



Historical Background of US/Iran Relations

As the noted Middle East expert Phyllis Bennis has repeatedly stated, when looking at events in the Middle East (Western Asia) the question that one must always begin with is when to “start the clock.” In the case of Iran, the “clock” should start with the 1953 overthrow, carried out under the leadership of the CIA and British MI-6, of the duly elected leadership of Prime Minister Mossadegh. This was followed by twenty-six years of dictatorship under the US puppet, the notorious Shah of Iran.

The overthrow of the Shah in 1979 through a popular revolution set the stage for a dramatic change not only in Iran but in the relations between Iran and the United States. Through a shrewd political coup and appeal to nationalism, Ayatollah Khomeini and his allies were able to out-organize left and progressive forces; physically eliminate thousands of them; and bring into existence the highly repressive Islamic Republic of Iran. Khomeini’s internal political victory and his ability to consolidate control of Iran was also assisted by the Iraqi invasion of Iran in 1980 which aimed at securing land that had previously been lost to Iran. This disastrous war, which lasted till 1988, though uniting the country against an invader, saw the deaths of millions and the use of bacteriological weaponry. It also saw the cynical intervention by the USA in support of both sides, and, interestingly, the support given by Israel to Iran.

The IRI’s Domestic and Foreign Policy

The Islamic Republic of Iran has remained a highly repressive state and has faced down, on many occasions, internal opposition be that ethnic, religious or political. It has positioned itself internationally as an alleged Islamic revolutionary state, though it has more so been a supporter of Shia “radicalism” (Shia fundamentalism) and, along with their arch-enemies—the Saudis—have played to religious sectarianism in the region as a means of building their respective power and spheres of influence.

The USA has refused to come to an on-going accommodation with the IRI. Instead it has engaged, over time, in tit-for-tat covert military, political and economic battles. This did not mean that the two states were necessarily always in opposition. Ironically, the IRI opposed the Al Qaeda attack on the USA on September 11, 2001 and had been on the verge of going to war with the Taliban regime in Afghanistan at the time of the US invasion.

After the US/British invasion of Iraq in 2003, Iranian influence skyrocketed. Fueled by years of discrimination and second-class status under the Saddam Hussein regime, Shiite forces, largely backed by Iran, rose to prominence filling a void that Middle East scholars had predicted would happen when they warned the George W. Bush administration regarding the potential unintended consequences of a US invasion. Iranian influence has been growing ever since.

The Nuclear Proliferation Treaty and Its Aftermath

Despite pressure from Israel over the years for the USA to engage in a full military operation against Iran, prior administrations have been more circumspect and covert. The most interesting turn, however, took place under the Obama administration with the signing of the multi-lateral treaty on nuclear proliferation, the Joint Plan of Action. This treaty aimed at limiting the growth of nuclear power in Iran so that the country would be less able to position itself to create nuclear weapons of mass destruction. The Iranians had consistently argued that they had no interest in nuclear weaponry but needed nuclear energy for non-military purposes. Israel and the US political Right-wing alleged that this was false. Under those circumstances, a compromise was arrived at that appeared to satisfy the interests of all sides.

The problem was that the US political Right, egged on by the Israeli political establishment, insisted that the treaty was fraudulent. This laid the foundation for Donald Trump's campaign pledge to withdraw the USA from the deal. Once elected, he put into motion the steps necessary to do so, even though no one in US or foreign intelligence services was able to provide any information suggesting that the Iranians were breaking the deal. Nevertheless, as we have come to learn, the facts never get in the way of this administration and in 2018, the USA withdrew from the agreement and instituted new sanctions.

Part of what appears to have been at issue is that the IRI has become increasingly involved in the internal affairs of countries in the region, including but not limited to providing direct support to what they themselves see as proxy forces. Iranian involvement in Syria is a case in point, where direct involvement in heinous crimes against the Syrian people has been repeatedly identified. But the Iranians have also engaged other proxies, as have their rivals, the Saudis. In this situation could be found the late General Soleimani.

Why Soleimani? Why Now?

Major General Soleimani was the leader of the Quds forces, a military unit that would be the equivalent of the CIA and Special Forces. It was involved in various theatres of combat including Syria, but also within Iraq as well as Iran itself. Though Soleimani was quite popular in Iran, he was also viewed as a major architect of domestic repression.

For a variety of reasons, US administrations have shied away from militarily targeting top Iranian officials. One reason has to do with international law. The other is the danger of various forms of retaliation. Therefore, the obvious question is what would motivate Trump to take his actions?

First, Trump believes that his actions, in pulling out of the Iranian nuclear deal, were justified by the fact that Iran has created mischief in the Middle East and Central Asia, at least from his standpoint. Even though the Iranian nuclear deal had nothing to do with Iranian foreign policy, that did not stop Trump from focusing on using the nuclear deal to shift Iranian foreign policy.

Second, although Trump does not see the USA withdrawal from the nuclear deal, and the subsequent imposition of additional sanctions, as an act of violence, it was perceived as just that by the IRI. The sanctions are not simply or mainly an inconvenience. People are suffering and dying. The IRI is frustrated that the EU is not taking greater steps to help them (largely for fear of the USA). Quite logically—whether one agrees with the IRI or not—the Iranians struck back.

Third, there have been major protest movements developing in both Iraq and Iran. One would think that a rational US administration would want to see these play out particularly since they have, to varying degrees, targeted the IRI theocracy. Yet the problem, for both the USA and, ironically the IRI, is that these movements could change the

balance of forces in the region. If a new regime emerged in Iraq, for instance, that was secular or simply included a good balance of Shia and Sunni, and wanted all foreign powers out of the country, this would be a threat to the interests of both the USA and the IRI. And certainly, a major movement against the right-wing theocracy of the IRI from within Iran would be a threat to that regime itself. Thus, Trump would have no interest in seeing such a victory, at least under terms that were not dictated by the USA.

Fourth, the IRI overplayed their hand when they engaged in more brazen attacks against US interests, including the most recent attacks on the US embassy. The latter attacks may, according to some reports, have been the last straw for Trump.

What is particularly odd about the current situation is that the USA is not positioned for a major war in the region. Unless Trump anticipates an air war—exclusively—there are simply not enough boots on the ground. This could mean that Trump, himself, has overplayed his own hand. His “red line”, crossed by the IRI, might have been the attacks on the US embassy or the killing of a US contractor, but how he chose to respond—assassination—recalibrated the entire situation.

Unconfirmed reports in the US establishment media indicate that the Pentagon never intended for Trump to assassinate Soleimani. They presented options to Trump, assassination being the most extreme, allegedly believing that Trump would understand that this was not the course of action to take and that other options were preferable. Things did not quite work out, and we’re only beginning to see the consequences.