



US SENATE II

US-Iran Relations Update

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Introduction

On February 11th, 1979, the US-backed Iranian government headed by Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, who had been put into leadership with the help of the CIA in 1953, fell, allowing the previously exiled Ayatollah Khomeini seize control of the nation and found an Islamic republic. On November 4th, 1979, the infamous Iran Hostage Crisis took place, as hundreds of students stormed the US Embassy in Tehran, capturing 65 American hostages. Five months later, after a botched rescue attempt, the United States formally broke contact with the Islamic Republic of Iran. Fifty-two of these hostages were held captive for 444 days, before finally being released. Limited official contact with Iran has taken place since, and relations between the two nations show little sign of a thaw.

Summary of the Problem

While the tensions in Iranian relations stem back to the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and the hostage crisis, the US and Iran have continued to butt heads since that time. President Bush famously labeled them a member of the “axis of evil”, along with North Korea and Iraq. Iran supports **Hezbollah**, and has actively, if covertly, supported insurgents in Iraq. Iran has stated that Israel, a close ally of the United States, should be “wiped off the map.” Most importantly, however, Iran’s nuclear program has alarmed US policymakers and threatens to shift the entire balance of power in the Middle East. With a nuclear arsenal, however limited, Iran could effectively balance Israel and the United States’ influence in the region. This is an outcome that most US policymakers find unacceptable, and the Israelis essentially refuse to allow. Both US and Israeli policymakers have threatened to use military force if necessary, despite Iranian protests that its nuclear program is for peaceful production of energy only.

Hezbollah—a Lebanese terrorist group responsible for the famous terror bombings in Beirut.

Recent Developments

In an unprecedented move, Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad sent a letter congratulating the newly elected President of the United States on his victory. Although Obama responded promptly to other world leaders’ congratulatory messages, Obama did not do so with Ahmadinejad’s, demonstrating from the outset that Obama was go-

ing to be tough with Iran. Thus far, Obama has indicated that the United States will be adopting a policy of **engagement** with Iran, a departure from previous administrations. Although, Ahmadinejad seems to be open to direct talks, soon after Obama assumed the presidency, Ahmadinejad demanded an apology from the United States for what he called US crimes against Iran over the past 60 years, such as the CIA-backed **coup d'état** in 1953 that installed the Shah.

Focus of Debate

Conservative View

Conservatives have been quick to indicate that military action is certainly a possible course of action against Iran and see little to gain from engaging in direct talks. Conservatives feel that a nuclear-armed Iran is an unacceptable threat to the United States, and anything less than a complete cessation of nuclear activity (something Iran refuses to discuss) is not an option. However, as it becomes more clear that Iran is not deterred by the threat of military action, some conservatives have been warming up to the idea of direct talks with Iran. As of July 2008, the Bush Administration had given some consideration to having an American diplomatic presence in Iran's capital, Tehran.

Liberal View

Liberals, too, see Iran as a threat, but unlike conservatives, liberals are more interested in negotiating directly with Iran, believing that such negotiations can lead to a cessation of Iran's nuclear program. They find the Bush Administration's policy of letting Great Britain, Germany, and France as **intermediaries** during negotiations to be troubling and unhelpful at resolving the situation. They believe that direct US engagement is necessary.

Presidential View

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. He has decided on a policy of engagement with Iran, meaning direct talks with Iran, if Iran "unclenches its fist." He has made it clear though, that while he wishes to talk directly with Iran, he will be very firm with the Iranians and make it clear that the United States will not tolerate Iran as a nuclear power.

Questions for Policymakers

How can the US and its international allies encourage Iran to abandon its uranium enrichment program, which Iran claims is key to its

Engagement—*directly negotiating and dealing with a nation.*

Coup d'état—*a sudden and decisive action in politics, usually one resulting in a change of government illegally or by force.*

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

energy plan and refuses to discuss abandoning? With **sanctions** failing, can diplomatic pressure and direct engagement help break the impasse between the US and Iran? Should the United States continue to increase its diplomatic presence in Tehran as it has recently, or should it pursue a stronger strategy of **containment** as it has done previously? US policy-makers also must consider how best to apply military pressure; if the United States cannot demonstrate the willpower and ability to militarily stop Iran, it will make negotiations significantly more difficult. Can the US build a coalition of allies to not only pursue a diplomatic solution, but one that will pledge to support the US militarily if the situation was irresolvable through diplomacy?

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

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

Conclusion

There is little debate in the US over whether a nuclear-armed Iran would pose a serious threat to the United States and its interests. After pursuing a policy of containment for decades, Obama's administration has indicated that there will be a change in US foreign policy towards Iran, beginning with the policy of direct engagement. As members of the United States Senate, it is your task to help steer the future of US-Iran relations, keeping in mind that with every day that passes, Iran continues its progress towards nuclear capabilities. This is an issue with serious time constraints, and the American people demand immediate action.

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