

The Coming War With Iran

Jessica Singh

Diablo Valley College

Abstract

For years now, the United States government has asserted time and time again that a nuclear-armed Iran poses a considerable threat to international peace as we know it. Using its power as a global hegemon, the United States has used this pretense as justification for economic and militaristic intervention in Iran throughout time. It is evident that these actions come from a place of insecurity within the nation-state, as Iran's consistent retaliation poses a threat to the U.S.'s ability to secure its own national interests. This history of hostility has led to the contemporary possibility of war between the United States and Iran. No matter the chances of this war occurring, the nature of the conflict can be analyzed using realist theory of international relations. Both the United States and Iran act as sovereign nation-states looking to ensure their own security and maximize their self interest in an anarchic international realm.

The Coming War With Iran

Introduction

For the past three decades, the steady militarization of United States foreign policy has allowed the American military to expand as the government's ultimate tool of control. In recent times, the election of Donald J. Trump has accelerated growth of the military with an assembly of personnel, including General James Mattis, General John Kelly, and Lieutenant General H.R. McMaster serving in prominent foreign policy positions. This militarization of Washington has now set the stage for our current predicament: a potential war between the United States and Iran. Many believe that a militaristic strike on Iran is not only necessary, but the only option to completely ensure U.S. national security from a nuclear-armed Iran. Whether or not a nuclear exchange occurs, however, one thing is certain: any conflict between the two nations will be of realist nature - one in which the United States and Iran will be fighting to maximize their own self-interest and ensure their self-preservation in an anarchic international environment. This potential conflict may have extensive catastrophic consequences around the world.

In order to fully comprehend the nature of the potential war between the United States and Iran, it is necessary to analyze the historical background of the relations between the two nations leading up to the modern day. Many argue that the root of conflict lies in Operation Ajax in 1953 when the United States C.I.A. overthrew the democratically elected Muhammad Mossadeq and reinstalled the Mohammad Reza Shah to the throne - all over control of the region's oil wealth. In 1951, the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) owned the oil fields of Iran; however, the Iranian people felt that the AIOC was taking advantage of them for personal benefit under unfair contracts, sparking a great political controversy. Muhammad Mossadeq, a member of the Iranian parliament, demanded a renegotiation and sought to audit the AIOC and

limit the company's control. The Iranian people stood behind Mossadeq in support and made him their leader, making the parliament the primary governmental agency in the area and rendering the Shah powerless; Mossadeq appeared to be Iran's first democratically elected leader. However, rather than comply with their demands, the AIOC ceased operations completely. Additionally, Mossadeq was extremely independent and refused the United States' requests to work together; many feared he would join forces with the Soviet Union (Allen-Ebrahimian, 2017). This did not settle well with the United States.

Subsequently, the C.I.A. orchestrated a coup d'etat headed by Kermit Roosevelt, a senior C.I.A. agent and grandson of former U.S. president Theodore Roosevelt. The goal of the coup was to return the Shah to power through the monarchy. Through corrupt Iranian politicians and military units bribed by U.S. officials, the U.S. engineered protests and riots throughout the region. However, the first phase of the mission failed and, fearing for his life, the Shah fled to Baghdad. The second phase was more successful and enabled the Shah to return to the throne for another 25 years, a dictatorship that was heavily supported by the United States (Allen-Ebrahimian, 2017). Needless to say, Operation Ajax angered many Iranians and ignited hatred, resentment, and distrust against America.

