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Congressional Briefing

History of US-Iran Relations

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#nhcbriefing

With the United States and Iran edging ever closer to confrontation, it is more important than ever that we understand the historical roots of this volatile relationship. Several leading historians of American-Iranian relations will trace that history and explain how we reached the current impasse.

Mark Gasiorowski is a Professor in the Department of Political Science at Tulane University in New Orleans. He is the author of *US Foreign Policy and the Shah* (Cornell University Press, 1991) and co-editor of *Neither East Nor West: Iran, the Soviet Union, and the United States* (Yale University Press, 1990) and *Mohammad Mosaddeq and the 1953 Coup in Iran* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2004). He has also written many scholarly articles about US policy toward Iran and other topics. He served as a Visiting Professor at Tehran University in 1994, 1996, and 1998 and as a Visiting Fellow at the Middle East Centre, Oxford University in 2001-2002.

John Ghazvinian is Associate Director of the Middle East Center at the University of Pennsylvania. A historian and former journalist, specializing in the history of US-Iran relations, he is the author of *Iran and America: A History* (Knopf, forthcoming) and *Untapped: The Scramble for Africa's Oil* (Harcourt, 2007), as well as coeditor of *American and Muslim Worlds before 1900* (Bloomsbury, 2020). He has written for such publications as *Newsweek*, *The Nation*, the *Sunday Times* and the *Huffington Post*, and earned his doctorate in history at Oxford University.

Matthew Shannon is Associate Professor of History at Emory & Henry College. He is the author of *Losing Hearts and Minds: American-Iranian Relations and International Education during the Cold War* (Cornell University Press, 2017). His original research is published in *Iranian Studies*, *Diplomatic History*, *International History Review*, and *The Sixties*, and he is the co-editor of *9/11 and the Academy: Responses in the Liberal Arts and the 21st Century World* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019). Dr. Shannon's current research project explores the work of Presbyterian missionaries and their influence on the American "mission" in Iran from the 1940s to the 1960s.

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American policy toward Iran since the Islamic Revolution of 1979

US policy toward Iran has cycled among three basic postures since that country's Islamic revolution in 1978-1979:

1. **Engagement:** US officials have undertaken dialog and diplomacy with Iran's leaders in the hope of changing Iranian behavior that the US has deemed objectionable. Engagement also usually has sought to strengthen moderates among Iran's leaders.
2. **Coercion:** US officials have used hostile action like economic sanctions or military force to compel Iran's leaders to undertake substantial change, and also perhaps to bring down the Islamic regime.
3. **Containment:** US policy has sought to contain Iran's aggressive behavior in the region, though on a limited, transactional basis.

Containment has been the main US posture toward Iran during these past 40 years, though Presidents Carter, Reagan, Clinton, and Obama pursued engagement at various times and President George W. Bush pursued coercion. US efforts at engagement have failed to achieve comprehensive change in Iran's behavior, mainly because Iranian radicals have thwarted it. US efforts to coerce Iran also have failed to produce substantial change, mainly because the Islamic regime remains fairly strong domestically and because Iran's geography and diverse retaliatory capabilities would make large military operations very costly. Containment has not been very successful either, but it seems to offer the best prospect for limiting Iran's objectionable behavior until domestic change makes engagement or coercion more fruitful.

The role of the Iranian nuclear program in US-Iran relations

The nuclear issue has become a proxy for broader disagreements between the US and Iran over the past 20 years, though it originated as part of an alliance between the two countries.

1. Iran's nuclear program was inaugurated in 1958 as part of President Dwight Eisenhower's "Atoms for Peace" initiative. The US provided Iran—then a staunch ally—with its first nuclear reactor and low-enriched uranium. In the 1960s and 1970s, the US insisted that peaceful nuclear power was essential to Iran's development, fearing that the country's sizeable oil reserves would not last forever.
2. After the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini shut down the program, calling it a western abomination and a "sin against Islam". Following Khomeini's death in 1989, Iran's new leaders restarted the program following the eight-year war with Iraq after reports surfaced that its leader (Saddam Hussein) was acquiring weapons of mass destruction. Iranian leaders sought nuclear technology as a deterrent to Iraqi aggression.
3. Though Iran was (and remains) a signatory to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) of 1968, which guarantees its right to fissile material and critical technology for nuclear energy, access to such materials was now blocked by the United States. In the 1990s, Iran's civilian nuclear program went underground, relying increasingly on illicit networks and secretive facilities. This heightened US suspicion about the program's ultimate intentions.

The landmark Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) of 2015—the "Iran Nuclear Deal"—seemed to resolve the nuclear issue, but the US unilaterally withdrew from the agreement in 2018.