

A Short Overview of U.S.-Iran Relations

Instructions: Read the following text about the origins of hostilities between the United States and Iran. Underline at least three new facts you learn. Write a question mark near a sentence that raises a question for you. Be ready to share with a classmate.

The U.S. relationship with Iran has been filled with hostility and mistrust for decades. For many Iranians, mistrust dates back to the U.S.-led coup of 1953 that forced Iran's elected prime minister from office. Many in the United States mark the start of a hostile relationship with Iran in 1979, when Iranian students seized the U.S. embassy in Tehran and held fifty-two Americans prisoner for more than a year.

Iran and the United States do not currently have diplomatic relations, making it more difficult for their governments to work together, resolve their differences, and even communicate.

Why does the U.S. government view Iran as an adversary?

Today, the United States views Iran as an adversary in conflicts in the Middle East. U.S. policymakers see Iran as a threat to the security of Israel and Saudi Arabia, two important U.S. allies. Iran has backed Bashar al-Assad's government in the Syrian Civil War, as well as groups in Yemen and Iraq who are fighting U.S.-backed groups. The

Iranian government also provides support to the militant group Hezbollah, which the United States and the European Union consider to be a terrorist organization.

On the other hand, the United States and Iran have consulted closely on certain security issues. For example, U.S. and Iranian diplomats cooperated on the military response to the Taliban government in Afghanistan after the terrorist attacks on the United States of September 11, 2001. More recently, U.S. and Iranian military forces both fought against the terrorist group ISIS in Syria and Iraq.

How did the United States respond to Iran's nuclear enrichment program?

For many years, the U.S. government worried that Iran had a program to develop nuclear weapons. The Iranian government denied that it was developing weapons, but claimed that as a signatory of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), it had the right to develop nuclear materials for peaceful purposes. (All countries that have signed

the NPT are allowed to acquire equipment, materials, and knowledge for peaceful purposes. For example, NPT countries may develop nuclear materials for nuclear power plants or medical purposes.)

The United States has been involved in various attempts to limit a potential nuclear enrichment program in Iran. (Highly enriched uranium is an essential component of a nuclear weapon.) When a secret Iranian nuclear enrichment plant was discovered in 2009, the United States, the UN, and the European Union



Public Domain.

Iranians climbing the gate at the U.S. embassy in Tehran, November 1979. The hostage crisis was a key event in the history of U.S.-Iran relations.

placed economic sanctions (penalties) on Iran in an attempt to pressure its leaders to cooperate. The sanctions severely damaged Iran's economy and caused hardships for Iranians. In 2010, the Stuxnet computer virus attacked Iranian nuclear enrichment facilities. Many experts believe that Israel and the United States developed the virus.

In 2015, after negotiations with the United States and other members of the international community, Iran agreed to reduce its nuclear program and to allow inspections of its nuclear facilities. In return, the international community agreed to end economic sanctions on Iran.

During his presidential campaign and after his election in 2016, U.S. President Donald Trump (2017-) stated that he thought the nuclear deal with Iran, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, was bad for the United States. In May 2018, Trump announced that the United States would withdraw from the agreement. Trump reimposed economic sanctions on Iran and tensions between the two countries increased. The United States' "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran brought much of Iran's economy to a halt. Unable to sell its oil overseas, inflation and unemployment skyrocketed in Iran and food and medicine began

to grow scarce. After waiting a year, Iran restarted its nuclear enrichment program in 2019.

What are some Iranian perspectives on U.S. policy?

Iranian perceptions of the United States and U.S. policy are complex and vary across the population. The Iranian government's primary goal is to protect itself from perceived security threats. The Iranian government sees the United States and its allies as a major threat to Iran's security.

Iranians elected their current president, Hassan Rouhani, in 2013 because he promised to reduce tensions with the United States and Europe and to bring Iran back into the international economic system. After he reached the nuclear deal with the United States and the international community in 2015, Iranians overwhelmingly reelected him in 2017 in support of his policies. Rouhani's conservative opponents warned that the United States could not be trusted to stick to the nuclear deal. When President Trump withdrew the United States from the agreement and reimposed sanctions on Iran, it made those conservative Iranians look right all along.



