

2-22-2010

## A Road Over Rough Terrain: US-Iranian Relations

Gleaves Whitney  
*Grand Valley State University*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/ask\\_gleaves](https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/ask_gleaves)

---

### ScholarWorks Citation

Whitney, Gleaves, "A Road Over Rough Terrain: US-Iranian Relations" (2010). *Ask Gleaves*. 5.  
[https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/ask\\_gleaves/5](https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/ask_gleaves/5)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Hauenstein Center for Presidential Studies at ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Ask Gleaves by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@gvsu.edu](mailto:scholarworks@gvsu.edu).

## A Road Over Rough Terrain: US-Iranian Relations

*It seems as if U.S.-Iranian relations have been getting heated the past six months. Has the United States always suffered a rocky relationship with Iran?*

By Gleaves Whitney

For anyone following the news, the Islamic Republic of Iran is no stranger. Starting with President Obama's inauguration in January 2009, the U.S. has attempted to mend a half-century of sour relations between the West and the Persian Gulf. Under the auspices of "a new beginning," Obama announced in Cairo last spring that the U.S. was prepared to move forward with Iran. "The question now is not what Iran is against, but rather what future it wants to build."

Unfortunately, the current administration's attempt to mend relations with Tehran has not gone according to plan. After six months of cat-and-mouse diplomacy over Iran's nuclear program, current negotiations with the Islamic Republic bare a closer resemblance to a Tom and Jerry cartoon than to Nixon's game-changing 1972 trip to the People's Republic of China.

Prior to the administration of Harry S. Truman, U.S. foreign policy with Iran had been fairly uneventful. The actions of U.S. administration since the Second World War, however, have made Obama's job a Herculean task.

When negotiations between the British and Iranians over the nationalization of Iranian oil stalled in 1953, newly elected President Dwight Eisenhower feared that Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh's actions reflected pro-communist sympathies. To block further Soviet influence in Iran, Eisenhower organized the overthrow of the democratically elected Mossadegh with the help of the British secret service. Operation Ajax – led by TR's grandson Kermit Roosevelt – successfully removed Mossadegh from office and installed a pro-American leader, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi – the "Shah."

As the Cold War continued, future U.S. administrations would prop up the Shah, even as he grew increasingly authoritarian. Over a decade, the United States pledged \$1 billion in foreign aid to Iran, mostly in the form of arms. The Shah's cozy relationship with the "decadent West," and his attempt to secularize the nation, infuriated Iran's hard-line, conservative, Muslim clerics.

U.S. support continued even as the Shah's popularity declined precipitously. When Jimmy Carter won a closely fought election contest against Gerald Ford, he promised that U.S. foreign policy would respect human rights. The Shah did not have a stellar record in this regard. His secret police routinely tortured opponents of the regime. Other Iranians were put off that Carter offered a New Year's Eve toast to the Shah, stating, "Under the Shah's brilliant leadership Iran is an island of stability in one of the most troublesome regions of the world. There is no other state figure whom I could appreciate and like more."

On February 11, 1979, the history of Iran – and indeed the world – changed forever. Routine protests against the Shah swelled into a revolution, when six to nine million protesters (10 percent of the country) hit the streets. The Shah's rule was so paralyzed that he fled into exile, never to return to Iranian soil. In his place arose Ayatollah Khomeini, a senior Muslim cleric. The Ayatollah's first move was to found the Islamic Republic of Iran, using the shariah, or Islam's holy law, as its constitution.

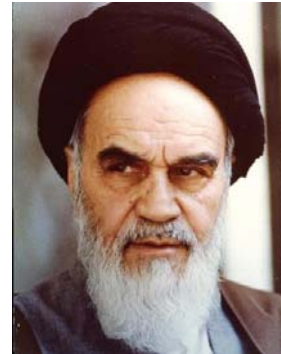
In November 1979, members of a student group loyal to the Ayatollah stormed the U.S. embassy in Tehran, taking 52 U.S. diplomats hostage. During the final months of his presidency, Carter launched Operation Eagle Claw to end the hostage crisis. The operation proved a clawless embarrassment – eight U.S. servicemen died in vain.

On Inauguration Day 1981, President Ronald Reagan secured the release of the hostages after a grueling 444-day captivity. While the release of the hostages marked a diplomatic victory for the U.S., relations with Tehran did not improve. In fact, the biggest scandal of the Reagan presidency – Iran-Contra – involved the secret sale of weapons to a moderate faction in Iran in exchange for the release of U.S. hostages held in Lebanon.

Worse, National Security Council member Oliver North used proceeds from the arms sale to fund anti-communist Contras in Nicaragua. After the Tower Commission reviewed the evidence, Reagan went on TV to apologize to the American people. He ended his presidency on a sour note with the Iranians. In 1988, the guided missile cruiser USS Vincennes shot down a civilian jet liner – Iran Air Flight 655 – believing it was an Iranian warplane. Two hundred and ninety civilians were killed.

The post-Cold War period in U.S.-Iranian relations has been characterized by sanctions, embargos, and failed attempts to renew diplomatic talks. After the September 11, 2001 attacks, relations worsened when allegations of Iran's sponsorship of terrorism were brought to public attention. Iran's alleged pursuit of nuclear weapons, and its expansionist foreign policy in the Persian Gulf, led the George W. Bush administration to add the Islamic Republic to the administration's infamous "Axis of Evil," joining the likes of Iraq and North Korea.

Now we learn that the Iranians are enriching uranium. Time will tell whether the Obama administration is successful in renewing diplomatic ties with Iran. If modern history is any guide, the road ahead is over rough terrain.



This essay originally [appeared](#) in the *Grand Valley Lanthorn* on February 22, 2010.



[Read more Answers](#)

---

Gleaves Whitney is the director of Grand Valley's Hauenstein Center for Presidential Studies. [Ask your question.](#)

*(Question from Austin Knuppe, Peter C. Cook Leadership Fellow)*