

2020 Model Senate Foreign Relations Committee

Briefing Paper – The Ongoing Political Tensions with Iran

Subcommittee on Near East, South Asia, Central Asia and Counterterrorism

Topic Background

Tensions between Iran and the United States are at their greatest point in decades. How did we get here? What decisions, events, and actions have occurred that have led to such tensions? And, most importantly, what kind of future relationship can we imagine between the United States and Iran, and how do we get there?

The history of government relations between the United States and Iran is long and complicated and can be viewed through a number of perspectives. At times, the two nations have been both allies and adversaries, each seeking to use the relationship for their own calculated purposes. Iran's strategic location in the Middle East, its status as the largest Shi'a Islamic state in the world, its ongoing geopolitical tensions with Saudi Arabia, and the United States ongoing and complicated relationship with the region further confounds the U.S./Iranian relationship.



Key to understanding the relationship of these two nations is to look beyond the political nature of the relationship and observe the cultural similarities and differences between the two nations. Understanding key historical events over the last 100 years is also critical to understanding the complicated tensions and opportunities in this relationship.

Iran's History and Culture

Modern day Iran, once named **Persia**, has a rich cultural history dating back thousands of years and encompassing some of the oldest civilizations in human history. At times, Persia was a part of some of the ancient world's largest empires, including the Sassanid Empire and the Greek Empire. In the 7th century, **Islam**, a newly formed religion, swept across Persia bringing with it new identities, cultures and connections throughout the Middle East. Over time, Islam became the dominating religion of the area, replacing Christianity and Zoroastrianism among others.¹

¹[De-Zoroastrianization and Islamization: The Two Phases of Iran's Religious Transition](#) - 2009

From about 1500 to 1736, the Safavid Empire dominated the region and marked the founding of what would become modern Persia. The empire established the rough boundaries that make up current-day Iran, and formalized **Shi'a Islam** as the official religion of the empire, a key development in the region. In 1908, **crude oil and petroleum** were discovered in vast quantities in Iran, thrusting the nation into the heart of international affairs.² The vast British Empire, the growing German Empire and the Russian Empire were all eager to obtain reliable sources of oil for their rapidly **industrializing** nations. During World War II, Iran was occupied by **Allied forces** seeking to limit German expansion in the Middle East. Ultimately, the various European powers colonized Iran, using the fledgling nation as source of oil and other strategic resources. Following a series of political upheavals throughout the 1950's and 1960's Iran underwent a **modernization** program which included **nationalizing** its oil industry, increasing defense spending and a joining of the political structure with the Shi'a Islamic leadership.

1979 – The Iranian Revolution

In the years leading up to Iranian Revolution, the U.S. and Iran experienced a period of friendly relations. The Iranian leader, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi held close ties to the United States and favored modernization and **westernization**. Opponents criticized the Shah as **authoritarian**, lacking any democratic or popular support, and disconnected from the religious base in Iran. Beginning in the late 1970's the Shah began to lose support as a coalition of groups, including students, left-leaning groups, and conservative Islamists who began to question his rule. Over time, these groups began to protest the Shah, sharply criticizing his connections to the West. In 1979, the **Iranian Revolution** burst forth with widespread protests throughout Iran. The Shah lost majority support from both the Iranian people as well as the influential military powers. Later that same year, the Shah was forced from power and exiled, which also brought the return of the Ayatollah Khomeini, an Islamic religious leader previously exiled by the Shah and his party. The Iranian Revolution had many principles including important populist and nationalist ideologies. However, first and foremost, the Iranian Revolution was an Islamic revolution aimed at establishing Shi'a Islam at the heart of Iran's economic, cultural and political centers. Many different group coalesced around the

In Iran and four other countries, half or more of the Muslim population is Shia

Countries where Shia make up ...

■ Half or more of Muslim population ■ Less than half of Muslim population



Source: The Shia estimate for Iraq is based on surveys by ABC News and Pew Research Center conducted between 2007 and 2011. For all other countries, Shia estimates are based on Pew Research Center's October 2009 report "Mapping the Global Muslim Population." Data on the share of each country's total population that is Muslim from the Pew Research Center's December 2012 report "The Global Religious Landscape."

