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Georgii RUDZIN

Master's Thesis

Supervisor

Asst. Prof. Dr. Deniz TÜRKER

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ABSTRACT

US DISCOURSE ON IRAN'S NUCLEAR PROGRAM

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This study, based on securitization theory, examines how discourse of different US presidents (Bush, Obama, Trump, and Biden) influenced a perception on Iran's nuclear program. Analyzing their public speeches and official documents from 2000 to 2024, the study reveals how each administration tried to securitize (or de-securitize) this issue. The study shows that Bush and Trump were more likely to securitize, presenting the Iranian program as an immediate threat. From the other side, Obama and Biden were looking for a diplomatic solution and reduced anxiety levels. The study demonstrates how language and rhetoric shapes threat perception and influences foreign policy, and highlights the value of securitization theory for understanding the dynamics of international relations.

Keywords: US, Iran, Nuclear Program, Non-proliferation, Securitization, Discourse

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ABBREVIATIONS

AIOC	:	Anglo-Iranian Oil Company
CISADA	:	Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act
EU	:	European Union
EU-3	:	Britain, France and Germany
IAEA	:	International Atomic Energy Agency
ILSA	:	Iran–Libya Sanctions Act
IRGC	:	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
JCPOA	:	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
JPOA	:	Joint Plan of Action
NPT	:	Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty
UN	:	United Nations
WTO	:	World Trade Organization

1. INTRODUCTION

It is widely known that the Iranian Nuclear problem has become significant over past decades. It is influencing not only the Middle East region but the whole world at this point. And it's not a secret that the United States of America has played a huge role in forming an opinion on the Iran and their goals not only inside their own country but also in the global community (Einhorn, 2015). For many influential actors of International Relations, especially for those who support western agenda, Iran perceived as a global threat.

Iranian Nuclear problem has a long and rich history. Flexible US rhetoric which has been changing with different administrations in White House over the years was and still is the crucial target for many people's eyes. Starting in 2002, when secret Iranian plans regarding nuclear efforts was revealed to the world, global audience has been closely watching the development of the situation and US's attempts to resolve the crisis (IAEA, 2003; Katzman, 2021).

And of course, different administration had different approaches to the matter over the years. For example, Bush's view was strict and "hawkish" (The White House, 2002), whereas Obama's attempt was closest to the peaceful solution in 21st century so far (The White House, 2015). During first Trump's term the rhetoric returned to aggressive strategy (The White House, 2018), while Biden tried to restore a diplomatic approach (The White House, 2021). What's important is that such a rocking of the boat has influenced and changed not only the view of US's allies and regular people but also Iran's own strategy and response.

There are multiple reasons of why studying and understanding the nuances of Iranian nuclear program is important. The first reason is that US is major power who has one of biggest economy and army in the world as well as a whole arsenal of nuclear weapons. That's why it is crucial to analyze responses and approaches of such actor when their interests in the region along with global security are at stake. And the second reason which is not less valuable is that such study brings a perspective through which scholars can receive insights regarding effectiveness of different tools. For example, what impact has economic sanctions, threats of military alliances or multilateral negotiations on nuclear non-proliferation.

The goal of this study is to analyze the nature and changes of US rhetoric regarding Iranian nuclear program from 2000's until present days. To achieve this goal, various tools will be

used, such as studying official statements, political documents, media materials and diplomatic correspondence. In our study, we will look at how discourse has been influenced by various factors, including intelligence assessments, internal political rivalries and broad foreign policy strategies.

The main purpose of this study is to conduct a detailed analysis of how the United States of America has shaped and presented its position on the Iranian nuclear program over the years. The paper will examine the phrasing and arguments used by different American administrations, as well as the policy measures and steps taken. In addition, the study will assess the impact of the discourse on the international relations, the development of the situation in the Middle East region, as well as the nuclear non-proliferation.

The research specifically centers on an in-depth comparison of the discourses employed by Presidents Donald Trump and Joe Biden, aiming to discern the extent to which each president characterizes Iran's nuclear activities as an acute, existential danger justifying urgent and exceptional responses (securitization), or alternatively, presents the nuclear issue as a political matter amenable to negotiation and regular diplomatic interaction (desecuritization). Additionally, discourses of George Bush's and Barack Obama's administrations are also included and analyzed to broaden the scope of research and better understand the evolution of US discourse towards Iranian nuclear program. The guiding question for this study is thus articulated as follows: How and to what degree can the respective narratives of US presidents regarding Iran's nuclear program be understood through the lenses of securitization and desecuritization theory?

The significance of the paper is based upon an importance of the crisis and a relevance of its solution. Relations between US and Iran are still tense. This is why it is crucial to study and provide insights on the history of relations between these two actors as well as everchanging discourse of US. Furthermore, it might be beneficially for scholars and policymakers who are directly connected to the international relations and nuclear studies to analyze success of different approaches regarding the resolution of this crisis for the future possible situations and nuclear non-proliferation.

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), in its current form, has proven unable to fully contain Iran's nuclear advances or ambitions, especially after the U.S. withdrawal and

Iran's subsequent reductions in compliance (Katzman, 2021; Mousavian, 2012). Meanwhile, regional and global security dynamics have further complicated the issue. The fallout from the Russia–Ukraine conflict since 2022 has intensified Iran's sense of insecurity, potentially incentivizing Tehran to accelerate its nuclear program as a deterrent. There is growing alarm internationally that, absent effective agreements, Iran may move closer to acquiring a nuclear weapons capability, an outcome that could destabilize the Middle East and pose a grave threat to global security (Einhorn, 2015). Understanding how U.S. leaders articulate this problem, whether as a looming existential threat or as a containable challenge, can shed light on likely policy responses and international outcomes.

Analyzing the presidential discourses on this issue also fills a notable gap in the scholarly literature. Previous studies of U.S.–Iran relations have predominantly concentrated on the policies and actions undertaken to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons, such as sanctions, diplomatic negotiations, or military options, often emphasizing the effectiveness of U.S. efforts to discourage Iran's nuclear activities (Hufbauer et al., 2007, Hussain, 2015). Fewer studies have examined in depth the language and narrative that U.S. presidents use to frame Iran's nuclear program in the public discourse (Parsi, 2017; Mousavian, 2012). Those discourse-oriented analyses that do exist tend to come from linguistics or communication studies and frequently focus on media representations, rather than employing theories of international relations to interpret presidential rhetoric. Given that the U.S. president plays a central role in shaping foreign policy and often sets the tone of national discourse through major speeches, examining presidential statements is crucial for understanding U.S. strategic thinking. The President's public discourse can legitimize certain policy options and signal to both domestic and international audiences how the United States perceives a foreign challenge. Indeed, as the head of state and government, the president is uniquely positioned to define threats, reassure or alarm the public, and persuade allies or adversaries through rhetoric (Wendt, 1992). Studying presidential speeches thus provides valuable insight into how critical security issues like Iran's nuclear program are constructed and understood at the highest level of U.S. policymaking.

Finally, while there is extensive research on the rhetoric of earlier U.S. presidents regarding various international issues, including some comparative studies of how presidents from George W. Bush to Barack Obama approached Iran's nuclear ambitions — there has been

relatively little scholarly attention devoted to the specific discourse employed by Donald Trump and especially by Joe Biden on this topic. President Trump's confrontational stance and President Biden's more diplomatic approach represent two contrasting paradigms, yet the nuances of their language have not been thoroughly compared in academic literature. President Biden's presidency is still recent, which partly explains why his discourse on Iran's nuclear program remains under-studied. By examining and juxtaposing Trump's and Biden's speeches, this thesis aims to enrich our understanding of how U.S. leaders rhetorically construct the Iranian nuclear issue, and how these constructions reflect or inform policy.

Thanks to a large number of studies, it has become possible to assess the changes in the dynamics of US–Iranian relations (Hussain, 2015; Milani, 1994). Especially in the field of nuclear proliferation. The researches focus in detail on various actions of the American administrations that were aimed at preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons (Hufbauer et al., 2007). Herewith, there are clearly differences between diplomatic approach and strict pressure tactics.

A number of studies are devoted to the approach of Barack Obama. They help us to easily trace the diplomatic approach of his administration, which contrasts well with his predecessor's tactics (Parsi, 2017; Mousavian, 2012). Obama prefers the most peaceful resolution of the situation possible. He also emphasizes that Iran is the most influential actor in the Middle East. As a result of this position, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action was created. This agreement had a huge impact on the crisis and became a symbol of the effectiveness of the peaceful approach (Einhorn, 2015).

The exact opposite approach was applied by Donald Trump during his first term. His approach was called "maximum pressure" and used economic sanctions as well as political pressure (The White House, 2018; Katzman, 2021). Various studies agreed that this tactic did not have the desired effect and did not lead to a positive outcome of the crisis (Nephew, 2021). On the contrary, Iran's retaliatory actions were aimed at strengthening nuclear activities. This tactic was called "maximum resistance." As a result, the tension between the actors has only intensified and the situation in the region has become more fragile and unstable (Dizaji, 2014).

Other scholarly works have assessed the impact and efficacy of the major policy tools used by the U.S. to impede Iran's nuclear progress. One focal point has been the 2015 nuclear agreement itself. Analysts have debated whether the JCPOA truly halted Iran's march toward a potential nuclear weapon or merely delayed it. For instance, one study argues that the JCPOA served more as a temporary pause than a definitive solution, given that its provisions would eventually sunset and Iran could then rapidly advance its nuclear program if it chose to do so (Parsi, 2017).

Another significant strand of literature examines the use of economic sanctions. The United States has for decades imposed extensive sanctions on Iran as a means of pressure, and researchers have scrutinized the outcomes of this approach (Katzman, 2021; Hufbauer et al., 2007). Some have found that while sanctions exacted a heavy toll on Iran's economy and indeed placed constraints on its nuclear enterprise, they also had severe humanitarian side effects, disproportionately impoverishing the Iranian population without necessarily weakening the resolve of the Iranian leadership or significantly curtailing Iran's nuclear potential (Dizaji, 2014). Moreover, there is evidence that sanctions alone may have limited long-term impact on nuclear proliferation unless they are paired with diplomatic incentives; in fact, if sanctions cannot eventually be eased or lifted in exchange for compliance (for example, due to political obstacles in the U.S. or Iran), their ability to induce lasting concessions is questionable (Nephew, 2021). These findings suggest that purely coercive measures, such as sanctions and threats, have inherent limitations and can sometimes even backfire by hardening Iran's stance.

In addition to policy-focused analyses, scholars have explored the discourse surrounding Iran's nuclear program, though this area of research is comparatively less developed. Some prior studies have looked at U.S. presidential rhetoric about Iran in historical perspective. For instance, comparative evaluations of speeches from the George W. Bush and Barack Obama eras reveal differing narratives. President Bush often framed Iran as part of a broader "Axis of Evil" and emphasized the imminent danger of Iran's nuclear quest to justify a tough stance (The White House, 2002), whereas President Obama's discourse highlighted possibilities for engagement and mutual respect while still underscoring the seriousness of the nuclear challenge (The White House, 2009; The White House, 2015). These studies illustrate how presidential discourse can oscillate between securitizing and desecuritizing

tendencies depending on the administration's philosophy and strategy. However, until recently, few works extended such analysis to President Trump's tenure, and even fewer to President Biden's, largely because Biden's term is still very recent.

Where discourse analyses have been conducted, it has often been situated in fields like linguistics or media studies rather than international relations. For example, some research has examined how U.S. media or officials linguistically portray Iran and its nuclear program, identifying recurrent themes, metaphors, and frames such as depicting Iran as irrational or untrustworthy (Parsi, 2017). While these studies provide valuable insights, they commonly do not engage with theoretical frameworks like securitization that are rooted in security studies and IR theory. One recent analysis noted that scholarship on U.S. discourse about Iran rarely incorporates concepts from international relations, focusing instead on communication styles or propaganda aspects in isolation (Nephew, 2021). This indicates a disciplinary gap: the language used by policymakers is being studied, but often without connecting it to the broader security context or understanding how that language might perform security functions (like threat construction) in the IR sense.

In summary, existing literature has thoroughly documented the policy measures and strategic debates surrounding Iran's nuclear program, including differences between administrations and the outcomes of engagement versus pressure. There is also some recognition of how various U.S. presidents have spoken about the issue, but comprehensive discourse-focused comparisons, particularly those leveraging security theories, remain limited. Notably, President Trump's rhetorical approach to Iran, characterized by stark warnings and adversarial slogans (such as vowing that Iran would never obtain a nuclear weapon under his watch), and President Biden's approach, which often stresses diplomacy and international cooperation, have not yet been systematically compared in academic literature. This thesis addresses that gap by examining their speeches, as well as speeches of George Bush and Barack Obama, through a securitization theoretical lens. By doing so, it bridges the divide between linguistic analysis and security studies, contributing to both the empirical understanding of U.S. policy discourse on Iran and the theoretical application of securitization concepts.

The review of prior research underscores that while much attention has been paid to what policies the U.S. has pursued regarding Iran's nuclear program, less has been devoted to how

U.S. leaders rhetorically justify and communicate those policies. In particular, the existing discourse studies do not fully employ analytic concepts from security theory that could elucidate whether U.S. officials are framing Iran as an existential threat or attempting to normalize the issue. To advance our understanding, this study adopts the theoretical framework of securitization and desecuritization. In the following chapter, these concepts will be discussed in detail. Securitization theory offers a lens to interpret when and how political leaders transform an issue into a security threat in their discourse, and conversely, desecuritization theory explains how leaders might downplay or remove an issue from urgent security status. Using these theories will enable a systematic analysis of US presidents' narratives on Iran, revealing the degree to which each treats Iran's nuclear program as a grave security emergency or as a negotiable diplomatic matter.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 SECURITIZATION THEORY

In international relations theory, securitization refers to the process by which state actors transform ordinary political issues into matters of “security” such that they warrant extraordinary handling outside the normal democratic process (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998). This concept, developed by the Copenhagen School of security studies, emphasizes that a security threat is not just something objective. It is also constructed through discourse (Wæver, 1995; Wendt, 1992). In other words, an issue becomes a security issue when an influential actor, typically a political leader or government, publicly depicts it as an existential threat to some valued referent object and calls for urgent measures to address it. For example, the nation, citizens’ safety, or regional stability. If the relevant audience (the public, the legislature, or the international community) accepts this portrayal, the actor is then empowered to take extraordinary actions that might otherwise be controversial or outside the bounds of normal politics (Buzan et al., 1998; Wendt, 1992).

There are a number of concepts that are crucial to theory of securitization. First, the securitizing actor is the entity that performs the act of securitization. Often, it’s a political leader, official, or institution who has both the platform and authority to declare a security threat. In the context of U.S. discourse on Iran’s nuclear program, the president of the United States is a prime example of a securitizing actor, as presidential speeches carry significant weight in defining national security priorities (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998). Second, the referent object is whatever is claimed to be under threat and in need of protection. This could be as broad as international peace and security, or as specific as the American people or a U.S. ally. Third, an existential threat is the peril that is said to endanger the referent object’s very survival or fundamental well-being. By characterizing Iran’s nuclear program as an existential threat, for instance, a U.S. president would be suggesting that Iran’s potential to obtain nuclear weapons poses a danger so severe that it threatens the existence or vital interests of the U.S. and/or its allies (Wæver, 1995; Wendt, 1992). Finally, extraordinary measures are the exceptional policies or actions proposed to counter the existential threat. These measures go beyond the routine and may include military strikes, regime-changing efforts, or other steps normally considered extreme. In a securitized narrative, such measures are presented as not only justifiable but necessary, given the

magnitude of the threat. Importantly, securitization is a dynamic process. It succeeds only if the audience is persuaded by the securitizing actor's argument and thus grants legitimacy to those extraordinary measures (Buzan et al., 1998).

The securitization framework is particularly useful for analyzing U.S. presidential discourse on Iran because it can illuminate how each president's rhetoric either escalates or de-escalates the sense of danger surrounding Iran's nuclear program. A highly securitizing discourse would focus heavily on worst-case scenarios (for example, the risk of nuclear war or nuclear terrorism), use urgent and alarming language, and argue that normal diplomatic or economic tools are insufficient. Instead, it would demand drastic action to avert catastrophe. By contrast, a less securitized approach might acknowledge the issue as a concern but stop short of apocalyptic language, emphasizing vigilance and containment within existing political processes (Wæver, 1995; Wendt, 1992). In subsequent chapters, this thesis will assess to what extent President Trump's speeches frame Iran's nuclear program in securitized terms versus how President Biden's speeches might reflect attempts at desecuritization or moderation of the threat narrative. Before doing so, it is necessary to formally define the core concepts of securitization that will be used as analytical criteria. Table 2.1 below presents the key terms related to securitization and their definitions as applied in this study.

Table 2.1: Key Concepts of Securitization and Their Definitions.

Concept	Definition
Securitizing Actor	An authority or agent who declares a certain issue to be an existential threat. In this context, a political leader (e.g., the U.S. President) who frames Iran's nuclear program as a grave danger in official discourse.
Referent Object	The entity that is claimed to be at risk and in need of protection. It can be a state, a people, national security, regional stability, or another cherished value that Iran's nuclear program is purported to threaten.
Existential Threat	A threat perceived as endangering the very survival or fundamental well-being of the referent object. It is portrayed as a menace of the highest order (e.g., the prospect of Iran obtaining nuclear weapons and using them against the U.S. or its allies).
Extraordinary Measures	Actions outside the normal bounds of politics, taken to counter an existential threat. These are exceptional steps (such as military action or severe sanctions) justified by the urgency to protect the referent object from the securitized threat.

