

# The Persian Prize

A close-up, artistic photograph of the Persian flag, showing the intricate texture of the fabric and the vibrant colors of the stripes and emblem. The flag is draped and folded, creating deep shadows and bright highlights that emphasize its texture. The title 'The Persian Prize' is overlaid in a white, serif font at the top.

theGe●polity

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Insights

Videos

Podcasts

Reports

Deep Dives

Book Reviews

# Introduction

At the dawn of the 20th century, Iran stood weakened, divided, and surrounded by empires. Within decades, it would become one of the most strategically important countries in the world—not because of its strength, but because of what lay beneath its soil.

Oil transformed Iran's fate. It drew in foreign powers, reshaped its economy, and entangled its politics in global rivalries. Britain secured control. The United States displaced it. And in response, Iranian leaders and movements emerged determined to reclaim sovereignty—often at great cost.

From royal courts to covert operations, from foreign-backed regimes to revolutionary upheaval, Iran's modern history is a story of power, resistance, and transformation.

This report follows that journey—charting how a fractured empire became one of the most consequential states in global geopolitics.





# The Colonisation of Iran

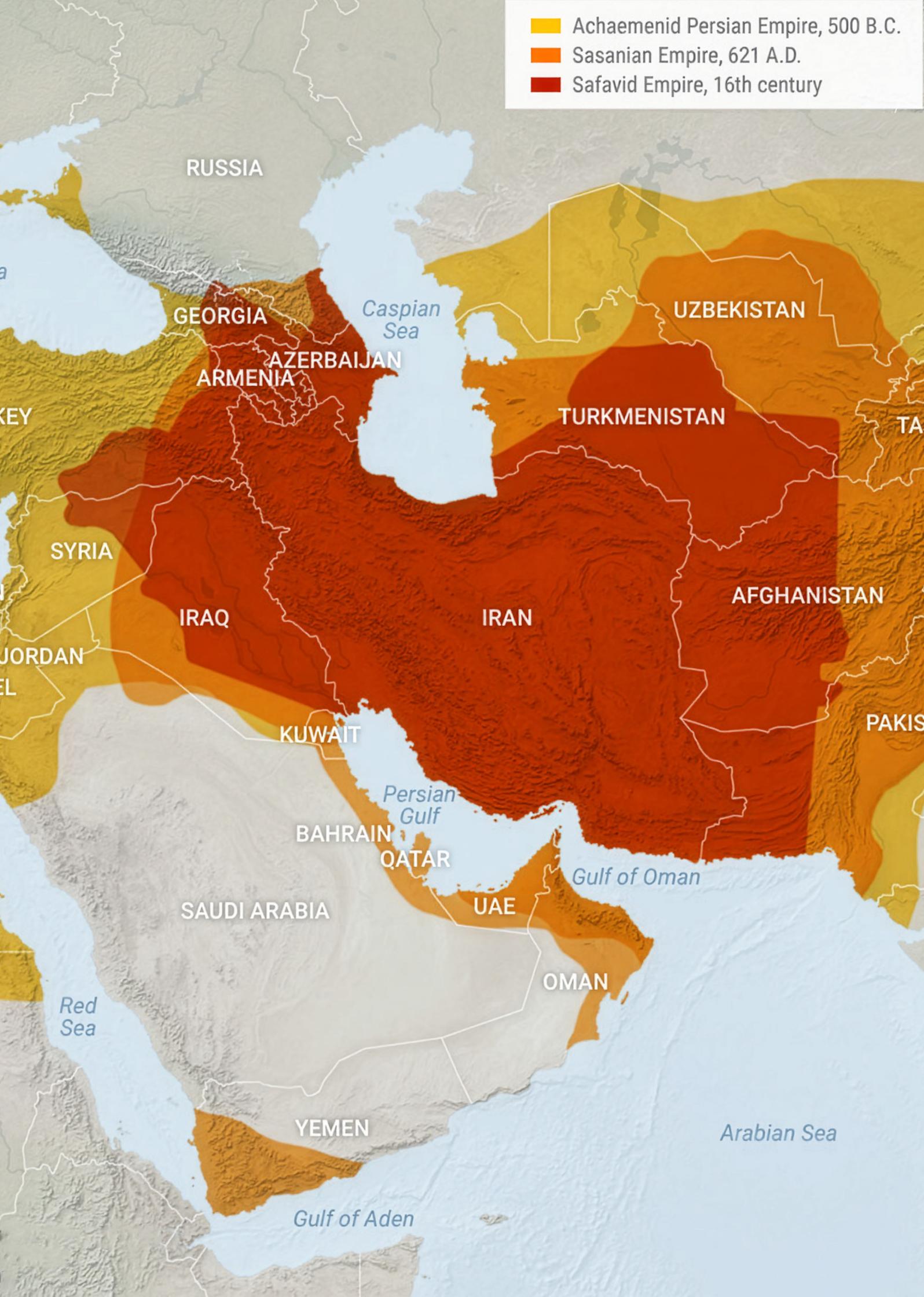
At the end of the 19th century, the Qajar Empire was on its last legs. Founded towards the end of the 18th century, the Qajar Empire had at one stage stretched from what are today Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan in the north, through what are today Turkmenistan and Afghanistan in the east, to what is today Iran in the south. But during the 19th century, this Qajar Empire got caught up in what became known as the “Great Game” between Russia and Great Britain, both of which tried to establish authority over the strategically important lands of the Qajar Empire. Britain feared that Russia, through a southward expansion, could end up threatening India. Russia, meanwhile, feared that a north and westward expansion of the British Empire in India would end up threatening the Russian heartland. As a result, Russia and Great Britain competed with each other over the lands of the Qajar Empire. During the 19th century, both therefore invaded the Empire, to force it to sign treaties under which it ceded land. In this manner Russia took control of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, while Britain took control of Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup>

This left the Qajar Empire devastated and bankrupt. In 1901, therefore, the Qajar Shah Mozaffar ad-Din signed a contract with British businessman William Knox D’Arcy, under which D’Arcy received exclusive rights to Iranian oil for a period of 60 years. At the time, oil had not yet been discovered in Iran. D’Arcy paid the Shah just £20,000 for this concession, less than £2 million or \$4 million today, and promised to pay him 16% of annual net profits on any oil found in Iran. It took D’Arcy years to find oil, however, which brought his business close to bankruptcy. In 1908, however, success was finally achieved, as his team struck oil at a place called Masjed Soleyman.

