

A Few Months Away for Thirty-Four Years

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Abstract

The recent military barrages between the United States and Israel against the Islamic Republic of Iran arose out of years of media manipulation and propaganda by the Israeli government.

Drawing heavily on John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt's realist framework and lobby thesis, Vali Nasr's explanation of Iran's rational grand strategy, and Trita Parsi's documentation of how U.S.–Iran diplomacy has repeatedly been derailed by Israeli pressure, this paper argues that the conflict is best understood not as a response to Iranian aggression or threats of nuclear proliferation, but as the product of Israeli strategic planning and the influence of the Israel lobby for decades on U.S. foreign policy, specifically the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). A chronological review spanning the 1953 CIA-backed coup against Mohammad Mossadegh through the collapse of the JCPOA, the 2020 assassination of Qasem Soleimani, and the 2025-2026 military attacks by the U.S.-Israel axis establishes the historical backbone of the argument, which is followed by the international relations analysis described above.

A Few Months Away for Thirty-Four Years

On February 28, 2026, two massive operations, Lion's Roar and Epic Fury, were launched, with the United States and Israel launching coordinated strikes on Iran. For many Americans, this seemed like the inevitable showdown with their supposed archenemy. Kamala Harris, during the 2024 presidential elections, claimed: "greatest adversary, I think there is an obvious one in mind, which is Iran. Iran has American blood on their hands" (Al Jazeera, 2024). Iran has been portrayed as an irrational, nuclear-obsessed regime, bent on escalating their supposed attacks on the U.S. But if this war were really about stopping Iran from getting a bomb, why would America attack even when diplomacy was working well to achieve that goal?

In 1992, as deputy foreign minister of Israel, Netanyahu warned the Israeli national representative body, the Knesset, that Iran would "become autonomous in its ability to develop and produce a nuclear bomb" within 3–5 years (Al Jazeera, 2025). This narrative of Iran gaining nuclear weapons was also pushed by Netanyahu in 1995, in which he asserted with little to no real evidence that Iran would likely have a nuclear weapon in "five years or less" (Netanyahu, 1995). Decades after that, Netanyahu was still singing the same song, still claiming to American lawmakers that Iran was "one to two years away" from nuclear capability (Al Jazeera, 2025). Three years later, when no bomb materialized, he told the UN General Assembly that Iran would reach the "final stage" of bomb fuel production by next spring, at most by next summer, and was already "a few weeks" from enough enriched uranium for a first bomb (Al Jazeera, 2025). And most recently, on February 28, 2026, Netanyahu announced Operation Lion's Roar in coordination with the U.S., stating: "If not stopped, Iran could produce a nuclear weapon in a very short time — it could be a year, it could be within a few months" (Al Jazeera, 2026a). This is just two days after nuclear talks in Geneva ended with apparent massive progress, according to

Oman's foreign ministry. It is like the story of the boy who cried wolf, except the villagers were deceived into not caring that he always lied. His attempts forced a fake narrative down the western world's throat, painting a picture of a rising evil, with the help of U.S. politicians (such as President Trump), who can pass legislation that, in the end, helps Israel at the cost of America.

But not all of Trump's confidantes blindly followed Netanyahu, with many questioning why this was America's war at all. For example, Tucker Carlson, who reportedly met with President Trump multiple times to argue against the strike, famously told his audience that "this is Israel's war" and highlighted it "NOT being waged on behalf of American national security objectives." (Al Jazeera, 2025) This paper argues that the 2026 U.S.–Iran military conflict is not primarily a product of Iranian nuclear aggression or ideological opposition to the Islamic Republic, but rather the culmination of decades of Israeli strategic imperatives and the institutionalized influence over American foreign policy decisions through the Israel lobby

Theoretical Framework

To make sense of the current U.S.-Iran military conflict and the over 34 years of strife resulting from incursions and interference in Iran by foreign powers, one may look to international relations theories most applicable to the conflict. Of the different approaches to international relations, the most pertinent theories to the conflict and region are Realism and decision-making theory. As tools, these theories explain both why states act and why policy sometimes deviates from pure state interest.

Realism

This research paper will use Realism, or realist theory. Tracing back to 400 B.C.E., with the writings of Athenian historian Thucydides, Realism is the oldest recorded theory of

international relations. More than 1900 years after Thucydides, the theory of Realism became openly discussed again in the famous work of Machiavelli, *The Prince*, followed a century later by Hobbes in his work *Leviathan*. Advancing to more recent years, Realist theory has become even more discussed with its reappearance in the writings of former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger in the late 20th century. Realism as a theory can be broken into many separate ideas, but more specifically, the paper will be using Mearsheimer's offensive realist framework laid out in his work *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (Mearsheimer, 2001). He argues that the true "hand of god" is an international anarchic system. States cannot be certain of others' intentions and, therefore, ought to maximize power to ensure survival. Mearsheimer underlines five core assumptions. Firstly, the international system is based on anarchy, an ordering principle in which independent or sovereign states have no central authority above them. Secondly, there is no international "government over governments" that truly controls the sovereign nation-states. Thirdly, true great powers arise out of these nation-states, which naturally possess military capabilities, which means that there will always be a possibility of war, mutual destruction, peace, and alliance. However, there is a tale-as-old-as-time truth: alliances are only as good as the shared interests and trust holding them together. Fourthly, states are never certain of others' intentions because states may be harmless one moment and harmful the next, given that intentions are dynamic and subject to changing interests. Finally, it is the primary goal of great powers to survive and dominate. States seek regional unipolarity; once secured, they act to prevent rivals from achieving the same. This is the "tragedy" of great power politics: "look for opportunities to gain power at each other's expense" (Mearsheimer, 2001). Offensive realism applied to the Middle East reveals that the U.S. historically acted as Israel's "offshore balancer,"

projecting power to prevent any rival regional hegemon, including Iran, from challenging Israel's goals.