In applying these concepts, it is worth noting that in the case of U.S. presidential speeches about Iran, some elements of securitization are given or uncontroversial. For example, the securitizing actor is clearly identifiable. It is the president (or, more broadly, the U.S. administration) articulating the threat. Because this analysis specifically focuses on Presidents Bush, Obama, Trump and Biden, the securitizing actor is already known for each discourse and does not require discovery. The more analytically significant elements are the referent objects each president emphasizes, the nature of the threat they describe, and the measures they advocate. By examining these, we can gauge how strongly each president “securitized” the nuclear issue. For instance, if President Trump consistently presented Iran’s nuclear advances as an imminent threat to the lives of Americans and demanded drastic measures, that would indicate a high degree of securitization (The White House, 2018). If President Biden, on the other hand, highlighted the issue as serious but manageable through alliances and negotiations, treating extreme measures as a last resort, that would reflect a lower degree of securitization and perhaps an element of desecuritization (The White House, 2021).

2.2 DESECURITIZATION

While securitization describes the elevation of an issue to a security emergency, desecuritization refers to the reverse process: the move to dial back an issue from the realm of “security” and return it to normal politics and diplomacy (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998). In essence, desecuritization involves reframing a topic so that it is no longer viewed as an existential threat requiring extraordinary responses, but rather as a challenge that can be addressed with the standard tools of statecraft, negotiation, or law enforcement. Desecuritization is an important concept because perpetual securitization can lead to a state of constant crisis, undermine democratic oversight (as extraordinary measures often bypass usual checks and balances), and exacerbate conflicts. By desecuritizing an issue, leaders can reduce tensions and open up space for dialogue and compromise.

Number of studies identify different approaches to desecuritization, which consist of various rhetorical methods. Such methods help decision makers to downplay the real severity or scale of certain threats (Wæver, 1995; Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998). One of the most common methods is deliberately avoiding certain military or crisis formulations. By

deliberately avoiding such terminology, decision makers can influence the perception of a given situation by the masses. This can lead to a situation becoming part of everyday political discourse rather than an imminent threat requiring radical actions.

Another method is related with the usage of diplomatic techniques in solvation of the threat. This method refuses to downplay threats. Instead, the threat is openly acknowledged. The rhetoric of decision makers is shaped with talks about the existing mechanisms of controlling the threat. In the case of nuclear proliferation, its international inspection and treaties. With the help of extensive assurances, it is argued that such mechanisms are more than sufficient to contain the risk of this threat and its further expansion (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998; Wæver, 1995). Thus, they deliberately avoid developing scenarios in which the threat could escalate into security risks or an arms race (ElBaradei, 2011).

Finally, the last method involves a complete transformation of the threat. This method is called the "transformational desecuritization." Such approach completely changes the perception of the threat. In the case of nuclear proliferation, for example, the emphasis may not be on the aggressive aspect of the problem, rather on the peaceful one. For example, focusing on joint projects that contribute to the development of the peaceful atom. However, transformational desecuritization necessitates profound shifts in attitudes and perceptions, typically demanding reciprocal initiatives and cooperative gestures from both involved parties—in the current context, requiring significant diplomatic engagement and visible concessions from Iran to effectively reshape perceptions and discourse (Wæver, 1995).

In practice, a political leader's discourse might employ a combination of these strategies to varying degrees. Table 2.2 provides definitions of the key concepts and strategies associated with desecuritization as they pertain to this study's analysis.

Table 2.2: Key Concepts Related to Desecuritization and Their Definitions.

Concept/Strategy	Definition
Desecuritization	The process of normalizing an issue by reducing or removing its framing as an existential security threat. It involves moving the issue out of “emergency mode” and back into the sphere of ordinary politics and diplomacy.
Avoidance of Security-Speak	Avoiding the use of military and aggressive rhetoric when discussing threats in such a way that the threat does not escalate to the level of a crisis of primary importance. For example, not to characterize the Iranian nuclear program as a "security threat."
Transformation	A complete transformation of the threat's essence so that it no longer appears to be a security threat. For example, to focus on the peaceful possibilities of the Iranian nuclear program and mutual benefit. That is, not to resort to the ultimative formulation "us or them".

By using the theory of desecuritization to analyze the discourse of American administrations regarding the Iranian nuclear program, we can better understand the basis behind their decisions and how they choose the rhetoric they use. The use of a desecuritization approach in presidential rhetoric can help diplomatic negotiations. If radical formulations are not used, the importance of the contribution of international inspections or emphasize the versatility of the Iranian nuclear program can be highlighted. The president may also emphasize that this crisis is being resolved internationally, that is, with the participation and cooperation of other influential actors.

President Biden's election campaign, among other things, was actively based on the resumption of diplomatic negotiations with Iran. Therefore, it is logical to conclude that during his presidency, the white house used more desecuritized rhetoric than under President Trump (The White House, 2021; Nephew, 2021. During the latter's term, radical terms were often used, such as "disaster" or "imminent threat" (The White House, 2018). Of course, it should be taken into account that the political landscape and other important factors influence the degree of desecuritization in the discourse. Therefore, in the following chapters, a study will be conducted that will show whether Trump's statements were strictly aggressive and unambiguous, or whether there were moments when the president was more diplomatic. The same goes for President Biden. Whether his rhetoric successfully balances between an adequate perception of the situation and a diplomatic approach.

Summing up, it can be concluded that securitization and desecuritization represent two extreme opposites in the analysis of rhetoric and discourse. By explicitly distinguishing between these two approaches, we can identify a method for analyzing the rhetoric of Presidents Trump and Biden. This method will be used in subsequent chapters to analyze the rhetoric surrounding Iran's nuclear program. The objects targeted by the rhetoric will be studied, as well as threats identified both explicitly and implied in the context. Whether all rhetoric formulations regarding the matter were portraying Iran as imminent security threat or as a manageable for peaceful resolution issue. The importance of the Iranian crisis is not denied by any of the administrations, however, the nature of statements regarding this issue will be studied in detail. Not only the rhetorical techniques used by the presidents will be highlighted and studied, but also the general influence of discourse on the formation of foreign policy.

2.3 CRITIQUE AND LIMITATIONS OF CONSTRUCTIVISM IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Constructivism is a crucial theoretical framework within international relations. It is focusing on how identities, norms, and ideas influence state behaviors and the global order (Wendt, 1992; Finnemore, 1996). As all other schools of thought, constructivism faces a number of critiques. First of all, the practical value of constructivism is evaluated. Critics ask the question: is it possible to accurately predict the development of events with the help of constructivism? In addition, attention is paid to academic accuracy and application opportunities. This section examines in detail the main points of criticism of constructivism, as well as its possible limitations based on the very essence of this school of thought (Hopf, 1998; Ruggie, 1998).

As mentioned earlier, one of the main points of criticism of Constructivism is its questionable ability to predict judgments that could be relied upon. In contrast, critics cite Realism and Liberalism, which make it more possible to predict the development of political dynamics. This is due to the fact that constructivism basically prefers historical and descriptive methods instead of predictive ones (Hopf, 1998; Ruggie, 1998). That is why critics insist that because of this, the predictive possibilities of constructivism regarding the future actions of actors are severely limited. The most striking example of this is the end of

the Cold War. Constructivism links the resolution of the conflict with the ideological transformations in the USSR and their fundamental changes in relations with the US (Wendt (1992). However, this happens after the fact, and not due to analytical predictions. That is why critics advocate interpreting constructivism as an interpretive structure rather than a predictive model (Checkel, 1999). Thus, the possibilities of the constitution in the field of policymaking are significantly limited.

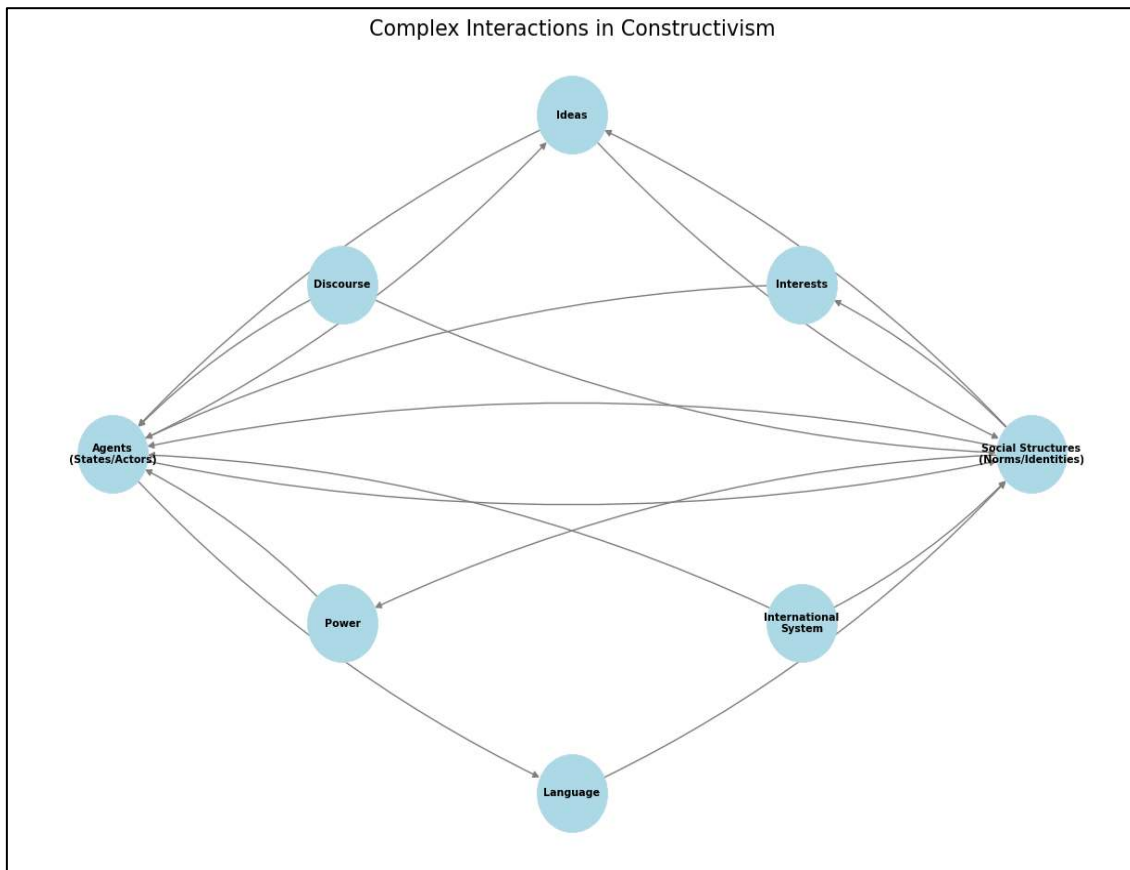


Figure 2.1: Intricate Dynamics Within Constructivist Analysis.

Another equally important critical thesis is directly related to empirical research and methodology. The basis of constructivism is norms, personalities, and perceptions. At the same time, these components, whether it is an assessment of the strength of the influence of the perception of the masses or the strength of the identity of the state, are quite difficult to measure empirically (Checkel, 1999). In this case, there is again a contrast with other schools of thought in which there are indicators that are better measurable (for example, estimates of the army or the economy).

Another limitation often noted is the potential for relativism in constructivist theory. Because constructivism posits that interests and even what constitutes reality in international relations are socially constructed, some critics worry that it lacks a solid normative or analytical foundation from which to judge actions (Ruggie, 1998). If each state's behavior is appropriate relative to its own socially constructed context, one might fall into the trap of saying that all perspectives are equally valid. This relativistic tendency could make it difficult to criticize or counter dangerous policies, since those too could be seen as products of particular historical social contexts. While most constructivists do not claim "anything goes", the emphasis on understanding actors "on their own terms" can sometimes make it appear that constructivism is analytically permissive, without clear criteria to distinguish more persuasive explanations from less persuasive ones (Wendt, 1992).

Realist scholars have also argued that constructivism, by foregrounding ideational factors, neglects material power dynamics or treats them as secondary. From a realist perspective, military capabilities, geography, and economic power continue to set the fundamental parameters within which international politics play out (Mearsheimer, 2001). These critics note that constructivism may overstate the malleability of interests. Even if identities change, the enduring imperatives of security and power cannot be ignored (Waltz, 1990; Jervis, 1999). For instance, a constructivist might emphasize how historical enmity or mutual perceptions shaped a rivalry, whereas a realist would point out that even culturally similar or friendly states can come into conflict over scarce resources or security dilemmas. In cases such as nuclear proliferation or great-power competition, critics assert that constructivist explanations based on norms (for example, the normative stigma against nuclear weapons) are insufficient by themselves; material incentives and constraints must be accounted for to fully understand state behavior (Sagan & Waltz, 1998). Thus, one limitation of constructivism is that it may offer an incomplete picture if it downplays the continued importance of material forces and rationalist calculations.

Furthermore, some scholars question whether constructivism is a cohesive theory or rather an analytical approach that supplements other theories. Constructivism does not provide a singular, agreed-upon model of international relations akin to the balance-of-power in realism or the interdependence model in liberalism. Instead, it offers a philosophical stance: that the world is socially constructed (Wendt, 1992; Onuf, 1989). The breadth and vagueness

of this claim mean that constructivism can be compatible with multiple outcomes, and constructivist scholars often differ in their specific arguments. Because of this, critics argue that constructivism lacks the internal consistency and simplicity that a paradigm should ideally have. In practice, constructivist insights are frequently combined with realist or liberal explanations. For example, one might explain an international negotiation by invoking both materials bargaining leverage (a realist element) and the normative framing of the issue (a constructivist element). The need to pair constructivist analysis with other frameworks is seen by detractors as evidence that constructivism on its own has limited explanatory power and functions more as a “supplement” to mainstream theories than as a standalone theory (Checkel, 1999).

Finally, there is the issue of policy relevance. Because constructivism highlights how unique each state’s historical and cultural context is, it may offer little straightforward guidance for policymakers. Realist and liberal theories often imply concrete strategies (balancing against threats, building institutions, etc.), but constructivism tends to suggest more abstract approaches like “changing discourse” or “redefining identities,” which are difficult to translate into immediate policy action (Checkel, 1999; Hopf, 1998). Despite its theoretical value, constructivism, according to critics, has difficulty providing specific recommendations about formation of new norms and identities. It explains why the changes has happened post factum rather than how to achieve them. This limitation reduces its attractiveness for decision makers who need quick answers to current challenges when time is short (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998).

Thus, constructivism has several key points of criticism. These include the inability to make accurate predictions, difficulties in confirming its effectiveness in practice, and a tendency to subjective and relative interpretations. These critiques do not render constructivism invalid; rather, they highlight that constructivism addresses certain questions in international relations better than others. Supporters of the approach respond by arguing that constructivism’s strength lies in its ability to uncover deeper social and ideational underpinnings that other theories ignore, thus enriching our understanding even if it cannot always predict specific events. They also point out that all theories have limitations, for example, realism cannot easily predict peace, and liberalism struggles to account for power politics. So, constructivism should be judged on whether it offers insights that complement

those of other approaches. In conclusion, the critiques above serve as a reminder that constructivism, like any theoretical framework, must be applied with awareness of what it can and cannot do. Recognizing these limitations allows scholars and practitioners to use constructivist insights in conjunction with other tools of analysis, thus obtaining a more well-rounded comprehension of international phenomena.



3. HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF U.S.-IRAN RELATIONS AND IRAN'S NUCLEAR PROGRAM

3.1 EARLY U.S.-IRAN RELATIONS AND THE SHAH ERA

The early relations between the United States and Iran were characterized by cooperation and strategic partnership, reaching their zenith during the reign of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (1941–1979). Over the course of the mid-20th century, Iran transformed from a distant acquaintance of the United States into one of its closest allies in the Middle East (Alvandi, 2014; The American Presidency Project, 1977). This section examines the development of U.S.-Iran relations from their initial encounters up to the Islamic Revolution of 1979, highlighting how geopolitical interests and mutual perceptions forged a strong alliance, albeit one with underlying tensions that later came to the fore.

Formal diplomatic relations between the two countries were established in the late 19th century and solidified by the early 20th century. The United States and Persia (as Iran was known until 1935) first signed a Treaty of Friendship in 1857, and diplomatic missions were opened subsequently, with a U.S. envoy to Tehran by 1883. Throughout the early decades of the 20th century, however, the United States played a relatively minor role in Iran, especially compared to Britain and Russia, which exerted far greater influence in Persian affairs (Alvandi, 2014). American involvement was generally limited to commercial ties and a few advisory missions. Notably, in 1942 during World War II, Iran was used as a supply route (the “Persian Corridor”) for U.S. Lend-Lease aid to the Soviet Union, marking one of the first significant strategic collaborations between the U.S. and Iran (Goode, 2019).

During World War II, Iran’s geopolitical importance increased. In 1941, British and Soviet forces jointly occupied Iran to secure supply lines and oust the pro-German Shah Reza Pahlavi (the father of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi). The Allies installed his son, Mohammad Reza, on the throne. Although the United States was not part of the initial occupation, it soon supported Iran’s sovereignty and post-war stability. In 1943, at the Tehran Conference, U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt famously acknowledged Iran’s importance and pledged assistance, which helped assuage Iranian fears of permanent British-Soviet control (Goode, 2019). After the war, one of the early tests of U.S.-Iran relations – and an early Cold War confrontation – occurred in 1945-1946 when Soviet troops initially refused to leave northwestern Iran, fomenting separatist movements in Azerbaijan. The United States backed

Iran's demands for Soviet withdrawal, invoking the newly formed United Nations, and the Soviets eventually withdrew in May 1946 under international pressure. This so-called Iran crisis of 1946 helped establish the U.S. as a protector of Iran's post-war independence and marked the beginning of Iran's alignment with the Western bloc in the emerging Cold War order (Sick, 1985).

