

Why America and Iran hate each other

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ABC Radio National By Monique Ross and Annabelle Quince for Rear Vision

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Photo: For 40 years, there has been no formal diplomatic relationship between the two nations. (Getty: Darwell)

America and Iran have despised each other for decades.

The hostility intensified in 2019, reaching a fever pitch yesterday as the Pentagon ordered an air strike that killed Iran's most powerful general Qassem Soleimani.

But where does the bitter tension between the two nations come from?

Oddly enough, it began with the British in the Middle East during the first part of the 20th century.

It's a story about oil, the Cold War, the jostling for power in the region, and a hostage crisis with a diplomatic impact "somewhere near" that of 9/11.

Oil, the Soviets and 'a menace to Western interests'

Before World War II, Britain essentially dominated Iran's oil industry through what was then called the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company.

But the war left a greatly weakened Britain in its wake.

"Its economy was pretty devastated, and it came to rely on some of its overseas facilities and programs to a greater degree," says Malcolm Byrne, deputy director for the Non-Governmental National Security Archive based at George Washington University.

"And its most expansive area of interest was Iran ... so it depended quite a bit on that."



Photo: Britain once dominated Iran's oil industry. (Getty: Morse Collection/Grado)

Around the same time, the presence of Russians in northern Iran was becoming a critical issue for the US.

"North-west Iran was very much the line drawn on the mountains between the West and the East, between the United States and Soviet Union," explains Anoush Ehteshami, professor of international relations at Durham University.

"And the Soviet Union's refusal to leave Iranian territory opened up new concerns about what became known as Soviet aggression."

Under a US "containment strategy", he says, the Shah of Iran was entrusted to keep that barrier, and also "make sure that oil continues to flow".

But that began to unravel when Mohammad Mosaddegh, a "strong nationalist figure", became Iran's 35th prime minister in 1951.



Photo: Mohammad Mosaddegh (fifth from right) nationalised the nation's oil fields. (Getty: Bettmann)

Mosaddegh believed Iran, not Britain, should own and control the country's oil.

"That was the clincher, the critical point," Professor Ehteshami says.

In 1951 Mosaddegh nationalised the oil fields, and Washington saw red.

Professor Ehteshami says the leader was seen as "a menace to Western interests".

"It is in that context that Britain and the United States begin to plot to ensure that his government is short-lived," he says.

The CIA plans to overthrow a 'demagogue'

In 1952 the British were expelled from Iran, and diplomatic relations ground to a halt.

The next year, the CIA mounted a covert operation to overthrow Mosaddegh.



Photo: Demonstrators march during riots in Tehran in the wake of the coup. (Getty)

Osamah Khalil, a historian at Syracuse University, says there is some debate over whether the plot was about "a fear of communism" or "the issue of oil".

While the US didn't believe Mosaddegh was a communist, he says, it saw him as a "demagogue" whose reforms could "create instability that would lead to the rise of the communist party in Iraqi".

The other theory is that the coup was "really about the control of Iran's oil resources".

"These two may not be mutually exclusive," Mr Khalil adds.

"If Iran were to fall to communism, this would open up the broader Persian Gulf to communist influence and threaten the world's major oil resources."

Ali Ansari, a professor of Iranian history at the University of St Andrews, says though there was a "Cold War narrative in the background", the coup had a "very hard-nosed corporate aspect to it".



"The Americans had a fairly sophisticated network already in Iran, prepared really for Cold War reasons," she says.

"Basically they had set up a network of agents and others that were there, meant to be, in case of a Soviet attack.

"They then turned this network against the domestic government."

Mobs were paid, police and soldiers were bribed, and the prime minister was driven from office. The Shah of Iran was reinstated.

A staunch ally

"After Mosaddegh is overthrown, the United States now takes a major interest in Iranian oil, in a way that they didn't have before," Mr Khalil says.

"In this consortium that's created after the coup, the United States now takes something in the area of 40 per cent of the profits."

Mr Byrne says the Shah "clearly felt he owed his remaining in power to the US", and the Americans in turn felt they now had a loyal partner in the region.

Over the years, the US pumped a lot of money into the Shah's regime, and he was promoted in the Western press as a staunch ally. The Shah even received an honorary degree from Harvard.



Photo: The Shah of Iran alongside Queen Elizabeth at Victoria Station during a state visit in London, in 1959. (Getty: Popperfoto)

"By the late 1960s, early 1970s, the United States decides effectively, because it's bogged down in the war in Vietnam, that it really can't maintain its interests around the globe," Mr Khalil says.

In what became known as the Nixon doctrine, the US effectively deferred to local allies to contain the Soviets.

The Shah and Iran became "the regional policemen for the Persian Gulf".

At the same time, coinciding with increasing oil prices, Iran started importing arms from the US at a massive scale.

"The Shah is buying all kinds of advanced weapons from the United States, his defence budget increases something like 800 per cent over four or five years," Mr Khalil says.

"At the same time that's causing a lot of instability in Iran economically. There is high inflation, there's a big push from the rural areas into urban areas, there's a lot of dislocation".

The Shah was also becoming increasingly repressive.

"This is effectively an autocratic police state. Those who spoke out were often arrested or tortured. If you were lucky you got out," Mr Khalil says.

Much of that was pushed under the rug by the US, which had come to rely on the Shah, Mr Khalil says.

Through the latter part of the 1970s, opposition to the Shah's rule increased dramatically.

The turning point

Mass protests eventually erupted into a revolution in 1979, and the Shah fled to America.

"Things begin to unravel very, very quickly and the Americans are left between a rock and a hard place," Professor Ehteshami says.

