

HISTORY BRIEF: TIMELINE OF US-IRAN RELATIONS UNTIL THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION

Key Facts & Catalysts

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Looking back at key events in this US-Iran chronicle is helpful in understanding some of the traditional causes of friction and mistrust between Tehran and Washington. A reference to the annals of US-Iran relations will also be valuable in appreciating that the policies of the past sixty years have not been advantageous to US interests and on the contrary, have resulted in blowbacks, which still vex the relations to this day.

→ **1856: Genesis of Formal Relations** | Diplomatic relations between Iran and the United States began in 1856.

→ **1909: American Lafayette in Iran** | In 1909, Howard Baskerville, an American teacher and Princeton graduate on a Presbyterian mission in Tabriz, Iran, instantly becomes an Iranian national hero where after joining the Constitutionalists during the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1911, loses his young life while fighting the Royalists and the forces of the Qajar king, Mohammad Ali Shah's elite Cossack brigade.

He is remembered as saying: "[t]he only difference between me and these people is my place of birth, and this is not a big difference." To this day he is revered by Iranians.

→ **Second World War** | Until the second World War, the US had no interest or an active policy vis-à-vis Iran and relations remained cordial.

→ **1953 C.I.A. Coup** | In 1951, Prime Minister Mossadegh and his National Front party ("*Jebhe Melli*"), a socio-democratic, liberal-secular nationalist party in Iran, nationalize the country's oil industry.

In August 1953, with the help and encouragement of Britain, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) orchestrates a successful Coup d'état from the American Embassy in Tehran, deposing the democratically elected Prime Minister Mossadegh derailing Iran's burgeoning democracy. The Shah of Iran (Mohammad Reza Pahlavi) is reinstalled.

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→ **1957: Sazeman-e Ettela'at va Amniyat-e Keshvar ("SAVAK")** | Iran's intelligence agency under the last Shah's reign is created with American encouragement and assistance. Initial planning for the creation of SAVAK was conceived immediately post the 1953 coup. CIA played an active role in training and firmly establishing SAVAK, an arm of the state Iranians came to recognize as the "most hated and feared institution" for its brutal crackdown on political dissidents.

1973 Oil Crisis | At the height of the 1973s Oil Crisis, petro-politics shakes the seemingly firm relations between the Shah of Iran and the US. Despite American insistence, the Shah refuses to bring down the price of oil in the 1970s, a policy he viewed to be in Iran's interests. Such 'defiance' overnight turned the Persian monarch from the "Gendarme of the Persian Gulf", and a ruler who Henry Kissinger had lauded as the "rarest of leaders, an unconditional ally, and one whose understanding of the world enhanced our own" to "a brilliant but dangerous megalomaniac, who is likely to pursue his own aims in disregard of U.S. interests..."

→ In a most insightful study entitled: "Showdown at Doha: The Secret Oil Deal That Helped Sink the Shah of Iran", recently published in the *Middle East Journal*, Andrew Scott Cooper in making reference to declassified documents revealing discussions between key American advisors under the Nixon and Ford Administrations (amongst the ranks of Henry Kissinger, Brent Scowcroft, and Donald Rumsfeld) advances the thesis that the uncovering of these formerly confidential materials "marks a significant milestone in our understanding of the origins of the Iranian Revolution. They reveal that in 1976 the US and Saudi Arabia colluded to force down the oil prices, inadvertently triggering a financial crisis that destabilized Iran's economy and weakened the Shah's hold on power" (Vol. 62, No. 4, 16 October 2008, 567).

Where most analysts trace the roots of current US grievances to the 1979 Revolution and the hostage crisis, a more accurate assessment would be to link the genesis of souring relations and American resentment of Iranian government policies further back to the 1970s oil crisis and the Shah's refusal to lower the price of oil (a policy he deemed necessary to help the Iranian economy and development). Complicating matters, a new American strategy of Soviet containment was emerging, one that favored creating a green belt of Islam as an effective medium to repel Soviet influence in the Middle East and Central Asia regions. These frictions and emerging trends triggered the divisions murmured in the halls of the White House as senior officials in the administration soon questioned if the privileged relationship with the Shah and Iran should be maintained. Washington was slowly abandoning the Shah well before the 1979 Revolution. A fervently anti-Western Islamic government seized power in the chaos of the revolution. The US received more than it bargained for and lost its traditional ally, Iran. Saudi Arabia quickly moved to fill the void replacing Iran as "the" American ally in the Gulf.

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1979 Revolution | The 1979 Iranian Revolution ousts the Shah, who until the 1970s was US's chief strategic ally in the Middle East.

The 1979 Revolution which created the Islamic Republic cannot be adequately described as a mere expression of Islamic revivalism in the country. The movement commenced as a popular revolution comprising many sects and factions. The vast majority of demonstrators demanding change during the revolution were not Islamic revolutionaries per se, but Iranians from all walks of life wanting to expand their political freedoms and improve their country in the wake of, at the time, the unpopular regime of the Shah. Putting aside discussions on the socio-psychology of a popular revolution and its bandwagon effect, the average Iranian *at the time* believed the movement would bring a series of enhancements to the socio-political life in Iran. These include, (i) terminating SAVAK's repressive practices, liberating in turn, political expression, (ii) ending the irresponsible fiscal spending of the monarchy at a time when the economy was in great distress and suffering from high inflation, (iii) reducing the sizeable gap between the rich and the poor, and (iv) making Iran a stronger independent nation by rejecting self-serving foreign intervention in the country.

