

United States and Iran: Truth Behind the Conflict Over the Years

Conor McCabe

Department of Political Science, Diablo Valley College

POLS 250: International Relations

Adjunct Professor - John Kropf

July 15, 2026

Abstract

The United States and Iran are in conflict for a variety of reasons, which can be explained by the international relations theories of realism and constructivism; the situation can be understood more comprehensively by considering how feminist theory relates to, and could be better applied alongside, the previous two theories. Realism accounts for the material drivers of the conflict — oil, nuclear power, and national security — beginning with the 1953 CIA- and MI6-backed coup against Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq and continuing through the Iran-Contra affair and present-day tensions over Iran's nuclear program. Constructivism explains how decades of hostile interaction, beginning with the reinstatement of the Shah and the 1979 hostage crisis, constructed the deep ideological distrust that still defines how each government views the other today. Feminist theory, applied alongside both frameworks, highlights how a narrow focus on military power and regime survival has repeatedly overshadowed the treatment of civilians and the domestic wellbeing of the Iranian people — and suggests that incorporating these concerns could open a path toward de-escalation that realism and constructivism alone cannot offer.

United States and Iran: Truth Behind the Conflict Over the Years

What is realism, and how do intellectuals who consider themselves realists think about international relations? Well, the Stanford dictionary would state that “[r]ealists consider the principal actors in the international arena to be states, which are concerned with their own security, act in pursuit of their own national interests, and struggle for power.” (Korab-Karpowicz, 2023)

It’s easy to see where the Iran-United States conflict started: August 19, 1953 when the CIA and British Secret Service plotted to dispose of Iran’s first democratically elected leader, whom they saw as a threat to their personal interests in the global Oil market. The United States and Britain had long controlled Iran’s Oil but after newly elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq enacted the oil nationalization law which ended decades of a western monopoly over the Iranian oil sector that the two western powers, The United States of America and Britain decided that “it was Mosaddeq’s incorruptibility and intense nationalism that led [them] to resent him” (Farzaneh 2022, p.603). Oil is what makes the world run, and it is a huge factor in many international policies. Farzaneh speaks more on this topic of oil's role in international relations when he quotes Abrahamian, who mentions that "US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles led a group of American oil executives... to push everyone, including President Dwight D. Eisenhower, to agree to his devious plans" (Abrahamian, 2021, as cited in Farzaneh, 2022, p. 603). The world values Oil above almost anything else, it why it is known as liquid gold. Nations use oil to run their militaries, with its use in machines or after it has been converted to gasoline. Not to mention the domestic uses of plastic, clothing, and all sorts of other manufacturing. This intense drive comes from realism. And this needs military and monetary power to drive the first negative interaction between the United States and Iran. This bad blood over oil reserves has

proven to have negative impacts all the way into today's future. For example, going from the first hostile interaction between the two countries and the most recent, President Donald J. Trump's illegal war with Iran, which caused the closing of the Strait of Hormuz, both interactions were about oil. This constant drive for putting your own nation's national interest above global peace is a huge part of why the United States and Iran have had tense relations for over half a century.

Another common reason why many historians believe the United States acted in 1953 against Iran was a fear of communism, which would act as the downfall of Western capitalism if it were to spread. This fear of its spread led to the Cold War between the United States and Russia. Both the United States and Russia made many moves internationally using other countries as proxy battlegrounds to fight this fight between capitalism and communism without starting a full-on nuclear war. Though this may have some validity because the world is never black or white. Farzaneh says that Abrahamian disagreed with other historians and goes back to this idea of oil, noting that Iranian "nationalization would have a domino effect spreading as far afield as Venezuela and Saudi Arabia" (as cited in Farzaneh, 2022, p. 603). Likely both hold some validity as the Cold War was a huge pressure on the United States' sense of security, which the theory of realism would argue the United States' international actions would be a cause of government concerns for national security based on fear of communism. Realism can also explain why the United States would act out of a struggle for power over the oil supplies in Iran. The latter, rather than the former, seems more compelling given current tensions with Iran over Oil and the transport of oil through the Strait of Hormuz. Whether you think the driving factor behind the United States' actions was fear of communism or an aspiration to control Iranian oil, the theory of realism is still the driving factor behind the start of the conflict between the United States and Iran.

