

Iran–United States Relations: Historical Dynamics, Strategic Rivalry, and Prospects for Diplomacy

 ¹ Kamran Valizada

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Keywords	Abstract
Iran United States Geopolitics Middle East nuclear diplomacy sanctions international relations	The relationship between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United States constitutes one of the most persistent and consequential geopolitical rivalries in contemporary international politics. Since the Iranian Revolution of 1979, diplomatic relations between the two countries have been defined by ideological confrontation, economic sanctions, strategic competition, and regional proxy conflicts. This article examines the historical evolution, ideological foundations, and geopolitical dynamics of Iran–United States relations through qualitative historical analysis informed by theoretical perspectives from structural realism, constructivism, and geopolitical studies. The study traces key turning points including the 1953 coup d'état, the Pahlavi-era strategic alliance, the Iranian Revolution, the hostage crisis, the Iran–Iraq War, post–Cold War missed opportunities, and nuclear diplomacy culminating in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. The article further evaluates the role of economic sanctions, proxy conflicts, identity narratives, and domestic political constraints in sustaining bilateral hostility. The study argues that despite recurring diplomatic initiatives, structural mistrust rooted in competing security perceptions and adversarial identity constructions continues to reproduce the rivalry. The article concludes by examining possible diplomatic pathways and the conditions necessary for sustainable détente between Tehran and Washington.

1. Introduction

Relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United States of America represent one of the most complex and enduring geopolitical rivalries in the modern international system. Although the two countries maintained cooperative diplomatic and strategic relations throughout much of

¹ Valizada, K. Nakhchivan State University, Azerbaijan. Email: mr.kamranvalizada@gmail.com. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-8999-3388>



the twentieth century, the Iranian Revolution of 1979 fundamentally transformed the nature of bilateral interactions. In the decades since, Iran and the United States have experienced sustained hostility characterized by political confrontation, economic coercion, proxy warfare, and strategic competition across the broader Middle East and beyond (Axworthy, 2016; Pollack, 2004).

The antagonistic character of this relationship is shaped by several interrelated factors. These include deeply rooted historical grievances, incompatible ideological frameworks, regional power competition, and conflicting security perceptions. From the perspective of the United States, Iran has frequently been characterized as a revisionist regional power whose policies challenge American strategic interests, threaten the security of key allies including Israel and Saudi Arabia, and undermine the existing regional order (Gause, 2014). Conversely, Iranian political discourse consistently portrays the United States as an interventionist hegemonic power that seeks to compromise Iran's sovereignty, contain its regional influence, and reshape its domestic political system (Arjomand, 2013; Ramazani, 2013).

The significance of Iran–U.S. tensions extends well beyond the bilateral dimension. The rivalry carries profound implications for regional stability in the Middle East, global energy markets, and international efforts to prevent nuclear proliferation. Armed conflicts in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen have all been shaped, to varying degrees, by the strategic competition between Tehran and Washington. Moreover, the dispute over Iran's nuclear program has constituted one of the most prominent and consequential issues in international diplomacy throughout the twenty-first century (Parsi, 2017; Mousavian, 2012).

Understanding the historical evolution and structural dynamics of this rivalry is therefore essential for analyzing contemporary Middle Eastern geopolitics and for evaluating the prospects of diplomatic engagement. This article seeks to examine the roots of the Iran–United States rivalry by exploring its historical origins, ideological narratives, and geopolitical dimensions across multiple phases. The study applies theoretical perspectives from structural realism and constructivism in order to explain why antagonism between the two states has persisted despite periodic diplomatic openings. In doing so, the article aims to contribute to scholarly debates regarding the relative weight of material power competition versus ideational factors in sustaining international rivalries.

2. Literature Review

Scholarly research on Iran–United States relations has expanded considerably over the past several decades, encompassing historical, geopolitical, ideological, and diplomatic dimensions. This body of literature can be organized around four major thematic clusters: historical analyses, geopolitical and regional studies, ideological and identity-based research, and nuclear diplomacy scholarship.