"Whether they support this transitional government of Shapour Bakhtiar that the Shah had put in place, or whether they try and reach out to the opposition and therefore undermine the government of Iran."



Photo: Demonstrators burn pictures of the Shah outside the US Embassy in Tehran in 1979. (Getty: Kaveh Kazemi)

Iranians then began to demand the return of the Shah, so he could be prosecuted.

"I think this is the turning point in the worsening relations," Professor Ehteshami says.

"The Americans are honour-bound to come to the rescue of an ailing, ill ally of decades, and as they do, then we begin to see the Iranians take a much, much harder line."

'Somewhere near the impact of 9/11'

The American reluctance to return the Shah caused outrage, and led to a hostage situation at the US embassy.

Some 400 armed students took 52 diplomats hostage, demanding the return of the Shah, who was undergoing cancer treatment.

The crisis lasted for 444 days.

"From then on, this sense of suspicion has never really gone away," Professor Ehteshami says.

"Iranians now are convinced that America is against the revolution and that they are doing anything and everything it can to undo the revolution."



Photo: The British and US flags are burned outside the former US embassy in Tehran in 2014, marking 35 years since Islamist students stormed the compound. (Getty: Atta Kenare)

Mr Byrne says it is hard to overstate the impact of the hostage crisis, which "sent shudders throughout the American public".

"It might not have been as great an impact as 9/11 but it's somewhere near there," he says.

"We lost our big ally in the region. The Soviets seem to be taking advantage of all this.

"But then on top of that there is the undeniable breach of international law and moral and ethical behaviour of ... going into sovereign territory and [taking] innocent civilians, as they were seen, hostage."

During the 1980s, the war between Iran and Iraq isolated Iran from the international community, most of whom were supporting and even arming Iraq.

In the 1990s there were attempts on both sides for some form of dialogue, but they didn't amount to much.

How likely is a US-Iran conflict?

US-Iran tensions are on the rise. Here's what that could mean for Australia, the region and world oil prices.

In 2001, when the September 11 terrorist attack devastated the US, Iran again reached out.



"The Iranian population are very much in sympathy with the Americans here. Iranians are very keen to highlight that their brand of Islam, Shi'ism, had not unleashed this terror on American soil," Professor Ansari says.

"But that didn't really cut much mustard with the Americans, and the Americans began to brush all Muslims as antagonistic and hostile.

"And again, very soon after that, President Bush invades Afghanistan, and two years later in March 2003, the new doctrine of pre-emptive strikes and Bush's allies in the administration begin to talk about Iran being the next target.

"And this is terrifying, sitting in Tehran, and it is made much, much worse when President Bush declares that Iran, Iraq and North Korea are this so-called axis of evil."

From Obama to Trump

During the Obama administration, a nuclear agreement was reached between Iran and the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, including America.

"When a more accommodationist approach is taken, as we saw under Obama in the second term, it opens up a window for the reformists to emerge, and that's effectively what we get when we get the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action," Mr Byrne says.

The US has since withdrawn from the Iran nuclear deal, and adopted what Mr Byrne calls a "more confrontational approach".

"Not just in terms of rhetoric but of openly adopting a regime change policy by the Trump administration," he says.

"It's again weakened the reformers in Iran, it's allowed the hardliners to basically say 'we told you so, we told you they couldn't be trusted!'"



Photo: President Donald Trump announces the withdrawal of the US from the Iran nuclear deal on May 8, 2018. (Getty: The Washington Post)

Professor Ansari says "of course there are moderates in Iran" — but a lot of them are in prison.

"Those moderates were crushed," she says.

"Power at the moment is invested in the Supreme Leader and with the Revolutionary Guard and these are really the two axes that operate."

Professor Ehteshami says there were three fundamental reasons for Mr Trump's decision to withdraw from the deal.

The first? Internal pressures from "people in his administration [with an] inherent hostility towards the [Islamic] Republic".

The second, he says, is that Mr Trump is "incredibly hostile to anything that the Obama administration achieved".

"And if this was President Obama's biggest achievement internationally, then Trump was bound to go after it and to dismantle it," Professor Ehteshami says.

"When Trump comes to power, the Arab spring is turned into an Arab winter. There are bushfires in Syria, in Libya, in Egypt, in Tunisia, in Yemen and elsewhere in the region," he says.

"America's interests are endangered, and Iran is seen by America's allies, including Israel and Saudi Arabia, as the main beneficiary of Arab uprisings.

"And the more Iran is involved in Syria, the more it is involved in Yemen, the more it supports the Shias in Bahrain and inside Arabia and in Iraq, the more fearful and hostile America's allies in the region get. And while they felt that Obama did not have a listening ear, in Trump they found a willing ally in not just containing Iran but to try and roll back Iran's influence.

"And so when you get those three, inevitably Trump's strategy of an aggressive reaction to Iran wins the day."

So where to from here?



Photo: President Vladimir Putin has a strategy for Iran and sticks to it, says Professor Ansari. (Getty: Mikhail Svetlov.)

Professor Ansari would like to see people in the West "taking the problem of Iran much more seriously".

"I think people should focus on the issue of Iran and say where do we want to be in 10 years' time, where do we want to be in 20 years' time and how are we planning to get there?" he says.

"Our problem in the West has been that largely we've tended to be very reactive, we haven't really had the patience to deal with this as a strategic issue, which I have to say the Russians do.

"I mean, the one advantage of Putin, as unpleasant as he is, is that certainly for those rulers in the Middle East is he seems to have a strategy and he sticks to it, whereas the West seems to be at sixes and sevens about what it's planning to do and doesn't really have a plan."