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U.S. - Iran Relations: A History of Covert Action and a Promising Future

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Of all the international interactions the United States has had with the nations of the world, arguably one of the most contentious relationships has been with the country of Iran. Through the last 35 years, the United States has completely and utterly refused to have diplomatic relations with the nation, never reinstating a U.S. Embassy after the infamous Iran Hostage Crisis. All these years later, the ties remain the same: strained. But why is this? Is it still necessary? In short, no. While, historically, the U.S. and Iran's relationship has been one of espionage, covert operations and deceit, the U.S. presently faces a great opportunity, one that if both nations could reconcile the past, could provide a fruitful future.

As noted above, U.S. - Iranian relations have been characterized by covert operations through the years. This “tradition” first took hold in 1953. Now this is not to say that the two countries did not have ties before this by any means. This is to say that the covert operation trend begun in 1953 marked a turning point in the gravity of the nation's affairs and a change in the nature of the countries' relationship.

As former foreign correspondent for *The Boston Globe* and *The New York Times* Stephen Kinzer outlines in his book *Overthrow*, “In the years after World War II, the currents of nationalism and anti-colonialism surged across Asia, Africa and Latin America. They carried an outspokenly idealistic Iranian, Mohammad Mossadegh, to power in the spring of 1951.”¹ As the country's new Prime Minister, Mossadegh's main goal was to modernize and democratize Iran, and for this he was immediately at odds with the nation's monarch Mohammad Reza Shah (the Shah). With passionate beliefs in democracy and nationalism, and a European education to boot, he looked to natural resources whose revenues favored extra-Iranian entities – this brought his attention to the British Oil giant BP. Seeing his country run by foreign institutions, and seeking to keep oil revenues at home for the betterment of his people, Mossadegh spearheaded a proposal that would nationalize Iran's oil fields.² The nationalization law, which provided monetary compensation for the British Oil facilities, was unanimously approved by both houses of the Iranian parliament.³

Needless to say, BP and the British government were furious over the affair. British Foreign Secretary Herbert Morrison said, “Persian oil is of vital importance to our economy. We regard it as essential to do everything possible to prevent the Persians from getting away with a breach of their contractual obligations.”⁴ Over the next few months, British authorities concluded that Mossadegh had to go and started brainstorming ideas on how to topple the new

1 Kinzer Stephen. *Overthrow*. New York: Holt, 2006. (pg. 118)

2 NPR. “Declassified Documents Reveal CIA Role In 1953 Iranian Coup.”

3 Kinzer Stephen. *Overthrow*. New York: Holt, 2006. (pg. 118)

4 Kinzer Stephen. *Overthrow*. New York: Holt, 2006. (pg. 119)

Iranian Prime Minister.⁵ After several failed plans, British intelligence agent Christopher Woodhouse made a plea to Washington.⁶ Knowing that a call to overthrow Mossadegh because he nationalized a British oil company wouldn't stir rousing American support, especially since *Time* magazine had just named Mossadegh "Man of the Year" calling him "the Iranian George Washington", Woodhouse drafted another idea.⁷ Woodhouse, with the guidance of Secretary of State John Dulles, figured they could portray Mossadegh's rule as Communist infiltration and that "the risk of leaving Iran 'open to Soviet aggression'" was a "compelling" factor in the necessity of American action.⁸ This, however, couldn't have been further from the truth. Mossadegh "abhorred Communist doctrine and rigorously excluded Communists from his government", though allowed them to freely function.⁹

This move was historic. Never had an order like this come down; never had the CIA been ordered to overthrow a foreign government. And with John Dulles' brother, Allen, as the CIA director, there would be little resistance.

After receiving the newly elected President Eisenhower's approval, planning the coup began. The plan devised was unlike anything the CIA or British agents had ever seen. It ran as such:

"...the Americans would spend \$150,000 to bribe journalists, editors, Islamic preachers, and other opinion leaders to 'create, extend and enhance public hostility and distrust and fear of Mossadegh and his government.' Then they would hire thugs to carry out 'staged attacks' on religious figures and other respected Iranians, making it seem that Mossadegh had ordered them. Meanwhile, General Zahedi [the CIA's appointed coup leader] would be given a sum of money... to 'win additional friends' and 'influence key people.' The plan budgeted another \$11,000 per week...to bribe members of the Iranian parliament. On 'coup day', thousands of paid demonstrators would converge on parliament to demand that it dismiss Mossadegh. Parliament would respond with a 'quasi-legal' vote to do so. If Mossadegh resisted, military units loyal to Zahedi would arrest them."¹⁰

It all sounded well and good, but State Department archives were bulging with dispatches declaring that Mossadegh had "the backing of 95 to 98 percent of the

5 NPR. "Declassified Documents Reveal CIA Role In 1953 Iranian Coup."

6 Kinzer Stephen. *Overthrow*. New York: Holt, 2006. (pg. 121)

7 Ibid.

8 Byrne, Malcom. "CIA Admits It Was Behind Iran's Coup." *Foreign Policy Magazine*.

9 Kinzer Stephen. *Overthrow*. New York: Holt, 2006. (pg. 121)

10 Kinzer Stephen. *Overthrow*. New York: Holt, 2006. (pg. 121)

people”, a hurdle that would undoubtedly be hard to jump.¹¹ But American operatives were optimistic, especially with U.S. Army General Norman Schwarzkopf attaining the Shah's secret blessing.¹² Soon after, under the cover of night, CIA agent Kermit Roosevelt slipped into Iran and immediately set about his work to create a web of artificial contempt.¹³

After several months, Roosevelt ordered the various Tehran street gangs (all of which were on the CIA payroll) to begin riots across the city. For a week, “a plague of violence descended on Tehran” with gangs and other thugs clashing, creating “the impression that the country was degenerating into chaos.”¹⁴ Mossadegh sent the police to maintain order, unfortunately for him most of the police commanders were CIA bankrolled.