The U.S. government kept the coup a secret from the American people and continued to support the Shah's rule from 1954 to 1979, an era of a very close alliance during which Iran was the United States' closest ally. In the first three weeks following the reinstatement of the Shah, the U.S. gave Iran about \$68 million in aid, followed by \$1.2 billion over the next decade (Wawro, 2011). In 1957, the U.S. provided Iran with nuclear supplies in an effort to start its nuclear program, providing Iran with weapons-grade enriched uranium; this program continued until the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Throughout the 1960's and 1970's, Iran's oil revenue grew

extensively, as did its relationship with the U.S. In 1977, President Jimmy Carter's inauguration alarmed the Shah and reminded many Iranians of the 1960's - a period during which the Kennedy administration favored a less authoritarian regime than the Shah. During the Carter administration, President Carter emphasized the importance of human rights in regards to foreign policy, especially the Shah's regime which was infamous for its disregard of such rights; this administration constantly undermined the Shah during this period (Bakhtavar, 2007).

In 1979, the Iranian Revolution undermined U.S. intelligence and came as a surprise to the U.S. government. As the Shah was ousted from his throne, the Iranian people replaced him with anti-American Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the leader of the revolution. Khomeini encouraged protests and supported organizations of the opposition, which often started riots and demonstrations in the streets throughout the region. The Shah himself was taken aback by these revolutionary protests and found that every major decision he made backfired and enraged the opposition. When he was finally overthrown, rather than stage another coup to reinstate the Shah to power again, the United States, under the Carter administration, refused to support him furthermore. When the Shah was let into the United States, the Iranian people suspected that he was planning to conspire against the Revolution; these sentiments arguably led to the Iran Hostage Crisis (Dreyfuss, 2006).

On November 4th, 1979, a group of Iranian students, the Muslim Student Followers of the Imam's Line, stormed the U.S. embassy and took 60 American diplomats as hostage. Executed out of fear of another American coup, this move was a declaration of sovereignty from American interference in Iranian affairs. The diplomats were held hostage for 444 days up until the inaugural address of President Ronald Reagan in 1981. The crisis hurt relations between the United States and Iran and caused lasting economic and diplomatic damage. The United States

froze about \$12 billion in assets; according to American officials, most of these were released and used in the release of the hostages but Iranian officials claim that \$10 billion remain frozen due to legal claims and issues after the Revolution (Chun, 2015). On April 7th, 1980, President Carter cut off all diplomatic U.S. relations with Iran. The embassy complex in Iran has since been converted into an anti-American museum (Bakhtavar, 2007).

Under the Shah, Iran had become the most westernized, secular country in the Middle East. However, after the Iranian Revolution in 1979, Khomeini declared Iran the Islamic Republic. Slowly, the Shiite Muslim clergy gained political and economic power. The mullahs and the mosque institutionalized their power under Ayatollah Khomeini and became the authorities of public morals, adapting Islamic Sharia law into the political and social spheres. Under the Ayatollah, women especially felt the effects of this law as conservative social values were enforced and women's rights were drastically reduced. As anti-American sentiments were imposed, the Western cultural influence was particularly suppressed: Western universities were shut down immediately and the "Committee for Islamization of Universities" removed foreign influence and instilled Islamic values back into the higher education system (Tabrizi, 2017).

In the 1980 Iran-Iraq War, under the Reagan and Bush administrations, the United States adopted a foreign policy designed to contain both countries economically and militaristically in the favor of U.S. national interest. The U.S. government's support for Iraq was no secret and it was reported that the "'Reagan/Bush administrations permitted - and frequently encouraged - the flow of money, agricultural credits, dual-use technology, chemicals, and weapons to Iraq'" (Mohammadi, 2016). U.S. intervention in the war did not end there: in April of 1988, the United States issued an attack, Operation Praying Mantis, on Iran in retaliation to Iranian mining in the Persian Gulf during the war and the subsequent damage caused to the American frigate *Samuel*

B. Roberts. The International Court of Justice ruled that Operation Praying Mantis could not be justified in any way as a preemptive attack. Eventually, the war ended in a ceasefire in 1988, but U.S. intervention set the stage for modern hostility between the two countries to follow (Mohammadi, 2016).