Despite cooperation, internal Iranian politics introduced major strains. In the early 1950s, Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh spearheaded a movement to nationalize the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC), challenging British economic interests. Mossadegh's nationalist policies and his Cold War neutralism alarmed the Western powers. In 1953, the United States, in collaboration with the United Kingdom, orchestrated a covert operation (codenamed TP-Ajax) to remove Mossadegh from power. His government was overthrown and Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi was restored in power. This was considered as an important victory in the Cold War for Western block. That is because they managed to not let communism spread its influence in Iran. The United States strengthened the position of the Shah, who established an authoritarian regime. However, this interference left a deep scar in Iranian society. It caused outrage and discontent that eventually affected relations between the two countries (Alvandi, 2014; Goode, 2019; Milani, 1994; Sick, 1985).

After the coup, Iran and U.S. became partners and allies in the ME region. Western agenda was accepted by Shah. In 1955 Iran has become a member of the Baghdad Pact. This alliance also included such members as U.S., U.K., Turkey, and Pakistan. Its main purpose was restraining communist influence in the Middle East (Alvandi, 2014). During following two decades, substantial military and economic aid was given to Iran by its Western allies. This help also included training of the Iranian army and secret police (SAVAK) by American advisors. Furthermore, U.S. technology and fundings became base for a number of Iranian development initiatives. In the 1960s the "White Revolution" were launched. A series of reforms which aim was to encourage economy growth and social reform. It was warmly greeted by U.S. as a good effort to strengthen Iran and lower risks of revolution. Relations between U.S. and Iran improved even further during presidency of Lyndon Johnson and later Richard Nixon. In 1969, the Nixon administration formulated a foreign policy doctrine. According to it the U.S. shifted responsibility for maintaining security to its allies. In the Persian Gulf, Iran was identified as a key actor to assume this role. In the 1970s, Iran was receiving significant revenues from oil sales. This allowed them to actively buy advanced

weapons from the U.S. These funds were also used to finance the modernization of the country to strengthen the army of Shah. At this time, Iran became the biggest buyer of the U.S. weapons in the world. Their army was considered the strongest in the region. This was a clear indicator of close cooperation and benefiting between Iran and U.S. (Sick, 1985; Alvandi, 2014).

At first glance, the situation seemed stable. But deep down the state resistance to Shah's regime started to grow. The Shah's policy of secularizing society and suppressing any dissident led to the formation of an opposition that included religious leaders, conservative citizens, and intellectual elites. Critics believed that the Shah was becoming more and more autocratic and relied too heavily on the support of the U.S. In their opinion, this led to the loss of Iran's cultural independence. The widespread economic and military influence of the U.S. in Iran created a feeling among common people that their country became a colony (Milani, 1994; Alvandi, 2014). Based on this perception, a large-scale anti-regime movement appeared in the late 1970s. Exiled to Najaf and then to Paris, Ruhollah Khomeini launched a powerful campaign against the Shah's regime. According to him, Shah was just an American puppet and thanks to whose government Islam in Iran was declining. He and other opposition figures tapped into public anger at social inequalities, corruption, and the repressive tactics of SAVAK, painting the United States as the patron of an illegitimate tyrant. It is noteworthy that President Jimmy Carter (1977–1981) initially pressured the Shah on human rights, reflecting some U.S. unease with the Shah's authoritarianism. However, as the revolution gained momentum, the U.S. administration ultimately threw its support behind the Shah in hopes of saving the alliance. This inconsistent approach did little to slow the tide of unrest sweeping Iran in 1978 (Goode, 2019; The American Presidency Project, 1977).

In 1978-1979, massive demonstrations and civil resistance paralyzed Iran. Facing defections in the military and lack of U.S. willingness to intervene directly, the Shah left Iran in January 1979, initially for a "vacation" that became permanent exile. In February 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini returned to Iran and soon after declared the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The collapse of the Pahlavi regime marked a dramatic turning point in U.S.-Iran relations. The once stalwart alliance abruptly ended; Iranian revolutionary leaders denounced the United States vehemently, calling it the "Great Satan," and accused it of

decades of oppression in Iran. For the United States, the loss of Iran was a severe strategic setback, eliminating its primary ally in the region and threatening its interests amid the Cold War. American policymakers were also shocked by the depth of anti-American sentiment that the revolution revealed (Milani, 1994; Sick, 1985, Goode, 2019).

The legacy of the Shah era thus became a double-edged sword in U.S.-Iran relations. On one hand, it was a period of unprecedented closeness, mutual benefit, and alignment of interests, as summarized in Table 3.1. On the other hand, the methods used to sustain that closeness – notably the 1953 coup and unwavering support for the Shah’s autocracy – created a backlash. The wounds inflicted during that period will continue to shape Iran's revolutionary ideals and define its hostile attitude towards the U.S. for many years to come. The consequences of this breakup became apparent immediately after the revolution, when the former partners turned into enemies (Alvandi, 2014; Milani, 1994). This is described in more detail in section 2.2.

Table 3.1: Key Events During the Shah Era (1941–1979).

Year	Event	Outcome / Significance
1941	Anglo-Soviet invasion of Iran; Mohammad Reza Pahlavi becomes Shah	WWII Allies secure Iran; young Shah installed under Allied oversight.
1943	Tehran Conference (Allied leaders in Iran)	U.S. affirms support for Iran’s sovereignty.
1945–46	Iran Crisis – Soviet refusal to leave Iran’s northwest	U.S. backs Iran at UN; Soviets withdraw (early Cold War victory).
1953	Coup against Prime Minister Mossadegh (Operation Ajax)	Shah’s rule reinforced with U.S. support; start of close alliance, but seeds of Iranian resentment sown.
1955	Iran joins Baghdad Pact (CENTO)	Iran formally aligns with Western bloc in Middle East.
1963	Shah launches the White Revolution reforms	U.S. supports modernization effort; growing dissent from clergy (including Khomeini).
1967	Iran signs the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)	With U.S. encouragement, Iran pursues a civilian nuclear program under NPT framework.
1969–72	Nixon Doctrine; U.S. bolsters Iran as “pillar” in Gulf	Massive arms sales and military training for Iran; peak of strategic partnership.
1978–79	Islamic Revolution – mass protests, Shah’s exile, Khomeini’s return	U.S.-backed monarchy falls; decades-long U.S.-Iran alliance abruptly ends.

3.2 FROM ISLAMIC REVOLUTION TO THE NUCLEAR ISSUE

Relations between U.S. and Iran significantly changed after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Instead of close allies, the states became enemies. This section explores relations between two actors after the Iranian Revolution. The main focus of analysis is the reasons why Iran's nuclear program became the subject of intense confrontation and a key determinant of bilateral relations. This period is famously known for unending confrontation and undefective diplomatic attempts.

After the revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini and his government, attacked the United States with fierce criticism. They accused the U.S. of supporting the autocratic Shah and declared America their worst enemy. The confrontation reached its peak on November 4, 1979 when the Iran Hostage Crisis occur. At that day, group of radical Iranian students stormed the US Embassy in Tehran. In result, 66 American citizens who worked at the diplomatic mission were captured and held hostage. All of this with the silent approval of Ayatollah (Milani, 1994; Sick, 1985). The main demand of the radicals was for the U.S. to extradite the Shah, who was in U.S. for medical treatment at the moment. Furthermore, they demanded the return of the wealth that Shah allegedly seized while he was in power. The crisis dragged on for 444 days, paralyzing U.S.-Iran diplomatic relations. The United States responded with immediate sanctions, including freezing about \$12 billion in Iranian assets, and broke off formal diplomatic ties in April 1980. A U.S. military attempt to rescue the hostages in April 1980 (Operation Eagle Claw) failed disastrously in the Iranian desert, underscoring the impotence of the United States in the face of the new regime's hostility (Goode, 2019). The hostage ordeal finally ended with the Algiers Accords in January 1981, on the eve of Ronald Reagan's inauguration, whereby Iran released the 52 remaining American hostages in exchange for the unfreezing of certain Iranian assets and a pledge of non-interference by the U.S. The legacy of the hostage crisis was deep bitterness on both sides: in the U.S., it cemented Iran's image as a rogue, revolutionary state willing to flout international law, while in Iran it was hailed (by hardliners at least) as a blow against American imperialism (Parsi, 2017).

Through the 1980s, direct diplomatic contact between Washington and Tehran remained severed, and relations were largely defined by indirect conflict. The most significant context was the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988). In September 1980, Saddam Hussein's Iraq invaded

Iran, aiming to seize border territories and take advantage of revolutionary chaos. The United States, still reeling from the hostage crisis, saw an opportunity to weaken the newly declared Islamic Republic and quietly tilted toward Iraq in the conflict. Although officially neutral, the U.S. provided Iraq with intelligence, facilitated third-party arms transfers, and removed Iraq from its list of states supporting terrorism despite Iraq's earlier record (Sick, 1985; Parsi, 2017). The U.S. also led efforts to block arms sales to Iran and later directly engaged in the "Tanker War" phase of the conflict: when Iran began attacking Persian Gulf shipping, including Kuwaiti oil tankers, the U.S. Navy intervened in 1987–1988 to protect shipping lanes (Operation Earnest Will). This led to direct U.S.–Iran armed incidents, such as the clash in April 1988 when U.S. forces sank several Iranian naval vessels and destroyed oil platforms (Operation Praying Mantis) in retaliation for Iranian mining of waters (Goode, 2019). The most tragic incident occurred in July 1988, when the USS Vincennes warship shot down Iran Air Flight 655, a civilian passenger Airbus, mistaking it for a hostile aircraft – killing all 290 people on board. Iran saw this as proof of American aggression, while the U.S. insisted it was a grave error (Milani, 1994).

During the same period, Iran was implicated in several attacks on U.S. interests through proxy groups, heightening American perceptions of Iran as a sponsor of terrorism. In 1983, for example, suicide bombings against the U.S. Embassy and Marine barracks in Lebanon were carried out by Hezbollah, a Shi'a militant group created with Iranian support; these attacks killed dozens of U.S. personnel. The U.S. officially designated Iran as a state sponsor of terrorism in 1984, citing its support for Hezbollah and other groups (Parsi, 2017; Katzman, 2021). Additionally, the convoluted Iran-Contra affair (1985–1986) – where U.S. officials illicitly sold arms to Iran in hopes of freeing American hostages in Lebanon, and used proceeds to fund Nicaraguan rebels – demonstrated that even hostile relations had back-channel dealings. However, the exposure of that affair further poisoned domestic U.S. views of Iran. By the end of the 1980s, the Iran-Iraq War concluded with a ceasefire, but U.S.-Iran relations had reached perhaps their lowest point, defined by open military clashes, terrorism accusations, and mutual demonization (Milani, 1994; Goode, 2019; Sick, 1985).

In the 1990s, with the Cold War over, U.S. policy towards Iran was driven by concerns over Iran's support for militant movements, opposition to the Middle East peace process, and nascent worries about weapons of mass destruction. The administrations of George H.W.

Bush and Bill Clinton adopted a strategy of “dual containment” toward Iran (and Iraq), aiming to isolate both regional rivals rather than playing them against each other. The U.S. maintained comprehensive economic sanctions: in 1995, President Clinton issued executive orders banning almost all U.S. trade and investment in Iran, notably to thwart Iran’s oil and gas development, accusing Iran of sponsoring terrorism and seeking nuclear weapons (Katzman, 2021). These sanctions were codified and expanded by the Iran–Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA) of 1996, threatening penalties on foreign companies investing in Iran’s energy sector (Hufbauer et al., 2007). Throughout the decade, Iran’s economy suffered from this isolation, even as European and Asian countries maintained more limited engagement with Tehran (Parsi, 2017).

Diplomatically, there were limited attempts at thawing relations. In 1997, a surprise development occurred: the election of a relatively moderate Iranian president, Mohammad Khatami. President Khatami advocated a “Dialogue of Civilizations” and in early 1998 extended a rhetorical olive branch to the American people in a CNN interview, condemning terrorism and calling for cultural exchange (United Nations, 1998). In response, the Clinton administration cautiously welcomed Khatami’s tone. In 2000, U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright acknowledged American involvement in the 1953 coup as a cause of Iranian mistrust and announced the lifting of import bans on a few Iranian goods (carpets, pistachios) as a goodwill gesture (Parsi, 2017). These were unprecedented admissions and steps by the U.S., aimed at encouraging reformists in Tehran. However, progress remained halting. Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, was deeply skeptical of U.S. intentions, and conservative elements in Iran stymied political normalization. From the U.S. perspective, Iran had not fundamentally changed its policies in areas of concern: Tehran continued testing ballistic missiles, and intelligence reports suggested it was still pursuing dual-use nuclear technology. A full rapprochement proved elusive, as each side’s gestures were often viewed by the other as insufficient or insincere. By the end of the 1990s, official relations had not been restored.

The turn of the century saw U.S.-Iran relations take on a new focus: Iran’s nuclear program. Ironically, Iran’s nuclear efforts had begun under the Shah with U.S. assistance (as part of Atoms for Peace), but were suspended after 1979. By the late 1980s, Iran, citing the need for diversifying energy resources, restarted its civilian nuclear program with help from countries

like Russia and China. The United States grew suspicious that Iran's ostensibly civilian program could mask ambitions to develop a nuclear weapons capability, given Iran's enrichment of uranium and construction of nuclear facilities in secret. In 2002, an Iranian dissident group revealed the existence of two undeclared nuclear sites: a uranium enrichment facility at Natanz and a heavy-water project at Arak. This discovery caused an international crisis, as the United States accused Iran of violating the NPT and secretly developing nuclear weapons (IAEA, 2003; Albright, 2015). President Khatami denied all accusations regarding the development of nuclear weapons. He reminded that Iran has its right for peaceful nuclear technologies. Nevertheless, the concealment of the nuclear sites still raised alarm in international community (ElBaradei, 2011).

The situation in the ME region was significantly changed and became more intensified due to a number of events. Particularly, the September 11 attacks, the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and consequent invasion of Iraq in 2003 played key roles. At first, Iran was covertly helping the U.S. in Afghanistan with the establishment of the new government. Both of the states viewed Taliban as their enemy. However, in 2002 George Bush famously named Iran a part of "Axis of Evil", addressing State of the Union. This statement shocked and angered Tehran, especially as it came despite Iran's quiet assistance in Afghanistan. It signaled a hard line from Washington and foreshadowed a confrontational approach to Iran's emerging nuclear issue (The White House, 2002; Parsi, 2017). The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 further stoked Iranian security fears, effectively encircling Iran with U.S. military presence in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Persian Gulf (Goode, 2019).

Under growing international scrutiny, Iran agreed in late 2003 to cooperate with Britain, France, and Germany (the EU-3) to avoid referral to the UN Security Council. In the Paris Agreement of November 2004, Iran pledged to suspend uranium enrichment as a confidence-building measure while negotiations continued. For a brief period, there was hope that a diplomatic solution could be reached, wherein Iran would limit its nuclear program in exchange for economic incentives and security assurances. However, this tentative progress stalled. In 2005, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a hardliner, was elected President of Iran. Shortly thereafter, Iran ended its voluntary suspension of enrichment, asserting its right under the NPT to develop nuclear fuel cycle capabilities. Negotiations with the EU-3 broke down. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) reported Iran's non-compliance to the UN

Security Council in 2006, leading to a new phase of multilateral pressure (IAEA, 2003; Albright, 2015; ElBaradei, 2011).

From 2006 onward, the UN Security Council passed a series of resolutions demanding that Iran suspend enrichment and cooperate fully with the IAEA. When Iran defied these demands, sanctions were progressively tightened. UN sanctions (Resolutions 1737, 1747, 1803, 1929) targeted Iran's nuclear and missile programs, arms exports, and restricted financial transactions (UNSC, 2006; UNSC, 2007; UNSC, 2008; UNSC, 2010). The United States and European Union went further, implementing sweeping unilateral sanctions that aimed to cut Iran off from the international financial system and oil markets. By 2012, U.S. legislation such as the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act (CISADA) and executive orders had placed severe penalties on foreign banks dealing with Iran's Central Bank, effectively crippling Iran's ability to sell oil abroad (Katzman, 2021; Hufbauer et al., 2007). The EU banned imports of Iranian oil and restricted dealings with Iranian banks. These measures caused a sharp drop in Iran's oil exports and significant economic contraction, putting Iran under its worst economic stress since the 1980s war. The rationale from the Western perspective was to coerce Iran into a deal by demonstrating that pursuing the nuclear program would exact unacceptable costs. During this period of international tension, Iran has demonstrated rebellious behavior in public. President Ahmadinejad's statements were often aggressive. He was rejecting the demands of other actors and even questioned the Holocaust. This led to further isolation of Iran and strengthened the position of the U.S. (Milani, 1994). At the same time, unrest have intensified within Iran due to the strengthening of the economic sanctions. The population has faced the consequences of rising prices and unemployment (Dizaji, 2014; Moghaddasi Kelishomi & Nisticò, 2022).

Hassan Rouhani's election as President of Iran in 2013 was a catalyst for a diplomatic settlement. Rouhani adhered to centrist views and sought to reduce tensions with the West. He received the approval of the Supreme Leader to hold talks on the nuclear issue. Thus started the secret bilateral talks between the U.S. and Iran. It was quite a notable event, held at such a high level for the first time since 1979. Subsequently, in November 2013, Iran and the 5+1 Group concluded a JCPOA in Geneva. According to this deal, Iran's nuclear

activities were paused in exchange for limited sanctions relief with the aim of building trust between the sides (Parsi, 2017; Mousavian, 2012; Einhorn, 2015).

The final deal was signed in July 2015, after almost two years of intense negotiations. Although the deal addressed only the nuclear issue, marked a potential turning point in relations between the United States and Iran. For the first time in more than 30 years, high representatives of both countries sat down personally at the negotiating table and reached an agreement. The Iranian leadership viewed the deal as a temporary measure to ease the economic burden, while the U.S. argued that it would permanently close Iran's path to developing nuclear weapons (U.S. Department of State, 2015; U.S. Department of State, 2015; The White House, 2015; Parsi, 2017).