On August 19th, the climactic day of the riots, thousands took to the streets of Tehran demanding Mossadegh's resignation.¹⁵ General Zahedi proclaimed to the nation via radio broadcast that he had been named the new Prime Minister by the Shah while the military bombarded Mossadegh's house with tank shells, causing Mossadegh and his supporters to surrender to Zahedi's troops. The coup, codename Operation Ajax, having successfully ousted Mossadegh, concluded with Mohammad Reza Shah returning to his throne with a feeling of safety, Zahedi as the new Prime Minister and Mohammad Mossadegh sitting in jail.

The U.S. had succeeded in creating a more “favorable world order” that would be beneficial to “American political, economic, and security needs” by reinserting the Shah who was established as a pro-U.S. leader.¹⁶ But at what cost did this come to the Iranian people? The Shah took this opportunity to create an “increasingly oppressive” regime to ensure a level of security, a buffer, in his rule.¹⁷ He created the Savak, the secret police known for their brutality to protect his power.¹⁸ And now, with little opposition mounted against him, the Shah saw fit to strongly centralize his rule and exert more and more vertical authority. From this moment on, “the shah was free to shape Iran as he wished.”¹⁹ This, however, came with certain strings.

Thankful for the coup, and generally pro-U.S. to begin with, the Shah began working closely with the United States, “[becoming] one of America's most

11 Kinzer Stephen. *Overthrow*. New York: Holt, 2006. (pg. 124)

12 Stuster, J. Dana. “The Craziest Detail About the CIA's 1953 Coup in Iran.” *Foreign Policy Magazine*.

13 Ibid.

14 Kinzer Stephen. *Overthrow*. New York: Holt, 2006. (pg. 127)

15 Kinzer Stephen. *Overthrow*. New York: Holt, 2006. (pg. 127)

16 Nuechterlein, Donald E. *America Recommitted*. 2nd ed. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001. (pg. 44)

17 The Washington Post. “US delays release of study on 1953 Iran coup.”

18 Kinzer Stephen. *Overthrow*. New York: Holt, 2006. (pg. 200)

19 Ibid.

trusted Cold War allies.”²⁰ Through the next three decades of his rule, “U.S. economic and military aid poured into Iran.”²¹ According to Stephen McGlinchey of *The National Interest*, “By the time of Richard Nixon’s arrival in office in January 1969, Iran was already America’s single-largest arms purchaser.”²² Moreover, during the Nixon administration, the U.S. “created a unique and unprecedented relationship with the Iranian ruler...dubbed the Twin Pillar policy.”²³ Under this policy, the shah was identified as one of the primary “guardians” of U.S. interested in the Middle East, and in return, was permitted to purchase non-nuclear U.S. military technology with a “the blank check.”^{24,25} This relationship, and the now blatantly obvious fact that the U.S. had a hand in the coup, led to undercurrents of anti-Americanism, though repressed. This repression led to hush-hush talks in back alleys, led to finding solace in “radical” figures. As historian James A. Bill concludes, “[American intervention] locked the United States into a special relationship with the Shah and signaled the powerful entrance of American intelligence and military activity into Iran. The U.S. intervention alienated important generations of Iranians from America, and was the first fundamental step in the eventual rupture of Iranian-American relations in the revolution of 1978-79.”²⁶ Which leads us to the next point: blowback.

Blowback, a term invented by the CIA, refers to the unintended consequences of American policies in relation to foreign policy and intervention.²⁷ As Chalmers Johnson writes in his book *Blowback*, “In a broader sense, blowback is another way of saying that a nation reaps what it sows.”²⁸ With this concept and definition in mind, and the 1953 coup case in the forefront, it is clear to see why the infamous Iranian Revolution of 1979 occurred; moreover, it is plain to see that the Iranian Revolution is perhaps the most concrete example of blowback in action.

In 1979, the country of Iran underwent radical changes during its violent revolution. Taking to the streets, angry crowds of Iranians protested the Shah’s rule, “surging through the streets...crying “Death to the American Shah.”²⁹

20 History Channel. “CIA-assisted coup overthrows government of Iran.”

21 Ibid.

22 McGlinchey, Stephen. “How the Shah Entangled America.” *The National Interest*.

23 Sick, Gary. “The Iranian Premier: The Carter Administration.” United States Institute for Peace.

24 Ibid.

25 McGlinchey, Stephen. “How the Shah Entangled America.” *The National Interest*.

26 Ibid.

27 Chalmers Johnson, *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire* (New York: Holt, 2004) pg. xi

28 Ibid.

29 Kinzer Stephen. *Overthrow*. New York: Holt, 2006. (pg. 202)

Leading this charge was the Islamic cleric Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, a fervently anti-Western figure. Khomeini's "revolutionary Islamist movement... promise[d] a break from the past and a turn toward greater autonomy for the Iranian people."³⁰ With this desire brewing for nearly 30 years, a movement snuffed by the U.S. with the coup, his movement became so powerful that the Shah was forced to flee from Iran and sought exile in Egypt. Soon after, needing cancer treatment, President Jimmy Carter allowed the Shah to enter the United States for his medical care. This outraged the revolting Iranian crowd stirring even more anti-American sentiments. In response, the new Ayatollah regime sanctioned the storming of the U.S. embassy in Tehran and the taking of hostages.³¹ On November 4 a group of pro-Ayatollah students smashed the gates and scaled the walls of the American embassy in Tehran holding 52 hostages captive.

