

Into Iran: American Aggression, Fueled by Iranian Oil

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Abstract

This paper serves as an examination and analysis of the complex political and economic relationships between the nations of the United States of America and the Islamic Republic of Iran beginning with the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The outbreak of war between the two nations has been a fear on both sides, and though conflict has not formally broken out since, there has been no indication of a guarantee of peace between the two. Utilizing a class system theory of analysis, which argues the significance of the role of economic control nations such as the U.S. seek over resource-rich nations such as Iran, in conjunction with a general understanding of U.S. relations with other oil-rich, Islamic majority, Middle Eastern states, this paper aims to explain that, if war does indeed break out between the two nations, the primary catalyst of the conflict will be America's insatiable need to access Iran's plentiful oil resources and the lengths it is willing to go to in order to control it.

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Introduction

The struggle of international relations is to attempt to analyze situations in a state of constant stage that make up the global political stage. Regime changes, economic adjustments, shifts in social consciousness – all must be accounted for and adjusted according to in order to provide as accurate an understanding of world politics as possible. But this is undeniably difficult, and the unpredictable nature of the relations between the United States of America and the Islamic Republic of Iran serve as a good example of this complexity. Political, economic, and military tensions between the United States and Iran have risen and calmed over the course of nearly four-decades now, yet the tensions seem to display no evidence that they will disappear anytime soon. With this ever-present tension in mind, it is absolutely necessary to consider the outbreak of war between the U.S. and Iran as a possibility.

In a discussion of whether or not the U.S. will go to war with Iran, the matter of import is not, in fact, a simple prediction of *what* is to come but is rather an analysis of *why* the leaders of either state are even contemplating the prospect of doing so. In other words, three fundamental questions must be answered: what is it about the U.S. state that makes military intervention in a sovereign state (Iran, in this case) a feasible – and perhaps even desirable – course of action? What is it about Iran that makes it such a threat to the U.S., the most powerful nation in the world? And what would both countries stand to benefit or lose from the outbreak of war? The basic answer that I propose, which will be elaborated on throughout the course of this paper, is that in the case that we do find ourselves in a war with Iran, it will be because the U.S. *wants* to be at war. The U.S. is the wealthiest nation on the constant move to increase its wealth, with the military capacity to do so by throwing aggression and force onto a nation like Iran, which holds

vast amounts of valuable oil. Though the stated reasons for going to war with Iran may vary, the fundamental reason for which the U.S. will go to war with Iran will be for access and control to Iran's oil that will bolster the already dominant political and economic position the United States occupies on the global political stage.

Historical Context

With the end of World War II came also a significant end in Iran's history; a British and American backed coup against the nationalist Mohammad Mosaddegh regime in Iran ended a period a severe isolationist policy within the nation and resulted in foreign powers – namely the U.S. – entering and dominating the nation of Iran. The U.S. presence in Iran grew so large, in fact, that it took a 40% share in the oil consortium in 1954 (Keddie & Richard, 2006). Though the state and nature of the Iranian regime prior to the coup no doubt served as a reason for U.S. intervention, the genuine threat perceived by the U.S. and offered by the Mosaddegh regime was limiting foreign access to Iranian oil. Surely, with the evidence of how plentifully the U.S. benefitted from Iranian oil in 1954, the United States' goals had been met. Up until this point, Iranian oil had primarily been under the control of British corporations; with the backing of the coup against Mosaddegh, the U.S. successfully integrated itself into the foreign affairs of Iran as well as won its favor, enough so that it could enter into the Iranian oil market and reap major benefits. By piggybacking onto the Iranian people's struggle against a poorly functioning government, the U.S. slipped its controlling hand into its economy and into its politics.