The modern definition of terrorism in the 21st century has been primarily defined by the attacks by the Islamic group al-Qaeda against the United States on September 11th, 2001. On the morning of September 11th, four commercial airliners were hijacked by 19 members of al-Qaeda. One plane was crashed into the North Tower and the South Tower of the World Trade Center in New York. A third flight was crashed into the Pentagon in Washington D.C. and a fourth, whose target was later determined to be the Capitol, crashed near Shanksville, Pennsylvania. Both World Trade towers collapsed after fires caused by the explosion of fuel; additionally, the west side of the Pentagon suffered a significant amount of damage. In total, the attacks caused more than 6,000 injuries and about 2,996 deaths, 265 of which included people on the planes. Additionally, many died of cancer and respiratory-related diseases in the time after the attacks (Taylor, 2011).

Suspicion immediately fell upon al-Qaeda as the perpetrators of the attacks. It was later determined that Khalid Sheikh Mohammed was the principal mastermind behind the terrorism of 9/11, under the direction of the leader of al-Qaeda, Osama bin Laden. Bin Laden specified three main motives for the attack: the United States' support of Israel, U.S. militaristic presence in Saudi Arabia, and the U.S sanctions against Iraq. Bin Laden took full responsibility for the attacks in 2004. In response, the United States retaliated by launching the War on Terror and invading Afghanistan to overthrow the Taliban, which failed to extradite al-Qaeda from the country, and destroy bin Laden's terrorist network base. President Bush defined the U.S.'s stance

in the war as he promptly declared, “We will make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them” (Izard, 2017). In 2002, Bush addressed the country’s opposition to terrorist organizations and named Iran as an “axis of evil” along with a list of other countries including North Korea and Iraq, spurring outrage and anger among the Iranian people.

The War on Terror only escalated hostility between Iran and the United States. In 2003, it was claimed that the U.S. started infiltrating the eastern border of Iran from Afghanistan in a search for underground structures developing nuclear weaponry. This commenced Iran’s contemporary nuclear dispute. In 2005, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad became the Iranian president and sent a letter to President Bush to negotiate an end to American concern over Iran’s nuclear program, which was aimed mainly at generating electricity; however, the United States dismissed it as a ploy and a publicity stunt. Instead, in 2006, President Bush insisted that Iran must be punished for its continued enrichment of Uranium and that the country posed an international nuclear threat. Later that year, Ahmadinejad invited Bush to a debate at the UN General Assembly over whether or not Iran had a right to enrich uranium for its own purposes, but the White House promptly rejected that invitation (Hartung, 2017). It was reported by American and European representatives that Iran possessed enough unenriched uranium to produce 10 atom bombs, soliciting intervention by the Security Council. At that point, many conservative right-wing lobbyist groups expressed the same fear that many share today: that a nuclear-armed Iran could be a potential threat to Israel and transform into the world’s largest sponsor of terrorism (Kaine, 2018).

In 2015, a preliminary agreement was reached between both the Islamic Republic of Iran and the permanent members of the UN Security Council and the European Union. According to

the framework of the deal, Iran would redesign and reduce its nuclear facilities and resources, ensuring that it was used only for civilian purposes; Iran had a limited enrichment capacity and would allow monitoring by international inspectors in return for the lifting of economic sanctions. In 2015, Iran had about 20,000 centrifuges but was limited to 5,060 until 2026; additionally, Iran's stockpile of uranium was reduced by 98%, from 10,000 kg to about 300 kg, of which only 3.67% was allowed to be enriched. In that time, inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), who oversaw nearly every element of the country's nuclear program, continuously verified that Iran was following all terms of the agreement and that no production of bombs was ongoing; Iran had dismantled two-thirds of its centrifuges and shipped approximately 25,000 pounds of enriched uranium out of the country. The economic sanctions that had been lifted under the Iran nuclear deal had cost the country more than \$160 billion in oil revenue and had been crippling the economy for years; after the sanctions were removed, Iran gained access to more than \$100 billion in frozen assets and was able to regain stability and resume selling oil at the international level (Beauchamp, 2018).