Needless to say, the entire hostage crisis humiliated the United States. Donald Nuechterlein, in his book *America Recommitted*, goes so far as to call it "the most political damaging foreign policy problem...for the country's international prestige [at that time]."³² Implementing the Shah's rule had become a safety blanket for Presidential cabinets for decades, though it was indeed a false sense of security. More importantly, the mass of the American populace was oblivious to why the events occurred, chalking the affair up to irrational anti-Americanism. However, one of the Iranian militants involved with the situation later explained their motivation as delayed retribution for American intervention in the form of the 1953 coup that altered the course of Iranian politics and government.³³ As noted before, this is a clear case of blowback; American international affairs backfiring with unintended consequences. After numerous attempts to rescue the hostages, they were eventually returned safely to the United States after 444 days of captivity. This event, in turn, changed the relationship between the two nations forever.

The post hostage crisis interaction between Iran and the U.S. was nearly non-existent, the only spark arriving in 1983 after the bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Beirut, Lebanon. Hezbollah operatives that carried out the attack reportedly received "financial and logistical support" from Iran in what appears to be an act of retribution for America's past in the region or a move to eradicate U.S. influence in the region.³⁴ Tensions were high and contempt ran deep on both sides. With the "umbilical cord" now severed between the two nations, some

30 History Channel. "Iran Hostage Crisis."

31 Kinzer Stephen. *Overthrow*. New York: Holt, 2006. (pg. 202)

32 Nuechterlein, Donald E. *America Recommitted*, 2nd ed. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001. (pg. 83)

33 Kinzer Stephen. *Overthrow*. New York: Holt, 2006. (pg. 202)

34 Frontline. "Terrorist Attacks on Americans, 1979-1988."

sought to take advantage.

For years, Iran and Iraq had a very contentious relationship, bombing each other sporadically for some time. Finally, Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein decided to invade Iran in September of 1980. According to an excerpt from *The Reader's Companion to Military History* featured on the History Channel website:

“When Saddam Hussein, president of Iraq, quite deliberately started the war, he miscalculated on two counts: first, in attacking a country greatly disorganized by revolution but also greatly energized by it-and whose regime could be consolidated only by a long 'patriotic' war, as with all revolutionary regimes; and second, at the level of theater strategy, in launching a surprise invasion against a very large country whose strategic depth he was not even trying to penetrate.”³⁵

What followed was one of the worst wars the region has ever seen, and through it all, the U.S. played a part.

In 1982, with Iraq's territorial gains into Iran lost to a strong counter strike, and the possibility of Iranian victory close at hand, the U.S. government implemented a two prong strategy to attempt to stop their new enemy. First, “the Reagan Administration [more specifically the CIA] secretly decided to provide highly classified intelligence to Iraq...while also permitting the sale of American-made arms to Baghdad.”³⁶ Second, “the U.S. actively engaged in an arms embargo against Iran called Operation Staunch” and pressured allies to do the same.³⁷ With these two tools in use, Iraqi defeat was stalled and the bloody affair continued for several more years. With the war continuing, and an administration operating under the Reagan doctrine (stopping Communist influence), another American opportunity was seen, one that has lingered in political discourse with its infamy.

Half a world away, Nicaragua was at a crossroads with the Communist Cuban backed Sandinistas battling the insurgent Contras, who, according to then President Ronald Reagan were “the moral equivalent of our Founding Fathers’.”³⁸ With this belief, the Contras' training, supplying and backing became the effort of the CIA. However, backing them involved a certain level of financial investment, a venture made near impossible by the Congressional passing of the Boland Amendment.³⁹ Meanwhile, with Iran and Iraq still at war, Iran made a secret

35 History Channel. “Iran-Iraq War”.

36 Hersh, Seymour. “U.S. Secretly Gave Aid to Iraq Early in Its War Against Iran.” The New York Times.

37 Brown University. “The Iran Contra Affairs.”

38 PBS: American Experience. “The Iran-Contra Affair.”

39 Ibid.

request to buy weapons from the United States.⁴⁰ National Security Adviser Robert McFarlane began talking with Israeli and Iranian officials about the possibility of selling American made missiles to Iran using Israel as a buffer in the transaction. The buffer proposition was no doubt a means to circumvent the arms embargo still in place. This potential deal was prompted by Iran's dire need for weapons in the ongoing war with Iraq and America's interest in retrieving American hostages in Lebanon where Iran had considerable influence.⁴¹ With the foundation of the plan set, McFarlane approached President Reagan with the details in August of 1985.⁴² The President approved the sale of "approximately 100 American-made TOW antitank missiles to Iran, seeing it as a chance to improve relations with Iran and to gain the release of hostages."⁴³

Nearly one month later, on September 15, 1985, American hostage Benjamin Weir was released by his captors due to Iran's influential voice.⁴⁴ With the program of exchanging weapons for money and prisoner releases seeming to work seamlessly, this covert operation continued and expanded. United States Marine Corps Colonel Oliver North was brought in to the fold to help deal with the logistics of the transactions of money and weapons.⁴⁵ This is where things got interesting.

