

IRAN AND THE UNITED STATES: FOUR DECADES OF TENSION AND MISSED OPPORTUNITIES

Prof. Anoush Ehteshami

Introduction

Iran-United States (US) relations have been confrontational for decades, making this relationship one of the most challenging in the world for the US to manage. The severing of diplomatic relations between the two countries soon after the revolution has meant that all contact between the two capitals has been indirect, and where direct contact has been established it has been too limited or too narrow in scope to help open the two countries' political regimes to each other. Absence of open and unfiltered relations between the dominant external power in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, namely the US, and one of the most active, if not powerful, states in the region, namely the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI), has left a massive geopolitical void in a region known for its instability and volatility. Over 40 years of animosity has imposed a heavy price on both countries' interactions with the wider region and arguably has been the root of much disruption in the normal flow of inter-state exchanges. Both parties' behaviour and approaches towards each other has arguably determinedly added to the MENA region's securitisation over recent decades. To unpack the basis of this tense relationship, one must look back and see how relations were before mass uprisings led to the collapse of Iran's ancient monarchical order in 1979.

Why Iran mattered to the United States

Following the CIA-orchestrated coup in 1953 to unseat Iran's democratically-elected government of Premier Mohammad Mosaddeq and the return of the young Mohammad Reza Pahlavi to the Peacock Throne, Washington became increasingly invested in the monarchy's well-being and security – for its riches in terms of cheap, plentiful and accessible oil, and other natural resources, on the one hand, and for its geopolitical significance as a pro-US state on the doorstep of the Soviet Union and as a regional power committed to the protection of the West's regional allies, on the other. Iran's domestic transformation, moreover, following its "White Revolution" to undo feudal landlordism and modernisation of Iran's society and its rapid economic development from the second half of the

1960s, also helped the West to showcase Iran and its progressive monarch as a model for the rest of the region to follow. So it was not long before Pahlavi Iran emerged as the linchpin of American and broader Western interests in the MENA region, as much as for its role as a frontline state against the Soviet Union. Even though Tehran had managed to develop cordial relations with Moscow from the mid-1950s onwards, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) had no illusions about the geopolitical place of Iran in the Cold War with the West.

There were at least four ways in which Pahlavi Iran contributed to and bolstered US/Western interests. **Firstly**, Iran was an active regional player and from the early 1970s onwards had become a hub for regional exchanges. Iran had become the main pillar of the Nixon Doctrine's "Twin Pillar" strategy for the region, which had entrusted the maintenance of Persian Gulf security at least to Iran as the senior partner and Saudi Arabia as the junior partner in the twin pillar security architecture. The security of this most important of global subregions was in effect entrusted to two, very different, monarchical orders, and the Shah of Iran was assigned the senior role and also the main benefactor of Western security support. But Tehran's influence extended to well beyond the Persian Gulf, as Iran was active in the Arab-Israeli theatre (as a friend of both Israel and pro-Western Arab regimes), and was the main regional protector of regional monarchies and particularly the newly-emerging monarchical elites of the Gulf. Tehran acted as a bulwark against the Arab nationalist regimes dotted across the region, whether the regime in next door Iraq or those in Egypt, Yemen or Syria. Iran was the backbone of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and as its largest and most experienced producer powerful enough to set policy directions for this most important of cartels following the oil price rises of the 1970s.

Secondly, Pahlavi Iran was also an active player on the world stage. As a "Cold War warrior", the Shah was one of the Global South's most important voices in influencing geopolitical positioning of emerging states. As an "honest broker", Tehran also actively promoted itself as a safe place for dialogue and off-the-record diplomatic conversations, which inevitably gave the Shah a finger in most geopolitical pies in Asia. As an emerging regional power, Iran had also managed to maintain close links with the West while cultivating economic and cultural relations with Soviet-allied Warsaw Pact states. Iran was one of the first MENA countries to establish with the People's Republic of China in 1971 and indeed secure praise from the Maoist regime for what the Chinese saw as progressive and enlightened policies. Iran also had fruitful and close relations with India and Japan and actively sought economic exchanges with both countries. Its regional role and active presence on the world stage ensured its access to sophisticated military hardware from the West and close links with Western intelligence agencies. These relationships contributed towards Iran becoming a dominant military power in the Middle East and to the Shah's ambitions to become a major maritime Asian power as well.

Thirdly, Pahlavi Iran had managed to secure for itself the reputation of a progressive and modernising state hell bent on becoming one of the world's most advanced industrialised economies in the twenty-first century. A country to be friendly with, from Tehran's perspective. **Finally**, Pahlavi

Iran represented a one-stop shop for addressing the many post-Vietnam security dilemmas the US faced in complex regional systems such as the MENA region. Iran was pro-US, heavily armed with top of the line US-made weapons systems, paid cash for its billions of dollars of weapons purchases, shared Washington's vision of MENA regional security, and was a problem solver for it had either warm or cordial relations with virtually every regime in the MENA region.