Historical analyses constitute the foundational layer of the field. A substantial body of work examines the long-term impact of pivotal events such as the 1953 coup against Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh and the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Abrahamian (2013) provides a detailed account of the 1953 intervention, arguing that Operation Ajax represented not merely a geopolitical maneuver but a formative trauma that shaped Iranian collective memory and political consciousness for generations. Kinzer (2008) similarly contends that the coup became a powerful symbol of Western imperialism and contributed to deep-rooted anti-American sentiment across multiple social and political strata in Iran. Milani (2010) traces how the revolutionary movement of 1978–1979 drew upon this historical memory to mobilize broad-based opposition to the Pahlavi monarchy and its perceived dependence on Washington. Bill (1988) offers one of the most comprehensive accounts of the entire arc of American–Iranian relations from the early twentieth century through the revolution, emphasizing the tragedy of mutual misperception.

A second cluster of scholarship focuses on geopolitical dynamics and regional power competition in the Middle East. Gause (2014) characterizes the contemporary Middle Eastern order as a form of “new Cold War,” structured around rivalry between regional powers and competing ideological alliances. Within this framework, Iran and the United States support opposing political actors and security architectures across the region. Byman (2020) examines Iran’s regional strategy in detail, documenting how Tehran has cultivated a network of non-state allies and militia forces to project influence beyond its borders. Pollack (2004) provides an American policy-oriented perspective, analyzing decades of strategic miscalculation and the persistent failure of both coercive and diplomatic approaches.

Third, a growing body of constructivist and identity-focused research examines the ideological dimension of Iran–U.S. tensions. Arjomand (2013) argues that the Islamic Republic’s revolutionary identity plays a central role in shaping its foreign policy orientation, with anti-Western rhetoric and resistance to perceived imperialism functioning as key components of regime legitimacy. Sadjadpour (2009) offers a focused analysis of Supreme Leader Khamenei’s worldview, demonstrating how ideological commitments constrain pragmatic diplomatic flexibility at the highest levels of Iranian decision-making. Keddie (2006) provides essential historical context for understanding how Iran’s revolutionary ideology emerged from longer patterns of modernization, foreign intervention, and political contestation.

Finally, research on nuclear diplomacy has become an important and rapidly growing subfield. Parsi (2017) provides a detailed account of the negotiations leading to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, arguing that diplomatic engagement between Iran and the United States is achievable when political leadership on both sides prioritizes pragmatic compromise over ideological rigidity. Mousavian (2012), drawing on his experience as a former Iranian nuclear negotiator, offers an insider perspective on the dynamics of nuclear talks and the domestic political constraints faced by Iranian negotiators.



Despite the breadth of existing scholarship, significant debates persist regarding the relative causal weight of structural geopolitical competition versus ideological confrontation in sustaining the rivalry. Many studies tend to privilege one explanatory dimension over others, resulting in partial accounts. This article contributes to the field by integrating insights from both realist and constructivist frameworks, applying them systematically across the full historical arc of Iran–United States relations.

3. Methodology

This study employs qualitative historical analysis as its primary methodological approach. The research draws upon a wide range of secondary sources, including scholarly monographs, peer-reviewed journal articles, policy analyses, and institutional reports. The historical narrative is organized chronologically across distinct phases of Iran–United States relations, enabling the identification of patterns, continuities, and ruptures over time.

The analytical framework combines insights from two major theoretical traditions in international relations: structural realism and constructivism. This approach, sometimes described as theoretical triangulation, allows the study to examine both the material and ideational dimensions of the rivalry. Realist analysis illuminates the security dilemma dynamics, power competition, and strategic calculations that structure bilateral interactions. Constructivist analysis reveals how identity narratives, ideological commitments, and historical memory shape threat perceptions and constrain diplomatic options. By integrating these perspectives, the study aims to provide a more comprehensive explanation of why the Iran–United States rivalry has proven so resistant to resolution.

The scope of the analysis extends from the earliest diplomatic contacts in the nineteenth century through the post-JCPOA period, with particular attention to critical junctures that reshaped the bilateral relationship. The study acknowledges the inherent limitations of relying on secondary sources and the challenges of interpreting politically sensitive events from contested perspectives.

4. Theoretical Framework

4.1 Structural Realism and the Security Dilemma

Realist theory, particularly in its structural variant, emphasizes the role of power competition and security imperatives in shaping state behavior within an anarchic international system. Kenneth Waltz (1979) argues that in the absence of a central authority, states must rely on their own capabilities to ensure survival, producing recurrent patterns of balancing, competition, and conflict. Mearsheimer (2001) extends this logic, contending that great powers are inherently driven to maximize their relative power position.