The JCPOA has not eliminated the deep mistrust between the two sides. However, it has caused a slight rise of optimism among diplomatic circles. Iran temporarily limited its nuclear program, which led to the partial lifting of sanctions. Nevertheless, political pressure from within both countries (conservatives in the U.S. and hardliners in Iran) undermined the agreement. In the end, Trump administration unilaterally withdrew from the JCPOA in 2018 (The White House, 2018; Nephew, 2021; Einhorn, 2015).

The Trump administration criticized the agreement for not addressing Iran's ballistic missile program or regional influence, and it doubted the temporary nature of some nuclear restrictions. Following withdrawal, the U.S. reimposed all previous sanctions and introduced additional ones in what it called a "maximum pressure" campaign. This policy sought to compel Iran to negotiate a broader deal or even to destabilize the Iranian government through economic strangulation (Katzman, 2021; Nephew, 2021). Consequently, U.S.-Iran tensions spiked again. Iran initially remained in the JCPOA with the other parties (Europe, Russia, China) hoping they could offset U.S. sanctions, but as economic benefits evaporated, Iran began breaching certain nuclear limits from 2019 onward – for instance, enriching uranium beyond the JCPOA's 3.67% limit and expanding its stockpile, thereby reducing its breakout time for a weapon (IAEA, 2003; Albright, 2015). Meanwhile, incidents between the U.S. and Iran multiplied: Iran was accused of attacking oil tankers in the Gulf and shooting down a U.S. drone, and in January 2020 the U.S. assassinated Iran's General Qassem Soleimani, dramatically increasing the risk of direct conflict. Although an all-out war was avoided, these events underscored the fraught state of affairs post-JCPOA (Sullivan, 2022).

Efforts to restore or replace the nuclear deal have been ongoing in the early 2020s. The Biden administration in the U.S. expressed willingness to return to the JCPOA if Iran also came back into full compliance, and multilateral negotiations in Vienna were launched in 2021 to find a path forward (Blinken, 2021; Sullivan, 2022). However, progress has been halting. Mistrust is now deeper than ever: Iran demands guarantees that the U.S. will not renege again, and the U.S. seeks stricter terms given Iran’s advanced nuclear work since 2019 (Nephew, 2021). As of 2025, the nuclear issue remains unresolved, illustrating how entrenched the mutual suspicion and strategic rivalry have become.

In reflecting on the period from the Islamic Revolution to the present, as summarized in Table 3.2, several patterns emerge.

Table 3.2: Major Developments in U.S.-Iran Relations from 1979 to the Nuclear Standoff.

Year/Period	Event or Development	Impact on U.S.-Iran Relations
1979	Islamic Revolution in Iran; U.S.-backed Shah overthrown	U.S. loses a key ally; Iran transforms into an anti-Western theocracy.
1979–1981	U.S. Embassy hostage crisis (52 Americans held 444 days)	Diplomatic relations severed; U.S. imposes initial sanctions, mutual animosity heightened.
1980–1988	Iran–Iraq War (U.S. supports Iraq indirectly)	Proxy conflict strains relations; U.S. and Iran engage in occasional naval clashes.
1984	U.S. designates Iran as “State Sponsor of Terrorism”	Codifies Iran’s pariah status due to support for groups like Hezbollah.
1988	U.S. Navy shoots down Iran Air Flight 655	Nearly 300 Iranian civilians killed; deepens Iranian distrust of the U.S.
1995–1996	U.S. expands economic sanctions (oil and trade ban; ILSA)	Iran’s isolation by the U.S. becomes comprehensive, damaging its economy.
2002	“Axis of Evil” speech; exposure of secret Iranian nuclear sites (Natanz, Arak)	U.S. labels Iran a primary rogue state; nuclear issue moves to forefront of international concerns.
2003–2006	Early nuclear negotiations (Iran-EU3 Paris Agreement 2004) fail; Ahmadinejad’s rise	Hopes for compromise dim as Iran resumes enrichment; U.S. pushes for UN action.

Table 3.2: Major Developments in U.S.-Iran Relations from 1979 to the Nuclear Standoff (Table Continued).

2006– 2010	UN sanctions (four resolutions) and U.S./EU sanctions tighten	Iran is economically pressured and politically isolated over its nuclear defiance.
2013	Hassan Rouhani elected President of Iran	New Iranian diplomatic approach leads to renewed direct talks with the U.S. and world powers.
2015	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action nuclear deal signed	Significant de-escalation: Iran limits nuclear program under international monitoring in exchange for sanctions relief.
2018	U.S. withdraws from JCPOA and reimposes “maximum pressure” sanctions	Relations sharply deteriorate again; Iran breaches some nuclear limits, trust destroyed.
2021– 2022	Tentative talks to restore nuclear agreement (Vienna negotiations)	Uncertain prospects for diplomacy as mutual skepticism persists; nuclear issue unresolved.

First, ideological narratives have consistently driven the relationship: Iran’s post-1979 identity as an Islamic anti-imperialist republic set it fundamentally at odds with the United States, whom it saw as a hegemonic power encroaching on Muslim lands and supporting Iran’s enemies. Conversely, American narratives cast post-revolutionary Iran as a source of extremism and instability that needed to be contained (Sick, 1985; Hussain, 2015). These adversarial perceptions created a security dilemma with both ideological and material dimensions. Second, despite the hostile rhetoric, both sides have occasionally found it necessary to engage pragmatically – whether it was Iran covertly dealing with the U.S. during Iran-Contra, or the U.S. negotiating the nuclear deal (Mousavian, 2012; Parsi, 2017). These instances show that common interests (however narrow, such as resolving the hostage situation or avoiding nuclear proliferation) can spur dialogue even amid conflict. Third, the nuclear issue came to symbolize the broader mistrust: to Tehran, the nuclear program is a matter of national pride and security; to Washington, it has been seen as a potentially grave threat. Managing this issue has required addressing the underlying lack of trust (ElBaradei, 2011). Constructivist analysts would note that without a change in the identity-based narratives – for example, if each continues to see the other as an implacable enemy –

technical agreements like the JCPOA will always be fragile (Wendt, 1992; Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). Realists, on the other hand, would emphasize how power asymmetry and strategic competition (for regional influence, security and oil resources) make the rivalry logically persistent regardless of rhetoric (Mearsheimer, 2001). In practice, both ideational and material factors have fed into the conflict.

Looking ahead, the trajectory of U.S.-Iran relations will largely depend on whether the two states can redefine their interaction from enmity to at least coexistence. The experience from 1979 to the present demonstrates how difficult that shift is. The animosity has become deeply institutionalized – in Iran through slogans, school textbooks, and the security apparatus built around confronting American plots, and in the United States through laws, sanctions, and alliances aimed at countering Iran (Parsi, 2017; Mousavian, 2012). The nuclear negotiations remain a critical flashpoint: a successful resolution could reduce tensions and open possibilities for addressing other issues, while failure could escalate towards open conflict. As of now, each side remains cautious and skeptical of the other's intentions. In international relations theory terms, this enduring conflict underscores the interplay of constructivist factors (hostile identities and narratives), realist dynamics (power struggle and security dilemmas), and domestic politics on both sides that reinforce a cycle of distrust (Wendt, 1999; Mearsheimer, 2001; Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). Breaking that cycle would likely require both a material accommodation of interests and a social re-framing of each side's image of the other – a challenging prospect given the legacy detailed above.

3.3 THE EMERGENCE OF THE NUCLEAR STANDOFF (2002–2008)

The Iranian nuclear controversy escalated in the early 2000s, transforming long-standing tensions between the United States and Iran into an acute international dispute. In January 2002, U.S. President George W. Bush labeled Iran as part of an “Axis of Evil,” signaling Washington's suspicion that Tehran was seeking weapons of mass destruction and aligning Iran rhetorically with other adversarial states (The White House, 2002). This hostile characterization set the tone for U.S.-Iran relations and heightened Iranian perceptions of threat from the United States.

Tensions mounted further in August 2002 when an exiled Iranian opposition group revealed the existence of clandestine nuclear facilities at Natanz (a uranium enrichment site) and Arak

(a heavy-water reactor project) that Iran had not declared to the IAEA. The international community has been alarmed by these revelations. The scale and objectives of Iran's nuclear program was at question. In response, the IAEA launched an investigation (IAEA, 2003). The U.S. and its allies have increased pressure on Tehran and demanded greater transparency in its nuclear activities. Despite Iran's recent statements about the peaceful nature of its program, the discovery of undeclared facilities has seriously undermined the country's trustworthiness and increased suspicions about its true intentions (Katzman, 2021).

In 2003, the Iranian nuclear program became the focus of international attention and active diplomatic efforts. The reformist Khatami government faced intense pressure from the international community. In order to avoid UN sanctions, they had no choice but to interact with the IAEA and negotiate with European countries. Such negotiations with EU-3 concluded in an agreement in October 2003. The agreement was named the Tehran Declaration. In the end, Iran voluntarily suspended uranium enrichment and agreed to stricter IAEA inspections by signing an Additional Protocol (IAEA, 2003; ElBaradei, 2011; Katzman, 2021).

The Tehran Declaration temporarily reduced tensions. But it failed to eliminate the cause of problems. The reason for this is serious violations of Iran's safeguards agreements. They were found by IAEA during the period of Iran's suspension of uranium enrichment and negotiations with the EU-3. These violations included undeclared experiments with plutonium and uranium enrichment. Iran tried to present these violations as minor, but the IAEA Board of Governors did not agree with this assessment and declared Iran in non-compliance with its obligations. This serious cause opened the way for the UN Security Council to consider it (IAEA, 2003; ElBaradei, 2011; Katzman, 2021).

In 2004, the international community took diplomatic effort to obtain guarantees from Iran for the peaceful use of its nuclear program. These efforts culminated in the signing of the Paris Agreement in November 2004. According to this document, Iran has committed to continue suspending work on uranium enrichment and reprocessing until negotiations on a long-term solution begin. In turn, European countries have recognized Iran's right to develop peaceful nuclear energy. In addition, a promise was made to consider options for stimulating cooperation. Such stimulations included financing of economic projects and assistance in the development of modern nuclear technologies. Although the United States was not

directly involved in the negotiations, it generally supported the European initiative. At the same time, they remained wary of Iran's true goals. The Bush administration viewed the negotiations as a way for Iran to buy time to secretly develop nuclear capabilities. This distrust led to the fact that even during the Iran-Europe talks, Washington did not rule out the possibility of using tougher measures, such as imposing sanctions or appealing to the UN Security Council (ElBaradei, 2011; Katzman, 2021; Hussain, 2015).

Iran's nuclear policy went through significant changes in 2005. The election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president in June 2005 was the main reason for these changes. His conservative administration has moved to more assertive rhetoric. The main focus was on emphasizing Iran's right within the NPT to develop a full nuclear fuel cycle, including uranium enrichment. Iranian officials argued that the earlier voluntary suspension was a goodwill gesture that had not been reciprocated adequately by the West, especially as talks had not yielded a conclusive agreement on Iran's nuclear rights and incentives. In August 2005, shortly after Ahmadinejad took office, Iran resumed uranium conversion activities at its Isfahan facility, effectively ending the suspension agreed under the Paris deal. The breakdown of the suspension heightened international concerns; European negotiators criticized Iran's move as a breach of trust, while the U.S. warned that Iran's resumption of enrichment-related work would have consequences (ElBaradei, 2011; Hussain, 2015; IAEA, 2003).

As the diplomatic impasse deepened, the IAEA Board of Governors voted in February 2006 to report Iran's nuclear file to the UN Security Council, citing the agency's inability to verify that Iran's program was exclusively peaceful. Iran reacted by halting its voluntary implementation of the Additional Protocol and limiting cooperation with inspectors to the legally required minimum under its safeguard's agreement. These steps reduced the transparency of Iran's program just as international worries were growing. In April 2006, President Ahmadinejad announced that Iran had succeeded in enriching uranium to a low level for the first time and had joined the "nuclear club," further exacerbating tensions with the West (ElBaradei, 2011; Hussain, 2015; IAEA, 2003).

Iran's actions have caused serious concern among the U.S. and European powers. This event was considered by them as a dangerous step towards developing nuclear weapons. They argued that even small amounts of enriched uranium undermines international efforts of non-

proliferation and violates previous agreements (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2005). In response, the UN Security Council adopted resolution 1696. The purpose of this resolution was calling on Iran to immediately cease all activities related to uranium enrichment and reprocessing. Iran's disregard of this resolution led to the implication of international sanctions (UNSC, 2006).

From 2006 to 2008, the UN Security Council consistently strengthened sanctions against Iran. This process was initiated by resolution 1737 which imposed initial restrictions on nuclear materials, technologies, and assets of individuals associated with Iran's nuclear program (UNSC, 2006). It also set a deadline within which Iran must suspend uranium enrichment, warning of further steps otherwise. Iran condemned the resolution as unfair and illegal, saying that its nuclear activities are carried out within the framework of its sovereign rights and aimed at generating electricity. It also set a deadline within which Iran must suspend uranium enrichment. Iran condemned the resolution as unfair and illegal. They kept insisting that its nuclear activities are carried out within the framework of its sovereign rights and aimed at generating electricity (IAEA, 2003; Hussain, 2015).

As Iran continued to ignore demands for the suspension of its activities, the UN Security Council took steps to increase sanctions pressure. In March 2007, resolution 1747 was adopted. It not only banned the export of Iranian weapons, but also expanded the list of individuals and organizations subject to sanctions (UNSC, 2007). Further tightening followed in March 2008 with the adoption of resolution 1803. This time it was focused on restricting the export of dual-use goods, called for increased control over financial transactions and added new names to the lists of persons whose assets are subject to freezing. (UNSC, 2008; Hufbauer et al., 2007).

The combination of international sanctions and restrictions has had a significant negative impact on the Iranian economy and political elite. However, Ahmadinejad's government chose to ignore these sanctions. The nuclear program has become active again. The number of centrifuges at Natanz has increased and the development of more advanced models has begun. By the end of 2008, Iran had accumulated significant reserves of low-enriched uranium and continued construction of a heavy-water reactor in Arak (IAEA, 2008). At the end of 2007, the U.S. National Intelligence Estimate published its assessment. According to it, Iran stopped work on the creation of nuclear weapons back in 2003 (National Intelligence

Council, 2007). This has somewhat eased concerns about the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, this conclusion did not lead to a significant change in Washington's pressure policy. The reason is that Iran continued to enrich uranium, and doubts about the true goals of this program remained (Katzman, 2021).

During that period of tension direct negotiations between the two countries were rare. The Bush administration mostly avoided direct contact because of their considering of Iranian regime as a part of a broader threat (The White House, 2002). The hostility between the two countries was based not only on Iran's nuclear program issue. Other factors, such as mutual accusations about Iran's role in the Iraq war and its impact on regional security, also played their role (Katzman, 2021). In late 2006, for the first time, the United States agreed to join multilateral nuclear talks on the condition that Iran suspend enrichment first, a precondition Iran rejected, resulting in a stalemate. As an alternative diplomatic track, U.S. officials occasionally floated offers—via the Europeans or intermediaries — hinting at possible security guarantees or WTO (World Trade Organization) membership for Iran if it verifiably gave up enrichment, but these overtures never gained traction (ElBaradei, 2011). Conversely, Iranian officials referenced a proposal reportedly made in 2003 (through Swiss diplomatic channels) for a “grand bargain” that would settle U.S.-Iran disputes including the nuclear issue, which had been ignored by Washington (Parsi, 2017). Such episodes reinforced a narrative on each side that the other was not genuinely interested in compromise. Consequently, by the close of 2008, the Iranian nuclear controversy had only deepened. Iran had achieved significant nuclear progress under increasing sanctions, and the United States, along with its allies, had solidified an international coalition to pressure Iran, setting the stage for a new approach by the incoming U.S. administration (Table 3.3).

Table 3.3: Timeline of Major Events in the Iranian Nuclear Dispute and U.S.–Iran Relations, 2002–2008.

Date	Event
January 2002	U.S. President George W. Bush identifies Iran as part of an “Axis of Evil,” accusing it of seeking WMD, which worsens bilateral relations.
August 2002	Iranian dissidents reveal secret nuclear sites at Natanz and Arak, prompting IAEA inspections and international demands for transparency.

Table 3.3: Timeline of Major Events in the Iranian Nuclear Dispute and U.S.–Iran Relations, 2002–2008 (Table Continued).

October 2003	Iran and EU-3 agree in Tehran to Iran’s voluntary suspension of uranium enrichment and signing of the Additional Protocol, averting immediate Security Council action.
November 2004	Paris Agreement: Iran extends its enrichment suspension during talks with the EU-3; in exchange, Europeans promise incentives and acknowledgment of Iran’s nuclear rights.
August 2005	Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s new government ends the voluntary suspension and resumes uranium conversion at Isfahan, citing dissatisfaction with negotiation outcomes.
February 2006	IAEA reports Iran’s non-compliance to the UN Security Council; Iran retaliates by ceasing implementation of the Additional Protocol and limiting cooperation.
July 2006	UN Security Council passes Resolution 1696 demanding Iran suspend enrichment; Iran rejects the demand, asserting its NPT rights.
Dec 2006 – Mar 2008	Security Council adopts Resolutions 1737, 1747, and 1803, imposing increasing sanctions on Iran’s nuclear and military entities as Iran continues enrichment activities unabated.
2007	U.S. National Intelligence Estimate reports Iran halted nuclear weapons design work in 2003, softening immediate fears but not altering U.S. policy of pressure.
Late 2008	With Iran’s program still advancing (several thousand centrifuges operating) and sanctions in place, the stage is set for renewed diplomatic efforts by the forthcoming Obama administration.