Decision-Making Theory

Another theory this paper will be using is decision-making theory, which arose from the rational actor model. Originally, these theories were primarily mathematical, as they argue that decision-makers act rationally to evaluate available information, weigh costs and benefits, and select options that maximize their goals. Scholars began to recognize that humans are incapable of perfectly rational calculations under stress. Economist and psychologist Herbert Simon challenged the concept in 1955. In his work "A Behavioral Model of Rational Choice", he coined the term "bounded rationality", noting that leaders are forced to choose options due to time constraints and limited information that are not mathematically optimal (Simon, 1955). It is a foundational framework used across economics, political science, and foreign policy to explain and predict human and state behavior. Later, the idea of decision-making theory came to international relations after Allison and Zelikow (Allison & Zelikow, 1999) challenged the assumption that states act as unitary rational actors and instead examined how domestic bureaucratic and interest-group politics shape foreign policy outcomes. Decision-making theory, when applied to the conflict between the United States and Iran, reveals how a large foreign interest group, such as AIPAC, invests in legislation and politicians to shape the conflict in ways favorable to their interests.

Levels of Analysis

Analyzing conflicts in International Relations requires using the concept of "levels of analysis" to provide a framework to explain global events. Originating in Kenneth Waltz's 1959

book *Man, the State, and War*, and later formalized by J. David Singer's 1961 article, which splits analysis into three levels: systemic, state, and individual. At the broadest level, there is a systemic level, which is the balance of power, U.S. hegemony, and the encirclement of Iran since 1991. To Iranian leaders, encirclement occurred after the new changes to the map revealed that the American military now wrapped around Iran on nearly every side: the Gulf to the south, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iraq to the west, and Afghanistan to the east. At the state level, there are Israeli foreign policy (Netanyahu's strategic imperatives) and Iranian grand strategy (fear-driven, but not irrational). The most obvious level to the mind is the level of an individual's actions, exemplified by Netanyahu's fear of political upheaval, Trump's susceptibility to foreign influence, and Khamenei's grand strategies.

Historical Backbone

Money and oil are Satan's excrements. Under the Qājār Dynasty's ruler Mozaffar od-Dīn Shāh, William Knox D'Arcy, a wealthy Englishman, was allowed to look for oil in Iran. At first, the lack of skilled labor and the harsh weather led to no success. This was until oil was discovered in Masjed Soleymān. The geopolitical implications of this find were profound, and Iran entered a momentous turning point in the region's economic and political landscape. Since the combustion engine gained significance a few decades earlier, petroleum became in demand, and the discovery of oil in Iran attracted British government attention. After the discovery of oil, the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (later known as British Petroleum or BP) was established in 1909. This partnership allowed for Persian oil to integrate into global markets (Britannica, n.d.).

Due to the rise of combustion engines at the start of the 20th century, many industrialized nations were looking for oil resources all over the world. The United States was primarily in the Gulf at the time. The Russian Empire had reached Iran's northern border while the British

Empire had forces both to the east and west of Iran, and both Russia and Britain sought to protect their interests in Iran during World War I (1914 - 1918). There was so much wealth to be gained from the oil that was extracted, and because Iran allowed Britain to claim ownership of all that oil, the wealth was leaving Iran and going to Britain. Iranians felt that the oil that belonged to them was not reaping benefits for them. Subsequent developments included efforts by local leaders, such as Reza Khan (later known as Reza Shah Pahlavi), to negotiate better terms for oil profits, reflecting a growing nationalistic sentiment (Britannica, n.d.). Mohammad Mosaddegh entered the political scene when he was elected to the Majles (representative assembly) in 1923, but after Reza Khan was elected Shah (monarch), Mosaddegh opposed the move, deciding to retire from government.

Following Reza Shah's forced abdication in 1941, Mohammad Mosaddegh reentered the public sphere in 1944, and he was elected again to the Majles (parliament) and became prime minister. Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh was one of the most outspoken leaders about what he felt was the colonizers' exploitation of Iran. He came to power promising to nationalize Iran's oil. With its strategic location and vast oil reserves, Iran was then of special interest to the United States, the United Kingdom, and other powers, who were concerned about Mosaddegh's promises. In 1951, Mosaddegh fulfilled his promise; he expelled foreign companies from oil refineries in the city of Abadan and took control of BP's assets, moves that Western historians later called the "Abadan Crisis." Hoping to force Iran to open up to foreign nations, the British, supported by the US, boycotted Iranian oil for the next two years and froze Iranian foreign currency reserves, which played into the Abadan Crisis (Britannica, n.d.).

1953 - Operation Ajax

The British embargoes were very successful, and the freezing of Iranian foreign currencies crippled Iran's economy. This forced Iran to move from relying on oil to an agricultural-based economy. Then, in August 1953, a coup was engineered that aimed to remove Mohammad Mosaddegh. It was funded and orchestrated by the United States and the British foreign intelligence agencies. After sanctioning Iranian oil for two years during the Abadan Crisis, they sought to gain control of the oil industry. Before the coup, British officials attempted to persuade the shah to remove Mossadegh from his position as prime minister. The British believed that because of economic uncertainty, the Iranian people would support these changes. This maneuver backfired, however, as it ultimately boosted Mossadegh's popularity while undermining the authority of the shah. So, the US and Britain took action to overthrow Mossadegh (Britannica, n.d.).