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² [A Brief History of the Iranian Oil Industry](#) – Wall Street Journal, 2015

ousting of the Shah including religious groups, leftist groups and **secularists**. Over time, power became concentrated in a few ruling religious elite effectively turning Iran into a **theocracy**.

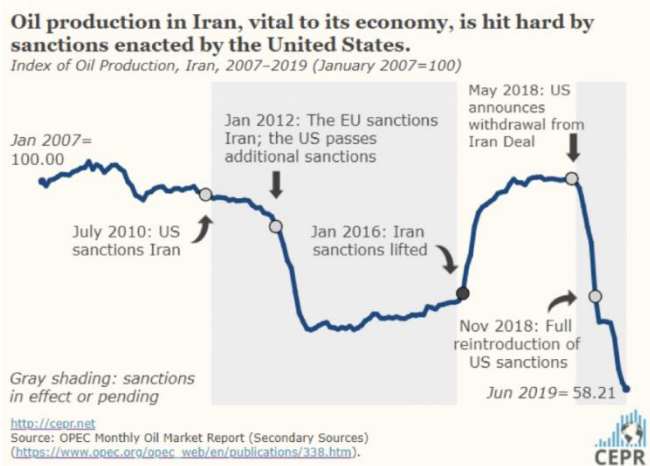
The Iranian Hostage Crisis

The Iranian Hostage Crisis represented one of the key turning points in the U.S. – Iranian relationship and is key to the ongoing tensions between the two nations. On November 4th, 1979, in the midst of the burgeoning Iranian Revolution, a group of Iranian students seized control of the United States Embassy in Iran’s capital, Tehran. The students took 52 Americans hostage for 444 days, leading to a protracted **geopolitical crisis** and heightened tensions between the two nations.

The crisis would ultimately end on January 20th, 1981 with the peaceful release of all hostages. The crisis had several critical impacts, including the strengthening of Ayatollah Khomeini and his political allies within Iran. The hostage crisis would prove difficult for American president Jimmy Carter to navigate, troubling his first and only term in the White House. Ultimately, crisis would end in the first days of Ronald Reagan’s presidency. Throughout the crisis, the United States and its allies instituted a significant number of economic sanctions in order to isolate Iran and damage its economy.³ Ultimately, the Iranian Hostage Crisis would lead to heightened tensions between the two nations that continue into the present day.

Iran’s Role and American Interests in the Region

In order to understand the ongoing tensions between Iran and the United States, it is important to understand Iran’s role and American interests in the Middle East. Iran seeks to grow its regional influence by expanding its economic, religious, cultural and geopolitical reach across the region. Like any country, Iran actively seeks to protect its territorial sovereignty especially from perceived threats from its Sunni majority neighbors in Iraq and Saudi Arabia. Dating back to the 1950’s, Iran has sought to produce nuclear energy for civilian and military purposes, including energy production and defense purposes.⁴



As the largest Shi’a Islamic country in the region, Iran sees itself at odds with many of the other powers in the region. This includes historical conflicts with Iraq dating back decades and even centuries. Iran also views Israel, the region’s only Jewish state as a regional threat and adversary. Finally, Iran is also at odds with the region’s **Sunni** Islamic power, Saudi Arabia. These two nations often view their success and dominance in the region as directly opposed to one other, leading to a **zero-sum scenario**. The

³ [How the Iran Hostage Crisis Shaped the US Approach to Sanctions](#) – Brookings, 2019

⁴ [Iran – Nuclear Technologies](#) – Nuclear Threat Initiative, 2018

United States has a long history of involvement in the Middle East, including long-running political and military conflicts.

The political and religious leaders in Iran see these nations, and specifically U.S. alignment with these three nations, as existential threats to their safety and security. Hence, Iran has allied itself with a number of **proxy forces** in the region aimed at disrupting the Western-aligned power balance. This includes the funding of a proxy war in Yemen, airstrikes in Saudi Arabia, destabilizing attacks in Iraq, and the seizure of ships in the critical Persian Gulf.

