

Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi returning from exile after a CIA coup, Tehran, 1953. James Whitmore/The Life Picture Collection/Getty

# America's Middle East Challenge

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For the past seventy some years, the Middle East has been a chessboard for the victors of the Second World War. The ongoing chaos in the region can be traced to how Great Britain, the United States, and France exercised their power here in the post-war years. The primary sources of conflict date back even further: to the arbitrary borders that were drawn by the French and the British in much of former Ottoman territories in the aftermath of the First World War; to the enthroning of kings, emirs, and sheikhs; and ultimately to the seizure of the wealth of the countries under their imperialistic control. A colonial mentality still prevails in the way Western powers and in particular the United States approach the Middle East.

American and Arab leaders like to claim an unshakable bond of trust, but in reality it is predicated upon a fragile ground; American relations with Iran, in turn, are all about mistrust. The presence of foreign forces in the Middle East has turned the region into two zones; one that sides with the United States, for example the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries; and another with a different foreign policy agenda that does not align with Washington—for example, Iran. The presence of foreign and particularly American military forces in the Middle East has served to disrupt the cordial relationships between regional powers such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Turkey, and Egypt. This disruption is felt especially strongly as the region confronts growing instability and terrorism today.

## Iranian Mistrust

The main origins of Iranian mistrust of the United States are Washington's involvement in overthrowing Mohammad Mosaddegh and imposing the rule of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. The mistrust increased after the Islamic Revolution in 1979 when the United States embarked on a strategy of regime change. An early sign of the policy could be seen in Washington's blatant support for Saddam Hussein's invasion of Iran in 1980. That eight-year conflict became one of the lengthiest and costliest wars of the twentieth century, with more than one million casualties on both sides and \$600 billion infrastructure damage to Iran. The United States, though claiming to be the champion of combating the proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), turned a blind eye to Saddam's use of chemical weapons against the Iranian people and reportedly assisted the Iraqi army with intelligence in carrying out those attacks.

At the end of the Iran-Iraq War, Iran was devastated and the nation was in dire need of foreign investment to rise from the ruins. The United States refused to invest in the Iranian economy, and sought to prevent other nations from economic cooperation with Iran as well. The conventional Western perception is that it is Iran that is adamant in maintaining a hostile relationship with the United States; in fact, the general consensus in various Iranian administrations has been that neither country benefits from tit-for-tat policies, and that prudence dictates that we can and should ultimately become friends. This general consensus stems from the fact that the framework of foreign policy in the Islamic Republic is not based upon the wishes of one person or one branch of power, but on the collective view among various strands of power. At the end of the consensus-building process, the supreme leader must authorize it. Except in very few cases, the leader has always approved of the decisions made by the Supreme National Security Council. Thus, it can be argued that however extremely guarded he may be of America's real intentions toward Iran, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is also inclined to put an end to the long spiral of animosity.

Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who served as president in the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq War, was the first to embark on normalizing Tehran's relations with Washington. During his presidency from 1989 to 1997, Iran invited an American oil firm, Conoco Inc., to take part in the development of the Siri oil field project and offered Washington cooperation in areas such as terrorism and drug trafficking. However, without exception, all of the approaches were rebuffed by the United States.

America's unwillingness to ease tensions continued under President Mohammad Khatami, who publicly called for a "Dialogue Among Civilizations" to improve relations with the West. The September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon occurred during the Khatami presidency; in contrast with other nations in the Middle East formally allied with the United States, the Iranian people as well as the Iranian government were among the first to offer condolences to the American people and their government.

Even before 9/11, a round of talks was held between Iranian and American officials to address issues of mutual concern as well as bilateral matters. After 9/11, Iran played a substantial role in the toppling of the Taliban in Afghanistan by assisting the United States with logistical and military support, as well as intelligence. In response, President George W. Bush declared Iran to be part of an “axis of evil” (along with Saddam Hussein’s Iraq and North Korea)—a move that effectively scuttled any path to détente.

The pragmatism of President Rafsanjani and moderation of President Khatami exhausted Iran’s diplomatic approaches to mend ties with the United States. It became clear that Washington was simply not inclined to normalize its relations with Tehran. In Iran, the political road had thus been paved for the emergence of a more conservative Iranian leader, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, even President Ahmadinejad was not completely opposed to improved relations. In 2006, he penned an eighteen-page letter to President Bush that raised issues from the history of grievances between the two countries to American support for Israel. Regardless of the content of the letter, it was an unprecedented gesture by an Iranian leader, the first of its kind since the 1979 revolution. President Ahmadinejad also congratulated Barack Obama on his election in 2008, yet another surprising and positive outreach to the American leadership from a conservative and principled Iranian president.