For the next several decades, the U.S. continued to capitalize on its newfound access to Iran's oil; this success pushed it to support the dictatorial Iranian state under the rule of the Shah. A symbiotic relationship was born: the Shah offered to the West its oil and openness to foreign investment, and the West offered to the Shah a pass on its oppressive practices and well as aid

for its development. The Shah, in direct contrast with his predecessor, welcomed Western nations, their markets, their culture, and their commodities, slowly entangling Western culture with Iranian culture over the course of several decades. By the 1970s, American oil companies marketed nearly 40% of the large consortium sales of Iran, which had become the world's second largest oil exporter. Simultaneously, with this economic success (which went to the state and to elites, not to the people), the Shah tore away at the rights of his citizens, with intense suppression of political opposition that came in the form of a lack of freedom of speech or press. People watched the Shah's ties with the West grow stronger and stronger, and as a result felt alienated and abandoned by their own government. The Iranian people, by the late 1970s, grew sick of the Shah's unquestionable authority as well as with his intimate relations with the Western states, cultures, commodities, and vices. As a result, a traditionalist reaction arose, and the Iranian people largely turned to Islam in opposition to the West (Keddie & Richard, 2006).

The opposition to the Shah was widespread, with many pulling from the youths and students of the population; the opposition also manifested in the creation of guerilla groups that attempted to undermine the Shah's government. This opposition found its leader in Ayatollah Khomeini, whose influence against the Shah got him sent into 15 years of exile (Keddie & Richard, 2006). He called for a new form of Iranian government, one that may be called a theocratic democracy, as it emphasized the need for leaders of the government to be of the Islamic faith. By 1979 Khomeini's exile was ended; in just a few months, the Shah's government was overtaken by the opposition forces and on April 1, 1979, a nationwide referendum occurred, which led to the establishment of a new, theocratic-republican constitution, and the current Islamic State of Iran.

With this turn of events, the U.S. realized that its strong ties with Iran were threatened now that the accommodating Shah was no longer in power. And, of course, weakening bonds with the government – a government that resented the Western influence that had so greatly impacted the previous regime – meant that U.S. dominance over Iran's oil was threatened as well, and with the creation of the Islamic state, the U.S. ended its trade with Iranian oil in 1979, which served as a major blow against the export-heavy nation.

Not soon after, Iran later found itself in an eight-year long conflict with the nearby nation of Iraq, during which the U.S. decided to back Iraq, despite the despotic and clearly tyrannical rule of Saddam Hussein (Keddie & Richard, 2006). The war brought devastation onto the people of Iran, and despite the problematic behavior of the Iraqi state, the U.S. saw Iran's traditionalist Islamic regime as an even greater threat. Iran-U.S. relations were significantly tainted by these actions (Limbert 2013). Surely, it is no coincidence that it was right after the U.S. lost control over Iranian oil and turned its economic power against Iran that the U.S. chose to back a dictator over Iran.

After the events of 9/11, the United States' approach to Middle Eastern nations grew testy. It's invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, however, somewhat positively affected its relations with Iran, as it mitigated two threats to the Iranian state (Hussain 2015). When it discovered Iran's nuclear program in 2002, however, the U.S. immediately labeled Iran a threat, claiming it was pursuing the creation of Weapons of Mass Destruction and labelling it as a nation within the Axis of Evil, and thus an enemy of the U.S. (Limbert 2013). A war was never instigated though, and so remains a tense relationship between the two nations despite a variety of changes under the American leadership of President Barack Obama and now under President Donald Trump. Widely considered one of President Obama's greatest successes in office, the Iran Deal reached

in 2015, which offered favorable changes to the economic relations between the U.S. and Iran in exchange for a guaranteed cessation of nuclear arms programs in Iran (Hussain 2015). What should have gone down in history as an immense diplomatic success has been turned into a simple moment in history, as Trump withdrew from the Iran deal that Obama had worked so long to establish. The current administration seems quite keen on the option of military engagement with Iran; with National Security Advisor John Bolton and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo both having voiced their support of a military strike in Iran in order to maintain U.S. security. With this in mind, we can now establish an approach to the question of what would lead to the outbreak of war.

Theoretical Framework

One of the primary goals of international relations is to identify and explain the conflicts that exist between nations. To do so, there are several major theories within the field that aim to offer specific perspectives on particular aspects of how states interact and how those interactions affect conflict (and, occasionally, cooperation). One such theory is called class system theory, which can be defined as an analysis of international relations that contends that economic classes and the divisions between them define and determine the course of state behaviors (Genest 2004). It is, as its name suggests, a system-level theory of analysis, meaning that it looks at the international system in its entirety, from a broad, global perspective. It is the *kind* of system that theorists aim to identify, because they believe that it works to set the standard from which analysis can be done; it “conditions and constrains the behavior of those [states] who operate within it” (Genest 2004).