Current U.S. - Iranian Relationship

Since the Iranian Revolution and Hostage Crisis, the United States and Iran have been engaged in a protracted adversarial relationship with significant ongoing hostilities between the two nations. One of the root issues at play is Iran's desire to obtain nuclear energy for its citizen population as well as its desire to obtain nuclear capacity for defensive purposes. The United States views Iranian nuclear power as a critical issue of national security and has maintained staunch opposition to Iran's strategic goals. For decades, the United States has pressured the international community to limit Iran's nuclear ambitions. In response to Iran's continued pursuit of nuclear technology, the United States and its allies imposed a number of debilitating economic sanctions on Iran and its leaders. These sanctions limit the ability of Iran to import and export critical goods and services, essentially cutting them off from the global trade community. Critically, the United States has pressured the international community to avoid Iranian oil exports, the nation's primary global export. Over time, these sanctions have impacted Iran's economy profoundly, limiting growth and causing significant economic hardships in the nation of 81 million people.

In November of 2013, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, also known as the Iran Nuclear Deal was signed by the United States, Russia, China, France, the United

A BRIEF HISTORY OF US - IRAN RELATIONS



This is a developing situation; this timeline is meant to provide a brief background on the issue and is by no means a comprehensive analysis of the relationship between the US and Iran.

For more in-depth information, visit the NYTimes page on Iran at <https://www.nytimes.com/topic/destination/iran>

Kingdom and Iran.⁵ The negotiated deal required Iran to limit nuclear production, submit to international nuclear inspections and cooperate with the international community. In return, the United States and its allies would lift economic sanctions on various Iranian imports and exports. Both sides heralded the deal as an improvement in relations between Iran and the coalition of western nations. On May 8th, 2018, President Donald Trump withdrew the United States from the Iran Nuclear Deal, effectively ending the negotiated compromise. Although the other Western nations remain committed to the deal, the decision will likely end years of diplomatic negotiation. The Trump administration reinforced this decision by further increasing economic sanctions on Iran in an attempt to limit nuclear production and cripple the Iranian economy.

2019 Iranian Protests and Evolving Events

In the Fall of 2019, reports of civilian demonstrations in Iran leaked to the international community.⁶ Some Iranian civilians took to the streets of Tehran and other major cities to protest a 50% increase in gasoline prices. Although the initial spark was the government's decision to increase gas prices, many observers believe that mounting frustration over the stressed Iranian economy, perhaps due to the increased economic sanctions by the global community, is causing some of the unrest.

In response to the demonstrations, the Iranian government shut down internet services throughout the country and limited the spread of information, both within Iran and to the larger global community. Although the demonstrations appear to be limited to frustration over the underperforming Iranian economy, observers continue to monitor the events for any changes to the political structure in Iran.

On January 2nd, 2020, the Trump Administration launched a drone strike, killing Major General Qassim Suleimani, the leader of Iran's powerful Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Major General Suleimani was responsible for coordinating Iran's military presence in the region, including its proxy forces in Iraq, Yemen and other nations. The killing of Iran's top military general is widely seen as a provocative act, further deteriorating the U.S. - Iranian relationship. At the time of this writing, public knowledge of Iran's response has been muted. Academics and theorists suggest that Iran is likely to use its proxy forces around the world to harass, intimidate, kidnap or kill U.S. or U.S.-allied forces abroad. Observers should continue to monitor the situation in Iran, as developments are likely to occur in the coming weeks.

Moving Forward

As with almost any issue in modern American politics, partisan views will largely shape individual responses to the evolving U.S.-Iranian relationship. Even though significant differences between political parties may arise, it is important to understand the common goals uniting each. First, peaceful reconciliation remains the top diplomatic priority of the U.S. government and should be pursued by all

⁵ [Iran Nuclear Deal: Key Details](#) – BBC, 2019

⁶ [Iran is Wracked by Greatest Unrest in 40 years](#) – New York Times, 2019

parties. How to achieve peace with Iran will remain one of the greatest political questions of modern American politics, and surely, each side will offer competing visions. In addition, ensuring that Iran is unable to produce a nuclear weapon remains a priority of both political parties.

The United States government has a number of tools at its disposal to achieve its strategic goals, including economic, diplomatic and military responses. Military responses are generally the costliest, both in terms of monetary value, as well as civilian and military lives, and should be considered last resorts. Economic options include increasing or reducing sanctions and providing economic benefits are routinely used to push nations toward peaceful resolution of differences. Finally, diplomatic efforts, although often under reported and unknown, represent additional opportunities for conflict resolution.

