

Impasse in the Middle East

Captain Akshat Upadhyay*

The US and Iran have been at loggerheads since the 1979 revolution that overthrew the monarchy of the Shah and established a theocratic state under Islamic jurisprudence. The present tripartite stand-off involving the US, Iran and Israel is a lethal extension of this stalemate, with Israel adding the recent, but volatile flavour to the fiery concoction. There are elements on both sides of the fence as well as outsiders that are hell bent on ensuring that the US gets sucked into a long drawn campaign with yet another Muslim country, destroying whatever little credibility it has managed to build by not interfering visibly in the beleaguered Arab states of Libya, Egypt, Yemen or Syria during the Arab Spring. Israel has not helped the situation either, with the right leaning premier Benjamin Netanyahu insistent on treating Iran as an existential threat. This has added an ominous undertone to the already decrepit situation, as Israel has shown with considerable determination how it deals with nations it considers threats to its very inception, during the Arab Israeli wars of 1948,'56,'67 and '73.

The US-Iran relationship can be described as rocky at best. However, it was not like this always. Starting from the very beginning, the US and Iran first established political relations in 1856, when the Shah of Persia sent his ambassador Mirza Abolhassan Shirazi to Washington DC.¹ However, America became etched in the minds of many Iranians when, in 1909, a young American Howard Baskerville took-up arms in support of the Constitutionalists against Royalist forces and died fighting in Tabriz², during the Persian Constitutional Revolution of 1905. To this day he is revered by the Iranians. The cause of this revolution was almost similar to the one that destroyed the Shah regime in 1979 ie alleged mishandling of the country's revenues by the Shah and foreign domination of Iranian assets. The end result of the revolution

***Captain Akshat Upadhyay** was commissioned into the Corps of Army Air Defence on 13 December 2008. Presently, he is serving as Adjutant 405 Light Air Defence Regiment (Self Propelled). He won Second Prize in USI Gold Medal Essay Competition 2011 in Group B – Open to all officers upto 10 years of service.

was the reduction in the power of the Shah and the creation of the Majlis, a parliament of elected representatives.

The relations between the US and Iran were cordial, in fact insignificant on the greater world stage until the Second World War. Iran's Reza Shah Pahlevi, who came to power with the help of the British in 1925, was seen as being sympathetic to the Nazis and was forced to abdicate to make way for his son, Muhammad Reza Pahlevi in 1941. This was after the Russians and the British had invaded and occupied Iran, despite its declared neutrality, to ensure Allied aid to Russia flowed unhindered through the country. The post Second World War relations between the US and Iran can be divided distinctly into four phases³ : the first one from 1941-53 till the overthrow of Premier Mohammed Mossadeq; then from 1953 to the late 1960s; from 1973-79, when the Shah began to assert his will on his relationship with the US, which until that time had taken for granted the superiority of the US; and finally post 1979, when all diplomatic relations between the two countries ended.

The Anglo Iranian Oil Company, established in the early 20th century by the British, operated in several oilfields of Iran and shared profits in the irregular ratio of 85 per cent for the British and 15 per cent for the Iranians. Moreover it withheld its records for audit by the Iranian Government. Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadeq, who came to power in 1951, led a movement which sought to nationalise all of the country's oil assets. This was passed by the Parliament in near total unanimity as well as huge public support. The British vehemently opposed the move and imposed an embargo on Iranian oil in addition to starting preparations to invade the country. The embargo hurt the Iranians badly and the economy started deteriorating. However, the then Democrat President Harry Truman was in favour of negotiations to end the confrontation and therefore persuaded the British not to go ahead with the invasion. However, unbeknownst to President Truman, the CIA had already started a series of covert actions against Mossadeq and his National Front government since 1952.⁴ The US made a public show of empathising with the Iranians, all the while honouring the British embargo and keeping the hopes of the Iranian people alive.

The change of baton in the White House occurred amidst these negotiations, and power then rested with the Republican

President Dwight D Eisenhower. He favoured the overthrowing of Mossadeq as he believed that Iran was heading towards instability and chaos, a perfect opportunity for the Communist vultures to swoop down on the country and take it under their dominion. It might not have occurred to the Eisenhower administration that it was the actions of its long-standing ally, Britain that had caused the instability in the first place. The CIA station in Teheran, with the help of British intelligence engineered a coup, resulting in the overthrow of Mossadeq and the reinstallation of the Shah⁵ (The coup had failed in its initial attempt and forced the Shah to flee to Italy). The operation was code named Ajax and resulted in the imprisonment of Mossadeq. The invalidation of a perfectly legal government, which wanted to take control of its own resources and limit foreign intervention created an enormous amount of bad blood between the two countries.