From a structural realist perspective, tensions between Iran and the United States can be understood as a manifestation of the security dilemma. Jervis (1978) defines the security dilemma as a situation in which actions taken by one state to enhance its own security are perceived as threatening by another state, triggering escalatory cycles of mutual suspicion. The United States maintains extensive military alliances and forward-deployed forces across the Persian Gulf region in order to contain Iranian influence and protect strategic interests including energy security and allied governments. Iran, in response, has developed asymmetric military capabilities, including ballistic missile programs and strategic partnerships with non-state actors such as Hezbollah, as instruments of deterrence and regional power projection (Takeyh, 2009). These dynamics generate a self-reinforcing cycle of threat perception and military preparation that sustains geopolitical competition.

4.2 Constructivism: Identity, Ideology, and Narrative

Constructivist theory, as articulated by Wendt (1999), highlights the centrality of ideas, identities, and intersubjective meanings in constituting international relations. From this perspective, the structure of the international system is not purely material but is shaped by shared understandings and social practices. Anarchy, Wendt famously argues, is “what states make of it”—meaning that rivalry and enmity are not inevitable consequences of systemic structure but are constructed through patterns of interaction and identity formation.

In the case of Iran and the United States, ideological perceptions play a crucial and often decisive role in sustaining hostility. Iranian revolutionary ideology, as it crystallized after 1979, portrays the United States as the embodiment of Western imperialism, cultural aggression, and moral decadence. Anti-American discourse has become deeply embedded within the political culture and institutional fabric of the Islamic Republic, functioning as a source of regime legitimacy and a constraint on diplomatic flexibility (Milani, 2010; Sadjadpour, 2009). Conversely, American political discourse has consistently framed Iran as a rogue state, a sponsor of terrorism, and a destabilizing force in the Middle East. These competing narratives construct adversarial identities that are reproduced through domestic political processes, media representations, and institutional practices.

4.3 Integrating Perspectives

Neither realism nor constructivism alone provides a fully satisfactory explanation of the Iran–United States rivalry. Realism accounts for the structural incentives driving competition but struggles to explain why specific diplomatic openings have failed even when material conditions appeared favorable. Constructivism illuminates the role of identity and ideology but risks underestimating the material constraints and security calculations that shape state behavior. This



article therefore adopts an integrative approach, applying both frameworks to different phases and dimensions of the relationship in order to capture the full complexity of the rivalry.

5. Early Relations and the Foundation of Engagement

Diplomatic relations between Iran and the United States date back to the nineteenth century, a period in which the two countries had minimal direct political interactions. Unlike European imperial powers such as Britain and Russia, which exercised extensive political and economic influence over Iranian affairs, the United States initially occupied a marginal position in Persian geopolitics. American involvement in Iran during this period was primarily cultural and humanitarian in character. American missionaries, educators, and medical professionals established schools and hospitals that contributed to educational modernization and cultural exchange (Bill, 1988).

In the early twentieth century, Iran's government sought to balance the competing influences of Britain and Russia by cultivating ties with the United States as a perceived neutral third party. In 1911, the Iranian parliament invited American financial advisor Morgan Shuster to help reform the country's fiscal administration and reduce its dependence on foreign creditors. Although Shuster's reform efforts were ultimately obstructed by Russian and British opposition, his mission symbolized Iran's strategic interest in leveraging American engagement as a counterweight to European imperialism (Abrahamian, 2008).

During the Second World War, Iran was jointly occupied by British and Soviet forces, and American troops were deployed to facilitate supply routes to the Soviet Union. In the postwar period, Cold War dynamics drew the two countries closer together. The United States increasingly viewed Iran as a strategic ally in the containment of Soviet expansion, while the young Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi sought American support to consolidate his authority and modernize the Iranian state. This convergence of interests laid the groundwork for a strategic alliance that would define bilateral relations for the next three decades (Keddie, 2006).

6. The 1953 Coup and Its Legacy

One of the most consequential events in the history of Iran–United States relations occurred in August 1953, when a coup d'état orchestrated by the Central Intelligence Agency and British intelligence services overthrew the democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh. Mossadegh had nationalized the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company in 1951, seeking to reclaim national sovereignty over Iran's most valuable natural resource. The nationalization threatened Western economic interests and intensified the broader geopolitical struggle of the early Cold War (Gasiorowski & Byrne, 2004).



