

Climax of Conflict: The Impending War with Iran

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Abstract

The United States has a long and bloody history of violence with Iran. With the implementation of the shah in 1953, the U.S. was able to secure economic control over the Middle East for half a century. However, after the Iranian Revolution of 1979, relations between the two powers became increasingly antagonistic, and the United States began to pursue a harsh campaign of economic sanctions to stifle the Iranian economy. With the adoption of the JCPOA in 2015, conditions began to improve, but Donald Trump's election to office marked a nosedive in Irani-American communications. Trump's inflamed rhetoric towards Iran, coupled with withdrawal from the Nuclear Deal and the reimposition of harsh sanctions, suggests a hostile atmosphere of rising tensions. Analysis of U.S. support for MEK and situational comparison with the 2003 conflict with Iraq suggests that the United States is poised to enter another devastating conflict in the region, primarily motivated by the American lust for power on the global stage. The conflict can best be explained using examination under a neo-realist lens. Control over the resource-rich Middle East is one of the primary interests of the United States, and the Saudi/Iran proxy provides the perfect theater for the U.S. to challenge Russia in its attempts to attain global hegemony.

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Introduction

When Donald Trump withdrew from the Iran Deal in May of 2018, he undid many years of diplomatic development. The deal, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), established terms under which relationships between the United States and Iran were poised to improve. The United States agreed to lift sanctions on Iran in exchange for the limitation of Iran's nuclear research programs. With the departure from the JCPOA and the reinstatement of strangulatory economic sanctions, Donald Trump set the stage for an escalation of conflict that will inevitably result in a prolonged and disastrous clash between the United States and Iran. The coming conflict can best be explained using the neo-realist theory of international relations. The primary national desire of the United States is global power, and the oil-rich Middle Eastern territory presents a slough of economic and political opportunities to those who control the vulnerable, resource-rich region. The United States has been looking to regain control over the influence it lost in 1979, and recent developments in American politics hint that U.S. leaders are committed to conducting a regime change in Iran to institute another NATO puppet. In the coming years, the United States, particularly under control of the Trump administration, will likely wage war against Iran in an attempt to increase its power on the global stage.

History of U.S.-Iran Relations

The modern Iranian government known today takes its historic roots from the Constitutional Revolution of 1906, in which widespread dissatisfaction with legislative corruption led to the overthrow of the shah. The new Iranian constitution established the *Majlis*, an elected parliament, but the state effectively became a constitutional monarchy (PBS, 2014).

When petroleum was discovered in the region in 1908, Iran came into the focus of many global powers, including the British Empire, which quickly established the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (later known as BP). The British and Russian Empires both attempted to establish spheres of influence over the nation. The scramble for power became part of “The Great Game”, a competition for Middle Eastern territory between the two dominant empires (Fromkin, 1980). Thus began Iran’s long and bloody legacy as a site for foreign power competition.

In 1921, the end of the First World War led to the collapse of the Qajar dynasty. The United Kingdom utilized the regional power vacuum to implement Reza Khan as the Prime Minister of Iran. After a bloody coup, Reza Khan declared himself monarch and adopted the name Reza Shah. During the 20 years of his authoritarian rule, he attempted to modernize Iran, bringing Western socio-economic reforms while focusing on militaristic and nationalistic tendencies and limiting free speech (Zirinsky, 1992). The shah was forced to abdicate his throne to his son Mohammed Reza Pahlavi during World War II, a time during which Iran became a transport for Ally munitions to the Soviet Union. After the war, the Tehran Conference of 1943 outlined the nation’s official borders, and while the Soviet Union continued its attempts to establish puppet states within the nation, their attempts ultimately proved unsuccessful.

Policy in Iran took a radical shift in 1951 when the newly elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq nationalized the British oil industry in response to the drainage of economic power from the region via Western capitalist exploitation. The British Empire unsuccessfully attempted to combat the measure with harsh economic blockades, but they ultimately resorted to requesting assistance from the United States. President Harry Truman refused to engage in the conflict, but after Dwight Eisenhower was elected, the U.S. used the novel Cold War pretext to assist the British in conducting Iranian regime change. Codenamed

Operation Ajax, the United States led a secret initiative to instigate a coup, forcing Mosaddeq from office and reinstating the autocratic shah (Newman, 2008). The ensuing regime was one of the most repressive and violent in Iranian history. The shah utilized a secret police force, Savak, to perpetrate torture, suppress the press, invoke mass imprisonment for his political dissenters, and massacre protesting demonstrators (Iran Chamber Society, 2018). Although the regime was clearly undemocratic and harsh, the United States desired Iran's economy to be vulnerable to foreign manipulation. The implementation of a U.S.-friendly autocrat in Iran, coupled with the alliance of the United States with Saddam Hussein in Iraq and the Saudi royal family on the Arabian Peninsula, finally satisfied the American desire for control over the oil-rich Middle Eastern region.