The crash course video explains how the Reagan administration helped cause more issues during the Cold War with its Iran Contra affair where two agents of the Reagan administration secretly sold weapons to Iran who was considered an enemy, they did this to funnel a part of that money to fight communism in Nicaragua by supporting the contra's rebellion this was a huge scandal because the United States tensions were already high due to the Cold War and there were already poor relations with Iran the whole situation left the American people with contempt for both the Reagan administration as well as with Iran on behalf of Iran conflicts were high and the Iranian government felt hostile because they were made to look a fool globally after they were caught buying weapons from a state which they had publicly declared an enemy that country. (Crash Course 2021). This brief but very informational video helps us understand where realism comes into international relations; both Iran and the United States are acting out of fear. Both nations are worried about their own survival and national security. The two governments created a tense situation between themselves by trying to look after their own interests: The United States, acting out of concern for the Red Scare and stopping the spread of communism in South America, and Iran, under pressure from the Iran-Iraq war, feeling the need to buy weapons no matter where they came from. The unfortunate situation shows why acting solely in a self-interested way can negatively affect relations with foreign powers.

Overall, the United States has a few main concerns when it comes to Iran that focus on its own interests as a nation and the national security of America: “to halt and eventually reverse its nuclear program, to restrain its external behavior, and to promote internal political reform” (Dobbins, James, et al, 2011). They want to achieve these objectives within the realist theory. Realism promotes the nation's self-interest and continued control over global power. The United States and Russia have been the two largest stockpilers of nuclear warheads since the invention

of the nuclear bomb, and the United States is desperate to keep it that way. The fewer nations with access to nuclear warheads, the better. Fewer people with the ability to cause as much damage as was witnessed when the United States bombed Japan in World War II is better for the United States and the rest of the world. To achieve this and their fanatically motivated goals surrounding Iran's oil supplies, they forced a regime change. While the United States is necessarily the moral compass of the world as they have been in the past, most American citizens and government officials sleep better at night knowing that the likelihood of a nuclear attack on America is extremely low and remains a low probability, while fewer countries have the ability to arm nuclear weapons. This fear and need for security are understandable reasons why the United States would act against Iran or any other nation that tries to bolster a nuclear program.

Feminism Inside Realism

Feminism, intertwined with realism, could lead to better international policies that create a safer life for both Americans and Iranians. When reading documents that focus on feminism in international relations is clear to see “in the modern world, principles of gender equality, social justice, and peace were crucially intertwined” (Tickner & True, 2018, p. 222). The risk of external threats could be minimized by prioritizing the lives of civilians. Feminism believes that there should be more concern for the poor, for the domestically abused, and for ecological destruction, just to name a few; realism focuses on power and national security fears. If the two governments of the United States and Iran could set aside some fears involving differences of opinion on nuclear policies and on regime ideologies — which is difficult due to both practicing international policy with an emphasis on realism and protecting their own interests — they could end this long conflict, but without change to both nations' fears of weakening their own military power and national security, peace cannot happen.

After the United States removed Prime Minister Mosaddeq, “the US reinstalled and supported the Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi... the Shah and his secret police the SAVAK abused its people” (Madden, n.d.). This was an utter disregard for the people of Iran and a complete disregard to the idea of feminism in international relations which asks governments to broaden their topics of concern from majority issues about military power to look at domestic issues and how these issues can overcome borders. The United States did not wish for the poor treatment of Iran’s people this reinstatement of the shah was not perfect but rather was more manageable for the United States Government and “the shah was suspect of U.S. motives and resented U.S. criticism of his domestic policies. Nevertheless, prerevolutionary Iran was viewed by the United States as an “island of stability” in an often-turbulent Middle East” (Dobbins, James, et al. 2011, p.25). With that said the United States at this point was more focused on traditional realism in their international actions involving Iran as their drive to have an Iranian leader they believed they could work with on the issues of Oil and on nuclear weapons was more important to the United States Government than the wishes of the Iranian people. This caused the Iranian people to overthrow the Shah, after which they established the Islamic Republic. “The 1979 Iranian revolution transformed Iran from an important U.S. ally into a regional nemesis” (Dobbins, James, et al.2011). While the United States was simply acting in accordance to realism and trying to create a stable Middle East for their own interests, Iran’s new leaders from the revolution any a large number of Iranian civilians, now believed the United States as the force behind the shah’s long and repressive rule which is a huge contribution to the current conflict. Later, the Shah was allowed to enter America to treat his cancer. This caused great discontent with many people, including Iranian students and activists. Students invaded the American embassy in Tehran, protesting any possibility that America may reinstall the Shah as they did in

