History Matters: The Iran War Did *Not* Come Out of Nowhere

By Will McLain

Iran is the hottest international relations issue of the last decade. The United States hasn't directly been involved in a conflict of this scale since the War on Terror. The geopolitical situation between Iran and the United States has never been as hostile and chaotic as it is today. But U.S and Iranian relations haven't always been this unstable; there were decades of high tensions, but there were also forgotten decades of peace since overshadowed by conflict. The history of U.S-Iranian relations has never before been so important. So, let's wind back the clock and look through the decades of history that led to today's conflict.

Some of the earliest interactions between Americans and Iranians took place in the 19th century. Over the course of hundreds of years, Americans visited what was then called Persia ostensibly to spread knowledge and religion to present day Iran. In terms of spreading religion, as Iran is heavily Shia Muslim, Americans had limited success. On other metrics, however, they were largely successful. For one, the mission established many hospitals, spread Western medical knowledge, and established schools that still exist in Iran today. Initially, Iran was opposed to new Western knowledge. Surprisingly, what awoke Iran to Western technologies wasn't a military conflict as with most other nations, but American missionaries. Besides establishing valued infrastructure within Iran, these missionaries formed an initially positive diplomatic bond between the people of Iran and the U.S. As a result, the first direct diplomatic tie between the governments of Iran and the U.S was established in 1883. These positive relations continued into the 20th century, even leading to an American lawyer, appointed to Iran by President Taft, fighting the British to protect Iranian interests, something that would be unimaginable right now. However, the American lawyers sent to the region were unsuccessful in mitigating Russian and British influence, and Iran was ultimately divided into spheres of influence. Despite this, it's certain that the relationship between Iran and the U.S. started out on good terms.

By the 1940s, the U.S and Iranian relationship would shift from small scale, missionary-centered to much more direct. This started during World War II, beginning with the escalation of tensions between Russia, Britian, and Iran. During WWII, the British and Soviets invaded and occupied Iran for multiple reasons, but primarily because the British were looking to secure their supply lines through Iran. Other causes include German presence in Iran, geographic security of British forces in the region, and Soviet pressure for the British to participate in the invasion. Surprisingly, U.S.-Iran relations weren't harmed by the invasion but improved. This is largely due to the U.S. response to the invasion. During the occupation, the U.S worked to improve Iran's technology and government structure. In 1943, the U.S. sent hundreds of advisors to Iran as not only a symbol of good faith but also as boots on the ground who assisted in the societal revolution of Iran. These advisors improved the Iranian army, made their government more efficient, and even controlled Iran's economy and distribution of food products like wheat. This was a huge step forward in relations. The U.S was materially improving Iran beyond independent missionaries; it was direct government policy. Additionally, improved relations were displayed through the United Nations, as Iran filed an official complaint to the UN security council with U.S support. This complaint led to the Soviet Union withdrawing its military from Iran and significantly strengthened the relationship between the U.S and Iran.

Unfortunately, the positive U.S-Iran relations ended in the 1950's. The Soviet problem was dealt with, but the British maintained their massive influence over Iran's economy, especially their oil production. In

1951, the democratically elected prime minister of Iran, Mohammed Mosaddegh, attempted to nationalize oil production. This was in direct response to the massive influence of the Anglo-Persian oil company and the growing opposition to foreign involvement by the Iranian people. This threatened British and U.S interests in Iranian oil. The British originally planned to oust Mosaddegh through a parliamentary decree by the Shah, but when that failed, they resorted to more drastic measures. The British decided to perform a coup to forcefully expel Mosaddegh and recruited the U.S to aid them. But, with firmly established positive relations between the U.S. and Iran, the British decided to exploit the Red Scare to raise anti-Mosaddegh sentiment. The British alleged that Mosaddegh was aligned with the Iranian Communist party. The U.S feared that communism in Iran would open the door to wider Soviet influence, and thus chose to support the quickest end to confrontation: the coup d'etat that placed a pro-western leader in charge. This all culminated in August 1953— the start of Operation Ajax. The CIA and British intelligence bribed politicians, organized street protests, and collaborated with the Iranian military, and in a matter of days Mosaddegh was overthrown. In his place, the U.S and the U.K placed Mohammed Reza Shah. This sparked immediate cooperation between the extremely pro-west regime of the Shah and the United States, beginning with the U.S. supplying the Shah with over 16 billion dollars in weapons and 3 billion in trade. This lead to a historic Civil Nuclear Cooperation Agreement that started Iran's now infamous nuclear program by providing Iran critical nuclear infrastructure. Soon, anti-Western – and particularly anti-U.S. – sentiment exploded, turning Iran into a pressure-cooker waiting to boil over.