The shah launched his "White Revolution" in 1963, a movement that primarily focused on land reform initiatives. However, the economy did not improve at any substantial rate for the middle class, and the reforms ultimately worsened economic inequality (Wolfe, 2013). Furthermore, Western liberal policies such as the enfranchisement of women sparked national blowback from fundamentalist Islamic citizens. One cleric, Ayatollah Khomeini, publicly spoke out against the shah, decrying "rigging of elections, rights for women, constitutional abuses, neglect of the poor, and the sale of oil to Israel" (Axworthy, 2009). Although he was imprisoned and exiled in 1964, Khomeini's religious voice became increasingly critical, and he became popular throughout the nation after smuggling in cassette tapes with recordings of his denunciation of the oppressive regime.

In 1979, Khomeini served as the figurehead for the Iranian Revolution, a response to widespread corruption, inequality, and political suppression. The movement also pushed back against the shah's secular and Western tendencies (Sawe, 2017). Pahlavi was ultimately forced to

flee from Iran on January 16, 1979, where he travelled to the United States to receive medical treatment. As a response to the shah's protection and the ratification of a new constitution, Iranian students stormed the U.S. embassy at Tehran and took 66 American diplomats hostage, where they were held for 444 days. The Islamic Revolution signified a turning point in the relationship between the United States and Iran; the U.S. lost control over the region and interaction between the two powers became increasingly antagonistic (Newman, 2008).

Despite the change in regime, the Islamic government under the rule of the fundamentalist Shia mullahs became nearly as oppressive as it had been under the shah. The decades that followed the revolution saw little pragmatic change within the nation itself, yet the United States made significant efforts to weaken regional Iranian power. After Israel's U.S.-backed invasion of Lebanon in 1982, Iran promptly deployed its Revolutionary Guard, and the country became one of the first in a long line of proxy wars fought for power and control in the oil-rich Arab world (PBS, 2014). Saddam Hussein invaded Iran in 1980, and the conflict quickly evolved into one of the bloodiest territorial wars of the century, resulting in the loss of at least one million lives on both sides over the span of eight years. The United States supported Hussein's campaign even after the Iraqi government was confirmed to have broken international law by using chemical weapons against the Iranians (Faily, 2018). However, the U.S. also sold weapons to the Iranians, a scandal that became known as the Iran-Contra affair after it was exposed during the Reagan presidency. The United States backed Iraq more heavily, but the contribution to violence on both sides reveals the true motive of the interference: regional destabilization. After losing control in Iran, the U.S. attempted to prevent any single state from acquiring excessive power over the sensitive Middle East. By weakening and destabilizing the

region as a whole, the U.S. cleared the path for further intervention and quashed the possibility of resistance to Western capitalist imperialism.

Relationships between Iran and the United States remained hostile moving into the 1990s. The U.S. waged economic war against the Islamic State, levying harsh sanctions that strangled the Iranian economy and caused the deaths of millions of starving citizens. The Clinton administration adopted the policy of “dual containment” to isolate Iran, punishing the state for its support for terrorist groups and the alleged pursuit of nuclear weapons. In 1995, Clinton signed a complete trade embargo with Iran, furthering the economic recession within the country (PBS, 2014). Despite these disastrous economic blows, the Iranian people elected the independent reformist candidate Mohammad Khatami in 1997. Khatami attempted to negotiate with the United States, proposing economic bargains and condemning the terrorist attacks by the Islamic radical group Al-Qaeda on September 11, 2001 (Newman, 2008). However, the U.S. did not reciprocate diplomatic efforts. In 2003, President George W. Bush delivered a speech in which he condemned Iran for being a member of the global “Axis of Evil” along with Iraq and North Korea. The speech led to widespread protest in Iran, and in 2005, the conservative hardliner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad took the presidential office (BBC, 2005). Over the last decade, strenuous U.S. relations with Iran have continued. Destructive sanctions continued until July of 2015, when the Obama administration, along with the support of China, Russia, France, the United Kingdom, Germany, and the European Union, negotiated with Iran to establish the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). The JCPOA, also known as the Iran Deal, agreed to free frozen Iranian assets and lift U.S. sanctions in exchange for the limitation of the country’s nuclear program (Fantina, 2018). However, the recent actions of the Trump administration threaten the total collapse of diplomatic relations between the two nations.