3.4 DIPLOMACY AND CONFRONTATION: TOWARD THE NUCLEAR DEAL (2009–2015)

The inauguration of U.S. President Barack Obama in January 2009 led to a recalibration of Washington’s approach to Iran, emphasizing engagement alongside pressure. Obama entered office publicly willing to pursue direct diplomacy with Tehran, a significant shift from the prior administration’s stance (The White House, 2009). In a March 2009 message marking Nowruz (the Persian New Year), he extended an overture to Iran’s leaders and people, offering a “new beginning” in relations and mutual respect if Iran would unclench its fist. Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei responded skeptically, demanding tangible changes in U.S. policy, yet this exchange opened the door to diplomacy (Office of the Supreme Leader of Iran, 2012). Throughout 2009, multilateral talks resumed in an expanded format: the P5+1 (the five permanent UN Security Council members plus Germany) met with Iranian negotiators to seek a breakthrough in the nuclear impasse (ElBaradei, 2011). One early opportunity emerged in October 2009, when talks in Geneva

yielded a tentative agreement on a fuel swap. Iran would export a large portion of its low-enriched uranium stockpile to be processed abroad into fuel for the Tehran Research Reactor. That deal meant to build confidence and reduce Iran's uranium stockpile. Initially, the agreement received support from both the United States and Iranian negotiators. However, pressure from the conservative Iranian opposition led Tehran to abandon the original fuel exchange plan. The failure of this deal in 2009 revealed deep mistrust between the parties and became a harbinger of further problems (Parsi, 2017).

Diplomatic efforts to resolve the situation with Iran's nuclear program have not yielded quick results. It is for this reason that the international community has increased the pressure. The opening of a secret uranium enrichment plant at Fordo and the failure of fuel exchange negotiations have led Western countries to believe that Iran's nuclear program is becoming more dangerous and requires resolute opposition (IAEA, 2010). UN Security Council Resolution 1929, adopted in June 2010, represented an unprecedented tightening of sanctions against Iran. This fourth round of restrictions was the toughest at the time and included a wide range of measures. Starting from a ban on foreign investments in the nuclear sector to increased control over the supply of weapons and cargo inspections (UNSC, 2010). The U.S. and the EU went even further by imposing their own extremely harsh sanctions. They targeted key sectors of the Iranian economy, such as oil exports and the banking system (Katzman, 2021).

By the early 2010s, Iran's economy was in crisis. Oil revenues declined sharply, and access to international finance market was severely limited. In parallel with this, a number of mysterious events occurred. In particular, from 2010 to 2011, several nuclear scientists were killed in Iran, and Iranian nuclear facilities were subjected to sophisticated cyber-attacks. Iran has accused Israel and the United States of organizing these acts of sabotage, declaring them as acts of terrorism. These events have caused a sense of insecurity and resentment in Iran (Parsi, 2017).

During this period, relations between the United States and Iran reached a peak of tension. Ahmadinejad's cabinet has taken some provocative measures. For example, an increase in the enrichment of uranium-235 to 20% at the Natanz facility. The official reason for this step was called the research reactor. In turn, the United States sought to further isolate Iran,

accusing it not only of violations in the nuclear sphere, but also of destabilizing regional conflicts (IAEA, 2011; Katzman, 2021).

Nevertheless, diplomatic channels remained open. For example, in 2012 there were several rounds of negotiations with Iran in the 5+1 format. However, the parties failed to achieve significant results. The reason for this was the different goals of the parties. For example, the 5+1 countries demanded that Iran significantly reduce its uranium enrichment program and export most of its reserves. In their turn, Iran insisted on recognizing its right for enrichment and easing sanctions as a prerequisite for any significant concessions. This led to a stalemate (Parsi, 2017). Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, took a wait-and-see attitude. He expressed skepticism about the true intentions of the United States. In addition, he set clear boundaries for what was acceptable, while allowing Iranian diplomats to explore opportunities for interactions.

However, by late 2012 and early 2013, back-channel communications between Washington and Tehran began to pick up momentum, facilitated by the country of Oman as a discreet intermediary. Senior U.S. officials and Iranian counterparts reportedly engaged in secret talks exploring the contours of a potential nuclear agreement and ways to improve relations, laying groundwork unknown to much of the world at the time (Parsi, 2017).

Hassan Rouhani won the presidential election in 2013. This has led to changes in the political climate in Iran. President Rouhani has already served as the lead negotiator on the nuclear issue from 2003 to 2005. One of the main promises of his election campaign was the intention to end the crisis over the nuclear program. After taking office, Rouhani confirmed Iran's readiness to limit nuclear activities in exchange for easing sanctions (Mousavian, 2012; Parsi, 2017). The United States and other actors reacted to this change in rhetoric with cautious optimism. Later that year, a new important event took place. For the first time since 1979, a direct telephone conversation took place between the heads of Iran and the United States. At the same time, US Secretary of State John Kerry and Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif met in person. A number of their meetings took place within the framework of the UN General Assembly (U.S. Department of State, 2015). All this led to the resumption of negotiations in the P5+1 format. As a result of these negotiations, the Joint Plan of Actions was signed in 2013. The essence of this interim deal was an agreement for Iran to freeze their nuclear activities in exchange for a partial lifting of sanctions by Western

powers. Under the JPOA, Iran specifically agreed to halt enrichment above 5%, dilute or convert its stockpile of 20% enriched uranium, and suspend progress on the Arak heavy-water reactor. While the P5+1 provided modest relief including unfreezing some Iranian assets and pausing certain trade sanctions (Einhorn, 2015; IAEA, 2003). The JPOA, implemented in early 2014, marked the first time in a decade that Iran agreed to roll back elements of its nuclear activity, and it created a constructive atmosphere for negotiating a comprehensive solution.

From early 2014 through 2015, negotiators engaged in intensive diplomacy to reach a long-term settlement, with multiple extensions of deadlines as they tackled complex technical and political issues (Einhorn, 2015). Talks took place in various cities (Vienna, Geneva, Lausanne) and at the highest levels, involving foreign ministers repeatedly. Key sticking points included the allowable scope of Iran's enrichment capacity (number and type of centrifuges), the fate of the Arak reactor, the duration of any long-term agreement (how many years it would impose special restrictions), the verification mechanisms (inspection and monitoring arrangements by the IAEA), and the sequencing of sanctions relief. The United States, under President Obama, faced pressure both domestically and from regional allies like Israel and Saudi Arabia to secure a deal that would unequivocally prevent Iran from ever obtaining a nuclear weapon, which meant imposing strict, long-lasting limits and verification (Parsi, 2017). Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was among the most outspoken critics of the negotiating process. He even delivered a speech to the U.S. Congress in March 2015 condemning the emerging deal as dangerously insufficient, underscoring the staunch regional opposition to any agreement perceived as too permissive. Iran's leadership, under Rouhani and with Khamenei's guarded approval, insisted on retaining a peaceful nuclear program including a limited enrichment capability and demanded prompt lifting of the most crippling sanctions. Negotiators sought creative solutions, such as redesigning the Arak reactor to cut off its potential plutonium output and converting Fordow into a research facility, that would address proliferation concerns while allowing Iran to save face and claim its nuclear rights (Einhorn, 2015).

By April 2015, the outline of a deal had emerged with the announcement of a preliminary framework in Lausanne. Finally, on July 14, 2015, after marathon negotiations, Iran and the P5+1 (plus the European Union) agreed on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. The

JCPOA was a landmark accord that put comprehensive limits on Iran's nuclear program in return for broad sanctions relief (Einhorn, 2015; Parsi, 2017). Under the JCPOA's terms, Iran consented to sharply restrict its enrichment capacity (for example, capping enrichment at 3.67% U-235 and reducing its operating centrifuges by two-thirds) and to ship out the bulk of its enriched uranium stockpile, thereby lengthening the time it would need to amass fissile material for a weapon (IAEA, 2015a). Iran also agreed not to build new heavy-water reactors and to modify the Arak reactor so it could not produce weapons-grade plutonium, as well as to accept an unprecedented verification regime, including continuous surveillance on key sites and adherence to the Additional Protocol of the IAEA (IAEA, 2015b). In exchange, the United Nations, United States, and European Union committed to lift nuclear-related sanctions, restoring Iran's access to international oil markets and the global financial system, among other economic benefits. To seal the deal's international legal standing, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 2231 later in July 2015, endorsing the JCPOA and setting a schedule for lifting UN sanctions while establishing a "snapback" mechanism to reimpose them if Iran were to significantly violate the accord (UNSC, 2015). Despite the long-standing tensions, the signing of the JCPOA gave a glimmer of hope for an improvement in relations between the United States and Iran. President Obama saw this agreement as a triumph of diplomacy that could stop the proliferation of nuclear weapons. He was sure that this agreement would cut off any path for Iran to build a nuclear bomb. At the same time, Iran has publicly declared its victory, because their rights for a nuclear program were retained. Both sides welcomed the economic benefits. (The White House, 2015; Devarajan & Mottaghi, 2015).

Notwithstanding the optimism of the negotiating parties, the deal faced criticism from hardliners on both sides: in the United States, opponents contended that the JCPOA's restrictions were only temporary and did not address Iran's ballistic missile program or regional influence, whereas in Iran, conservatives warned against trusting the U.S. and resented the continuing limitations on sovereignty. In Washington, despite a Republican-controlled Congress and intense lobbying against the JCPOA, the Obama administration succeeded in securing the deal's survival. Opponents ultimately failed to obtain enough votes to block its implementation. Still, in 2015, the immediate implementation phase moved forward with both the U.S. and Iran taking steps to fulfill their initial obligations. Iran began

dismantling excess centrifuges and shipping out uranium, while the U.S. prepared to suspend sanctions. It culminated in the JCPOA's Implementation Day set for early 2016 (U.S. Department of State, 2015).

Table 3.4: Timeline of Major Events Leading to the JCPOA, 2009–2015.

Date	Event
March 2009	President Obama offers dialogue with Iran in a Nowruz message, indicating a U.S. willingness for engagement and a break from past policy.
October 2009	P5+1 and Iran agree in principle on a fuel swap deal in Geneva to ship out Iranian enriched uranium for reactor fuel, but the deal later falls apart due to political opposition in Tehran.
September 2009	Disclosure of Iran's secret Fordow uranium enrichment facility near Qom heightens international suspicion and urgency in addressing Iran's nuclear activities.
June 2010	UN Security Council passes Resolution 1929 imposing broad sanctions on Iran, while U.S. and EU enact comprehensive unilateral sanctions targeting Iran's oil and banking sectors.
2011–2012	Covert actions (cyber-attacks like Stuxnet, and assassination of nuclear scientists) and additional EU embargoes increase pressure on Iran, which in turn advances enrichment to 20% and hardens its stance.
June 2013	Hassan Rouhani is elected President of Iran on a platform of resolving the nuclear dispute and lifting sanctions, signaling Tehran's renewed interest in diplomacy.
Sept–Nov 2013	U.S.-Iran diplomatic engagement intensifies: Obama and Rouhani speak by phone; Kerry and Zarif launch talks. In November, Iran and P5+1 sign the interim Joint Plan of Action, freezing parts of Iran's program in exchange for limited sanctions relief.
Jan 2014 – July 2015	Extended negotiations take place toward a comprehensive agreement, addressing enrichment limits, reactor modifications, verification, and sanctions lifting. Despite challenges and extensions, parties maintain dialogue and narrow gaps.
July 14, 2015	The JCPOA is finalized in Vienna. Iran agrees to significant long-term nuclear restrictions and monitoring, and world powers agree to lift nuclear-related sanctions, fundamentally altering the trajectory of Iran's nuclear program.
July 20, 2015	UN Security Council adopts Resolution 2231 endorsing the JCPOA and outlining the schedule for sanctions relief and a mechanism for reimposing sanctions if Iran breaches the deal.
Late 2015	Iran begins implementing nuclear rollback steps and the U.S. prepares sanctions waivers, in anticipation of JCPOA Implementation Day (January 2016), marking a rare instance of U.S.-Iran cooperation on a major security issue.

3.5 REVERSAL AND UNCERTAINTY: THE JCPOA AND ITS AFTERMATH (2016–PRESENT)

The period following the JCPOA's conclusion was initially characterized by cautious optimism and incremental compliance, but it soon gave way to renewed strain and uncertainty in U.S.-Iran relations (Parsi, 2017). On January 16, 2016 ("Implementation Day"), the IAEA verified that Iran had fulfilled its preliminary nuclear commitments under the JCPOA, such as reducing its number of centrifuges and shipping out 98% of its enriched uranium stock (IAEA, 2016). Accordingly, the United States and European Union lifted or suspended their nuclear-related sanctions as promised. Iran quickly reaped significant economic benefits: regaining access to billions of dollars in frozen assets, increasing its oil exports, and reconnecting to global financial networks (Devarajan & Mottaghi, 2015). For the first time in years, Iranian and American officials found themselves implementing an accord cooperatively, and the threat of an immediate nuclear crisis appeared to recede. Notably, that same day, Tehran and Washington carried out a prisoner exchange that resulted in the release of detainees on both sides, an indicator of slightly improved diplomatic goodwill beyond the nuclear realm (Parsi, 2017). However, underlying mutual distrust remained, and new points of contention soon emerged. Iran complained that remaining U.S. sanctions (unrelated to the nuclear file, such as those tied to human rights and terrorism) continued to hinder full economic normalization, as banks and companies remained wary of doing business in Iran. Meanwhile, opponents of the deal in the U.S. Congress and among America's regional allies grew increasingly vocal, arguing that Iran's ballistic missile tests and its involvement in Middle Eastern conflicts (Syria, Yemen, etc.) violated the spirit of the accord and demonstrated malign intentions not addressed by the JCPOA (Hussain, 2015; Parsi, 2017).

A major shift occurred with the change of U.S. administration in January 2017. President Donald Trump came into office harshly critical of the JCPOA, which he denounced as "one of the worst deals ever made," reflecting a stark departure from his predecessor's policy (The White House, 2018). The Trump administration, aligned with skeptical U.S. lawmakers and regional partners like Israel and Saudi Arabia, sought to confront Iran more aggressively on multiple fronts. Though the IAEA consistently reported through 2016 and 2017 that Iran was complying with the deal's nuclear limits (IAEA, 2016; IAEA, 2017), President Trump

expressed dissatisfaction, focusing on the JCPOA's sunset clauses (which would allow certain restrictions on Iran's program to expire after 10–15 years) and on issues the deal did not cover, such as Iran's missile program and regional military activities. After months of threatening to withdraw, Trump announced in May 2018 that the United States would unilaterally exit the JCPOA and reimpose all U.S. sanctions on Iran that had been lifted, despite Iran's continued compliance at that time (The White House, 2018). This decision, taken over the objections of European allies, marked a turning point that reignited tensions. The U.S. "maximum pressure" campaign that followed aimed to exert economic coercion on Iran to force it into a new negotiation on terms more favorable to Washington's demands (Katzman, 2021). By November 2018, the U.S. had fully reinstated secondary sanctions, targeting Iran's oil exports, banking sector, and other key industries, leading to a sharp downturn in Iran's economy. Iran's currency plummeted in value, inflation soared, and the country was largely cut off from international trade, even as the European signatories of the JCPOA attempted to devise mechanisms (like the INSTEX payment system) to permit some sanctioned trade and keep Iran in the deal, though such efforts had limited practical effect as major companies remained reluctant to re-engage Iran (Laudati & Pesaran, 2022).

For about a year after the U.S. withdrawal, Iran continued to adhere to the JCPOA's constraints, hoping that the other parties could compensate for the American exit and deliver economic relief. However, by May 2019, Iranian leaders declared that they would begin responding in kind to U.S. violations of the accord by incrementally expanding Iran's nuclear activities beyond JCPOA limits (Katzman, 2021). Beginning in the summer of 2019, Iran engaged in calibrated breaches of the deal: it exceeded the 300 kg cap on low-enriched uranium, enriched uranium beyond the 3.67% purity limit (eventually reaching 4.5% and later higher levels), installed more advanced centrifuges than permitted, and restarted enrichment at the Fordow underground facility (IAEA, 2020). These steps were taken in stages, each accompanied by warnings that Iran would roll back the measures if sanctions were lifted, thus using non-compliance as leverage while still keeping the door open to diplomacy (Nephew, 2021). Concurrently, security incidents in the Persian Gulf region contributed to a growing danger of military confrontation between the U.S. and Iran. In June 2019, after a series of mysterious attacks on oil tankers that the U.S. blamed on Tehran, Iran's air defenses shot down a U.S. surveillance drone over the Strait of Hormuz, nearly prompting American airstrikes in retaliation (Katzman, 2021). Still, president Trump

cancelled the retaliatory measures at the last moment. However, this episode highlighted the instability of the situation. Tensions rose again in September 2019. At that time, there was a major attack on Saudi Arabia's oil facilities in Abqaiq. Many credits responsibility to Iran. This event halved Saudi oil production for some time. This, in turn, led to a further tightening of sanctions by the United States. In addition, extra troops were sent to the Persian Gulf as a matter of strengthening the deterrent (Katzman, 2021).

The assassination of General Soleimani in early 2020 by an American drone in Baghdad not only brought the United States and Iran to the brink of war, but also dealt a serious blow to the already fragile Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (Nephew, 2021; Katzman, 2021). Iran, declaring this as an act of war, further distanced itself from compliance with the terms of the agreement. In retaliation, they launched ballistic missiles at bases in Iraq hosting U.S. troops on January 8, 2020, causing injuries but stopping short of killing American personnel, which allowed both sides to step back from a wider war (Katzman, 2021). Amid this crisis, Iran's government announced that it would no longer be bound by any operational limits of the JCPOA, effectively lifting restrictions on its production of enriched uranium (although it stated that cooperation with IAEA monitoring would continue). Thus, by 2020 the nuclear deal was largely hollowed out: Iran was breaching most of its key provisions, and the U.S. had re-imposed its sanctions, even as the European powers struggled to keep the agreement alive diplomatically. In an unprecedented move rejected by other world powers, the U.S. attempted to invoke the JCPOA's UN sanctions snapback mechanism in September 2020 (despite having withdrawn from the deal), claiming to reapply all UN sanctions on Iran; this claim was not recognized by the UN Security Council or Europe, deepening the legal and diplomatic confusion. As a result, in October 2020 the UN conventional arms embargo on Iran expired as scheduled under the terms of Resolution 2231, marking a setback for Washington's efforts to extend international sanctions beyond the nuclear sphere (UNSC, 2015).