Nonetheless, under President Obama the United States ratcheted up pressure on Iran by orchestrating an international consensus, sometimes through arm-twisting, to impose crippling sanctions on Iran. In her 2014 book *Hard Choices*, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton spoke of her “pride” after the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 1929 against Iran. The move came amid growing pressure on the administration from Congress, Israel, and pro-Israel lobby groups. Since the mid-1990s Israel has been pushing Washington to pursue a harsh policy toward Iran. In July 1996, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu gave a speech to a joint session of Congress where he stated that “time is running out” for preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons and called for immediate and effective prevention. The most recent American-led sanctions not only target Iran’s oil industry, financial transactions, Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, and arms sales, but they also make it almost impossible for Iranians to purchase goods such as medicines and medical equipment. The sanctions policy, which is intended to dissuade Iran from developing its nuclear program, has been mainly targeting the lives of ordinary Iranians rather than the nuclear program. Clear testament is the substantial increase despite sanctions in the size of Iran’s enrichment capacity over the past decade from roughly 200 centrifuges to more than 20,000 centrifuges.

The American approach to Iran has been predicated upon engagement and pressure. Therefore, positive overtures toward Iran are perceived by Iranians with suspicion. Hillary Clinton states very clearly that during her term as secretary of state the policy of engagement “would open our hand in seeking tougher sanctions on Iran.” Ayatollah Khamenei believes that the United States is intent on toppling the Islamic Republic, citing American support for Saddam Hussein’s invasion, covert operations against Iran, open backing for anti-regime groups, denial of Iran’s right to peaceful enrichment under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and paralyzing economic sanctions. The declaration that “all options are on the table,” used by various American administrations, is insulting language that exacerbates the shortage of confidence on the Iranian side.

Since the start of President Obama’s second term, though, a change in American policy toward Iran has been evident. A change in tone appeared in the remarks of President Obama in the UN General Assembly, where he shed light on the mutual mistrust between the two countries and the need to resolve years of animosity through diplomatic means. In an unprecedented move, President Obama and President Hassan Rouhani spoke over the phone after the latter’s election in 2013. There have also been meaningful high-ranking talks between Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif and his American counterpart, John Kerry, over the nuclear program; such talks were hard to envisage only three years ago. Since President Rouhani took office, there have been a number of substantive and constructive negotiations over Iran’s nuclear program that resulted in an interim deal called the Joint Plan of Action in November 2014 and an outline agreement for a Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in April 2015.

Should the dispute over Iran’s nuclear program be resolved, it will certainly prepare ground for cooperation between Iran and the United States. The two countries have common interests in the Middle East: combating drug trafficking, stability in Iraq and Afghanistan, containing and ultimately eradicating the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and putting an end to the Syrian civil war. Thus, a comprehensive resolution based upon mutual respect over Iran’s nuclear program could be a promising first step in further Iranian-American cooperation and could pave the way for a paradigm shift in relations.

### **Arab Suspicion**

Arab attitudes toward the United States are grounded to a large extent in U.S. foreign policy toward the Middle

East.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is an old wound in the relations between the Arab World and the United States. The peace plan supported by both would have at its core a two-state solution—one state for the Palestinians and one for the Israelis—has long lost its viability. The 1967 borders that have internationally been recognized as the basis for the fruition of a two-state solution are no longer accessible given the mass construction of Israeli settlements beyond the 1967 borders and on the territory of the future Palestinian state. The number of Israeli settlers in the occupied territories has risen from 200,000 in 1991 to roughly 600,000 today. The Arab Peace Initiative that was suggested by the late King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud of Saudi Arabia in 2002, which was endorsed by the entire Arab World, does not have any applicability given the settlement issue and Israel's rejection of any compromise. Benjamin Netanyahu, who on numerous occasions stated his commitment to the two-state solution, ruled out the possibility of a Palestinian state in the days before the 2015 Israeli election. Furthermore, the American policy of not recognizing Palestinian statehood is itself humiliating to the Arabs and a source of contention between the Arab World and the United States.

Iraq proved to be another area of serious friction for U.S.-Arab relations. Although several Arab states had joined the U.S.-led coalition to eject Saddam Hussein's troops from Kuwait in 1991, many Arab governments were uncomfortable with the Iraqi human suffering that resulted from severe American sanctions following the conflict. Prior to the American-led invasion of 2003, Iraq still constituted a potential security threat to its Arab neighbors. However, unlike the case in 1991, U.S. war plans ignored the considerations of Arab countries and left them uneasy and humiliated.

America's policy toward Iran is one of the main Arab grievances against Washington. Many Arab countries perceived and continue to perceive that the U.S. invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan paved the way for the steady rise of Iran's influence in the region at their expense. Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud Al-Faisal put it this way: "Several years ago, we fought a war with the United States and Saudi Arabia in order to save Iraq from the occupation of Iran. Now it seems that Iran is being handed over Iraq on a golden platter."

