



## FROM THE ISLAMIC REVOLUTION TO THE NUCLEAR CRISIS: IRAN AND THE NEW GLOBAL CHALLENGES

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**Abstract:** Following the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Iran was transformed into a Shi'a Islamic state. Since then, it has sought to expand its role in the Middle East while weakening the influence of the United States and Western powers. To achieve these goals, Iran has adopted various strategies. After the Iran-Iraq War, Tehran resumed its nuclear program, which has repeatedly brought it into conflict with the international community. As a result, Iran has faced periodic sanctions, which have negatively impacted its political and economic development. Parallel to sanctions, there have been recurring negotiations between Iran and Western powers aimed at limiting the nuclear program—efforts that have yielded mixed results. Currently, Iran continues to construct new nuclear facilities. The latest flashpoint is the 12-day war between Iran and Israel, in which the United States participated in airstrikes targeting Iran's nuclear infrastructure.

**Keywords:** Middle East, Islamic Revolution, Iran, United States, nuclear program, Israel, 12-day war

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The Islamic Revolution of 1979, which overthrew the Pahlavi dynasty and established a theocratic republic, was a transformative event not only for Iran but for the entire Middle East. The revolution was not spontaneous; a series of economic, social, and political factors preceded it. In 1953, Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh was ousted through a joint operation by British and American intelligence agencies (Operation Ajax), allowing Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi to consolidate power with direct U.S. support. While the Shah's so-called "White Revolution" aimed to industrialize and modernize the country, it ultimately imposed a heavy burden on the population. To suppress opposition and consolidate authority, the Shah established the SAVAK, a secret police force notorious for its brutality. His reforms also touched on religious and gender issues, including granting women the right to vote and banning the hijab, which alienated Iran's religious clergy.

By 1978, widespread discontent had led to mass protests, which were supported by clerical circles. The opposition was met with violent crackdowns, arrests, and even executions. By the end of that year, the situation had deteriorated to the point that the Shah fled the country.

On February 1, 1979, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini returned to Iran from exile in France and was welcomed by millions. In a seminal speech at the Behesht-e Zahra cemetery, Khomeini declared that Iran would no longer be a monarchy or a democratic republic, but an Islamic state governed by Sharia law. He accused the United States of plundering Iran's resources and rejected foreign domination.<sup>1</sup>

This historic speech further strengthened anti-American and anti-Western sentiments. In November 1979, radical students seized the U.S. Embassy in Tehran and took 52 diplomats hostage. In response, the United States severed diplomatic ties with Iran in 1980 and imposed a series of military and economic sanctions. These measures included freezing Iranian assets under U.S. jurisdiction,<sup>2</sup> banning imports and exports,<sup>3</sup> and ending diplomatic relations. In the following years, Washington tightened sanctions to exert political pressure. The European Union and the United Nations joined this policy of isolation, banning the purchase of Iranian oil and enacting embargoes on nuclear, missile, and arms-related trade.

While isolation severely damaged Iran's economy and industry, it also allowed the country to free itself from Western influence. The new regime adopted an anti-American foreign policy, laying the groundwork for enduring antagonism between Iran and the U.S. After the revolution, Iran successfully nationalized its economy and resources. Its ambition to become a regional hegemon and exporter of the Islamic Revolution, by promoting Shi'a influence in Sunni-majority countries and reducing the impact of the U.S. and Israel, became increasingly tangible. To counter Western and Israeli influence, Iran established an "Axis of Resistance" comprising allies like Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. Tehran continues to rely on proxy political and military

<sup>1</sup>Khomeini, R. (1979). "Historic Speech at Behesht-e Zahra Cemetery," February 1 1979r.<https://web.archive.org/web/20080506195159/http://taghrib.ir/russian/?pgid=63&scid=108&dcid=39564>

<sup>2</sup>*Executive Order 12170 – Blocking Iranian Government property. 14.12.1979*

<sup>3</sup>*Executive Order 12205 Prohibiting certain transactions with Iran. 07.07.1980* *vs* *Executive Order 1221 Further prohibitions on transactions with Iran. 17.04.1980*

organizations, including Hezbollah, the Houthis (Ansar Allah), and pro-Iranian militias in Iraq. Through this proxy network, Iran created a powerful geopolitical tool that expanded its regional influence and undermined the interests of the U.S. and its allies without requiring direct intervention.

