

# Iran & the US, Mutual Threat Perception and Deterrence Policies

Parts of Mousavian's speech at the United State Strategic Command, August 17, 2023-Nebraska

## The 1953 coup

To understand this foundational moment in modern Iranian perceptions of the US, we have to see how, after the Second World War, Washington established a new world order and decided to use Iran as one of its bulwarks against the Soviet Union.

Just a few years after World War II, the US established almost every international institution in the modern world. Each was dominated by the US.

Since then, the US has also been involved in 80% of all the global conflicts and wars since WWII.

According to one study, the US also carried out at least 81 interventions in foreign elections during the period 1946–2000 and according to another, the US engaged in 70 attempts at regime change during the Cold War.

In Iran, this manifested itself in 1953, as the US & U.K. orchestrating the coup to remove democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq and installing the Shah as a dictator. Thereafter, by supporting the dictator, the US dominated Iran, indirectly, for a quarter of a century. Americans may have forgotten, but every Iranian knows this story.

The 1979 revolution Americans do remember the 1979 revolution in Iran, and the taking of American diplomats as hostages. They do not recall that the revolution was a popular reaction to the Shah's dictatorship and US interference and violation of the political independence of Iran.

Confronted by mass protest, the Shah fled Iran. Thirteen days after the Shah arrived in New York on October 22, 1979, protesters stormed the US embassy in Tehran. 52 American diplomats were seized and spent 444 days in captivity. A sad and unfortunate story.

Eventually, on 19 January, 1981, the Algiers Accords were signed between the two countries to resolve their major bilateral disputes. Iran agreed to release its American hostages, and the US promised not to intervene, directly or indirectly, politically or militarily, in Iran's internal affairs, revoke US sanctions, and return Iranian assets.

This Accord laid the foundation for Washington and Tehran to restore normal diplomatic relations based on mutual respect, non-interference and mutual interests.

Soon after the American hostages were released, the US violated the Accord. Iran learned that US assurances could not be trusted.

## Saddam Hussein's Invasion of Iran

Iran soon learned a more painful lesson. The US supported Saddam Hussein's invasion of Iran.

During the eight years' war, Saddam used chemical weapons produced with materials and technology from the US and Europe.

A Washington Post investigation revealed that "the administrations

of Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush authorized the sale to Iraq of numerous items including poisonous chemicals and deadly biological viruses."

The New York Times revealed that "60 American officers were secretly providing detailed information on Iranian deployments, tactical planning for battles, plans for air strikes and bomb-damage assessments for Iraq."

The Soviet Union and Europe provided sophisticated conventional weapons including missiles, and the Arab allies of the US provided financial support.

Three major consequences of war on Iran were:

- 1- the militarization of the Iranian revolution,
- 2- Major shift in Iranian strategy acquiring deterrence capability. Iran developed its own conventional arms, drones, nuclear and missile capability,
- 3- A new army called the Iranian Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) was created to mobilize and organize hundreds of thousands of volunteers for the war front.

Today, one of the major challenges for the US in the Middle East is the power and influence of Iran's Revolutionary Guard inside Iran and across the region, coupled with the missile, drones, conventional arms and nuclear capability Iran has built up.

## The US and Iran's Nuclear Program

After Iran's 1979 revolution, Iran decided to forgo the Shah's ambitious nuclear program and US policy changed to "zero nuclear technology" for Iran. The US & EU stopped all nuclear exports to Iran, and under US pressure, all other countries stopped nuclear cooperation with Iran as well.

As the result, in 1996, Iran decided to go for self-sufficiency in nuclear fuel and technology. By 2002, it had mastered uranium enrichment.

When the US learned this, its policy shifted from "Zero Nuclear" to "Zero Enrichment" in Iran.

Recognizing the folly of this policy, France, Germany and the UK began talks with Iran in October 2003 to accept limits on Iran's nuclear capabilities. But the US refused to negotiate with Iran.

In March 2005, Iran proposed the same principles that were later agreed in the 2015 Nuclear Deal. However, the 2005 nuclear talks failed due to US insistence on "zero enrichment in Iran" and increased sanctions. In response, Iran increased the level and capacity of its uranium enrichment program and reached a capacity in 2013 that meant Iran would have required only 2-3 months for it to produce enough weapon-grade uranium for a bomb. This served Iran as a deterrent.

This deterrent capability was not acquired easily. In 2010, in a joint operation with Israeli intelligence services, the US launched cyberattacks on Iran's nuclear facilities.

Subsequently, several Iranian nuclear facilities were sabotaged and Iranian nuclear scientists were assassinated.

In response, Iran began to create a cyber army and today is among the top 10 most powerful cyber nations in the world.

The Office of the Director of National Intelligence's 2023 Annual Threat Assessment states that: "Iran's growing expertise and willingness to conduct aggressive cyber operations make it a major threat to the security of US and allied networks and data." This is just another example of deterrence as both action and reaction.

## The Iran Nuclear Deal

It took a long time for the US to see sense. Ultimately, President Obama changed the US policy from "Zero Enrichment" to "zero Nuclear Bombs". The Iran Nuclear deal known as JCPOA agreed in July 2015 included:

- 1- Most comprehensive transparency measures,
- 2- Limits on enrichment capacity and stocks of low-enriched uranium and heavy water, and
- 3- An estimated one-year breakout time for a bomb.

Iran complied with its side of the deal with zero failure. The US did not.

