



The United States and Iran: A Complex Relationship

Paul Rogers

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Summary

With heavy involvement in the Iraqi Army's attacks on Islamic State forces in Tikrit, Iran has greatly consolidated its influence in Iraq, especially as US air power has not so far been used in this attack. The degree of Iranian influence is even higher than when the US forces withdrew from Iraq at the end of 2011, but also comes at a time when relations between Washington and Tehran have improved substantially, causing great concern both in Israel and Saudi Arabia. This complex US-Iran relationship has not come out of nowhere. It has antecedents which may emerge as significant factors in the coming months, both in terms of the war in Iraq and Syria and the nuclear negotiations.

The Historical Dimension

The Iranian Revolution and the fall of the Shah at the end of the 1970s were traumatic for the US foreign policy establishment. The Shah's regime had been a key bulwark in the western security posture against the Soviet Union in the Middle East at the height of the Cold War, and the sudden loss threw into confusion US security policy throughout the region. Added to this was the holding hostage of 52 US diplomats and citizens for 444 days from November 1979 to January 1981, an incident that had a lasting effect on the US State Department's attitude to Iran.

Subsequent US support for Iraq towards the end of the Iran-Iraq War from 1980 to 1988 made matters worse, as did the outlook of the George W Bush administration when it came to power in 2000. There was an opinion in

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neoconservative and assertive realist circles within the Bush administration that Iran was by far the greatest threat to US interests in the region and even before the 9/11 atrocities there was a widespread view that the regime had to be dealt with in some way.

In the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 atrocities, the United States successfully terminated the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and dispersed the al-Qaida movement. By January 2002, President Bush was in a position to deliver his first State of the Union Address to Congress, reporting on a successful response to a grievous attack. Perhaps the most significant aspect of a hugely popular speech was the announcement of the start of a much broader expansion of the war on terror.

Essentially, this was the decision to extend the war to counter an “axis of evil”, a phrase harking back to the “evil empire” characterisation of the Soviet bloc at the time of the Reagan administration two decades earlier, and at the heart of this axis were three states, North Korea, Iran and especially Iraq. As Bush put it:

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“ States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world. By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave threat and growing danger. They could provide these arms to terrorists giving them the means to match their hatred. They could attack our allies or threaten to blackmail the United States. In any of these cases the price of indifference would be catastrophic. ”

Four months later in his address to cadets at the West Point military academy, he made it clear that:

“ ...the war on terror will not be won on the defensive. We must take the battle to the enemy, disrupt his plans, and confront the worst threats before they emerge. In the world we have entered, the only path to safety is the path of action. And this nation will act. ”

The Road to Tehran

By mid-2002 it was obvious that the United States was moving to terminate the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq, but it was widely held in Washington that the real problem in the region was not Iraq but Iran. Regime termination in Iraq was considered likely to greatly limit Iran's power and influence: a common adage at the time was “the road to Tehran runs through Baghdad”. With Afghanistan under Western control and US bases being established, with the US Navy patrolling the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea and with western Gulf States such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait opposed to Iran, if Iraq could also be brought into the Western fold, it was thought, Iran would be hugely constrained and would not be a problem in the future.

The Iranian response to Bush's speech was hostile, given that the government in Tehran had not hindered the US termination of the Taliban regime across the border just three months earlier, in spite of its ability to do so. The then president, Mohammad Khatami, had been quite open to improving relations with the West but in this new political environment that was now circumscribed

and in 2005 Khatami was replaced by the much more suspicious Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as Iran's sixth President, serving two terms through to 2013.

One of the outcomes of the war in Iraq from 2003 to 2011 was that the removal of the Saddam Hussein regime and the eventual elections meant that the Shi'a majority in the population largely determined the make-up of the new government. This was a reversal of the situation under the old regime, which had cemented its power by drawing from the Sunni minority's support, leaving the Shi'a marginalised. Moreover, many of the Shi'a political leaders had been given refuge in Iran during the Saddam Hussein era and were particularly keen to maintain good relations. The overall effect therefore was greatly to increase Iranian influence in Iraq and in that respect, as in so many others, President Bush's pursuit of the war on terror proved to be terribly counterproductive for US interests in the region.