1953, decaling their beliefs that Shah Pahlavi be put on trial for his crimes. “In total, over fifty American diplomats and CIA agents were held for 444 days. In an attempt to retrieve the hostages, America promised that ‘it would never again interfere in the domestic affairs of Iran’” (Madden, n.d.). Today it is obvious that the United States has not kept that promise hopefully the United States will achieve their goals in a way that could promote better quality of life for both their own citizens and those who reside in Iran by embracing more feminist theory into their policies while working towards regime changes in Iran. Intertwining realism and feminism could be a great step forward for international relations, where governments take action to address domestic issues they face and the challenges they face from other countries, because this would improve their own national interest and security as a nation. It seems like governments often forget that internal issues can be just as concerning to a nation’s interests and safety as exterior threats. This focus on regime change for Iran focuses on putting in place an Iranian government that is cooperative with its neighbors and other international powers, as well as a more democratic government for Iran where its people get a say in how they are treated and how they live their lives. the spread of western democracy has long been a priority for the United States and would have a multitude of benefits if done correctly. This could only be done by focusing on issues that keep both American citizens safe from nuclear threats and Iranian people treated better domestically. The book *Coping with a Nuclearizing Iran* discusses the topic of the United States actions with Iran gearing up their nuclear program and shows why this ideal of mixing the two theories may never happen due to “U.S. support for regime change [growing so much that] in 2002 and again in 2003, Washington actually spurned offers from Tehran to cooperate on Afghanistan and Iraq and negotiate out other U.S./Iranian differences, including over its nuclear program” (Dobbins, James, et al. 2011, p.25). This comes down to the United States' distrust of

the current Iranian government, which can be derived from realism, the United States fear of any threats to national security, and the United States yearn for power. A more democratic Iran could be beneficial and would not be against a regime change of their theocratic authoritarian regime, as an American, we should be more concerned with solving other issues, especially any nuclear threat Iran could pose. While realism holds some truth that governments need to be worried about military power and national security, it seems the United States threw away an opportunity to negotiate. Issues about nuclear weapons and likely more issues could have been resolved, but were not all because the United States government does not like the Iranian regime. At the end of the day, Iran's government should not be a major concern for our government if that regime holds no immediate threat.

Constructivism's Impact

What is Constructivism? The encyclopedia Britannica defines it as such: "Constructivism in international relations posits that state behavior is shaped by social identities, values, and shared beliefs, rather than solely by material power." (The Information Architects of Encyclopedia Britannica, 2026). With that definition given it is clear to see that constructivism has had its own impact on the conflict between Iran and the United States.

According to *Coping with a Nuclearizing Iran*, "The Islamic Republic views the United States as its principal ideological and geopolitical enemy". Iran's elite think that the United States remains upset that Iran overthrew the shah in 1979 and would like to change the current Islamic theocracy system with a secular regime that would support the United States (Dobbins, James, et al. 2011, p.31). The fact that these two countries have such different ideological beliefs also causes a great amount of tension that feeds the current conflict between Iran and the United States. Iran has a strong stance when it comes to upholding their ideologies which "was mostly