Subcommittee Background

The subcommittee on Near East, South Asia, Central Asia, and Counterterrorism is responsible for handling all matters involving U.S. relations with the countries of the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia and Central Asia, as well as regional IGOs. Regionally, this subcommittee is responsible for dealing with terrorism and non-proliferation, crime and drug trafficking, U.S. foreign assistance programs, and the promotion of U.S. trade and exports. Globally, this subcommittee is responsible for dealing with matters of counterterrorism.⁷ This subcommittee is comprised of a chairman and ranking member, four Republican majority members with three Democratic minority members. Sen. **Mitt Romney** (R) of Utah holds the title of chairman, while Sen. **Chris Murphy** (D) of Connecticut holds the title of ranking member. The other members of the Republican majority are Senators **Ted Cruz** of Texas, **Lindsey Graham** of South Carolina, **Cory Gardner** of Colorado, and **Rand Paul** of Kentucky. The Democratic minority includes Senators **Ben Cardin** of Maryland, **Jeanne Shaheen** of New Hampshire, and **Tim Kaine** of Virginia.

Regarding legislation, this subcommittee has introduced two **resolutions** and one bill in the spring of 2019. The bill, known as the **Prevention of Unconstitutional War with Iran Act of 2019**, was the first to be introduced, and prohibits the use of funds for engaging in military operations against Iran without authorization from Congress; responses to immediate threats are an exception.⁸ Of the two resolutions, the first one to be introduced opposes the removal of sanctions placed on Iran without first addressing Iran's nuclear program, ballistic missile development, support for terrorism, and other activities that threaten U.S. national security.⁹ The second resolution introduced is a **concurrent** resolution that

⁷ Subcommittees: United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations." About | United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, n.d. <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/about/subcommittees/>.

⁸ Udall, and Tom. "S.1039 - 116th Congress (2019-2020): Prevention of Unconstitutional War with Iran Act of 2019." Congress.gov, April 4, 2019. [https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/1039?q={\"search\":\[\"s.+1039\"\]}&s=1&r=1](https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/1039?q={\).

⁹ Tom. "S.Res.195 - 116th Congress (2019-2020): A Resolution Opposing the Lifting of Sanctions Imposed with Respect to Iran without Addressing Iran's Nuclear Program, Ballistic Missile Development, Support for Terrorism, and Other Destabilizing Activities." Congress.gov, May 8, 2019. [https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-resolution/195?q={\"search\":\[\"Iran\"\]}&r=2&s=1](https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-resolution/195?q={\).



condemns Iran’s cooperation with the **Houthi** movement—a Yemeni **insurgent** group that has been opposing and engaging in conflict with the current Yemeni government, and is often held responsible for starting the Yemeni civil war. This resolution also condemns the human rights violations and violations against civilians committed by the Houthi.¹⁰

Subcommittee Charge

The goal of the subcommittee on Near East, South Asia, Central Asia and Counterterrorism is to draft a measured response to the ongoing protests in Iran. Senators should acknowledge the longstanding conflict between the United States and Iran, including recent developments in the Iran Nuclear Deal and beyond. Senators should pry expert witnesses to gain an understanding of the geopolitical strategies of each country and the interests of each nation. Senators should also gain an understanding of the critical issues relevant to this conflict and potential solutions to each of those issues.

Questions to Consider

1. Describe current Iranian-U.S. relations. What major events in the past 50 years have defined this relationship?

2. Define Colonialism. Which countries were colonizers of Iran and how did that impact its relationship with Western counties?

¹⁰ Tom. “Actions - S.Con.Res.21 - 116th Congress (2019-2020): A Concurrent Resolution Strongly Condemning Human Rights Violations, Violence against Civilians, and Cooperation with Iran by the Houthi Movement and Its Allies in Yemen.” Congress.gov, June 27, 2019. [https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-concurrent-resolution/21/actions?q={\"search\":\[\"Iran\"\]}&r=3&s=1](https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-concurrent-resolution/21/actions?q={\).

3. How did the Iran Hostage Crisis affect relations between the United States and Iran?

4. What are the defining characteristics of a theocracy? Is the United States a theocracy? Is Iran a theocracy?

5. Are there any potential bipartisan solutions for ensuring that Iran does not build a nuclear weapon?

6. What economic, military, and/or diplomatic tactics and policies can the U.S. government employ to achieve its strategic goals with Iran and in the region?