Of course, the U.S. and the West were unwilling to accept Iran's defection from their sphere of influence. They sought justification for regime change, which was seemingly provided by Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein. With Egypt sidelined after its 1978–79 peace agreement with Israel and the domestic turmoil in post-revolutionary Iran, Saddam saw a chance to assert Iraqi leadership in the region. Believing Iran was too weakened to resist, he launched a surprise attack in 1980, citing dissatisfaction with the 1975 Algiers Agreement on border demarcation.<sup>4</sup>

In reality, the Iran-Iraq War had deep-rooted causes beyond disputed borders, including religious, economic, and political causes. While Saddam and other Arab states anticipated a swift victory, the war dragged on for eight years with catastrophic losses on both sides. The conflict killed millions, destroyed vital infrastructure and oil facilities, and ended in a stalemate. Despite its devastation, the war helped solidify the Islamic Republic, strengthened Khomeini's authority, and brought Iran closer to the Soviet Union. After the war, calls intensified for the resumption of Iran's nuclear program. Following the revolution, the program had halted due to internal unrest and the withdrawal of Western partners. Initially, many Iranian leaders opposed nuclear development on religious grounds. However, the war exposed the existential need for both conventional and nuclear deterrents.

In the 1990s, Iran leveraged assistance from the Soviet Union and China to revive its nuclear capabilities. With their support, it constructed and equipped several nuclear facilities. Iran's nuclear program—ironically initiated with U.S. support before the revolution—has since become one of the most contentious issues in Iran-West relations. Key facilities include:

1. Natanz Fuel Enrichment Plant (FEP)
2. Fordow Fuel Enrichment Plant (FFEP)
3. Arak Heavy Water Reactor (IR-40)
4. Isfahan Nuclear Technology Center (INTC)
5. Bushehr Nuclear Power Plant
6. Kashan/Parchin Military Site<sup>5</sup>

In 2002, revelations that Iran had been enriching uranium at Natanz beyond the levels needed for peaceful purposes caused a new crisis.<sup>6</sup> In response, the EU3 (France, the UK, and Germany) initiated diplomatic talks.<sup>7</sup> A supplementary agreement required Iran to limit enrichment, use

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<sup>4</sup>Treaty Concerning the State Frontier and Neighbourly Relations Between Iran and Iraq (Algiers agreement 1975)

<sup>5</sup><https://world-nuclear.org/information-library/appendices/nuclear-proliferation-case-studies>

<sup>6</sup><https://isis-online.org/isis-reports/iran-building-nuclear-fuel-cycle-facilities-international-transparency-need>

<sup>7</sup>EU3 negotiations with the Islamic Republic of Iran: Not out of the woods yet and time is short, very short Paul Ingram  
BASIC Notes: Occasional papers on international security policy, 1 July 2005

nuclear technology only for peaceful purposes, and allow International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors full access. In exchange, economic and trade sanctions would be lifted. Between 2003 and 2005, Iran temporarily suspended enrichment, but resumed it in 2006, prompting new UN sanctions. Despite sanctions, Iran emerged as a significant regional actor. Recognizing the limits of isolation, the U.S. under President Barack Obama signed the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran and the P5+1 (U.S., Russia, China, UK, France, Germany). The deal lifted key sanctions in exchange for Iran limiting uranium enrichment to 3.67%.<sup>8</sup>

JCPOA was seen as an attempt to re-engage Iran diplomatically. However, in 2018, President Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew from the deal, calling it "a horrible, one-sided deal, failed to achieve the fundamental objective of blocking all paths to an Iranian nuclear bomb, and it threw a lifeline of cash to a murderous dictatorship that has continued to spread bloodshed, violence, and chaos".<sup>9</sup> that failed to block Iran's path to a nuclear bomb. Trump reimposed sweeping sanctions on Iranian oil, minerals, and banking sectors. Iran, in turn, resumed uranium enrichment. By 2023, Iran was found to have enriched uranium up to 84% purity at the Fordow site—approaching the 90% required for weapons-grade material.

