

Brief history of Iran-US relations

The difference between perceived history and actual figures

by Larry C. Johnson,* USA



Larry C. Johnson.
(Picture ma)

(CH-S) Iran is currently back in the geopolitical spotlight. Contrary to all international legal agreements and conventions, the US administration, together with the Israeli government and the silence of "the West", is considering further military action

against the country.

Many Americans are under the misconception that thousands of US citizens have died because of Iran – or, more precisely, because of its alleged "terrorist regime". In Europe, there is a perception that the Iranian government, also contemptuously referred to as a "mullah regime" is fundamentally oppressing all women in the country. Regardless of the actual circumstances, both prejudices are being used to justify possible military action. US journalist and military expert Larry Johnson reviews the past 45 years of history between the US and Iran.

Iran's anger with the US begins in 1953, when the democratically elected President, Mohammad Mossadegh, was ousted from office in a CIA- and MI6-backed coup on 19 August 1953. The event is commonly referred to in Iran as the "28 Mordad" coup, after the corresponding date in the Iranian calendar.

Jump ahead to 1979, when the Iranian Revolution toppled the US-backed Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, ushered in the Islamic Republic under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. The revolution stemmed from deep-seated grievances against



Vakil Mosque in Shiraz. (Picture ro)

Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who had ruled since 1941 as an autocratic monarch closely aligned with the West, particularly the United States and Britain. The Islamic Revolution was fuelled by a variety of factors:

Repression and autocracy – The Shah's regime used secret police (SAVAK) to suppress dissent, political parties, and opposition figures.

Rapid Westernization – His White Revolution (launched in 1963) promoted land reform, women's rights, and modernization, but alienated traditional landowners, the clergy (ulama), and conservative segments of society who saw it as eroding Islamic values and cultural identity.

Economic inequality and inflation – Oil wealth boomed in the 1970s, but benefits were unevenly distributed, leading to corruption, urban migration, and economic hardship for many.

Foreign influence – Resentment lingered from the 1953 CIA-backed coup that restored the Shah after ousting Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, who had nationalized oil.

Religious revival – Shi'a Islam provided a unifying force against perceived secularism and imperialism.

This seismic shift severed diplomatic ties, with the US imposing sanctions and viewing the new regime as a threat to regional stability and American interests in the Middle East. Tensions peaked with the Iran Hostage Crisis (November 1979–January 1981), when students seized the US Embassy in Tehran, holding 52 Americans for 444 days – a direct response to US support for the Shah. The hostage crisis at the US Embassy in Tehran, lasted 444 days, deepened the

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enmity, setting the stage for decades of confrontation.

Iraq–Iran War (First Gulf War) and the use of chemical weapons

As tensions simmered, the Iraqi leader *Saddam Hussein*, sensing weakness in post-revolutionary Iran and with the encouragement of the US, launched a full-scale invasion of Iran. Though the US did not directly orchestrate the assault, Washington quickly tilted toward Baghdad, providing critical military and intelligence support to prevent an Iranian victory, fearing that it could destabilize the Gulf.

Billions in economic aid, satellite intelligence, and dual-use technology flowed to Iraq, bolstering its war machine. By 1983, as the conflict dragged into a brutal stalemate, Iraq escalated with chemical weapons, deploying mustard gas and nerve agents like tabun against Iranian troops and civilians. The US government facilitated Iraq's chemical weapons program. Iraq began producing small quantities of mustard blister agent as early as 1981 (about 10 metric tons initially), with production ramping up significantly by the mid-1980s.

The most documented US-linked precursor exports involved *thiodiglycol* (TDG), a key ingredient for producing *mustard gas* (sulfur mustard). American companies, with *US Department of Commerce* export licenses, supplied hundreds of tons of TDG and related dual-use chemicals to Iraq starting in the mid-1980s. Exports of these precursors by US firms (notably *Alcolac International of Maryland*, among others) occurred primarily from 1985 through 1989, though some shipments dated back to 1987–1988 for specific large consignments routed through intermediaries (e.g., via Jordan or Europe to disguise the final destination). By 1987, Iraq's mustard agent production had increased dramatically (90-fold from 1981 levels), aided in part by these late-war supplies of TDG from two American companies, totalling hundreds of tons.