On the basis of the oil found at Masjed Soleyman, D’Arcy established the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC). APOC built a pipeline linking Masjed Soleyman with Abadan, 200 km to the southwest near the Persian Gulf, along with a refinery. From here, APOC shipped Iranian refined oil products to the world. These investments, and the fact that APOC had to pay other companies to transport its products to end users, left the company in financial difficulty. In 1914, on the eve of World War I, First Lord of the British Admiralty Winston Churchill pushed the British government to purchase a 51% controlling stake in APOC. At that time, Britain was converting its naval fleet from coal to liquid fuel, but it was struggling to find a reliable fuel supply of sufficient quantity. Britain therefore paid £2.2 million to APOC, through which Iranian oil became the fuel that powered the British navy.<sup>2</sup>

The Russian Revolution of 1917, and Britain’s victory over the Ottoman Empire in World War I in 1918, brought Iran under effective control of Great Britain. Britain used its power and influence to formally embed Iran in the British Empire. It engineered the appointment of Hassan Vossough as prime-minister, who proceeded to write up the Anglo-Persian Convention agreement of 1919, which would formalize British control over Iran’s economic resources, in particular its oil. Because there was public opposition to the agreement, in 1921 Britain engineered a coup in Iran to establish a military dictatorship. This coup installed a nearly illiterate officer of the Cossack Brigade of the Iranian army, a certain Reza Khan, as ruler of the country. In 1925 he crowned himself “Shah Reza Pahlavi of Persia”. As ruling dictator, Shah Reza then proceeded to formalize treaties that gave the British everything they wanted in Iran, including total control over Iranian oil production, refining and marketing.<sup>3</sup>

-  Achaemenid Persian Empire, 500 B.C.
-  Sasanian Empire, 621 A.D.
-  Safavid Empire, 16th century





## America Enters Iran

Shah Reza was a brutal dictator in the service of Great Britain. He repressed his people with an iron fist, killing thousands. And he amassed for himself the wealth of Iran that he did not hand over to Great Britain. During World War I, this political situation in Iran became a problem for Great Britain. As the Germans sent an army into southern Russia, with the ultimate objective to attack Iran from the north, and another army into northern Africa, with the ultimate objective to attack Iran from the west, it realized it needed support from the Iranian people. Britain therefore deposed Reza Shah from his position, and replaced him with his son Mohammed Reza Pahlavi.<sup>4</sup>

In 1942 America joined World War II on the side of Great Britain and the Soviet Union. Iran then became an important part of the American supply line to the Soviet Union. For this reason, America sent troops into Iran. Unlike Great Britain, America deeply despised the Pahlavi family, because they had kept American oil companies out of Iran, despite immense American pressure on them to open up the Iranian oil industry to “international competition”. Nevertheless, because the war effort required it, America entered into various agreements with Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi to organize the American involvement in Iran. The Americans were hopeful, also, that longer term these agreements would be helpful in removing the Shah from power, or at least weaken his influence in the country. These treaties put the Iranian army, police, internal security service

and public finances under control of American advisors. In a letter addressed to the then American president Franklin D. Roosevelt, Wallace Murray, advisor to the American president for international relations, wrote: *“The obvious fact is that we shall soon be in the position of actually ‘running’ Iran through an impressive body of American advisers”*<sup>5</sup>

In Iran, America took control of Iran’s internal security organization, the Royal Gendarmerie. America sent colonel Herbert Norman Schwarzkopf to transform the Gendarmerie into an institution that could ensure stability and security in Iran, such that the country would no longer rely on British or American soldiers for these purposes. Schwarzkopf therefore turned the Gendarmerie into a military organization. After World War II the relationship between America and the Royal Gendarmerie was maintained and in 1950 it was even further expanded through the signing of the United Security Pact by Iran and America. Following this, the Royal Gendarmerie grew in size, from approximately 35.000 men to over 70.000, and its officers were sent to America for training. The Gendarmerie then took responsibility for stability and security in over 80% of Iran, mostly the rural areas outside of the cities.<sup>6</sup> All this made Colonel Schwarzkopf a powerful and influential man in Iran, especially amongst the traditional tribal elders. In a telegram to the American ambassador in Iran, John C. Wiley, Schwarzkopf claimed that 88 members of the Iranian parliament obeyed his commands.<sup>7</sup>



## Mossadeq, America and Britain

After World War II Great Britain tried hard to maintain their control over the Iranian oil industry through APOC. APOC still controlled the production, refining and marketing of Iranian oil, a lucrative business. From 1945 to 1950 APOC earned over £250 million. Over the same period Iran made just £90 million on its oil, even less than what the British government made from taxes on APOC.<sup>8</sup> Because of this, but also because of the influence that could be projected over the Middle East from Iran, both the Soviet Union and America worked to take over the “Persian Prize” from Great-Britain.

America had a number of CIA agents stationed in Iran who worked to find potential agents amongst the political and financial elite established in Iran by Great Britain. On behalf of the CIA a certain Dr. Taqi Nasr approached crown prince Abdoreza and General Ali Razmara. The latter gave the impression he was willing to work with America to further his own career. Razmara told Dr. Taqi Nasr that if the Americans would support him to become prime-minister of Iran, he would make Dr. Nasr minister of economy, start an anti-corruption campaign to remove British agents from influential circles in Iran, and break the APOC monopoly on Iranian oil. In 1950 Washington ordered its ambassador in Iran John C. Wiley to “urge” the Shah to appoint general Razmara as prime-minister. The Shah heeded the advice.<sup>9</sup>

Following his appointment as prime-minister general Razmara indeed implemented far reaching reforms, for which America praised him extensively. He fired some 400 high-placed civil servants and signed the “Point Four” agreement with America, which enabled the Americans to buy influence in Iran under the guise of economic support. On the matter of

APOC, however, Razmara did not do as America wanted and expected from him. In fact, dissatisfied with the amount of money America had made available to him, he signed a new agreement with APOC which legitimized the latter’s control over Iranian oil. Shortly after this, Razmara was murdered by a member of an Iranian Islamic organization that called for complete nationalization of APOC.<sup>10</sup> According to Soviet diplomats in Iran at the time, America was the organizer of the assassination.<sup>11</sup>

The Iranian parliament, where Colonel Schwarzkopf was so influential, then pressured the Shah to appoint Mohammed Mossadeq in place of Razmara. Until 1919 Mossadeq had been a very important Iranian politician. Because he was against the British influence in Iran, he was forced to leave the country that year. In 1921 Reza Khan invited him back to the country, with the aim of utilizing his influence to solidify his position. Mossadeq accepted the invitation to return to Iranian politics, but when Reza Khan crowned himself Shah in 1925 he argued so strongly against this move that again he was sidelined. Mossadeq hated Great-Britain because of this, which made the Americans interested in him. America saw Mossadeq as a person who could help them remove the British influence in Iran, so they kept an eye on him. In 1944 the American consul in Tehran reported back home that Mossadeq was “a very popular man in Iran, and his words carry a great deal of weight”<sup>12</sup>

Indeed Mossadeq’s first deed after being appointed prime-minister was to nationalize the Iranian oil industry. The British were absolutely furious and developed a plan to have its military invade Iran just as in 1918. When they approached the Americans

with this plan to get their endorsement, however, the Americans refused and flatly told the British they would not tolerate any military moves against Iran.