The four driving concepts upon which class system theory is based are as follows: first, that economic factors drive international relations in the sense that “political and military power

are the direct result of the underlying economic strength of the dominant class”; second, that focus must be put on the capitalist world economy and how it “both creates and perpetuates uneven development between advanced capitalist states and poor, less developed states”; third, that there exists an international class structure in which “the advanced industrialized states in the center of the world capitalist system dominate and exploit poorer states, occupying the periphery of the system”; and finally, that “transnational class coalitions represent the primary actors in international politics” (Genest 2004). Though all aspects of this theory will be accounted for in how they apply to the conflict between the U.S. and Iran, the third concept – that rich nations exploit poor nations – will be a primary focus later on in this paper.

Essential to class-system theory are the concepts laid out by Marxism, the political and economic doctrine developed by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in the latter half of the 19th century. Marxism relies heavily on the idea of dialectical materialism, which contends that history is driven by the struggle between economic classes, which pushes us through stages of economic systems, from feudalism to capitalism to socialism and to the final stage of communism (Genest 2004). The classes under the current stage of capitalism as outlined by Marx are the capitalists, who own the means of production who control and exploit the members of the classes below them in order to accumulate wealth and power, the proletariat, who are the workers whose labor is “owned” and thus exploited, and the peasants, who work the land owned by capitalists. From this tension between classes arises the class struggle, in which “the oppressed worker and peasant classes attempt to free themselves from the domination of the wealthy capitalist class” and establish a socialist order (Genest 2004).

What class system does with Marxism is that it takes it and applies it to the global system at large. So rather than the capitalists and the proletariat, there exists a core class of wealthy

states, a periphery class of poor states, and a semi-periphery class of developed but poor nations (Genest 2004). Like the capitalists, the core countries are those that control the global means of production, which allows them to amass ridiculous amounts of wealth as well as to draw immense power from it. The relationship between the core states and the periphery states is that of dependence; the core nations rely on the resources and cheap labor available for exploitation in the periphery nations, and the periphery nations (with its own class structure within), controlled by their own capitalist class (who allow the majority of their nations to suffer while they reap the benefits), rely on the material “support” offered to them by the core states.

With these fundamental ideas of class system theory established, we can continue by assigning both the U.S. and Iran roles within the larger international system. The United States, undeniably, occupies the position of the rich, core nation utilizing exploitative practices in order to increase its power and wealth; Iran, on the other hand, occupies the position of the poorer, semi-periphery nation whose resources are being exploited for foreign gain at domestic expense. As earlier mentioned, the U.S. historically found immense success by working with the Iranian government in order to utilize its oil industry for its own gain; when it did so, though, the U.S. was willing to work with a horrifically oppressive regime in order to find its own gain. This action, consistent with U.S. affairs in other countries that offer it economic benefits (Saudi Arabia, for example), shows how highly the United States prioritizes its economy and oil. The U.S. backed 1953 coup, indeed, was done so in order to suppress the threat to Western control over Iranian oil that the nationalistic government wanted to reduce. American favorability to Iran has consistently been contingent on Iran’s willingness to provide oil to the U.S. Under the Shah’s rule, U.S.-Iranian relations seemed difficult to break; it was only after the Revolution that the U.S. realized its hold over Iran was loosened, making the state a threat.

Interestingly enough, state sponsored rhetoric against Iran – labelling it an enemy, a supporter of terrorist groups, a threat to Israel – heightened as Iran’s oil economy became less and less dependent on the U.S. William Clark anticipated that Iran would create a new oil trading market by means of eliminating its reliance on the U.S. dollar for its oil sales; by 2007, successful transactions with Japan and with China using the yen and the euro, respectively, occurred, infuriating the U.S. The success of these trades meant that the U.S. control over oil sales, by means of the dollar standard, was waning and that Iran would be able to build wealth off its oil reserves, despite American attempts to keep that from happening by putting in place embargos on Iranian oil. As Bennis notes, what is important to the U.S. is “maintaining control of Iran's and other countries' oil supplies: the ability to determine price and the quantity available, and to guarantee access to oil to favored friends and deny it to competitors” (Bennis 2009). On this strategy of shifting currencies, Clark states that “If Iran’s oil bourse becomes a successful alternative for international oil trades, it would challenge the hegemony currently enjoyed by the financial centers in both London (IPE) and New York (NYMEX)” (Clark 2005). This maneuver on the part of Iran is quite clever in that, rather than being a direct attack on U.S. global control over oil, the Bourse is a mere undermining of its power. “A successful Iranian bourse will solidify the petroeuro as an alternative oil transaction currency, and thereby end the petrodollar’s hegemonic status as the monopoly oil currency” (Clark 2005). The aggressive reaction under the Bush administration – further demonizing and threatening war – by this simple act shows just how deeply invested the United States is in maintaining its control over the global oil market.

