

# Oil, Israel, and America: The Root Cause of the Crisis

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There is no shortage of examples of historical points of friction between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United States to draw upon in order to illustrate the genesis of the current level of tension. One can point to the Islamic revolution that cast aside America's staunch ally, Reza Shah Pahlevi, the period of reactionary exportation of Islamic "revolution" that followed, the take over of the US Embassy and subsequent holding of Americans hostage (replete with a failed rescue mission), the Iranian use of proxies to confront American military involvement in Lebanon, inclusive of the bombing of the Marine barracks and US Embassy compounds, America's support of Saddam Hussein during the 8-year war between Iran and Iraq, the 'hot' conflict between Iran and the United States in the late 1980s, or Iran's ongoing support of the Hezbollah Party in Lebanon. The list could continue.

With the exception of the current situation in Lebanon, most of these "friction points" are dated, going back nearly three decades past. And when one examines the 'root' causes of these past points of friction, we find that there is no simple 'black and white' causal relationship which places Iran firmly in the wrong. Much of the early animosity between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United States was derived from the resentment most Iranians felt over American support for a brutal, repressive regime. This resentment, coupled with an uncompromising approach taken by the United States towards maintaining cordial relations with a post-Shah Iran, manifested itself in the furtherance of anti-American activity in Iran, which in turn hardened the posture of the US government against Iran, leading to a cycle of devolution that ultimately resulted in the severance of all ties between the two nations.

The animosity between the United States and Iran was further exacerbated by the US support for Saddam Hussein during the bloody 8-year war between Iran and Iraq. This support, which manifested itself by actually drawing the US military into a shooting war with elements of Iran's military during the re-flagging of Kuwaiti oil tankers in the late 1980's, in turn created the conditions which led to the policy of "dual containment" of both Iran and Iraq from 1991, in the aftermath of the first Gulf War. "Dual Containment" was more a product of the lack of policy between the United States and Iran than it was representative of a singular policy direction. The end result, namely a failure to achieve any discernable results, created the conditions for "policy drift," which by 1998 led to the adoption of a policy of regime change in Iraq, and the embrace of ideologically-driven national security strategies which expanded regime change to be inclusive of the Islamic Republic of Iran. These policy directions on the part of the United States took place in a virtual reality-deprived atmosphere, being driven more from the perspective of a domestic American perspective based on inaccuracies and misperceptions of Iran than they were from any hard, factual analysis of the genuine state of affairs inside Iran. It is largely because of this

systemic lack of intellectual curiosity regarding Iran that many in America, including the main stream media, find themselves divining models of national behavior derived from actions and events more than 20 years past.

Iran's nuclear program, far from being the "root cause" of Iranian-American animosity, is simply a facilitator for those who are predisposed to accept at face value anything that paints Iran in a negative light. The same can be said of almost every effort undertaken by the US government, post-1998, regarding Iran. A major impetus behind this trend towards rhetorically-based negativism regarding Iran is the influence exerted on the US national security decision making process by the government of Israel, and those elements within the United States, both governmental and non-governmental, which lobby on behalf of Israel. Israel has, for over a decade, listed Iran as its most serious national security threat, and has lobbied extensively to get the United States to embrace a similar policy direction.

A pre-occupation with Saddam Hussein's Iraq during the 1990s up to 2003 precluded such a shift in policy. However, while the deteriorating situation in Iraq since the March 2003 invasion and occupation by the United States has dominated the US national security decision-making hierarchy, the elimination of Saddam Hussein, coupled with a less than satisfactory outcome regarding holding to account the perpetrators of the September 11, 2001 terror attacks on the United States, created an ideologically-driven gap in the threat models pushed by those making policy in the United States, and since 2004 Israel has been successful in pressuring American policy positions vis-à-vis Iran to more closely model the positions taken by Israel, up to and including a characterization of Iran as a nation pursuing nuclear-weapons ambitions, operating as a state sponsor of terror, and possessing a government which is fundamentally incompatible with regional and global peace and security.

The Israeli perspective on Iran is driven by two primary factors: a "zero tolerance" for the acquisition of nuclear weapons by any nation deemed a threat, either real or potential, that is so strict even nuclear energy-related programs permitted under the Non-Proliferation Treaty (which Iran contends, and the IAEA concurs, is the case regarding its nuclear activities) are deemed unacceptable, and an inability to diplomatically resolve the reality of the Lebanese Hezbollah Party on its northern borders.

The Israeli posturing regarding Iran's nuclear program, and America's unquestioning support of the Israeli position, has nullified any chance of meaningful diplomacy in this regard, since diplomacy is at least nominally based upon the rule of law as set forth under relevant treaties and agreements, a reality Israel refuses to acknowledge as legitimate concerning Iran's nuclear ambitions. Hezbollah has further complicated the issue given the fact that it a) receives considerable support, financial and material, from Iran, and b) it has demonstrated an ability to embarrass Israel's vaunted military machine on the field of battle. National hubris, more than legitimate national security concerns, drives Israel's unyielding stance concerning Hezbollah, which in turn colors American policy pronouncements which list Iran as a state sponsor of terror, even though there is little in the way of concrete evidence to back up such claims other than Iran's ongoing status as a major benefactor of Hezbollah.

But the key factor in the calculus of what serves as the root cause of conflict between Iran and the United States is energy, namely Iran's status as one of the world's leading producers of oil and natural gas. The United States has, for some time now, placed a high

emphasis on Middle Eastern and Central Asian oil and gas when it comes to determining future economic development trends. In a fossil-fuel driven global economy, energy resources have become one of the major factors in determining which nation or group of nations will be able to dominate not only economically, but also militarily and politically.

In the “Power Equation” that gets factored into national security decision making here in the United States, fossil fuels play a dominant role. America’s interest in dominating the Middle Eastern region is driven almost exclusively by the energy resources of that region. Iran’s situation is further exacerbated by the reality that Iranian oil and gas represent a critical part of the future economic growth of the world’s two largest expanding economies, namely China and India. By leveraging its control over Iranian energy production, as well as the other major centers of fossil fuel production in the Middle east and Central Asia, the United States is positioning itself to be able to control the pace of economic expansion in China and India, a capability deemed vital when it comes to the national security posture of the United States in relation to these two nations and the rest of the world.

In short, there are many factors involved in what one might term the “root cause” of Iranian-US animosity. But the reality is all of the points of friction between Iran and the US could be readily resolved with viable diplomacy save two: Israel’s current level of unflinching hostility towards Iran, and America’s addiction to global energy resources. These two factors guarantee that there will be tension between Iran and the United States for some time to come, and place blame for the continuation of tension firmly on the side of the United States.

*Scott Ritter was a Marine Corps intelligence officer from 1984 to 1991 and a United Nations weapons inspector in Iraq from 1991 to 1998. He is the author of numerous books, including “Iraq Confidential” (Nation Books, 2005) , “Target Iran” (Nation Books, 2006) and his latest, “Waging Peace: The Art of War for the Antiwar Movement” (Nation Books, April 2007).*

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