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CIA-Iran relations: An enduring journey of epic proportions

By SHAZAR SHAFQAT
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Sanctions by President Trump and Iran's heroism. The United States of America and the Islamic Republic of Iran might be raring to go. Hold your horses, please. War is a nasty business; peace is pacification. War is desolating; peace is durable. War suffocates; peace ameliorates.

Can Iran sustain its isolation? Are the latest developments a precursor to another US-Iran showdown? Who is going to make the first move? Or has it already been made? Will Iran succumb to the pressure, or is the Islamic Republic going to snub the American warnings, again?

Over the past couple of weeks, the world has been witness to many fascinating, and somewhat mind-boggling, revelations. Perhaps none are more significant than the US Central Intelligence Agency's massive data release.

While the Stargate Project and the mention of UFOs may have made headlines in the United States, the CIA's digital data has much to say about the country's bilateral relationships with its friends and foes worldwide. The declassified information contains almost 12 million pages, and around 930,000 documents that detail the CIA's worldwide reach.

The data was released on January 17 through the Crest Reading Room, the CIA's official database. Previously, the Reading Room could be accessed only during office hours at selected CIA offices.

Iran's affability over its nuclear program hasn't gone down well with US President Donald Trump. The war of words has started all over again. But this surely isn't something out of the blue. The CIA's declassified documents reveal that Iran has always held a special place in the Agency's international operations. In this treasure trove, there are 1,582 search results pertaining to documents related to Iran.

The CIA's deployment of large numbers of field officers in Iran is an open secret. It wasn't just that the 1979 revolution caught the Americans by surprise. Rather, the US has always been wary of the Shia version of Islam, which is considered by many Americans as inherently opposed to their geopolitical maneuvers.

A document from the CIA's 1979 directory that was approved for release in 2003 highlights the Agency's assumed vulnerability to Shia Islam. It is titled "Iran: The Shia Revolution and Iran's Neighbors." It continuously refers to the Iranian Shias as "radicals", and the discomfiting effect they could have on the entire world. Even back then, the CIA seemed worried about the Iranians having extended international clout.

The CIA over the years has enjoyed suitable ties with the Persian Gulf region, primarily adherents of Sunni Islam. Therefore, the intelligence agency made sure it did not let the Shia influence gather any foothold outside Iran and Iraq.

Contrary to popular belief, the Shah of Iran wasn't the CIA's "go-to guy". Documents reveal that the Agency believed he was responsible for much of the chaos that had gripped the region back then.

"The real culprit behind the great oil rip-off is identified in secret intelligence reports as the Shah of Iran."

The document goes on to state that the Agency was convinced that the Shah's agitation and the policies thereof led to the 1973 oil crisis.

Concerns regarding Iran's regional influence skyrocketed during the Iran-Iraq War. A document from 1982 indicates that the CIA had been closely observing the proceedings during the war. The document contains all the graphical representations and pictorials that the CIA operatives were able to gather and report to their offices in the United States.

In regards to Iran, the intelligence brief noted: "Iranian forces have received additional infantry and engineer units and the supply and transport staging area in the vicinity." To ascertain the Iraqi position and deployment of their forces, the document notes, "Iraqi forces continue to redeploy, reinforce, and construct positions along their side in probable preparation for an expected Iranian attack."

The CIA was also astute enough to have come up with a classified document that briefed the decision-makers about who the actual culprit in the war really was. As per that assessment, both Iran and Iraq had their reasons and the policy decisions to back their claims.

In terms of Iraq, the CIA stated, “Iran almost certainly will insist on approving prospective panel members and will expect that they will reach a verdict quickly, punish Saddam Hussein, and assess reparations. Even if a panel issues a verdict generally favorable to Iran, Tehran probably will continue to seek a military victory over Iraq.”

Highlighting the Iraqi perspective on the issue, the document notes, “Iraq will also insist on choosing sympathetic panel members who believe Iran shares responsibility for the war.”

The recently released documents authenticate the view that the CIA wasn’t able to foresee the 1979 revolution. It not only caught the entire US intelligence community by surprise, but it was a moment of awe for the entire world.

“what we didn’t forecast was that a 78-year old cleric who had been in exile for 14 years would be the catalyst that would bring these forces together, and that we would have one huge volcano—a truly national revolution.”

As per the released documents, it is noteworthy that the CIA’s primary role was to ensure Iran wasn’t able to flex its muscles beyond its borders. Domestic developments, more or less, may have gone unnoticed.

Hezbollah hardliners in Iran including Ali Akbar Mohtashemi were staunchly opposed to president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and the idea of hostage release. The CIA noted, “Rafsanjani wants to use the hostages to get the United States to return to Iran more than \$1 billion in frozen assets. He hopes the hostages can be a bartering chip in Iran’s bid to join the community of civilized nations.”

The US has always been fearful about Iran having a nuclear weapon. This isn’t just about the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action agreement. In a confidential document dated back in 1984, it was stated that the CIA was of the view that “Iran is in the final stages of making a nuclear bomb.” If Iran were to get the bomb, it would become a more active regional player. This nuclear paranoia has historically kept the premier intelligence agency of the United States watchful of Iran’s every move.

Lieutenant-General Michael Flynn may have resigned as US national security adviser, but Trump’s perpetual animosity toward Iran is rather obvious. It seems as if Iran is setting itself up for a standoff with the United States. The recent spat doesn’t bode well. Calm and tranquility are desperately needed. The CIA, on the other hand, might have already finalized its next move.

Watch out, Iran.