The Obama Era

In 2008, Senator Barack Obama campaigned for US withdrawal from Iraq, finally achieved by the end of 2011, and also sought to improve ties with Iran. The latter proved difficult given the attitude of the Ahmadinejad government and the suspicions of Israel and its supporters in the United States. It was further complicated by Iranian support for the Assad regime in Syria and for Hezbollah in Lebanon and by the repression of dissent in Iran during and after Ahmadinejad's re-election in 2009.

The Syrian uprising, its repression and the evolution of a bitter civil war was a human tragedy that further complicated US-Iranian relations. Initially the key element was the violence of the Assad regime coupled with the support it received from Iran, but as extreme Sunni Islamist paramilitary groups came to

the fore, Western states loosened their opposition to Assad and began to see the key jihadist group, Islamic State, as the greater threat.

This increased hugely with the Islamic State gains in northern Iraq a year ago, but the deep reluctance of the United States and its allies to deploy large numbers of troops on the ground meant that the response was limited primarily to an air war starting last August. By early February an intense use of airpower had involved attacks on nearly 5,000 targets and the reported killing of 8,500 Islamic State fighters.

Without large numbers of Western troops and with the Iraqi Army in disarray, much of the defence against Islamic State advances has been down to Shi'a militias, strongly supported by Iraq and with active involvement of elements of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Indeed IRGC officers are playing a major role in the assault on Tikrit; it appears that so are Iraqi Shi'a militias, more so than the Iraqi Army.

Complications

The United States and its coalition partners now face a situation in which Iran is the dominant external force in the war in Iraq and is likely to remain so. Other factors complicate this still further. The first is that the last three years have seen a marked increase in inter-confessional violence in Iraq, with many thousands of deaths each year frequently stemming from paramilitary attacks by Sunni groups against the government and against Shi'a communities. Shi'a militias, in turn, have acquired a reputation for violent treatment of Sunni communities, with this increasing their opposition to the Iraqi government and also leading to more support for Islamic State.

Beyond that, though, Western states are now far less concerned with opposition to the Assad regime, which means that the Iranian support for the regime is seen as less significant. Furthermore, the election of Hassan Rouhani as President of Iran in 2013 has resulted in a notable improvement in US-Iranian relations and the prospect of an agreement on the vexed nuclear issue. Whatever Washington may say in public about the role of Iran in the Iraq civil war, it appears that there is unofficial cooperation on the ground.

In the immediate region, Saudi Arabian policy is now internally conflicted. There is deep suspicion of Tehran and considerable worry that a nuclear agreement will lead to an overall improvement in Washington's relations with Tehran, but the Saudis are also greatly concerned at the rising power of Islamic State, especially as it controls Iraqi territory just across the country's northern border. Israel, meanwhile, is even more concerned with a US-Iranian rapprochement over the nuclear issue, more so than over the threat from Islamic State.

Conclusion: The Significance of Timescales

The result of the forthcoming Israeli General Election may change Israeli attitudes somewhat if Netanyahu cannot form a government, but the more important issues outlined above concern a longer timescale. Obama sees a deal with Iran as one of the most important legacy issues for his administration and he has little more than a year to consolidate this. In Iran, the Rouhani government has longer, until mid-2017. During that period there are some prospects for a potentially enduring improvement in relations, but if not, much will depend on the new administrations – in Washington in 2016 and in Tehran in 2017. There is a window of opportunity that transcends the bitter war in Iraq and Syria and yet the two issues – the war and US-Iranian relations – are deeply intertwined. It is going to take considerable diplomacy, both within and

between the two key states, but the rare opportunity is there for a measure of progress in a deeply troubled region.

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Image: *Mural on the wall of the former US embassy in Tehran, Iran.* **Source:** [Wikimedia](#)

About the Author:

Paul Rogers is Global Security Consultant to Oxford Research Group and Professor of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford. His [Monthly Global Security Briefings](#) are available from our website or via our monthly newsletter.

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