Escalation and Conflict

Recent developments by Donald Trump and his advisors allude to the administration's desire to escalate conflict in Iran. Trump's strong condemnation of the Islamic state begun in his 2016 presidential campaign, and he has slowly ratcheted up his anti-Iran rhetoric ever since. In 2017, vice president Mike Pence proclaimed that Tehran was "the leading state sponsor of terrorism", and Trump repeatedly threatened punitive measures against Iran (Tabrizi, 2017). These threats came to fruition in May 2018, when Trump announced that the United States would withdraw from the JCPOA. Trump claimed that the Iran Deal was ineffective despite reports from the United Nations Nuclear agency confirming Iran's complacency with the regulations. According to the U.N., Iran had already surrendered 97% of their enriched uranium and had shut down the majority of their uranium-enrichment centrifuges (Vox, 2018). However, Trump's campaign against Iran had already begun. Quickly after withdrawal from the JCPOA, the U.S. reimplemented intense sanctions, suffocating the Iranian economy and leading to another wave of mass starvation and death. The sanctions continued even after the harsh and almost universal condemnation from the international community. Trump's vitriol continued as he requested other countries, specifically NATO allies and Japan, to cease all Iranian oil imports, and he maintained his threats to exert "unprecedented financial pressure" on the government (Batmanghelidj, 2018). In October 2018, Trump withdrew from a 1955 treaty with Iran, signaling his intentions to eliminate any remaining peaceful relationship between the two nations. The aggressive foreign policy that the U.S. has exhibited towards Iran is a clear indicator of the impending escalation of conflict.

Engaging in a war with Iran would be a highly strategic move for the Trump administration. The propaganda that smothers the American people regarding the "War on

Terror” has led to bipartisan support for imperialistic measures in the Middle East. While the Democrats may have advocated for slightly less aggressive engagement, they have consistently demonstrated that they have no qualms with the perpetration of widespread violence and war. Barack Obama ratified the JCPOA during his presidency, yet in 2013, he warned that “all options are on the table” with Iran, alluding to possibility of military intervention in Tehran (CBS, 2013). The consensus among political leaders in the United States allows Trump to target Iran as a common enemy. If the United States engages in a conflict with Iran, the struggle could improve Trump’s chances for reelection in 2020. Additionally, the instigating conflict with Iran would take media attention away from Trump’s slough of domestic issues (Levine, 2018). These factors would provide additional motivation for the Trump administration to streamline the imperialist plans that the U.S. has been developing for decades.

Another indicator of the U.S. plan to escalate the conflict is the recent American alliance with the Mojahedin-e Khalq (MEK), a group of freedom fighters with a long and complex history in Iran. MEK began as a leftist opposition group dedicated to the overthrow of the shah regime throughout the 1960s and 70s. However, after the Islamic Revolution, they revolted against Ayatollah Khomeini, fighting against Iran during the 1980s and ultimately leading to the fracture of the group on a large scale. The United States understands the utility of the opposition group as a proxy to foster internal conflicts with the Islamic State, and it has increasingly moved to ally itself with the freedom fighters. John Bolton gave a speech to a group of MEK supporters in 2017, rallying dissent against Khamenei and declaring the U.S. goal of regime change in Iran (Leupp, 2018). By utilizing MEK, the United States prepares to provoke a counterrevolution, hoping to “engineer a collapse from within” (Batmanghelidj, 2018).

The primary pretext that the United States has used to justify the economic strangulation of Iran has been the effort to prevent Khamenei from obtaining a nuclear weapon. The fear that the United States has instilled over the development of the Iranian nuclear program has also been echoed by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who has made claims about secret Iranian nuclear warehouses and their development of atomic weaponry (Norton, 2018). However, these claims are all critically unsubstantiated. Iran has a nuclear energy program—due in large part to the country’s lack of refineries for oil—but the nation does not have a nuclear weapons program. In 2012, the National Intelligence Estimate found no evidence of any Iranian plan to produce nuclear weapons (Johnson, 2017). The United States is aware that there is no nuclear threat, yet it continues to promulgate such claims to inspire fear in the American populous.

