

## THE WIDER WORLD

### America, Iran's Contentious Relationship

By Diane Chido  
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The previous [essay](#) on the Middle East described the violent extremist group Ansar Allah (Partisans for God) in Arabic, often called “the Houthis” for their founder, Hussein al-Houthi, and why they are firing on ships in the Red Sea as part of the widening war in Palestine.<sup>[1]</sup> This group is just one of possibly dozens that are supported to various degrees by Iran and are often casually referred to as its “proxies” when they become involved in regional conflicts.

This can be true to some extent, but in most cases, they receive support and sometimes instructions from Iran, but essentially work independently with their own objectives, which often happen to correspond to Iran's own. The objective of this piece is to delve into the U.S.-Iranian relationship to understand why it is so contentious.

In the 1920s and 1930s, Great Britain partnered with the Shah of Iran to develop Iran's vast oil fields, giving Britain a controlling interest in the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC), which later became British Petroleum (BP). In 1952, Muhammad Mosaddegh, a longtime member of the Iranian parliament, the *Majlis*, was elected prime minister. Among Mosaddegh's initial acts was to nationalize the oil company to use the revenues for social services and domestic infrastructure projects to modernize the country.

Mossadegh was overthrown in 1953 by a U.S.-British covert operation. After some turmoil, the power of the parliament was reduced, and the Shah returned to power. A 50-50 partnership between the British and the Iranians was

established to share revenues from Iranian oil, which lasted until 1979. During this time, the Shah closely aligned Iran with the U.S. in the Cold War against Soviet interests.

The Shah's family became world renowned for its fabulous wealth and conspicuous consumption, which was one of many reasons his subjects became so disaffected. The opulence of the Shah's palaces and lifestyle cannot be overstated. This is illustrated with the photos below of the Shah on his gold and jewel-encrusted throne, as well his wife Farah's coronation crown made of emerald velvet and famously set with 36 emeralds, 36 rubies, 105 pearls, 1,469 diamonds, and a single 150-carat emerald at the center. For those who are curious, the Hope Diamond is a measly 45.5 carats.<sup>[iii]</sup>



*Shah of Iran on his throne during his 1967 coronation<sup>[iii]</sup> and his wife Farah's crown<sup>[iv]</sup>*

The stark inequality exhibited by the Shah's family as well as his increasing cultural and financial ties with Western countries rankled the average Iranian. By 1967, he began referring to himself as "the Shah of Shahs." This bred discontent among many Iranians who looked for alternative leadership in religious scholars. The most prominent of these was Ayatollah Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini, whose firebrand sermons decried, in his view, the shameful western ways of the Shah and other Iranian elites and championed revolution and sharia law among the population.

For his sermons, Khomeini was exiled in 1964, landing first in Turkey, then settling in Iraq until 1978. He was asked to leave Iraq by Saddam Hussein and ended up in France, living in a suburb of Paris. Throughout this time, he continued preaching and his sermons were recorded. These audio tapes spread across the region like young people's favorite music tapes and his message was heard by millions of frustrated youth across the Middle East and elsewhere.

The Shah's Bureau for Intelligence and Security of the State, abbreviated from Farsi as the SAVAK, kept tight, often brutal, control over opposition forces, but a fire blamed on SAVAK that killed an estimated 400 people caused ongoing protests to intensify, leading to the Shah to flee the country in January 1979. Sick with cancer and floating around as a refugee on his luxury yacht, the Shah begged various countries to take him in. U.S. President Jimmy Carter eventually took pity on the Shah and admitted him to the U.S. for medical treatment, which deeply angered Khomeini's followers and many other sectors of Iranian society. Two weeks later, Khomeini returned to Iran and was greeted as a kind of messiah.

What followed was the 1979 seizure of the U.S. embassy in Tehran and subsequent holding of 52 American hostages for just over a year. After a spectacularly failed rescue attempt, President Carter lost his re-election bid and the day Ronald Reagan was sworn into office, Iranian assets seized as a consequence of the embassy attack were released and the hostages were freed. All of this was part of Khomeini's Iranian Revolution, and the strong animosity between Iran and the U.S. to this day. As a side plot to the hostage crisis and Iran's defining move against Carter's re-election chances, evidence emerged years later that Ronald Reagan's aides negotiated secretly and illegally with Iran over the American hostages.

For most of the 1980s, Iran was locked in a war of attrition with Iraq, which did not want Iran's radical Islamic revolution to spread, especially among its own Shia population. The U.S. armed both sides of this conflict, which allowed it to continue with enormous casualties on both sides. To regain popular support after the war ended essentially in a stalemate, then-President Saddam Hussein annexed Kuwait claiming, much like Russian President Vladimir Putin has claimed about Ukraine, that it was a historical part of Iraq that should be returned to it. American President George H.W. Bush told Hussein that "this will not stand"<sup>[v]</sup> and the First Gulf War freed Kuwait, and left thousands of U.S. soldiers in permanent bases across the Gulf and the Middle East, including in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.

