



## SENATE II

### US-Iran Relations

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#### Introduction

“You have no right to do this! This is cruel; this is inhumane! These people have done nothing! This is a violation of every law of God and man! You cannot take innocent people hostage!” yelled Bruce Laigen, the Chief US Diplomat assigned to Iran in the 1970s, from his cell phone. The Iranian officer calmly replied, “You have no right to complain because you took our whole country hostage in 1953.” While hostage captor was verbalizing how he and his fellow hostage guards felt, Laigen was expressing what the 64 other American hostages thought.

Though the Iranian guard believed that 1953 pinpointed the beginning of anti-American sentiments in Iran, 1979 marks the official souring of relations between Iran and the United States. On February 11, 1979, Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, the US-backed Iranian leader who had been put into power with the help of the **Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)** in 1953, was **deposed**. This allowed the previously exiled Iranian leader Ayatollah Khomeini to stir up pre-existing anti-American sentiments that were further **exacerbated** when the US government allowed the Shah to seek medical attention in America. This tension culminated in the Iran Hostage Crisis on November 4, 1979. Hundreds of students stormed the US Embassy in Tehran, Iran capturing Laigen and 64 other American hostages. Five months later, after a failed rescue attempt, the United States formally broke contact. Fifty-two of these hostages were held captive for 444 days. Since that incident, the US has had little official contact with Iran.

#### Explanation of the Problem

##### *History of the Problem, 1941-1979: The Shah*

The Iranian Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi assumed rule in 1941. At this time, The Soviet Union was extending its Communist influence over countries in the Persian Gulf. Because the Shah was anti-Communist, the US saw Iran as an ideal barrier against Communist expansion. However, in 1951, the Shah’s power became **tenuous**, and he was forced to appoint left-leaning Mohammed Mossadeq to the position of Prime Minister. In 1953, the Shah’s attempt to remove Mossadeq from his position was met with fierce opposition from Mossadeq’s followers, and the Shah was forced to flee Iran. Upset with the turn in events in Iran, the United States CIA restored the Shah to his throne

**Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)**—An agency of the US government responsible for collecting and analyzing information about foreign governments, companies, and individuals in order to advise policymakers.

**Depose**—to remove from a high office.

**Exacerbate**—to make worse.

**Tenuous**—weak; lacking substance.

through a **coup d'état**.

The Shah tried to promote western ideals with his industrialization and modernization programs. However, one of the primary consequences of these programs was a widening income gap between the rich and the poor, which led to social instability. In addition to economic tensions, there were also religious tensions. In the 1960s, many **Shiite Muslims** took to the streets and rioted under the influence of Ayatollah Khomeini. The Shah forced Khomeini into exile in 1968. Then, due to increasing discontent and intense political pressure for him to leave, the Shah fled Iran in 1979.

#### *1979-1989: Ayatollah Khomeini*

The Ayatollah Khomeini returned from exile in Paris in February of 1979 and renamed Iran the Islamic Republic of Iran. Khomeini was the complete opposite of the Shah: he was anti-West and was especially anti-United States. Under his leadership, the Iran Hostage Crisis took place. The Iran-Iraq War took place from 1980 to 1989, with the United States providing a small degree of assistance to Iraq in the form of battlefield intelligence and blocking arms sales to Iran. The United States was even involved in direct **skirmishes** in 1987 and 1988. One year after the war ended, Khomeini died, leaving the Islamic Republic of Iran intact despite internal tension in the Iranian government.

#### *1989- Present*

After Khomeini's death, the Ayatollah Khamene'i assumed the position of Supreme Leader. Like Khomeini, Khamene'i was—and continues to be—opposed to the United States. An improved relationship between the nations seemed possible when George H.W. Bush assumed the US presidency in 1989, as he implied in his inaugural speech that the US would look favorably upon help from Iran in persuading **Hezbollah** to release US hostages in Lebanon. Iran supposedly did help, but relations between the United States and Iran did not improve.

When Bill Clinton became president in 1993, the United States adopted a more **isolationist** approach towards Iran. The United States was concerned about Iran's weapons of mass destruction, involvement with terrorist groups, and attempts to disrupt the Arab-Israeli peace process. However, when **reformists**, as opposed to the conservatives, began winning elections in Iran, the United States began to shift away from isolationism. However, in 2003 conservatives rebounded and gained power in Iran. The current president, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, is an anti-US, moderate-conservative who is popular among lower class Iranians. Ahmadinejad has been in power since August 6, 2005.

**Coup d'état**—a change in government that is often sudden and forceful.

**Shiite Muslims**—the second largest denomination of Islam, after Sunni Islam.

**Skirmish**—a minor fight or conflict.

**Hezbollah**—an organization with political and military arms based in Lebanon; regarded as a legitimate organization by some and a terrorist organization by others.

