

The United States and Iran: A Clash of Cultures

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Abstract

Recent concerns regarding Iran's possession of nuclear materials have led many to believe that conflict between the United States and Iran is a distinct possibility. Contrasting cultural perspectives, religious values, and customs, have painted a tumultuous history, with little hope of peaceful relations. Political Culture Theory proposes that dominant values, beliefs, and attitudes of nations are catalysts for their policies and behaviors in the international political arena. Iran's rigid Islamic regime and the United States' democratic and Christian ideals have dictated a past filled with bitter strife. These disparities will likely dictate a future of continued animosity and possibly violent conflict. This paper reflects research using various books and articles regarding the histories of the United States and Iran, as well as research on Political Cultural Theory and its application toward explaining future conflicts.

The United States and Iran: A Clash of Cultures

Rising tensions between the United States and Iran have come to the forefront of public consciousness in recent years. Following invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, in a declared attempt to defeat terrorism abroad, the United States has begun to shift its focus to the nation of Iran. A heated issue for the American government at present is whether Iran is developing nuclear weapons. Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has emphatically stressed that Iran's nuclear materials exist exclusively for peaceful purposes. Despite the International Atomic Energy Agency's 2006 report, finding no indication of Iranian development of nuclear weapons, the United States remains skeptical; leading many to believe an armed conflict is imminent. (Timmerman, 2006)

Analyzing past interactions between the United States and Iran reveals a tumultuous past, fueled by vastly opposing values and cultural perspectives.

Foreign interference not being new to Iran, the nation was subjected to a political tug-of-war between British and Soviet forces long before the United States would begin their political meddling. In the midst of World War II, Iranian monarch Reza Shah refused to yield to British pressures to take a stand in support of Allied powers. Much to Reza Shah's dismay, British and Soviet forces took up occupation of Iran in 1941. Now under British and Soviet control, Iran's leader was impelled to relinquish his throne. Reza Shah was promptly exiled to South Africa, as his son, Prince Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, pledged his support to Britain and its allies, clearly displaying his willingness to become a puppet for western interests in the Middle East. In

exchange for Iran's cooperation, an agreement was made that all forces would withdraw from the nation within the six months following the conclusion of World War II. Iran would also be officially recognized as independent. (Abrahamian, 2008)

Mohammad Reza Pahlavi maintained monarchal power in Iran until 1951. In April of that year, Iranian Parliament nearly unanimously elected Mohammad Mossaddegh, a distinguished member of the parliament, as Iran's prime minister. Mossaddegh was a strong advocate of nationalizing Iran's oil industry, proclaiming that foreign interest in their oil supply, namely by the British, had welcomed corruption. According to Mossaddegh, nationalizing the oil industry and allocating oil revenues to the Iranian people, rather than to foreign powers, would rejuvenate the nation's economy and serve to combat further foreign interference. Speaking in 1951, Mossaddegh asserted, "Our long years of negotiations with foreign countries [...] have yielded no results thus far. With the oil revenues we could meet our entire budget and combat poverty, disease, and backwardness among our people. Another important consideration is that by the elimination of the power of the British company, we would also eliminate corruption and intrigue, by means of which the internal affairs of our country have been influenced. Once this tutelage has ceased, Iran will have achieved its economic and political independence." (Abrahamian, 2008)

The British government was infuriated by Mossaddegh's resolves and quickly responded with a boycott and naval blockade, coupled with pressures on international oil companies to steer clear of cooperation with Iran. Britain repeatedly attempted to reach settlements with Iran and regain control of the oil industry. When these attempts failed, the British government turned to

