

Transatlantic Tensions

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Abstract

In this research paper, the conflict between Iran and the United States is discussed through the perspective of realism as an international relations approach. Realism states that international politics is anarchical and the main objectives of the state in its foreign policy include survival, security, and the acquisition of power. Through the use of such notions as anarchy, rational behavior of states, balance of power and security dilemma, this paper seeks to explain the causes of a decades-long tension between the two states. Motives for American policies such as sanctions, alliance formations and preventing Iran from getting nuclear weapons will be considered alongside Iran's policies aimed at gaining regional influence, building up its military capacity and developing nuclear deterrence. In addition, the historical background of the conflict such as the 1953 coup in Iran, 1979 revolution, JCPOA and current military escalations will be considered in order to prove how Iran and the United States perceive their own behavior as rational but the other country's behavior as dangerous.

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Thucydides, a famous Athenian war general once said that “The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must” (Thucydides, ca. 400 B.C.E./1972). Thucydides is saying that the world is in a zero-sum game, some countries gain power, and when some countries gain power that means that other countries must lose power. In this system power is finite and all the countries are fighting for a piece of the pie to gain more power than anyone else. Stronger countries will enforce their will through their military might, economic pressure, or political influence, while weaker ones will try to endure the aftermath of these actions. This struggle for power leads to mistrust between states, often making cooperation more difficult, increasing the possibility for conflict when interests collide.

This realist approach could explain the connection between the United States and Iran through analysis of how both nations react towards security issues that are being posed by both sides in the anarchical international community. It would be possible to explain this issue using realism as a theoretical framework since both countries have tried to protect their power, security and influence in reaction to one another. The US tries to maintain its superpower status in the world and tries to influence the Middle East and protect itself from any potential threats. An example would be that the US imposes sanctions on the Iranian oil industry which tries to weaken the Iranian economy and limit their influence over the Middle East. From the perspective of a realist these actions are not only about political disagreements but keeping the higher ground over a potential rival. At the same time Iran seeks to keep its sovereignty over its nation, while also trying to increase its influence over the region. This has been done by Iran’s attempts at acquiring a nuclear weapon and supporting allied groups in the Middle East. These actions can

be discerned as trying to strengthen their own security while also trying to fight back against the United States attempts at expanding power. When both nations try to pursue their interests a cycle of rivalry, mistrust, and military competition is created, with each side viewing the other's attempt to increase power as a potential threat. This relationship illustrates how realism is a useful framework for comprehension of the tensions between the United States and Iran.

Realism Theory

Realism theory provides a view to look at the current events that are unfolding between Iran and the United States right now because they are both acting in order to preserve their own self interests in this anarchic system. Anarchy in this context does not refer to a chaotic world, but that there is no central authority preserving each nation's interests and keeping order between the states of the world (Genest, 2004). Since there is no central authority keeping order they must protect themselves and to do this each nation pursues a journey to gain as much power as possible. They yearn for this power because each nation aspires to be able to carry out their goals and interests with minimal interference from other nations. The United States cannot rely on international organizations to carry out its goals. In a report by the United States Department of State it claims that the International Court of Justice “claims the authority to prosecute and even imprison American servicemen and officials operating on behalf of America’s national interest” (U.S. Department of State, 2026). This shows that international systems cannot reliably pursue the interests of the American government, so this means that the United States cannot delegate the task of pursuing their interests to other organizations, so they must take matters into their own hands. Iran also cannot fully trust international organizations either. When the United States violated the UN Security Council Charter for aggressing against Iran, the E3 nations shifted the blame onto Iran (The Financial Express, 2026). This shows that Iran distrusts the IAEA, an

international organization, because the E3 draft resolutions and negotiations with Iran from the European bloc in Iran's nuclear program.

States are considered to be rational actors, and they will do anything that is reasonable for them to achieve their interests. Genest cites Morgenthau to explain this phenomenon of rational actors trying to pursue their interests “[S]tates pursue prudent goals that are within their power (capability) to achieve. Likewise, a state's foreign policy is based on prudent calculations of national interest” (Genest, 2004). The United States is a rational actor because it is trying to pursue its interests of maintaining influence in the Middle East by supporting its allies such as Israel. The American Jewish Committee says, “The campaign, focused on Iran's nuclear facilities, military infrastructure, and leadership, followed a conclusion reached in Washington and Jerusalem that diplomacy had been exhausted and that a nuclear-armed Iran posed an unacceptable threat to the United States, Israel, America's Arab partners, and global security.” (American Jewish Committee, 2026). This demonstrates that the United States is helping out Israel to help maintain relations with them so that they can secure their interests in the Middle East of having influence there. Iran is also a rational actor because they secure their interests of nuclear deterrence by expanding their weapons arsenal to include nuclear weapons. Fars News says that “To achieve the peace and calm that Iran needs, it must absolutely reach nuclear deterrence to ensure that the rest of the issues can be resolved through negotiation,” (Blair, 2026). This would increase Iran’s power making them feel more secure because they know that they can deter other countries from bombing them by threatening them and if they are able to obtain nuclear weapons their interests of security are attained.

