

Iran and the Foreign Powers: Engagement with the Islamic Republic—A History of Intervention

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The current administration of President Obama has made it clear they wish to negotiate with Iran concerning its nuclear program. This policy, however, begs the question: "Where does one even begin to negotiate with Iran?" Every major diplomatic effort with the Islamic Republic, since the fall of Shah Pahlavi during the Iranian Revolution of 1979, has ended with little or no headway made, and has only continued to further the diplomatic divide and inflame rhetoric between the nations. The legacy of U.S. negotiation with Iran is fraught with an almost irrational disability to effectively cooperate, characterized by periods of absolute diplomatic drought. Whenever there is a demand or offer made on behalf of the U.S. seemingly the Iranians are convinced that it is some sort of foreign plot against them, or a plan to subvert their sovereignty. Due to a legacy of foreign intervention and forced capitulations, this is the mentality of Iranian negotiators and is exactly how the regime operates. This fear, almost paranoia, is now deeply rooted in Iranian history and has subsequently become a part of their cultural identity. Coupled with this viewpoint is a long national memory and inability to forget the slights of the past. It is this legacy that is at the forefront of every negotiation between the U.S. and Iran, making it nearly impossible for any progress toward meaningful engagement.

Although foreign powers have at various times in history dominated what is today Iran—from the Greeks to the Ottomans—it is the more recent period, from the nineteenth century onward, that has marred the Iranian national consciousness the most. The period of the "Great Game" between Russia and Britain in Western and Central Asia was seminal to the creation of this fear of foreign intervention. If you ask an Iranian today about their thoughts on either Britain or Russia you will see a reaction varying from mild discontent to outright contempt for both former occupying empires. It is a contempt that is still very much alive today. It was not long before the U.S. became a part of Iran's "interventionist" fear as well. By embracing the Pahlavi dynasty in the mid-twentieth century, and standing up his government, the U.S. was seen as puppeteers, interfering with both the will of the country and spirit of the people. The 1979 revolution changed that.

The Treaty of Golestan can be considered the first of many forced agreements that make up the legacy of foreign intervention. This treaty, signed in 1813 after the first Russo-Persian war, recognized the loss of the Caucasian territories to Russia. In [Confronting Iran](#), Ali Ansari's notes that, "Among [the Treaty's] clauses was the guarantee of the Qajar dynastic succession, with a suggestion that intervention would be possible if necessary to support it."¹ This treaty solidified foreign control of Iranian internal succession, giving de-facto control of all domestic policies to the Russians. However, this treaty paled in comparison to the Treaty of Torkamanchai, which was the result of the second Russo-Persia war. The treaty granted capitulation rights to all Russian citizens in Iran, giving them immunity from Iranian law. The idea of capitulation

¹ Ansari, Ali M.. *Confronting Iran: The Failure of American Foreign Policy and the Next Great Crisis in the Middle East*. New York: Basic Books, 2007.

was humiliating to the Iranians, as well as a stark undermining of the country's sovereignty. This concept of capitulations would come back to taint all Iranian foreign relations.

Further into the "Great Game" period in Asia came the 1907 Anglo-Russian convention which divided Persia into British and Russian spheres of interest; the northern and central Persian cities of Tehran and Isfahan fell into the Russian sphere and the southeast went to the British, while the area between them was made a neutral zone.² This served to further foreign influence in Iran by making it a hot zone between the respective spheres of influence of Russia and Britain. In 1908, oil was struck in the Khuzestan province of Iran, and the majority stake was taken by the British government, thus forming the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (later the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company or AIOC). In taking this majority share, Britain would dominate the domestic political discourse and internal policies of the Iranian government. The organization was set up with the vast majority of the profits going home to Britain and a small share going to the current Shah. From the British perspective this was a benevolent and profitable relationship meant to assist the Persians in a task that they could not have accomplished themselves. To the Iranians, this was an affront to their national pride and exploitation on the part of a foreign power.