With the ability to send money to the Contras limited to near nothing by the Boland Amendment, "North came upon the idea of overcharging the Iranians for weapons sold to them by Americans 'and using the surplus to fund the Contra resupply operation and other covert activities.'"⁴⁶ The program continued for another year until the sales were discovered and the story leaked by the press in 1986. In the end, "more than 1,500 missiles had been shipped to Iran and three hostages had been released - only to be replaced with three more."⁴⁷

The question then becomes: where did this leave U.S.-Iran relations? Despite working together to exchange favors, covertly at that, the United States still had hostages abroad that Iran couldn't, or didn't, help to return, who instead allowed them to be replaced. On top of that, the U.S. worked both sides of the Iran-Iraq war and turned a blind eye when the Iraqi army used chemical weapons in at least four major offensives that heavily relied on received U.S. intelligence.⁴⁸ As Shane Harris and Matthew Aid point out in their article for *Foreign Policy*

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

42 Brown University. "Iran: The Beginning of the Affair."

43 Ibid.

44 Brown University. "Iran Timeline."

45 Brown University. "Iran Timeline."

46 Brown University. "The Iran Contra Affairs."

47 PBS: American Experience. "The Iran-Contra Affair."

48 Harris, Shane, and Matthew M. Aid. "CIA Files Prove America Helped Saddam as He Gassed Iran."

Magazine, “U.S. intelligence officials conveyed the location of the Iranian troops to Iraq, fully aware that Hussein's military would attack with chemical weapons, including sarin, a lethal nerve agent.”⁴⁹ While policy makers and military officials alike still maintain a certain level of denial in knowing what Saddam's actions would be, “retired Air Force Col. Rick Francona, who was a military attaché in Baghdad during the 1988 strikes, paints a different picture. 'The Iraqis never told us that they intended to use nerve gas. They didn't have to. We already knew...’”⁵⁰ Needless to say, the affair did nothing towards bridging the gap between the U.S. and Iran, not that it was really meant to be a durable solution to a still open wound. Best case scenario, relations broke even remaining unchanged. But even that best case scenario leaves the relationship between the two nations in a poor place.

Things remained quiet between the two countries for the next 20 years. The two nations had a brief relationship in the post 9/11 attacks world that involved Iran rounding up hundreds of al-Qaeda suspects and handing their information, though in a roundabout, covert way, to American authorities.⁵¹ According to James F. Dobbins, the Bush administration's chief negotiator on Afghanistan, despite Iran being “‘comprehensively helpful' in the aftermath of the 9-11 attack in 2001 in working to overthrow the Taliban militias' rule and collaborating with the United States to install the Karzai government in Kabul”, the Bush administration was not interested in broader cooperation.”⁵² Soon after these events, then President Bush went so far as to call Iran a member of the new “axis of evil” and once again set relations down the road to utter failure. For the next few years, other than the occasional threat or political posturing, no Earth shattering events, especially covert ones, changed the state of affairs in any way. That is until Stuxnet.

As far back at the George W. Bush Presidency, the United States has been engaged in sophisticated cyber attacks against Iran under the project name “Operation Olympic Games.”⁵³ However, the story of the Stuxnet virus, the most famous and really the only known example of these attacks, begins in June of 2010 when it was first discovered. Within a month, a small group of high tech anti-virus experts were analyzing Stuxnet to figure out what its purpose was. For the researchers, the first hurdle when looking into Stuxnet involved how incredibly complicated and sophisticated it was – that is was beyond cutting edge. Liam O Murchu, one of the experts delving into the virus's secrets, determined

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid.

51 CBS News. “Iran Gave U.S. Help On Al Qaeda After 9/11.”

52 Ibid.

53 Sanger, David E. “Obama Order Sped Up Wave of Cyberattacks Against Iran.” *The New York Times*.

that Stuxnet was “crawling around the world, computer by computer, looking for some sort of industrial operation that was using a specific piece of equipment, a Siemens S7-300 programmable logic controller.”⁵⁴ This piece of computer equipment essentially runs manufacturing plants; it tells machines when to turn on and off. But what fascinated and confused O Murchu and his peers more than Stuxnet's complexity was that “We saw that 70% of the infections occur in Iran and that's very unusual for malware...”⁵⁵ Soon after these revelations, Ralph Lagner, a German expert on industrial control systems, added another piece of important information. He concluded that the virus was specifically designed with a system of checks that forced it to only attack one target in the world: Iranian nuclear facilities⁵⁶. As Steve Kroft, reporting for *60 Minutes*, concluded:

“By the fall of 2010, the consensus was that Iran's top secret uranium enrichment plant at Natanz was the target and that Stuxnet was a carefully constructed weapon designed to be carried into the plant on a corrupted laptop or thumb drive, then infect the system, disguise its presence, move through the network, changing computer code and subtly alter the speed of the centrifuges without the Iranians ever noticing. Sabotage by software.”⁵⁷

By the time this revelation had been made, it was too late to save Iran's nuclear facilities from Stuxnet's designed destructive behavior. Many months before the virus was detected, inspectors from the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) had noticed that the nuclear facility in Natanz, Iran was having serious problems with its centrifuges.⁵⁸ Reports suggest that nearly one-fifth of Iranian centrifuges, about 1,000 to 2,000 units, were incapacitated, damaged and removed due to the corruption Stuxnet's attack brought forth.⁵⁹ Then President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad blamed the cyber attack on enemies of the state and downplayed the damage to maintain appearances. The question then becomes: who would be behind such an attack?

Looking at this question through an American mindset, the first logical leap would be to accuse international terrorists; however, due to Stuxnet's complexity this almost certainly isn't the case. As Liam O Murchu pointed out in his interview with Steve Kroft, “What we do know is that this was a very large operation. You're really looking at a government agency from some country who is politically motivated and who has the insider information from a uranium

54 Kroft, Steve. “Stuxnet: Computer worm opens new era of warfare.” CBS News: 60 Minutes.

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.