The election of Joe Biden as U.S. President in November 2020 created a possibility for de-escalation on the nuclear issue. Biden had campaigned on returning to the JCPOA if Iran also came back into compliance, as a basis for further negotiations. In early 2021, indirect talks between the U.S. and Iran (mediated by the remaining JCPOA parties in Vienna) commenced with the goal of restoring mutual compliance with the nuclear deal. Over several

rounds in 2021, progress was reportedly made on a roadmap for the U.S. to lift sanctions and Iran to reverse its nuclear breaches, but obstacles remained, including Iran's demand for guarantees that the U.S. would not abandon the deal again and debates over the scope of sanctions relief. The diplomatic effort was complicated by political changes in Iran: the June 2021 Iranian presidential election brought Ebrahim Raisi, a hardline conservative, to power, replacing Rouhani's more moderate administration. The Raisi government initially took a tougher posture and paused negotiations for several months, resuming talks only in late 2021 with maximalist demands that the U.S. lift all sanctions, not just those related to the nuclear file (Nephew, 2021; Katzman, 2021). Though negotiations continued fitfully into 2022, including proposals for a mutual return to compliance and even a draft agreement by March 2022, no final consensus was reached. Moreover, key substantive disputes remained unresolved. Tehran demanded that Washington remove the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) from the U.S. terrorism blacklist and insisted that the IAEA's ongoing investigations into Iran's past nuclear activities be closed, conditions the United States and its European partners were not prepared to accept (IAEA, 2022; Laudati & Pesaran, 2022). External factors like Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and rising tensions over Iran's domestic repression (after September 2022 protests) further dimmed prospects as the year went on, with the U.S. and Europe broadening their focus to include Iran's regional and human rights conduct alongside the nuclear discussions.

As of 2023, the status of the JCPOA remained unresolved and U.S.-Iran relations are marked by profound distrust and occasional crises rather than the rapprochement once hoped for in 2015. Iran's nuclear program has advanced significantly beyond the JCPOA limits. Tehran has installed hundreds of new centrifuges, including more efficient models, accumulated a stockpile of uranium enriched up to 60% U-235 (a level just short of weapons-grade), and curtailed some monitoring by disconnecting certain IAEA cameras and limiting inspector access. These developments have shortened Iran's theoretical "breakout time" (the time required to acquire enough fissile material for one bomb) to just a few weeks by some expert estimates, raising international alarm. The United States, for its part, maintained the bulk of its sanctions on Iran, continuing the pressure policy albeit without formally terming it "maximum pressure" under the Biden administration. Diplomatic contacts have not completely ended. U.S. and Iranian officials have engaged in intermittent indirect talks through mediators like the European Union, and discussions have arisen about possible

interim arrangements to curb Iran's nuclear advances in exchange for some sanctions relief, but a full revival of the JCPOA has not been achieved.

Meanwhile, regional dynamics continued to influence the trajectory of U.S.-Iran relations. Incidents such as periodic skirmishes involving Iranian-linked militias and U.S. forces in Iraq and Syria, Iran's supply of armed drones to Russia for use in Ukraine (which drew new Western sanctions in 2022), and Iran's own internal political hardened all complicate the diplomatic landscape. In September 2023, Iran and the U.S. conducted a prisoner exchange (five detainees on each side) facilitated by the release of frozen Iranian oil revenues, an action that indicated a mutual willingness to engage pragmatically despite the absence of a nuclear agreement. Nevertheless, absent a renewed agreement, the fundamental issues persist. Iran insists the U.S. must fully respect its commitments and lift sanctions, while the U.S. insists Iran return to strict nuclear limits. A stalemate unlikely to be broken without significant political will and trust-building measures. Indeed, with observers (and U.S. regional allies such as Israel) fearing that a continued impasse could eventually lead to a nuclear proliferation crisis or even military confrontation if diplomacy fails.

In June 2025, an Israeli airstrike on Iranian nuclear facilities, followed by a coordinated U.S. military operation authorized by the Trump administration, provoked a sharp escalation of tensions over Iran's nuclear program (New York Post, 2025). The Trump administration, presenting Iran's nuclear developments as an imminent threat, justified military intervention despite warnings of potential destabilization of the region. Some of Gulf states have expressed restrained support, while European allies have expressed deep concern about the risk of full-scale conflict and the disruption of diplomatic channels. Inside the United States, the Trump administration has used these events to strengthen its hard line against Iran, ignoring calls for a diplomatic solution.

The Trump administration's statements about the complete destruction of Iran's nuclear program after joint strikes turned out to be far from reality. Despite loud statements about depriving Iran of the ability to develop nuclear weapons, intelligence data and independent reports have shown that the damage was only temporary. Experts argued that Iran would be able to resume significant enrichment activities in one to two months.

On June 23, 2025, President Trump announced a cease-fire, presenting the situation as a triumph of American military might (Reuters, 2025). However, the details of the agreement

were kept secret, and the Trump administration continued to threaten Iran with new strikes if nuclear progress was made. Analysts warn that such a fragile and unstable truce, which does not address the root problems of Iran's nuclear program, can be easily destroyed by either side, which perceives the other's actions as a provocation.

The June airstrikes led the IAEA to recall its inspectors from Iranian nuclear facilities, citing the inability to ensure access and security (Reuters, 2025). This unprecedented decision effectively deprived the international community of the ability to monitor Iran's nuclear program. As a result, a number of concerns raised that Iran could accelerate uranium enrichment without fear of external control. The Trump administration, taking advantage of the situation, has increased its rhetoric about the need to deter Iran by force in order to prevent it from developing nuclear weapons. At the same time, critics warn that halting inspections could lead to further development of Iran's nuclear program and reduce the chances of a diplomatic settlement in the future.

Table 3.5: Timeline of Key Developments After the JCPOA, 2016–Present.

Date	Event
Jan 16, 2016	JCPOA Implementation Day: IAEA confirms Iran's compliance with initial nuclear steps; U.S. and EU lift nuclear sanctions, beginning a brief period of reduced tensions.
May 8, 2018	U.S. President Trump announces withdrawal from the JCPOA and reimposes U.S. sanctions, repudiating the deal despite Iran's continued compliance at that time.
Nov 2018	"Maximum pressure" sanctions fully in effect, targeting Iran's oil exports and banking; Iran's economy enters recession as oil sales plunge and inflation rises.
May 2019	Iran begins incremental violations of JCPOA limits (exceeding uranium stockpile cap, enrichment level), following one year of waiting for promised economic relief from remaining deal participants.
June 2019	U.S.-Iran military tensions spike: after tanker attacks in the Gulf, Iran shoots down a U.S. drone; Trump orders a retaliatory strike then calls it off at the last minute, narrowly avoiding war.
Jan 3–8, 2020	U.S. kills Gen. Qassem Soleimani in a drone strike. Iran retaliates with missile strikes on U.S. bases in Iraq and declares it will no longer observe JCPOA limits on uranium enrichment, escalating the crisis.
2020	Iran's nuclear breaches accumulate (e.g., installing advanced centrifuges, enriching up to 20% by early 2021) and the U.S. attempts a failed UN sanctions "snapback." European allies urge restraint to keep diplomacy alive.

Table 3.5: Timeline of Key Developments After the JCPOA, 2016–Present (Table Continued).

April 2021	Negotiations begin in Vienna to restore the JCPOA, with indirect talks between the U.S. and Iran. Discussions make progress on technical steps for mutual compliance, but political hurdles remain.
June 2021	Hardliner Ebrahim Raisi is elected Iran’s president, leading to a more uncompromising Iranian stance and a pause in Vienna talks, though negotiations resume later in the year.
Aug–Sept 2022	EU mediators propose a final draft for a restored deal. Iran and the U.S. exchange responses, but disagreements over issues such as guarantees, IRGC sanctions, and IAEA probes prevent an agreement.
September 2023	U.S. and Iran conduct a prisoner exchange (five detainees on each side) facilitated by the release of frozen Iranian oil revenues, a rare instance of cooperation amid the ongoing stalemate on the nuclear issue.
June 2025	Joint air strike of Israel and U.S. on Iran’s nuclear facilities.

4. U.S. DISCOURSE ON IRAN'S NUCLEAR PROGRAM (2000–2024)

4.1 EMERGENCE OF THE “AXIS OF EVIL”: U.S. RHETORIC IN THE EARLY 2000S

At the dawn of the 21st century, American official discourse began framing Iran's nuclear program as part of a broader threat matrix linked to terrorism and weapons of mass destruction. Even before concrete evidence of Iranian nuclear advances became public, U.S. policymakers voiced deep mistrust of Tehran's intentions. This skepticism intensified after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, which heightened U.S. threat perceptions across the board (Hussain, 2015).

In 2002, President George W. Bush sharply condemned Iran in his speech. Along with Iraq and North Korea, he called it part of the "axis of evil" (The White House, 2002). He stated that Iran is actively developing weapons of mass destruction. This, in turn, poses a serious threat to the entire global community. Bush argued that the Iranian regime could gain the opportunity to sponsor terrorists with nuclear weapons or use them to put pressure on other actors. Such language has brought Iran's nuclear ambitions to a new level of public attention. The US administration has equated the Iranian nuclear program with the global threat of terrorism. Such rhetoric made it possible to present the program as an existential threat, similar to those that arose after September 11. This approach has had a long-term impact on the political debate in the United States (Hussain, 2015).

George W. Bush's affiliation with the Republican Party, as well as his commitment to conservative foreign policy principles, had a significant impact on his perception of Iran. The Republican Party is known for its preference for betting on a strong army and its willingness to use force to protect national interests. This had a major impact on shaping Bush's approach to responding to the Iranian nuclear issue. After the September 11 attacks, the Bush administration viewed the Middle East through the prism of the fight against terrorism. Iran, with its revolutionary ideology and opposition to the United States, was quickly ranked as a serious threat. Iran's inclusion in the "Axis of Evil" reflected the Republican vision of the Iranian nuclear program not only as a problem of nuclear proliferation. To this was added the serious threat posed by terrorism. It is the Republican

emphasis on preventive measures and deterrence that explains Bush's repeated statements about considering "all options," including military action against Iran.

At the beginning of the Bush presidency, two key points were actively promoted in the American media. First, Iran's nuclear ambitions were directly linked to its "vicious" or "dishonest" political system. Secondly, preventing Iran from developing nuclear weapons was presented as an absolute priority for the United States and the whole world. At the same time, senior officials regularly questioned the need for Iran to develop nuclear energy. The main argument in favor of this thesis was Iran's rich oil and gas reserves. Thus, any work on uranium enrichment should have been equated to the development of nuclear weapons (Einhorn, 2015). In 2002 and 2003, as Iranian opposition groups revealed undeclared nuclear facilities (notably a uranium enrichment plant at Natanz and a heavy-water project at Arak), U.S. statements grew sharper. Bush administration officials accused Tehran of systematically violating its nonproliferation obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) by concealing nuclear work (The White House, 2002). Iran was depicted as following the path of other proliferators like North Korea, using diplomacy as a cover while inching toward a bomb. This narrative persisted even as Iran in late 2003 agreed with Britain, France, and Germany to temporarily suspend enrichment as a confidence-building measure. The U.S. remained openly skeptical of Iran's good faith. Indeed, Washington took a back-seat role to the EU-3 negotiations, declining to engage Iran directly and instead pressuring for referral of Iran's file to the U.N. Security Council if compliance faltered. American officials insisted that Iran must fully and verifiably abandon any weapons-relevant nuclear capabilities to prove its peaceful intent. Anything less, in their view, would leave the "fox in the henhouse" (Hussain, 2015).

Despite the hardline public posture, there were undercurrents of debate within the U.S. foreign policy establishment about whether engagement with Tehran could yield better results. Notably, in May 2003, shortly after the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Iran reportedly sent a private diplomatic overture (the so-called "grand bargain" fax) proposing comprehensive talks on all issues, including its nuclear program (Mousavian, 2012). However, top U.S. officials rebuffed this initiative, reflecting the prevailing mindset that Iran was on the defensive and could be coerced into compliance without granting concessions or legitimacy to its regime (Einhorn, 2015).

The ideologically driven approach of the Bush administration, which portrayed Iran as a hostile state and included it in the "axis of evil," undermined the possibilities for effective diplomacy (Hussain, 2015). Instead of real engagement, the administration has focused on narratives implying the transformation or even overthrow of the Iranian government. The American rhetoric that included Iran in the "axis of evil" had serious consequences. In Tehran, this was seen as confirmation of US plans to destabilize the Iranian government (Mousavian, 2012). This, in turn, strengthened the positions of those in Iran who considered nuclear weapons necessary to protect national sovereignty. The United States' demands on Iran regarding its nuclear program, combined with Iran's growing distrust of American goals, have created an atmosphere of mutual suspicion and tension. As a result, the moralizing rhetoric of the United States has led to a prolonged confrontation. Iran was presented as a violator of international law, and the United States as a defender of global security (Hussain, 2015).

From 2000 to 2004, the United States conducted an active diplomatic campaign aimed at shaping international opinion on Iran's nuclear program. The American authorities argued that a nuclear Iran would destabilize the region, increase support for terrorist organizations, and provoke the proliferation of nuclear weapons. These arguments were intended to create a global consensus in favor of harsh measures against Tehran. The discovery by the IAEA of evidence of Iran's clandestine nuclear activities in 2004 became an important argument in favor of the American position and allowed the United States to convince the IAEA to recognize Iran's violation of its obligations (IAEA, 2003; Einhorn, 2015). Thus, despite the fact that the official appeal to the UN Security Council took place later, it was the US efforts in the early 2000s that formed the idea of Iran's nuclear program as a serious threat to international security.

The period 2000-2004 marked a turning point in U.S.-Iran relations. Washington has consolidated the view of Iran's nuclear program as a serious threat to global security. President Bush's "axis of evil" rhetoric, which combined nuclear concerns with anti-terrorist principles, led to a rejection of diplomatic engagement. In addition, emphasis was placed on direct measures such as sanctions. This strategy was aimed at mobilizing domestic and international support. It had a significant impact on the further development of the situation around Iran's nuclear program.

4.2 CONFRONTATION INTENSIFIES: SANCTIONS AND HARDLINE POSTURES (2005–2008)

The 2005 Iranian presidential election brought Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to power. His government has resumed work on uranium enrichment. This fact has caused serious concern in the United States. In the second term, the George W. Bush's administration significantly toughened its stance towards Iran. This position was greatly influenced by Tehran's renunciation of its obligations to the EU-3. In response to Iran's resumption of uranium enrichment in early 2006, the United States has made active diplomatic efforts to impose international sanctions (Einhorn, 2015; Hussain, 2015).

After Iran resumed uranium enrichment, accusations in the American discourse intensified. The Bush administration began to view Iran as a serious threat to nuclear nonproliferation efforts and stability in the Middle East. As a result, diplomatic efforts were shifted to the United Nations. With the active support of the United States, a number of Security Council resolutions were adopted condemning Iran for non-compliance with international obligations (Parsi, 2017; Einhorn, 2015). These resolutions, starting from 1696 in July 2006, imposed various sanctions and restrictions against Iran (UNSC, 2006).

The United States actively promoted the adoption of sanctions against Iran, presenting each resolution as a significant victory for American diplomacy. Officials sought to convince the public that these measures reflected global agreement with the American position on the Iranian nuclear issue. They have consistently justified the sanctions, arguing that Iran's stubborn unwillingness to cooperate has forced the international community to take tough action in order to protect the nonproliferation system. This rhetoric emphasized the need for a tough response to Iran's defiance in order to prevent the undermining of international norms in the field of nuclear control (Einhorn, 2015; Hussain, 2015).

From 2005 to 2008, the Bush administration emphasized the priority of a diplomatic approach to resolving the crisis. However, they also constantly hinted at the possibility of military intervention against Iran. The phrase "all options are being considered" was used in the rhetoric. This ambivalence was characteristic of the U.S. rhetoric of the time. On the one hand, Iran was presented as a serious and potentially demanding a military response threat. On the other hand, the hope for a peaceful settlement through sanctions and negotiations was

emphasized. A good example is a press conference in April 2006, where Bush clearly outlined the US goal. It was to prevent Iran from acquiring even the theoretical knowledge necessary to create nuclear weapons. He reaffirmed his commitment to multilateral diplomatic pressure aimed at rejecting Iran's nuclear ambitions. It was emphasized that Iran would not be allowed to develop nuclear weapons or create the infrastructure for their production. Bush said that the US strategy was based on the "doctrine of prevention" (The White House, 2006).

By combining harsh rhetoric with calls for cooperation with allies, the Bush administration sought to create an appearance of legitimacy for its position, presenting it as firm and reasonable. In fact, it was a way to present the situation as if Iran itself had provoked increased pressure by rejecting the offered opportunities to fulfill its obligations (Parsi, 2017). The United States has consistently pointed out that Iran stubbornly ignores all diplomatic efforts aimed at resolving the nuclear crisis. Particularly significant was Tehran's rejection of the Russian offer to supply nuclear fuel for Iranian reactors. This would avoid the need for uranium enrichment in Iran (Einhorn, 2015). The United States took this as clear evidence that Iran is pursuing goals unrelated to the peaceful use of atomic energy and is seeking to develop nuclear weapons. The United States, in order to justify sanctions against Iran, has often accused it of inflexibility, both domestically and internationally. The Bush administration argued that Tehran's economic and political isolation was a direct result of its refusal to cooperate and engage in diplomacy (Hussain, 2015).