The covert operation, designated Operation Ajax by the CIA and Operation Boot by British intelligence, resulted in Mossadegh's removal from power and the restoration of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's full authority. While the coup achieved its immediate strategic objectives—securing Western access to Iranian oil and preventing a perceived leftward drift in Iranian politics—it produced lasting and deeply consequential political repercussions. Many Iranians came to view the intervention as definitive proof of Western willingness to subvert democratic governance in pursuit of imperial interests (Kinzer, 2008; Abrahamian, 2013).

Scholars widely agree that the 1953 coup profoundly shaped Iranian political consciousness. The event became embedded in national collective memory as a foundational narrative of foreign domination and democratic betrayal. Over subsequent decades, this historical memory served as a powerful mobilizing resource for opposition movements of various ideological orientations, including secular nationalists, leftists, and Islamist activists (Keddie, 2006).

From a constructivist perspective, the coup's significance extends beyond its immediate political consequences. It contributed to the construction of an enduring narrative framework within which the United States came to be understood as a hostile external force fundamentally opposed to Iranian sovereignty and self-determination. This narrative would later become a central pillar of revolutionary ideology after 1979, shaping the identity of the Islamic Republic and its orientation toward the Western world (Milani, 2010).

The coup also strengthened authoritarian governance in Iran. In the aftermath of Mossadegh's overthrow, the Shah increasingly centralized political authority and expanded the coercive apparatus of the state. The secret police known as SAVAK, established in 1957 with assistance from American and Israeli intelligence agencies, became a feared instrument of political repression. While the Shah pursued ambitious modernization programs and economic reforms under the rubric of the White Revolution, growing inequality, political exclusion, and cultural alienation fueled dissatisfaction among religious leaders, intellectuals, bazaar merchants, and segments of the urban middle and working classes (Axworthy, 2016; Abrahamian, 2008).

7. The Pahlavi Era and the Strategic Alliance (1953–1978)

Following the 1953 coup, Iran emerged as one of the most important American strategic partners in the Middle East. The Pahlavi monarchy served as a key pillar of the Western security architecture during the Cold War, functioning as a bulwark against Soviet influence in the strategically vital Persian Gulf region. The United States provided extensive military, economic, and technical assistance to Iran, transforming the country into one of the most heavily armed states in the developing world (Bill, 1988).

The strategic partnership deepened significantly during the presidency of Richard Nixon. Under the Nixon Doctrine, which sought to reduce direct American military involvement abroad by



empowering regional allies, Iran was designated as the primary guardian of Western interests in the Persian Gulf. The Shah was granted virtually unrestricted access to American weapons systems, and Iran's military expenditures expanded dramatically throughout the 1970s. This arrangement served American strategic interests by outsourcing regional security responsibilities while simultaneously reinforcing the Shah's domestic authority and regional ambitions (Pollack, 2004).

However, the close alignment between the Shah and Washington generated significant domestic opposition within Iran. Many Iranians perceived the Pahlavi regime as excessively dependent on American patronage and insufficiently responsive to national aspirations. The Shah's modernization programs, while producing economic growth and infrastructural development, also generated social dislocations, cultural tensions, and deepening inequality. Rapid urbanization, the displacement of traditional economic structures, and the perceived imposition of Western cultural norms alienated significant segments of Iranian society, including the influential clerical establishment led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (Keddie, 2006; Arjomand, 2013).

From a realist perspective, the Pahlavi-era alliance represented a rational alignment of security interests within the bipolar Cold War structure. However, the very closeness of the strategic relationship contributed to the conditions that ultimately produced its collapse. By so thoroughly identifying with the Shah's regime, the United States became implicated in the failures and repressions of the Pahlavi state, ensuring that the revolutionary movement that eventually toppled the monarchy would carry with it a powerful anti-American dimension (Sick, 1991).

8. The Iranian Revolution and the Diplomatic Rupture

8.1 The 1979 Revolution

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 constituted one of the most transformative political upheavals of the twentieth century. The revolutionary movement was driven by a remarkably broad coalition that included religious leaders, secular intellectuals, leftist organizations, students, bazaar merchants, and industrial workers united by opposition to the Shah's authoritarian rule and his close alignment with the United States. Under the charismatic leadership of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the Pahlavi monarchy was overthrown and replaced by the Islamic Republic of Iran, a political system that combined republican institutions with the authority of Shia religious jurisprudence through the doctrine of *velayat-e faqih* (Abrahamian, 2008; Arjomand, 2013).