Under the title Operation Ajax, CIA agent Kermit Roosevelt ran the operation using \$1 million to pay mobs, bribe newspaper editors, and mobilize religious leaders against Mosaddegh. The British and the United States feared that if the coup attempt was unsuccessful, they would risk severe diplomatic and economic backlash and would have exposed both foreign intelligence groups (MI6 and CIA), garnering massive embarrassment. The British were more fearful as they were less of a superpower during the Cold War, and were reluctant to shoulder the responsibility alone, so they persuaded the U.S. to join forces. The United States took the leading role in the covert operation. Publicly, the West legitimized the conflict, playing on Cold War fears that Mosaddegh was aligning himself with Tudeh, the Iranian Communist Party, despite being an avowed anticommunist. The CIA-backed coup was ultimately successful, and the coup overthrew the democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh. At the time, the

US government and the British denied any action, but in 2013, the CIA formally acknowledged its role (though many still debate if the coup was truly caused by the CIA, as described by Michael Axworthy (Axworthy, 2013)). Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi was restored as Iran's imperial leader. Not only were the events illegal under Iranian and international laws, but also extremely ironic. Britain and the U.S. claimed to support democracy and freedom, yet here they developed and led an anti-democratic overthrow against the democratically elected prime minister, handing power to a monarchical leader, Reza Shah. America specifically was willing to ignore its ideals for profit. Mossadegh was imprisoned and placed under house arrest until his death three years later. After the 1953 coup, the U.S. immediately gave Iran \$45 million in emergency economic assistance to stabilize the Shah's regime. Mohammad Reza, compared to Mossadegh, was a pro-Western leader, but the shah, fearful for his throne, signed the 1954 Consortium Agreement, which granted U.S. oil companies a 40% stake in Iranian oil, despite hesitating over signing the royal decrees, laws he previously publicly opposed (Britannica, n.d.).

In the time following the coup, the Iranian government under Reza Shah Pahlavi focused on tightening relations with the West and its allies. In October 1955, Iran joined the Baghdad Pact, together with Iraq, Turkey, and Pakistan, in an alliance that included Britain and the United States. Throughout the Cold War atmosphere until the fall of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, Iranian contact with the Soviet Union was minimally friendly. In 1956, the Shah visited the Soviet Union, but Iran's alliance with the West continued alongside opposition shown through Soviet propaganda attacks. Three years after visiting the U.S.S.R. in March of 1959, Iran signed a bilateral defense agreement with the United States, "solidifying" their position with the West. Domestically, following the 1953 coup, a period of political repression and censorship followed the overthrow of Mossadegh, as the Shah centralized power around him. He suppressed and even

banned parties like the National Front and pro-communist Tudeh, while also censoring the press (Country Studies, n.d.). From 1954 to 1956, elections to the Majlis were closely controlled and watched over. During these early years, the shah replaced Zahedi as prime minister with Hosain Ala in April 1955. This began a line of successive prime ministers who did the Shah's bidding. In 1957, the CIA, alongside Mossad, helped the Shah establish secret police named SAVAK (Sazman-e Ettelaat va Amniyat-e Keshvar). It is important to note that the regime of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi and the State of Israel maintained a close, informal strategic alliance during this time. During this time, Israel not only trained Iranian secret police but also trained agricultural experts and sold weapons to the Shah's military forces (DW News, 2024). Between 1963 and 1975, 179 Iranians were trained through CIA-run programs at the International Police Academy and International Public Services School in Washington D.C. Reports from Amnesty International state that SAVAK tortured over 100,000 political prisoners from 1957 to 1979 using the techniques taught by American and Israeli instructors. These actions were formally documented as systematic torture under the Shah's instructions (Amnesty International, 1976). The U.S. did not merely tolerate the Shah's brutality; it trained, funded, and was briefed on it. A former CIA officer, Jesse Leaf, admitted that "stories of SAVAK torture of political dissidents were common knowledge" inside the agency (Kaplan, 1980). This is the "offshore balancing" Mearsheimer describes: Washington accepted the moral cost of supporting a repressive client state to maintain regional dominance and secure oil access. The consequence, as Vali Nasr, an Iranian American academic and former dean of the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, argues in his book *Iran's Grand Strategy*, was the creation of a deeply traumatized Iranian national consciousness linking America directly to decades of internal repression (Nasr, 2025). The actions of the SAVAK and the US government's involvement led to

three former Iranian political prisoners filing a \$225 million lawsuit in U.S. federal court against SAVAK's former chief, Parviz Sabeti, in 2025 (National Council of Resistance of Iran, 2025).

America's participation in supporting a repressive regime illustrates offensive realism, prioritizing maintaining a powerful regional ally to ensure its own survival and dominance over competitors in the region.

The White Revolution

Iran is a country of recurring earthquakes, and in 1962, it faced the Buin Zahra Earthquake, one of the most violent in the nation's modern history (with a Magnitude of 7.1). It brought death and destruction; it completely obliterated over 21,300 homes across 300 villages and claimed 12,225 lives. As a country just moving from being mainly supplied with agriculture-based products, the earthquakes temporarily made hundreds of thousands of agricultural acres unproductive, farmlands on which the country's economy greatly depends. Iran was just recovering from this tragedy when its latest troubles erupted. Ironically, one of the causes of new rioting was the Shah's land reform program instituted to ease a lot of the country's impoverished peasants at the expense of large landowners. In January 1963, the Shah started modernization programs called the "White Revolution" due to U.S. pressure from the Kennedy administration, which included land redistribution to over 2.5 million families, gave women the right to vote, created free universal education, and created forests that were nationally owned. While these reforms were economically productive for a minority of citizens, the vast majority were destabilized by them. The redistributed land plots were too small and unviable for agriculture, causing mass rural-to-urban migration and poverty due to a failing farming sector. In addition, Iranian Shia clergy, vital to Iranian society, actively rejected these reforms because the reforms undermined clerical authority over law and education while stripping religious endowments

(waqf) of their land. In a news broadcast in the United States, however, the reason for the riot was identified as “the shah’s plans for the emancipation of the nation’s women, rioting against this program, was led by a leader of a strict Muslim sect opposed to women’s suffrage” (Britannica, n.d.).