***“The CIA was therefore ordered to organize a coup against Mossadeq. In 1953 the CIA operation “Ajax” was executed and Mossadeq was removed from power”***

America took Mossadeq’s side and forced the British to enter negotiations. This the British refused. Instead, through the United Nations Great-Britain organized a global embargo on Iranian oil and instructed its agents on the ground in Iran to organize a military coup against Mossadeq. America was displeased with the British initiatives. The oil embargo upset the global oil markets. There was a concern in Washington also that the Soviet Union might try to make use of the instability caused by a military take-over and launch a counter-coup to establish a communist regime in Iran. America’s ability to go against Britain was limited, however, as it needed British support in the Cold War against communism, especially in the Korean Peninsula where America was fighting a war at the time. Therefore, America began to put pressure on Mossadeq. It wanted him to make a deal with Great-Britain. Mossadeq, however, refused to compromise and in discussions with the British refused to give in on critical subjects. Some within the American administration saw this as betrayal and suspected Mossadeq of working with the Iranian communists. The CIA was therefore ordered to organize a coup against Mossadeq. In 1953 the CIA operation “Ajax” was executed and Mossadeq was removed from power.<sup>13</sup>

# America and the Shah



Operation Ajax returned Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi to power. He knew who he had to thank for his position. It is said that in front of Kermit Roosevelt Jr, head of the CIA in Iran, he remarked that he realized he owned his throne “...to God, my people, my army – and you”<sup>14</sup>

The return of the Shah saw an increase in the American influence in Iran. The CIA organized for the Shah a new internal security organization named SAVAK. Colonel Schwarzkopf returned to Iran in 1955 to take responsibility for this operation. The organization would become notorious for its extensive surveillance, repression, and torture of opponents to the Shah.<sup>15</sup> America also supported the Shah financially. It gave him \$68 million following his return to power, approximately one-third of the oil revenues the Iranian state had missed out on due to the British embargo on Iranian oil. During the remainder of the 1950's America would lend the Shah a further \$300 million for economic development, and \$600 million to equip his army.<sup>16</sup>

All this firmly established the Shah in his position, to the point that he began dreaming of a future independent from America. His policies began focusing on turning Iran into a regional power, and he began spending large amounts of money to build the strongest army in his region. In a meeting with US Vice President Nelson Rockefeller in 1976, the Shah spelled out his vision and ambitions: “My policy is honest and straightforward and I have no hidden agenda. I say quite openly that I wish Iran to play a role in the Indian Ocean. I have no objection to America being present.” To somewhat soften the

impact of his words, the Shah added: “...indeed I shall actively defend your interests.” In line with his ambitions toward Iranian independence, the Shah also started to make decisions without first consulting America. An example was his decision to sign the Algiers Accord with Iraq in 1976, which greatly upset the US secretary of state Henry Kissinger as it strengthened Saddam Hussein in Iraq. America did not like this behavior of the Shah. He “...wasn't trying to just be the hegemon of the region; he wanted to become a power on the world stage,” was the assessment of Henry Precht, then the Iran desk officer at the US Department of State. When the Shah began to publicly criticize the US for being “unreliable”, America began to backtrack on weapons sales to Iran.

This infuriated the Shah to the point that he began to threaten America. When asked by an American journalist what he would do if Washington were to cease providing Iran with arms, the Shah answered: “If you try to take an unfriendly attitude toward my country, we can hurt you all badly, if not more so, than you can hurt us. Not just through oil—we can create trouble for you in the region. If you force us to change our friendly attitude the repercussions will be immeasurable.”<sup>17</sup> With that statement, the fate of the Shah was sealed. America decided to remove him from power.<sup>18</sup> On 9th November 1978 the US ambassador to Iran, William Sullivan, sent a cable to Washington DC entitled “Thinking the Unthinkable”, in which he said that America should get the Shah and his top generals out of Iran, and then make a deal between junior commanders and the leader of the Islamic opposition to the Shah, the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.<sup>19</sup>



## America and Ayatollah

# Khomeini's "Islamic Revolution"

America began to search for a party that could take over power from the Shah. Various diplomats and advisors to the American government were sent to Iran under false pretexts, to analyze the domestic Iranian situation and identify alternatives for the Shah that could be acceptable to America. Henry Precht, one of the diplomats involved in Iran at the time, described these missions in the following manner: *"To ensure access to Iran's new political elite and establish a pro-American regime in Iran"*.<sup>20</sup> William H. Sullivan, the American ambassador to Iran from 1977 to 1979, said about this period: *"But in the spring of 1978 the situations were changed and we seized the opportunity ... our Embassy developed its contact networks within the Iranian dissidents and won their confidence ... Most of them were surprised by our opinions and the fact that how much our opinions were close to them ... he [the Shah] often asked me, 'What are your Mullah friends doing?'"*<sup>21</sup>

When the diplomats and advisors returned to Washington a decision was taken to support the Islamic opposition to the Shah. The national opposition was deemed too weak, namely, while the communist opposition was too closely aligned with the Soviet Union. This Islamic opposition was led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Khomeini was born into a religious family with an established clerical heritage in the city of Khomein in central Iran on May 17th, 1900. He entered into religious studies at an early age and was accepted into the seminary in Arak and Qom under the leadership of Ayatollah Sheikh Abdol-Karim Haeri-Yazdi. In 1963, Khomeini publicly denounced

the Shah's government and was imprisoned for eight months. That same year, Khomeini sent a message to America to explain that although he was against the Shah, he was not opposed to American interests in Iran. To the contrary, an American presence was necessary to counter the Soviet and British influence in Iran, Khomeini said.<sup>22</sup> After his incarceration at the hands of the Shah, Khomeini was exiled, first to Turkey and then later to Iraq, where he continued his anti-Shah sermons. In 1978, Saddam Hussein had had enough of the fiery ayatollah and expelled him, following which he took up residence in France, in a suburb of Paris named Neauphle le Chateau.<sup>23</sup>

America sent representatives to Neauphle le Chateau to discuss and negotiate with Khomeini and his entourage. For the US, CIA agent Richard Cottam led these engagements, while Ibrahim Yazdi, a dual Iranian-American national, represented Khomeini.<sup>24</sup> In October of 1978 Khomeini and America reached an official agreement under which Khomeini promised to cooperate with America, if America helped him to topple the Shah and following the revolution would not interfere in domestic Iranian affairs. In return, Iran would continue to sell oil to international markets, including America, not interfere in the rest of the Middle East, and ensure a slow, non-radical political process to reshape Iran following the exit of Iran. The Americans agreed to this.<sup>25</sup>

The American president Carter then sent General Robert Huyser to Iran to ensure support for the revolution amongst the Iranian generals. Huyser arrived in Iran on the 4th of January 1979. His message to the Iranian generals was that if they did not support Khomeini's revolution, through not interfering, the communists would certainly make use of the situation to make Iran a communist state. President Carter, in his memoirs, confirmed that Huyser had indeed been sent with this mission: "*Huyser was of the opinion that the army had made sufficient plans to protect its equipment and facilities and that it would not come onto the streets. He had dissuaded some of its leaders from the idea of attempting a coup.*"<sup>26</sup>

The Shah understood Huyser's visit in the exact same manner. In his memoirs he said he had been surprised by the arrival in Tehran of Huyser in January of 1979, because Huyser had not informed him of his travel plans. The Shah said that the general "... *had come to Tehran a number of times, scheduling his visits well in advance to discuss military affairs with me and my generals.*" However this time the Shah was not informed. The Shah further said that about Huyser's mission: "*Huyser succeeded in winning over my last chief of staff, General Ghara-Baghi, whose later behavior leads me to believe that he was a traitor. He asked Ghara-Baghi to arrange a meeting for him with Mehdi Bazargan, the human rights lawyer who became Khomeini's First Prime Minister. The General informed me of Huyser's request before I left, but I have no idea of what ensued. I do know that Ghara-Baghi used his authority to prevent military action against Khomeini. He alone knows what decisions were made and the price paid. It is perhaps significant that although all my generals were executed, only General Ghara-Baghi was spared. His savior was Behdi Bazargan.*"<sup>27</sup>

On the 14th of January 1979 the American ambassador then organized a meeting between Ebrahim Yazedi and representatives from the American State Department. Yazedi had lived in America for a long time. In 1961 he had been forced to flee Iran because of his opposition to the Shah, after which he resettled in America. There he had developed close ties with the CIA and the American State Department. Eventually he had even become an American national. During the meeting Warren Zimmerman, on behalf of the American State Department, told Yazedi to communicate a message to Khomeini: Khomeini had to wait and not return to Iran until Huyser had made the necessary arrangements with the Iranian generals.<sup>28</sup>

Then on the 26th of January an American delegation consisting of Ramsey Clark, Peter Falk and Philip Luce met with Khomeini in Neauphle le Chateau, after first having spent 10 days in Iran to assess the situation.<sup>29</sup> On the 1st of February Khomeini then boarded a chartered Air France plane that took him from Paris to Tehran. The Shah was outside of Iran at that moment, according to the official statement "on vacation". It was clear, however, that he knew what was coming and had fled Iran knowing that he was unable to stop it.





