

Iran-US Relations: Past and Present

BY MOJTABA MAHDAVI



Flag of the Central Treaty Organization (1955-1979)

Iran-US relations have experienced many ups and downs. Prior to World War II, the US was not a hegemon in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), and was respected throughout the region. The death of Howard Baskerville (1885-1909), the American martyr of Iran's Constitutional Revolution (1905-11) best captures this fact. Baskerville was an American teacher in the city of Tabriz, Iran who joined the revolutionary crowd and was killed for the freedom of Iranian people during the Constitutional Revolution. He is respected in Iran as a hero.

However, the end of World War II and the beginning of the Cold War brought a dramatic shift in US policy towards MENA, including Iran. Since then, US policy has been guided by three principles, CIO: *Containment* and the priority of stability over democracy for the US allies; the security and regional superiority of *Israel*; and the free flow of *oil*. The triple-pillars of CIO remain the guiding principles of US policies in MENA, despite several shifts over the past eight decades. The shifts may be categorized as five historical periods: the *Cold War* period, the *Neo-conservative* era, the Obama age of *Post-neo-conservatism*, *Trumpism*, and *post-Trumpism*.

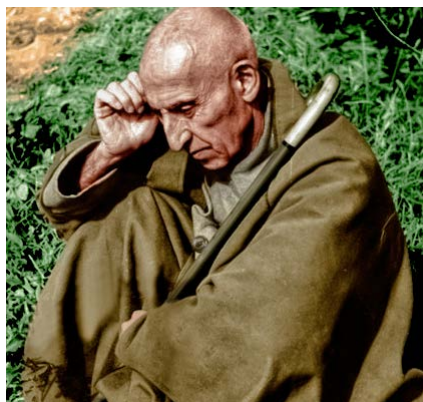
IRAN AND COLD WAR AMERICA

The Cold War determined US policy of MENA containment. This included supporting anti-communist regimes and movements, suppressing anti-colonial nationalist movements through military coups, and organizing collective security alliances such as The Middle East Treaty Organization (METO), also known as the Baghdad Pact and subsequently the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), from 1955 to 1979. The goal was to contain communism and independent nationalist movements.

President Eisenhower's pivotal role in the 1953 coup was a turning point

Cold War America offered unconditional support to Israel as its main regional partner, beginning with President Truman's recognition of Israel eleven minutes after its creation on 14 May 1948. The US has vetoed all UN Security Council resolutions against Israel since 1967 and provided significant financial and military aid.

American interest in MENA oil dates back to the joint US-Saudi cre-



Mohammed Mosaddeq | © Wikimedia

Supporting regional "friendly tyrants" who would protect the US interests

ation of ARAMCO in the 1930s. However, the US shifted from being a western partner to a global hegemon during the 1950s nationalization of Iran's oil industry. The US and UK overthrew Iran's democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammed Mosaddeq, who nationalized Iran's Anglo-Persian Oil Company.

President Eisenhower's pivotal role in the 1953 coup was a turning point, changing Iran's public into perceiving the US as an imperial power. Under US and UK pressure, the Pahlavi monarch signed the 1954 Consortium Agreement, which gave the US, British, and French oil companies 40 percent ownership of the nationalized oil industry for twenty-five years.

President Richard Nixon's travel to post-coup Iran in May 1972 was significant in the context of the new US policy of no direct intervention after its defeat in the Vietnam War. The "Vietnam Syndrome," or the American public aversion to overseas military involvements, contributed to the development of the Nixon Doctrine of supporting regional "friendly tyrants" who would protect US interests (the triple-pillar of the CIO) in the region. Iran and Saudi Arabia formed the US "twin pillar" strategy in the Persian Gulf region. Iran under the shah acted as a gendarme of the Persian Gulf, suppressed the Dhofar leftist rebellion in Oman, and was able to purchase high-tech weaponry from the US.