Clerics publicly attacked the Shah’s actions, a movement that was later named the White Revolution; among them Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (Ayatollah being a religious title like Cardinal), who emerged as the most vocal clerical critic. After a fiery speech attacking the Shah in June 1963, he was arrested by SAVAK agents, sparking the most violent riots since the 1953 coup (Country Studies, n.d). Before the White Revolution in 1963, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini was a prominent Twelver Shia cleric, teacher, and religious scholar based at the Qom Seminary. He was relatively quiet in public, though highly respected within academic and religious circles as an expert in Islamic law (fiqh), philosophy, and ethics, having been widely recognized for his intellectual works, *Revealing of Secrets* (1943) and *Kitab al-Taharah* (1957). After his protest, Khomeini was eventually exiled, first to Turkey, then Iraq, then France, where he continued to organize opposition, circulating cassette tapes of his sermons inside Iran (PBS, n.d.). By the late 1970s, continued rapid modernization had created massive inequality: oil wealth concentrated among a few, a new mass urban poor, and a fed-up clergy ready to lead revolution. The U.S.-backed modernization during the White Revolution was not neutral or benevolent — it was a tool for consolidating the Shah’s (and by extension, America’s) hold on Iran. The backlash it produced was less irrational Islamic extremism and more a natural, predictable response to foreign-directed repression and disruption of Iranian social, economic, and religious life.

Islamic Revolution

On 7 January 1978, an article published in the national daily Ettela'at newspaper titled "Iran and Red and Black Colonization" attacked Khomeini as a "British agent" and a "mad Indian poet" conspiring to make Iran communist (Britannica, n.d.). The article, which was meant to appease the citizens, ultimately backfired – catastrophically. In the city of Qom, students rallied and headed towards the homes of the religious leaders. The protesters were attacked by the Shah's security forces, who shot live ammunition to disperse the crowd, turning the peaceful demonstration violent, with a death toll estimated in the hundreds. A wave of unrest swept through multiple cities on February 18, 1978. Figures such as Khomeini (who lived in Paris, France) pressured for a 40-day mourning cycle for those "martyred" in the protest. The protest escalated in Tabriz, where peaceful demonstrations rapidly devolved into widespread rioting. Angered by Western and state influence, crowds targeted and burnt symbols of the regime and Western culture, such as movie theaters, drinking establishments, state-run financial centers, and police headquarters. To quell the chaos and reclaim control of the streets, the government scrambled conventional combat divisions of the Imperial Iranian Army (Wikipedia, n.d.).

At the same time, after the opening up of oil to foreign nations in the 1970s, this revenue created an "alarming" increase in inflation, waste, and a gap between wealth classes. Many Iranians were also angered by the fact that the Shah's family inherited the income generated by oil, amounting to over \$3 billion. The cycle of unrest persisted on March 29, forty days later, as coordinated demonstrations occurred in dozens of cities, including the capital, Tehran. By the summer of 1978, the protests lasted for four months, with approximately 10,000 participants in each major city. These and later events in Iran are frequently cited as one of the most consequential strategic surprises that the United States has experienced since the CIA was

established in 1947. Opting for a strategy of political concessions and dialogue over immediate military suppression, the Shah pledged to hold open parliamentary elections by 1979.

Additionally, his administration eased press restrictions (which backfired as challenging ideological papers were more easily accessible) and outlined measures to curb graft among state officials and the monarchy (Wikipedia, n.d.).

Hoping to appease protesters, the Shah's imperial government put on trial those who had been imprisoned in civilian courts, and they were quickly released. However, domestic security personnel had lacked specialized training or modern gear for managing public disturbances for over a decade. Consequently, local law enforcement routinely failed to manage the crowds, forcing the regular military to intervene. This operational deficit was exacerbated by the U.S., as the Carter administration declined to export crowd-control supplies like tear gas or non-lethal projectiles to the regime. By the summer months, the movement reached a plateau, maintaining a consistent rhythm for a third of a year. During this phase, typical turnout hovered around ten thousand protestors per major hub every forty days, with Isfahan seeing larger crowds and Tehran experiencing smaller turnouts. By late 1978, massive strikes, demonstrations, and assassinations of government officials paralyzed the country. On January 16, 1979, the Shah suddenly fled Iran; Ayatollah Khomeini returned from exile on February 1. On February 12, 1979, the Shah's prime minister also fled. Though the protests included political figures from many factions, the clerical factions consolidated power rapidly, and the Islamic Republic was established (PBS, n.d.). President Carter had admitted the Shah into the U.S. for medical treatment on October 22, 1979 — just two weeks before the Islamic Republic was declared. Everything boiled over out of control. On November 4, 1979, a group of students representing Khomeini's anti-colonial ideals stormed the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, capturing the building and

taking 63 American delegates hostage. The students initially expected to stay only a day or two; it escalated when Carter took military action, which failed with special operations forces that crashed and failed. Then, President Carter took military options completely off the table, and the U.S. National Security Council leaked this to Iranian negotiators (American Enterprise Institute, 2019). The conventional U.S. framing portrays the hostage crisis as an act of Iranian terrorism, but that is not how the Iranians saw it. For them, they were overthrowing the source of power that supported and propped up a corrupt regime in destroying their social contract. Students displayed a banner reading: “Khomeini struggles, Carter trembles” — and demanded the Shah be returned to Iran to face trial (New York Times, 1979). Khomeini publicly endorsed the takeover. The crisis lasted 444 days, from November 4, 1979, to January 20, 1981.

From the CIA coup in 1953, 26 years of SAVAK torture, and U.S. economic extraction, the country has become “a nationalist rupture from a relationship that had never served Iranian interests” (Nasr, 2025). Trita Parsi, an Iranian Swedish international relations writer and co-founder of the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, argues that the U.S. severing of diplomatic ties after the crisis was the foundational break that foreclosed decades of potential rapprochement, not Iranian aggression, but American abandonment of diplomacy (Parsi, 2008). With the Islamic Republic being formed under Ayatollah Khomeini, and the alliance between Iran and the United States crumbling, a new figure emerged who set their eyes on Iran, with the hope of conquest. On September 22, 1980, Iran and Iraq went to war when Iraqi President Saddam Hussein ordered an invasion of western Iran; he believed that because of the chaos in Iran, the nation would be vulnerable to a military invasion. So, Iraq launched a full-scale invasion across the Shatt al-Arab waterway. What followed was a war that lasted eight years and claimed over one million lives. Under the President Ronald Reagan administration, the U.S.

decided to align with Saddam Hussein in the 1980s. Of the many Star Wars-like quotes Ronald Reagan used during the Cold War, he described his logic in Hammurabi's code: enemy of my enemy is my friend.