## The Clerical Era Begins

On the 4th of February Khomeini took formal control of Iran and appointed an interim-government. At the head of this government he placed Mehdi Bazargan. Bazargan had been one of America's informants during 1978. On behalf of the American government John Stempel, Henry Precht, Warren Zimmerman and Richard Cottam all had meetings with the Iranian Freedom Movement which was led by Bazargan. Through this Freedom Movement America also remained in close contact with Bazargan during the first months of the revolution.<sup>30</sup>

On the 14th of February Bazargan appointed the other members of his cabinet. The important posts of second prime-minister and foreign minister went to Abbas Amir-Entezam and Karim Sanjabi. Amir-Entezam was appointed second prime-minister. He had lived in America for 20 years and had been in contact with the CIA since the days of Mossadeq. He had actually been a resource for the CIA during the coup against Mossadeq. Sanjabi was appointed foreign minister. He had been in regular contact with the American embassy in Tehran. In total, five people in Bazargan's cabinet held dual Iranian-American citizenship.<sup>31</sup>

The Bazargan government drafted a new constitution for Iran for which he used the French constitution as starting point. Consequently, the Bazargan-constitution follows the western model, based on nationalism and democracy:

- Article 6: "In the Islamic Republic of Iran, the affairs of the country must be administered on the basis of public opinion expressed by the means of elections"
- Article 15: "The official language and script of

Iran, the lingua franca of its people, is Persian. Official documents, correspondence, and texts, as well as text-books, must be in this language and script."

- Article 41 "Iranian citizenship is the indisputable right of every Iranian"
- Article 78: "All changes in the boundaries of the country are forbidden"
- Article 115: "The President must be elected from among religious and political personalities possessing the following qualifications: Iranian origin; Iranian nationality ..."
- Article 177: "Revision of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, whenever needed by the circumstances, will be done in the following manner ... The decisions of the Council, after the confirmation and signatures of the Leader, shall be valid if approved by an absolute majority vote in a national referendum."

A referendum on the 24th of October confirmed Bazargan's proposals as the new constitution for Iran.

In his memoirs American president Carter said about Bazargan's government: "*He and his predominantly Western-educated cabinet members cooperated with us. They protected our embassy, provided safe travel for General Philip C. Gast, who had replaced Huyser, and sent us a series of friendly messages. Bazargan announced publicly his eagerness to have good relations with the United States, and said that Iran would soon resume normal oil shipments to all its customers.*"<sup>32</sup>

All this made clear to America the anti-American rhetoric during Khomeini's revolution was not an expression of the relationship between Khomeini's

revolutionary regime and the Americans, but a political strategy to ensure support for the revolution amongst the populace of Iran. The Iranian people were well aware of America's many years of support for the Shah and therefore held America partly responsible for the oppression and tyranny during this era. This left Khomeini no other choice but to publicly denounce America, although behind closed doors he and his staff worked closely with America. This was made clear when during a visit from Yasser Arafat, leader of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), Khomeini showed coldness and distance. He also refused a request from Arafat to use Iranian F-14 fighter jets to support the Palestinians in Lebanon who were being attacked by Israel.<sup>33</sup>

***The anti-American rhetoric during Khomeini's revolution was not an expression of the relationship between Khomeini's revolutionary regime and the Americans, but a political strategy to ensure support for the revolution amongst the populace of Iran.***

With this reality in mind the case of the occupation of the American embassy in Tehran, which lasted from 1979 to 1981, should be reviewed and studied.

Towards the end of 1979 it became apparent that Khomeini's revolution was stalling and was in need of a new push. The Bazargan government had not been able to immediately improve the living conditions of most Iranians, namely, and the people began to question whether Khomeini would ever be able to. In addition, the intellectual elite, raised during the time of the Shah, had issues with many articles in the new constitution while some in the clergy did not feel comfortable with Khomeini's political activities. On the 1st of November 1979 Bazargan met president Carter's head of the National Security Agency (NSA), Zbigniew Brzezinski, in Algiers. Shortly after this meeting America gave the Shah permission to travel to America for medical treatment. The two events infuriated the Iranian public and were presented in the Iranian media as American efforts to return the Shah back to power. In response, Iranian students entered the compound of the American embassy in Tehran on the 4th of November and took the embassy personnel hostage. During February of the same year a similar event had taken place. That time Khomeini had immediately ordered the

students to return home. This time, however, all leaders in Khomeini's revolution expressed support for the action of the students. On the 5th of November Khomeini, Ayatollah Beheshti and Ayatollah Montazeri all expressed support for the occupation, separately but at roughly the same time. An indication that the hostage taking was part of a plan. Consequently, the Iranian public's attention was moved from domestic issue to the "Great Satan" America.<sup>34</sup>

Two days into the hostage taking prime-minister Bazargan resigned. In January 1980 the Iranian people then elected a new prime-minister: Abul Hassan Bani Sadr. Bani Sadr had been in contact with the Americans since Khomeini's stay in Paris. His contact at the CIA was Guy Rutherford. Many years later Bani Sadr would confirm that the Iranian hostage crisis had been part of an American plan, the objective of which had been to strengthen Khomeini's position domestically and give his regime a valid reason to meet America for discussions.<sup>35</sup>

The hostage crisis came to an end exactly the day Ronald Reagan entered the White House as president of the United States. The release of the American hostages was part of a treaty between Iran and America that became known as the Algiers Accords of 1981. In addition to the release of the hostages through this treaty the two countries also agreed that America would not interfere in Iran's domestic affairs, that the relations between the two countries would be managed through appointment of a third country intermediate, and that Iran would be returned the \$12 billion of Iranian assets in America, which America had confiscated following the revolution against the Shah.<sup>36</sup>