The Shah was in power from 1953 to 1979, and throughout his rule, U.S and Iranian relations seemed to remain stable. But in reality, things were very different. Throughout the early 60's, Iran experienced the White Revolution, a series of industrial and social reforms implemented by the Shah. Many of these reforms were beneficial, like equitable land distribution, greater worker benefits, establishing literacy and health corps, and advancing women's rights. Under this, however, was a growing dictatorship; secret police raided the homes of political opponents, a fake oppositional party was established to give the illusion of democracy while elections were rigged, and large social and economic issues were ignored by the Shah. Over time, the Shah's power would only grow while policies would worsen. The previously mentioned agricultural reforms were led by prime minister Ali Amini, who was later pressured into resigning by the Shah. His resignation signifies the transition away from reformist policy and the slip into dictatorship. Simultaneously, many of the economic reforms implemented by the Shah began to backfire throughout the 60's and 70's. With a large reliance on the unstable oil market came high costs, significant inflation, a skyrocketing cost of living in Iran. Cracks were beginning to show in the Shah's regime, and social discontent among the lower classes rose once again. This discontent led to large demonstrations against the Shah in the form of protests and anti-Shah political movements, with leaders like the now infamous Ali Khamenei rising to power. The response by the Shah was a total crackdown on protests; shoot to kill orders were issued, leaders of resistance movements were arrested and/or exiled, and protesters were killed by the thousands. Yet, despite the clear wrongdoing of the Shah, the U.S. still maintained unconditional support for him. Nixon even escalated arms dealing with Iran when he visited in 1972, signing the "Blank Check" agreement that allowed Iran to buy any non-nuclear U.S. weapons. U.S. support for the Shah was becoming increasingly unpopular and fueled anti-U.S. sentiment that culminated in one of the most famous moments in the history of U.S-Iran relations.

In 1979, the pressure inside Iran bubbled over. The anger toward Iran's failing economy, harsh social decisions, and the brutal crackdowns on protests resulted in a violent revolution. The Shah was overthrown and replaced with an Islamic Republic that maintains power to this day. This marks the largest shift in U.S-Iran relations since the Shah's installation. The revolution was an organization composed of dozens of different political and ethnic groups united by three commonalities. The first was

a hatred of the Shah and his autocratic ruling that had been driving Iran into the ground. The second was a strict following of Islam. The third was a hatred of Western influence in Iran.

The decades of built-up resentment toward the U.S acted like gunpowder; it only needed a spark to light it. That very spark came after the revolution in 1979, when Jimmy Carter allowed the Shah, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, to take refuge in the U.S. This was, and still is, an extremely controversial decision that ruined any hope of positive relations with the new Islamic regime in Iran. The new regime planned to take Pahlavi to trial for his crimes against the people of Iran, but because the U.S. intervened in Iranian politics, they could not. This U.S. intervention would prove to be a fatal mistake. On November 4, 1979, Iranian students took over the U.S. embassy in Tehran, capturing over 60 Americans and taking them hostage for 444 days. They were released only after a deal with U.S. President Ronald Reagan in 1981. During the crisis, eight U.S. service members were killed, an economic embargo was placed against Iran, and the UNSC (United Nations Security Council) and ICC (Internation Criminal Court) both sided with the U.S. and condemned Iran's actions. This incident marks the shift from negative relations to actual violence between the U.S. and Iran, scarring the next 40 years of U.S.-Iran relations.

The 1980s and 90s were filled with unprecedented violence between the U.S. and Iran. The first blow came from the U.S. during the Iran-Iraq war of the early 1980s. Sadam Hussein launched an invasion in Iran in 1980 that led to an eight-year war between the countries, costing billions of dollars and killing over a million people. But throughout the war, the U.S. was secretly supplying Iraq with classified intelligence and arms sales, which helped Iraq avert defeat in the war and grow into a regional powerhouse. That was the start of a string of conflicts between the U.S. and Iran, as Iran's retaliation involved the funding of terrorist attacks against the U.S. The most famous example of these attacks is the Beirut barracks bombing, carried out by Hezbollah with Syrian and Iranian involvement, killing 241 U.S service members. These attacks led the U.S to declare Iran a state sponsor of terror in 1984 and is now the major talking point for Trump in his war against Iran.