The U.S. control over the global oil market, the U.S.’ status as the global hegemon, and the U.S.’ status as the wealthiest nation in the world (in history) are no coincidences; rather, these factors all work together, in tandem, to bolster each other, and the threat against one of

these factors is considered a direct attack upon the United States. For this is how core nations function: they maximize their wealth by any means possible – through exploitation of labor, through the undermining of sovereign nations, through sheer military force – and in turn maximize their power. Once established as the most powerful nation, any other nation that attempts similar practices or threatens U.S. holds over the world is considered a threat to power, to the world order, as is then subjected to the true might of the hegemon. From our class-system theory of analysis, we see many of the things assumed and predicted by theorists come to fruition in the case of the U.S. conflict with Iran, especially in regard to how their relationship affects the American oil economy that continues to be one of the largest industries in the world.

Conclusion

It is a personal belief of mine that war has never been, is not, and never will be an inevitability; war is a *choice* made by *states* – not by the people – when they believe that the benefits of doing so outweigh the losses. In the case of Iran, war is not inevitable; if war does break out, it will be because the United States has something to gain from doing so. In the case of Iran, there are a variety of reasons that could be used as a reason for instigation; the state, for more than a decade now, has constantly pointed to Iran as a threat because it is a primarily Islamic and theocratic government (which makes it a threat to Western civilization, and particularly to the U.S.), because of its supposed sponsorship of terrorist organizations, because of its continued attempts at establishing and developing a nuclear energy program that could potentially really be a ploy to cover up a nuclear arms program, because of its antagonism towards our strongest ally in the Middle East, Israel, because of its faulty democracy and its threat to human rights – the list could go on and on. But Iran's oil will likely never be mentioned, or at least not explicitly, as a reason for intervention. Bennis draws some important similarities

between Iraq and Iran, and these similarities should be considered warning against intervention in Iran.

Iran and Iraq are nations that both have oil wealth, water, and vast regions, which Bennis labels as requisites to become indigenous powers (Bennis 2009). When the U.S. invaded Iraq, it undermined the power of its government, opening up a space for Iran to rise up as a regional power. Iran is no longer a small nation with an easily manipulated government; it is now a major regional force that must be reckoned with. In instigating a war with Iran, we should look to the results of the Iraq War: millions of Iraqi deaths, billions of American tax dollars gone to the destabilization of a large nation, and bolstered U.S. control over Middle Eastern oil. Multiple government officials have come out to say that the Iraq war was, fundamentally, about controlling oil. It should come as no shock that the U.S. may consider wreaking the same sort of havoc in Iran in order to achieve the same ends that it did in Iraq, regardless of the consequences. The lengths to which the U.S. government was willing to go in their efforts to control oil in Iraq should serve as a warning to us, today, facing the precipitation of similar events in a country not far from Iraq. And with the current Trump administration that has been so favorable and inviting towards oil companies, we should, indeed, be fearful of what decisions the state will make in terms of Iran should it indeed come down to the stake that the U.S. government has in keeping Iran from becoming an oil-producing nation with little to no influence exerted over them by U.S. forces.

If war is to break out we, as citizens, must keep certain things in mind. First, we must question what right the U.S. has to intervene in sovereign nations, regardless of their domestic politics. We must then consider what motivating factors ultimately move us to war and whether those reasons are justifiable *and* just (I argue: they are neither). Thirdly, we should attempt to see

things from the Iranian perspective and remember that war is a conflict between states that is fought by its people. And finally, we must remember that, though class system theory offers us an answer as to why we might end up in a war with Iran, class system theory should also guide us to act against the will of corporations and of the states that are subject to their will.

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