

The Soviet Collapse, the Growth of Islamic Fundamentalism, and The Intensification of U.S. Hostility Toward Iran

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For over 100 years, the domination of Iran has been deeply woven into the fabric of global imperialism, enforced through covert intrigues, economic bullying, military assaults, and invasions. This history provides the backdrop for U.S. hostility toward Iran today—including the real threat of war. Part 1 of this series explored the rivalry between European imperialists up through World War 1 over which one would control Iran and its oil. Part 2 exposed the U.S.'s 1953 overthrow of Mohammed Mossadegh's secular, nationalist government in order to restore a tyrannical client, the Shah. Parts 3 and 4 examined the impact of 25 years of U.S. domination via the Shah, and how it paved the way for the 1979 revolution. Part 5 explored the 1979 revolution and the U.S. response, including how both fueled the rise of Islamic fundamentalism. Part 6 exposed the imperialist logic—and necessities—behind Ronald Reagan's 1985-86 "arms-for-hostages" gambit to Iran. Part 7, traces the escalation of U.S. hostility toward Iran—from the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 until 2001, when George W. Bush took office.

The Soviet Collapse—A Geopolitical Earthquake

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 was a geopolitical earthquake—opening both new opportunities for and new threats to U.S. imperialism. In one swift stroke, the main rival to U.S. global power had (at least temporarily) been removed. America's theoreticians of empire sensed a historic opportunity to forcefully extend U.S. global dominance and deal decisively with a raft of impediments—to create an unchallenged and unchallengeable empire.

This new mix of opportunity and necessity reshaped Washington's approach to Iran. During the 1991 Persian Gulf War, the U.S. not only drove Saddam Hussein from Kuwait but destroyed much of Iraq's military and industrial infrastructure—while Iran remained neutral. Afterward, the Islamic Republic's leaders took some tentative steps to normalize relations with the U.S., which had been broken when the U.S. Embassy was seized in 1979. The Ayatollah Khomeini had died two years earlier and a new, more pragmatic leadership under President Rafsanjani had come to power. And Iran was eager to attract new foreign investment and trade to prop up its economy.

The U.S. wasn't interested. The Islamic Republic was still an obstacle to U.S. aims on a number of fronts. The Soviet collapse hadn't resolved the knot of problems the U.S. faced in the Middle East (in fact it exacerbated some) and it opened up a Pandora's box in Central Asia. The U.S. was increasingly bumping up against Iran in both regions. And now with the

Soviet Union gone, U.S. strategists no longer felt the need to balance Iran and Iraq. Instead they could move more directly against both.

“Dual Containment”—Preserving the U.S.-Dominated Status Quo

The Clinton administration adopted a policy of “Dual Containment,” with punitive economic sanctions against Iran and Iraq, aimed at weakening and isolating both. Clinton and company feared that Iran’s regional needs and ambitions and the growth of Islamic fundamentalist movements could jeopardize the U.S.-dominated Middle East order.

Iran’s 1979 revolution and its anti-U.S., Islamist message still reverberated with people living under brittle pro-U.S. tyrannies in Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states, Jordan, and Egypt. The Soviet Union’s demise had weakened (sometimes fatally) many pro-Soviet parties and movements. This further strengthened Islamic fundamentalist trends, which were becoming the main pole of opposition to the U.S. and its clients. The Iranian revolution and then the Soviet defeat in Afghanistan emboldened Islamists who could now argue that if they had helped bring down the Shah and then a superpower, why couldn’t they do the same to the United States?

As the region’s main Islamist state, Iran represented an ideological challenge to U.S.-led imperialist globalization and “modernization.” The Islamic Republic represented a pole of opposition to some of the U.S.’s political objectives in the region, as well as a source of inspiration (and sometimes direct support) for various Islamic trends.

The Clinton administration viewed the U.S.-sponsored Israeli-Palestinian “peace process,” which was aimed at ending the Palestinian struggle and strengthening Israel, as crucial to undercutting anti-U.S. sentiments and strengthening U.S. control of the region. But Iran was an obstacle here—both because of its political support for the Palestinians and its material support of Lebanon’s Hezbollah and Islamic Palestinian forces.

The U.S. also worried about Iran’s potential to become a major force in the region due to its size, location, vast oil resources, and its efforts to reach out to global powers. The fact that the U.S. 1991 war on Iraq had weakened it as a regional bulwark against Iran added to these worries.

Iran, meanwhile, was eager to attract foreign investment precisely to expand oil production and build its industrial and military infrastructure. In the early 1990s, Iran offered the U.S. oil giant Conoco \$1 billion to help develop its oil and gas industry. This sparked a furor in the U.S. and led to the imposition of sanctions in 1995, blocking any U.S. companies from investing in Iran’s oil and natural gas industries (later expanded to punish foreign firms who did so).