the United States for assistance. Britain's prime minister, Winston Churchill, claimed the Iranian people had become sympathetic to communist ideals and could possibly come under control of the nation's communist Tudeh Party. Under the leadership of Dwight D. Eisenhower, the United States demonstrated its Cold War era fear of communism by allowing Central Intelligence agents to enter into talks with the British Government regarding overthrow of the democratically elected Mossaddegh. The coup d'état, known in the west as Operation Ajax, was subsequently constructed. As part of the operation, the Central Intelligence Agency began to launch a massive anti-Mossaddegh propaganda campaign in Iran in hopes that resulting tensions would lead to the ousting of Mossaddegh. Mobs, backed and financially supported by the United States, took to the streets of Tehran, stirring up discord. On August 19, 1953, a mob arrested Mohammad Mossaddegh and jailed him under charges of treason. The democratically elected official, who had shown himself unwilling to continue allowing the usurpation of oil revenues by western forces, had seen his last days of Iranian rule. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the demonstrated puppet to the West during World War II, was now restored to his dictatorship, ensuring Iran's cooperation with Western powers. (Abrahamian, 2008)

The Shah quickly began instituting reforms collectively known as the White Revolution. Among other changes in Iranian tradition, the White Revolution allowed non-Muslims to hold government offices. This was viewed as affront to Islam and was denounced by many religious figures, including Ayatollah Khomeini, a well known politician and Shia marja. In 1967, Pahlavi declared himself emperor of Iran, asserting his tyrannical power over the Iranian people while still demonstrating subservience to the United States. Pahlavi worked to suppress various Iranian political parties, including the Tudeh, silenced journalists, and bolstered the Iranian

secret police force. The Shah's monarchy stood mostly due to active United States military support, provided in exchange for a generous flow of oil. (Abrahamian, 2008)

Nearing the end of the 1970's, unrest throughout Iran due to the Shah's oppressive regime began to spark fears of civil war. Led by the exiled Ayatollah Khomeini, the opposition movement spread their views through smuggled tape cassettes. Uprisings began, often culminating in the slaughter of thousands of dissidents by the Shah's ruthless police force. Despite threat of execution, Iranian protestors held their ground and fought against Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's rule. On January 16, 1979, the Shah fled his country, dethroned and disgraced. In February, Ayatollah Khomeini returned to Iran as its supreme spiritual leader. The Iranian people had prevailed in overthrowing their tyrannical monarch, thus also forcing out unwanted Western interference in the country. (Algar, 2000)

Under the newly instated Islamic Republic, Iranian society underwent numerous changes. Western influences previously welcomed by the Shah of Iran were seen as corrupting and in opposition to Islamic traditions. Concerted efforts were made to de-Westernize Iranian society and direct it towards traditional Islamic customs. (Algar, 2000)

With the topple of the Shah's regime in Iran, cooperative relations between the United States and Iran diminished. Shortly after the Islamic Revolution, tensions heightened between the two nations when American president Jimmy Carter allowed the Shah, sickened with lymphoma, to enter the United States for medical treatment. On November 4, 1979, infuriated Iranian students stormed the U.S. embassy in Tehran and took 66 of its occupants hostage. Although female and African American hostages were released, for 444 days 51 United States diplomats

and citizens were kept as hostages. President Carter tried in vain to negotiate their release, but Iran's demands were considered too great. The hostage takers demanded that the Shah be sent to Iran for trial, as well as a promise that the United States would no longer meddle in Iranian affairs. Carter imposed heavy sanctions against Iran, but the country refused to release its hostages. A disastrous rescue attempt followed. Operation Eagle Claw was aborted after a United States helicopter and an airplane, both involved in the mission, collided, killing six. The incident was broadcast over Iranian television waves, humiliating the Carter administration. November of 1980 saw the defeat of Jimmy Carter in the U.S. presidential election. Moments after Ronald Reagan was sworn in, the hostages were released. Speculation remains over whether top-secret negotiations went on between Reagan's men and the Iranian hostage takers. Whatever dealings had or had not gone on behind closed doors, the Iranian hostage crisis had come to an end, leaving in its wake even more animosity and distrust between the United States and Iran.

