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Iranians' past with U.S. colors how they see standoff over nuclear program

By [Walter Pincus](#), Published: June 11, 2012

Know your adversary, goes the adage, and that is good advice when it comes to thinking about Iran and its nuclear program. But it is just as important to remember the United States' own history in dealing with Tehran. Iranians do.

"The majority, including the supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, they doubt the real intention of the U.S. Specifically, the leader maintains that the real, the core policy of the U.S. is regime change."

That's Seyed Hossein Mousavian, discussing his new book, "[The Iranian Nuclear Crisis: A Memoir](#)," last Tuesday at the Brookings Institution. Iran's former nuclear spokesman and a member of the Iranian nuclear negotiating team from 2003 to 2005, Mousavian was later arrested and tried for espionage by the government of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Today, Mousavian is a research scholar at Princeton University's Program on Science and Global Security.

Everyone recalls that regime change was the stated U.S. policy for most of the eight years of President George W. Bush's administration, but few Americans realize that the younger Bush was a latecomer to American attempts to control Iran's government.

Recall the August 1953 military coup that overthrew the elected government of Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq, an event that led to the 25-year autocratic rule of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi.

That coup was largely the result of a joint covert operation run by the CIA and its British equivalent, MI6. Within the United States, the overthrow was hailed the end of a potential pro-communist regime; for Iranians it ended the country's drive to assert sovereign control over its own resources, primarily oil. It also smothered the country's nascent nationalist movement and restored to power a monarch reliant on the West.

The 1953 coup "changed the course of democracy [in Iran] and led to dictatorships," Mousavian said Monday in a telephone interview. But even more present in the minds of today's Iranians, according to Mousavian, was Washington's bias in the 1980s toward Saddam Hussein's Iraq after it invaded Iran.

Mousavian said that some 300,000 Iranians were killed or injured in the eight years of war that ensued and



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that U.S. policies in that era have had a profound impact on “the families of those who died or were wounded.”

Of course the United States was not acting in a political vacuum. The November 1979 seizure of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran by Islamist student and militants and the holding of 52 Americans as hostages for 444 days has permanently remained as a symbol of the radical nature of the regime guided by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

Though Americans saw the embassy seizure as a strike against the United States, within Iranian political circles it was seen as a clever step by Khomeini and his fellow mullahs to get rid of the Iranian exiles who had taken over the Iranian government in the wake of the 1979 revolution.

There is another bit of history that Iranians remember and Americans don't. In 1976, President Gerald Ford signed a directive allowing the shah's government in Tehran to buy and operate a U.S.-built reprocessing facility for extracting plutonium from used nuclear reactor fuel as part of a multibillion-dollar deal to purchase American nuclear power plants. After 1979, according to Mousavian, the Khomeini revolutionary government decided against many power plants and the enrichment facility. The Bushehr nuclear power plant, which was begun in 1975 with German help, was halted in 1979, but restarted with the Russians in 1995 despite U.S. objections.

It was at this time, Mousavian said, that Iran, now under Khamenei, decided “to go for self-sufficiency for fuel.” The reason, he said at Brookings, was that the French halted a prior enrichment agreement. Under that plan, Iran paid \$1.2 billion for a joint facility inside France. But technical issues, delays in restarting Bushehr and U.S. pressure helped end the joint project, according to Mousavian.

Against that background, consider these other factors on the Iranian side as the current struggle over Iran's nuclear program plays out.

Iranians in general support their right under the Non-Proliferation Treaty to enrich uranium. As Mousavian put it: “Regardless of who is ruling Iran . . . no one would make concession on the rights of Iran for enrichment.”

On sanctions, Mousavian said, “I'm 100 percent sure if even they [the United States and others] go for further crippling sanctions, Iranians, they would not change their nuclear policy. When I say nuclear policy, the core issue is the rights under NPT. This is the core issue. They would not give it up.”

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