peace talks, but he agreed with the established of the peacekeeping corps. There seemed to be a little hope for progress being made towards a peaceful settlement of the war. However, the negotiations ended in a failure because Iran (unexpectedly) rejected Cuba's proposal for a peacekeeping army on December 11 (“Tájékoztató Malmierca...” 1981, 12-13).

Nevertheless, the following next 2 years, Cuba actively tried to establish peace between Iraq and Iran. These Cuban attempts were encouraged and supported by the Non-Aligned countries. Malmierca met the President of Mozambique, Somore Moisés Machel (1975-1986), Nigerian President Alhaji Shehu Shagari (1979-1983) and Indian President Indira Ghandi (1966-1977) in December 1980, who advocated stopping the war as soon as possible. They also encouraged Cuba to continue its efforts towards peace (“Tájékoztató Malmierca...” 1981, 13, 14, 15). On the other hand, Cubans did not want anyone to intervene in the war between Iran and Iraq and thus strengthen either side military. This would have endangered the balance of the region (“Tájékoztató Malmierca...” 1981, 15). In order to avoid this possibility, it was necessary to end the war through mediation.

5.2. The II. and III. Stages (1981-1982)

Cuban Foreign Minister Isidoro Malmierca continued his mediation in the Iraq–Iran war through the spring of 1981, after the Coordination Office of NAM gave permission for Cuba to continue its mission in the Middle East (CIA 1982c, 46; “A kubai nagykövet látogatása” 1981, 1). However, Cuban mediation added a new aspect in that year. Malmierca not only conducted individual negotiations with the warring countries but also involved other members of the NAM in these conversations. Thus, on May 10 and on August 6, the delegation –the members of which were foreign minister of India, Narasimha Rao (1980-1984) and Lamec Goma the Namibian Foreign Minister (1980–1986) and representatives of the Palestine Liberation Organization– led by the Cuban Foreign Minister, travelled to Tehran where conversations were held with Iranian officials. The main topic of these meetings were the possible solution to the Iraq–Iran war (“Chronology...” 1981b, 606; “Chronology...” 1981a, 76). The formation of this delegation had already begun at the end of the previous year, when, on November 2, 1981, the mentioned Foreign Ministers and PLO officials met in Belgrade to discuss a possible mediation mission in Iran and Iraq (“Chronology...” 1981c, 218).

But why exactly was it necessary to set up this delegation? In our opinion, this may have been a guarantee on the one hand that Cuba was really serious about the peace talks taking place under supervision of a committee of Non-Alignments. However, the logic behind the election of members is not entirely clear, except that all Third World countries were represented (Africa: Zambia, Asia: India, Middle East: Palestine Liberation Organization, Latin America: Cuba). On the other hand, the creation of the delegation was, in our view, intended to speed up mediation and to emphasise the early start of peace talks. This was necessary because the NAM awarded Baghdad the right to host the movement’s upcoming 7th Non-Aligned Movement summit conference (1982) at the Havana Conference in 1979. After the war erupted in 1980, some members of the movement (e. g. Panama) began to feel uncertain about the feasibility of the next conference (“A kubai nagykövet látogatása” 1981b, 4). In this regard the following problem arose: “if [...] the Iraq–Iran conflict is not resolved, the number of non-aligned countries expressing concern is likely to increase” (“A kubai nagykövet látogatása” 1981b, 5). Thus, in order to clarify the issue, it was necessary to resolve the conflict as soon as possible and at the same time to assess the existing situation. The latter also provides an answer to the third possible reason for the creation of the delegation, namely its role as a kind of fact-finding mission. This would have given the Non-Aligned members a more comprehensive picture of the seriousness of the war and the expected extent of the conflict.

In 1981, the individual efforts of Foreign Minister Isidoro Malmierca and his efforts with the Non-Aligned delegation to bring success in the Iraq–Iran war have failed. Nevertheless, Malmierca, together with his Indian and Zambian colleagues

and representatives of the PLO, travelled again to Tehran in April 1982, where the delegation was received by President Ali Hosseini Khamenei (1981-1989). This meeting, unfortunately, did not produce any results, nor the individual visit of the Cuban Foreign Minister to Baghdad between the 26th and 29th of August that year. Moreover, this visit was not very positive from many aspects. Cuba then told Iraq that it would not support the holding of the next conference of the Non-Aligned Movements in Baghdad, because the country was not a safe place for a meeting with a huge number of participants (CIA 1982d, 9)⁷. But this meeting was not the first when Havana had to disappoint its Iraqi partner for security reasons: before Malmierca's August trip on July 14, Cuba announced that it had to call home some 500 Cuban workers and professionals from Iraq because of the war (CIA 1983, 79).