The revolution fundamentally transformed Iran's foreign policy orientation. The new government repudiated the strategic alliance with the United States and adopted an explicitly anti-hegemonic posture, emphasizing independence from both Western and Soviet blocs. Anti-American rhetoric became a constitutive element of revolutionary ideology, and the United States was officially designated as the "Great Satan" in the political vocabulary of the new regime (Milani, 2010).



8.2 The Hostage Crisis and the Severance of Relations

Relations between Iran and the United States deteriorated catastrophically in November 1979, when revolutionary students seized the American Embassy in Tehran and held fifty-two American diplomats hostage for 444 days. The immediate trigger for the embassy seizure was the decision by the Carter administration to admit the deposed Shah into the United States for medical treatment, which Iranian revolutionaries interpreted as evidence of continued American support for the fallen monarch and potential plans for a repeat of the 1953 coup (Sick, 1991).

The hostage crisis became one of the defining diplomatic confrontations of the late twentieth century and carried profound consequences for bilateral relations. The United States responded by freezing billions of dollars in Iranian assets and imposing comprehensive economic sanctions. Diplomatic relations were formally severed in April 1980 and have not been restored to the present day (Crist, 2012).

The crisis also fundamentally reshaped political narratives in both countries. In the United States, the hostage crisis produced a lasting image of Iran as a hostile, irrational revolutionary regime that violated fundamental norms of international diplomacy. In Iran, the embassy takeover was framed by revolutionary factions as a legitimate act of resistance against foreign domination and a decisive assertion of national sovereignty. These conflicting interpretations hardened mutual distrust and entrenched the adversarial identities that continue to characterize the relationship (Parsi, 2017).

8.3 Theoretical Analysis

From a constructivist standpoint, the revolution and the hostage crisis represent a critical juncture in the social construction of enmity between Iran and the United States. The events of 1979–1981 crystallized adversarial identities on both sides and established powerful narrative frameworks that have proven extraordinarily resistant to revision. For the Islamic Republic, opposition to the United States became a foundational element of state identity and political legitimacy. For the United States, the trauma of the hostage crisis produced deeply negative affective associations with Iran that have influenced public opinion and policy decisions for decades (Sadjadpour, 2009).

From a realist perspective, the revolution represented a dramatic shift in the regional balance of power. The loss of Iran as a strategic ally deprived the United States of its most important regional partner and created a new source of instability and opposition in the Persian Gulf. The subsequent American turn toward Saudi Arabia and the Gulf monarchies as replacement pillars of regional security restructured the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East in ways that continue to shape strategic dynamics (Gause, 2014).

9. The Iran–Iraq War and Strategic Realignment (1980–1988)



The Iran–Iraq War, which lasted from September 1980 to August 1988, represented another critical phase in the evolution of Iran–United States relations. Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein launched a military invasion of Iran shortly after the revolution, seeking to exploit the perceived vulnerability of the new regime and to contain the spread of revolutionary ideology to Iraq’s Shia majority population. The resulting conflict became one of the longest and deadliest conventional wars of the twentieth century, producing an estimated one million casualties and causing immense economic devastation on both sides (Crist, 2012).

Although the United States initially declared neutrality, Washington gradually adopted a policy of strategic tilt toward Iraq. American policymakers, operating within a realist logic of balancing, calculated that an Iranian victory would pose a greater threat to regional stability and Western interests than an Iraqi one. The United States provided Iraq with intelligence, logistical support, and diplomatic cover, while simultaneously pursuing covert channels of communication with Iran in the episode that became known as the Iran-Contra affair (Pollack, 2004).

For Iran, the war profoundly reinforced perceptions that the United States was an implacable adversary committed to undermining the Islamic Republic by any available means. The American naval intervention in the Persian Gulf during the later stages of the war, culminating in the accidental downing of Iran Air Flight 655 in July 1988 which killed 290 civilians, deepened Iranian grievances and contributed to lasting distrust. The war also shaped Iran’s subsequent strategic doctrine, encouraging the development of asymmetric military capabilities, missile programs, and regional alliances as instruments of deterrence against technologically superior adversaries (Takeyh, 2009).

10. The Post–Cold War Period and Missed Opportunities (1989–2001)

The end of the Cold War and the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989 created conditions that, in retrospect, appeared favorable for a gradual improvement in Iran–United States relations. Under Presidents Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989–1997) and Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005), Iran pursued cautious diplomatic overtures toward the West. Rafsanjani prioritized postwar reconstruction and economic pragmatism, signaling a willingness to moderate revolutionary fervor in favor of national interest (Ehteshami & Zweiri, 2007).