It should be pointed out that the Arab concerns about Iran come against the backdrop of Iran's repeated calls for the consolidation of security and stability in the region. Nonetheless, some GCC countries led by Saudi Arabia have sought and failed to win an even stronger Western stance against Iran. Saudi Arabia was unable to convince Washington to launch a military strike on the Islamic Republic. The truth is that Iran's rich history, civilization, human resources, and strategic energy resources are the reasons that Iran has managed to resist pressures from the United States and its Arab allies. But now that Iran possesses substantial influence in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and to a lesser extent Yemen, the Arabs blame the United States for Iran's rising influence.

The nuclear talks between Iran and the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany (P5+1) are another factor in Arab suspicion toward the United States. The Arab concern is primarily predicated on the assumption that any resolution to Iran's nuclear program would enhance Iran's position in the region vis-à-vis its neighbors. The Arabs fear that Iranian-American détente may lead to an American departure from the region that would be detrimental to their national interests and security. The main concern of the Saudis and other monarchies may be the potential political upheaval that could follow such a strategic realignment in the Persian Gulf. A Rand Corporation report in 2009 noted that "Saudi Arabia has tried to paint Iran as a cultural and ideological aberration from the rest of the region, and the most expeditious means of doing this has been to cast the Islamic Republic's Shi'a/Persian ambitions as a threat to Sunnis everywhere."

Another area of concern for Arabs is America's response to the political upheaval of the so-called Arab Spring that swept the region starting in 2010. The United States called for Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak to step down, supported the election of Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohammed Morsi, and threatened to cut off military aid after a coup brought Abdel Fattah El-Sisi to power. Prince Saud laid out Saudi uneasiness about this: "Concerning those who announced stopping their assistance to Egypt or threatening to stop them, the Arab and Islamic nation is rich with its people and capabilities and will provide a helping hand to Egypt." The Saudis and other monarchs in the Persian Gulf are highly concerned by the potential rise of Islamist ideologies and organizations, including the Muslim Brotherhood. It could embolden the disenfranchised segments of these societies to embark on violent actions against their governments. Therefore any successful political change in any of the Arab countries of the Middle East can potentially ignite major political challenges to the Gulf monarchies as well. It could be argued that Mohammed Morsi's ouster and Saudi support for El-Sisi were partly triggered by Morsi's inclination to normalize Egyptian relations with Iran, which had been suspended since 1979.

Bahrain is another area of contention. The United States has a strong interest in preserving the security of Bahrain, as the country hosts the United States Fifth Fleet. However, Bahraini officials seem to be grappling with the

assumption that Washington is covertly colluding with the Shia opposition leaders who might share ideological and religious affinity with Iran. The Bahraini government has accused Iran of meddling in the domestic affairs of Bahrain by supporting the Shia-dominated opposition groups (an accusation rejected by Iran). Last year, a senior U.S. diplomat was expelled from Bahrain for meeting Sheikh Ali Salman, secretary-general of Al-Wefaq National Islamic Society, one of the opposition groups in Bahrain. However, given the importance of Bahrain to the U.S. military presence in the region, it seems unlikely that Washington would be willing to jeopardize its interests by weakening the Bahraini government.

Syria is another area where the United States has not acted according to the desires of its Arab allies in the region, who seek the ouster of President Bashar Al-Assad. In spite of immense pressure from the governments of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and United Arab Emirates, as well as Turkey, Washington did not intervene in Syria to overthrow the Al-Assad government. The United States has launched aerial bombardments in Syria against ISIS, but it seems increasingly logical to assume that the Obama administration might find it necessary to cooperate with the Al-Assad government in fighting ISIS more in line with the Iranian strategy in Syria. This will certainly be another blow to the already tense American-Arab relations.

The menace that has engulfed Syria and Iraq is to a large extent due to logistical and financial support given to various extremist groups by a number of Arab countries as well as Turkey. Although denied by the heads of these states, Vice President Joe Biden noted the role of Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, and Turkey in creating the quagmire. "Our allies in the region were our largest problem in Syria," Biden said. "They were so determined to take down Assad and essentially have a proxy Sunni-Shia war, what did they do? They poured hundreds of millions of dollars and tens, thousands of tons of weapons into anyone who would fight against Assad. Except that the people who were being supplied were Al-Nusra [Front] and Al-Qaeda." Had it not been for the support that ISIS has received, it would have been impossible for it to destabilize the region to the extent it has done this far. Ironically, all the countries that either directly or indirectly helped ISIS to come into being joined the United States in a coalition to fight ISIS through air strikes. Zarif, Iran's foreign minister, termed it the "coalition of repenters."