By 2007, Iran's stubborn unwillingness to stop uranium enrichment led the UN Security Council to adopt a series of even stricter resolutions. These measures were actively supported and promoted by the United States. President Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice have openly stated that the sanctions imposed are a strategic tool designed to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons (The White House, 2006; U.S. Department of State, 2005). They presented this not as a punishment, but as a necessary step to maintain global nuclear safety and Iran's compliance with generally accepted norms.

The publication in December 2007 of the U.S. National Intelligence Estimate report claiming that Iran had stopped developing nuclear weapons in 2003 created a political problem for the Bush administration (National Intelligence Council, 2007). The report contradicted previous statements about the imminent nuclear threat from Iran. Despite this, the Bush

administration sought to maintain pressure on Iran by downplaying the significance of the NIE findings and continuing to highlight the dangers of Iran's uranium enrichment program. President Bush and Vice President Cheney continued to make tough statements to prevent the easing of international sanctions and preserve the possibility of military intervention (The White House, 2007).

By the end of 2008, the United States had managed to build a broad, yet formal at most, international consensus. It concerned the goal of preventing Iran from developing nuclear weapons. The Bush administration played an important role in creating the P5+1 format for negotiations with Iran. This demonstrated the desire of the U.S. to allow multilateral negotiations. However, in public statements, American officials remained strict about diplomacy. Often, they were hinting that Iran was using the negotiations for stalling time. The main idea was that only constant pressure could convince the Iranian leadership to change course. In his last year in the office, president Bush often portrayed efforts to prevent Iran from building a nuclear bomb as part of a larger struggle. He emphasized that the goal of such struggle was to prevent the world's most dangerous weapons from falling into the hands of the world's most dangerous regimes (Einhorn, 2015; Parsi, 2017; Hussain, 2015).

The US policy towards the Iranian nuclear program, formed in the period 2005-2008, has proved to be very stable. It became a kind of template for all subsequent administrations. Despite the different political views, the Iranian nuclear program has always been viewed as a serious problem. During this period, there was also a shift towards more active use of economic sanctions as the main means of diplomatic influence on Iran.

The United States has portrayed Iran in its rhetoric as stubbornly refusing to comply with international opinion. This was used to justify increasingly harsh economic measures. Ambiguous hints of military intervention, in fact, represented a veiled threat. It was intended to increase diplomatic pressure and underscore U.S. determination in terms of the alleged Iranian threat (Parsi, 2017). This hard line has allowed the United States to make the Iranian nuclear program a key issue of international politics. By doing so, they ensured constant attention to their foreign policy goals (Einhorn, 2015). This stage laid the foundation for a long-term confrontation between the United States and Iran in the nuclear sphere. Iran's nuclear program has become a matter of paramount importance for American administrations, requiring constant attention and the use of a wide range of tools.

Furthermore, it included not only economic and diplomatic tools. Military measures were also considered as a possible means. The rhetoric that prevailed in Washington during these years has confirmed the view of Iran's nuclear program as a global problem requiring a permanent and decisive international response (Parsi, 2017; Einhorn, 2015).

4.3 BALANCING PRESSURE AND ENGAGEMENT: THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION'S EARLY APPROACH (2009–2013)

In contrast to the Bush administration's hard line, the Obama administration, which came to power in 2009 as a representative of Democratic party, chose a more flexible approach to Iran's nuclear program. Unlike previous approach, the Obama administration, while remaining faithful to the principle of nonproliferation, offered Iran dialogue and cooperation based on mutual respect. The multilateralism and cooperation traditionally supported by the Democratic party have had a significant impact on such a shift of vector. This step was aimed at convincing Iran of the need to use nuclear energy exclusively for peaceful purposes.

In the first months of his presidency, Barack Obama took steps to tone down his rhetoric towards Iran. A landmark moment was his address to the Iranian people and leadership in March 2009 (The White House, 2009). This event was timed to coincide with the celebration of Nowruz, the Persian New Year. In this unprecedented address, Obama expressed his desire to improve relations between the two countries. He stressed the need for a diplomatic dialogue based on common interests and mutual respect in order to reset US-Iranian ties. This approach marked a significant shift in U.S. rhetoric. The statements of the American side began to more explicitly recognize the history and rights of Iran, including its right to the peaceful use of atomic energy within the framework of the NPT. Harsh expressions such as "the axis of evil" were excluded. However, this desire for dialogue was accompanied by clear conditions. Obama stressed that Iran must prove the peaceful nature of its nuclear program and comply with international obligations. He stated that Iran is facing a choice: either abandon confrontation and return to the international community, or face further isolation and pressure (Hussain, 2015; Einhorn, 2015).

In 2009-2010, the Obama administration aimed to resolve the Iranian nuclear issue using a carrot-and-stick strategy. On the one hand, they actively promoted a diplomatic solution and were ready for direct negotiations with Iran. This was different from the approach of the

previous administration (Parsi, 2017). On the other hand, the United States insisted on tightening international sanctions in the event of a failure of diplomacy. U.S. officials, including President Obama and Secretary of State Clinton, have publicly declared their readiness for dialogue (The White House, 2009; U.S. Department of State, 2010). At the same time, they stressed that time for diplomacy is limited and depends on Iran's constructive position. Obama made it clear in his 2009 speech at the United Nations that the United States would use all available means to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons.

Despite the emphasis on diplomacy, the Obama's administration rhetoric has consistently reaffirmed the United States firm position against Iran's possession of nuclear weapons. This demonstrated strategic consistency, even when using different diplomatic approaches. The phrase "doing what we have to do" implied that military intervention remained an option if diplomacy failed (The White House, 2009; U.S. Department of State, 2010). Thus, the administration combined diplomatic efforts with clear "red lines", making it clear that the patience and diplomatic capabilities of the United States are not unlimited. The Obama administration has often used the terms "international community" and "the UN framework" to emphasize that Iran is going against the whole world, not just U.S. Presenting the situation as Iran's non-compliance with UN Security Council resolutions and IAEA requirements, the United States aimed to reduce the focus on bilateral hostility. This was reflected in statements by Secretary of State Clinton, who emphasized the unity of the "world's largest powers" in holding Iran accountable (U.S. Department of State, 2010). This wording was intended to refute Iran's claims that the nuclear crisis was caused by the hostility of the United States, and not by the actions of Iran itself. The Obama administration has been actively working with other countries to form a united front. These efforts bore fruit in June 2010, when UN Security Council Resolution 1929 was adopted, imposing the toughest sanctions against Iran (UNSC, 2010). These included restrictions on the sale of weapons and financial activities. After the adoption of the resolution, US officials stressed that Iran itself had left the world no other choice by rejecting an offer to exchange some of its enriched uranium abroad. In the American understanding, sanctions were seen not as a goal, but as a tool to force Iran to return to serious negotiations.

By 2011–2012 Iran's nuclear program continued to expand with the enrichment of uranium to 20% purity and the activation of the Fordow underground enrichment facility (IAEA,

2011). U.S. rhetoric grew more urgent. President Obama, facing domestic political pressure and Israeli warnings about Iran's progress, toughened his public stance. In March 2012, speaking at the AIPAC conference, he explicitly rejected any policy of containment and vowed to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon. He stated "I don't bluff" regarding the use of force if necessary. That same year, in his address to the U.N. General Assembly, Obama famously declared, "Make no mistake: a nuclear-armed Iran is not a challenge that can be contained. It would threaten the elimination of Israel... and the stability of the global economy... That's why the United States will do what we must to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon" (The White House, 2012). This forceful language, coming from a president known for his preference for diplomacy, was intended to reassure allies of American resolve, and to maintain pressure on Iran even as back-channel talks quietly began. The discourse of this period combined such firm warnings with continued offers of diplomatic resolution. U.S. officials reiterated that Iran could enjoy peaceful nuclear energy and improved relations if it met international demands (primarily, suspending high-level enrichment and cooperating fully with the IAEA). For example, Vice President Joe Biden in 2013 said the U.S. was open to bilateral talks, reinforcing that "the ball is in Iran's court" to move diplomacy forward (The White House, 2013).

Importantly, Obama's early-term discourse also situated the Iranian nuclear issue within a broader vision of global nuclear nonproliferation and U.S. war fatigue. In his 2009 Prague speech, Obama spoke of seeking a world without nuclear weapons and reducing nuclear dangers, implicitly contrasting constructive U.S. leadership with Iran's alleged violations (The White House, 2009). He also subtly acknowledged past U.S. policies. In a 2013 U.N. speech, Obama even referenced the 1953 U.S.-backed coup in Iran, demonstrating awareness of Iranian historical grievances (The White House, 2013). By doing so, he attempted to create political space for Iranian moderates to reciprocate engagement, signaling that the U.S. was not intrinsically hostile to the Islamic Republic if it adhered to international norms. A balanced approach to the Iranian problem has brought results.

The election of Hassan Rouhani, a more moderate politician, as president of Iran in 2013, was a signal of the possibility of improving relations with the world and easing sanctions. The Obama administration saw this as an opportunity and was cautiously optimistic. In September 2013, Obama welcomed Rouhani's statements about his readiness to resolve the

nuclear issue and instructed John Kerry to begin negotiations with Iran in coordination with other world powers.

Obama stressed that the United States does not seek to overthrow the Iranian regime and is ready to recognize Iran's right to a peaceful atom, provided transparency and verifiability are guaranteed. This marked a departure from the previous harsh rhetoric and a transition to potential cooperation. The new strategy, while maintaining the goal of preventing Iran from developing nuclear weapons, offered Tehran a real diplomatic alternative. This gave the Iranian leadership an opportunity to improve relations with the international community through dialogue.

From 2009 to 2013, U.S. rhetoric regarding Iran's nuclear program combined pressure and diplomacy. The Obama administration continued to emphasize the threat of nuclear proliferation, but at the same time actively offered respectful dialogue and open negotiations, creating the basis for future diplomatic efforts.

4.4 DIPLOMACY TRIUMPHS? NEGOTIATING AND CONCLUDING THE JCPOA (2013–2016)

From 2013 to 2016, the United States radically changed its approach to the Iranian nuclear program. A big bet was placed on active diplomacy. These efforts culminated in the conclusion of the historic nuclear agreement, the JCPOA. This was facilitated by the diplomatic activity of Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, which led to unprecedented interaction at the highest level (United Nations, 2013). One of the key events was the first direct telephone conversation between Presidents Obama and Rouhani in several decades.

During the negotiations, the Obama's administration was solving a difficult task. It was necessary to convey the essence of his diplomatic strategy to different groups of people. On the one hand, public statements were supposed to inspire hope for positive results of the agreement. On the other hand, it was necessary to convince critics and skeptics both in the United States and abroad that vigilance would not be relaxed and that any attempts by Iran to violate the agreement would be suppressed. In early 2014, when serious discussions began, President Obama and Secretary of State Kerry made it clear that any future agreement must be based on verifiable and significant restrictions on Iran's nuclear program, as well as unprecedented inspections and transparency. Using the phrase "verification, not trust,"

American officials have consistently convinced the public and critics that, despite diplomatic efforts, the United States is not naive (The White House, 2015; U.S. Department of State, 2015). This rhetoric emphasized that the United States would carefully monitor the implementation of the agreements and would not allow Iran to deceive them or use the negotiations for its own purposes.

During the negotiations, the US representatives focused on the successes achieved. They presented them as proof of Iran's ability to stimulus measures. This was confirmed by the conclusion of an interim agreement between Iran and the 5+1 group in November 2013 (The White House, 2013; Einhorn, 2015). In exchange for a partial lifting of sanctions, Iran suspended key elements of its nuclear program. President Obama, commenting on this "first step agreement," stressed that for the first time in almost a decade, it not only stopped the development of the Iranian nuclear program, but also reversed some of its key aspects (The White House, 2013). He also reaffirmed his commitment to a comprehensive agreement guaranteeing the exclusively peaceful nature of Iran's nuclear program. It is important to note that Obama recalled both his priority in preventing Iran from developing nuclear weapons and his preference for a peaceful solution to this problem. He presented the interim agreement as confirmation of the effectiveness of his strategy combining sanctions with diplomacy (The White House, 2013). This approach has helped to strengthen confidence both domestically and internationally that the negotiations are progressing successfully and in the right direction. In addition, it was implied that previous pressure had forced Iran to sit down at the negotiating table, thereby combining contradictory elements of American policy into a single logical chain.

As the talks progressed into 2014 and 2015, U.S. officials became more explicit about what a final deal would accomplish. They sought to pre-empt criticism by detailing stringent constraints on Iran. For instance, well before the deal was finalized, President Obama and Secretary Kerry publicly asserted that a good agreement would "block all of Iran's ways to a bomb" and put in place intrusive inspections (The White House, 2015; U.S. Department of State, 2015). They frequently enumerated the key demands such as a significant reduction of Iran's installed centrifuges, shipment of enriched uranium stockpiles abroad, re-purposing of nuclear facilities and a verification regime of unprecedented scope. This high level of detail in public discourse was unusual in the midst of sensitive negotiations, indicating the

administration's awareness of the political battle it faced at home. Indeed, domestic opposition to any deal with Iran was vocal, with many U.S. lawmakers and allies like Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu arguing that emerging terms were too lenient. To counter this, the Obama administration's rhetoric in 2015 became almost as much about defending the concept of a deal as about Iran itself.

On July 14, 2015, after intense negotiations, the 5+1 group and Iran concluded a Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (U.S. Department of State, 2015). In the U.S., this event was greeted with great optimism. The American authorities presented the agreement as an outstanding diplomatic victory achieved through negotiations. Which was seemed impossible until recently. The famous photo of US Secretary of State John Kerry standing next to the foreign ministers of the 5+1 countries and Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif symbolized international cooperation. In Washington, this image was used as proof that thanks to the multilateral efforts and leadership of the United States, it was possible to prevent the threat of Iran developing nuclear weapons.

President Obama, in his speech, praised the JCPOA, saying that "after two years of negotiations, we have reached a detailed agreement that permanently deprives Iran of the opportunity to obtain nuclear weapons. This cuts off all of Iran's paths to building a bomb." He stressed that the agreement is backed by "the most comprehensive inspection and verification regime that has ever been discussed." In August 2015, speaking at the American University, Obama drew parallels with the breakthroughs in the field of arms control during the Cold War. Also, he bluntly stated that abandoning the deal in favor of coercion or war would be a tragic mistake. At the same time, the peaceful implementation of the JCPOA will limit Iran's nuclear program for a long time. The Obama administration presented the JCPOA as a triumph of "strong, principled diplomacy" that ensured US security more effectively than military force. Official statements often used the terms "verifiable," "transparent," "unprecedented inspections," and "permanent prevention," emphasizing that the United States does not rely on blind faith in Iran, but imposes strict controls (The White House, 2015).

In presenting the deal to both Congress and the public, U.S. officials also carefully noted what the JCPOA did not do, to appease concerns. They pointed out that the deal was narrowly focused on the nuclear file and did not signify U.S. endorsement of Iran's other

policies such as support for militant groups or human rights abuses. This nuance aimed to deny the criticism that the deal “empowered” Iran regionally. President Obama acknowledged that “this deal does not resolve all problems with Iran”, but argued that by neutralizing the nuclear issue it removed the most urgent threat and opened possibilities for addressing other issues from a stronger position. Thus, U.S. discourse around 2015 packaged the JCPOA as a net security gain. Iran’s pathways to a bomb were blocked for the foreseeable future, buying time and stability. And if Iran cheated, the world would know in time to react. By emphasizing that “no deal means a greater chance of war”, the administration sought to portray opponents of the JCPOA as proponents of a risky status quo or conflict, while casting supporters as champions of a safer global order (The White House, 2015). This rhetorical strategy narrowly succeeded. Congress did not block the deal and implementation began in early 2016.

In the immediate aftermath of the deal’s implementation in January 2016, U.S. discourse briefly took a celebratory tone. Iran had shipped out 98% of its enriched uranium, thousands of centrifuges were dismantled, and the core of the Arak reactor was filled with concrete (IAEA, 2016). Secretary Kerry lauded these steps as making the world safer, and even long-time U.S. Iran hawks conceded that Iran’s breakout time to a bomb had been significantly expanded (U.S. Department of State, 2016). However, this period of harmony in discourse was short-lived. The Obama administration, while positive about JCPOA’s technical aspects, remained wary of Iran’s regional behavior. In speeches through 2016, U.S. officials praised Iran’s compliance on the nuclear front while criticizing its ballistic missile tests and militant proxies. They maintained a tough rhetorical line on those fronts to reassure partners that the U.S. was not “soft” on Iran overall. Still, the overall narrative by the end of 2016 was that diplomacy had worked. The specter of an Iranian bomb was removed at least for 10–15 years, given the JCPOA’s timeline, validating Obama’s decision to pursue engagement (Parsi, 2017).

It is important to note that the success of the JCPOA in U.S. discourse was always somewhat contingent and politically polarized. While the Obama administration and many in the international community hailed the agreement, opponents in U.S. domestic politics lambasted it as dangerously weak. They argued that the deal merely delayed Iran’s nuclear ambitions, provided Tehran with financial resources via sanctions relief, and did not address

Iran's missile program or regional influence. In anticipation of these critiques, Obama had already in 2015 rebutted them in detail. For instance, dismissing the idea that a "better deal" with total Iranian capitulation was achievable, and highlighting that the alternative to diplomacy was a war that nobody genuinely wanted. This contentious background meant that even as U.S. officials in 2016 spoke about the JCPOA as a cornerstone of nonproliferation success, they were aware that the durability of this narrative was uncertain. Nevertheless, Chapter 3's period closes with a rare moment. By 2016, for the first time since 2000, the immediate crisis over Iran's nuclear program had abated, and U.S. discourse reflected cautious hope that a long-term resolution was in place. The challenge that remained was to uphold the deal and build upon it, amidst continuing distrust between Washington and Tehran on other issues.

