

# The Last Word

## Unpacking Tragedy: Trump, Iran, and “Maximum Pressure”

Gregory Brew

In 1988, the historian James Bill published what is still regarded as one of the finest surveys of U.S.-Iranian relations. *The Eagle and Lion* laid out in 400-plus pages how the United States and Iran went from close allies in 1945 to bitter enemies in 1979. The subtitle, *The Tragedy of U.S. Iranian Relations*, points to a recurring theme in the literature, one which has grown more prominent since Bill’s book appeared thirty years ago. Misunderstanding, suspicion, and fate have conspired to keep the United States and Iran in a state of unending conflict. Yet “tragedy” does not quite cover the truth of the matter. Tragedy implies an absence of agency, or at the very least its subordination to surrounding circumstances. And as we have seen over the last three years, it is human action as much as fate which has brought the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United States to the brink of war.

There is, of course, the inciting incident: the August 1953 *coup d’etat*, sponsored by the United States and Great Britain, which overthrew the government of Iranian prime minister Mohammed Mossadegh. My research has found that U.S. policy-makers were concerned with Iran’s internal stability. They worried that Mossadegh’s nationalist government, which refused to negotiate a deal with Western companies surrendering national control over Iran’s oil resources, would lead Iran towards collapse and eventual communist rule. The coup was motivated by an acute desire to “save” Iran from a dire future—a deliberate effort, though one which would have countless unforeseen consequences.

Generations of Iranians, conscious of the CIA actions in 1953, looked upon the United States with ambivalence, suspicion, and in many cases, outright contempt. When the shah’s military rule collapsed in the late 1970s, the new regime led by followers of Shi’a cleric Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini denounced the United States as the “Great Satan.” Drawing on a century of discourse informing modern Iranian nationalism, Khomeini promised to preserve Iranian independence from further U.S. interference. When the Carter administration permitted the dying shah entry into the United States, furious students stormed the U.S. embassy in Tehran in November 1979. The hostages were finally released on January 20, 1981, after 444-days in captivity.

The hostage crisis continues to inform U.S. policy towards Iran. Indeed, the 1980s were a formative decade for President Donald J. Trump, who has made pressuring Iran a key part of his foreign policy. Notably, President Trump assumed office during a period of declining tensions in U.S.-Iranian relations. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), an agreement reached between Iran, the

United States, and the international community in July 2015, promised Iran relief from U.S. sanctions, so long as it restricted its nuclear program and limited uranium enrichment. On the campaign trail, Trump railed against the deal. Upon becoming president, he did not hide his disgust for Barack Obama’s signature foreign policy achievement.

Yet there was little strategic rationale for abandoning the JCPOA. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) confirmed that Iran was abiding by the agreement. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson warned Trump against pulling out of the deal. Experts agreed that a unilateral withdrawal without a strong justification would damage U.S. credibility and encourage Iran to pursue a more radical course of action, ratcheting up support for regional proxies and pursuing asymmetric attacks against the U.S. and allies like Saudi Arabia or the United Arab Emirates. But Trump hated the JCPOA, chiefly for personal reasons. The president came into office determined to undo the legacy of his predecessor, regardless of the repercussions. Advice from counselors dissuaded Trump until early 2018, when Tillerson and national security adviser H.R. McMaster made way for Mike Pompeo and John Bolton, respectively. In May 2018, Pompeo announced the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA. Instead of diplomacy, Iran would get “maximum pressure.”

The purpose of the new U.S. policy was opaque. Pompeo claimed that Iran had not held up its end of the JCPOA, arguing—without evidence—that it still secretly desired a nuclear weapon. Re-imposing sanctions, including a near-total shut-down of Iran’s oil exports reminiscent of an embargo imposed on Mossadegh’s Iran in the early 1950s, was ostensibly meant to push Iran back into negotiations. But the extent of the maximum pressure campaign, the stringency of the terms proposed by the Trump administration, and the apparent glee U.S. officials have taken in Iran’s economic woes, have led many to speculate that the U.S. aim is more grandiose: nothing less than the collapse of the Islamic Republic and the rise of new, pro-U.S. Iranian government in Tehran.