President Trump withdrew the US from the Iran Nuclear Deal & reimposed sanctions. In response, step by step, Iran began reducing its compliance with the deal.

From May 2019, Iran increased enrichment from 3.67% to 20% and then 60%, and its stockpile of low-enriched uranium from 300 to about 4,000 kg.

President Trump also had popular Iranian Revolutionary Guard Gen. Soleimani assassinated. In response, Iran attacked a US military base in Iraq with conventional ballistic missiles – the first time; a US military base was ever attacked in the Middle East.

Trump's withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal was disastrous for the US because:

- 1- Since Trump's withdrawal in May 2018, Iran's breakout time has declined from a year to less than 10 days.
- 2- Neither US-led sanctions nor Israeli assassinations have stopped Iran's nuclear advances.
- 3- Meanwhile, Iran has moved closer to China and Russia.

4- Iran joined the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and applied to join the BRICS group (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa). Both organizations were created by China and Russia.

5- Iran has been providing drones to Russia. The US and Europe suspect that Russia has used Iranian drones in Ukraine war.

Had the US stayed in the nuclear agreement, Iran's strategy toward China and Russia might have been different and Iran and the US also could have negotiated on the other disputed Middle East issues.

## Recommendations

Where do we go from here? I have three major recommendations for the United States:

1. Revive the Iran Nuclear Deal. In June 2023, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence released its assessment on Iran. The main point of the report is that: "Iran is not currently undertaking the key nuclear weapons-development activities that would be necessary to produce a testable nuclear device." This assessment has remained much the same during the past 20 years.

This means, Iran does not have a nuclear bomb and has made no decision to build a nuclear bomb.

But this was because Iran hoped the US would make a deal and keep its promises. Iran is trying again with President Biden. But this view cannot be assumed to last forever. Reviving the JCPOA would be the most credible objective guarantee that Iran's nuclear program would remain peaceful.

2. Pursue nuclear disarmament in good faith.

Weapons of Mass destructions are a major threat to global security and stability. We are entering an era where the possession and use and threat of use of nuclear weapons is seen by almost all as a problem. The risks are escalating and the penalties for their use are uncertain.

The US and the other world powers should strengthen regimes and international norms by ending double standards. Everyone in the Middle East knows Israel, a key US ally, is the only country in the region with nuclear weapons, and the US says nothing about this.

3. Revise US Middle East strategy. The core of the conflict between Iran and the US is about the future of the Middle East. Through sanctions, military and political action and creating regional alliance, the US has tried to isolate Iran.

For its part, Iran has tried to undermine the US regional role and interests. 40 years of this confrontational strategy has been a losing game for Washington and Tehran.

In 2023, an Iranian MP, Mohsen Pirhadi, said that the number of people living below the poverty line in Iran had reached 28 million. The US has also lost because:

- 1- Today, the US is worried about Iran's growing regional influence in Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, and Iraq.
- 2- The regional alliance led by Israel and Saudi Arabia against Iran has failed. In fact, and with China's initiative, Tehran and Riyadh are on the way to rapprochement.
- 3- China has become the No. 1 economic partner of many US allies in the region.

4- US Persian Gulf allies have not confronted Russia on its war on Ukraine.

5- Public opinion polls show that most people in the Middle East consider the US and Israel as the major threats to peace in the region.

6- According to studies by Brown University in 2023, the wars the US waged in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria,

Yemen, and Pakistan following September 11, 2001, have caused at least 4.5 million deaths and the displacement of 49–60 million, rivaling the displacements in WWII. Last month, Foreign Policy Magazine published a report titled: America's love of sanctions will be its downfall. The report says:

■ A total of 23 countries are under US sanctions, the US had sanctions on about 10,000 individuals, companies, and sectors worldwide

■ The countries subject to US sanctions collectively account for more than one-fifth of global GDP, are now seeking to rewrite the rules of the global financial system.

■ At the end, the Foreign Policy article suggests that US policy makers should reconsider their love affair with sanctions because they are actively undermining US interests. In short, the US regional strategy for the Persian Gulf and Middle East has failed and China is winning the region because Beijing has focused on technology, trade, cooperation and investment and not destroying its resources by engaging in wars, regime change attempts or sanction policy in the Middle East.

I therefore have 7 recommendations for a revised US Middle East strategy that would make the US more competitive with China:

1- Focus on economic, investment and technological cooperation rather than sanctioning and weaponizing.

2- End dangerous and counterproductive policies of war, interference and regime change.

3- Establish healthy and friendly relations with all countries rather than creating alliances with some countries against other countries.

4- Support creation of a new regional security and cooperation system in the Persian Gulf and hand over the responsibilities to the regional countries to maintain peace and stability rather than trying to achieve it with tens of military bases and trillions of dollars.

5- Promote civilian diplomacy to strengthen citizen-to-citizen relations such as tourism, athletic, academic, cultural, and social relations based on respecting each other's religions and cultures rather than imposing western cultures.

6- Support a Middle East free from all WMDs. Regionalize the principles of the JCPOA in a Persian Gulf cooperative security system. This would make possible a Nuclear Free Zone in the Persian Gulf.

7- Last but not least, launch a comprehensive dialogue between Iran and the US to end 40 years of animosity, restore normal relations based on mutual respect and non-interference. Cooperate on issues of common interests because the list of issues on which American and Iranian interests diverge is a long one. What America needs today, is a new strategy that does not involve wars, regime changes, and operations against sovereign states obsessively trying to control everyone in every part of the world. That is my message to this deterrence summit.