The shrewd actions of AIOC made the British a convenient scapegoat for any Iranian grievance and began to fuel nationalism, finally culminating in the election of Mohammed Mosaddeq in 1951. Dr. Mosaddeq was a strong Iranian nationalist who through a combination of populist sentiment, anti-British rhetoric and charisma ascended to the position of Prime Minister in Iran. Upon his taking the seat, he proceeded to push for nationalization of the AIOC, after the British refused to agree 50-50% profit shares. Seeing what he viewed as two friends quarreling, President Truman sent an envoy, Averell Harriman, to mediate. Up until this point the U.S. had retained a strong and positive relationship Iran, pre-dating World War I; however, the actions undertaken in the few years after the election of Mosaddeq would dictate the relationship maintained up to and including current day.

After negotiations with Mosaddeq failed and Truman began to exhibit pressure on Tehran for a solution, a response was sent to Washington, and not one that would help resolve the situation. In early 1953, Mosaddeq sent a letter to newly-elected President Eisenhower pleading for aid, asserting there were other parties eager to assist in the situation if he failed to comply. The letter was meant to coerce Eisenhower into sending money to avoid the Soviets aiding Iran. The letter, however, proved to be the final nail in the coffin of Mosaddeq's reign and, shortly thereafter, a CIA coup (under the direction of Kermit Roosevelt) was undertaken to overthrow the Prime Minister. Upon Mosaddeq's ousting, Shah Pahlavi was installed by the U.S. as the leader of Iran. The overthrow of Mosaddeq sowed the seeds of discontent in Iran and made it easy for Iranians to lump the United States in with other foreign powers that sought to take advantage of the country. Gone were the days of the United States' very positive public appeal in Iran.

Having been installed by the U.S. and fearing the consequences of even minute disloyalty, the Shah maintained a very close relationship with D.C., inadvertently casting himself, to the Iranians, as "Washington's Shah." This special relationship was seriously

² Andreeva, Elena. "Travelers In Persia to 1917." Encyclopedia Iranica. www.iranica.com/newsite/home/index.isc (accessed March 1, 2009).

challenged in the early 1960's when the U.S. Department of Defense began to push hard for a status-of-forces agreement for American military personnel in Iran. After years of stalling, wrangling, and fear on the part of the Shah and his relatively docile parliament, the SOFA was passed. "With the partial exception only of an agreement with West Germany, the Iranian-American SOFA was unprecedented. It was a particularly severe application of the concept since it nullified any and all Iranian legal control over the growing American military colony stationed in the country. And it broadened the idea to include all dependents."³ Given the history of both Russian and British capitulations in Iran, the measure was met with widespread angst in the country and proved to undermine the legitimacy of the Shah. It was this point of contention that empowered a little known Shi'a cleric by the name of Sayyid Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini. The chain of events leading from this point to the Islamic Revolution are well known and need not be re-stated; however, it was not U.S. during the Revolution period that dominates the mentality of the Iranians today but, rather, the actions before-hand, most notably the SOFA.

Each event involving world-Iran relations is a study in itself, and can be exhaustively examined. When looking at the broad historical perspective of the Iranians, it takes little effort to draw the simple conclusion that the destiny of Iran has been dominated by foreign powers for as long as its collective memory has existed. From the moment that Iran began to interact with the Western world, the memory of foreign interference began to build. It is this memory that is infused in the actions, policies, and negotiations of the Iranian state, because to them, everything could potentially be a foreign plot to sneak back into Tehran. If the current administration truly seeks to engage with the Islamic Republic in a manner that will yield an effective policy influence, it must take comments like those from President Ahmadinejad, "We will hold talks with the United States if they come to us on equal footing,"⁴ and integrate them into our diplomatic efforts. This remains difficult, and rightfully so, as Iran continues to call for the annihilation of one of our closest allies and underwrites Hezbollah and Hamas to do so. Calls for equal footing, however, stem directly from the decades of foreign powers dictating terms to the Iranians and ignorance of this history will only be met with continued failure. Unfortunately, when it comes to diplomacy, the Islamic Republic is the gatekeeper and the U.S. has not yet found a key—or the back door.

³ Bill, James A.. *The Eagle and the Lion: The Tragedy of American-Iranian Relations*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989.

⁴ "Fars News Agency: Iran Ready for Talks with US under Fair, Equal Conditions." Fars News Agency. <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8704250449> (accessed March 10, 2009).