1979 American Hostage Crisis | On 4 November 1979, the American Embassy in Tehran is stormed by Iranian revolutionaries. 52 American diplomats are taken hostage and held for 444 days. The crisis came to an end with the signing of the *Algiers Accords* on 19 January 1981. The American hostage crisis leads to a complete breakdown in US-Iran diplomatic ties severing formal relations since April 1980.

In the aftermath of this catalytic event, the American government froze some \$US12 billion of Iranian assets, the vast majority of which remain frozen to this day. The American Embassy in Tehran, which was used in 1953 to mastermind and execute the CIA coup, is the same embassy, which some thirty years later became the scene of the American hostage crisis during the 1979 Revolution. Though clearly not justified and in clear violation of international law, to the Iranian revolutionaries it made 'rational' sense to seize the Embassy given their fears that the same Embassy who had overthrown the country's democracy years earlier might be used again to reinstall the Shah (a second time). To the revolutionaries, the Embassy was, as they called it, a "Den of Spies." In the US, Americans with no clear memory or knowledge of the 1953 coup at the time looked at the hostage crisis on their TV screens as purely a barbaric act of the 'Orient.' The hostage crisis remains the cause of much rift between Tehran and Washington.

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Post 1979 Revolution: Sanctions | Economic sanctions against Iran ever since the hostage crisis, increased in recent years in response to Iran's nuclear program is another point of tension. Sanctions have had little impact on the ruling establishment but have cost the Iranian people dearly, diminishing in turn support from the same base the US wants to empower. Iran's economy has been under the weight of sanctions ranging from economic, scientific and military for three decades. Concrete examples include Boeing's inability to sell aircraft, repair parts and equipment to Iran notwithstanding warnings of the *International Civil Aviation Organization* that with Iran's aging fleet of passenger planes, such sanctions will place civilian lives in danger. Economic sanctions not only limit commercial relations between the two countries and greatly restrict the "development of petroleum resources located in Iran", but equally impose penalty and severe restrictions on non-US companies intending on investing any meaningful project on Iran's gas industry (i.e. *Iran and Libya Sanctions Act* of 1996, later to become, the *Iran Sanctions Act*, which will remain in force until 2011). The US has also implemented a complete embargo on US citizens wanting to deal with Iran.

1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War | American support for Iraq in its invasion of Iran in 1980 and the ensuing eight year bloody war. During the conflict chemical weapons were used against Iranians and in addition to military personnel, thousands of civilians perished. The US also actively engaged its own military against Iranian targets [e.g. "Operations Praying Mantis"]. During the war, the US also prevented Iran from contracting needed loans from international financial institutions.

1982: The Hezbollah Factor | Meaning "The Party of God" in Arabic, Hezbollah is a Shi'a, paramilitary organization with its base in Lebanon, which first emerged partly as a militia response to the 1982 invasion of Lebanon by Israel during the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990). The organization was created with support from, *inter alia*, Iranian authorities and receives financial support from Iran and Syria. The US considers Hezbollah a terrorist organization, and blames it and by extension Iran for several bombings during the Lebanese Civil War that have resulted in American casualties (i.e. 1983 US Embassy Bombing in Beirut where 17 Americans soldiers, marines and CIA personnel; Beirut Barracks bombing where 241 American servicemen were killed).

1988: Iran Airflight 655 | In July, 1988, as the Iran-Iraq war continued, the U.S. navy stationed in the Persian Gulf shot down an Iranian passenger Airbus (Iran Airflight 655) flying over Iranian airspace killing 290 civilians, 66 were children.

Post 1979 Revolution: Encouraging Separatist Movements | Past US policies of encouraging and supporting separatist movements shaking the stability of the country and putting its territorial integrity in jeopardy have only created more distance between Tehran and Washington.

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Post 1979 Revolution: Destabilizing the government | Another cause of friction is the American refusal to recognize the post-revolution Iranian government and influencing the country's destabilization by supporting a variety of opposition groups some of whom are extremists even when compared with the hardliner factions of the seated government, and who equally neither have legitimacy nor connect with the Iranian population.

Post 1979 Revolution: Isolation Policies | American efforts at isolating the country and to keep it out of regional and international economic institutions (i.e. World Trade Organization) are further aggravating factors.

The Khatami Administration | The Iranian government under the Presidency of Seyed M. Khatami, a reformist cleric made a series of unprecedented overtures towards the US. The two countries cooperated on Afghanistan and Iraq, and a grand bargain for the normalization of relations was presented by Iran in 2003, yet it was rebuffed by the Bush Administration.

"Axis of Evil" | Notwithstanding Iranian assistance to American efforts in Afghanistan and exhibited cooperation, in January 2002, former President George W. Bush labeled Iran, along with Iraq and North Korea as the Axis of Evil.

Friction in Iraq | In 2007, American forces in Iraq raided the Iranian consulate General in Erbil, Iraq seizing Iranian diplomats and taking them prisoner. In November 2007, they were released along with other Iranians taken prisoner by the American army operating in Iraq. The Bush administration accused Iran of supporting and arming Shi'a insurgency in Iraq as a proxy war against the US, a charge strongly denied by Iran.

Iran's Nuclear Program | While the US supported Iran's nuclear program during the reign of the Mohammad Reza Shah, it is adamantly against it under the current Iranian government. The US is concerned Iran's nuclear program may develop a military dimension.

Nuclear Sabotage | Apart from US border incursions into Iranian territory (i.e. by the use of unmanned aerial vehicles) to gather intelligence, the US along with Israel have engaged in sabotage operations against Iran's nuclear program as reported by Haaretz, CBS and New York Times.

Iranian Government's Stance on Israel | The US takes issue with Iranian authorities' aggressive rhetoric and stance vis-à-vis the State of Israel, wants Tehran to change its antagonist policy towards Israel and become a constructive player in the Arab-Israeli peace process.