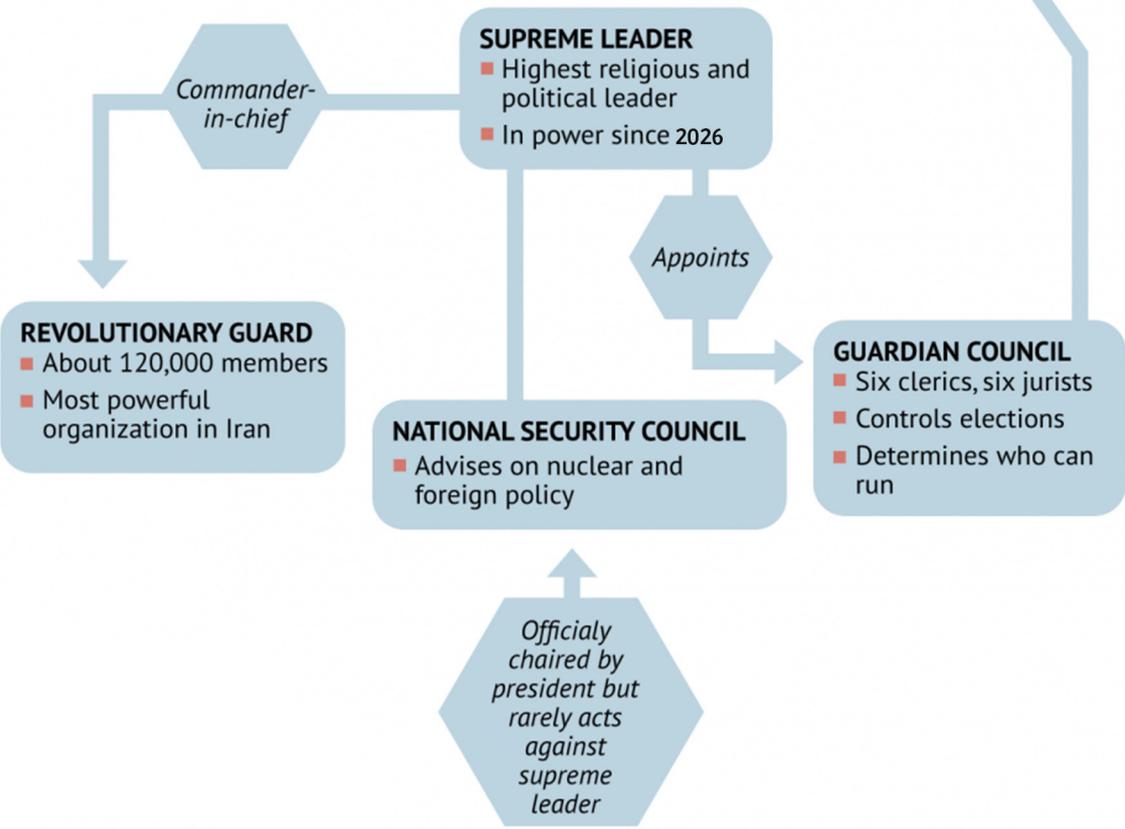


# Iran's Political Structure

## ELECTED POSITIONS



## NON-ELECTED POSITIONS



A photograph of several Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) officers in uniform. They are wearing green and tan uniforms with caps featuring the IRGC emblem. The officers are saluting with their right hands raised to their foreheads. The background is a bright, slightly hazy outdoor setting.

# Iran's Foreign Legion

Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has played a central role for decades in spreading Iranian influence beyond its borders. Iran's ability to project power internationally and maintain domestic stability rests with this elite military institution.

The IRGC was formed in May 1979 following the Iranian revolution in order to protect the newly founded regime. As the intelligence services and armed forces were stacked with personnel from the Shah's era, similar to Hitler's SS the IRGC is the clerical regime's first and last line of defence. During the 1980s, the IRGC fought against insurgencies and took a lead role in the Iran-Iraq War. These experiences helped the IRGC become the core of the Iranian national security and foreign policy establishment. Although the IRGC operates independently of the regular armed forces, it is effectively a military force in its own right due to its important role in Iranian defence. The IRGC consists of ground, naval, and aviation forces, which parallel the structure of the regular military. The IRGC comprises around 125,000 members and continues to derive its legitimacy from the clerical elite, led by Iranian Supreme Leader, who maintains ultimate authority in Iranian politics. IRGC generals are appointed by the supreme leader, the group's commander in chief, not the civilian government.

**The al Quds Force**, a component of the IRGC, has formed pro-Iran militias in foreign countries. The core operatives of the Quds force comprises only a few thousand highly skilled and dedicated specialists. The core personnel are considered to be highly educated, most speak foreign languages, and are all supporters of Iranian national and regional ambitions. The Quds Force biggest success has been in Lebanon, where they helped local Shia form Hezbollah, which has come to play a central role in Lebanese politics and in maintaining Iranian influence. In Syria, the al Quds branch has played a key role in maintaining the regime of Bashar al-Assad. Whilst in Iraq the al Quds branch was directly leading and directing forces on the ground in order to prop up the regime in Baghdad and to take on ISIS.

The IRGC also has a paramilitary force of 100,000 personnel to deal with any anti-government activity inside Iran. To assist them, **the Basij Forces** (Mobilisation Resistance Force), was created which is a network of potentially up to a million active individuals who could be called upon when street muscle is required. The Basij could be committed to assist in the defence of the country against internal or external threats, but by 2008 it had also been deployed in mobilising voters in elections and alleged tampering during such activities. The Basij are usually young, Islamic men, who are not afraid to get their hands dirty. If opponents to the government stage a large demonstration, it will often be broken up by Basij, in civilian outfits, using fists and clubs.

Over the decades the IRGC has expanded and gained influence — in some cases, control — over domestic law enforcement, foreign intelligence operations, strategic military command and the national economy. Today the IRGC has a robust economic portfolio. Many IRGC commanders retire relatively early, usually at 50 years old and join Iran's political and

economic elite. Former IRGC commanders now dominate heavy industries, including the construction industry, and civilians operating in these industries are subordinate to IRGC elements. The group also generates revenue through illicit channels. Its mandate for border security enables the group to run massive smuggling operations. In these operations, IRGC troops move luxury goods and illegal drugs (especially Afghan heroin), charge port fees and receive bribes. The proceeds from these activities augment the funds appropriated to the IRGC by the civilian government.

The IRGC is Iran's most cohesive institution which in turn has led it to eclipse many other institutions and dominate Iran's security, military and economic landscape. It continues to maintain loyalty to the clerical leadership and its importance can be seen from the fact that the IRGC, rather than the country's conventional forces maintain the country's ballistic missiles. The IRGC remains the most efficient component of the state apparatus and guardian of Iranian security.



# The Iran – Iraq War

Shared interests had brought America and Khomeini together. After the success of the revolution America began work to ensure it would remain in Khomeini's interest to work with America, through preventing Iran from becoming a regional power. This policy was known as the "Dual Containment Policy", under which America "...stroved to maintain a de facto balance of power between Iraq and Iran so that neither would be able to achieve a regional hegemony that might threaten American interests."<sup>37</sup>

For this reason America supported a number of clients from the regime of the Shah who had fled their country following Khomeini's revolution. It used these people to exert pressure on the Khomeini regime. Amongst these people was Gholam Ali Oveisi who had set up a base in Iraq and worked from there against the new power in Iran. Another was Shapour Bakhtiar, the last prime-minister of the Shah. Both these men regularly flew to Washington to meet representatives from the American government.<sup>38</sup>

When on the 22nd of September 1980 Iraq attacked Iran, America had what it really wanted. Richard Murphy, America's deputy foreign secretary from 1983 to 1989, summarized what this American policy meant as far as the Iran was concerned: "*(The) administration's basic position in the war between Iran and Iraq was that a 'victory by either side is neither military achievable nor strategically desirable.'*"<sup>39</sup> Following the invasion America therefore immediately pressured Saudi-Arabia to increase oil production and make the oil price collapse. The combination of war and low oil prices destroyed public finances in both Iraq and Iran.<sup>40</sup>

Initially, the element of surprise seemed to work in support of Iraq as it quickly moved forward. Iran seemed destined for defeat. At that exact moment America began supplying Iran with weapons and spare parts for its military equipment. During January of 1981 American supplies worth billions of dollars were sent to Iran through Israel, which enabled Iran to counter the Iraqi offensive.