A New “Great Game” in Central Asia

The Soviet collapse also had enormous repercussions for the U.S.—and Iran—in Central Asia. Suddenly, states formerly part of the Soviet Union possessing vast energy resources—Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan (today the site of the world’s largest oil development project)—were independent and up for grabs. Fierce competition was quickly underway between the U.S., Russia, China, as well as European powers for access, influence and control. Former Carter official Zbigniew Brzezinski warned, “For America, the chief geopolitical prize is Eurasia...America’s global

primacy is directly dependent on how long and how effectively its preponderance on the Eurasian continent is sustained.”

Iran sought to expand its historic, geographic, cultural, and linguistic ties with these new republics. It also sought inclusion in the new energy arrangements centering on the construction of oil and gas pipelines from Central Asia to outlets for the global market. Iran lies between the energy-rich Caspian Sea to the north and the Persian Gulf to the south, and already had a network of pipelines. So why not transport oil and gas through Iran?

As *Revolution* noted, “If the pipes go south through Iran to its refineries and harbors, then the U.S. containment of Iran is broken.... The U.S. vetoed any Iranian route and insisted the pipes run over Afghanistan—to Pakistan.” (See [“Afghanistan: The Oil Behind the War,”](#) *Revolutionary Worker* (now *Revolution*) November 4, 2001)

In the 1980s and 1990s, the U.S. and its ally Saudi Arabia were also covertly organizing and bankrolling anti-Iranian Sunni fundamentalist groups (including the Taliban) in order to isolate Iran and counter Iranian-inspired Shia Islamists, particularly in Pakistan and Afghanistan. These covert intrigues further fueled reactionary religious fundamentalism and sectarianism across the region.

The Clash Over Grand Strategy in the 1990s

U.S. strategy toward Iran was shaped by sharp debate within the bourgeoisie that took place during the 1990s over post-Soviet global strategy. The neocon strategy was articulated in 1992 by top officials in the George H.W. Bush administration (who returned to power under Bush II). It called for wielding U.S. military power to preemptively knock down potential rivals and establish unilateral global hegemony.

During his eight years in office, Clinton championed Washington’s “right” to act unilaterally and shape the global environment by force if need be, while emphasizing acting in alliance with other imperialist powers, an overall posture the administration called “assertive multilateralism.”

Clinton was not hesitant to use military force, as in the NATO intervention in the former Yugoslavia, the military preservation of the no-fly zone over Iraq, and the taking out of targets in Sudan. And he pushed for NATO expansion into the former Soviet Bloc. But this was still in the context of a more traditional “multi-lateral approach” (in which the U.S. always had the final say and veto power). Further, there was a considerable focus by the Clinton administration on strengthening the U.S. economic hand globally, and aggressively pushing forward with imperialist globalization and things like “free trade agreements” in the interest of U.S. finance capital.

Clinton never adopted a strategy of regime change toward the Islamic Republic, but while emphasizing the stick, also dangled the carrot of better relations. U.S. bullying was, in the words of Clinton’s “Report to Congress on National Security Strategy” (January 11, 2000), “aimed at changing the practices of the Iranian government in several key areas,” while “signs of change in Iranian policies” were viewed “with interest...”

The neocons felt the Clinton administration was squandering the victory of the Cold War, allowing events to drift and threats to build. They considered Clinton’s approach too multilateral (vs. unilateral) and his efforts to forge a new wave of globalization (in the

interest of U.S. imperialism) too economically focused. What these neocons saw was an opportunity to radically reshape global relations through a hard line, unilateral and vast step-up in the application of military force and an aggressive program of “regime change.”

Their view was that even though Saddam Hussein was not a major threat to the U.S., the Middle East needed to be radically reshaped or else it would keep generating anti-U.S. forces, particularly Islamic fundamentalist forces, which would get in the way of U.S. domination in the whole region—an objective shared by the whole ruling class, even while there were (and are) differences over how to go about achieving this.

This battle was intertwined with a sharp debate over the significance of resurgent Islamic fundamentalism, which had been sparked by serious Islamist challenges to the ruling regimes in Egypt, Algeria, and Afghanistan. According to author Robert Dreyfuss, there were basically two camps within the U.S. establishment: those who “argued that the United States had nothing to fear from the Islamic right” versus “the clash-of-civilizations school [championed by right-wing academics like Samuel Huntington and Bernard Lewis], which believed that the Muslim world was unalterably and fundamentally hostile to the West.”

George Bush’s capture of the presidency in 2000 followed by the attacks of September 11, 2001 led to the consolidation of the neocon grand strategy and the launching of the “war on terror” to carry it out. The U.S. war machine would be unleashed to defeat Islamic fundamentalism and take down states impeding U.S. objectives. Global relations were to be radically transformed, and America’s sole superpower status locked in for decades to come. Iran would quickly become a prime target in this war for greater empire, as we will explore in the next and final installment of this series.

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