

The U.S. & Iran: A History of Imperialist Domination, Intrigue and Intervention

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Part 6: The 1980s—Double-Dealing, Double-Crossing, and Fueling the Gulf Slaughter

For over 100 years, the domination of Iran has been deeply woven into the fabric of global imperialism, enforced through covert intrigues, economic bullying, military assaults, and invasions. This history provides the backdrop for U.S. hostility toward Iran today—including the real threat of war. Part 1 of this series explored the rivalry between European imperialists up through World War 1 over which one would control Iran and its oil. Part 2 exposed the U.S.'s 1953 overthrow of Mohammed Mossadegh's secular, nationalist government in order to restore a tyrannical client, the Shah. Parts 3 and 4 examined the impact of 25 years of U.S. domination via the Shah, and how it paved the way for the 1979 revolution. Part 5 explored the 1979 revolution and the U.S. response, including how both fueled the rise of Islamic fundamentalism. Part 6 exposes the imperialist logic, cynicism—and necessities—behind Ronald Reagan's 1985-86 "arms-for-hostages" gambit to Iran.

In 1986, President Ronald Reagan sent a personally inscribed Bible and a key-shaped chocolate cake—along with offers of millions in military hardware and a new strategic relationship—as a gesture of goodwill to Iran's Islamic Republic, then led by Ayatollah Khomeini. Some 16 years later, in 2002, President George W. Bush condemned Iran as part of an "axis-of-evil," and has since targeted Iran, openly threatened it with a military attack, and refuses to normalize relations.

This seemingly dramatic shift is the product of dramatic global changes and therefore different opportunities and necessities confronting U.S. imperialism in the years between Reagan's offer and Bush's threats.

But there is also continuity here. The shift from Reagan to Bush may seem stark, but both were attempting, in different circumstances and with different tactics, to advance U.S. imperialist interests—including strengthening U.S. domination over Iran and the whole region.

The U.S. offer of military aid to Iran was in the midst of the bloody 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war. This war was launched by Iraq's Saddam Hussein, with a bright green light from the Carter administration. The Islamic Republic had just taken power in Iran following the 1979 revolution overthrowing a hated American puppet—the Shah. The White House calculated that Iraq's attack would weaken the new Republic, prevent it from threatening U.S. clients in the Persian Gulf, and force it to release the 444 U.S. personnel that were being held at the U.S. embassy.

Reagan's offer didn't come about because the U.S. imperialists had come to like or accept Iran's new rulers. Far from it. The U.S. was stung by the Shah's fall and saw the new Khomeini regime as an impediment to U.S. political, military, and economic control of Iran. And the U.S. was increasingly concerned about Iran's efforts to promote anti-U.S. Islamist currents and play a larger role in the Middle East—such as in 1982 dispatching 1,500 Revolutionary Guards to Lebanon during its war with Israel to help found the armed group Hezbollah. In 1984, the U.S. put Iran on its list of countries supporting “terrorism.”

Fears of Soviet Coup in a “Geopolitical Pivot”

However, by 1985, the U.S. had an even bigger worry: that the Soviet Union could score a major geopolitical coup in the struggle for power in Iran after Ayatollah Khomeini (then in his 80s), died.

After the end of World War 2—and especially since the 1960s—U.S. actions in the Middle East were primarily shaped by its global rivalry with the Soviet Union, an imperialist power with a “communist” cover. This contention, including in Iran, had placed major constraints on what the U.S. could and couldn't do. For instance, one reason the U.S. hadn't directly or massively intervened militarily in the region was the fear that the Soviets would come to the aid of the targeted country and gain a new beachhead. And there was also the possibility that such a confrontation could spiral toward nuclear war.

As a result, during the 1980s, while the U.S. stepped up its military presence in the Persian Gulf, it was still forced to work through regional states—like Iraq—that it often despised and distrusted. Sometimes the U.S. was reduced to trying to play one side off against the other or use unreliable regional states as proxies. The Iran-Iraq War was a case in point, illustrating both the cynical depravity of America's ruling imperialists—but also their limited options.