(Lawson, & Silberdick, 1991)

Continued support of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi after the Islamic Revolution proved to be disastrous for American and Iranian relations. Iran recognized their exiled former leader as a fugitive deserving of execution, while the American government sympathized with the deposed ruler, granting his request for medical care despite substantial opposition from the Iranian people. The United States' decision to allow the Shah into the country epitomized its unwillingness to cooperate with Iran's newly instated republic. The U.S. feared the Ayatollah Khomeini and the rigid Islamic regime he helped to institute. Iran, with its Islamic republic still in its infancy, feared foreign meddling and return to its old system of government. Speaking to a crowd during a celebration at the end of Ramadan in 1979, an impassioned Khomeini stated,

“Those who have not voted for the Islamic Republic, it means that they want the previous system. Those who boycott the election so no one votes for the Islamic Republic are seditious. We will treat them like enemies, and we will oppress them. You are enemies that you want to cause trouble. You are enemies that you are conspiring against Islam and against the country. Your comings and goings are controlled. We have been informed that you are in contact with those who want to bring our country back to its previous system. Now that your conspiracy has been proven, we will destroy you all. If you don't stop your evilness, we will mobilize an even higher mobilization, and we will clean out all of you. We will not allow you groups of corrupt people to remain and continue your activities.” (Algar, 2000)

The United States further demonstrated its animosity toward Iran during the Iran-Iraq war in the early 1980's. The U.S. saw little benefit in either Iraq or Iran emerging victoriously. A clear winner meant concentrated power in the oil-rich Gulf region, possibly impacting the security of Western nations. Triumph of anti-American Iran was far too great a threat to the United States, so the country took the position of providing support to the pro-Western regimes, hoping that both Iraq and Iran would suffer too many casualties and damage to seize power of the Gulf. Iraq's leader, Saddam Hussein had previously proven himself willing to consort with western forces. Hussein had donated large sums of money to numerous American institutions just prior to the Iran-Iraq war. The United States opted to provide Iraq with economic support, weapons, and intelligence. A war of attrition continued over the next nine years, leaving behind a body count of millions and considerable damage to both nations. (Karsh, 2002)

Long before the Iran-Iraq war began, Saddam Hussein had shown himself to be a tyrannical dictator, receiving support from the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, because of Iraq's established pro-Western stance, Americans viewed Iraq as the lesser of two evils. The United States perceived Iran, with its rigid, uncompromising Islamic regime, as threatening. Above all else, Americans revere personal liberties and Iran's policies appeared to be the antithesis of American values. Differences in culture and values had once again played a hand in undermining peaceful relations between the United States and Iran. (Kashani, 2004)

On September 11, 2001, members of a terrorist organization hijacked American planes, crashing them into New York's World Trade Center buildings and the Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia. Nearly 3,000 Americans lost their lives and relations between the United States and the countries of the Middle East were permanently altered. Soon after the attacks, a terrorist organization known as al-Qaeda, under the direction of Osama bin Laden, claimed responsibility. In 2002, bin Laden issued a "Letter to America" in which he proclaimed the United States' support of Israel as motivation for the attacks, stating, "The creation and continuation of Israel is one of the greatest crimes, and you are the leaders of its criminals. And of course there is no need to explain and prove the degree of American support for Israel. The creation of Israel is a crime which must be erased. Each and every person whose hands have become polluted in the contribution towards this crime must pay its price, and pay for it heavily." (Kashani, 2004)

Other motivations for the attacks surfaced, including sanctions against Iraq and American military presence in Saudi Arabia. (Kashani, 2004)

In response to the attacks of September 11th, the United States declared a “War on Terrorism”. In October of 2001, American forces invaded Afghanistan. It was suspected that the Middle Eastern nation was harboring Osama bin Laden and that Taliban members in the country had been supporting al-Qaeda. Although, at present, bin Laden has not been recovered, the United States claims victory in suppressing significant Taliban activity in Afghanistan. (Kashani, 2004)