However, behind the recall of the Cuban workers and the withdrawal of the right to host the 7th Non-Aligned Movement summit conference, there may have been a mediating aspect as well. In our opinion, the island nation was trying to influence Baghdad in order to bring it to the negotiating table with Iran as soon as possible. From another perspective, these may have been gestures towards Iran, namely that Havana did not see Iraq as having much sympathy for the war. In other hands, Cuba remained independent on this issue, which we base on the fact that the island nation's leadership acted similarly at the eruption of the war when it withdrew its military advisers from Iraq to demonstrate its impartial position (Amerchastegui 1999).

Isidoro Malmierca was not the only Cuban high-level politician who tried mediating between Iraq and Iran. On October 31, 1982, Vice-Minister Carlos Rafael Rodríguez visited Baghdad. Here, he discussed with Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister (1979-2003) and Foreign Minister (1979-1991) Tariq Aziz about the options for a negotiated solution to war. However, he also failed to find a solution for the peaceful settlement of the conflict (CIA 1983, 79).

Moreover, Fidel Castro himself tried to mediate the warring parties in early 1982 when he met Tariq Aziz in Havana on January 29 of that year. Then, on February 8, Castro received Iranian official Ahmad Azizi, who visited Cuba, to discuss ways to resolve the conflict politically (CIA 1983, 79). But the Cuban leader's attempts were also unsuccessful.

⁷ Eventually, the 7th Conference of the Non-Aligned Movement was held in New Delhi, India in 1982.

6. Conclusion and Outlook

Cuban Foreign Minister Isidoro Malmierca travelled to Iraq and Iran a total of 23 times between 1980 and 1982 to mediate between the two countries for a peaceful solution to the war. However, these attempts were failures (Acosta and Elena 2023, 108.) In 1982, both Iraq and Iran continued to insist on their own terms for starting the peace talks. In addition, these conditions did not change after 1980, at least in a direction that would have been a step forward. The only new development in the conditions at the end of 1982, was the payment of Iraqi reparations demanded by Iran (CIA 1982a, 2). Cuba, seeing the ineffectiveness of its efforts, decided to end its active mediation between warring parties in 1982. However, this did not mean that Havana completely gave up its goal of helping to end the Iraq–Iran war peacefully.

After 1982, Havana tried to mediate twice in the Iraq–Iran war. First in the spring of 1985, when “Havana is considering sending Malmierca to Tehran later this year to review prospects for mediating the Iraq–Iran war” (CIA 1985, 5). This decision may have been prompted by the fact that Iraq and Iran began bombing each other’s countries in March of that year. In 1986, Fidel Castro tried an alternative solution to appease the warring parties when he asked North Korean dictator Kim Il-Sung to use his good relations with Iran to end the war between the two opposing Arab states as soon as possible (Szalontai and Jinil 2023, 238). Furthermore, Castro called on North Korea to halt arms deliveries to Iran⁸. However, these attempts were also unsuccessful, and after 1986 Cuba gave up the mediation and prioritised the development of economic and trade relations with Iraq and Iran (CIA 1988, 130, 131, 132; CIA 1989, 190-191). The issue of war was settled by the UN Security Council in the summer of 1988, when the parties signed the ceasefire on August 20.

In conclusion, the Cuban mediation attempt in the Iran-Iraq war was an impasse in the island nation’s internationalist foreign policy. Cuba did not only fail to achieve successes, or even partial successes to bring the warring parties to the negotiating table. Cuba’s attempts to gain influence in the Middle East also failed. Moreover, Havana’s mediation attempt annoyed the Iranian leaders (e. g. Ayatollah Khomeini did not receive the Cuban mediation delegation), and relations between the two countries intensified even more after Havana gave up its mediation activities (Stubits 2011, 25).

⁸ North Korea supplied Iran with T–62 tanks, MiG–19 fighter jets, missile-launchers, towed artillery and self-propelled grenades, short-range ballistic missiles, anti-tank missiles, etc. during the Iraq–Iran war. In addition, military advisers were sent to Iran and helped train Iranian officers and pilots. In exchange, North Korea received oil from Iran (See more: Szalontai and Jinil 2023, 179-247).