The 1979 Iranian revolution put an end to the "twin pillar" strategy and shifted Iran-US relations under Pres-

ident Jimmy Carter. In the 1979-81 American hostage crisis, 52 American diplomats were taken hostage for 444 days, with Iran demanding that US extradite the shah from the US to revolutionary Iran. The shah died in 1980 in exile and the American hostages were released with the Algiers Accords, signed just minutes after the inauguration of President Ronald Reagan. Washington cut ties with Tehran, sanctioned Iranian oil imports, and froze Iranian assets, but promised not to intervene in Iranian politics.

The US secretly facilitated the sale of arms to Iran

In September 1980 Iraq's Saddam Hussein invaded Iran, seeking to replace it as a new regional hegemon. The US, conservative Arab states, and other regional and global powers were not particularly pleased with Saddam Hussein, but supported his move to contain the common enemy, revolutionary Iran. The US helped Iraq with economic aid, military training, and dual-use technology until the war ended in 1988, even after the CIA found evidence that Iraqi forces used chemical weapons against Iranians. But the US also secretly facilitated the sale of arms to Iran, hoping to get the Shiite group Hezbollah to release American hostages in Lebanon. Because Iran was subject to an arms embargo, the US secret arms

“Dual containment”

deal, the “Iran-Contra Affair,” was a scandal. President Reagan took responsibility for it in a 1987 televised address, some US officials were convicted, and Hezbollah killed two of the American hostages but released the others over several years.

In April 1988, the US Navy destroyed two Iranian oil platforms, sank a frigate, and shot down an Iranian commercial airline, killing 290 civilians.



Mohammad Khatami | © Farzad Khorasani

The US neither admitted legal liability nor formally apologized to Iran, though it paid US\$61.8 million to the families of the Iranian victims. The US policy towards the Iran-Iraq war reflects its doctrine of “dual containment,” in which war was instrumental in containing the regional ambitions of both Iran and Iraq and prevent a clear victory by either side.

IRAN IN THE POST-COLD WAR ERA

American “dual containment” doctrine continued after the Cold War and Iran was “contained” by comprehensive economic sanctions under Presidents George Bush and Bill Clinton from 1992-96. In 1992, the US Congress passed the Iran-Iraq Arms Non-proliferation Act, sanctioning materials that could be used to develop advanced weaponry. The White House expanded sanctions with an oil and trade embargo in 1995, and in 1996 imposed economic sanctions on firms investing more than \$20 million per year in Iran's and Libya's oil and gas sectors.

Khatami expressed appreciation for American democracy

During the first few years of Iran's reformist president Mohammad Khatami, Iran-US relations experienced a “mini-détente” from 1998 to 2000. Shortly after his election, Khatami expressed appreciation for American de-

mocracy, condemned all forms of terrorism, and even expressed regret for the 1979 American hostage crisis. In his UN speech, Khatami's idea gained recognition by the UN, declaring the year 2001 the official year of “Dialogue between Civilizations.” It also raised hopes for a détente with the US, opened up contacts in sports, academe, and the arts. Clinton's Secretary of State Madeleine Albright met with Iran's deputy foreign minister at the 1998 UN General Assembly. She also acknowledged the US' role in overthrowing Mosaddeq in 1953 and called previous policy toward Iran “regrettably short-sighted,” although she did not explicitly apologize for it. Zbigniew Brzezinski, Brent Scowcroft, and Richard Murphy called for an end to the “dual containment” of

The US neoconservative Iran policy changed everything

Iraq and Iran. With US support, Iran received over \$500 million in loans from the World Bank. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, President George Bush established a back channel with Iran to help coordinate the defeat of the Taliban, a shared enemy that had provided safe-haven to al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. Iran and the US collaborated on the Bonn Conference Agreement regarding post-Taliban state-building and the repatriation of Afghan refugees. The US neoconservative Iran policy, however, changed everything.

