needed food, medicine, and medical care to Afghanistan, though it clashed with Taliban authorities about their consistent violations of human rights. For their part, the Taliban realized that they needed the UN to provide food; any government with a population that was starving was unlikely to remain in power. Despite Taliban policies that appealed many in the UN and a lack of cooperation from the Taliban on other issues, aid continued to flow.

**What were the Taliban government's relations with other countries?**

Only three countries established diplomatic relations with the Taliban government: Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

Pakistan became the Taliban’s most important ally. Pakistan hoped a Taliban-led Afghanistan would be helpful to Pakistan in its ongoing confrontation with India. (Pakistan and India had fought three wars since 1947. Both countries had nuclear weapons and saw the other as a threat.) The Taliban government relied heavily on the ISI for weapons and Pakistan’s madrassas for recruits. Pakistan saw the training camps in Afghanistan as a good source of fighters for an ongoing guerilla war in Kashmir—a territory claimed by both India and Pakistan.

With the exception of Pakistan, bordering countries were not pleased with their new neighbors. For example, the Taliban nearly provoked a war with Iran by murdering Iranian diplomats, massacring Afghans who practiced Shi’i Islam, and criticizing the Shi’i religion practiced in Iran. Uzbekistan and Tajikistan (before 1991, part of Soviet Central Asia) worried about Taliban insurrections against their secular governments. Russia sent twenty thousand troops to both countries’ borders to protect against this. Both Iran and Russia sent aid to Ahmad Shah Massoud’s fighters, the last holdout against the Taliban.

After the withdrawal of Soviet troops in 1989, the United States government had largely lost interest in Afghanistan. In fact, the United States closed its embassy and withdrew its diplomats that same year. Aid programs also ended. The United States was content to let Pakistan and Saudi Arabia take the lead in Afghanistan. But a development in 1996 convinced the United States to reconsider its policy: the arrival of Osama bin Laden.

**Who was Osama bin Laden?**

Bin Laden was the founder and leader of an international terrorist organization known as al Qaeda (loosely translated as “the base”). Bin Laden came from a wealthy and influential Saudi family. In the 1980s, he had fought the Soviets in Afghanistan. Bin Laden believed that he and the mujahideen had helped bring about the end of the Soviet Union. When Saddam Hussein’s Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, bin Laden proposed to the Saudi government

---

**Bin Laden and Islam**

Bin Laden used his beliefs about Islam to justify his methods and attacks against the United States. For many around the world this raised concerns about Islam. Some wondered whether there are justifications for terrorism within Islam. For others, the events seemed to confirm a perception of Islam as a violent and fanatical faith. In contrast, many Muslims worried that their religion would be wrongly associated with the beliefs of bin Laden.

Like all religions, Islam is subject to interpretation. Most interpretations of Islamic tradition note a history of tolerance and peace. (The word Islam is related to the Arabic word *salaam*, which means peace.) Throughout much of history, Muslims have lived peacefully with followers of other religions. For example, many Jews fled the persecutions found in Christian Europe for the relative freedom of the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East. Islam permits the use of force in self-defense, but not the killing of innocents or civilians. After September 11, numerous important Islamic clerics from many branches of Islam and different countries condemned bin Laden.
that he be allowed to raise volunteers to fight like he had in Afghanistan. Bin Laden saw Saddam Hussein’s secular government as an enemy of Islam. The Saudi government rejected his suggestion. It grew concerned about his increasingly radical ideas and eventually took away his citizenship. Bin Laden fled to Sudan in the early 1990s. When the U.S. and Saudi governments began to pressure Sudan’s government to hand bin Laden over, he fled to Afghanistan.

Why did Osama bin Laden go to Afghanistan?

Afghanistan was an attractive place for bin Laden to go. It was the site of a dramatic success against the Soviet Union, a success that gave al Qaeda the confidence to believe it could take on the United States. In addition, the Taliban government and bin Laden had similar ideas about what an ideal Islamic society should be. The Taliban also resisted relationships with the outside world, which put bin Laden out of reach of the United States and other governments. At the same time, the Taliban government was very weak and had little influence over al Qaeda’s actions.

Bin Laden wanted to start an international *jihad* that would end U.S. and European dominance, cause the governments of the Middle East to fall, and create one large nation ruled by a single Islamic ruler. For its part, the Taliban was not interested in international *jihad*. Instead, they were focused on destroying what they saw as the enemies of Islam inside Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the Taliban welcomed international jihadist groups that provided fighters and resources in Afghanistan’s ongoing civil war.

In Afghanistan, bin Laden trained thousands from Pakistan, the Middle East, and North Africa to fight for the Taliban against Ahmad Shah Massoud’s fighters, who were known as the Northern Alliance. Al Qaeda camps also trained Pakistani militants to fight against India in Kashmir. At the same time, Pakistan provided military officers to coordinate the attacks against Massoud. Bin Laden also began to organize international terror operations. From Afghanistan, bin Laden directed the attacks on the U.S. embassies in Tanzania and Kenya in 1998 that killed 224 and wounded nearly 5,000, and the attack on the U.S.S. *Cole* in Yemen by suicide bombers in 2000 that killed seventeen and wounded thirty-nine U.S. sailors.