Bibliographical references

- Acosta, Álvarez y Elena, María. 2023. "Una aproximación a la política exterior de Cuba hacia África Norte y el Medio Oriente." *Diplomacia Cubana*, 5(4). 103-119. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8422830>.
- Anderle, Ádám. 2004. *Kuba története*. Szeged: Akkord Kiadó.
- Amerchastegui, Domingo. 1999. "Cuba in the Middle East: A Brief Chronology." *U.S. Department of State*. <https://2009-2017.state.gov/p/wha/ci/cu/14745.htm>.
- Bain, Mervyn J. 2005. "Cuba-Soviet Relations in the Gorbachev Era". *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 37(4). 769-791. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022216X05009867>.
- "Befejeződött az algíri értekezlet." *Népszabadság*, September 11, 1973.
- Brun, Elodie. 2020. "Las relaciones de Irán con Cuba, México y Venezuela: la ponderación entre Estados Unidos, ideología y coyuntura económica." En *Irán 40 años de revolución: Sociedad, estado y relaciones exteriores*, editado por Moisés Garduño García, 265-287. México: UNAM.
- Castro, Fidel. 1980. "Reports on Intl Activities (Iran-Iraq Resolution)." *LANIC – Fidel Castro Speech Data Base*. 2024. <http://lanic.utexas.edu/project/castro/db/1980/19801029.html>.
- "Chronology August 1, 1981 – October 1, 1981." *Middle East Journal*, 36(1). Winter, (1981a).
- "Chronology May 1, 1981 – July 31, 1981." *Middle East Journal*, 35(4). Autumn, (1981b).
- "Chronology November 1, 1980 – January 31, 1981." *Middle East Journal*, 35(2). Spring, (1981c).
- Fernandez, J. Damian. 1988. *Cuba's Foreign Policy in the Middle East*. Westview Press. https://www.google.hu/books/edition/Cuba_s_Foreign_Policy_In_The_Middle_East/pIxEAAQAQBAJ?hl=hu&gbpv=1&dq=Dami%C3%A1n+J.+Fernandes+Cuba%E2%80%99s+Foreign+Policy+in+the+Middle+East&pg=PA1979&printsec=frontcover.
- Grenville, John Ashley Soames. 2000. *A History of the World in the 20th Century*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- "Iraq: Dr. Fidel Castro Arrives Baghdad: Dr. Fidel Castro Leaves Baghdad after His One Day Visit to Iraq; President Ahmed Hassan Al Bakr Received Dr. Fidel Castro." *British Pathé*, September 10, 1973. <https://www.britishpathe.com/asset/220635/>.
- J. Nagy, László. 2009. *Az ummától a nemzetállamig. Az arab országok a 19-20. században*. Szeged: SZTE Juhász Gyula Felsőoktatási Kiadó.
- Karsh, Efrain. 2002. *The Iran – Iraq War 1980 – 1988*. Oxford: Osprey Publishing.