IRAN AND THE NEOCONSERVATIVES

Despite rhetoric of “democracy promotion,” the neocons' MENA and Iran policy resumed the triple policy of CIO – containing US enemies/rivals, protecting Israel, and ensuring the free flow of oil/energy. President George Bush's “axis of evil” speech on 29 January 2002 placed Iran amongst other “rogue states,” Iraq and North Korea. The speech raised speculation about a US plan for regime change in Iran, remind-



Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Kashmir | © Hamed Malekpour, Fars Media Corporation

ed people of the 1953 coup, shocked the Iranian reformists, and strengthened the position of Iran’s hardliners. In response, Iran stopped secret meetings with US diplomats pursuing al-Qaeda and the Taliban.

“Axis of evil”

The 2003 American invasion of Iraq further intensified the Cold War between Iran and the US. Iran certainly welcomed the fall of its sworn enemy, Saddam Hussein, but was concerned about the next US steps. A successful invasion of Iraq, Iran thought, would encourage neocons to attack Iran, another member of the “axis of evil”. Hence, Iran assisted Iraqi Shiite militias in their fight against US forces.

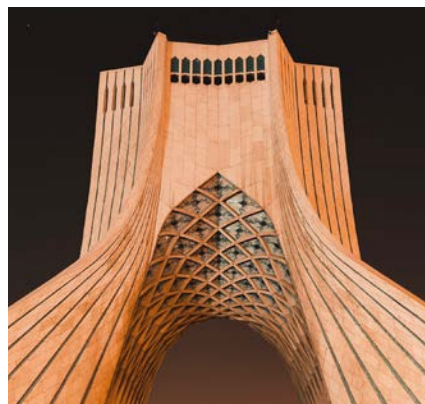
The political failure of Iranian reformists and the US neoconservative policy of Iran regime change further radicalized Iran’s domestic, foreign, and nuclear policies. In the 2005 presidential election, the hardliner Ahmadinejad became the President. In a letter to President Bush, he criticized US MENA policy but proposed new ways to ease US-Iran nuclear tensions, while insisting on Iran’s right for uranium enrichment. A year later at the UN General Assembly, having made no progress, Ahmadinejad argued that Iran had cooperated fully with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), that the dispute over Iran’s peaceful nucle-

ar program is closed, and that the UN Security Council resolutions calling on halting uranium enrichment would be disregarded.

The US alleges that postrevolutionary Iran violates democratic and human rights, engages in international terrorism, causes regional instability, opposes the Arab-Israeli peace process, and is developing nuclear weapons.

As Ervand Abrahamian argues, the first two charges are “polemical and peripheral,” but the last three, particularly the nuclear issue, have increased tension and hostility between the two states.

Iran’s nuclear program, begun under the shah’s regime in the early 1970s, was interrupted by the 1979 revolution and Iran-Iraq war, and was revived in the early 1990s. A nuclear-armed Iran, or even one with nuclear technology that would let it weaponize later – the



Azadi Tower, Tehran | © Houman Ali

so-called “Japanese option” – would shift the balance of power against Israel’s regional nuclear monopoly, foster a nuclear arms race with other MENA countries, and meet hostility from the five permanent members of the UN Security Council.

Tehran insists on Iran’s right to pursue a peaceful scientific nuclear program and an alternative source of energy. Also, after an eight-year war with Iraq, Iran has security concerns and recalls President Bush’s “axis of evil” speech in 2002, which called for regime change.