In a realist framework, states are constantly involved in some sort of competition for power and influence over other states. This competition often centers around 3 core areas:

military strength, regional influence, and having access to strategic resources. Military strength allows countries to feel more secure by being able to defend themselves from invasions or being able to deter potential threats, military strength is often the priority of most states. States also want to expand their influence because then they will be equipped to shape political outcomes in surrounding areas, and being allied with neighboring countries means you have one less enemy to worry about. Lastly, having control over strategic resources greatly increases a country's economic and political power. Together all three of these factors drive competition between states as they try to secure advantages over rival states.

U.S Perspective: Maintaining Regional Power

Realism theory is based on the fact that states are looking for power and security, and they are motivated to increase their global standing. One way that their power will increase is by the large amount of oil that is found by the Middle East. According to the Visual Capitalist, approximately 29% of the world's oil is produced by the Middle East, and its leading producers are Iran and Saudi Arabia (Neufeld, 2026). That is a substantial amount of the world's oil while being only a very small amount of the world. If the United States gains control of these resources, it will make sure that its own economy is stable because the United States will always be able to move goods from place to place unless trade routes are blocked. The middle east contains key trade routes making the shipping of products significantly cheaper and quicker. The goods are cheaper because they do not have to use the amount of fuel that is needed to go all the way around the cape of good hope. Being able to make your goods cheaper is also important because it makes your goods more likely to be bought and makes more profit increasing your economic power. Its location is also good for military strategy as it allows for quick deployment

across 3 major continents. For these reasons it would be vital for the United States to maintain influence in the middle east in order to keep their power and security.

In addition to the deployment of forces, another major component of the American strategy in the region is the alliance system. The United States enjoys good relations with countries like Israel and Saudi Arabia among others to help solidify its place in the Middle East. This gives the United States military, economic, and political gains in order to enhance its influence in the region without having to use force alone. According to the United States department of state Israel benefits the United States through joint military operations: “Further, through the annual Joint Counterterrorism Group and regular strategic dialogues, the United States and Israel work together to counter a range of regional threats” (U.S. Department of State, 2020) This helps the United States counter terrorist groups in the Middle East that have threatened United States national security, for instance Al Qaeda. These relationships are not like a friendship where it exists because of shared values but is more like a professional relationship to achieve one's goals, in this case for the United States it is to maintain the balance of power in the region. Through its strategic partnerships, the United States is able to prevent any rival state from becoming dominant in the region.

Finally, the main goal of United States foreign policy in the Middle East is to restrict Iran from growing in influence. This can be seen with the United States repeated use of economic sanctions on Iran in order to try to limit its expansion of power. As the government offices of Sweden explains “sanctions can be introduced in an attempt to change the policies of a state that threatens international peace and security” (Government Offices of Sweden). This reflects how the United States is trying to use economic sanctions to alter the behavior of Iran because they feel threatened by its current actions. Another way that the United States has tried to keep a

strong military presence in the Persian Gulf in order to try to deter potential aggression coming from Iran. It has also tried to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear arsenal, as it views Iran having nuclear weapons as a threat to global stability. These actions reflect the view that a stronger Iran could challenge United States hegemony and could topple the balance of power in the region. As a result, the United States wants to limit capabilities and influence in order to keep its place as the leading power in the Middle East.

Iran's Perspective: Survival and Security Seeking

From Iran's perspective in the Middle East, its actions are motivated by a history of insecurity and foreign intervention. One of the most noteworthy events was the 1953 CIA backed coup, which overthrew Iran's democratically elected leader and strengthened distrust towards the United States. This distrust was demonstrated in the 1979 Iranian hostage crisis. According to RealLifeLore there was widespread paranoia because of the two prior coup attempts which led to them thinking that there could be a third one from the American embassy leading them to take 52 American diplomats as hostage (RealLifeLore, 2025). This was just one of the many manifestations of the distrust that formed after the 1953 coup. Iran's feeling of vulnerability grew further during the Iran-Iraq war from 1980-1988. This prolonged conflict threatened Iran's stability and survival. Such experiences have made Iran see the international environment as dangerous and volatile as other powers might try to undermine its sovereignty. For this reason Iran tries to come prepared for the possibility of any foreign threats. Such a sense of insecurity explains the reasons for Iran's need to build its military and political strength so that it can survive in the anarchical international system.