Within a year thereafter it was Iraq that was close to collapse. During spring of 1982 Iran threatened to win the war and at that point America began sending supplies worth billions of dollars through Israel to Iraq.<sup>41</sup>

In addition to weapons the CIA also supplied both sides in the war with intelligence. During 1986 the CIA met with representatives from the Iranian government for this purpose on various occasions. This further American interference caused mass casualties on both sides of the conflict. For example, America had warned Iran that Iraq was preparing an attack on the massive Majnoon oil field. This enabled the Iranians to prepare and inflict heavy damages on the Iraqi's. When Iraq learned about this, they realized that the American objective behind their "support" was to make the war between Iraq and Iran last as long as possible. America was only out to weaken both Saddam Hussein and Ayatollah Khomeini, with the ultimate aim of bringing Iraq into the American realm of influence and keeping Iran there.



***“(The) administration’s basic position in the war between Iran and Iraq was that a ‘victory by either side is neither military achievable nor strategically desirable.”***

(Richard Murphy, Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs, 1983-1989)





## Iran and America's Second Iraq War

Shortly after invading Iraq on the 20th of March 2003, America installed in the country a transitional government. This so-called Iraqi Governing Council (IGC) was organized along ethnic lines with 13 representatives from Iraq's Shia community, 5 from the Sunni community, 5 Kurds, 1 Turkmen and 1 Assyrian, allegedly to ensure all the Iraqi communities were represented. The IGC was fully controlled by the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) led by the American Paul Bremer.

Iran was the first country in the world that recognized the IGC as an independent government, although it was obvious from the very beginning that it was fully controlled by America. The Iranian president at that time, Mohammed Khatami, said concerning the IGC on the 17th of November 2003: *"We recognize the Iraqi Governing Council and we believe it is capable, with the Iraqi people, of managing the affairs of the country and taking measures leading toward independence."* Analysts from STRATFOR saw in this declaration a proof that *"... common geopolitical interests have forced both sides to collaborate with one another."*<sup>242</sup>

The first foreign trip of the IGC was also to Iran, on the 19th of November 2003. Jalal Talabani, who led the IGC delegation, said the Iranians agreed with the opinion that the Iraqi resistance against Americans was not *"...resistance against occupation but the work of indiscriminate killers"*. During the visit the IGC and Iran also signed a number of treaties under

which Iran promised to help improve "stability" in Iraq, "support" the rebuilding efforts, and help Iraq sell its oil on the world markets.<sup>43</sup> In other words, Iran committed to supporting the plans to bring Iraq under American control.

And Iran kept its promise. On the 10th of April 2004 president Khatami responded to the Iraqi Shiite leader Moqtada as Sadr's refusal to obey the Americans in the following manner: *"Iran considers any policy that would intensify the crisis in Iraq and jeopardize the establishment of security harmful for Shiites and Islam."*<sup>44</sup> Then on the 14th of April Iran sent an official delegation to Iraq to support the Americans and British in bringing Iraq under control. This delegation was headed by Hussein Sadeqi from the Iranian ministry of foreign affairs and one of its tasks was to reign in Moqtada as Sadr and his Sadr-army. In an official declaration the Americans said Sadeqi had been invited by the British. They also said, however, that they had agreed to this British initiative, meaning that America had been involved in this plan from the very beginning. The Iranian minister of foreign affairs Kamal Kharrazi said regarding Sadeqi's mission: *"There has been a lot of correspondence with the US about Iraq and the Swiss embassy in Tehran, which represents US diplomatic interests in the Islamic republic, played a mediating role in the recent exchanges."*<sup>245</sup>

Nevertheless, despite receiving this active Iranian support, America publicly accused Iran of being

behind the resistance in Iraq against the American occupation.<sup>46</sup> Gary Sick, Iran-advisor to president Carter, explained this in the following manner: *“There have always been two strains to US policy. Just as Iran often seems to follow policies where the one part of the government seems to differ from what the other part of the government is doing, we see the same thing in the United States very much. We have, from the beginning, in fact, relied on Iran and its assistance, especially in the south and its relations with the Shi’ite, to maintain peace and order and to lend support to a more moderate perspective in Iraqi politics. At the same time, almost without stop, we have been criticizing Iran’s activities in Iraq.”*<sup>47</sup>

Following the American – Iranian cooperation to stabilize Iraq, the two countries also cooperated to ensure continued American control over the country. America allowed pro-Iranian political parties to take the positions of leadership in Iraqi politics and these parties, led by Ibrahim al Jafari and Nouri Al

Maliki, signed various treaties that enabled America to continue to control Iraq and use it as a base from which it could project power across the Gulf region. The Status of Force Agreement (SOFA) from 2008 allowed America to keep 30,000 to 50,000 soldiers stationed in Iraq permanently as advisors, with full immunity from Iraqi law. Through the Strategic Framework Agreement the two countries agreed that America would continue to protect Iraq from internal and external enemies, would help Iraq to “democratize” further, and would have full freedom to fight “terror” on Iraqi soil. The Strategic Framework Agreement also locked Iraq into the American plans for the Iraqi economy, international trade, science, and culture.<sup>48</sup> An example of the far-reaching influence America maintains in Iraq is the fact that buyers of Iraqi oil have to transfer their money into an account with the New York Federal reserve bank. From there, the money is transferred to Iraq, if the American government gives permission.<sup>49</sup>



The American military operation “Enduring Freedom” removed the Taliban from all positions of power in Afghanistan. Thereafter, America installed a new political structure that could be controlled from Washington and would be loyal to the American interests. This structure was headed by Hamid Karzai, who during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan had worked for the CIA.<sup>50</sup>

Iran worked closely with America during its military operation in Afghanistan. Tehran provided sanctuary to distressed American military personnel inside Iranian territory, and allowed the US to transport food and humanitarian goods to Afghanistan through Iran’s territory. A top official of the Iranian Foreign Ministry under Iranian president Khatami even claimed that it became rather clear in Iran’s back-channel talks with the US that Washington “...did not have a clear plan for the post-Taliban Afghanistan”, and that Iran offered advice and warned the US about major fault lines in Afghanistan. He also claimed that “Americans paid attention to our [Iran’s] sensitivities.” It further reported that Iran “...brought out maps to try to tell the United States the best targets to bomb” in Afghanistan.<sup>51</sup>

One of the first American political maneuvers with regard to Afghanistan in the international arena was the organization of the Bonn Conference during December 2001. Through this conference America wanted to gather support amongst the various local Afghan factions and international players for the Afghan transitional government established by America. According to James Dobbins, the chief American negotiator during this conference, Iran realized for America “...the final breakthrough without which the Karzai government might never have been formed”. Iran thereafter remained an important player on the international scene, participating in all major international conferences on Afghanistan organized by America, such as the London Conference of 2006, the Hague Conference of 2009 and the Bonn Conference of 2011. Iran also supported the American plan to have Karzai negotiate with the Taliban.<sup>52</sup>

The Iranian ambassador to Afghanistan Muhammad Reza Bahrami explained his country’s actions: “*Our strategy in Afghanistan is based on security, stability and developing a strong central government*.”<sup>53</sup> In other words, just as was the case for America’s war in Iraq, the Iranian policy vis-à-vis Afghanistan was in perfect alignment with the American policy, to the extent it serves as an extension of the American policy.