Enter Osama bin Laden, son of a wealthy Yemeni construction magnate who had moved to Saudi Arabia as a young man to flee justice for killing a neighbor's goat and to seek his fortune. Bin Laden the younger used his personal resources to support the American-backed Mujaheddin in kicking the Soviets out of Afghanistan after their 1980 invasion. After the Russians completed their departure in 1989, bin Laden saw that the Americans had no intention of leaving Saudi Arabia, which he viewed as Islam's Holy Land being despoiled by foreign infidels. This led to his creation of al-Qaida and the rest, as they say, is history. Thus, American President George W. Bush's claim after 9/11 that "they attacked

us because they hate our freedoms” does not accurately reflect U.S. historical activities in the region.

In Iran, the anniversary of the embassy attack on Nov. 4, 1979 is still celebrated as “Death to America” day. Recent Islamic leaders have toned down the rhetoric to say it means an end to America’s policies in the region, not a literal death wish upon the American people. However, with that kind of sentiment, it is no wonder we are not allies.

However, few may be aware that immediately following the al-Qaida attacks on 9/11, the U.S. did not just form its own coalition of nations to fight al-Qaida and overthrow the Taliban, but as Ambassador Jim Dobbins testified before U.S. Congress in 2007, the U.S. and its NATO allies joined and broadened an existing coalition with the same goal that included India, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, and the Northern Alliance.<sup>[vi]</sup>

This last was a collection of opposition groups in Afghanistan led by Ahmad Shah Massoud, the “Lion of Panjshir,” so-called for his skills as a warrior in protecting the Panjshir Valley from the expanding Taliban. Massoud was killed on Sept. 9, 2001 by a bomb placed in a camera and exploded by al-Qaida operatives posing as journalists in an effort to break the Alliance before the anticipated U.S. retaliatory invasion.

Ambassador Dobbins elaborated on the continuing collaboration with Iran, reporting:

In January 2002, the President [Bush] in his [State of the Union] address included Iran in what he characterized as an axis of evil. Despite that, the Iranians persisted for a number of months in offering significant cooperation to the United States. For instance, in March 2002, the Iranian delegation asked to meet with me on the fringes of an international meeting in Geneva that I was chairing on assistance to Afghanistan. They introduced me to an Iranian general in full uniform who had been the commander of their security assistance efforts to the Northern Alliance throughout the war.

The general said that Iran was willing to contribute to an American-led program to build the new Afghan national army. ‘We are prepared to house and train up to 20,000 troops in a broader program under American leadership,’ the general offered. ‘Well, if you train some Afghan troops and we train some, might they not end up having incompatible doctrines?’ I responded somewhat skeptically. The general just laughed. He said, ‘Don’t worry, we are still using the manuals you left behind in 1979.’

Part of the problem in the evolution of America's relationship with Iran is America's limited perspective and desire to characterize the world, as President Bush often said, "you're either with us or against us." However, diplomacy and international relations are rarely black and white. Experts like Ambassador Dobbins would say that the view of the Iranian regime as an oligarchic fundamentalist theocracy is too simplistic. The truth is more complex. While it has little similarity to Western democracies, it is more democratic than some of its neighbors and is less fundamentalist than Saudi Arabia, one of our closest allies.

While the recent demonstrations against the "morality police" on how women dress highlight restrictions and gender inequality, unlike in Afghanistan today, women can drive, vote, go to school, attain higher education, and work in their chosen fields. The parliament and president are popularly elected in real elections that take place on schedule, although the choice of candidates is narrowed by whether they are approved by the Guardian Council and not by popular primaries.

The U.S. invasions of Afghanistan in 2001 and of Iraq in 2003 with their subsequent long occupations were supported with U.S. air bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan and transit permission from them through and over Turkmenistan. The U.S. also had a close alliance and heavy presence in Saudi Arabia and was operating in Pakistan. Turkey is a NATO member that also participated in these operations. A quick look at the map[v] shows how this caused Iran to feel encircled by the U.S.





*Map of Iran and its neighbors*

Note how much larger Iran is than Iraq. While many in the U.S. are calling for retribution on Iran for the Hamas attack on Israel, there can be no consideration of a direct invasion, as this would draw all of Iran's proxy groups into the fight and would pale in comparison to our bloody slogs in Afghanistan and Iraq. This struggle will likely be fought much like the Cold War, through proxy battles and clandestine operations with technology and stealth.