based on that of Khomeini. In the 1980 speech ‘We Shall Confront the World with Our Ideology,’” (Madden, n.d.). There are differences of beliefs when it comes to cultural tradition, religion, political structure and gender roles; all of these add to how the two nations view the world differently and see each other in a hostile light. One place where the differences is major is “velayat-e faghih (rule of the supreme jurisprudent), the political-ideological foundation for the clerical regime. Secular, leftist, and nationalist groups are prohibited from participating in the political system.” (p.31). This idea is vastly different from the United States government's policy on religion, which, per the First Amendment, which gives freedom to religion for American citizens. The Iranian government is a theocracy, the exact opposite of the United States government, which believes or at least claims to hold a separation between church and state. Differences in religious beliefs are not an uncommon reason for tension between countries historically. The leaders of Iran’s government support the idea of resistance against the United States and the idea of “khod-kafa i (self-sufficiency).” From the United States and these aims drive a wedge between the United States and Iran deeper because of Iran’s goal of “khod-kafa i” which “has led to assertive foreign policies, such as active support for “resistance” groups (such as Hizballah)” (p.31). This support of a group such as Hizballah, which has been designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization by the United States and many other nations, is just one more reason for the conflict. The support of a terrorist organization and for their drive towards creating nuclear weapons which they have been sanctioned against causes the United States to distrust Iran. This lack of agreement on basic human rights, or the trustworthiness of Iran to have nuclear power is why the United States would like a regime to change in Iran. That is also why Iran distrust the United states, out of fear of more foreign interference from the United states in their political organization—it is a catch 22, the United States does not trust Iran with nukes and

would support regime change, and Iran does not trust the United States out of fear of a forced regime change—so while both governments continue to hold onto those ideological beliefs the tensions continue in a loop of distrust. Another reason for the discontent between the two states is Iran's current leadership specifically "Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei will have the final say in U.S.-Iranian relations" (p.34). Khamenei is unlikely to relinquish control of Iran and has been extremely unsupportive of the United States, particularly when President Obama was in office. Khamenei is "A conservative revolutionary tortured in the shah's jails" (p.34). Given that the United States was responsible for the reinstatement of the shah back in 1953 and then the shah's mistreatment of his people, specifically their current supreme leader, it is easy to see how Khamenei would hold a grudge against the Western power. Though the United States did not mean for the torture of any of the Iranian people when they forced a regime change, they are still responsible for the actions of the government they put in place. If he is in power in Iran due to his stance where he, "positioned himself not only as a common man fighting the corrupt elite [but also] as a force of resistance against "Western imperialism"—namely, the United States" (Dobbins, James, et al. 2011, p.35). Khamenei's experiences and ideological stance are a great representation of why there is so much conflict due to a variety of reasons, namely—realism, constructivism, and a lack of attention to feminism. The conflict over the many years, though it has taken on many different challenges and moments of tension, can be drawn back to the reinstatement of the shah and then the hostage situation in response, which broke the trust between the two nations and, without some major changes or concessions from both countries, is likely a rift that cannot be sewn back together.

Feminism inside Constructivism

Another reason why the United States and Iran cannot get along is due to differences in political ideologies, Iran is an authoritarian theocracy which does not align with America's core principle of democracy and being a government by the people for the people, not to mention the separation of church and state which the United States claims to believe in. When it comes to feminism in regard to international policy "[d]emocracy [means] equal political rights and participation for women" (Tickner & True, 2018, p. 223). The reason women are mentioned in particular is that they have historically been left out of having a political voice and still are denied today in Iran. One solution in Iran would be, "The Green Movement...represents a broad spectrum of reformist groups, in addition to important sectors of Iran's civil society, including human and women's rights organizations. Though led by Islamists, such as Mousavi, Khatami, and former Speaker of Parliament Mehdi Karroubi, the Green Movement also contains secular and nationalist elements. It is not strictly a political faction, but the Green Movement nevertheless represents an important current in Iranian politics" (Dobbins, James, et al. 2011 p.33). While the Green movement is not in power in Iran, they are a valuable part of the political system and could be seen from all three international theories as a step away from the United States and Iran's continued conflict. The Green Party from the stance of constructivism, would better align the two nations ideologically with a mix of some religious and some secular perspectives. The Green Party would also significantly improve civil rights in Iran and women's rights, aligning itself closely with feminist theory. The fact that the current Iranian government is so conservative is another reason why the United States and Iran have such tensions, being on different ends of the political spectrum relative to history, the United States has been a more progressive country than Iran. Though there may be hope in the idea that "The Green Movement