But terrorism wasn't the only conflict between the U.S and Iran in the 80's and 90's; there was also direct military conflict between the two. In 1988, Operation Praying Mantis was an escalation in the Iran-Iraq war that drew in the U.S., trying to to protect oil supplies in the region. A U.S. ship, USS Samuel B. Roberts, hit an Iranian mine, and the U.S. launched full scale naval retaliation against the Iranian Navy, wiping out a large portion. Iran was not the only bad actor in this Gulf conflict (known as the Tanker War), as a U.S. naval ship mistakenly shot down an Iranian passenger plane, killing 290 people. This incident was a culmination of countless mistakes, miscommunications, and instances of negligence that led to an astounding loss of life, undoubtedly angering the state of Iran and the people within it. Three years later, U.S. support for Iraq during the Iraq-Iran war came back to haunt us. In 1991, Iraq used the very weapons the U.S. supplied them with to invade Kuwait, starting the Gulf War. The conflict led to a large deployment of U.S. troops in the region while Iran remained mostly neutral. However, the continued presence of U.S. troops in the Middle East served as a point of contention among many groups in the region, including Iran. For example, in 1996, an Iranian group attacked the Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia in response to increased U.S. presence after the Gulf War. Despite the 80's and 90's being an extremely violent era in U.S.-Iranian relations, the 2000s and 2010s are arguably even more influential.

The attacks of 9/11 substantially increased U.S. involvement in the Middle East, drawing the U.S. into several conflicts over the course of two decades that would impact the U.S.'s relationship with Iran. Iran was never proven to be directly involved in the attacks on 9/11, but they were still heavily involved in many of the conflicts that resulted from 9/11. Iran-U.S. relations improved immediately after 9/11, with

Iran helping the U.S. fight the Taliban in Afghanistan and holding a series of talks with the U.S. that led to parts of Al-Queda leaving Iran. However, President Bush still refused to pursue a positive relationship with Iran, famously declaring Iran as a member of an "Axis of Evil." After the U.S. invasion of Iraq, relations between the U.S. and Iran began to deteriorate once again. Iran funded resistance groups against U.S. occupation, specifically Shiite militias that maintain power and influence in Iraq to this day and are directly responsible for multiple attacks against U.S. forces.

But as the war on terror cooled down, so did confrontations between U.S. and Iran with President Clinton pursuing an agenda of containment rather than confrontation, and no direct military confrontations between the two occurred for several years, but tensions did take on another form: conflict over Iran's nuclear program. Throughout the mid 2000s, Iran's program began to gain internation attention with several UN chapters prohibiting Iran's continued development, but many were ignored; several sanctions were imposed but Iran never officially stopped pursuing enrichment of Uranium. This caused internation condemnation of Iran by the U.S and other allies. But the Obama administration was able to make substantial breakthroughs with deals in 2009, 2013, and one in 2015, know as the JCPOA, that ensured that all nuclear programs in Iran would be for solely peaceful reasons. These deals cooled the main tensions that existed between the U.S. and Iran throughout the later 2000s and earlier 2010s, but relations were never exactly good under Obama. But they could, and would, get a whole lot worse.

The Trump administration would substantially escalate tensions with Iran and reverse most progress made by Obama, who'd eased tensions on the nuclear and non-nuclear level. Trump started by pulling out of the JCPOA and resuming heavy sanctions on Iran, which was largely condemned by most foreign policy analysts. In response, Iran immediately began to resume its nuclear program and began attempting to enrich uranium once more. Throughout the next few years of Trump's first term, he came extremely close to launching strikes on Iran on multiple occasions and even ordered the assassination of a top Iranian military official in a drone strike, further escalating tensions beyond just Iran's nuclear program. Trump also applied a campaign of "maximum pressure" on Iran in 2018, which consisted of threats of military action and attempts to expand a new deal with Iran to strictly control Iran's ballistic missile program, and most importantly, signaled a violent foreign policy approach to containing Iran that could not have possibly led to a peaceful relationship between the U.S. and Iran. Ultimately, Trump was voted out of office in the 2020 elections, and the sanctions were later reversed.