Iran-Iraq War

The creation of the Islamic Republic of Iran, following the 1979 Iranian Revolution, led the US government to inculcate a sudden threat to U.S. regional interests to the American audience, rather than a secular Iraqi dictatorship, so the Reagan administration moved to work with Saddam. Over time, the reasons cited for the Iran threat to U.S regional interests stemmed from two main reasons: first, American intelligence feared attacks on their refineries in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia; second, which will be further analyzed by levels of analysis, is the resentment and retribution the American people wanted against the Islamic Republic for hostage taking after Reza Shah was overthrown. After deciding to ally with Saddam Hussein against Iran, the U.S. provided Iraq with satellite intelligence on Iranian troop positions during the Iran-Iraq War. They additionally gave billions of dollars worth of agricultural credits, freeing up Iraqi funds for purchasing weapons instead of focusing on their citizens. Everything changed when Saddam Hussein deployed mustard gas and nerve agents against Iranian forces throughout the 1980s, killing and maiming tens of thousands. Declassified CIA files in 2013 confirmed that "the U.S. had firm evidence of Iraqi chemical attacks," the Pentagon nevertheless continued providing intelligence data to Baghdad (NPR, n.d.). NPR reported that "the United States defended Saddam Hussein's use of chemical weapons even as late as 1988" (NPR, n.d.). Nasr traces Iran's current strategic posture directly to this experience: the war forged "a geopolitical outlook driven by pervasive fear of America and its plans for the Middle East" (Nasr, 2025). The Islamic Republic

had watched Washington arm the man gassing its soldiers and say nothing, even after a ceasefire was agreed on August 20, 1988.

After the Iran-Iraq war ended, U.S.-backed Saddam Hussein (not Iran) turned his attention to invading another U.S. ally, Kuwait. The U.S. intervened to attack Iraq in the 1991 Gulf War, which only brought a new and more ominous reality to the region. After the chaos of the 1991 Gulf War and the expulsion of Iraq from Kuwait, the United States did not withdraw. Instead, America, using the pretext of protecting Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, established a wide presence across the Persian Gulf, with new bases in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, and Kuwait, thereby strengthening its position in the region. Iran sensed that the advances of bases after the Gulf War did not signal American strength, but rather the beginning of a strategic encirclement that in the long term would affect them. For a state that had already been sanctioned and had its soldiers gassed with the help of the United States, the possibility was not far-fetched and was an existential threat taking physical form.

Axis of Evil and 9/11

Then came September 11, 2001, and with it what might have been an opening of peace and a clash that put it in the past (because Iran had nothing to do with the attacks, and almost all of the hijackers came from a U.S. ally, Saudi Arabia). An event not widely taken into account by American political discussion, after the attacks, Iran cooperated with the United States in their initial campaign to demolish the Taliban in Afghanistan. Iranian officials shared intelligence, facilitated access, and helped stabilize the post-Taliban political arrangement at the 2001 Bonn Conference. Iranian and American diplomats engaged in direct back-channel talks for the first time in over two decades. During this time, there was briefly something resembling the beginning of a functioning relationship. Despite the growing possibilities of future collaboration,

on January 29, 2002, President George W. Bush erased the possibility with a single sentence. In his State of the Union address, Bush stated Iran was part of an “Axis of Evil” alongside Iraq and North Korea, despite having just recently been cooperating with and knowing Iran lacked the capacity to harm the U.S. (History, n.d.). The Iranian government was stunned; President Khatami, who had extended his hand toward the United States, was politically disgraced overnight.

As Trita Parsi documents, even after the “Axis of Evil” framing, Iran sent a back-channel communication to Washington through the Swiss embassy, a grand offer that included transparency on its nuclear program, an end to support for Palestinian armed groups, and recognition of Israel’s right to exist, in exchange for normalized relations and security guarantees. The Bush administration, under pressure from Israeli officials and neoconservative advisors who argued the U.S. should never legitimize the Islamic Republic, rejected the offer without substantive response. Parsi frames this as a decisive missed opportunity — one shaped not by any failure of Iranian willingness to negotiate, but by the institutional influence of those in Washington who viewed regime change, not diplomacy, as the only acceptable outcome (Parsi, 2008). U.S. posture toward Iran (and vice versa) has remained much the same ever since, until President Trump launched violent kinetic military attacks against the Islamic Republic, which changed the status quo.

Controlling the West

Benjamin Netanyahu, on March 3, 2015, stood at the podium of the United States Congress and delivered a 43-minute address whose purpose was to kill a diplomatic agreement that the American president was actively negotiating for (Wikipedia, n.d.). What was remarkable about this is that this foreign leader, invited by Republican House Speaker John Boehner,

addressed the U.S. national representative body against the wishes of President Obama's administration. Sixty Democratic members of Congress boycotted in protest. Despite that, Netanyahu received 26 standing ovations from those who remained. "This is a bad deal," he said flatly. "It doesn't block Iran's path to the bomb. It paves it," (BBC News, n.d.). Netanyahu's direct address to the U.S. Congress in 2015 was not an attempt at diplomacy; it was a foreign head of government attempting to use the American Congress to override American foreign policy, and his attempt nearly worked. Netanyahu's personal strategic goals and his ability to influence American lawmakers demonstrate the individual's ability to dictate the course of international security.