Supporters of President Rouhani celebrate his 2017 election victory in Tehran.

For years after the Iranian Revolution of 1979, Iran's government-controlled media produced anti-U.S. propaganda. Today, some Iranians—including some conservative religious leaders and members of older generations—continue to condemn the United States. Many express skepticism about the motivations behind U.S. foreign policy, claiming that the stated goals of U.S. policy in Iran do not always align with U.S. actions.

While disapproval and skepticism toward the United States still exist, many younger Iranians have more favorable views of the United States. These Iranians have concerns about U.S. policy toward Iran, but they also hope for improved relations with the United States. Many believe that stronger relations would help their country join the international economy and prosper.

“Stop saying, ‘Death to America,’ make amends with the world and foreign investors and jobs will come.”

—Hamidreza Faraji, May 15, 2017

Key Terms

Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)—The IRGC, whose name in Persian means “army of the guardians of the Islamic revolution,” is tasked with the protection and survival of the Iranian government.

Quds Force—an elite special operations group of the IRGC.

How did the U.S. killing of Iranian General Solomeini create a crisis in U.S.-Iran relations?

On January 3, 2020, a U.S. drone strike assassinated General Qasem Solomeini, the head of the Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, while he was traveling in Iraq. While the United States government had said that he was a terrorist, he was seen as a hero by some in Iran. President Trump claimed the drone strike was necessary, arguing that Solomeini represented an imminent threat to U.S. soldiers in the region. The drone strike caused shock and anger in Iran. Tensions between the two countries, already extremely high, threatened to boil over and lead to war. When



The funeral of General Qasem Solomeini, Tehran, January 6, 2020.



Today, the United States has military forces throughout much of the Middle East and other surrounding regions. For example, the United States has military forces in the following countries pictured on the map: Afghanistan, Bahrain, Djibouti, Greece, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, Pakistan, Qatar, Romania, Somalia, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Syria.

Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei promised a military response against the United States for Solomeini's killing, U.S. President Donald Trump threatened to bomb fifty-two sites in Iran—a reference to the fifty-two U.S. embassy employees held hostage in Iran in 1979.

“Those who refer to the number 52 should also remember the number 290.”

—Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, in a tweet, January 6, 2020, responding to President Trump's threat to bomb 52 sites in Iran with a reminder that the U.S. Navy had shot down an Iranian passenger airliner and killed 290 civilians in 1988.

The exchange of threats between the leaders of both countries raised the possibility that both countries would begin an “escalatory spiral” of increasing violence that would lead to an all-out war. On January 8, 2020, Iran launched a missile attack

against two U.S. air bases in Iraq, but there were no U.S. or Iraqi casualties. After the missile attack, Iran's foreign minister announced that Iran had completed its response and did not want war. President Trump responded the next day that the United States wanted peace.

“Iran took & concluded proportionate measures in self-defense... targeting base from which cowardly armed attack against our citizens & senior officials were launched. We do not seek escalation or war, but will defend ourselves against any aggression.”

—Iranian Foreign Minister Javid Zarif, in a tweet, January 7, 2020

“The fact that we have this great military and equipment, however, does not mean we have to use it. We do not want to use it. The United States is ready to embrace peace with all who seek it.”

—U.S. President Donald J. Trump, in a speech to the public, January 8, 2020

While the immediate threat of war seemed to recede for the moment, the tensions between the United States and Iran will continue into the future. Any attempts to reduce the long-standing tensions between both countries will require a significant effort to address their long history and acknowledge each others' security concerns and interests. Whether the leadership in both countries are willing to approach the U.S.-Iran relationship differently and reduce the risk of conflict remains to be seen.

The Middle East



The geographical term “Middle East” means different things to different people. Here, the term “Middle East” refers to the countries highlighted on the map, stretching from Egypt in the west to Iran in the east. The term “Arab world” refers to the countries in which Arabic is widely spoken. This includes countries in North and East Africa and extends to the Persian Gulf. It does not include Iran, where Persian is the official language, or Turkey, where the official language is Turkish. The map includes cities in Iraq and Iran that are mentioned in the readings.