Khatami’s presidency represented the most significant attempt at diplomatic rapprochement during this period. His call for a “Dialogue of Civilizations” was widely interpreted as an invitation to redefine the terms of engagement between Iran and the Western world. The Khatami government also provided quiet cooperation to the United States following the September 11, 2001 attacks, assisting American efforts against the Taliban in Afghanistan and participating in the Bonn Conference on Afghan reconstruction (Parsi, 2017).



However, these diplomatic openings failed to produce lasting improvement. In January 2002, President George W. Bush designated Iran as part of an “Axis of Evil” alongside Iraq and North Korea, effectively closing the window of diplomatic opportunity that had opened after September 11. The designation stunned and demoralized reformist forces in Iran while strengthening hardline factions that had always argued that engagement with the United States was futile. This episode illustrates how domestic political dynamics and ideological commitments on both sides can override structural opportunities for détente (Takeyh, 2009; Pollack, 2004).

From both realist and constructivist perspectives, the post–Cold War period represents a case study in the persistence of rivalry despite changed structural conditions. The end of bipolarity removed the original Cold War rationale for American–Iranian competition, yet the rivalry persisted because it had become embedded in institutional practices, identity narratives, and domestic political structures on both sides. The failure to capitalize on diplomatic openings during this period deepened mutual cynicism and raised the threshold for future engagement.

11. Proxy Conflicts and Regional Competition

11.1 Iran’s Regional Strategy and the Axis of Resistance

Since the 1980s, Iran has developed an extensive network of regional alliances and partnerships with non-state actors that collectively constitute what Iranian policymakers describe as the “axis of resistance.” This network includes Hezbollah in Lebanon, various Shia militia groups in Iraq, the Houthi movement in Yemen, and Palestinian militant organizations. These alliances serve multiple strategic functions: they provide Iran with strategic depth beyond its borders, enhance its deterrence posture against technologically superior adversaries, and expand its capacity to project influence across the region (Byman, 2020).

11.2 Theaters of Competition

Proxy competition between Iran and the United States has been particularly intense in several regional theaters. In Iraq following the 2003 American invasion, Iran cultivated deep relationships with Shia political parties and militia organizations, becoming one of the most influential external actors in Iraqi politics. In Syria, Iran provided extensive military, financial, and logistical support to the government of Bashar al-Assad during the civil war, while the United States backed various opposition groups. In Yemen, the Houthi movement’s ties to Iran became a focal point of regional tensions, particularly as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates intervened militarily with American support (Crist, 2012; Byman, 2020).

11.3 Theoretical Implications



From a realist perspective, Iran's regional strategy represents a rational response to its relative conventional military weakness vis-à-vis the United States and its regional allies. By cultivating asymmetric capabilities and proxy relationships, Iran has developed a cost-effective means of projecting power and deterring direct military confrontation. From a constructivist perspective, the axis of resistance also serves an important identity function, enabling the Islamic Republic to project itself as the champion of an alternative regional order opposed to Western hegemony (Ramazani, 2013).

12. Nuclear Diplomacy

12.1 Origins of the Nuclear Dispute

Iran's nuclear program became a major international concern in 2002, when dissident groups revealed the existence of previously undisclosed nuclear facilities at Natanz and Arak. Western governments, led by the United States, suspected that Iran was pursuing nuclear weapons capabilities under the guise of a civilian energy program. Iranian authorities consistently maintained that their nuclear activities were exclusively peaceful and oriented toward energy diversification and technological development. The dispute triggered successive rounds of negotiations, United Nations Security Council resolutions, and increasingly stringent international sanctions (Mousavian, 2012).

12.2 The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action

After years of diplomatic stalemate, intensive negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 group—comprising the United States, United Kingdom, France, Russia, China, and Germany—culminated in 2015 in a landmark agreement known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. Under the JCPOA, Iran accepted significant constraints on its nuclear program, including limitations on uranium enrichment levels and quantities, the redesign of the Arak heavy water reactor, and enhanced verification and inspection arrangements by the International Atomic Energy Agency. In return, multilateral and national economic sanctions were progressively lifted (Parsi, 2017).

The JCPOA represented a rare instance of successful diplomatic engagement between Iran and the United States and was widely regarded as a significant achievement of multilateral diplomacy. Many analysts viewed the agreement as a potential foundation upon which broader diplomatic normalization might eventually be constructed.