**Isolationist**—a two-pronged foreign policy approach that uses economic and political sanctions and non-interventionist policies to prevent entangling alliances.

**Reformists**—liberal group of Persian politicians and intellectuals interested in giving greater freedom and the ideal of democracy to the Iranian people.

## Recent Developments

The Bush Administration has been increasingly wary of Ahmadinejad, with particular concern over Iran's progress towards nuclear capability. This is set to be achieved between 2010 and 2015. The United States' two-pronged effort to prevent Iran from achieving nuclear capability consists of both international diplomacy and **sanctions**—some through the United Nations and some not. Additionally, members of the US Department of State have met with Iran to discuss specific policy issues, such as both countries' relationships with Afghanistan. However, there are some in Washington, like former Vice President Dick Cheney, who believe that the United States needs to take a more aggressive stance. They believe that military action may be necessary to curb Iran's nuclear program.

However, Iran's nuclearization is not the only problem with US-Iran relations. The US is also concerned with Iran's involvement in its neighbor, Iraq. The US has accused Iran of supporting militants in Iraq, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and **Hamas** in Palestine/Israel. Furthermore, Iran tried to populate Iraq's government during the 2005 elections with pro-Shiite members in order to influence Iraq's politics. Both of these two Iranian actions have created even greater tension.

In July 2008, however, the Bush administration took steps towards improving the tense relations between the US and Iran. Reports indicate that the US might open an **interest section** in Tehran, Iran. This would be the first time in thirty years that the US would have a diplomatic presence in Iran. While an interest section is not an embassy, it serves in the same capacity as a full embassy. This sudden change in US foreign policy may be due pressure from the State Department that first arose in 2006 due to the fact that President Bush wanted to leave a positive **legacy**.

## Congressional Action

### *Iran-Sanctions Act*

Much of the action has occurred outside of Congress in the forms of United Nations resolutions and international diplomacy. However, the House and Senate have both passed relevant bills, including the 1996 *Iran Sanctions Act*, which discourages foreign and US investment in Iran's energy sector by imposing penalties on investments exceeding \$20 million. The purpose of the act was to put pressure on Iran to curb its nuclear program and to stop its support for organizations that the United States considers terrorist groups, such as Hezbollah of Lebanon and Hamas of Palestine.

**Sanctions**—*rules placed on countries that often ban specific behaviors between two or more countries; can be economic, international, or trade sanctions.*

**Hamas**—*an organization with both political and military arms based in Palestine/Israel; regarded as a legitimate organization by some and a terrorist organization by others.*

**Interest section**—*the office responsible for protecting U.S. interests in countries where the U.S. has no formal diplomatic relations; as such, the interest section must be housed in the embassy of a third country.*

**Legacy**—*something handed down from the past to future generations.*

### *Iran Counter Proliferation Act (1996)*

Although not yet passed by the US Congress, the *Iran Counter Proliferation Act* attempts to amend the Iran Sanctions Act of 1996 to encourage foreign countries to apply tighter restrictions on Iran. Such restrictions include making it harder for American firms to **evade** current sanctions on Iran's energy sector by using foreign firms and banning nuclear transactions with bodies that deal with Iran's nuclear sector. This House version of this act was passed on September 25, 2007, and the Senate version was introduced for debate on March 22, 2007. Both versions allow the US to impose sanctions on more types of foreign institutions in their dealings with Iran; it would essentially prevent any American firm from being involved with any foreign subsidiary that deals with Iran. The House version specifically reduces presidential power, removing the president's ability to waive sanctions on certain institutions.

**Evade**—to avoid or escape.

### *H. Con. Res. 362 and S. Res. 580*

Another currently pending piece of Congressional legislation calls on the President to impose even greater economic, social, and political pressure on Iran, explaining that Iran's nuclear program is a grave threat to US National Security. One way it increases the pressure is by imposing sanctions on Iranian banks, particularly Iran's Central Bank. It also calls for restrictions of gasoline exports to Iran and the examination of cargo exported to Iran. This bill takes two very similar forms: *House Concurrent Resolution 362* and *Senate Resolution 580*. The House bill was introduced on May 22, 2008, and the Senate bill was introduced on June 2, 2008. The two bills are very similar except that *Senate Resolution 580* does not call for inspections or a gasoline ban.

## **Focus of the Debate**

### *Conservative View*

Conservatives tend to be more willing to involve the military when dealing with Iran, seeing it as a serious risk to national security. They are less willing to engage in direct diplomacy, as they view it as less efficient and less effective. However, with American troops spread thin due to the War in Iraq, conservatives have become more amenable to options involving diplomacy. As of July 2008, the Bush Administration has given some consideration to having an American diplomatic presence in Iran's capital, Tehran.