4.5 REVERSAL AND RENEWED TENSIONS: THE JCPOA WITHDRAWAL AND AFTERMATH (2017–2024)

The election of President Donald Trump in November 2016 led to an abrupt reversal of U.S. discourse on Iran's nuclear program. Trump's Iran policy has been deeply rooted in the conservative ideology of the Republican Party, which has historically tended towards confrontation and militarism. Instead of diplomacy, Republicans tend to prefer using force and economic pressure. Following this line, Trump demonized Iran, calling it a rogue regime, and rejected international agreements, considering them a threat to American sovereignty.

Trump had campaigned strongly against the JCPOA, calling it "the worst and most one-sided transaction the United States has ever entered into" (The White House, 2018). Upon taking office in January 2017, his administration's rhetoric pivoted back to confrontation and skepticism toward Iran's intentions. Gone was the nuanced, diplomatic language of the Obama era. In its place, Trump and his advisers employed strong, uncompromising terms to describe both the Iranian regime and the nuclear deal. They framed Iran once again as an untrustworthy actor cheating the spirit of the JCPOA and continuing to threaten U.S. interests. Throughout 2017, President Trump used every major platform, from press conferences to his first address at the U.N. General Assembly to criticize the JCPOA and Iran's behavior. At the U.N. in September 2017, he termed the Iranian government a

“murderous regime” and the nuclear deal “an embarrassment to the United States”, signaling clearly his desire to abandon it (The White House, 2018). American discourse under Trump re-securitized the Iranian threat. Officials often combined Iran with North Korea as dual nuclear dangers, and highlighted Iran’s ballistic missile tests and regional militancy as inseparable from the nuclear file. This was a clear contrast to the previous administration’s narrower focus (Parsi, 2017).

In October 2017, President Trump declared that he would not certify Iran’s compliance with the JCPOA under U.S. law, accusing Tehran of multiple violations and arguing that the deal’s sanctions relief had emboldened Iran’s aggression (The White House, 2017). Although the IAEA and U.S. allies assessed Iran to be meeting its nuclear commitments, Trump’s discourse asserted the contrary. Not necessarily that Iran had outright breached specific clauses, but that its overall behavior (i.e., revoking inspectors’ access or exceeding minor technical limits) deny the deal’s intent. By painting Iran as untrustworthy and the JCPOA as ineffective or temporary, the administration laid the groundwork for withdrawal. It happened on May 8, 2018, when President Trump announced the United States’ exit from the deal (The White House, 2018).

In his speech on the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA, Donald Trump sharply criticized the agreement, calling it a "rotten" and "decaying" structure. According to him, it will only delay, not prevent, Iran's creation of nuclear weapons after certain restrictions expires. He argued that maintaining the JCPOA would lead to an escalation of violence, increased terrorism, and the real threat of an Iranian nuclear breakthrough. The implication was that the agreement is creating a future crisis rather than solving it (The White House, 2018). Trump's speech, rich with apocalyptic predictions, emphasized the uncompromising position of the United States.

Trump famously said "as long as I am president, Iran will never get nuclear weapons." This promise returned the rhetoric to the absolutist formulations of the Bush administration, but now without the support of international control. The visual image of Trump announcing his withdrawal from the deal against the background of American flags and journalists has become a symbol of a radical change in US policy. Subsequently, National Security Adviser John Bolton and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo reinforced this message at press briefings (The White House, 2018; The Heritage Foundation, 2018). They presented Iran with a list

of 12 strict requirements. It included a complete cessation of uranium enrichment, missile tests and changes in regional policy. These became the conditions for forming a new deal. These demands were basically a demand for Iran's surrender. The concept of "maximum pressure" has become firmly entrenched in US rhetoric, implying that only colossal economic and political pressure will force Iran to completely abandon its nuclear ambitions.

In 2018 and 2019, after the restoration and strengthening of sanctions, American officials confidently stated the significant consequences of these actions. They asserted that Iran's oil exports had been driven to historic lows and its economy crippled, presenting this as a success in reducing Iran's capacity to fund nuclear or military endeavors. However, Iran responded by gradually breaching certain JCPOA limits from mid-2019 onward. For example, exceeding stockpile limits of low-enriched uranium and enrichment levels (IAEA, 2020). This development prompted a new layer of U.S. discourse, one that paradoxically had to deal with the very nuclear escalation that the U.S. had feared, now occurring after the deal's collapse. The Trump administration's line was to blame Iran alone for these steps, insisting that Iran was engaging in "nuclear blackmail" to coerce concessions. At the same time, officials maintained that Iran's breaches only validated the U.S. decision to leave the "bad deal," since they showed Iran's true colors once restrictions were lifted. Instead of acknowledging that Iran's most aggressive nuclear steps were taken after Washington withdrew from the agreement, U.S. chose to accuse Iran of malicious intentions, thereby distracting attention from its role in escalating tensions.

In 2020, U.S.-Iran relations deteriorated further after events such as the U.S. killing of Iranian General Qasem Soleimani and Iran's retaliatory missile strikes. Nuclear discourse took a backseat to these severe security incidents, but it never disappeared. Even amid near-conflict, President Trump and his officials repeated that Iran "will never be allowed to have a nuclear weapon" (The White House, 2020). In January 2020, after the Iranian missile strikes on U.S. bases, Trump addressed the nation and opened with that very assertion, linking Iran's regional aggression to the nuclear issue by stating "Iran has been the leading sponsor of terrorism, and their pursuit of nuclear weapons threatens the civilized world. We will never let that happen." (The White House, 2020). This framing suggested that all of Iran's challenges to the U.S. were ultimately tied into one comprehensive threat, which the U.S. was determined to confront fully. American discourse under Trump thus reached a peak

of securitization. Iran was not a state with which to bargain or reason, but one to be subdued through strength. The idea of a diplomatic accommodation faded almost entirely from official narratives between 2018 and 2020.

With the transition to President Joe Biden's administration in January 2021, U.S. discourse took another turn. Biden returned to line of his Democratic party. As in case with Obama, Biden's goal was to revive diplomatic path of interaction. However, this time it was an attempt of something of a hybrid between Obama's engagement and Trump's firmness. Biden had campaigned on restoring the JCPOA if Iran returned to compliance, criticizing Trump's withdrawal as counterproductive (The White House, 2021). Upon taking office, Biden officials signaled willingness to re-enter talks. However, they also inherited an Iran that had advanced its nuclear program beyond JCPOA limits and an Iranian leadership skeptical of U.S. reliability (IAEA, 2022). In early 2021, U.S. public statements struck a careful tone. Secretary of State Antony Blinken noted the U.S. would rejoin the deal if Iran did, but warned that Iran's nuclear "breakout time" had shrunk dangerously due to its recent violations (Blinken, 2021). Thus, even as diplomacy was re-emphasized, the sense of urgency and threat remained in the discourse. President Biden himself, speaking at international forums and bilateral meetings, consistently reiterated the core commitment: the United States will never allow Iran to acquire a nuclear weapon (The White House, 2021). This simple, clear pledge was meant to reassure allies and frame all policy moves in that light. In an August 2022 phone call with the Israeli Prime Minister, Biden "underscored U.S. commitment to never allow Iran to acquire a nuclear weapon", a stance that was frequently echoed in press statements and speeches. At the same time, Biden outlined a preference for diplomacy, often emphasizing the diplomatic damage of the prior withdrawal (The White House, 2021).

In 2021 and 2022, indirect negotiations were held in Vienna, the purpose of which was to resume the JCPOA. The American representatives who participated in these difficult discussions tried to avoid loud statements and provocative rhetoric. However, they have repeatedly stressed that the window of opportunity for reaching an agreement is not unlimited. By the middle of 2022, when negotiations reached a deadlock, the US position became more decisive. The Biden administration has made it clear that it will not "wait indefinitely" for Iran to make a final decision. The statements of the American side

increasingly mentioned "alternative options" in the event of a failure of diplomatic efforts. Which, in fact, was a veiled hint at the possibility of using coercive measures (Sullivan, 2022).

By 2024, when the JCPOA was not restored, and Iran continued to develop its nuclear program, the US rhetoric found itself in a difficult situation. The administration continued to assert that diplomacy was the preferred path, but at the same time made it clear that it would use pressure to stop the progress of Iran's nuclear program in the absence of an agreement. Visits by senior American officials and joint military exercises with Israel were presented as signals of readiness for military intervention if necessary. Although publicly the emphasis was on a diplomatic solution to the problem.

By 2024, it became obvious that Iran's nuclear program had reached a scale unprecedented in the last 20 years. At the same time, the prospects for concluding a long-term agreement remained vague. In response, the US administration has increased sanctions pressure and international isolation of Iran, while signaling its willingness to negotiate. President Biden, speaking at the United Nations in 2023, emphasized the U.S. commitment to a diplomatic solution. He also firmly stated his intention to prevent Iran from building nuclear weapons, thus confirming the consistency of American policy (The White House, 2023). The internal political discussion in the United States around the Iranian nuclear program has somewhat subsided compared to the period of active discussion of the JCPOA. This is due to a shift in attention to other, larger-scale crises, such as the rivalry with China and Russia. Nevertheless, with every mention of the Iranian nuclear issue, American leaders have consistently emphasized the key principle underlying their policy since the early 2000s - the unacceptability of Iranian nuclear weapons.

Between 2017 and 2024, American diplomacy regarding the Iranian nuclear program underwent significant changes. At first, under President Trump, there was a sharp departure from the previous policy. Instead of diplomacy, a course of harsh pressure and uncompromising demands on Iran was chosen. The Trump administration has abandoned previous agreements and adopted a confrontational position.

Later, the Biden administration tried to return to a more diplomatic approach, seeking to restore cooperation with its allies. However, these efforts have been complicated by Iran's

ongoing nuclear activities. Other key factors were its regional policy and the internal opposition in the United States, which was skeptical about the resumption of cooperation.

Despite the different approaches, both administrations were united in one thesis - Iran should not get nuclear weapons. The differences were only about tactics, the balance between pressure and diplomacy, and optimal strategies to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons. By 2024, American diplomacy has become more pragmatic and cautious. The United States has expressed its readiness for dialogue, but at the same time it is also showed preparedness for the fact that it may not bring results. The American position has become a combination of determination and realism. The United States has demonstrated its willingness to engage constructively with Iran, while at the same time transmitting its commitment to international partners.

5. CONCLUSION

The American policy towards Iran's nuclear program from 2000 to 2024 was a dynamic process that included periods of aggressive pressure and diplomatic negotiations. Despite the tactical changes, the strategic goal of the United States remained constant. An analysis of U.S. discourse during this period reveals several key and unchanging elements.

An invariable constant of American foreign policy during the period under review was the rejection of Iran's nuclear potential. It was considered an unacceptable threat to international security and key strategic interests of the United States. This position, demonstrated by all administrations, despite differences in diplomatic style and tactics, had a significant impact on the dynamics of US-Iranian relations. The consistent rejection of a nuclear Iran, expressed in the statements of Presidents Bush, Obama, Trump and Biden, was perceived by Iran as evidence of ongoing hostility, which, in turn, influenced the formation of Iranian security policy and diplomatic strategies.

Although the main goals remained the same throughout the study period, approaches to solving the Iranian nuclear issue differed clearly under different administrations. The Bush administration, for example, used harsh and moralizing rhetoric, presenting the Iranian nuclear program as part of the global fight against terrorism and authoritarianism. This made it possible to attract broad international support for the imposition of sanctions and pressure. At the same time, it intensified the mutual hostility and reinforced the existing hostility.

The Obama administration took a more flexible and diplomatic approach to the Iranian issue between 2009 and 2016. Recognizing Iran's limited rights and claims, it has created the conditions for multilateral negotiations. Thanks to such tactful diplomacy and patience, a Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action was achieved, which demonstrated the potential of a balanced diplomatic strategy.

From 2017 to 2020, the Trump administration radically changed its approach to foreign policy, moving from diplomatic solutions to strict requirements that went beyond the terms of the JCPOA. This shift in rhetoric has escalated tensions and set back diplomatic efforts.

During his term in office from 2021 to 2024, the Biden administration was seeking a diplomatic solution to the Iranian nuclear crisis, relying on the experience of previous administrations. They combined constant pressure on Iran with new diplomatic initiatives

aimed at strengthening cooperation with international allies. Recognizing the progress Iran has made in developing its nuclear program, the Biden administration has aimed at a balanced approach combining firmness on ultimate goals with diplomatic openness.

The chronology shows that the US diplomatic discourse towards Iran is reactive. It changes cyclically in response to internal political shifts and global changes. Presidential administrations, coming to power, are forced to adapt or completely revise the rhetoric of their predecessors. This, in turn, maintains an atmosphere of instability in US-Iranian relations. In general, the affiliation of US presidents to one of two parties has had a significant impact on the formation of their position on the Iranian nuclear program. Republican administrations displayed more mundane and acute elements of securitization. They focused on the existential threat from Iran and used harsh language that justified taking extreme measures. While the Democrats tried to create a more diplomatic and multilateral approach. This is direct evidence of the trend towards desecuritization, which allowed to consider the issue through the prism of negotiations and international control. Nevertheless, regardless of party affiliation, all administrations agreed on the main goal of preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. Thus, party affiliation set the accents and style of rhetoric rather than changing the basic position of the United States on the issue of preventing nuclear weapons. This underlines that the discourse of American presidents is a dynamic combination of the ideological views of the parties and the unchanging strategic interests of the state.

Another important point found in the analysis of the period 2000-2024 concerns the multi-level strategy that the United States used in its political rhetoric regarding the Iranian nuclear program. The American leaders deliberately adapted their statements not only for Iran, but also for the domestic audience, the allies and the Iranian people. Examples of this can be seen at key moments when presidential speeches were aimed at building consensus or bolstering support. For example, in 2015, President Obama carefully explained the details and benefits of the nuclear deal, both publicly and in a more academic manner. This was done in order to convince skeptics within the country and wavering allies of its effectiveness. In contrast, in 2018, President Trump used harsh criticism of the same deal, targeting a domestic audience and regional partners already doubting Iran. This rhetoric reinforced the existing mistrust and emphasized the need for pressure rather than negotiation.

The American approach to Iran has often been indirect in diplomatic terms. Instead of communicating directly with the Iranian authorities, the United States mainly used its statements and actions to influence the global political situation and domestic public opinion, considering this as a more effective way to achieve its goals. The American security discourse consistently portrays Iran as a unique and serious threat. Using metaphors and historical parallels, various administrations have purposefully shaped the image of Iran as a source of danger in order to justify their policy decisions. Each president strategically presented Iran as an exceptional threat. This was done to justify the chosen political line and to mobilize international support.

The prioritization of the Iranian nuclear issue in American foreign policy, expressed in constant diplomatic statements, had a dual effect. On the one hand, it made it possible to mobilize the international community and gain legislative support. Especially in the periods from 2006 to 2010 and during the negotiations on the JCPOA. On the other hand, this same rhetoric, which portrays Iran as a serious nuclear threat, significantly limited the possibilities for a diplomatic compromise. Especially during periods of escalating tensions, for example, in the early 2000s and after the US withdrawal from the JCPOA. As a result, the US strategy was effective in building an international consensus against Iranian nuclear weapons, but left little room for diplomatic solutions that did not guarantee Iran's complete and immediate abandonment of nuclear development.

The consequences of actions during years from 2000 to 2024 underscores that a favorable international climate and consistent policies are needed to ensure trust in American diplomacy. The initial US statements about Iran's nuclear program, made in the context of the events after September 11 and the controversy over false intelligence on Iraq, initially aroused skepticism. As a result, American diplomacy was forced to rely on independent verification by international organizations, in particular the IAEA, and actively participate in multilateral cooperation to restore trust.

The JCPOA negotiations took place in an environment where the United States enjoyed significant diplomatic influence, backed by international verification of its arguments and broad support. However, the US withdrawal from the agreement in 2018 seriously undermined their credibility, because it was perceived as a unilateral rejection of multilateral cooperation. The Biden administration has made efforts to restore American trust through

diplomacy and strengthening international ties, but has faced persistent skepticism indicating that U.S. influence directly depends on the correspondence between their statements and actual actions.

As a result, a study of American discourse regarding Iran's nuclear program from 2000 to 2024 reveals a contradictory picture. Despite the change of administrations and policy fluctuations, the United States has consistently tried to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons. The approaches of American rhetoric have changed: from harsh threats and confrontation to attempts at diplomacy, then back to a tougher stance and, finally, to partial compromise. Various rhetorical techniques have combined to form a comprehensive view of a situation where the United States advocates global nonproliferation, Iran is seen as a potential threat requiring deterrence or a diplomatic solution, and international cooperation is considered necessary to overcome this geopolitical problem. In 2024, the rhetoric fluctuated between warnings and diplomatic perspectives, reflecting the ongoing uncertainty surrounding Iran's nuclear program. The events of June 2025, in particular the US-Israeli strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities, show that securitization rhetoric continued to justify military measures after 2024. Although these developments fall outside the scope of this work, they underscore the need for further study of their impact on diplomacy and regional stability.

This in-depth study focuses on the key role of political discourse in international relations, especially in the context of the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Diplomatic language is not just a means of communication, but a strategic tool that can either open the way to diplomatic solutions or strengthen existing contradictions. The American discourse regarding Iran's nuclear ambitions is a prime example of this ambivalent nature. The analysis shows that, despite the changing political conditions and rhetorical nuances, the fundamental political task of the United States – preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons in threatening countries such as Iran – has remained a priority and has been consistently expressed throughout a quarter of a century of complex diplomatic history.

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