In his January 29, 2002 State of the Union Address, American president, George W. Bush, proclaimed Iraq, Iran, and North Korea as supreme threats to the safety and security of America. In his speech, Bush accused the Iranian government of promoting terrorism, further claiming the Iranian people themselves were repressed and in need of freedom. While referring to Iraq, Iran, and North Korea, Bush stated, “States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world. By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger. They could provide these arms to terrorists, giving them the means to match their hatred. They could attack our allies or attempt to blackmail the United States. In any of these cases, the price of indifference would be catastrophic.” (Kennedy-Shaffer, 2006)

The United States invaded Iraq in 2003. George W. Bush had taken up a policy of pre-emptive military action. The Bush administration made claims that Iraq possessed large quantities of weapons of mass destruction, undermining the security of America and its allies. The United States now viewed Saddam Hussein’s ruthless dictatorship as threatening. Despite

the fact that no indication of a connection between Hussein and al-Qaeda was evident, the terrorist attacks of September 11 were used as part of the rationale for invasion. (Wise, & Baron, 2006)

Nearly 10 years after the invasion of Afghanistan, and 7 years after the invasion of Iraq, much frustration has been felt, both within the United States and abroad, over why large numbers of troops still remain in those regions. Although Saddam Hussein was successfully removed from power in Iraq, backlash was felt after American forces failed to uncover evidence of weapons of mass destruction within the nation. (Wise, & Baron, 2006)

Many in the Middle East believe the September 11th attacks were orchestrated by the United States as pretext for subsequent military action. Iran's president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, in a 2010 United Nations address, called for an independent and neutral investigation to determine who was truly behind the September 11th attacks, suggesting that the majority of people believe the United States played a role in the plot. (Forte, 2010)

American support of Israel was named by al-Qaeda as the primary reason behind the September 11th terrorist attacks. The 1948 creation of the State of Israel in Palestine has sparked immeasurable violence, riots, assassinations, and unrest throughout the Middle East. Years of fighting have failed to bring resolution in the region, as both Palestinians and Israelis claim the territory as their native homelands. Massive immigration of Jews from European and Arab countries have seen the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians. (Makdisi, 2010)

More than 60 years after the official creation of the State of Israel, the topic remains at the forefront of issues affecting international relations. The opening lines of Israel's Declaration

of Statehood, issued on May 14, 1948, make clear a Jewish claim to the land based primarily on religious grounds, stating, “The land of Israel was the birthplace of the Jewish people. Here their spiritual, religious and national identity was formed. Here they achieved independence and created a culture of national and universal significance. Here they wrote and gave the Bible to the world.” (Morley, 2007)

In recent polls, approximately 85% of Americans identified themselves as Christian. Intrinsic Christian values and attitudes permeate United States policy and affect its relations with other nations. (Wigger, 2001) Fundamental to Christian belief is the return the people of Israel to their rightful homeland. In numerous prophecies, the Bible predicts the restoration of a Jewish state, including Ezekiel, which states, “For I will take you (the Jews) out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land.” (Ezekiel 23:24, NIV) The region of Palestine is not only sacred to Christians and Jews, Muslims too regard the land as holy, believing that the Prophet ascended into heaven from Mt. Sinai. (Akhtar, 2001)

Religious beliefs and traditions have fueled the long-suffering tensions resulting over recognition of the Israeli State. The United States maintains unwavering support of the Jewish people in Israel, while countries of the Islamic world continue to declare the state’s existence reprehensible. In an interview with USA Today in February, 2006, Iranian president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, named the Zionist regime of Israel as the dominant obstacle in peaceful relations, further stating, “In fact, all of the dominant powers impose their power on Muslims through the regime that occupies Jerusalem; and that regime, as their agent, has assumed the responsibility to terrorize, threaten, sow disunity, and sabotage the political, economic and cultural relations

between the countries of the region with each other and with other countries of the world.”