## Iran and the American Occupation of Afghanistan





# The Nuclear Issue

Iran's nuclear program goes back decades, to the time of the Shah. In the 1960, America provided Teheran with a nuclear reactor, as part of President Dwight D. Eisenhower's "Atoms for Peace" program that shared nuclear technology with American allies eager to modernize their economies and move closer to Washington in a world divided by the Cold war.<sup>54</sup> During the 1970s, the Shah sought to expand his nuclear program and signed deals with France for the supply of five 1,000-megawatt nuclear reactors – but due to the revolution of 1979, these were never delivered.

Another country that at that time received American support for a nuclear program was Israel. Since then, it has developed nuclear weapons and refuses to abide by the United Nation's non-proliferation treaty.<sup>55</sup> At the same time, it had a policy of ensuring other countries in its region do not have any nuclear capabilities – even if they sign the non-proliferation treaty. Ephraim Sneh, Israel's deputy defense minister in 2006, once explained this pillar of the Israeli policy: *"Most Israelis would prefer not to live here; most Jews would prefer not to come here with families, and Israelis who can live abroad will (if a surrounding country would get nuclear weapons)."*<sup>56</sup> Because of this policy Israel has in the past undertaken various military operations across the Middle East. For example, through Operation Opera on the 7th of June 1981 it attacked Saddam Hussein's nuclear facilities in Iraq.<sup>57</sup> And in 2007 through Operation Outside the Box it attacked suspected nuclear facilities in Syria.<sup>58</sup> Specifically regarding Iran, Israel has "warned" the world about its nuclear program for decades. In 1992 an Israeli parliamentarian named Benjamin Netanyahu first took the stage to warn that the Iranian nuclear program was just years away from developing a nuclear bomb.<sup>59</sup>

However, during the first years following the Iranian revolution, Iran's nuclear program was not a prominent concern for America. In 1979 America first imposed sanction on Iran, freezing all Iranian assets held in the US. Though this was presented to the public as a response to the hostage crisis, in reality the plan was drawn up months before in order to prevent a sudden repatriation of Iranian assets following the fall of the Shah. All this was designed to starve the new Khomeini-led government of funds, and thereby make Iran willing to cut deals with America. The asset freeze was one of the main reasons Iran signed the Algiers Accord of 1981, under which it promised to pay back all debts with American banks, and to establish a fund at American banks from which American companies who had supplied goods or services to the Shah could get paid. In 1983, then, America imposed a ban on weapons sales to Iran and encouraged other countries to increase weapons sales to Iraq. This was designed to ensure the Iran – Iraq War continued without either side winning. In 1984 America then designated Iran as a "state sponsor of terrorism" following the bombing of an American Marine base in Beirut. Though there was no concrete evidence connecting Iran to the case, it was useful to further isolate Iran and leave it incapable of winning the Iran – Iraq War. In 1987, then, America instituted a ban on the import of goods from Iran. This too was connected to the Iran – Iraq War. At the time, Iraq was again in a losing position in its war with Iran. In an act of desperation it then started to attack crude oil carriers shipping Iranian crude oil to international markets. In response, Iran attacked crude carriers carrying Iraqi oil. This triggered calls inside America to ban the import of Iranian crude, and to deploy the American navy to protect Iraqi and Kuwaiti ships, which led to adoption of a law banning all import of goods

from Iran.<sup>60</sup> This first decade of American sanctions regarding Iran shows that it was primarily designed to prevent Iran from securing a stable position in the Middle East commensurate with its size and resources. In other words, it was designed to keep Iran weak.

During the 1990s Israel became more influential in America's Iran policy. During the Iran – Iraq War, Israel was mostly concerned about ensuring Iraq was weakened, as it saw Saddam Hussein as a greater threat to Israel than the Ayatollah Khomeini. For that reason it collaborated with America in the supply of weapons to Iran during the period 1981 – 1986, which became public knowledge through the Iran Contra Affair.<sup>61</sup> After the economic and military destruction of the two countries in the eight-year war, and the further destruction of Iraq in the 1991 American war on Iraq following Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, Israel turned its attention to destroying Iran. Among the Israeli priorities was the destruction of the Iranian economy, which it sought to do by promoting continuous American sanctions on Iran. In 1995 this led to America instituting a ban on trade with any country involved in Iran's oil and gas industry. In its engagements with American policymakers, Israel presented three reasons for continued American sanctions on Iran: Iran's alleged support for international terrorism, Iran's alleged opposition to the peace process in the Middle East, and Iran's alleged pursuit of weapons of mass destruction.<sup>62</sup> This brought Iran's nuclear program onto the radar screen.

During the 2000, the Israeli effort to use America to weaken Iran led to Israel pushing the nuclear issue. In August 2002, an Iranian opposition group called the Mujahideen e Khalq (MEK) held a press conference in Washington DC during which it warned the West that Iran was building nuclear facilities in two Iranian cities, Natanz and Arak.<sup>63</sup> While it was not immediately obvious to analysts then, it is well known today that the MEK and Israel's security agency the Mossad are in a close relationship. For example, in 2012 American officials confirmed that through the Mossad, Israel financed, trained and armed the MEK, in return for which the MEK assassinated Iranian nuclear scientists.<sup>64</sup>

The accusation by the MEK was picked up by Great Britain, France and Germany, who began a political process to make Iran halt all its nuclear activity. In both 2003 and 2004 the countries, known as the EU-3, came to agreements with Iran on the matter. But

on the ground these agreements did not lead to the outcomes desired by the EU-3. In 2006, therefore, the EU-3 pushed the United Nations Security Council to adopt Resolution 1696, which demanded that Iran halt all nuclear activities, even those allowed under the United Nation's non-proliferation treaty.<sup>65</sup> At that time, Israel pushed America hard to adopt the stance of the EU-3,<sup>66</sup> but America pushed back. In 2007 America's intelligence agencies released a report which concluded that Iran had halted its nuclear weapons program in 2003 already.<sup>67</sup>

During the first decade of the 20th century this remained the American position: push back against an overly aggressive Israel when it came to Iran. America therefore worked to protect Iran against an attack on her nuclear facilities by Israel.<sup>68</sup> In 2013, for example, the chief-of-staff of the American military, General Martin Dempsey, and the chief-of-staff of the American air force, General Mark Welch, personally travelled to Israel to ensure Israel would not do anything rash such as a military attack on Iran.<sup>69</sup>

***“During the first decade of the 20th century this remained the American position: push back against an overly aggressive Israel when it came to Iran. America therefore worked to protect Iran against an attack on her nuclear facilities by Israel.”***