59 Ibid.

enrichment facility that would facilitate building a threat like this.”⁶⁰ So if this attack was from a state based actor, who could it have been? This question is about as rhetorical as it gets. As seen through history, at least dating back to 1953, the United States and Iran have had a shaky relationship, especially when you factor in Iran's more recent goal of achieving nuclear capabilities. Other than Israel, the United States has the most to gain from destroying Iranian centrifuges and crippling their system. When this very idea was brought before former CIA head Michael Hayden, who would have been the agency's director at the inception of the attack, he responded saying, “I don't want to even suggest what may have been on the horizon or not on the horizon. Or anything like that...there is no good with someone of my background even speculating on that question, so I won't.”⁶¹

Needless to say, because of how confidential and top secret programs like these are, we may never know if the U.S. was behind the attack. That being said, there have been some very serious allegations made since the discovery of the attack. Not surprisingly, the country whose name has come up the most in these talks has been the United States. One such citation has come in the wake of Edward Snowden's NSA information leaks. During an interview conducted by German newspaper *Der Spiegel*, the “interviewers ask[ed] if the NSA helped create the Stuxnet virus. Snowden said, '[the] NSA and Israel co-wrote it.’”⁶² It then is only a small logical leap to assume that if the U.S. and Israel created the virus that one or both of the nations released it on Iran. More recently, a *Christian Science Monitor* article suggested that the U.S. intercepted shipments of Iranian nuclear facility equipment and tainted it with the virus before it entered the facility. This argument is supported by the fact that “leaked State Department cables posted on the WikiLeaks website show the US at that time to have been seeking to intercept shipments of [nuclear] equipment headed to Iran.”⁶³

Regardless of what means were used to put it in place, as Ralph Lagner pointed out in his article for *Foreign Policy Magazine*, “uncovering Stuxnet was the end of the operation, but not necessarily the end of its utility.”⁶⁴ It seems abundantly clear that the U.S. perpetrated this attack on Iran's nuclear system, even with abundant denials, “no-comments” and a handful of anonymous sources confirming American involvement. Furthermore, it wouldn't be surprising considering American strategic interests concerning Iran's fledgling nuclear program – interests to be discussed later. After all of this, President Obama, in the wake of Stuxnet, “decided to accelerate the [cyber] attacks” started under Bush

60 Kroft, Steve. “Stuxnet: Computer worm opens new era of warfare.” CBS News: 60 Minutes.

61 Ibid.

62 Ngak, Chenda. “NSA leaker Snowden claimed U.S. and Israel co-wrote Stuxnet virus.” CBS News.

63 Clayton, Mark. “Exclusive: New thesis on how Stuxnet infiltrated Iran nuclear facility.” *Christian Science Monitor*.

64 Lagner, Ralph. “Stuxnet's Secret Twin.” *Foreign Policy Magazine*.

codenamed Operation Olympic Games.⁶⁵ This has had the effect of further damaging U.S.-Iranian relations as, in a way, the U.S. is actively engaged in a war effort against them. While this effort may not be the traditional dropping of bombs and killing of people, as Ralph Lagner astutely concludes, “[there is] one thing we do know: [Stuxnet] changed global military strategy in the 21st century.”⁶⁶

Moving beyond historical analysis, with the past covert conflicts between Iran and the U.S. freshly in mind, it is important to discern where the two nations are now, and more importantly, where they could be.

As things sit now, the United States has a total blanket embargo against Iran – nothing comes in, nothing goes out. More than that, Iran is continually demonized in the American media. Within the last decade, under President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, relations between the U.S. and Iran could not have been worse. This was a time at which Iran's nuclear capabilities were under the highest scrutiny. Fears of terrorism in the wake of the September 11th attacks spurred increased suspicion, rightly or wrongly so, into Iran's budding program. As noted before, this fear made former President Bush go so far as to call Iran part of the new “axis of evil”. In Colin S. Gray's book *National Security Dilemmas*, he calls Iran “the menace of the decade and beyond and, as a result, the focus of most recent and current U.S. debate over the merit...in preventive war.”⁶⁷ In a 2007 report for *60 Minutes*, reporter Scott Pelley asked President Ahmadinejad about Iran's controversial nuclear program. On the topic, President Ahmadinejad said,

“Our plan and program is very transparent. We are under the supervision of the Agency. Everything is on the table. We have nothing to hide...what do you think that the nuclear technology is only limited in a bomb? You can only build a bomb with that?...We don't need that. What needs do we have for a bomb?”⁶⁸

It goes without saying that anyone can say one thing and do another, especially with Ahmadinejad's track record of threats, especially ones where he uses nuclear weapons against Israel – this being a major sticking point for U.S. lawmakers as Israel is one of, if not the, most important global allies. At this time, President Bush was quoted saying that if he could sit across from Iran's president and tell him what he thought of his leadership, he would say, “...that you've made

65 Sanger, David E. “Obama Order Sped Up Wave of Cyberattacks Against Iran.” *The New York Times*.

66 Lagner, Ralph. “Stuxnet's Secret Twin.” *Foreign Policy Magazine*.

67 Gray, Colin S. *National Security Dilemmas: Challenges and Opportunities*. Dulles, VA: Potomac Books, 2009

68 Pelley, Scott. “Ahmadinejad: Iran Not Walking Toward War.” *CBS News: 60 Minutes*.

terrible choices for your people. You've isolated your nation you've taken a nation of proud and honorable people and made your country the pariah of the world...⁶⁹ With the harsh rhetoric from both sides, it is easy to see that the wounds from the past have not healed, and that neither side was really interested in fostering any sort of growth. The last decade of U.S.-Iranian relations should be, if it hasn't been, marked as one of the worst periods of “diplomacy” between the two countries. While, with Ahmadinejad's leadership, this probably should have been the case, there is the serious present possibility of building a lasting, positive relationship with Iran.

