

monument to the achievements of ancient Greece, but it should not become a stage for turning ancient rivalries into arguments against modern Iran. The legacy of Greek civilization belongs to the broader history of humanity. Likewise, Iran’s contributions to world civilization cannot be erased or diminished by the rhetoric of American officials. Neither nation’s historical identity should be manipulated to justify hostility toward the other. The real test of American foreign policy is not the ability to construct a compelling historical narrative. It is whether Washington respects international law, protects civilian life, acknowledges the consequences of its decisions, and pursues diplomatic solutions instead of escalating conflict. Iran and the United States have serious disagreements, but those disagreements must be assessed through contemporary evidence and political realities, not through selective interpretations of events from antiquity. Washington cannot rewrite Iran’s history to serve its strategic interests, nor can it claim moral superiority while avoiding scrutiny of its own actions. If the United States genuinely seeks stability, it must abandon the politics of demonization and recognize that sustainable security depends on diplomacy, respect for national sovereignty, and equal application of international law. The Acropolis should remind the world of humanity’s capacity for intellectual and cultural achievement. It should not be used to revive ancient conflicts as a rhetorical justification for modern confrontation. Iran’s history is not Washington’s to define, and the future of relations between the two countries should be determined by political realities and the pursuit of peace, not by attempts to portray an entire nation as a perpetual enemy.

Is continued US-Iran hostility inevitable?

Rereading Walt’s ‘Revolution and War’ 30 years later



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OPINION

The US and Iran have had antagonistic relations ever since the 1979 Iranian Revolution. This constant state of hostility, of course, is understandable since the US and Iran have differed throughout this entire period over several issues. These include Israel and the Palestinians, the Iranian nuclear program, the political orientation of Syria and Iraq, Iranian support for the “Axis of Resistance” (Hamas, Hezbollah, the Ansarullah, Iraqi Shia armed groups, and others) which have targeted US forces and allies in the region, and now control over the flow of oil from the Persian Gulf and Red Sea. Indeed, there is little that Washington and Tehran have agreed upon since 1979. Common opposition to the Taliban and Al Qaeda in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 as well as common opposition to the rise of Daesh (ISIS) in Iraq and Syria in the mid-2010s were interests which both shared, but these were not strong enough to enable them to overcome their many differences. There is one sense, though, in which continued US-Iranian hostility ever since 1979 is not understandable. In his masterful 1996 book “Revolution and War,” Stephen M. Walt theorized about how revolution in one country can quickly lead to war between it and one or more status quo powers. As Walt observed, this is because each side sees the other as an existential threat but also sees the other as weak in the immediate aftermath of the revolution, thus creating a strong incentive for one or both to attack the other while it is seen to be weak and before it can pose a stronger threat in the future. Walt also theorized, though, about how after status quo powers find themselves unable to reverse the revolution they see as a threat and after the revolutionary regime discovers that exporting revolution is more problematic than it had originally hoped, the two sides come to realize that they cannot defeat each other. Normal relations between them start to develop when the status quo powers accept the existence of the revolutionary regime while the revolutionary regime halts efforts to export revolution. They can then coexist. Walt himself expected Iranian-American ties to improve in his 1996 book where he wrote



A veiled Iranian woman walks past an anti-US mural on a wall of the former US embassy in downtown Tehran, Iran, on January 20, 2026.

● MORTEZA NIKOUBAZL/
NURPHOTO

that “...efforts to establish more normal foreign relations have already begun and are likely to increase” (p. 268). Needless to say, this did not occur either then or at any time since then. I do not want, however, to single Walt out for being wrong about this. At various points, I also thought that an improvement in US-Iranian relations was possible. Indeed, many scholars have observed that revolutionary regimes tend to moderate over time for any of several reasons, including the frequent pattern of extremists being displaced by moderates, socialization, embourgeoisement, emergence of a common adversary, or other reasons still. Whatever the reason that other revolutionary regimes have

grown more moderate and their relations with status quo powers have become normalized, however, this clearly has not happened in the case of Iran, which has had antagonistic relations (involving greater and lesser degrees of intensity) from 1979 to the present with America, the West in general, conservative Arab states, and, of course, Israel. What would it take, then, for this to change and for normalization to occur between the revolutionary regime in Iran, on the one hand, and America, the West, and conservative Arab states (if not Israel), on the other? Extrapolating from Walt’s 1996 theory, this only seems likely to occur when Iran halts all efforts to export revolution through its support for the Axis of Resistance, and the US and its allies halt all efforts to undermine the Islamic Republic. An agreement resolving the Iranian nuclear issue by itself would not suffice. Just as Soviet and allied military intervention in support of Third World Marxist regimes during

the 1970s interrupted the considerable progress that Washington and Moscow had made regarding strategic arms control, continued Iranian support for the Axis of Resistance will undermine the achievement or the durability of another Iranian nuclear accord. But in that status quo powers have never yet been able to coerce or persuade Tehran into halting support for Iran’s Axis of Resistance allies, it seems highly doubtful that they will be able to do so in the future — especially now when the Iranian leadership seems to think that it is winning the ongoing conflict between Iran and the Axis of Resistance, on the one hand, and the US, Israel, and the Persian Gulf Arab states, on the other.



Supporters of Yemen’s Ansarullah (Houthis) hold posters of Iran’s martyred Leader Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei at a protest in Sanaa, Yemen, on March 6, 2026, against the war in Iran.

● OSAMAH ABDULRAHMAN/AP



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For Tehran to end its support for the Axis of Resistance, a major change would need to happen inside Iran. Its leaders would have to come to the conclusion that Hamas, Hezbollah, the Ansarullah (Houthis), and Iraqi Shias are not assets, but liabilities. A cost-benefit analysis would also have to be made in Tehran which finds that better relations with America, the West, conservative Arab states, and perhaps even Israel better serves the Iranian leadership’s interests than the activities of the Axis of Resistance. Indeed, continued support for the Axis of Resistance would have to be judged as a waste of Iranian resources that could be better spent on more important matters, especially internal economic development — something that would be greatly enhanced by the trade and investment that would come with having good relations with as many countries as possible (and not mainly with China and Russia). As a hypothetical, a truly Machiavellian Iranian leadership that prioritized the acquisition of nuclear weapons might even calculate that its ability to do so would increase if it ditched the Axis of Resistance, improved ties with its long-time adversaries, and thus made the prospect of Iran acquiring nuclear weapons seem no different than India or Pakistan having done so. Nor is the Trump administration, much less Netanyahu or any other Israeli leader, likely to see the possibility of improved relations with Iran occurring any time soon. Indeed, the better Iran and its Axis of Resistance do in the ongoing conflict, the more US and Israeli leaders are likely to see it as necessary to do something to thwart Iran. Instead of conforming to the pattern that Walt and others identified of relations between a revolutionary regime and status quo powers normalizing over time, then, the US-Iran case may be one in which they only get worse. Despite his premature optimism about the possibility that relations between Iran and status quo powers would improve, Walt also foresaw the possibility that they may not. In his 1996 book, he observed that relations between revolutionary states and other countries would become normal, “assuming, of course, that each side is capable of evaluating and revising its policies in light of experience”. (p. 43)

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