### *Liberal View*

Liberals, upset already with the War in Iraq, have little interest in engaging with Iran militarily. Like conservatives, liberals see Iran as a threat, but unlike conservatives, liberals are more interested in negotiat-

ing directly with Iran, believing that such negotiations can lead to stoppage of Iran's nuclear program. Liberals are interested in establishing a diplomatic presence as they believe that it will relieve tension between the two nations. They find the traditional use of **intermediaries** like Britain and France as means of communication during negotiations to be troubling and unhelpful at resolving the situation and see that a change is necessary.

**Intermediaries**—*a body acting as a mediator, often to settle a dispute between two parties .*

### *Presidential View*

President Obama, who was born in 1961, is the first president to belong to a generation that came of age in the beginnings of a more multi-polar world. His solutions to problems tacitly recognize that it is difficult for the US to achieve moral authority in this fragmented arena. President Obama believes that Iran's build-up of its nuclear capacity is a threat. His recommendations do not, however, highlight the image of a world divided between "good" Western democracies and "bad" states, like Iran. So, while President Obama presses for collective sanctioning of Iran, he wants to include all of the stakeholders in Iran's future, including its undemocratic trading partners, like Russia. President Obama is also for engaging in direct talks with Iran. President Obama's stance is very utilitarian. He appears to care little about the finger shaking, or the image of a respectable and parental state punishing another.

President Obama considers Iran's nuclear program to be a threat to the United States, views its support for terrorist organizations in Iraq as troubling, and deems its denial of the state of Israel unsound. However, Obama believes that non-military options are still available. He is in no rush to engage the US military in Iran; instead, he proposes to have direct talks with member of the Iranian government to present deals that give incentives to Iran to stop its nuclear program.

## **NGO Perspectives**

### *The Heritage Foundation*

The Heritage Foundation is a conservative think tank that stands by the principles of free enterprise, limited government, freedom, American values, and a powerful national defense. The Foundation sees Iran as a serious threat to national security and believes that US's approach towards Iran should be assertive and uncompromising. Seeing current diplomatic efforts as ineffective, the Foundation believes that the US and its allies need to aggressively impose tougher sanctions on Iran and to work together toward containing the threat that Iran's uranium-enrichment program imposes.

Heritage sees two options for approaching Iran: militarily or diplomatically; it finds both options unappealing. The Heritage foundation is hesitant to engage in a war with Iran for several reasons, including the

fact that there is even less intelligence on Iran than there was on Iraq in 2003. Because it sees the Iranian government as able to be restrained, they believe that diplomacy is the best course of action. It encourages the US to see, to deter Iran's nuclear development, explaining that this option is the least costly.

### *Amnesty International*

Amnesty International, an international non-governmental organization based in the United Kingdom, is critical of the human rights abuses abundant in Iran, ranging from arbitrary arrests, to suppression of free speech, to abuses of women and minority rights. To address these human rights concerns, Amnesty International has relied on widely publicizing such abuses in reports, engaging in letter campaigns with the Iranian government, and passing United Nations Resolutions. One such resolution, introduced in October 2007, called for a global suspension on executions with a particular emphasis on Iran.

### *Red Cross*

An international humanitarian organization, the Red Cross attempts to evade dealing with the Iranian government by instead dealing with local authorities toward achieving disaster relief. Although the Red Cross does not take an explicit stance diplomatically towards Iran, it publishes reports on the projects that they have implemented and the lessons they have learned, one of which tends to be the fact that relations with local authorities allow projects to proceed more smoothly.

## **Possible Solutions**

### *Containment*

First introduced during the Cold War, **containment** is a foreign policy approach that attempts to prevent the expansion of a hostile power. This tactic involves isolating a country, which forces it into stagnation and eventual acquiescence to outside demands. It was used again both in the Vietnam War and against Iraq from 1991 to 2003. This approach is achieved primarily through economic, political, and international sanctions. In Iran's case, examples of containment could involve imposing sanctions on American firms that engage with firms necessary to Iran's economic sectors, such as the oil industry. Discouraging involvement with Iran would render it less economically powerful and would force it to **comply** with American requests in order for it to survive financially. As of June 2008, the US approached Iran with the strategy of containment; however, it has thus far been rather ineffective at curbing Iran's nuclear program.