This technique is anything but novel. The United States utilized an identical technique in 2003 to justify the provocation of the Iraq War. The Bush administration claimed that it had hard evidence to indicate that Saddam Hussein was developing a nuclear arsenal, yet after years of conflict and half a million casualties, absolutely nothing had been produced to substantiate the allegations (Sheridan, 2017). The eerie similarities between the 2003 situation with Iraq and the current situation with Iran are logical once examined critically. Ultimately, the war on Iraq was only the first step of the United States. In 2007, General Wesley K. Clark exposed the true American intentions in the Middle East. He described his experience receiving a memo outlining a plan to destabilize seven countries in the region, commencing with Iraq and concluding with Iran. Of the seven, Iran is the only state left that has not been invaded or destabilized (Norton, 2018). The United States has been planning on pursuing regime change in Iran for over a decade, and with the Trump’s election to presidency, the right-wing warhawks of the Bush era have been

presented with the opportunity to complete their mission. Conflict with Iran lies close on the horizon. The U.S. has been prepared for the conflict for years, placing aircraft carriers in the gulf region and funneling long-range jet bombers to Israel. Within the next year there is a great chance that the United States will implementation of a limited strike campaign instigate another internal revolution in Iran.

U.S. Motives

As the prospects of war with Iran become greater and greater by the day, the central question eventually forms: why? The war would likely boost the Trump's domestic popularity, but the United States would not sacrifice thousands of lives and billions of dollars solely for the purpose of aiding approval ratings. The answer that the government espouses is that the United States provokes war to promote global safety and democracy. This is clearly not the case. If the U.S. had concerns about the brutal theocratic government in Iran, it would not ally itself with the equally oppressive Saudi regime. Many critics raise concerns about the threats that current Iranian president Ahmadinejad often makes great threats towards Israel and the United States. However, his words are ultimately chosen to garner popular domestic support. Ayatollah Khamenei, the supreme leader of Iran, is the one who truly makes important foreign policy decisions. Khamenei has repeatedly stated that Iran has interest in waging any war, and he has even supported plans for peace. In 2003, Iran proposed the "Grand Bargain" to the United States, an deal in which Iran offered to comply with all U.S. interests in exchange for their removal from the Axis of Evil and the lifting of sanctions. The United States rejected the proposal (Newman, 2008). For American policymakers, war is the most effective method for furthering national interests.

To understand the behavior of Iran and United States, a neo-realist analysis is crucial. Realist theory focuses on the struggle for power between various states in an anarchic international system (Genest, 2004). The global stage upon which foreign policy is conducted today is certainly an anarchic system. While there are some attempts to establish centralized global authorities, international organizations are ultimately powerless. For example, the United Nations attempts to regulate world affairs, but UN resolutions are inherently weak. The U.N. International Committee of Justice condemned the American sanction campaign against Iran, but the United States simply ignored all demands because there was no real incentive to terminate their endeavours. The only U.N. body with any substantive power is the Security Council, but its influence still pales in comparison to most states. Also, the presence of the permanent Big Five nations with superior veto power on the Security Council means that resolutions will not be passed without the support of the United States and its NATO allies (Mahbubani, 2013).

Because of the lack of centralized authority, states are engaged in a self-help system, meaning that they are each responsible for their own survival and cannot rely on other nations for support (Genest, 2004). Iran will not be able to resist the influence of the United States because there is no global authority to check American power. The self-help system model also explains why the United States does little to support humanitarian intervention when doing so would not fall in line with American interests. During the horrific events of the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s, the United States did not stop Saddam Hussein from using chemical weapons on civilians because it was profiteering off of the bloodshed (Newman, 2008).

Another key facet of the neo-realist analysis is the focus on power politics, or a states' reliance on force to achieve their goals. The United States clearly utilizes power politics in their struggle against Iran. While the Iranian government has made many peaceful attempts at

negotiation with the United States, the latter consistently prefers employing violence when possible. The U.S. rejected the “Grand Bargain” in 2003, and it has even ignored Iranian concessions to join the Saudi Peace Plan in exchange for Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank territories (Newman, 2008). The use of force is ultimately the most powerful tool that a state has.