12.3 U.S. Withdrawal and the Maximum Pressure Campaign

In May 2018, President Donald Trump announced the unilateral withdrawal of the United States from the JCPOA and the reimposition of comprehensive economic sanctions on Iran under a policy framework described as “maximum pressure.” The stated objectives of this policy included



compelling Iran to negotiate a more restrictive nuclear agreement, curtail its regional activities, and end its missile development programs (Katzman, 2021).

The withdrawal produced a severe escalation in bilateral tensions. Iran responded incrementally by reducing its compliance with various provisions of the JCPOA, expanding uranium enrichment activities, and accelerating its nuclear research. The period following the withdrawal also witnessed a series of dangerous military confrontations, including attacks on oil tankers in the Persian Gulf, strikes on Saudi oil infrastructure attributed to Iranian-backed forces, and the American assassination of Major General Qassem Soleimani, commander of Iran's Quds Force, in January 2020. The Soleimani strike represented the most direct military confrontation between the two countries in decades and brought the region to the brink of open war (Crist, 2012).

12.4 Subsequent Diplomatic Efforts

Efforts to revive the JCPOA or negotiate a successor agreement have continued intermittently but have thus far failed to produce a breakthrough. The Biden administration expressed willingness to return to the agreement, and indirect negotiations took place in Vienna through European intermediaries. However, mutual preconditions, expanded Iranian nuclear capabilities, domestic political constraints in both countries, and the introduction of new issues such as Iran's drone transfers have complicated diplomatic progress. As of the time of writing, the nuclear file remains unresolved and continues to represent one of the most consequential challenges in international diplomacy.

13. Economic Sanctions: Instruments, Impact, and Limitations

Economic sanctions have constituted one of the most prominent and persistent instruments employed by the United States to influence Iranian policy behavior. Over four decades, Washington has constructed an increasingly elaborate sanctions architecture targeting Iran's financial sector, oil exports, petrochemical industry, shipping, insurance, and access to international payment systems. The scope and severity of American sanctions, particularly secondary sanctions that penalize third-country entities transacting with Iran, have made them among the most comprehensive economic coercion regimes in modern history (Katzman, 2021).

The economic consequences of sanctions for Iran have been substantial. Periods of intensified sanctions enforcement have been associated with significant currency depreciation, elevated inflation, reduced foreign direct investment, and contraction in oil export revenues. The maximum pressure campaign imposed after 2018 was particularly devastating, reducing Iran's oil exports to historically low levels and restricting its access to foreign exchange reserves.

However, the strategic effectiveness of sanctions as a tool for altering Iranian state behavior remains deeply contested. While sanctions have imposed significant economic costs, they have not



produced fundamental changes in Iran's regional policies, military programs, or political system. Indeed, some analysts argue that sanctions have strengthened regime narratives of external siege and economic warfare, reinforcing public support for resistance and reducing domestic pressure for compromise (Takeyh, 2009).

Iran has also pursued strategies of sanctions adaptation, including the development of alternative economic partnerships with countries such as China and Russia, the expansion of regional trade networks, and the cultivation of non-oil economic sectors. These developments illustrate both the limitations of unilateral economic coercion and the capacity of targeted states to develop countermeasures over time (Ehteshami & Zweiri, 2007).

14. Identity, Ideology, and the Politics of Mistrust

Ideological narratives and identity constructions play a critical and often underappreciated role in sustaining the Iran–United States rivalry. The persistence of adversarial identities on both sides creates what constructivist scholars describe as an “enmity structure”—a pattern of social relations in which each party defines its own identity partly in opposition to the other (Wendt, 1999).

Within the Islamic Republic, revolutionary ideology frames the United States as the primary external threat to Iranian sovereignty, Islamic governance, and regional justice. This narrative draws upon historical experiences of foreign intervention—most notably the 1953 coup and American support for Iraq during the 1980–1988 war—and is continuously reinforced through state media, educational curricula, and political rhetoric. Supreme Leader Khamenei's persistent skepticism toward engagement with Washington reflects and reinforces this ideological orientation at the highest level of decision-making (Sadjadpour, 2009).

Within the United States, Iran has been discursively constructed through categories such as “rogue state,” “sponsor of terrorism,” and “axis of evil”—labels that frame the Islamic Republic as fundamentally irrational, dangerous, and unfit for normal diplomatic engagement. These threat constructions have been amplified by domestic political dynamics, including the influence of pro-Israel advocacy organizations, Gulf-aligned interest groups, and partisan competition over foreign policy credibility.