**Containment**—a foreign policy approach that prevents a hostile power from expanding in power and influence.

**Comply**—to conform with or submit to.

### *Direct Diplomacy*

Advocated by Barack Obama in the 2008 United States presidential election, direct diplomacy involves breaching the rift between the US and Iran through direct negotiations. Discussions would center on finding a way to curb Iran's nuclear program through **incentives**. Some, particularly conservatives, consider direct diplomacy to be a form of surrendering to the enemy and explain that it is unlikely to produce desirable results. However, Bush has nevertheless shifted towards this plan. Iran has commented in the past that it has not liked the fact that the US does not deal with them explicitly and instead relies on European nations to engage in talks with Iran. With the proposal of direct negotiations, perhaps Iran will be more willing to compromise with the United States.

**Incentive**—*something that inspires action or determination.*

### *Military Action*

Another option, which tends to be more popular among conservatives, involves bombing factories where uranium enrichment occurs. However, repercussions of such a drastic action could make matters worse, as foreign nations are already unhappy with the US's independent attitude towards the world and the sense of superiority that it generates. Issues with pursuing a war of this type include the fact that US troops are already spread so thin and that the US has very little intelligence information on Iran. Therefore, use of military force would likely not achieve great success on this issue.

### *Democracy Promotion Programs*

Democracy promotion programs became an option in 2006. Implemented by the US State Department, these programs have involved using more Persian-speaking US diplomats when engaging in diplomatic missions with Iran. The State Department is also working with many organizations that have Iranian connections, and as of June 2008, the US has sponsored such missions for Iranian academics, athletes, artists, and other professionals. These programs do not necessarily aim to produce a regime change; rather, they attempt to create a change in the regime's behavior and an improvement in Iranians' perception of the United States. Some US political officials, such as former Vice President Dick Cheney, see these programs as ineffective, and Iran maintains that these programs illustrate that the US is meddling in Iranian internal affairs.

## **Questions for Policymakers**

A good bill should address an issue this complex by delicately centering on the big question: Which foreign policy option should the United States pursue? Additional questions to consider include: Should

the United States continue to increase its diplomatic presence in Tehran as it has recently, or should it pursue the strategy of containment as it has done previously? Should the United States continue to fund democracy promotion initiatives even though Iran insists that it violates its rights and others insist that they are ineffective? Is military action a viable option?

## Conclusion

Relations between the United States and Iran are very delicate. Conservatives believe that the United States should pursue more **assertive** policies, whereas liberals lean toward policies that involve diplomacy. Regardless of these differences, both liberals and conservatives see Iran and its nuclear program in particular as a threat to American security. Recently, the United States has moved toward increasing a diplomatic presence in Tehran, the capital of Iran. It's up to you, as members of the United States Senate, to decide the best course of action in dealing with this threat.

**Assertive**—*vocally bold and confident.*

## Guide to Further Research

US-Iran relations are very delicate and complicated. Further research can help explain some of these complexities and help you draft thoughtful bills that effectively tackle these issues. Below are a few sources to help you start your research.

- <http://www.state.gov/p/us/rm/2008/106817.htm>  
Check out the State Department's site for updated remarks on US Policy on Iran! The link above is the Opening Statement before the House Foreign Affairs Committee and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on the updated US Policy on Iran as of July 9, 2008, Under Secretary for Political Affairs, William J. Burns.
- <http://www.nytimes.com/library/world/mideast/041600iran-us-timeline.html>  
Look up popular newspapers, such as the *New York Times*, and skim through past articles detailing US – Iran relations. Above is a link to a chronological timeline provided by the *NY Times* regarding Iran and its relations with the US.
- <http://aljazeera.com/news/newsfull.php?newid=145158>  
Look up popular Middle Eastern news outlets to get the Middle Eastern perspective on the issue. Above is a link to *Al Jazeera* magazine with insights on US – Iran relations.

- <http://isg-mit.org/research/?id=40&cat=iran&stat=full>  
The Iranian Studies Group at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) has published numerous reports on relations between the two nations. Check them out by looking at the link above.
- <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB21/index.html>  
Provided by George Washington University, the link above gives declassified documents from the CIA starting in 1947 on Iran.
- <http://www.iran-press-service.com/index.shtml>  
Look up popular Iranian news outlets to get the Iranian perspective on the issue. Above is a link to *Iran Press Service* with information on US – Iran relations.
- [http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/publication/18449/why\\_everyone\\_is\\_negotiating\\_in\\_the\\_middle\\_east.html](http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/publication/18449/why_everyone_is_negotiating_in_the_middle_east.html)  
The Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government provides links to many scholars' articles on this subject. Look at the link above to see one such article addressing recent negotiations by the US with Iran.
- <http://www.jimmycarterlibrary.org/documents/hostages.phtml>  
The Jimmy Carter Library provides information on the Iran Hostage Crisis, which marked the decline of US – Iran relations. See the link above to read one hostage's diary, a list of hostages and casualties, etc.

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