Good Reasons why the Islamic Revolution has mattered

The revolution effectively, and for all practical purposes, dismantled the US' MENA security architecture, exposing the West to unforeseen security challenges. Secondly, the revolution caused a geopolitical earthquake in the region, which destroyed the regional balance of power, effectively disrupting the emerging geopolitical balance in the region. Thirdly, the revolution fundamentally altered this critical American ally's role and position in the region, turning it hostile overnight. The revolution also challenged the US' other Muslim allies by producing the region's first revolutionary Islamist regime bent on exporting its unique model of revolutionary Islamism. But the revolution also turned the US' regional policies into chaos, by raising its security commitments to the region when it was hoping to be reducing its commitments following the Vietnam War: then, by markedly increasing its military engagements and security presence in the region, and, finally, by literally multiplying America's security dilemmas in the MENA region. The twin pillar doctrine was now in tatters, and on the back of the Carter and Reagan Doctrines the US was firmly and unambiguously back in the region.

From the US perspective, Iranian revolutionaries had humiliated their country by taking their diplomats hostage and daily burning the symbol of American unity and power (namely the flag), had added to regional insecurity by acts of state-sponsored violence, for challenging the security and legitimacy of many of America's allies – whether Saudi Arabia, or Egypt or Israel –, and had pursued strategies contrary to US interests.

So there are good reasons why the two countries have been caught in a cycle of distrust, confrontation, sometimes violence and, ultimately, misunderstanding. And despite many instances of relative convergence in interests – during the Kuwait crisis of 1990-91, in Bosnia in the early 1990s, in Afghanistan against the Soviets in the 1980s, during 9/11 when Iran came out condemning the attacks and expressed solidarity with the American people, in the removal of the Taliban from power in Afghanistan in autumn 2001, and in struggles against al-Qaeda, ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), Salafi Jihadists – attempts at dialogue have been disrupted by the cycle of electoral politics in each country. Each time that one side has an open-minded approach towards the other, the other side has a hostile administration in power.

The politics of the cycle of electoral politics

Iran's reformist administrations of President Khatami (1997-2005) come up against the Clinton (1993-2001) and George W. Bush (2001-2009) administrations during which Iran is called an

“outlaw nation” (Clinton) and part of an “axis of evil” (Bush). Clinton launches a strategy of “dual containment” against Iran (and Iraq), and Bush packages both countries as evil. Clinton’s narrative clashed directly with Khatami’s “dialogue of civilizations” in his effort to rebuild relations with the West and the US as part of a wider compromise. On the side, it transpired that while Khatami was preaching dialogue, the state was secretly making rapid progress in its nuclear programme, which led to much closer scrutiny and suspicion when revelations were made in 2002 and 2003, around the same time as the US was mobilising for war in Iraq. Obama’s administrations (2009-2016) clashed with its neoconservative counterpart in Iran (2005-2013, under President Ahmadinejad), but the one time both sides had like-minded presidents in office (Rouhani in Iran, 2013-2021), Obama and Rouhani did deliver the nuclear deal of 2015 known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPoA), following intensification of the sanctions regime against Iran by Obama. In the next cycle, President Rouhani’s efforts to lift the sanctions on his country through a comprehensive diplomatic dialogue and direct engagement with his American counterpart was then undone by the new conservative president occupying the White House in 2016. The Trump administration (2016-2020) undid all the diplomatic efforts of the 2013-2016 period by leaving the JCPoA in 2018, thus undermining all diplomatic efforts to restore balance in the region. Iran’s distrust of the US was heightened as in this instance for no good reason at all Trump was effectively walking away from a binding international treaty because of his dislike of his predecessor and because of his dislike of Iran. Electoral politics has surfaced with a vengeance to return relations to their worst state since the early 2000s.

And here we are in 2021! The US has a Democratic president (Biden) who campaigned on the return of the US to the JCPoA but is faced by a hardline conservative administration in Iran (Raisi) that has no interest in negotiating with the US on Washington’s terms. Raisi is a member of a new breed of Iranian politicians who are close to the Supreme Leader (Khamenei), are ultra-conservative, close to Iran’s Revolutionary Guards (IRGC), and invested in the success of the regime through closer ties with Russia and the East. So we seem to be back to square one, and in the absence of any other forum for dialogue between these two countries we have to rely on the multilateral platform of JCPoA for US-IRI diplomatic engagements. As neither party trusts all the parties in the negotiations it will not be surprising if progress proves to be slow, intermittent and prolonged. Can the JCPoA serve as the basis for a change in narrative for the two countries? The answer is, probably not. Can it help reduce tensions? The answer is definitely yes. Can the JCPoA bring Iran into the framework of regional dialogue? Yes, this remains a possibility, but that will not happen if Tehran and Washington do not learn to live with each other in the region. Were that to happen, then Washington can comfortably complete its “pivot” towards the Indo-Pacific, and Tehran can make haste towards accelerating its “look East” strategy. It is ironic, in the last analysis, that their Asian dreams and anxieties might serve as the determining factor in ending the animosity between these two countries.