In response to these threats, Iran has tried to extend its regional influence to feel more secure. This is seen through its support of militant groups in countries like Iraq, Lebanon, and

Yemen (Thomas, 2024). Through such partnerships Iran is positioning itself to extend itself outside of its borders and develop an alliance system to try to help in balancing out the influence of the United States and its allies in the Middle East. Rather than just seeing it as an act of aggression Iran views these actions as acts that will mitigate any potential threats from the United States. The more that Iran increases its regional presence the less likely it will be targeted by other threats.

Iran's nuclear program is another key issue that can be understood through the ideas of realism, as it reflects the concerns of national security and survival of a nation on both sides. Iran argues that developing nuclear capabilities would be a strong deterrent against potential attacks, making it a less vulnerable threat. As Kallenborn explains "[n]uclear weapons place a cap on how bad great power conflict can become and may deter the emergence and escalation of great power war" (Kallenborn, 2024). This article reinforces the idea that states see nuclear weapons as a potential way to get security and not a way to support an attack on other countries. It is supported by Genest's balance of power principle "[t]he balance of power principle contends that if two or more states, or coalitions of states, maintain an even distribution of power, neither side can be confident of victory should conflict arise. Under such conditions, we would presume that states are reluctant to initiate or pursue a military resolution to their differences with other states. In this way, balance and stability in the system are preserved." (Genest, 2004). This supports the idea of nuclear deterrence because if both sides had nuclear weapons neither side would be sure of victory and neither side would initiate conflict because of this making it so that Iran would be able to feel secure knowing that the United States would not attack it. The United States thinks the opposite would occur if Iran was able to obtain nuclear weapons. All-out war would break out between both states as it would actually enable Iran to challenge the status quo in the region.

This is why opposition to Iran gaining nuclear weapons continues by placing economic sanctions and diplomatic efforts to try to stop Iran's nuclear program. The explanation above says that nuclear capabilities are developed in order to provide security for states and to deter external threats. In other words, both sides are concerned about their own survival while perceiving the actions of the opposite side as threatening their interests.

The Security Dilemma: Why Conflict Continues

The concept of the security dilemma helps to explain why conflicts can keep on occurring when neither side has the intention of provoking war. In an anarchic international system, there is no central authority that carries out the duty of protecting each state, states are responsible for defending themselves. As a result, when one state actually takes action to try to ensure their security-like by building up its military, making new alliances with other countries, and developing new weapons, other states will see these actions as threatening to their own national security. This creates the dilemma because when one state tries to make sure that it feels will cause other states to feel the opposite and it just creates this endless cycle. "[A] state's attempts to increase its security can lead other states to feel less secure." (Herz, 1950). This quote highlights the central idea of the security dilemma: a country can believe it is acting in a defensive manner while threatening countries at the same time. Put simply, the problem is not that states are always intentionally aggressive, but their actions are just interpreted differently by rival countries. Because humans cannot read each other's minds, states cannot either, so they are not able to tell the intentions of other states. States naturally have this mindset of better to be safe than sorry, so they build up their own arms leading to this cycle. This cycle is an important part of realism as it clearly shows that fears and insecurities can create conflict between states even though both sides feel as if they are protecting themselves.

The security dilemma is illustrated by the dynamics existing between Iran and the United States. From the Iranian side, developing a military arsenal and increasing their influence in the region are seen as ways of ensuring their security from external threats, considering their previous experiences and threats with the United States. Their experience with foreign interference in their government and never-ending economic sanctions against Iran makes Iran believe that they can only depend on themselves to survive as a state. On the American side they view those actions that Iran does as acts of aggression and expansionism. This means that when Iran increases its military capacity and develops its nuclear capacities, it becomes a threat to the stability of the Middle East and American interests. You must also remember that the United States wants to protect its friends in the Middle East. Hence, they do this by increasing sanctions on Iran, increasing its military presence in the area, and working with its allies to try to counteract Iranian influence in the region. While all of this is meant to control Iran it also confirms Iran's belief about constantly being under threat from a stronger enemy, perpetuating the cycle once again.

In this result, a cycle of actions and reactions form between the United States and Iran, which makes it extremely difficult to solve tensions between the two nations. Iran reacts to the sanctions imposed on it by the United States, and military aggression by reinforcing its defense capacities, improving its military and remaining resistant to any outside influences. The United States sees the activities of Iran in the military and regional sphere as an excuse to impose more pressure on the country through more sanctions and other strategic actions. The example of Iran and the United States clearly demonstrates the Security Dilemma, as both parties perceive their actions as defensive, and try to secure their own safety from perceived threats, which might be potentially dangerous. It becomes clear that there is no way for any party to give up due to fear

of being looked at as weak or as vulnerable. We should keep in mind though that no country wants total war or military aggression. Unfortunately, the situation proves that attempts to increase security of any nation lead to escalation of tension and suspicion.