While Iran is still run under a religious theocracy with Ayatollah Khamenei the new Supreme Leader, the country has been becoming increasingly democratic. Just last year, Hassan Rouhani was elected the new President of Iran in a surprising election. The moderate, reform minded “westernizer” is perhaps the greatest opportunity the United States has had in the last 30 years to build a relationship that can grow in a positive direction.

Earlier this year both sides took a step back from the hostile remarks and defamatory comments to sign a temporary “truce”. According to Steve Kroft of *60 Minutes*, “Iran agreed to freeze development of its nuclear capability and in exchange the U.S. and five world powers promised Iran some relief from economic sanctions.”⁷⁰ The longer version of that deal is in the works now.

Iran and the U.S., accompanied by a handful of other significant world powers, have been ironing out the details for a nuclear deal. Before the most recent set of talks, Vice President Joe Biden said “there was a 'less than even shot' of a nuclear deal with Iran but that it was still worth pursuing”; furthermore, he “rejected calls for more sanctions against Tehran over its nuclear program because 'this is not the time to risk a breakdown when we still have a chance for a breakthrough.’”⁷¹ Middle East expert, and former adviser to Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, Vali Nasr, furthered this stance on sanctions, saying, “the pressure really has an impact on the Iranian economy -- it's kind of like trying to starve somebody. Yes, they do lose weight, and that only proves that starvation works. But it doesn't mean that starvation actually gets them to do what [you] want.”⁷² This is right minded thinking for the new age of U.S.-Iranian relations. Right now, the U.S. has a golden opportunity to reestablish ties with Iran – further hurting the country has quite the opposite effect. The question with these nuclear talks revolves around whether or not the Iranian government will make concessions. When *60 Minutes* reporter Steve Kroft asked this very question to

69 Ibid.

70 Kroft, Steve. “8 days in Tehran.” CBS News: 60 Minutes.

71 Trott, Bill. “Biden sees 'less than even' chance of nuclear deal with Iran.” Reuters.

72 Esfandiari, Golnaz. “Vali Nasr: 'Starving Somebody Won't Make Them Do What You Want'.” Radio Free Europe – Radio Liberty.

Said Fateh, a wealthy business mogul empowered by President Rouhani's privatizing of state-owned industry and increasing competition, he said, "It depends on the concessions, doesn't it? To stop it totally, I doubt it. But to reach some middle grounds, most probably."⁷³

This provides the potential first step to building bridges with Iran. The United States, just as much as Iran, can not take a hardline stance when it comes to these nuclear talks. The U.S. must be willing to concede. As Middle East expert Vali Nasr has pointed out, "the tightening of the screws is making Iran increasingly determined to get nuclear weapons – not to start a war, but to prevent one...Iran's leaders worry that foreign powers would 'feel safe enough to interfere in the affairs of a non-nuclear-armed state.'"⁷⁴ Former Congressman Ron Paul has said much the same thing in his time in the political spotlight. Writing on the Iranian nuclear situation, Paul notes, "The unintended consequences of our confrontational policies toward Iran may be to actually encourage them to seek nuclear weapons capabilities. We should be using diplomacy rather than threats and hostility."⁷⁵ American policy makers need to see this; they need to see the conflict through Iran's eyes. Unfortunately, this so far hasn't been the case.

Recently, a letter co-signed by 47 Republican U.S. Senators was sent to Iran in, what appears to be, an attempt to derail the deal. The letter detailed the 'whim-sickle' nature any executive action would have as opposed to a Congress ratified treaty. This seems to be a clear example of trying to scare Iran away from the table, making them fear any sense of security and relief from sanctions, no matter what concessions they make, as it could all crumble like a house of cards. The question is: why are so many American law-makers not only opposed to, but are attempting to undermine, these nuclear talks? There are a few potential reasons.

Firstly, and perhaps the most obviously, it could be Israeli influence in the realm of American foreign policy, especially that which deals with Iran. Before the publishing of the now infamous open letter to Iran, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu spoke on the floor of the House "denounc[ing] the developing deal."⁷⁶ More recently, news agencies have reported stories of Israeli espionage regarding the closed door Iranian nuclear talks, using their intelligence to "help build a case against the emerging terms of the deal."⁷⁷ Of course, Netanyahu's, and Israel's, fear hinges on Iran's development of nuclear weapons, a fear the Israeli government preaches as reality. They seem to view any

73 Kroft, Steve. "8 days in Tehran." CBS News: 60 Minutes.

74 Wright, Robert. "Ron Paul Vindicated on Iran (Unfortunately)." The Atlantic.

75 Kim, Mallie. "Ron Paul: Free Trade, Not Sanctions, Will Solve Iran Nuclear Crisis." U.S. News and World Report.

76 Baker, Peter. "G.O.P. Senators' Letter to Iran About Nuclear Deal Angers White House." The New York Times.

77 Entous, Adam. "Israel Spied on Iran Nuclear Talks With U.S." The Wall Street Journal.

compromise as a willing step towards the inevitable development of weapons. This is a view that has permeated American politics through osmosis. As one of America's biggest international allies, Israel has been granted a certain 'veto' power in foreign relations, often dictating a lot of the dialog. This relationship, mainly with Republican representatives with similar hawkish ideas, may be the most obvious reason such opposition has been swirling around the talks, but it certainly isn't the only explanation.