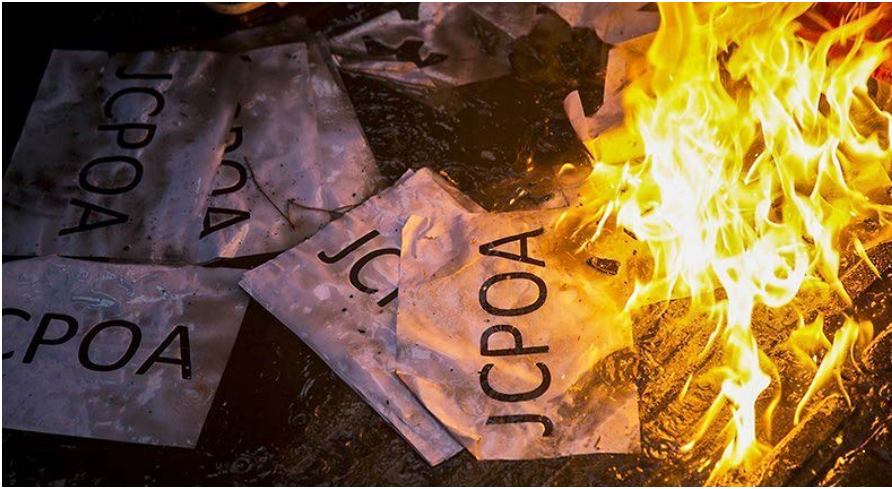
Iran offered secret negotiations over its nuclear program

There is no consensus as to whether Iran’s nuclear program is peaceful or has a military component. For historian Ervand Abrahamian, Iran is interested in the “Japanese option”, meaning a “full nuclear cycle,” *not for making bombs* but just for the “option of having it” for deterrence. All US intelligence agencies declared that the weapons component of the program was dropped in 2003 and has not been resumed.

IRAN AND THE OBAMA DOCTRINE

Four months after President Obama took office and after his secret letter proposing negotiations to Iran’s Ayatollah Khamenei, Iran offered secret negotiations over its nuclear program in Oman. The Iran-US secret talks, hosted by Oman, was followed by negotiations with the P5+1 (five permanent members of UNSC + Germany). It resulted in a nuclear agreement on 14 July 2015 known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

In return for relief from the crippling US, EU, and UNSC nuclear-related sanctions, Iran was subject to a comprehensive nuclear inspection regime, and agreed to eliminate its stockpile of medium-enriched uranium, cut its stockpile of low-enriched uranium by 98%, and reduce about two-thirds of



Protest against US withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action | © Mobamadrsk, Tasnim News Agency

its gas centrifuges for 13 years. For the next 15 years, Iran would only enrich uranium up to 3.67%, and not build any new heavy-water facilities. Moreover, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) would have regular access to all Iranian nuclear facilities to monitor and verify Iran's compliance with the agreement.

Obama prioritized Iran's nuclear issue over Iran's democratization

Some of Iran's neighboring countries, particularly Israel, and several US lawmakers distrusted the nuclear agreement and opposed lifting Iran's sanctions. Obama's doctrine of multilateral diplomacy hoped that sanctions relief would contribute to the reintegration of Iran into the global economy and a more regional engagement among all MENA states. Also, Obama's "realist" pragmatism prioritized Iran's nuclear issue over Iran's democratization. For this reason, and consistent with the US triple-pillar of the MENA policy, he did not offer much support to Iran's pro-democracy Green Movement in 2009.

Some hoped that a successful JCPOA could be the basis for a fundamental change in US-Iran relations. However, US Republican and some Democrat lawmakers were eager to kill the agree-

ment as soon as it was released. Although Obama, in an attempt to please Israel and its US lobby, committed \$3.8 billion annually for military aid to Israel in the next 10 years, Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu openly opposed the deal. The Arab conservative US regional allies were not happy either. And for different reasons, the hardliners in Iran were not pleased with the JCPOA.

However, the Iranian parliament, the Majles, quickly passed a motion to approve the deal with a green light from the leader Khamenei. With the deal on the horizon, an unprecedented number of foreign company delegations visited Tehran every week for potential business deals. With the nuclear file closing,

The sanctions hurt ordinary Iranians but strengthened a mafia economy

some expected a relative socio-political opening, but the hardliners in the US, in the region, and in Iran did not want it. A successful JCPOA would threaten the economic and political interests of Iran's hardliners. The sanctions hurt ordinary Iranians most, but strengthened a mafia economy – an Islamist crony rentier-capitalism. For the hardliners,

anti-Americanism became a discourse of oppression, an excuse to suppress democratic movements and blame the West for their own mismanagement. Nonetheless, it was the US that put an end to the JCPOA and dashed hopes for a better Iran-US relation.