Towards the end of that period, during the presidency of Obama, America tried to establish a new relationship with Iran. Starting in 2009, as America was benefitting from Iran's support in Iraq and Afghanistan, it started to explore pathways and avenues to get to a more formal agreement with Iran on collaboration. This agreement would require Iran to accept that it would never develop a nuclear weapon, but it could offer Iran sanctions relief through which it would become better able to support the American project for the Middle East. From the American perspective, the Arab Spring, in particular the Syrian Revolution, required Iran to be enabled to support America more in the Middle East region.<sup>70</sup>

To get Iran to agree these conditions, in 2012 Obama instructed his teams to start secret negotiations with Iran on the nuclear issue.<sup>71</sup> According to Amir Mohebbian, one of the most influential advisors of the Iranian regime, this American outreach was why

Hassan Rouhani was elected president of Iran on the 15th of June 2013. Mohebbian said: *“It is clear that any international outreach could not be handled by someone like President Ahmadinejad. I think the leader (the ayatollah) helped bring Mr. Rouhani to power to make the public ready for a policy change.”*<sup>72</sup> After announcement of his electoral victory Rouhani said his ultimate aim as president was to *“...revive ethics and constructive interaction with the world through moderation”*. America responded by saying it considered this *“...potentially hopeful sign.”*<sup>73</sup>

Next, after appointing his cabinet during August 2013 Rouhani declared his goal was *“...threat prevention and alleviation of tensions”*. He appointed Javad Zarif as his minister of foreign affairs, who has been educated in the United States and previously served as Iran’s ambassador to the United Nations.<sup>74</sup> Under this new leadership, in 2015 Iran and America then announced that they had reached a deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreement. Under this agreement, Iran agreed not to produce either the highly enriched uranium or the plutonium that could be used in a nuclear weapon. It also agreed that its Fordow, Natanz, and Arak facilities pursued only civilian work, including medical and industrial research, and that the International Atomic Energy Agency would have access to Iran to check and confirm Iran’s compliance with the agreement. In return, America reduced sanctions on Iran, including the embargo on conventional weapons sales to Iran.<sup>75</sup>

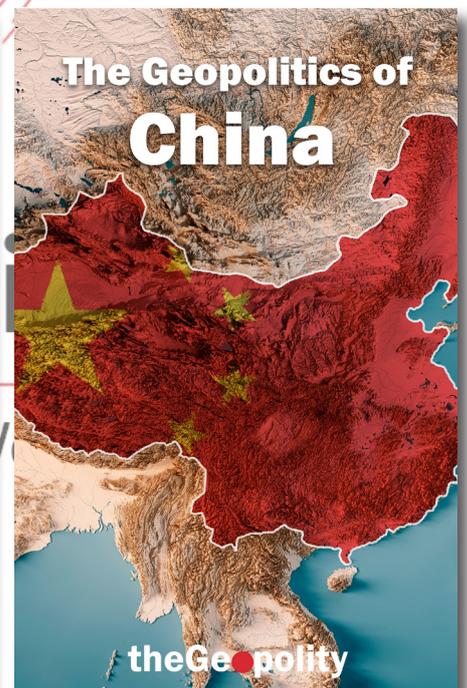
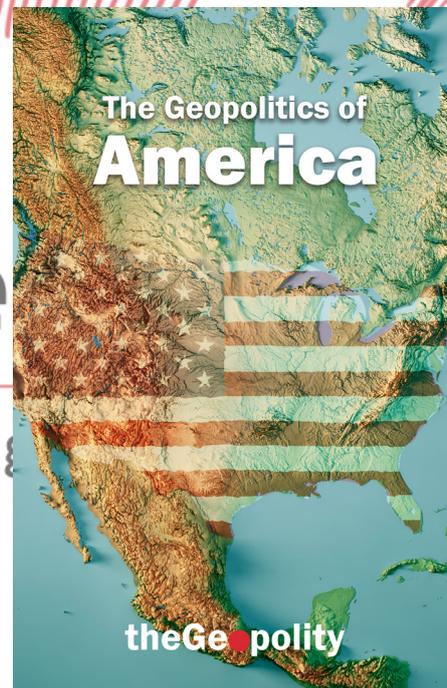
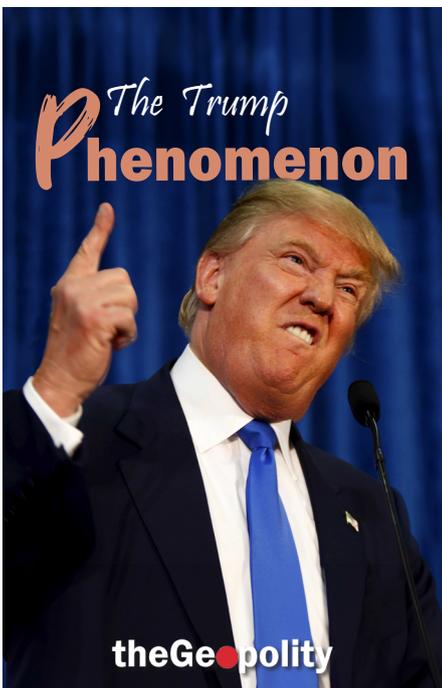
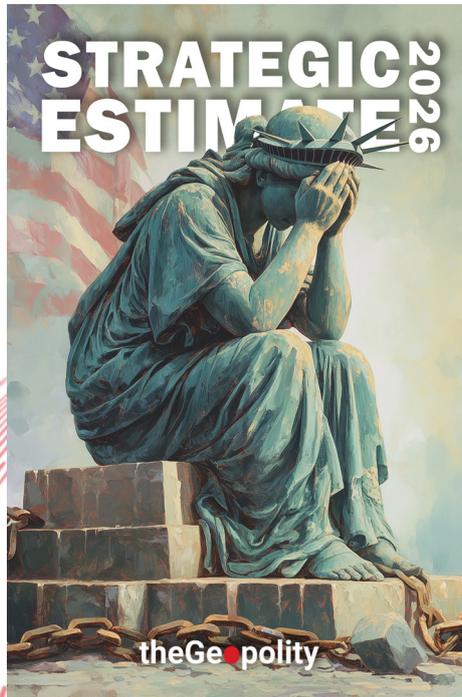
Israel’s response to the JCPOA was hostile, however. Its prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu called it a *“...stunning historic mistake”* and personally travelled to Washington DC to find support among the American members of Congress for a blocking of the agreement. In 2017 Netanyahu then worked hard to influence the newly elected American president Donald Trump to cancel the deal, although Iran was abiding by its terms.<sup>76</sup> In 2018, Netanyahu got his breakthrough. Trump cancelled the deal. *“This was a horrible one-sided deal that should have never, ever been made,”* Trump said. *“It didn’t bring calm, it didn’t bring peace, and it never will.”*<sup>77</sup> Shortly after metaphorically killing the JCPOA, America then proceeded to literally kill the commander of Iran’s elite Quds Force, Qasem Soleimani, in January 2020. Soleimani had been Iran’s point-man in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, organizing the shi’ite militias that and operated in support of American goals in Afghanistan and Iraq (defeat of the armed uprising against the American occupation) and Syria (preservation of

the Al Asdad regime).<sup>78</sup>

The killing of Soleimani indicated the start of a new era in America – Iran relations, one in which Israel’s opinion on the matter dominated, and as a result, Iran came to be seen by America as no longer useful, and even dangerous, in line with the Israeli position since the end of the Iran – Iraq War.



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