Why did Osama bin Laden launch a terror campaign against the United States?

Osama bin Laden’s public statements outlined his justifications for the attacks against U.S. citizens and others. (Like the Taliban, bin Laden had an extreme and narrow interpretation of Sunni Islam.) He expressed anger about the presence of U.S. troops in Arabia, the sacred lands of Islam. He saw their presence as a way for the United States to fight against and humiliate the peoples of Islam in the region. He objected to U.S. support of Israel and Israel’s presence in the holy lands, as well as to the deaths of Muslims at the hands of Israel. Bin Laden believed that U.S. actions amounted to a declaration of war by the United States on God and Muslims. Bin Laden presented his call to arms as a defense of Islam, a struggle against an enemy whom he believed wanted to destroy Islamic culture and religion.

“We call upon Muslim scholars, their faithful leaders, young believers, and soldiers to launch a raid on the American soldiers of Satan and their allies of the Devil.”

—Osama bin Laden, 1996

In public statements and interviews with news organizations, bin Laden warned repeatedly that he would take revenge on the United States for humiliating Muslims.

What was the response to bin Laden’s terror campaign?

Bin Laden’s actions and the support he received from the Taliban regime began to focus international attention on Afghanistan. After the attacks on the embassies in 1998, President Clinton ordered seventy-five missiles fired at al Qaeda camps in Afghanistan. That attack
killed some Pakistani militants and some members of the ISI, but no senior members of al Qaeda. The CIA formed a group devoted to finding bin Laden. They worried that he was trying to obtain chemical, biological, or even nuclear weapons.

At the UN, the United States helped pass resolutions demanding that the Taliban turn over bin Laden and stop harboring terrorists, and that all nations stop sending weapons to the Taliban. Saudi Arabia demanded that Mullah Omar hand over bin Laden. When he refused, Saudi Arabia withdrew its ambassador from Kabul. In the midst of international efforts to pressure the Taliban, Pakistan remained a firm supporter. The ISI organized political support in Pakistan to help the Taliban resist international pressure and continued sending weapons.

"We are trying to stop the U.S. from undermining the Taliban regime. They cannot do it without Pakistan's help, because they have no assets there, but we will not allow it to happen."
—Major General Ghulam Ahmad Khan of Pakistan, May 15, 2000

When President George W. Bush took office in 2001, U.S. national security officials told the new administration about their growing concerns about bin Laden. They worried that an attack was coming. It was just uncertain where and when it would be.

"There will be a significant terrorist attack in the next weeks or months... Multiple and simultaneous attacks are possible and they will occur with
little or no warning."

—CIA official in a briefing to National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, July 10, 2001

U.S. diplomats began to pressure Pakistan to end its support of the Taliban and to stop al Qaeda from recruiting new members in Pakistan. France and Russia presented information at the UN showing that Pakistan was violating UN resolutions and still arming the Taliban. There were other diplomatic efforts including one in Europe where Iranian and U.S. officials met to discuss a plan to arm Ahmad Shah Massoud’s Northern Alliance and undermine the Taliban. This was remarkable because Iran and the United States had not had an official relationship since 1979 and were generally hostile to each other in public.

"There were essentially two sets of conversations going on between the Americans and the Iranians, one in public and the other in private, where they discussed how to undermine the Taliban."

—UN Diplomat Francesc Vendrell, March 1, 2006

As the international community tried to figure out how to deal with the Taliban, bin Laden was planning a big attack on the United States. He knew this attack would lead to pressure on the Taliban to hand him over. To preserve his sanctuary in Afghanistan, bin Laden needed the Taliban’s leaders in his debt and willing to shield him from the outside world. He offered to assassinate Ahmad Shah Massoud, the leader of the Northern Alliance and the last organized resistance to the Taliban. On September 9, 2001, two Tunisian men, disguised as television journalists, killed Massoud with a bomb hidden in a television camera. Two days later, planes hijacked by al Qaeda terrorists crashed into the World Trade Center buildings in New York, the Pentagon building in Washington, DC, and a field in Pennsylvania. The suicide attacks killed nearly three thousand people.

The attacks had profound effects that rippled around the world. In the United States, disbelief, patriotism, and anger were followed by sharp changes in U.S. laws and foreign policy. They would also change the course of Afghan history.

In this section of the reading you have explored about how U.S.-Soviet competition during the Cold War affected the people of Afghanistan. You have seen how the withdrawal of Soviet forces, a loss of U.S. interest, and an active role by Pakistan contributed to the rise of the Taliban and the arrival of Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda.

In Part III of the reading you are going to learn about the overthrow of the Taliban and the effort led by the United States to remake Afghanistan. You will also explore the important role of Afghanistan’s neighbor, Pakistan, in events in the region.