On May 8th, 2018, President Trump announced that he was withdrawing from the Iran nuclear deal - a move that was heavily criticized by Western allies. He announced that he would reimpose those stringent sanctions upon Iran and its oil sector, declaring "We cannot prevent an Iranian bomb under the decaying and rotten structure of the current agreement," (Beauchamp, 2018). However, the majority of evidence suggested that Iran had been complying with all obligations and the deal was specifically designed to make it virtually impossible for Iran to acquire or produce a nuclear weapon. Nevertheless, Trump continued to call the agreement the "worst deal ever", without citing evidence to back up his claim.

With Trump continually inching and alluding towards conflict in Iran, it seems that Washington seems to abhor any country that conducts its foreign policy independent of the U.S.'s interests. Iran's possession of oil and natural gas only exacerbates the issue - the United States feels entitled to that resource and will use any means to expropriate it. It seems that the U.S. is intent on isolating and punishing Iran for resisting any intrusion into their affairs, no matter how much suffering the Iranian people have endured over the years at the hands of these policymakers. Additionally there is a significant lack of evidence that Tehran even poses any nuclear threat to the United States or its allies - the allegations appear to be another excuse made up by the political elite, and spread by the mainstream media, to invade Iran.

Behind the debate over whether or not there will be a war, however, lie theories as to why the two nations would be going to war in the first place. There exist three levels of theories: the system level, state level, and individual level; each theory emphasizes a unique set of characteristics and conditions of that level in explaining the relation between states (Genest, 2004). For the Iran-U.S. conflict, a system level approach would be best to analyze the issues at hand because we can characterize the international environment as an anarchic one, in which there is no higher power maintaining global peace and governing states like Iran and the United States. This lack of a central authority and population of the globe by sovereign states provides an explanation for perceived insecurities and constant threats to state survival, as is the case between the two nation states in our analysis. Additionally, the allocation of power and distribution of wealth are two factors that guide a system-level analysis and can be especially helpful in examining U.S.-Iran relations.

Within the system level of analysis, realism is the most prominent theory of international relations that can be used to study the modern nuclear conflict between the United States and

Iran. Realists generally focus on states as the major actors within the international system, which is consistent with the nuclear conflict, in that every action leading up to the conflict has been executed by the nation-states of Iran and the United States. Between Iran and the U.S., we have witnessed a constant competition for markets, security, influence, and power - the currency by which survival of these sovereign states is both ensured and maintained. Survival of the state is the primary goal of each state and its foreign policy is based around this interest; this is evident in several instances: the coup staged by the U.S. in favor of a more pro-American Iranian leader or even Iran's agreement to the nuclear deal which lifted sanctions and lifted its economy. In the process of ensuring its own security, one nation-state will stimulate the insecurity of others, whether advertently or not, leading to a spiral of insecurity. Realists often note that military arms build up by one state is likely to be attempted to be matched by its neighbors in a preemptive way to enhance security. This can be seen directly in Iran's initial desire to nuclearize and the U.S.'s immense dismay at that notion. The anarchic nature of the system naturally leaves every state for itself.

Though many supporters of liberal theory have a more positive outlook on the system and believe that change is possible, the history of events as they have unfolded along with the actual nature of the system at hand says otherwise. Liberals believe in the possibility of mitigation of the international anarchy as well as global interdependence of nations states. Though these concepts may ring true to some extent, the United States has proved itself to be the global hegemon of this age, whether through economic influence or military might; additionally, one can argue that the presence of nuclear weapons in this conflict rules out international stability as a key goal of nation-states. The potential war between Iran and the U.S. could very well be

nuclear in nature, and we should not underestimate the power of that conflict to upset and change the international environment for the worst.