7. What would the person in your assigned role for this program recommend as a foreign policy solution to this issue?



Glossary of Terms

Term	Description
Allied Forces	Refers to a group of states that fought together during World War II. The Allied Forces were made up of Britain, France, Russia (Soviet Union) and the United States.
Authoritarian	Of or relating to a governmental or political system, principle, or practice in which individual freedom is held as completely subordinate to the power or authority of the state, centered either in one person or a small group that is not constitutionally accountable to the people.
Concurrent Resolution	Resolution adopted by both Houses that does not require the President's signature and does not have the force of law
Crude Oil	Unrefined petroleum
Houthi	
diversification	A risk management technique that mixes a wide variety of investments to provide higher returns on the investment with lower risk. If one investment fails, it will not ruin the investor because they have invested in other places that are safe. A diversified economy has multiple strong sectors (agriculture, service, manufacturing etc.) and can remain strong even if one sector fails.
egalitarian	The idea that all people are equal and deserve equal rights and opportunities.
exploit	To use and utilize selfishly for one's own ends, especially for profit.
flawed democracy	Flawed democracies are nations where elections are fair and free and basic civil liberties are honored but may have issues such as media restrictions that in some way prevent complete freedom of speech. These nations have significant faults in other democratic aspects, including underdeveloped political culture, low levels of participation in politics, and issues in the functioning of governance.
foreign investment	One or more nations providing money to a borrowing nation so they can build or buy necessary goods and services.
full democracy	A full democracy is a nation where civil liberties and basic political freedoms are not only respected but also reinforced. These nations have a valid system of governmental checks and balances, independent judiciary whose decisions are enforced, governments that function adequately, and media that is diverse and independent.
grants	A sum of money given by an organization, especially a government, for a particular purpose. Unlike a loan, there is no need to "pay back" a grant.
human rights	The rights and freedoms that we are all entitled to including (but not limited to) the right to go to school and to work. Every person has every human right because we are all born equal and should be treated with equal dignity and respect.
indicators	A sign or signal that shows something exists or is true, or that makes something clear
industrialization	The large-scale introduction of manufacturing, advanced technical enterprises, and other productive economic activity into an area, society, country, etc.
infrastructure	The basic physical and organizational structures and facilities (i.e. buildings, roads) needed for a society to operate.
insatiable	Having an appetite or desire for something that is impossible to satisfy.



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interest	A charge for borrowed money. Generally a percentage of the amount borrowed
International aid	Money, goods and services given by the government of one country or an international institution such as the World Bank to help another country.
investment	The expenditure or use of money and capital in order to gain profitable returns as interest, income, or appreciation in value.
loans	Things that are borrowed, especially a sum of money that is expected to be paid back with interest.
marginalized	Treated (a person, group, or concept) as insignificant or peripheral
marginalized populations	Groups of people that are treated as insignificant or of lower status.
member state	The term used for a country that is a member of an international organization, such as the United Nations.
military rule	A form of government where the military has complete control over political authority.
monarchy	A form of government where one person rules the state. What differentiates a monarchy from a dictatorship for example is the fact that the ruler (the monarch, like kings or queens) gains power through family succession.
non-governmental organizations (NGOs)	Non-profit, citizen-based groups or international organizations that are independent of governments. NGOs are typically active in humanitarian, educational, healthcare, public policy, social, human rights, environmental, and other areas to make changes according to their objectives.
parliament	A representative body of people who make the laws in some countries; Generally found in flawed or full democracies.
partial democracy	A partial democracy, also known as an illiberal democracy, is a governing system in which, although elections take place, citizens are cut off from knowledge about the activities of those who exercise real power because of the lack of civil liberties. It is not an "open society."
predatory lending	A practice of loaning money to a borrower and forcing them to accept unfair terms through deceiving, coercing, or exploiting the borrower.
sovereignty	The full right and power of a governing body over itself, without any interference from outside sources, influence, or actors.
true democracy	A true democracy, also known as a direct democracy, is a type of democracy in which the people vote on policy and initiatives directly. This differs from a representative democracy, where the people vote for politicians (ex: House of Representatives, Senate) who vote for policy.