Realist analysis assumes the rationality of state actors and the prudence of their goals (Genest, 2004). The rational-actor assumption explains much of the controversy around Iran’s nuclear program. While there is currently no evidence that Iran is developing nuclear weapons, the construction of such an arsenal would be significantly beneficial to the nation. Such a project would fall in line with the realist principle of the security dilemma, or the concurrent arming of neighboring states in the system. Israel, one of Iran’s greatest regional threats, has already developed a nuclear arsenal, so Iran would be rational to follow (Fisher, 2013). Critics of Iran claim that their possession of such weapons would be highly dangerous for global security. However, as a rational actor, Iran would never voluntarily choose to fire a nuclear missile at a neighboring state because of the catastrophic consequences to the Iranian people.

The struggle between the United States and Iran can be fundamentally reduced down to a struggle for power. Since the end of the Cold War, the U.S. has operated as a global hegemon in a unipolar system. To maintain that status quo, the American government pursues interests that increase its global power, and the destabilization of Iran happens to be one of those interests. Control over the Middle East is essential for any state looking to consolidate international power. The Middle East is the home to majority of the world’s oil resources, so any nation with an advanced industrial economy will have an economic tie to the region. The United States already has some foothold with its deep and loyal connections to Saudi Arabia, but to truly cement its

power, the U.S. needs control over Iran, a territory that sits upon the largest natural gas supply in the world and fourth largest global oil reserves (MEHR, 2018). Under a realist lens, the

In addition to establishing American power over the Middle East, the United States must also ensure that no singular power in the region becomes strong enough to challenge the presence of the U.S. The American government has accomplished this means through a variety of tactics. For Iran, crippling sanctions eliminate the possibility for any significant power (Fantina, 2018). Another primary strategy that the U.S. employs is the provocation of internal regional conflicts to ensure the balance of power and instability of Middle Eastern states. Over the last half century (after the Islamic Revolution), the United States has actively funded various ethnic groups throughout the Middle East in an attempt to cause divisions and conflicts within states. The U.S. has fostered hatred between Shia and Sunni groups to ensure a perpetual state of weakness for all major actors in the area (Newman, 2008). By doing so, American government has undermined the stability of the region, creating a series of effective and exploitable power vacuums which are subsequently filled with U.S. puppet leaders.

While the U.S. government continually pursues war in the Middle East, the greatest threats to American hegemony are not Iran or Iraq. The only two significant rivals of the United States are Russia and China. The United States has no desire to relinquish any of its global power, so it moves forward in the Middle East to consolidate access to resources and prevent its major global competitors from establishing themselves in the volatile region. Because of this struggle, the Middle East as a whole has become the site of a global proxy war between the United States and the forming Russian/Chinese coalition. While Saudi Arabia and Israel have become the American ports of influence to the West Asia and North Africa, Iran is the primary Middle Eastern stronghold for Russia (Fantina, 2018). Because of this, the United States has a

fundamental desire to flip the Russian-backed Khomeini regime into one that will support Western power and influence in the region.

Conclusion

Relationships between the United States and Iran have a history of hostility and exploitation, and the strict economic sanctions that the U.S. has placed on the Iranian economy have caused massive bouts of famine and disease. In 2015, economic relations slowly began to heal after the adoption of the JCPOA. However, Donald Trump's foreign policy over the last two years suggests an abysmal future for relations between the two nations. Trump's vitriol and behavior towards Iran portends a looming conflict that may be approaching faster than previously predicted. The United States has long fought for power and control within the Middle East because of the plethora of natural resources available. If the United States could effectively dominate the region, global hegemony would be almost assured. Therefore, due to undeniable lust for power, the United States will likely instigate some violent conflict in Iran to harness greater control and influence over the Middle East.

Despite the probable inevitability of this conflict, a hot war between the United States and Iran would have disastrous consequences. Hundreds of thousands of people would likely lose their lives in the conflict, and American taxpayers would lose millions funding a war that would never benefit them. Additionally, if United States attempts to shut down oil exports, Iran might respond by closing off the Strait of Hormuz, through which 20% of the world's oil travels (Rainwater, 2018). If this occurs, altercation could have catastrophic effects on the world economy as a whole. A war with Iran would be the next step in the American plan to destabilize the Middle East and consolidate the absolute power of the United States on the global stage, an endeavor that would leave a trail of desolation in its wake.

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