These competing identity narratives do not merely reflect underlying material conflicts; they actively constitute and reproduce the rivalry by limiting the range of politically feasible policy options. Leaders who advocate engagement risk being accused of weakness or naivety, while acts of confrontation are rewarded with political credibility. This dynamic creates a structural bias toward escalation and against compromise, independent of the specific issues under negotiation (Milani, 2010; Parsi, 2017).

15. Prospects for Diplomatic Engagement



Despite decades of hostility and mutual recrimination, the historical record demonstrates that diplomatic engagement between Iran and the United States is not inherently impossible. The JCPOA negotiations, conducted under the Obama and Rouhani administrations, proved that pragmatic cooperation could emerge when political leadership on both sides perceived sufficient mutual benefit and was willing to invest political capital in pursuing compromise (Parsi, 2017).

Drawing upon the historical analysis presented in this article, several conditions appear necessary for meaningful diplomatic progress. First, confidence-building measures would need to be undertaken to address the profound deficit of mutual trust that characterizes the relationship. Such measures might include incremental sanctions relief in exchange for verifiable nuclear constraints, prisoner exchanges, and the establishment of reliable channels of communication to manage crises and prevent miscalculation.

Second, any sustainable diplomatic framework would need to address the regional dimension of the rivalry. Iran's regional alliances and the security concerns of American allies in the Persian Gulf cannot be treated as entirely separate from the nuclear file. A comprehensive diplomatic architecture would therefore need to incorporate mechanisms for regional security dialogue and conflict management.

Third, both sides would need to recognize and account for the domestic political constraints that limit diplomatic flexibility. In Iran, the authority of the Supreme Leader and the influence of hardline factions within the security establishment represent significant obstacles to sustained engagement. In the United States, partisan polarization, congressional prerogatives, and the influence of allied governments create their own set of constraints.

Fourth, the role of third-party actors deserves attention. European governments, China, and Russia have all played roles in mediating or complicating Iran–United States diplomacy at various points. A durable diplomatic framework would likely require the active support, or at minimum the acquiescence, of these external stakeholders.

The choice between incremental engagement and comprehensive grand bargain models remains a subject of scholarly and policy debate. Incrementalism offers the advantage of lower political risk and the possibility of building trust gradually, but it is vulnerable to disruption by domestic political changes and external shocks. A comprehensive approach might address the root causes of rivalry more directly but demands a level of political will and mutual commitment that has rarely been available in either capital.

16. Conclusion

The Iran–United States rivalry stands as one of the most consequential and enduring geopolitical contests of the modern era. This article has traced the evolution of the relationship from its



cooperative origins in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries through the transformative rupture of 1979 and the subsequent decades of confrontation, demonstrating that the rivalry is sustained by a mutually reinforcing combination of material power competition and ideational conflict.

Structural realist analysis reveals that the rivalry is grounded in concrete security dilemma dynamics, regional power competition, and competing strategic interests in the Persian Gulf and the broader Middle East. Constructivist analysis demonstrates that adversarial identities, ideological narratives, and historical memory play equally important roles in reproducing enmity and constraining diplomatic flexibility. The interplay between these material and ideational factors explains why the rivalry has proven so resistant to resolution, even during periods when structural conditions appeared favorable for détente.

Key historical junctures—the 1953 coup, the Iranian Revolution, the hostage crisis, the Iran–Iraq War, the post–Cold War missed opportunities, and the rise and collapse of the JCPOA—have each added new layers of grievance, mistrust, and political symbolism to the relationship. These accumulated layers make any future diplomatic initiative necessarily more complex and politically costly than its predecessors.

Nevertheless, the JCPOA experience demonstrates that engagement remains possible when sufficient political will exists on both sides. Sustainable improvement in relations will ultimately depend on the willingness of leaders in Tehran and Washington to invest in long-term confidence-building, to manage domestic political constraints, and to develop broader regional dialogue mechanisms that address the legitimate security concerns of all parties.

This study has certain limitations that should be acknowledged. The reliance on secondary sources, while appropriate for a historical synthesis of this scope, means that the analysis does not incorporate primary archival materials or original interview data. Future research could usefully complement this work through detailed case studies of specific diplomatic episodes, comparative analysis with other enduring rivalries, and empirical investigation of public opinion dynamics in both countries.

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