The U.S.-Iranian relationship has a long history of contention but has recently become more intense as Iran has used its oil wealth to build powerful military and intelligence capabilities and support its allied groups in other countries. Its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps controls the internet and some large Iranian companies. Council on Foreign Relations scholar Ray Takeyh has posited that it is the most powerful institution in the country, controlled directly by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, who commanded it during the Iran-Iraq War. Some of the groups the IRGC supports include those listed in the table.<sup>[viii]</sup>

Main area of activity	Militia	Influence	Estimated size
BAHRAIN	Al-Ashtar Brigades	Strong	Unknown
IRAQ	Kata'ib Hezbollah	Strong	20,000–30,000
	Badr Organization	Strong	10,000–30,000
	Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq	Strong	5,000–15,000
LEBANON	Hezbollah	Strong	30,000–45,000
PALESTINIAN TERRITORIES	Hamas	Moderate	30,000–40,000
	Palestinian Islamic Jihad	Moderate	1,000–15,000
SYRIA	Fatemiyoun Brigade	Strong	10,000–15,000
	Zainabiyoun Brigade	Strong	2,000–5,000
	Quwat al-Ridha	Strong	3,000–3,500
	Baqir Brigade	Strong	3,000
YEMEN	Houthi movement	Moderate	10,000–30,000

Within the IRGC is the Quds Force, responsible for foreign and clandestine military operations. In 2020, the U.S. assassinated the Quds Force leader, Qasem Soleimani, considered the mastermind behind the various insurgent groups supporting Syrian President Bashir al Assad and organizing other known

partners of Iran's Revolutionary Guard violent groups attacking the U.S. and European interests.

The latest iteration of this intense animosity is largely due to the Iranian leadership's desire to expand Iranian influence in the region to become the local hegemon while keeping the U.S. and Western powers out and historically Saudi Arabia down.

While the U.S. was heavily involved in the war in Ukraine, China brokered a rapprochement with Iran and the Gulf States in March 2023. Some experts argue that with Palestine engulfed in a protracted war, and Afghanistan, Iraq, and Yemen are out of the U.S. orbit, and Lebanon and Syria are in disarray, this is a time for Iran to become a major player and it does not intend to let a crisis go to waste.<sup>[ix]</sup>

Iran and Israel are bitter enemies, but traditionally, Iran and Saudi Arabia have been acrimonious regional rivals. They are on opposite sides of the Muslim schism with Iran largely Shia and the Gulf States, Sunni. This animosity is part of Saudi Arabia's former intentions to make a peace agreement with Israel keeping in mind the proverb, "the enemy of my enemy is my friend."

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[i] "Who are the Houthis and why are they attacking Red Sea ships?" BBC, February 5, 2024, available [here](#), accessed on February 8, 2024

[ii] Hope Diamond Data, Smithsonian Institution, available [here](#), accessed on February 23, 2024

[iii] Photo of Shah Reza Pahlavi on his throne during his October 1967 coronation available [here](#), accessed on February 23, 2024

[iv] Photo of Shah Farah Pahlavi's crown available [here](#), accessed on February 23, 2024

[v] "George H.W. Bush Warned Iraq War Would 'Not Be Another Vietnam': Relive Newsweek's 1990 Cover Story" *Newsweek*, November 30, 2018 reprint of 1990 cover story available [here](#), accessed on January 22, 2024

[vi] Iran: Reality, Options And Consequences, Part 2--Negotiating With The Iranians: Missed Opportunities And Paths Forward, Hearing Before The Subcommittee On National Security And Foreign Affairs Of The Committee On Oversight And Government Reform, House Of Representatives, November 7, 2007. In his testimony, Ambassador James Dobbins, the President George W. Bush administration's First Special Envoy for Afghanistan, "who was intensely involved in talks with Iran concerning Afghanistan" available [here](#), accessed on February 23, 2024

[vii] Map of Iran and its neighbors available [here](#), accessed on February 23, 2024

[viii] Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps, *Council on Foreign Relations*, January 8, 2024, available [here](#), accessed on February 14, 2024

[ix] "The 'Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste' Crowd Strikes Again," *Real Clear Policy*, The American Enterprise Institute, September 09, 2022 available [here](#), accessed on February 23, 2024

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Diane Chido is an Erie native who spent her early career in Washington, D.C, returning to found DC Analytics, a research and analysis firm. She has taught Intelligence Studies at Mercyhurst University, Political Science at Gannon University, and Cultural Analysis at the US Army War College and has conducted research for numerous US defense agencies. She holds an MS in Applied Intelligence Analysis, an MA in Russian Language, and a BA in International Relations and Soviet Studies.



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