

History of past Iranian efforts to project influence

Adapted from the broadcast audio segment; use the audio player to listen to the story in its entirety.

As unrest continues throughout the Middle East, the Obama Administration and its regional allies fear that Iranian power will fill the void left by deposed Arab autocrats. It's the newest US concern in a troubled relationship with the Islamic Republic that dates back over 30 years.

But Iran, or Persia as it was once called, counts the United States as a relatively new enemy. There is a much longer history of rivalry between Iran and its Arab neighbors, a rivalry that stems in part from Iran's sense of its own powerful history, says Susan Maloney, a Senior Fellow with the Saban Center at the Brookings Institution.

"I mean, Iranians' national epic is one that is a poetic retelling of some of the great wars of the Persian Empire and so this sense of identification with this history is something that is inculcated and has been for generations among all school children."

It isn't only schoolchildren that are caught up in this conception of Persian grandeur. In 1971 the Shah held a massive gala at Iran's ancient capital of Persepolis to celebrate his nation's storied past, and it was past Persian conquests that fed the Shah's future ambitions.

"The Shah certainly viewed himself naturally as a successor to those great monarchies of the past, Cyrus and so forth. He aspired to the same level of regional prominence and regional influence," says Ray Takeyh, an expert on Iran at the Council on Foreign Relations.

The US decided to back the Shah's efforts in becoming a regional power and Iran served as a critical buffer against Soviet aggression, and a stabilizing force in the turbulent Middle East.

Maloney says this support led to tensions within the Middle East community.

"Iran was a rising power with sharp elbows and big ambitions, and that kind of a player doesn't always get along well with his neighbors."

Iran's Arab neighbors were troubled by the Shah's sharp elbows, but they were terrified by what came next. In 1979 a popular revolt toppled the Iranian monarch. In the chaos that followed, an Islamic Revolution swept Iran.

While Iranians celebrated, according to Takeyh, nearby Arab states viewed Iran's new revolutionary Shiite republic as a grave threat.

"Suddenly you have a regime that comes into power which rejects the legitimacy of the regional order, monarchies or otherwise. It seeks an Islamist regime throughout the region as an aspiration. So it is viewed as a threat, an acute threat. It's a status quo power vs. revolutionary Iran, secular powers vs. Islamic insurgency."

That division soon turned into a devastating war.

Hoping to take advantage of Iran's military disorganization after the revolution, Saddam Hussein invaded his neighbor. The fear in Baghdad and other Arab capitals was that Iran's Islamic revolution would spread across the region.

"When Saddam stepped forward to stop the contagion of Khomeini's revolution especially in the gulf. They were largely supportive of it and they would go on to substantially subsidize Iraq's war effort," says Takeyh.

With the Gulf States bankrolling Saddam's military machine, the war became Iran versus the Arabs.

By the time the war ended in 1988, both Iran and Iraq lay in ruins and the Islamic Republic's foreign policy became a little less about revolution, and a little more about rebuilding the nation.

In years to come, more war would have an impact on the country.

"The Gulf War was a sea change for Iran," explains Maloney, who says that when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in 1990, Iraq replaced Iran as public enemy number 1 in the Middle East.

"You can look at that period as the first of many, many points in time in which Iran has been an unintended but very lucky beneficiary of changes in the regional order. They made every effort, invested in every opportunity, and took every risk to ensure that they covered all their bets in Iraq."

Recently, with an enemy in Egypt removed, and protests continuing to sweep the Middle East, Suzanne Maloney says Iran won't necessarily have more allies, but it will certainly have fewer rivals in the near future. That's a major gain for a nation intent on making its presence felt throughout the region.

"Iran considers itself to be the heavyweight of the Middle East and of the broader Islamic world, and it wants to be acknowledged and respected as such."