To understand how this was possible, one must understand the lobbying sector that made it normal. John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, in their crucial 2007 writing *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*, identified the mechanism: "a loose coalition of individuals and organizations has consistently pushed American policy in a pro-Israel direction — not through conspiracy, but through political activity" (Mearsheimer & Walt, 2007). From a realist perspective, this is precisely the problem: domestic pressure from a foreign-focused lobby has steered the United States away from normal calculations of its own national interest and toward policies that serve foreign strategic aims instead — specifically, Israeli aims. At the center of the coalition sits the American Israel Public Affairs Committee — AIPAC. AIPAC maintains over 50 full-time lobbyists on Capitol Hill and spends nearly \$1 million per quarter on lobbying alone (Tehran Times, 2026). This is not normal. ActBlue, the largest and highest-grossing political action committee and conduit in the United States, only has one registered lobbyist on Capitol Hill to represent it. A Columbia University study found that bipartisan support for AIPAC ensured that "numerous sanctions against Iran passed with near universal support in both

chambers of Congress” over the preceding two decades (Columbia International Affairs Online, n.d.). When AIPAC wanted sanctions tightened, Congress tightened them. When AIPAC wanted diplomatic openings narrowed, Congress narrowed them. The pattern is obvious and consistent enough to understand that the actions of the US government often reflect Israeli interest, not because of a similar ideology, but rather a forced agenda. Decision-making theory helps explain how pressures and incentives created by a powerful interest group like AIPAC can pull U.S. foreign policy away from what American interests recommend.

Trita Parsi, who would become one of the most knowledgeable voices on U.S.-Iran relations, had spent years documenting the specific means by which lobbying translated into actual diplomatic sabotage. In his 2008 work *Treacherous Alliance*, based on over 130 interviews with Israeli, Iranian, and American officials, Parsi demonstrated that the Iran-Israel rivalry was not an ideologically rooted conflict but one that Israel had a structural interest in keeping unresolved despite being “a resolvable strategic conflict” (Parsi, 2017). In Israel’s strategy, a normalized U.S.-Iran relationship would eliminate Iran’s outsider status and redistribute regional influence in ways that threatened Israeli primacy. The goal for Israel was not to defeat Iran but to allow them to be strong enough to survive and seem as a possible threat, no matter how far from the truth it was. Their goal was to ensure that the United States and Iran never stopped being enemies, keeping them locked in permanent hostilities. Even if this strategy was in Israel’s interest, it is hard to see how it was in the U.S. interests.

Sabotaging JCPOA

Israel’s strategy was evident when the United States and Iran reached the peak during the JCPOA negotiations. Finalized on July 14, 2015, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) set caps on Iranian uranium enrichment, reduced its centrifuge count by two-thirds, and

limited its enriched uranium stockpile in exchange for phased sanctions relief (Wikipedia, n.d.). The deal worked for stopping Iran from getting nuclear capabilities, and the U.S. intelligence community assessed that it effectively stopped Iranian nuclear weapons development for at least a decade. In *Losing an Enemy*, Parsi, who had access to decision-makers on both sides, documented in detail how Israeli officials and AIPAC allies on Capitol Hill mounted a well-funded effort to end the agreement even as it was being finalized (Parsi, 2017). Netanyahu's March 2015 congressional speech was the most visible act in that campaign, but it was one maneuver within a much broader operation: coordinated messaging, backroom congressional pressure, and a media propaganda strategy designed to make the deal appear dangerous to average Americans. Despite it all, the deal went through.

Two years into the first Trump presidency, on May 8, 2018, President Donald Trump withdrew the United States from the JCPOA, calling it "The Iran deal is defective at its core," the same language Netanyahu and his allies had been using since 2015 (Al Jazeera, 2026a). The consequences were immediate and, by most assessments, counterproductive to the stated goal of preventing Iranian nuclear development. Removing the deal freed Iran from the deal's restrictions, systematically dismantling every limitation they had agreed to. Enrichment levels climbed from the "permitted" 3.67% to 60%, centrifuge counts multiplied, and IAEA inspectors were expelled (Wikipedia, n.d.). The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, concluding that Israel now "sort of misses" the JCPOA that they helped destroy (Zilber, N., n.d.). It was a frank admission that their lobby's victory had instead produced a strategic catastrophe, not for Israel alone, but for the United States, which in the end bore the bigger burden. Regardless, the saga showed the Israel lobby's power over U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East.

Escalation Toward War

Mearsheimer put it bluntly in April 2026: “As long as Israel opposes a deal, especially one permitting any uranium enrichment, no American president can deliver a meaningful agreement with Iran” (Tehran Times, 2026). The collapse of JCPOA was not because of a direct disagreement between the U.S. and Iran or failure of performance, but rather it derived from the lobbying efforts conducted by agents of a foreign government, Israel. Netanyahu had been lobbying, using fear of Iranian nuclear capabilities, for years for the U.S. to attack Iran. Those many years of lobbying led to an unprecedented event at 1:00 a.m. local time on January 3, 2020, when a U.S. MQ-9 Reaper drone fired missiles at a Hyundai minivan leaving Baghdad International Airport, killing General Qasem Soleimani, the commander of Iran’s Quds Force and one of the most powerful figures in the Islamic Republic. The Guardian reported that Trump had authorized the strike, which Iran’s Supreme Leader called an act of war, demanding “severe revenge” (Borger, J., & Chulov, M., 2020). What followed, however, was not a forceful Iranian retaliation. Michael Eisenstadt of the Washington Institute documented that Iran calibrated its response precisely — 16 ballistic missiles fired at U.S. bases in Iraq, timed and targeted to avoid American casualties, with advance notice quietly sent through back-channels (Eisenstadt, 2020). It was a restrained response that showed the Islamic Republic’s Realist motive, satisfying the Iranian need to save face without losing everything by being lured into a war that Iran neither wanted nor needed.