Spinning off this U.S. - Israeli relationship briefly, this is one of the major reasons many hardliners in Iran are opposed to a nuclear deal. With a skeptical view concerning Western influence and, in some cases, a hatred for the nation of Israel, many Iranian hardliners, either overtly or covertly, aim to stop this deal. As the *New York Times* points out, many "hard-line Shiite Muslim clerics and Revolutionary Guards commanders [are] usually vocal on the subject of the Iranian nuclear program, loudly proclaiming the country's right to pursue its interests and angrily denouncing the United States"; however, as of late they have been very quiet.⁷⁸ Many analysts report this generally quiet demeanor and compliance with the Supreme Leader's request to continue the talks has to do with generally improving economic conditions and increased influence in the global and Middle Eastern landscapes.⁷⁹ Despite President Obama saying that there are some, both domestically and abroad, that wish to see the talks derailed, Ayatollah Khamenei has said, "No one in Iran is against the resolution of the nuclear issue through negotiations. What the Iranian nation does not want to agree with is the impositions and bullying of the Americans."⁸⁰

That brief aside over, another explanation to why American law-makers are opposed to an Iranian nuclear deal is what implications any deal could have concerning Iranian influence in the region. As it stands, America has made it policy to keep a finger in every proverbial pie across the world. Whether that policy is right or wrong is not the question. What is the question is how a deal impacts Iran's influence in the world. If a deal is reached and Iran continues its nuclear program with no sanctions hampering economic activity, they most certainly will reap the socioeconomic benefits (in greater detail below). In turn, they may rise from their N-11 status to one of a BRICS country. This transition will undoubtedly raise the clout they have in the international community as well as the Middle East. In the wake of this, Iran will surely become a major influence in the region, pushing out America as the key power. This certainly must be a fear of the more hawkish members of the U.S. Congress seeing as how several wars

78 Erdbrink, Thomas. "Iran's Hard-Liners Show Restraint on Nuclear Talks With U.S." *The New York Times*.

79 Erdbrink, Thomas. "Iran's Hard-Liners Show Restraint on Nuclear Talks With U.S." *The New York Times*.

80 Ibid.

have been fought to gain power in the region. Despite these fears, valid as they may or may not be, it is prudent to herald back to the rather prophetic words of Ron Paul and Vali Nasr. While U.S. law-makers opposed to the Iran talks are opposed on the grounds that any deal will foster the development of nuclear weapons, it is equally, if not more certain, that further sanctions, harsh rhetoric and confrontational posturing will push Iran to develop a weapon for their own defense and autonomy. After all, as Mohammad Nahavandian, chief of staff to President Rouhani, said in an interview with Steve Kroft, “For Iran, [nuclear capability is] just another example of technological advancement.”⁸¹ This is something that can be seen in Persian culture through the ages. Iran is one of the best educated countries in the Middle East, on top of being one of the wealthiest and most sophisticated. They launched a satellite into space just a few years ago, a source of national pride. So more than just wanting a nuclear technology for defense, in the form of a weapon, it may be a point of showing the world what they are capable of – not to mention Iran's development could just be leading to nuclear energy and self sustainability. The waters of Iran's intentions remain unclear. What is clear is that America's hardline stand against any form of Iranian nuclear power, in any sense of the word, should be strongly reconsidered.

Continuing the theme of building bridges, one point that the U.S. and Iran could rally around in the present day is the fight against ISIS. For the past few months, the U.S. military has been bombarding ISIS fighters across Iraq and Syria in an attempt to defeat the radical movement. Joining this fight, though secretly, has been Iran. As Tim Arango and Thomas Erdbrink discuss in their article in *The New York Times*:

“The apparent shift in Iran’s strategy has been most noticeable in Iraq, where even American officials acknowledge the decisive role of Iranian-backed militias, particularly in protecting Baghdad from an assault by the Islamic State, also known as ISIS or ISIL, but also working with the American-led air campaign.”⁸²

While “working with” may be the wrong word here, there certainly is the chance for a little reconciliation. Iran has been fighting ISIS by their own rules. They have not joined the U.S. led effort to defeat them. Regardless of where the attacks are occurring, American officials are glad to have Iran's “cooperation”. Secretary of State John Kerry has said, “I think it’s self-evident that if Iran is taking on ISIL in some particular place and it’s confined to taking on ISIL and it has an impact,

81 Kroft, Steve. “8 days in Tehran.” CBS News: 60 Minutes.

82 Arango, Tim and Thomas Erdbrink. “U.S. and Iran Both Attack ISIS, but Try Not to Look Like Allies.” The New York Times.

it's going to be — the net effect is positive.”⁸³ While the U.S. and Iran are not coordinating their efforts, as Secretary Kerry indicated, the effect is still the same. More than that, “Hakim al-Zamili, an Iraqi politician and a Shiite militia leader, said, 'If there were an honest coordination between U.S. and Iranian advisers, Iraq could have been liberated within a week.’”⁸⁴ If Iran and the United States were to come together to defeat a common enemy, we are shown yet another staging ground where further cooperation could be achieved. A positive working relationship here could build a positive working relationship elsewhere. Finding common interests is vitally important if the U.S. and Iran are going to repair the ties between them. However, as mentioned before, an American fear here is increased Iranian influence.