leadership might also see Iran's belligerent foreign policies, possibly even including support to armed "proxies," such as Hizballah and HAMAS, as endangering their own political and economic interests" (Dobbins, James, et al. 2011, p.33). If the green party were to withdraw Iranian support of these terrorist groups that would be a major step toward the two countries seeing eye to eye. Unfortunately, "international politics and gender relations alike are the stuff of the *longue durée*; change happens, albeit slower than we would like" (Tickner & True, 2018, p. 231). While politics move slowly, it is better to know that change can happen over time rather than to rush into any situation without understanding the gravity of the changes that could happen. One change is like a domino effect. Hopefully, those dominoes fall on the side of cooperation. The Green Party could be a positive change in Iran. The support of a terrorist organization is a strong contributor to the United States distrust of the Iranian regime; therefore, if Iran were to choose to elect the Green Party to power, the catch-22 mentioned earlier could be resolved. Iran would not have to worry that the United States wants a regime change, and the United States could trust Iran's leaders.

Conclusion

The conflict between the United States and Iran cannot be traced to a single cause or a single moment — it is the product of decades of decisions made under the logic of realism, reinforced by an ideological rift that constructivism helps explain, and made worse by a persistent failure to weigh feminist concerns for civilian wellbeing alongside national security. The 1953 coup set the tone for everything that followed: a United States government acting to secure its own interests in Iranian oil and regional stability, with little regard for how those actions would be remembered by the Iranian people. That resentment, carried forward through the Shah's repressive rule, the 1979 revolution, and the hostage crisis, hardened into the

ideological distrust that Khamenei and Iran's current leadership still hold today. The Iran-Contra affair only deepened the pattern, showing both governments willing to abandon their own stated principles the moment self-interest demanded it.

What this paper has tried to show is that realism and constructivism, on their own, explain why this conflict exists and why it has proven so difficult to resolve — but they do not, by themselves, point toward a way out. Feminist theory offers that missing piece. By asking governments to weigh the lives and rights of civilians alongside questions of military power and national security, feminism suggests that the United States and Iran do not need to resolve every point of ideological disagreement before they can reduce tension. Movements like Iran's Green Movement demonstrate that internal shifts toward broader civil and women's rights could realign Iran's political system in a way that serves the interests of realism, constructivism, and feminism all at once — without requiring either government to fully abandon the theories that have long guided its behavior. Until both nations are willing to set aside some of their fears surrounding military power and ideological differences, however, the cycle of distrust that began in 1953 is likely to continue.

References

- Abrahamian, E. (2021). *Oil crisis in Iran: From nationalism to coup d'état*. Cambridge University Press.
- CrashCourse. (2014, January 11). *The Reagan Revolution: Crash Course US History #43* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2h4DkpFP_aw
- Dobbins, J., Nader, A., Kaye, D. D., & Whereby, F. (2011). *Coping with a nuclearizing Iran. RAND Corporation.*
<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/dvc/detail.action?docID=826893>
- Farzaneh, M. M. (2021). [Review of *Oil crisis in Iran: From nationalism to coup d'état*, by E. Abrahamian]. *Middle East Journal*, 75(4), 602–604. [suspicious link removed]
- Korab-Karpowicz, W. J. (2023). Political realism in international relations. In E. N. Zalta & U. Nodelman (Eds.), *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy* (Winter 2023 ed.). Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University.
<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2023/entries/realism-intl-relations/>
- Madden, M. (2025). American influence on Iranian succession through arms during the Reagan administration. *University of Massachusetts Undergraduate History Journal*, 9(1).
<https://openpublishing.library.umass.edu/umuhj/article/id/3859/>
- The Information Architects of Encyclopaedia Britannica. (2026, June 23). *Constructivism*. In Encyclopaedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/constructivism-international-relations>