It should be recalled that the quagmire is partly due to shortsighted American foreign policy toward the region. The chaos and disorder that followed the U.S. invasion of Iraq created fertile ground for Sunni radicals such as Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi to pursue the most extreme brutality and terror. Al-Zarqawi was a Jordanian terrorist who set up the forerunner to ISIS: Jamaat Al-Tawhid Wal-Jihad (Party of Monotheism and Jihad) made up mostly of non-Iraqis.

The threat now posed by ISIS has brought the United States and Iran closer together, which might well result in even more uneasiness for Arab countries. The late Saudi King Abdullah told John Kerry that if the Iranians were invited to join the coalition against ISIS, Saudi Arabia would boycott the talks. Obviously Iran as a country that possesses tremendous influence in Syria and Iraq can play a major role in the fight against ISIS—indeed it is a role that Iran has already been playing in collaboration with the governments in Baghdad and Damascus.

### **Toward a Master Plan**

The Middle East is in dire need of cooperation on issues of long-term interest to the stability and well-being of the whole region. The Arab Spring has resulted in political instability in many countries, while extremist and terrorist groups have wreaked havoc across the region. It is imperative for Middle Eastern countries to work collaboratively in order to tackle these region-wide challenges.

The United States faces lack of trust from Iran and suspicion from its Arab allies. America's oil-centered involvement in the Middle East is becoming less strategically important as the United States moves toward becoming the leading exporter of oil and gas. As a result, the Arabs are losing their oil leverage with Washington and are resorting to suicidal strategies to destabilize the region, by funding various extremist groups, in hopes that it would compel America to stay involved.

America's increased involvement in the Middle East is inevitable as a result of the expansion of ISIS and other terrorist groups. This heightened involvement could result in positive outcomes if it is calculated carefully. The United States should come to the realization that its military might is not capable of bringing about peace in the Middle East. As Chas W. Freeman Jr. argued in his book *America's Misadventures in the Middle East*, "How do we propose to manage the contradiction between our desire to assure the stability of the Persian Gulf and the fact that our presence in it is inherently destabilizing?" However, U.S. military superiority could be applied positively and used to support regional governments to fight terrorism in the region. Washington's efforts toward a regional cooperation system in the Persian Gulf (akin to that of the European Union) would fill the vacuum caused by an eventual U.S. departure and assuage Arab fears of a resurgent Iran. President Rouhani, in his 2014 address to the UN General Assembly, pointed out, "The right solution to this quandary comes from within the region and

regionally provided solutions with international support and not from outside the region.”

The United States needs to abandon its foreign policy approach of alienating Iran and recognize Iran’s power and potential in the region. Iran, in return, as a regional power should engage with neighbors such as Saudi Arabia to tackle regional issues. As it did in the 1990s, Iran should once again embark on a policy of good relations with its Arab neighbors. Normalization of relations between Iran and Egypt would be of utmost importance. In 2007, President Rouhani, in his previous capacity as secretary of Iran’s Supreme National Security Council, proposed the establishment of a regional cooperation system between Iran and the GCC. His ten-point initiative encompassed an array of issues of mutual concern. The initiative proposed the establishment of a Persian Gulf security and cooperation organization between Iran, Iraq, and the GCC; facilitation of cultural, economic, and political cooperation; plans to ensure the security of energy supply and production; cooperation on nuclear-related issues and establishment of a region free of WMD; and finally paving the way for the withdrawal of foreign forces from the region.

Regional cooperation faces serious challenges, however. For some Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia, the proverb the “enemy of my enemy is my friend” justifies its Israel-like policy toward nuclear talks with Iran. The Kingdom has persistently been involved in sabotaging the talks by hinting that international endorsement of Iran’s nuclear program would trigger a nuclear proliferation race in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia’s former Director General of the General Intelligence Directorate Prince Turki Al-Faisal stated in an interview with BBC, “ending the fear of Iran developing weapons of mass destruction is not going to be the end of the troubles that we’re having with Iran.” The Saudis now perceive themselves to be entangled in an Iranian-dominated Middle East that straddles Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. The Saudis, thus, feeling alienated by its oldest ally, the United States, has recently been engaged in forging a block against Iran’s growing power in the region.

Iran can commit itself in reaching security, political, and economic agreements with its neighbors, particularly with Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Egypt to restore security and stability in the region. This would be to the benefit of the region, the United States, and the entire world. As an influential player in the Middle East, the United States should restore the confidence of its Arab allies, gain the confidence of Iran, and help provide a foundation for collaboration among regional countries to eradicate terrorism. The United States and the regional powers need to engage other great powers such as Russia, China, and the European Union to realize such a master plan.

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