In analyzing the history of Iran-U.S. relations, it is easy to see that war between these two countries is not out of the question. It seems that the trajectory of foreign relations under the Trump administration has escalated hostility and set us on a path that highly favors warfare over diplomacy. Trump's consistent rejection of diplomatic action is highly concerning. The war against Iraq in 2003 was arguably a very unnecessary conflict and one of the worst mistakes our country has made, and it seems that our president now, primarily guided by his ego, is leading us to another such avoidable war in the Middle East. But we must keep in mind that in engaging in war with Iran, we run the risk of stirring great instability in that area, inflicting lasting damage on American credibility, and imposing immense costs on American taxpayers. The idea that Iran is harboring nuclear weapons has been disproved repeatedly via international agencies that have verified that the country has not attempted to seek, develop, or acquire nuclear weapons. Thus, it is evident that war with Iran would be a foolishly dangerous direction to head in. As American citizens, then, it is our responsibility to stay informed and stay alert: as a nation, we cannot afford another unnecessary war and we must be vigilant in stopping it.

References

- Allen-Ebrahimian, B. (2017, June 21). 64 years later, CIA finally releases details of Iranian coup. *Foreign Policy*. Retrieved July 19, 2018, from <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/06/20/64-years-later-cia-finally-releases-details-of-iranian-coup-iran-tehran-oil/>
- Bakhtavar, S. (2007, August 26). Jimmy Carter's human rights disaster in Iran. *American Thinker*. Retrieved July 19, 2018, from https://www.americanthinker.com/articles/2007/08/jimmy_carters_human_rights_dis.html
- Beauchamp, Z. (2018, May 08). Trump's withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal, explained. *Vox*. Retrieved July 19, 2018, from <https://www.vox.com/world/2018/5/8/17328520/iran-nuclear-deal-trump-withdraw>
- Chun, S. (2015, July 16). 6 things you didn't know about the Iran hostage crisis. *CNN*. Retrieved July 19, 2018, from <https://www.cnn.com/2014/10/27/world/ac-six-things-you-didnt-know-about-the-iran-hostage-crisis/index.html>
- Dreyfuss, R. (2006). *Devils game: How the United States helped unleash fundamentalist Islam*. New York, NY: Henry Holt.
- Genest, M. A. (2004). *Conflict and cooperation: Evolving theories of international relations*. Belmont, CA: Thomson/Wadsworth.
- Hartung, W. (2017, March 06). Could war with Iran be on Washington's agenda? *Common Dreams*. Retrieved July 19, 2018, from <https://www.commondreams.org/views/2017/03/06/could-war-iran-be-washingtons-agenda>

- Izard, R., & Perkins, J. (2017). *Lessons from Ground Zero: Media response to terror*. London ; New York: Routledge.
- Kaine, T. (2018, July 13). Don't let Trump go to war with Iran. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved July 19, 2018, from <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/07/dont-let-trump-go-to-war-with-iran/565082/>
- Klare, M. T. (2017, December 07). A tough-oil world. *Huffington Post*. Retrieved July 19, 2018, from https://www.huffingtonpost.com/michael-t-klare/obama-gas-prices_b_1342042.html
- Mohammadi, F. (2016, January 23). 20 things the U.S. did to help Saddam against Iran. Retrieved July 19, 2018, from <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/2168/20-things-the-U-S-did-to-help-Saddam-against-Iran>
- Tabrizi, B. G. (2017, March 02). A paradigm shift in the Middle East: Iran as the solution, not the problem. *Counterpunch*. Retrieved July 19, 2018, from <https://www.counterpunch.org/2017/02/28/a-paradigm-shift-in-the-middle-east-iran-as-the-solution-not-the-problem/>
- Taylor, A. (2011, September 08). 9/11: The day of the attacks. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved July 19, 2018, from <https://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2011/09/911-the-day-of-the-attacks/100143/>
- Wawro, G. (2011). *Quicksand: America's pursuit of power in the Middle East*. New York: Penguin Books.