Let's assume that the U.S. and Iran join together in the coordinated effort against ISIS and they successfully eliminate them from the region. In that case, who 'conquers' the territory for the purpose of their own influence? Is it America located half a world away? Or is it Iran with just a few mountains separating them from the rest of the region. The best bet would most likely be on the latter. This would be a two prong issue for the United States and its strategic interests. First, it would disturb America's desire for a favorable world order where it maintains some semblance of control. Second, it would put into question America's relationship with the nations of OPEC and their oil supplies. Arguably, gaining this control has been one of the main American goals in the Middle East and seeing this influence slip would be a tragedy to many in the American political bureaucracy. Again this is not a call for an argument on ideology – it is a call to determine what U.S. policy would be in the wake of such an occurrence. It is hard to believe that the U.S. would let such an incident go by the wayside and accept such a change to the political organization of the region. On the flip side, it seems as though any form of military confrontation or hard power would be off the table as well. In this situation, what seems far more likely is a carbon copy of what we see now: sanctions and discussions. Using the 'carrot' here, persuading with positive incentives, would be the tool to counter Iranian influence in the region and promote American strategic interests. The U.S. wants a piece of the action just as much as Iran does. It would be a matter of working out an amicable arrangement as they are doing now.

Beyond regional influence and beyond the nuclear program itself, the implications of a deal transcend nuclear science altogether. More than anything else, a rekindled diplomatic link between Iran and America could be beneficial to both sides economically. With the crippling sanctions the U.S. has imposed on Iran for the greatest time, the hurt has really been felt. As Steve Kroft reports,

83 Ibid.

84 Arango, Tim and Thomas Erdbrink. “U.S. and Iran Both Attack ISIS, but Try Not to Look Like Allies.” The New York Times.

“The country's limited ability to export oil, import goods, and participate in the international banking system are largely responsible for high unemployment and an inflation rate of 30 percent.”⁸⁵ Iranian markets have continually been an object of positive prospect, but the current web of U.S. sanctions has kept potential investors, businesses and the like at bay. And as one of the globe's most promising emerging economies, it's no wonder international business has their sights set on the blank slate which is Iran. The costs of everyday goods have skyrocketed, many Iranians wanting to see prices drop as the main result of any deals made with the U.S. Despite the sanctions though, American goods, and goods otherwise banned by sanctions, have been making their way into Iran for some time. Going to a mall, any Iranian can buy a pair of Nike sneakers and drive home in their new BMW. While the black market has been bringing these things in, it comes at a cost. Iranians pay two, three times as much as they should for common amenities. A healthy U.S.-Iranian economic friendship would help this plight. Not only that, but while it helped the masses of Iranians by providing cheaper, more accessible goods, it would also help boost the American economy. As CNN astutely observes, a deal with Iran opens up the 4th largest oil market and has the potential to drop international oil prices with an increase in supply.⁸⁶ As stated before, this is an obvious U.S. strategic interest. Everyone wins. As Presidential Chief of Staff Mohammad Nahavandian put it, “instead of imposing economic sanctions” both sides should “try to utilize economic relations to overcome political disagreement.”⁸⁷

What the U.S. faces now is a situation similar to that of the mid-1980's in the Soviet Union with Mikhail Gorbachev. Gorbachev was a westernizer, a modernizer. He saw the potential for a relationship after years of hostility and sought to deal with American officials amicably. The Iran of today is no different. President Rouhani is “a reform-minded cleric who won a surprising and convincing victory by promising to improve the economy and end Iran's international isolation.”⁸⁸ To do both of these things he must deal with the U.S. in one way or another. There is no reason the U.S. should hamper this process. With strong democratic principles at play in Iran, the U.S. should be glad to finally find a willing partner in the Middle East. Instead, the standoff continues. While some progress has been made there is still a long way to go. Even if a strong agreement can't be reached on the topic of their nuclear program, or their increased influence in the Middle East, it's important to recognize that diplomacy and cold war can co-exist.

And the way forward is diplomacy. Just last year, President Obama and

85 Kroft, Steve. “8 days in Tehran.” CBS News: 60 Minutes.

86 CNN Money. “Iran nuclear deal could make oil even cheaper”.

87 Kroft, Steve. “8 days in Tehran.” CBS News: 60 Minutes.

88 Ibid.

President Rouhani spoke over the phone, the first time the leaders of each respective country have spoken since 1979.⁸⁹ In response to these talks, “Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei endorsed Obama’s defense of diplomacy, describing the U.S. president’s talk of a window of opportunity as ‘good words.’”⁹⁰ And according to Vali Nasr, “diplomatic engagement” is the proper American policy moving forward⁹¹.

In order for the U.S. to effectively deal with Iran in foreign policy, one thing must be listened to: the will of the Iranian people. During his *60 Minutes* in-depth look into the Iran of today, Steve Kroft spoke with a man on the streets of Tehran that hit the nail on the head in two sentences: “What we want is not to impose anything to us. Nothing should be imposed by the U.S. to us.”⁹² And the U.S. must follow this policy. Moreover, 75% of Americans desire to deal diplomatically with Iran.⁹³ For too long in both nation's intertwined history has the U.S. undermined and subverted the Iranian people through covert operations. For too long has the U.S. refused to deal with an important player in the world. An opportunity has presented itself and American policy makers would be fools not to take advantage. As President Rouhani's Chief of Staff Mohammad Nahavandian said, “Starting from foreign policy, you cannot find friends in Iran. But if you start from economics, from technological cooperation, from academic relations, from cultural relations, there can be some common ground found.”

89 NBC News. “The phone call heard around the world: Obama talks to Iran's president.”

90 Nasr, Vali. “Obama Needs to Go Whole Mile on Iran Diplomacy: Vali Nasr.” Bloomberg View.

91 Chotiner, Isaac. “How Much Control Does Iran Have Over Iraq? An Expert Explains.” New Republic.

92 Kroft, Steve. “8 days in Tehran.” CBS News: 60 Minutes.

93 Paul, Ron. “An Opening to Iran?” Ron Paul Institute for Peace and Prosperity.

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94 Kroft, Steve. “8 days in Tehran.” CBS News: 60 Minutes.