Biden proved to be much more moderate with Iran during his four years in office. Despite being moderate, Biden did little to actually improve U.S.-Iran relations. He promised to restore the JCPOE but nothing materialized. Biden had almost no confirmed posture on Iran's government or Iran's nuclear program and he did little to escalate tensions or diffuse them. Biden put the pressure on Iran to resume negotiations to rejoin the JCPOE, assuming that Trump's "maximum pressure" campaign gave the U.S. leverage and gave Iran motivation to want to rejoin. Israel also repeatedly hurt U.S.-Iran relations by bombing an Iranian nuclear plant on the day of talks, prompting Iran to further increase uranium enrichment. The war in Gaza was also a PR nightmare for the U.S., as Israel's devastation of Gaza became more and more of a controversy, worsening U.S.-Iran relations. One of the only major developments during Biden's term was a hostage deal. Iran had been holding several U.S. troops prisoner in Iran and Biden struck a deal to get five of them released in exchange for unfreezing around $6 billion in funds. This was extremely controversial and many believed it did little but encourage other countries to take American hostages for financial gain. But this did, however, show that Biden was capable and willing to work and communicate with Iran, and showed a minor de-escalation in tensions after Trump's presidency. But attacks between the two countries still existed with Iran proxies attacking

oil tankers in the strait of Hormuz and the U.S. killing Qasem Soleimani (commander of Iran's Quds force) with a drone strike in Baghdad. However, once again, all progress made via de-escalation of military tensions and hostage deals would fall apart, once again during a Trump presidency.

The leadup to escalating conflict in Iran was relatively gradual. The first major development was the resumption of Trump's policy of "maximum pressure," reimplementing heavy sanctions against Iran, believing them to be a deterrent against Iran's funding of terrorist groups. This notably had little effect on Iran's nuclear posture but did eventually lead to another series of talks from February to June of last year. However, these talks were ultimately unsuccessful; several months and rounds of talks were not enough to strike a substantive nuclear deal to replace the JCPOA. Throughout the talks, Trump declared deals were struck but nothing ever materialized, and Trump's posts on truth social and official comments always seemed to move the goalposts.

Then in June the end of the talks was officially marked by an attack on Iran by Israel, the most strategic U.S. ally in the region. Israel started "The 12 Day War" by launching surprise attacks on Iranian nuclear and military infrastructure, Iran retaliating with missile bombardments of Israeli cities. Days later, the U.S. joined in with precision strikes on Iran's nuclear infrastructure, penetrating deep into bunkers and laboratories beneath the ground.

This was the end of diplomatic talks between Iran and the U.S.; Trump gave up diplomacy and chose the violent option, and we only see now how far he's willing to go. This hasn't ended Iran's nuclear program. Iran says they've moved their infrastructure to more secretive and secure locations. A ceasefire is was announced 12 days after the start of Israeli strikes on Iran on June 24 of 2025, ending the 12 Day War, but not ending conflict between the U.S. and Iran. The aftermath of the 12 Day war was difficult for Iran, as it didn't collapse the regime or substantially weaken Iran's military, but it did create major internal tensions that would erupt in January of this year. Internal instability after the 12 Day War wasn't the only issue, as U.S sanctions reimplemented by Trump led to inflation of Iran's currency and economic instability. These two factors combined, along with many other grievances, sparked major protests throughout the country. Iran responded with unprecedented crackdowns opening fire on protestors, allegedly killing over 30,000 people.

Many American Iranians were killed in the protests, and the killings were internationally condemned. Trump used this, along with Iran's track record of supporting terrorist groups, Iran's nuclear program, and the 1979 Hostage Crisis, to declare our operation to be defensive and justification for a joint U.S.-Israeli operation against Iran on February 28 of this year. The war has drawn in dozens of other countries, pulling the Middle East into a region-wide conflict that's so far taken the lives of over 3,500 people.

The U.S.-Israeli war with Iran has very shaky justifications and has had worldwide consequences. The rising price of oil and the large loss of life have been devastating. There is no one person to blame for the war, although many leaders have a lot of blame for escalating tensions, but there are decades and decades of history that set us on the path to conflict. Trump and Netanyahu likely would not have seen Iran as a threat if it weren't for the hostage crisis, the barracks attack, and the Iranian revolution that put the country in the hands of Islamic fundamentalists. All these events have their own detailed histories, so it's impossible to isolate a single cause for *any* of what's happening between the U.S. and Iran right now; to do so would be to entirely misunderstand the event. That's why it's so important to understand the history behind things like the war with Iran, because misunderstanding the history and placing blame on a singular person or event is what leads to conflicts between nations in the first place.

But understanding the history behind conflicts can help us find more effective solutions and help us see the offramps that can prevent devastation before it's too late.