The US was fully aware of the carnage being inflicted on the Iranians, and continued its backing, sharing battle plans, providing intelligence (my deceased friend, retired Army Colonel *W. Patrick Lang*, personally carried US intelligence to the Iraqi General Staff in 1988 and 1989) and supplying precursor chemical compounds that were weaponized – despite international bans

later imposed. US actions prolonged the war, which claimed at least 500,000 Iranian lives, leaving scars of poison and fire across Iran's battlefields. And the American public still wonders why Iran chants *Death to America*.

Lebanon – another chapter of US-Iranian friction

Meanwhile, across the Mediterranean, another chapter of US-Iranian friction was ignited in Lebanon amid its civil war when the Israeli army invaded Lebanon on 6 June 1982, which catalysed the formation of Hezbollah as an armed resistance movement. Hezbollah, a Shi'a movement, was backed and trained by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in the Bekaa Valley. Two months later – in August – the US joined a multinational peacekeeping force in Lebanon, deploying Marines to Beirut ostensibly to stabilize the fractured nation and support the pro-Western government. But American forces soon shed their neutral facade. Naval bombardments from US warships, including the USS *New Jersey*, targeted Druze and Shiite militias aligned with Syrian and Iranian interests, killing civilians and escalating the conflict.

The US actions were correctly perceived as partisan intervention and provoked fierce retaliation from Lebanese-based groups, which included the newly-formed Hezbollah and AMAL, a Shi'a militia established in 1974 by the charismatic Iranian-born Shi'a cleric, Imam *Musa al-Sadr*, and politician *Hussein el-Husseini*.

On 23 October 1983, a suicide truck bomber struck the US Marine barracks, killing 241 American service members in one of the deadliest attacks on US forces since World War II. The bombing, linked to Iranian directives and carried out by AMAL, forced a US withdrawal in 1984, marking a humiliating retreat and hardening anti-Iranian resolve in Washington.

Decades later, the saga evolved into covert shadows. The *Mujahedin-e Khalq* (MEK), an Iranian opposition group with a Marxist-Islamist ideology, had long waged guerrilla warfare against the Islamic Republic, including assassinations and bombings that killed thousands. Designated as terrorist organization by the US in 1997 for attacks that included killing Americans in the 1970s, the MEK found unlikely patrons in Washington after the 2003 Iraq invasion.¹

US forces disarmed but protected MEK camps in Iraq, and allegations surfaced that the CIA and

the *Joint Special Operations Command* (JSOC) trained MEK operatives for cross-border sabotage and intelligence operations inside Iran.

By the 2010s, amid nuclear tensions, the MEK – delisted as terrorists in 2012 after aggressive lobbying – allegedly conducted assassinations of Iranian scientists and terrorist attacks, with tacit US support to undermine Tehran's regime. According to open sources between 2007 and 2012 there were five Iranian scientists assassinated that were clearly linked to Iran's nuclear or related military programs inside Iran. This shadowy alliance exemplified the enduring US strategy: containment through proxies, even if it meant embracing terrorists.

Number of Americans killed by terrorism

I want to deal with the actual numbers of Americans killed by Iranian *terrorism*. In defining terrorism, I use *Bibi Netanyahu's* definition that he gave to *William F. Buckley* in a 1987 interview: "*Terrorism is the use of violence against CIVILIANS for political purposes.*"

The number of Americans killed directly by Iran (meaning actions carried out by Iranian state forces, such as the *Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps* (IRGC), without intermediaries like Hezbollah, Iraqi militias, Hamas, Houthis, or other proxies) since the 1979 Islamic Revolution is *very low*, and credible historical sources point to *zero confirmed fatalities* from purely direct Iranian military or terrorist operations targeting Americans in that timeframe.