(Hollis, 2010)

The current policies of Iran reveal little change since the victory of the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Iranian political discourse has focused closely on the dichotomy between East and West. The importance of resisting Western cultural, political, and religious imperialism remains one of the most pressing topics in the Iranian political realm. Pro-revolutionary Iranian scholars have emphasized the importance of Iranians seeing themselves first and foremost as Muslims, as part of the larger global Muslim community. Rejecting the idea of ethnic or nationalistic pride, they emphasize brotherhood in faith, and joint struggle against the tyranny and oppression brought about by Western imperialism. Before his assassination by factions opposed to the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Murtada Mutahhari, an extremely influential Iranian Islamic scholar, often discussed the insidious nature of Western cultural imperialism. Mutahhari worried that without conscious deliberation in regards to the self-identity of the Iranian people, it would be all too easy for the nation to fall victim to Western influence in both the cultural and political spheres. (Naqvi, 1985) Addressing the issue of ethnicity, and the fact that the Iranian people are part of the Aryan race, Mutahhari in *Western Nationalism and Islamic Nationhood* writes, “If we give priority to the Aryan factor in determining and defining Iranian nationality, its consequence in the last analysis will be to make us closely related to the Western world. And this affinity and relation to the West would influence our national and political policy, whose main result would be to break our relationship with our neighbors and non-Aryan Muslim nations and incline us

towards Europe and the West. In this case, the imperialist West becomes our kin and Muslim Arabs will become strangers.” (Mutahhari, 1960)

Mutahhari then goes on to offer an alternative means of self-identity, one that he believes will strengthen the Iranian people against Western imperialism. “If the ideological system, religion, and social institutions of the last fourteen centuries are regarded as the deciding factor in identifying our nationality,” Mutahhari states, “it will lead us to adopt a different course and policy whose basis is faith. In that case Arab, Turk, Indian, Indonesian and Chinese Muslims will be our own kinsmen, and the non-Muslim West will be alien to us.” (Mutahhari, 1960)

Likewise, Ayatollah Khomeini, leader of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, continually urged the Muslim world to unite against Western imperialism. American foreign policy has often sought to encourage strife between the Sunni and Shia Islamic sects. Taking advantage of the fact that Iran is a Shia nation, while 80-90% of the world’s Muslim population is Sunni, Western imperialists often encourage disputes between the sects as a means of isolating Iran from its fellow Islamic countries, and discouraging unity in the Islamic world as a whole. Khomeini emphatically urged Sunnis and Shias alike to resist falling victim to the West’s divide and conquer tactics. He urged Muslims to abandon trivial theological divisiveness, and join together to form a united front against Western militant imperialism. Referencing one such trivial dispute between Sunnis and Shias, Khomeini famously stated, “We Muslims are busy bickering over whether to fold or unfold our arms during prayer, while the enemy is devising ways of cutting them off.” (Islami, 1992)

Political Culture Theorists propose that conflicts arise between one nation and another due mostly to incompatibilities of regimes and political and cultural ideologies. (Thompson, Ellis, & Wildavsky, 1990) The United States and Iran's policies are deeply rooted in their cultural and religious values. The behaviors of each nation in the international arena directly reflect the personal convictions and attitudes of their citizens. Iran is a nation of people who identify first and foremost as Muslim, showing little desire to cooperate with a nation that continues to undermine its core beliefs and principles. Furthermore, following the Islamic Revolution, Iran worked to institute a genuine theocracy, while American foreign policies are driven by intrinsic values of democracy, freedom, and separation of church and state. The United States views an Islamic regime as oppressive and adverse to personal freedoms, while Iran views Western culture as corrupt and immoral. These conflicting views, coupled with the United States' repeated attempts to enforce its values upon other nations, have created strife and ultimately prevented peaceful relations.

Considering the antagonistic positions and policies of the United States and Iran, armed conflict remains a credible concern, though only time will tell whether these two powerful nations will take up arms against one another.

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