The Shah, after coming back to power, was determined not to let events like these endanger his authority and began consolidating his power with a vengeance. Sāzemān-e-Ettelā'āt va Amniyat-e-Keshwar (SAVAK), Iran's brutal and most feared intelligence agency was created with the help of the CIA in 1957, and was instrumental in eliminating political dissidents, including the clerical establishment. The Shah also introduced the 'White Revolution', a package of social and economic reforms that sought to modernise the country. He developed close relations with Israel during this period, a fact unheard of, as many of the Arab countries had refused to even recognise the state of Israel. This, according to the Shah's calculations, was necessary for his survival as his neighbouring countries were increasingly turning into republics. The Shah started leaning towards the US for all kinds of support including political, diplomatic and financial. The US administration, breathing a sigh of relief that it had saved a country from the clutches of communism, wholeheartedly supported the Shah's regime.

According to historian Randy Bell, USMC(Retd)⁶ "American military and security interests in the Persian gulf area originated during World War II. However, it was not until around 1971 that the US became increasingly and directly concerned with the defense of the region and Western interests there. Prior to 1971, the responsibility for the region's security fell to the British, with the United States maintaining a supportive role. However on 18 January

1968, British Prime Minister Harold Wilson announced to the House of Commons that the British had decided to withdraw their forces from the Persian Gulf by the end of 1971. That action set the stage for America's future involvement in the Persian Gulf." The US policy in the Gulf was shaped by three successive presidents, i.e. Nixon, Carter and Reagan. The US believed that the British withdrawal from the Gulf would lead to the creation of a void which may be filled by the USSR leading to a situation where America would find itself totally cut-off from the Gulf, source of the largest amount of crude in the entire world. The fact that the Tudeh Communist Party had gained quite a following in Iran helped accelerate the formation of a foreign policy specifically for the Persian Gulf region. It was Richard Nixon, who initiated the twin pillars policy in the Persian Gulf area, according to which Iran and Saudi Arabia would form the foundations on which the security of Middle East would be based. Since Iran was the more powerful and influential partner of the two, due to its military might and the Shah's ambitions to make Iran the most powerful nation in the Middle East, and was willing to fill the void left by the British, it received an unprecedented amount of military hardware and technological sophistication.

The fourth Arab-Israeli War of 1973 changed everything drastically. The powerful Arab oil nations temporarily halted the production of oil, triggering the Petro crisis due to which the global prices of crude skyrocketed. Iran was also one of the countries that willingly participated in the collusion. Despite American pleas, the Shah refused to lower the prices of oil as he believed it would be beneficial to Iranian economy. This may be seen as the beginning of the end of the US-Iran relations which finally culminated in the 1979 revolution. According to an article published in the Middle East Journal in October 2008, "In 1976 the US and Saudi Arabia colluded to force down the oil prices, inadvertently triggering a financial crisis that destabilised Iran's economy and weakened the Shah's hold on power."

The Iranian revolution of 1979 that brought about the downfall of the Shah was initiated not by the clerics but by Iranians from all walks of life who wanted :

- (a) An end to SAVAK's brutal policies and end of political oppression.

- (b) Reduction of gap between the rich and the poor.
- (c) End to disastrous fiscal policies of the Shah.
- (d) Rejection of foreign intervention.

Ayatollah Khomeini, who had opposed very vocally the SOFA or the Status of Forces Act⁷ of 1964 that gave any US military personnel in Iran diplomatic immunity and was exiled for the same reason, made the revolution his own. He injected into it, his compassionate anti-American rhetoric coupled with the people's anger against the Shah and very adeptly steered the revolution in the direction he wanted. He seized power and declared himself the 'Supreme Leader' and ensured that anti-Americanism remained the most binding theme among the Iranians in the post revolutionary period.

The years between 1979 to 1982 proved to be very crucial to the US foreign policy towards the Gulf region. First came the war between North Yemen and South Yemen in March 1979. The US, anxious to prove its loyalty towards its Arab partners sided with North Yemen, which was also being supported by the Saudis. The attack by South Yemen was considered a communist adventure against a conservative government and the Carter administration dispatched a carrier based task force in addition to deploying AWACS aircraft based in Saudi Arabia to deal with the threat. Concurrent with the Yemeni war, the monarchy of the Shah in Iran was breathing its last. The Shah left Iran for exile in mid-January 1979, and in the resulting power vacuum two weeks later Ayatollah Khomeini returned to Tehran to a greeting by several million Iranians. The royal regime collapsed shortly after on 11 February when guerrillas and rebel troops overwhelmed troops loyal to the Shah in armed street fighting. Iran voted by national referendum to become an Islamic Republic on 1 April 1979. If this wasn't enough bad news for the US, Russia (erstwhile Soviet Union) invaded Afghanistan on 24 December 1979 on the pretext of providing support to the communist government of Nur Mohammed Taraki. Fearing a communist takeover of Afghanistan spilling on towards the Gulf, the Carter administration initiated the Carter Doctrine, which according to the President's own words,⁸ "Let our position be absolutely clear: any attempt by outside force to gain control of Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault;

on vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary including military force." America very clearly defined the Gulf to be its sphere of influence and warned against any interference by the outside world, particularly the Soviets at the time.