Israeli Strikes Iran

The restraint of Iran brought five years of silence but not enduring peace. On June 13, 2025, Israel, acting in its government’s interest to dominate the region, launched a massive wave of airstrikes targeting both Iranian nuclear infrastructure and military installations. Israeli

officials described the strikes as a “unilateral, independent act of self-defense.” These claims were met with widespread international condemnation, as organizations such as the International Commission of Jurists stated the action violated the UN Charter and international law. Despite this, nine days later, the United States joined the attack, striking Iran’s nuclear facilities at Natanz, Fordow, and Isfahan on June 22, 2025. A twelve-day ceasefire, brokered through Omani intermediaries, was a fragile but functional agreement that went into effect on June 24. Nuclear negotiations shortly followed, and by early 2026, Iran had agreed, in principle, to reduce its enriched uranium stockpiles to “the lowest level possible” (Al Jazeera, 2026a).

Two Operations

Then, on February 28, 2026, Israel launched an unprovoked wave of strikes on Iran, including targets in the capital Tehran itself; their actions triggered what would become a full-scale war that pulled in the U.S. (War Intel Hub, 2026). The strikes successfully murdered Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and family members, along with numerous high-level military and intelligence officials. In an era of precision data, there were U.S. strikes on a girls’ elementary school in Minab, killing over 156 civilians, including 120 children. Mearsheimer wrote in March 2026, which captured the dominant global interpretation of these events: “It is now widely believed in the US — and all around the planet — that the US was dragged into the Iran war by Israeli PM Netanyahu and the lobby” (Mearsheimer, 2026a).

The actions of the U.S. government reflect two separate international relations theories this paper uses: realism and decision-making theory. Using realism, specifically offensive realism, the U.S.’s behavior would predict they would welcome a negotiated settlement that would eliminate Iran’s nuclear ability. That is exactly what the 2026 negotiations were producing. Yet, the United States chose not to de-escalate and pursue diplomacy, but to attack.

Attacks by the U.S. escalated (and continue today to escalate) despite the past success of diplomacy and the Islamic Republic's stated willingness to negotiate. The rational choice existed but was ignored. Why? One must look away from the international system and look inside American foreign policymaking. This is where decision-making theory emerges, picking up where realism left off. As Allison and Zelikow argued, states do not always act as unitary rational actors; instead, the choices that emerge from government reflect the "pressures, incentives, and constraints of the domestic actors who shape them" (Allison & Zelikow, 1999). Those actors in early 2026 included a massive pro-Israel lobby that had spent decades ensuring that any normalization of U.S.–Iran relations was propagandized and treated as a threat. The Israel lobby did not want a diplomatic deal with Iran, particularly one that left the Islamic Republic intact and regionally influential; it wanted a war to tamp down Iran using U.S. military might.

Israel's own behavior during this recent period fits with Mearsheimer's offensive realist framework well. According to offensive realism, regional powers act not merely to defend themselves but to eliminate threats before they fully materialize; striking preemptively when an adversary shows any sign of accumulating enough power to become dangerous (Mearsheimer, 2026b). Under offensive realism's logic, the most dangerous Iran of all in the eyes of Israel is not the one actively building a bomb, but the one slowly rebuilding the capacity to resist other regional powers. The strikes on February 28 were rational for Israel. The problem, as Mearsheimer and Walt have argued for nearly two decades, is that American decision-makers treated Israel's rational interests as if they were America's own (Mearsheimer & Walt, 2007). Offensive realism illustrates a similar pattern in Iran since Soleimani's assassination in 2020. Iran has absorbed the blow, responded proportionally, signaling a willingness to return to

negotiation. It showed the rational behavior of a government that understands victory will not come from direct military confrontation against the combined force of the United States and Israel, but in the longer term, the cost is high enough to make the war politically unsustainable. Mearsheimer called Iran's strategy "simply to survive as long as it can while continuing to inflict pain," and if it could do that, Tehran wins (CGTN, 2026). The escalation of the conflict began with a drone strike on a Baghdad airport road in 2020, which, six years later, produced a war despite many alternative solutions being within reach.

Iran as a Rational Actor

The word "irrational" is often used by American politicians when describing Iran. It appears in think tank reports, congressional testimony, and presidential speeches as a self-evident descriptor of Iran's actions. It is a useful framing for those who want war to claim the enemy as crazy, because an irrational enemy cannot be negotiated with, cannot be deterred, and cannot be trusted with any agreement. If Iran is simply crazy, then diplomacy is a waste and military action is the only option. The problem is that thirty years of evidence do not support the idea. Vali Nasr in *Iran's Grand Strategy: A Political History* (2025) dismantles the irrational-actor framing methodically. Drawing on original interviews with Iranian decision-makers, declassified documents, and oral histories unavailable to most Western analysts, Nasr argues that Iranian strategy is best understood as a product of "a potent mix of encirclement fears and outsized ambition" (Nasr, 2025). What drives Iran is fear, historically grounded, of being overthrown by foreign intelligence agencies and foreign-backed neighbors while being enveloped by foreign military bases and sanctioned into dependence for decades. The Iranian strategy is rational and realist, one that Nasr argues, reflects "a deep sense of siege" combined with "a surprisingly effective capacity for power projection" (Nasr, 2025).

When discussing the danger of Iran, the single issue most frequently cited as evidence of Iranian recklessness that fits this framework precisely is the nuclear program. Iran does not need a nuclear weapon to destroy Israel; it has proxy forces, ballistic missiles, and the ability to close the Strait of Hormuz. The Russian Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, observing the 2026 war, put it bluntly: the Strait of Hormuz, through which roughly one-fifth of the world's oil supply flows, is Iran's "nuclear weapon" (Al Jazeera, 2026b). Iran already holds a lever capable of triggering a global economic catastrophe. For example, South Korea and Bangladesh, after the Strait of Hormuz was closed, faced immediate challenges in managing their crude oil and LNG imports, causing local inflation. Specifically, Bangladesh suffered secondary impacts due to a heavy reliance on Persian Gulf natural gas and imported agricultural fertilizers, crippling its agricultural sector's access to affordable fertilizers, reducing crop yields, and significantly spiking local food security risks (Cohen, P., 2026). The attacks of the United States and Israel not only affect the lives of the Iranian citizens but also the stability of the rest of the world. The nuclear program, then, is not Iran's most dangerous card; it is the card that ensures no one takes the others away. From an offensive realist standpoint, a nuclear weapon provides Iranian offensive capability and deterrence. A nuclear-armed Iran cannot easily be regime-changed, nor invaded. It cannot be struck without the threat of consequences that no person wants to witness. Iran watched as the United States invaded Iraq, which had no nuclear weapons, and deserted Libya, which had given up its nuclear program and soon collapsed. The lesson the Islamic Republic drew from those two cases was straightforward: states without nuclear deterrence are vulnerable; states with it are not. Realism theory shows how Iran's push for nuclear capability is not crazy at all, but a rational move in a world where the only safe states are the strong ones.