IRAN AND TRUMPISM

President Donald Trump's right-wing populist slogan of "America First" translated into a policy of "Israel First" in the MENA region, as he declared himself in August 2019 "history's most pro-Israel US president." Then Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu described Trump as "the best friend Israel has ever had in the White House." Trump recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital city and moved the US embassy there in 2017, recognized the occupied Golan Heights of Syria as part of Israel in 2019, facilitated his Israel-Palestine peace plan of the "Deal of the Century" in favor of Israel, and withdrew from Iran's nuclear deal (JCPOA) on 8 May 2018, a deal Netanyahu had opposed. With the help and advice of some Christian Zionists and/or neoconservatives in his administration, such as Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and National Security Advisor John Bolton, he imposed the most comprehensive economic sanctions regime against Iran, targeting Iran's oil exports and imposing "maximum pressure" on Iran to negotiate and get a "better" deal. He then unilaterally withdrew from JCPOA.

Like Bush's "Axis of Evil" speech, Trump's "maximum pressure" weak-



Former President of the United States Donald Trump
© Gage Skidmore



Flag of the Islamic Consultative Assembly | © SpinnerLaserz

ened Iran's reformist/pragmatist camp and strengthened Iran's hardliners. Although the pragmatist president Hassan Rouhani attempted to moderate Iran's response, promising to abide by the agreement for the time being and continued working with the remaining five parties of JCPOA (UK, France, Germany, Russia and China), Iran's hardliners were quick to seize the moment.

Iran responded by boosting uranium enrichment

Europe was unable or unwilling to effectively challenge the US sanction regime and failed to maintain normal economic relations with Iran, while Iran was still abiding by the agreement. After several months, Iran responded by boosting uranium enrichment on an "industrial scale". On the floor of the Majlis, conservative MPs, set fire

to a copy of the JCPOA amid chants of "death to America." Iran also used its proxy militias in Iraq against US troops.

The withdrawal marked the beginning of rhetorical and military escalation with Iran under the Trump administration. Trump designated Iran's elite Revolutionary Guards as a foreign terrorist organization, allowing the US to impose further sanctions. Iran retaliated by declaring US forces in the region as a terrorist organization. From May to October 2019, several attacks on oil tankers and commercial ships in the Strait of Hormuz in the Persian Gulf worsened US-Iran relations. The US blamed Iran, as "a nation of terror", for the attacks, sending troops and an aircraft carrier strike group and B-52 bombers to the region.

Iran will pay "a very big price"

The Revolutionary Guards shot down a US surveillance drone two days later over the Strait of Hormuz because it "violated Iranian airspace." The US continued blaming Iran for attacks on oil tankers and seized an Iranian vessel near Gibraltar. In September 2019, drone attacks on oil facilities in Saudi Arabia halted half the country's oil production and increased oil prices. Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi rebels claimed responsibility for the attack, be-

cause of Saudi intervention in Yemen's civil war, but the US and Saudi Arabia blamed Iran. Trump approved the deployment of US troops to strengthen Saudi air and missile defenses.

Trump's "maximum pressure" also contributed to empowering hardliners

Disappointed with Trump's policy, on 31 December 2019, Iraqi demonstrators and Iran-backed militias attempted to seize the US Embassy in Baghdad in retaliation for an air strike that killed militia members. Protesters demanded that the US withdraw its troops from Iraq. In response, President Trump tweeted that Iran will pay "a very big price" for any lives lost or damage at US facilities.

On 3 January 2020, General Qasem Soleimani, Iran's commander of the Quds Force of Revolutionary Guards, a division primarily responsible for extraterritorial and covert military operations, was assassinated by the US via a drone strike at Baghdad International Airport as Soleimani was arriving to meet the Iraqi prime minister. The Iraqi militia leader and seven other Iranian and Iraqi nationals were also killed. The US officials justified the strike as necessary to stop an "imminent attack" and to deter Iran and protect US personnel. Iran called it an act of "state terrorism" and a violation of Iraq's sovereignty.

