



US-Iran-Israel Rivalry: Enduring Hostility, Uncertain Future

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Why has US-Iran hostility proved so enduring?

US-Iran hostility has now lasted longer than the Cold War

Despite transformative global strategic shifts and changing leaders, U.S. policy has remained remarkably consistent since the 1979 revolution

Hostility, isolation and containment have persisted as prevailing policies from Reagan to Trump

Direct and indirect diplomacy between American and Iranian officials did occur at different junctures, but never lasted long

Even the Iran nuclear deal of 2015 did not prove transformative

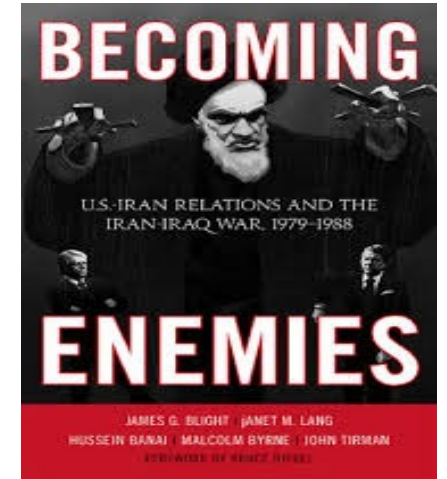
It's not only about Iran

- Iran does bad things: support for terrorism/armed militias, imprisonment of foreign nationals, missile and nuclear development, threats to destroy Israel
- But Iran's hostile actions are only part of the story
- Political constraints and narratives on the American side have also contributed to the animosity and inability to change course
- The belief that Iran is unchanging also limits policy options even though repeated policies have not produced positive results



Cold War considerations led to testing of openings but ultimately resulted in scandal and conflict

- The Reagan administration's key concern was protecting Iran's oil from the Soviets
- Strategic calculations and an interest in the release of US hostages in Lebanon led to infamous US missions to Iran in search of Iranian moderates
- Instead of a breakthrough the secret dealings led to the Iran-Contra scandal, creating a chill for future engagement
- US also tilted toward Iraq in the Iran-Iraq war—US officials viewed Iran as even worse than Saddam Hussein



After the Cold War Iran is framed as a “rogue” state as US policy shifts to “dual containment” and Arab-Israeli peacemaking

- The death of Khomeini and end of Cold War presented another opportunity to reduce tensions
- A short window opened with Bush’s “goodwill begets goodwill” speech but political costs were viewed as too high to sustain
- The Clinton administration focused on Arab-Israeli diplomacy and dual containment of Iran and Iraq
- Congressional action on Iran increased—sanctions intensified with ILSA legislation
- Some gestures by Albright in Clinton’s second term after Khatami’s election but room for maneuver was limited due to domestic considerations



After 9/11: from cooperation on Afghanistan to “axis of evil”

- After 9/11 we see the first US talks with Iran since Iran-Contra; overlapping interests in a stable Afghanistan after the Taliban
- Then Iran named in “axis of evil”
- Fierce battles emerged within the administration that limited engagement with Iran
- The US does not test a grand bargain offer in 2003; the 2006 NSS supports preemptive actions against “rogue” states
- Iranian backed militia forces kill American personnel in Iraq and seek to oust the US presence from the country



The era of “great power competition” and the JCPOA did not fundamentally alter US Iran policy

- Obama reached out to Iran in his first term, but little changed in concrete policies
- The JCPOA breaks the pattern in Obama’s second term with a new set of advisors
- But openings proved limited
- Trump’s first administration policies were dominated by “maximum pressure” and withdrawal from nuclear deal
- Even Biden did not reverse course
 - Attitudes only hardened with “woman, life, freedom” protests and Iranian drone sales to Russia



Is Israel the key reason US hostility toward Iran endures?



- Israel plays a large role in American policymaking on the Middle East
- But Iran policy is ultimately homegrown
- Israeli preferences are not always decisive or aligned with the US
 - Israel opposed the US tilt toward Iraq in the 1980's
 - Israel preferred US attack Iran, not Iraq, in 2003
 - The high-profile campaign by Netanyahu to derail the 2015 nuclear agreement failed
 - Israel was pushing on an open door in the case of Trump's 2018 withdrawal from nuclear deal

Israel's own posture toward Iran evolved over time

- Iran wasn't Israel's priority in the 1980's; Iraq was viewed as Israel's primary threat
- Israelis perceived an increased threat from Iran in the 1990's but focused on Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking
- The rivalry heats up considerably in the 2000s with exposure of nuclear enrichment facilities in Iran and the expansion of Iran's missile program
- President Ahmadinejad is elected in 2005 with his 'wipe Israel off the map' rhetoric
- Also growing concern about Iran's increasing influence across the region after the Iraq war
- Shadow war escalates



The Gaza war intensified the US-Iran-Israel conflict

- The Gaza war expanded to the entire region as Israel shifted focus to Iran as the leader of the resistance axis
- Israel's attack on a consular facility in Damascus in April 2024 triggered an unprecedented direct Iranian missile and drone strike against Israel
- Israel expanded its attacks over the summer and fall of 2024, killing the Hamas head in Tehran and Hezbollah leader Nasrallah in Beirut
- Iran retaliated in October 2024 with another direct missile strike on Israel; Israeli retaliation significantly eroded Iranian air defenses
- This set the stage for Israel's surprise attack in June 2025 on Iranian nuclear and missile sites, with the US joining the '12-day war' with B2 bomber attacks on hardened nuclear sites



Relations are likely to remain hostile

- Trump declared that Iran's nuclear sites had been "obliterated," yet considerable uncertainty remains
- Numerous redlines have been crossed as the conflict escalated from covert actions to open military confrontation
- Trust deteriorated further after the June attacks, which took place amid Omani-mediated US-Iran diplomatic efforts
- There is a rationale for renewed diplomacy, given Iran's weakened state and the preference for dialogue among Arab neighbors
- However, Iranian hardliners appear entrenched, focusing on deterrence and the restoration of missile capabilities
- Trump's dedication to pursuing diplomacy remains ambiguous
- Meanwhile, Israel continues to view the Iranian threat as unresolved

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ENDURING HOSTILITY

THE MAKING OF AMERICA'S IRAN POLICY

QUESTIONS?