- Lehoczki, Bernadett. 2019. "A kubai-latin-amerikai kapcsolatok elmúlt hatvan éve." *Külgügyi Szemle*, 18(3). 23-44. <https://kki.hu/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/3-Lehoczki.pdf>.
- Lugosi, Győző (ed.). 1989. *Dokumentumok a Közel- és a Közép-Kelet történetéhez (1914-1980)*. Budapest: Tankönyvkiadó.
- Makai, György. 1985. *Etiópia 1974-1984*. Budapest: Kossuth Könyvkiadó.
- Metz, Allan. 1993. "Cuban-Israeli Relations: From the Cuban Revolution to the New World Order." *Cuban Studies*, 23. 113-134.
- Mor, Jessica Stites. 2019. "Rendering Armed Struggle OSPAAAL, Cuban Poster Art and South-South Solidarity at the United Nations." *Jahrbuch für Geschichte Lateinamerikas. Anuario de Historia de América Latina*, 56. 42-65. <https://doi.org/10.15460/jbla.56.132>.
- Padilla, Fernando Camacho. 2019. "Las relaciones entre Latinoamérica e Irán durante la última década de la dinastía Pahlevi". *Anuario de Historia de América Latina*, 56. 66-96. <https://doi.org/10.15460/jbla.56.133>.
- Sánchez, Arturo Bonilla. 1990. "El petróleo y la guerra Irán-Iraq." *Momenta Económico*, 21(82). 137-167. <https://doi.org/10.22201/uec.20078951e.1990.82.35057>.
- Shamshiri, Marral. 2022. "Sawt al-Thawra: A Counterarchive of the Dhufar Revolution." *Revolutionary Papers*, 21 April. <https://revolutionarypapers.org/teaching-tool/sawt-al-thawra/>.
- Shamsunahar, Imran. 2018. "The Dhofar War and the Myth of 'Localized' Conflicts." *The Strategy Bridge*. <https://thestrategybridge.org/the-bridge/2018/1/12/the-dhofar-war-and-the-myth-of-localized-conflicts>.
- Stubits, Adam. 2011. "Introduction." In *Iran in Latin America: Threat or 'Axis of annoyance'?* edited by Cynthia Arnson, Haleh Esfandiari and Adam Stubits, 1-13. Washington: Woodrow Wilson International Center.
- Sweig, Julia E. 2009. *Cuba: What everyone Needs to Know*. Oxford University Press.
- Szalontai, Balázs and Jinil Yo. 2023. "Maneuvering between Baghdad and Tehran. North Korea's Relations with Iraq and Iran during the Cold War." *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 25(2). 179-247. https://doi.org/10.1162/jcws_a_01119.
- Szarka, Evelin. 2014. "«Hotel Cuba» – A zsidóság helyzete és szerepe a kubai társadalomban." *Latinamerica.hu* <https://latinamerica.hu/szarka/hotel-cuba-a-zsidóság-helyzete-es-szerepe-a-kubai-társadalomban>.
- Zourek, Michael. 2015. "Operation MANUEL. When Prague Was a Key Transit Hub for International Terrorism." *CEJISS*, 3. 78-98.

Primary sources

- CIA. 1978. *National Intelligence Daily (Cable)*. 29 December.
- CIA. 1980a. *National Intelligence Daily*. Saturday, 26 April.
- CIA. 1980b. *National Intelligence Daily*. Wednesday, 24 September.
- CIA. 1980c. *Cuba: Castro's May Day Speech*. 13 May.
- CIA. 1982a. *National Intelligence Daily*. 21 July.
- CIA. 1982b. *National Intelligence Daily*. 3 December.
- CIA. 1982c. *Cuban Chronology 1981*. February.
- CIA. 1982d. *National Intelligence Daily*. 30 August.
- CIA. 1983. *Cuban Chronology, 1982*. June.
- CIA. 1985. *Latin America Review*. 29 March.
- CIA. 1988. *Cuban Chronology, 1987*. April.
- CIA. 1989. *Cuban Chronology, 1988*. August.
- Foreign Relation of the United States – FRUS. 1980. 302. *Summary Memorandum of Conversation*. Vol VI. New York, September 25.
- Foreign Relation of the United States – FRUS. 1983. 212. *Telegram From the Embassy in Yugoslavia to the Department of State and the White House*. Vol. X. Belgrade, September 22.
- National Archives of Hungary – MNL OL KüM XIX-J-1-j-1, TÜK, Kuba 1976. 83. d., 001625/9/1976. *Kubai Köztársaság Külpolitikája*. Budapest, november.
- National Archives of Hungary – MNL OL KüM, XIX-J-1-j-1 TÜK, Kuba 1980. 85. d., 003645/2/1980. *Kubai közvetítés az iráni-iraki háborúban*. Havanna, november 22.
- National Archives of Hungary – MNL OL KüM, XIX-J-1-j-1 TÜK, Kuba 1980. 85. d., 003645/3/1980. *Kubai közvetítés. (Irak-Irán háború)*. Belgrád, december 19.
- National Archives of Hungary – MNL OL KüM XIX-J-1-j-1, TÜK, Kuba 1981. 86. d., 00597/1981. *Tájékoztató Malmierca külügyminiszter közvetítő tárgyalásairól*. Havanna, január 11.
- National Archives of Hungary – MNL OL KüM, XIX-J-1-j-1 TÜK, Kuba 1981. 87. d., 001071/1981. *A kubai nagykövet látogatása*. Budapest, január 28.
- National Archives of Hungary – MNL OL KüM, XIX-J-1-j-1 TÜK, Kuba 1981b. 87. d., 001071/12/1981. *A kubai nagykövet látogatása*. Budapest, december 7.