Could economic sanctions push Iran back to the negotiating table? Certainly not on the terms laid out by Pompeo in May 2018, which include restrictions on Iran’s missile program and its policy of supporting regional proxies. Pompeo’s terms demand Iran subordinate its foreign policy to the United States, in return for a chance to negotiate. No Iranian government, and certainly not the Islamic Republic, would accept such an arrangement.

Will economic pressure bring about the collapse of the Islamic Republic? Probably not. Inflation has caused

tremendous economic pain inside the country, while sanctions cut off access to medicines and other life-giving commodities. But the Islamic Republic is a robust authoritarian state with a vast array of coercive tools at its disposal. In 2009, security forces put down mass protests in Tehran. When sporadic demonstrations over economic hardship exploded into widespread outrage in November 2019, the Iranian government shut down internet access and sent riot police and armed soldiers into the streets. Anywhere from 100 to 1500 Iranians were killed by regime forces.

The legacy of Mossadegh and the Revolution imbues Iranian nationalism with a firm resilience to foreign pressure. Opposition groups supported by foreign actors have uncertain political support inside the country. Imagining that the regime will collapse due to outside forces is to live in the world of fantasy.

Iran responded to the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA precisely as experts had warned. In June 2019, Iran attacked several oil tankers passing through the Persian Gulf. On June 20, Iran shot down a U.S. drone, claiming it had entered Iranian air space. On September 14, an attack by missiles and drones on the Saudi oil facility at Abqaiq took half of all Saudi oil production temporarily off-line.

Since killing the JCPOA, Trump has been pulled in two directions. In June, he declined to respond to Iran's downing of the U.S. drone. In September, the Iranian attack on Abqaiq registered only a weak U.S. response. Trump's disinterest with Middle East politics, as well as his reticence to undertake actions which could potentially rebound politically, informs his moderation towards Iran's provocations. It is easy to impose sanctions—but a war against Iran would be costly, both in material and political terms, for a president. Yet Trump is bellicose by nature. While he eschews strategy, the president embraces muscular displays of military power. Advisors more adept than Bolton at navigating his temperament, including Secretary of State Pompeo, have steered Trump into an Iran policy defined by displays of aggression. The maximum pressure campaign illustrates the President's bellicosity, on

display in Syria, where a decision to withdraw is limited by Trump's ambition to "take the oil," in contravention of international law.

On January 3, 2020, a U.S. air strike assassinated General Qassem Soleimani near Baghdad airport. The Trump administration, which had been mulling the decision for seven months, claimed the killing was justified, arguing that Soleimani—commander of the elite Quds force and architect of Iran's foreign policy—was about to launch "imminent" attacks on U.S. forces in Iraq and elsewhere. In Iran, hundreds of thousands came out to march in Soleimani's funeral processions, a powerful display of Iranian nationalism, despite Soleimani's bloody legacy and the simmering discontent towards the regime. An Iranian retaliatory missile strike in Iraq killed no Americans, though dozens were injured. President Trump—anxious to avoid further escalation and contented with his show of force *vis-à-vis* Soleimani—steered away from launching additional strikes.

"Tragic" implies the unavoidable. But to characterize the current course of U.S.-Iranian relations as a tragedy would be to elide the very human choices lying at its center. In Tehran, a brutal authoritarian regime rewards cronyism and incompetence while punishing dissent and free expression. In Washington, a mercurial president flexes his muscles as advisors push a punishing array of economic sanctions aimed at a tantalizing but ultimately fantastical goal—regime change in Iran.

It may be that Pompeo and Trump "stand with the Iranian people," as they often claim—that maximum pressure, the travel ban, restrictions on humanitarian relief, and economic punishment are meant to free the Iranian people from an authoritarian government. If so, it would echo President Eisenhower's claim in the aftermath of the 1953 coup: "Whatever we have done, good or bad...we have saved Iran from communism." That is the true tragedy—that the people of Iran must be made to suffer, not only from the vicious repression of their own government, but from the righteous fury of an angry superpower.