Major Historical Examples Through a Realist Lens

The 1953 coup against Iran became an important turning point in the relationship between the United States and Iran due to the fact that it was staged by the US and UK to remove Mohammad Mossadegh from his position of prime minister in Iran because of his decision to nationalize the country's oil industry. The reasons for this were related to the need to maintain power and control over the region in order to ensure access to oil supplies in the course of the Cold War. The geographical position of Iran became very important at this time, and Washington worried about its destabilization and possible penetration of the Soviet Union into the country. This event led to widespread dissatisfaction over the Iranian government by the Iranian people because of the things the Shah did to try to maintain his power and keep his seat as the leader of Iran. "The [S]hah immediately set about consolidating a vast apparatus of repression, torture, and control, centered in the SAVAK secret police and bolstered by uncritical and unlimited US military and police assistance" (Bennis, 2009). The horrific things done by the Shah started the distrust between the Iranian people and the United States government. The Iranian people felt like they could not be secure within this government which led to the 1979 Iranian revolution.

The Iranian Revolution drastically altered the political structure of Iran through the fall of the pro-U.S. Shah government and the installation of the revolutionary government headed by Ruhollah Khomeini. This movement led by him brought many Iranians a feeling of hope and the sense that they were actually choosing a government that supports their interests: "and ultimately

in the guidance of Ruhollah Khomeini, an accomplished religious scholar critical of the Shah who had articulated, as an alternative, a populist form of government overseen by a spiritual authority” (Afary, 2026). This shift in leadership and ideology of the government marked a turning point in Iran's political direction, making it obvious that they want to be free from foreign influence. Such drastic changes due to the struggle of Iran towards sovereignty and the removal of any outside influence over its internal affairs. It is also noteworthy that the country changed its affiliation from a pro-American state to an anti-American state, thus decreasing the influence of the United States in the area. For this reason of decrease in influence the United States has placed economic sanctions on Iran hoping to gain their power back in the Middle East.

In 2015, Iran negotiated the JCPOA, an example of cooperation between Iran and other major countries in the world. In the agreement, Iran promised to restrict its nuclear weapons development program in order to stabilize its economic stability and security within the country, and, on the other hand, the U.S. was trying to prevent Iran from having nuclear weapons because of the change in balance of power (Robinson 2023). This case proves that adversarial countries can still cooperate if that serves their interest through negotiations.

In particular, an airstrike launched in 2026 which killed Ali Khamenei has been recognized as one of the major instances of escalation in the U.S.-Iran tension throughout modern history since the assassination of Iran's leading political and religious figure was intended to undermine the stability of the country's governance and its capability to operate strategically. The mentioned action was carried out in the framework of a combined U.S.-Israeli military operation and is a vivid example of application of disproportionate power in order to destroy the source of threat and shift the power balance in the region. “ ‘Our objective is to defend the American people by eliminating imminent threats from the Iranian regime, a vicious

group of very hard, terrible people,' Trump said in an eight-minute video posted on Truth Social” (Estrin, Myre, Arraf, & Duster, 2026). According to Trump the goal of this strike was to keep the citizens of the United States of America safe from the foreign threat of Iran. Hence, this strike was motivated to protect the interests of the United States government. As Ali Khamenei had played a critical role in shaping Iran's foreign policy and military strategy, his elimination was meant to destabilize the situation in the whole Middle East. However, for Iran such action has been seen as an infringement on the country's sovereignty and resulted in its response to the U.S. military presence.

Conclusion

The US-Iran relation is a perfect example of the key concepts of realism. Throughout history, the two nations have continuously taken actions that ensured their security and helped them maintain their power and national interests in a system which has no ultimate governing body that guarantees the safety of all states. From the US point of view, establishing alliances, applying economic sanctions, and ensuring that Iran does not produce its nuclear bomb are critical steps to ensure the stability of the region and protect itself globally. On the other hand, Iran believes that expansion of influence in the region, development of its military capability, and seeking nuclear weapons are necessary steps for survival.

The security dilemma is responsible for the constant tension between the two countries since each action taken by one of them to enhance its security is always interpreted as aggression. The list of historical events includes the 1953 coup, the Iranian revolution, JCPOA, and recent military engagements.

Even though there have been phases where cooperation has taken place, such phases have mostly been short-lived and based on self-interest rather than trust. According to the theory of

realism, both states will always prioritize their security and power over cooperation. In this regard, it is evident that realism can satisfactorily explain the prolonged conflict between Iran and the U.S., as well as the difficulty of achieving reconciliation without altering the balance of power or security perceptions.

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