The eight year war between Iran and Iraq proved to be the proverbial icing on the cake. The war, initiated by Saddam Hussein, was an attempt by Iraq to oust Iran as the most powerful state in the Gulf region; in addition, to dispel any notion of resurgence amongst the majority Shia community in Iraq which was buoyed by the successful revolution in Teheran. The war which claimed half a million lives on both the sides witnessed a massive arms sales rush to supply both the countries. More than 30 countries including Poland, Czechoslovakia, the USSR, Brazil, India, Pakistan, Spain, Netherlands, Greece supplied arms to either one side or the other and in some cases both. The countries tossed aside their so called scruples and benefitted massively in the conflict which also witnessed use of Mustard gas by Iraqis on Iranians and their own people (Iraqi Kurds). The US, which initially had vowed not to take any side, launched Operation Staunch⁹, in order to stop the illegal third country transfer of its own arms to the belligerent nations. It also provided intelligence support to the Iraqi forces and reflagged Kuwaiti tankers (carrying oil to Iraq) as belonging to the US Naval Central Command. This brought it into direct conflict with the Iranian Navy during the Tanker phase of the Iran Iraq war. It also resulted in one of the largest naval engagements since the Second World War (Operation Earnest Will, Operation Nimble Archer and Operation Praying Mantis).

The most controversial event, however, from the point of view of both the US and Iran was the 1979 hostage crisis¹⁰ which occurred in the US embassy in Teheran on 4 November 1979, when student revolutionaries claiming victory of the Iranian revolution, took hostage 52 diplomats of the US Embassy Office in Teheran. This event acted as a *coup de grace* to the deteriorating relations between the two countries. Even after intense diplomatic negotiations, the kidnappers did not yield. America launched a military rescue operation Eagle Claw on 24 April 1980. However, the mission ended in a disaster and the death of eight US servicemen. The hostages were finally released after 444 days,

just hours after the new President Ronald Reagan was sworn in. Though the two countries did sign the Algiers Accords in 1981, the diplomatic relations were severed, never to be re established till today.

The Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 proved to be an extension of the long winding story that was the US Iran relationship. Israel sought to finish the PLO which had ensconced itself firmly in Lebanon, especially West Beirut, which had become the de facto headquarters of Yasser Arafat.¹¹ The PLO had launched many attacks against Israel from this territory including the notorious massacre of Israeli athletes during the 1972 Munich Olympics. The Fakhani, Sabra and Shatila neighbourhoods of West Beirut had in fact become, Arafat's quasi sovereign territory. However, soon after the invasion was underway, kidnapping of foreigners especially Americans began in earnest. The US was forced to compromise with Iran, which was suspected to be the guiding force behind these kidnappings and provide arms to Iran in 1986. The funds that flowed into the US due to these arms sales were diverted to the 'Contras' fighting the elected government of Nicaragua. This came to be known as the Iran Contra affair and resulted in a major foreign policy fiasco for the US.

Though most of the people are aware of the current developments in the US-Israel Iran crisis and may relate them to Iran's attempt to build a nuclear bomb, they may or may not be aware of the complicated history between the two main rivals i.e. Iran and the US. This article is a small effort to put into perspective the various events that occurred between the nations and the double faced nature of American foreign policies which have played a major part in advancing the confrontation to the stage that it is at today. In the words of Igor Korotchenko, editor of the Russian National Defense Magazine "Basically, Washington will use any convenient reason that appears legitimate cause for the international community to attack Iran."

Endnotes

1. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iran-United_States_relations.htm
2. <http://web.mit.edu/mitir/2009/online/us-iran-2.pdf>
3. www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/tehran/etc/cron.html

4. www.mohammadmossadegh.com/1953
5. speteforpeace.org/us.iran.timeline.html
6. www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/1990/BRB.htm
7. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Status_of_forces_agreement.htm
8. www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/1990/BRB.htm
9. www.iran.org/tib/krt/fanning_ch7.htm
10. www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/documents/hostages.phtml
11. 'From Beirut to Jerusalem' by Thomas Friedman, pp 119-120