What about Iranian proxy attacks on civilians? Core confirmed civilian deaths from major proxies (primarily Hezbollah's early attacks and Hamas operations) is estimated at 50–100+, depending on inclusion of dual citizens and less-documented cases, during the past 46 years.

Now let's examine the number of US military deaths attributed to Iranian proxies – Note, these are not acts of terrorism, these are attacks on legitimate military targets. The number of US military deaths attributed to Iranian proxies (groups funded, trained, armed, or directed by Iran's *Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps* (IRGC), such as Hezbollah, various Iraqi Shia militias like Kata'ib Hezbollah and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, and others) since 1979 is estimated in the hundreds to over 1,000, depending on the source and scope of attribution. There is no single, universally agreed-upon official cumulative figure from the US government that encompasses all incidents,

but reliable estimates from Pentagon reports, declassified documents, think tanks (e.g., *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*/FDD), and court rulings provide the following breakdown:

1983 Beirut Marine Barracks Bombing (Lebanon): Carried out by *Islamic Jihad* (an early Hezbollah precursor, backed and directed by Iran). This suicide truck bombing killed 241 US service members (primarily Marines, plus Navy and Army personnel). US courts and intelligence have held Iran responsible for directing the attack through its proxy.

Iraq War (2003–2011): Iranian-backed Shia militias, supplied with weapons like *explosively formed penetrators* (EFPs), training, and funding by the IRGC-Quds Force, are attributed with killing at least 603 US troops (per revised 2019 Pentagon estimates; earlier figures cited ~500). This accounts for roughly 17% of all US combat deaths in Iraq during that period. Some sources (e.g., older analyses) suggest the toll could exceed 1,000 when including indirect or harder-to-attribute cases.

January 2024 drone attack by Kata'ib Hezbollah (Iran-backed Iraqi militia) on *Tower 22 base* in Jordan: Killed 3 U.S. service members and wounded dozens.

Iraqi and Afghan civilians killed by the USA

Now let's look at the *civilian death tolls* inflicted by the US in Iraq and Afghanistan in the 21st Century. The most reliable source for directly attributed deaths is the *Iraq Body Count* (IBC) project, which compiles cross-verified media reports, official records, and other sources. According to the IBC documented violent civilian deaths (2003–present) are an estimated 150,000–210,000 (with totals reaching 187,000–211,000 by recent updates, including post-2016).

Estimating Afghan civilian deaths attributed to the US-led coalition forces (primarily the United States and NATO/ISAF partners) from the 2001 invasion through the 2021 withdrawal is difficult because there is no comprehensive, publicly available database equivalent to *Iraq Body Count* (IBC) for Afghanistan. Instead, Afghanistan relied heavily on *United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan* (UNAMA) reports starting in 2009, which provide documented (not exhaustive) figures, often with breakdowns by perpetrator. Total documented civilian deaths (all causes, 2001–2021) are an estimated 46,000 (per *Costs of War Project* and *Wikipedia* summaries drawing from UNAMA and other sources). This is the number for direct vi-

olent deaths ... If we included indirect deaths from disease, malnutrition, and displacement, experts believe the numbers could be closer to 100,000.

Returning to Bibi Netanyahu's definition of terrorism, there is only one country operating in West Asia that has killed at least 250,000 civilians ... It is not Iran; it is the United States.

For the last 46 years, the American public have been gaslit about an Iranian terrorism threat that pales in comparison to what America

has done. If we add in the number of Iranians killed because of a US-funded proxy, than the toll of lives lost approaches one million. If there is a God who passes judgment on nations for the evil they do, the one country that should fear divine judgment is the US, not Iran.

Source: <https://larryjohnson.substack.com/p/iran-does-not-hate-americans-but>, 14 January 2026

¹ vgl. <https://sonar21.com/us-and-israel-prepping-for-a-new-attack-on-iran-by-creating-a-narrative-of-government-chaos/>