The Iraqi parliament passed a non-binding resolution to expel all foreign troops from its territory. On the same day, Iran reduced its last commitments to the JCPOA. Iran also launched multiple ballistic missiles at an Iraqi base hosting US forces, wounding dozens of US personnel, having informed the Iraqi government of the attack shortly beforehand. The strike was deliberately designed to avoid major casualties and avoid a US military response.

Finally, the Trump administration aimed to extend a decade-long UN arms embargo on Iran at the UN Security Council before its expiration in Oc-



Qasem Soleimani receiving Zolfaghar Order from Ali Khamenei | © Khamenei.ir



President Joe Biden in Baghdad | © <https://www.instagram.com/p/BEvzFGwFwcz/>

tober 2020. It also put forward another resolution to reimpose international sanctions on Iran using the JCPOA's "snapback" mechanism. Both UNSC resolutions failed. The Trump administration then unilaterally re-imposed those sanctions and new sanctions in oil and finance.

The Biden administration has not yet removed Trump's unilateral sanctions

Trump's crippling sanctions and the maximum pressure campaign failed to bring Tehran back to the negotiating table. Nor did it persuade Iran to stop supporting its anti-US allies. Instead, it left a sense of betrayal among Iran's political leaders and public. Although the failure of the reformist/moderate camp in the 2020 and 2021 elections were largely due to their incompetence and the regime's crisis of legitimacy, Trump's "maximum pressure" also contributed to empowering hardliners, massive economic crises, and recent anti-establishment popular uprisings.

IRAN-US RELATIONS AFTER TRUMPISM

Since Trump left the White House, some of his legacies are continuing – notably Iran's nuclear issue and the US withdrawal from JCPOA and sanctions.

The Biden administration has not yet removed Trump's unilateral sanctions, nor did it return quickly to the JCPOA. The JCPOA's signatories hold talks in Vienna aimed at bringing the US and Iran back into compliance with the agreement. US and Iranian officials attend the Vienna meetings, but each side insists that the other should be first to resume its obligations. The talks have continued even after the assassination of Iran's top official in the nuclear program, Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, and an explosion at Iran's Natanz nuclear facility, which Iran blames on Israel. Iran, in response, boosted its uranium enrichment, first to 20 percent and then 60 percent.

In June 2021, Iran's presidential election was won by conservative cleric Ebrahim Raisi, a judiciary chief targeted by US sanctions due to his involvement in 1988 revolutionary courts sentencing thousands of dissidents to death as well as his role in repressing 2009 Iran's pro-democracy Green Movement. Ne-



Natanz nuclear facility | © Hamed Saber

gotiations to revive the JCPOA stopped as Raisi transitioned to power but resumed in November. Iran's new conservative negotiators demand lifting the sanctions plus guarantees that the US will not unilaterally withdraw from the JCPOA.

Putin's invasion of Ukraine has worsened relations between the West and Russia, increased oil prices, and put Russia under comprehensive sanctions. Russia, as one of the P5+1 negotiation team, demanded exemption from US sanctions to let it do business with Iran after the revival of the JCPOA. The US, however, first dismissed Russia's demands, casting a shadow over the future of Iran nuclear negotiations. It remains to be seen whether the new Cold War between US/NATO and Russia plays a role in the revival of the JCPOA.

PEACE FOR DEMOCRACY?

Diplomacy, dialogue, and détente may promote peace and democracy in Iran. War, indiscriminate economic sanctions, and regional conflicts jeopardize democratization. Iran's over-a-century quest for democracy needs peace, engagement, and global integration.

Economic sanctions hurt the political establishment, but more so the middle and working classes who are the main driver for democratic changes. Besides, economic sanctions often benefit the underground economy, consolidate systemic corruption, and make the rich richer and the poor more miserable. Iranian society is caught between the rock of the US economic sanctions and the hard place of an authoritarian state. For democracy to flourish, peace is needed. ■

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