Domination of the Middle East—for both its vast energy resources and its strategically central location—had been a pillar of U.S. global power and the functioning of U.S. capitalism since the end of World War 2. What made the prospect of Soviet gains so threatening was that Iran is what Carter's National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski called a “geopolitical pivot”—a country whose fate can shape global geopolitics. Iran is large—four times the size of Iraq. It is strategically located—dominating the Persian Gulf geographically with 1,000 miles of coastline, bordering the energy-rich Caspian Sea, standing between the Soviet Union and the oil fields of the Middle East, and linking the Middle East and Central Asia. And it has the world's second or third greatest oil reserves.

A June 1985 draft National Security Directive worried: “Soviet success in taking advantage of the emerging power struggle to insinuate itself in Iran would change the strategic balance in the area.” A debate ensued in the Reagan administration, and ultimately those pushing for attempting to open a strategic dialogue with Iran's leaders prevailed. National Security Advisor Adm. John Poindexter wrote, “We have an opportunity here that we should not miss...if it doesn't work, all we've lost is a little intelligence and 1,000 TOW missiles. And if it does work, then maybe we change a lot of things in the Mideast.”

The U.S. sent several high-level missions to Iran to attempt to work out a deal. Beginning in the fall of 1985, the U.S. began secretly shipping TOW anti-tank missiles, Hawk missile parts, and Hawk radars to Iran, first via Israel and, beginning in early 1986, directly to

Tehran. The immediate goal was the release of U.S. personnel held by Islamists in Lebanon. But the broader objective was building links and gaining leverage with Iran's rulers and heading off any Soviet efforts to do likewise.

What U.S. Imperialists & Iranian Theocrats Have in Common

Reagan's offer of "arms-for-hostages" also reflected an appreciation by the U.S. rulers of what the imperialists had in common with Iran's theocrats. For all its anti-U.S. posturing, the Islamic Republic's program was never about breaking free of the imperialist-dominated world order. Iran's clerics explicitly upheld capitalism and private property. Iran's economy was still geared to producing oil for the world market (80 percent of its government revenue still comes from oil sales), and it still relied on various technological and marketing agreements with global multinationals to do so. Iran welcomed foreign investment. Iran's clerics preserved (and in many ways strengthened) the traditional class and social relations which were the internal basis of imperialism's dominance. And they butchered those in Iran—communists, leftists, revolutionary intellectuals, and democrats—who were part of the struggle against U.S. domination of Iran.

Of course, for Reagan and his officials, cutting a deal never meant treating Iran with mutual respect and equality. The point was to incorporate and subordinate Iran in a U.S.-dominated order—through a mix of inducements, threats, and bloody double-dealing. The goal remained, as *The New York Times* put it in 1984, "that both [Iran and Iraq] should lose" and that their "mutual exhaustion" would further U.S. interests in the region. So in true Mafia godfather fashion, as Reagan was dispatching envoys, gifts, and arms to Iran, his team had also set up a secret intelligence link with Iraq, giving it near real-time battlefield intelligence to use against Iran. And Reagan himself sent Saddam a secret message urging him to step up the bombing of Iran.

In the fall of 1986, the U.S.'s Iran initiative collapsed (for a number of reasons, including deep distrust between the two governments and divisions among the U.S. rulers) after the arms-for-hostages arrangement was revealed by a Lebanese magazine. This, plus growing fears that Iran might defeat Iraq, led the U.S. to tilt decisively back to Iraq. It stepped up military and intelligence aid and increased its direct naval presence in the Gulf. On July 2, 1988, the U.S. warship *Vincennes* shot down an unarmed Iranian passenger jet—killing all 290 onboard. The U.S. claimed it was an accident, but the Iranian leadership apparently read it as a not-so-veiled threat: "halt the war or face further American attacks." On July 18, just 16 days later, Khomeini accepted a UN cease-fire resolution.

By that time, thanks in large part to U.S. encouragement for and direct aid in the mutual slaughter, an estimated 367,000 to 262,000 Iranians and 105,000 Iraqis had been killed, and 700,000 were injured or wounded on both sides.

Next: Part 7: 1985-2007: From Containment to Confrontation—Possibly War

References

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