

Saudis may hold key to resolving conflict

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Few nations in recent decades have had as cantankerous a relationship with the United States as Iran. Many Iranians cannot forgive Washington for supporting the 1953 coup, which replaced the democratically elected government of Muhammad Mussadiq with one headed by Iran's monarch, Muhammad Reza Shah.

Nor have Americans forgotten the 1979 Iranian Revolution, which toppled the Shah and paved the way for the emergence of Iran's Islamic government under the leadership of the Shi'a cleric, the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

Inspired in part by Khomeini's anti-American rhetoric, young Iranian activists stormed the U.S. Embassy in Tehran on Nov. 4, 1979, and took more than 50 U.S. diplomats hostage. When U.S. diplomacy failed to release the hostages, President Carter suspended U.S. diplomatic relations with Iran and ordered a military operation to free the hostages. That operation failed disastrously, with the loss of eight U.S. soldiers. In November 1980, Carter lost his bid for re-election to Ronald Reagan. It was not until Jan. 20, 1981 — Reagan's first day in office — that the U.S. diplomats were released after 444 days in captivity.

Today, Washington and Tehran face their worst political crisis since the Iranian Revolution. Although Bush administration officials have denied that they intend to attack Iran, investigative journalist Seymour Hersh has written that the Pentagon is planning a war with Iran this spring. Other analysts don't believe a war is imminent, but agree tensions are high due to Iran's nuclear program, alleged Iranian involvement in Iraq, instability in Lebanon, and pressure from U.S. allies to check Iranian power. Importantly, a U.S. attack on Iran could threaten the stability of the global economy because of Iran's proximity to Saudi Arabia and the other major Arab oil-producing states.

Enemies' shared goals

Still, it is worth remembering that both Tehran and Washington wish to stabilize Iraq and end the civil war there. Both governments also aim to combat international narcotics, al-Qaida, and the resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan. In addition, U.S. and Iranian officials reportedly cooperated closely during the 2001 U.S. invasion of Afghanistan.

While Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad often steals headlines with his fiery rhetoric, he holds little direct power and may be impeached by Iran's legislature. In addition, his supporters fared poorly in recent elections. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's spiritual leader and highest political authority, recently hinted at his displeasure with Ahmadinejad's handling of the nuclear issue.

Ahmadinejad has already visited the United States' close ally, Saudi Arabia. U.S. and Iranian officials will attend a regional summit in Baghdad on Saturday. Saudi Arabia has sought to improve its relations with Iran and could serve as a diplomatic bridge.

Saudi Arabia has also sought to solve conflicts in Lebanon and the Palestinian territories. It has been said for many years that the road to peace in the Middle East runs through Jerusalem. In the future, that road and U.S.-Iranian ties may run through the Saudi capital, Riyadh.

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