Despite Iran's restraint, the United States has persistently treated Iran as though rationality did not apply to them. Nasr, in his earlier work *The Dispensable Nation* (2013), identified the root of this problem: U.S. policy toward Iran has amounted to "a single-track policy" of economic sanctions with no serious attempt at negotiation (Nasr, 2013). Iran showed willingness to negotiate as it did in 2003 in the aftermath of 9/11, as it did during the JCPOA process, and as it did in the months before February 28, 2026. The opportunity for peace time and time again failed in the U.S. because of a U.S. foreign policy that, through decades of lobby influence, was captured by a foreign lobby that convinced decision makers that any normalization of relations with Iran is a betrayal of Israel.

Consequences

The saying "Strike while the iron is hot" is about seizing the moment, but by April 2026, America learned the hard way what happens when you strike incorrectly. The Israel/US - Iran conflict had killed more than 3,000 people, and Iran closed the Strait of Hormuz long enough to send shockwaves through global energy markets, supply chains, and food prices across major markets. Oil prices surged over 40% in less than two months (War Intel Hub, 2026).

Mearsheimer warned of this: "The reality is that we have no way to keep the Strait of Hormuz open" (Press TV, 2026a). He understood that, despite having the most powerful navy in the world, the United States' position in the region did not allow them to keep the strait open. Four months after the war first began, on June 19, 2026, President Donald Trump signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Iran, which may or may not be valid at the present time. Mearsheimer wrote: "There is no question that Iran won the war and forced the US to concede to almost every one of its demands". The deal reflected that Iran was winning, and hawkish American government officials were "outraged" and demanded the deal be reversed. The gap

between what the lobby wanted and what American national interest needs is the thesis of this paper, made visible in real time. Israel had spent thirty years pushing the United States toward this war, and having it end with the June MOU was an unsatisfactory conclusion for the Israel lobby. If recent times show anything, it is that Israel lobbyists will continue to fight tooth and nail to have peace reversed and war restarted.

The outcome of the war, according to Mersheimer, has been “a colossal mistake” that “will be recorded by a wide margin as the biggest U.S. foreign policy mistake, far surpassing the Iraq war” (Press TV, 2026b). That is a comparison not to brush over. The Iraq war cost over 4,400 American lives and trillions of U.S tax money, destabilizing an entire region and now widely regarded as one of the largest blunders in modern American history. If Mearsheimer is right, that means the United States is being led by Israel into its doom. Just as Mearsheimer, in June 2026, predicted, “Once again, we see manifest evidence that Israel, which was principally responsible for convincing Trump to launch this disastrous war and now wants to prevent a settlement, is an albatross around America’s neck” (Mearsheimer, 2026b).

Conclusion

Mearsheimer wrote in March 2026, which captured the dominant global interpretation of these events: “It is now widely believed in the US — and all around the planet — that the US was dragged into the Iran war by Israeli PM Netanyahu and the lobby” (Mearsheimer, 2026). The evidence in this paper shows that the 2026 U.S.–Iran war was not driven primarily by Iranian nuclear aggression or ideological fanaticism, but by Israeli strategic imperatives and the long-term institutional influence of the Israel lobby on American decision-making. At the systemic level, the United States broke international law and committed war crimes while sacrificing exports from the Strait of Hormuz to fight a war in the Middle East that served Israel’s regional interests more than America’s own. At the state level, Congress and the

executive branch repeatedly ignored peace and diplomacy, from the JCPOA to the 2026 Geneva talks, under pressure from Israel and lobbyists, who treated any negotiations with Tehran as unacceptable even when it enhanced U.S. security. At the individual level, Netanyahu relentlessly sought confrontation and regime change; Trump made choices that reflected personal incentives, ultimately launching and then ending a war, he could neither win nor justify in terms of American national interest.

After decades of Israeli strategic planning and purposeful influence over American politicians and policy led by AIPAC, Americans have been propagandized via lobbying and media to resist any long-term peace with Iran through negotiation or alliances. Change is likely to have to start from the citizens of this nation. The future of peace between the U.S. and Iran depends on the arrival of American political leaders who will ignore the Israel lobby's influence, view them as foreign interests, and, for the greater good of American national interest, choose peace over the wishes of AIPAC lobbyists. As long as Israel holds its grip on U.S. Congressional and executive decision-making, Iran will be framed as irrational. Realist theory says Iranian nuclear capacity represents, or should represent, their attempt at self-defense because of fear of American and Israeli aggression against Iran. No deals between the U.S. and Iran are happening because of Israeli-AIPAC lobbying against them, and as long as such deals are disrupted, the global petroleum market will remain Iran's lever through the Strait of Hormuz. The war between Iran and America has been costly and detrimental to the global economy, and an analogy by Meersheimer reflects a similarity between when America invaded Vietnam and now, saying "simply to survive as long as it can while continuing to inflict pain on the US, Israel, and their allies. If it can, then Tehran wins." (CGTN, 2026). Iran and America will be in constant war and

negotiations until lobbyists and the Israeli government either no longer exist or no longer have a large enough grip on the U.S. government system.

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