The core issue today remains the revival of the JCPOA or a new agreement that can guarantee peace and stability in the region. The U.S. has demanded that Iran cease all uranium enrichment, even for peaceful purposes—an unacceptable condition for Tehran. On May 23, 2025, Iranian negotiator EsmailBakaei told CNN that Iran's nuclear program is strictly peaceful and that the country has no intention of relinquishing its right to enrichment. He warned that American and Israeli threats of military intervention could derail negotiations.<sup>10</sup>

In this context, recent developments have further destabilized the region. The fall of the Assad regime in Syria and the rise of pro-Turkish forces weakened Iran's proxies like Hezbollah and Hamas. Nonetheless, Iran remains a significant force and an existential threat to U.S. ally Israel. Just two days before the fifth round of U.S.-Iran nuclear talks on June 13, 2025, Israel launched a surprise military campaign dubbed "Operation Raising Lion." Israeli forces bombed Iran's nuclear sites, assassinated military commanders, and killed nuclear scientists.<sup>11</sup> Although officially targeted at military infrastructure, civilian areas in Tehran and other cities were also hit, causing civilian casualties.

In response, Iran launched counterattacks, sparking a 12-day war. Within days, the U.S. deployed bombers to support Israel and attacked Iranian facilities. President Donald Trump announced that Iran's key nuclear sites had been destroyed.<sup>12</sup> However, sources like The

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<sup>8</sup> *Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, Vienna, 19.07.2015*

<sup>9</sup> *Statement from the President on the Reimposition of United States Sanctions with Respect to Iran. Issued on: August 6, 2018*<https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/statement-president-reimposition-united-states-sanctions-respect-iran/#:~:text=The%20United%20States%20is%20fully,with%20Iran%20risk%20severe%20consequences>

<sup>10</sup> <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/05/26/world/video/iran-us-nuclear-talks-pleitgen-interview-vrtc/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2604345/middle-east>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.politico.com/news/2025/06/21/us-bombed-3-iranian-nuclear-sites-trump-says-00416403>

Washington Post later reported that while Iran's nuclear infrastructure suffered heavy damage, it was not entirely eliminated.<sup>13</sup> In retaliation, Iran bombed a U.S. airbase in Qatar but had warned the U.S. State Department in advance, allowing American personnel to evacuate.

These exchanges appeared more symbolic than strategic, intended by the U.S. to fulfill obligations under its alliance with Israel, and by Iran to save face. Trump's public thanks to Tehran for the advance warning lent credence to this interpretation.<sup>14</sup> Despite limited military engagement, the 12-day war heightened tensions across the Middle East. One significant consequence was Iran's decision to withdraw from the IAEA, making its nuclear program even less transparent and limiting international oversight.

Ultimately, it is evident that the global redistribution of power has impacted the already fragile Middle East. Iran and the U.S. (via Israel) are engaged in a struggle for influence. Russia maintains deep-rooted ties to the region, and China has major investments. The UK, through Turkey, also seeks to preserve its historical interests. Iran's "Axis of Resistance," built in the 1980s, is slowly unraveling as allies like Syria and Lebanon shift allegiances. Still, the 12-day war revealed that Iran remains a formidable player.

Iran's Supreme Leader insists that no sanctions will deter the country from pursuing its nuclear ambitions. As a member of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), Iran claims the right to peaceful nuclear development. Years of isolation have made the country resilient to pressure. Moreover, Iran benefits from the inability of Arab states to form a unified military front against it. Despite U.S. support, Arab monarchies would suffer in any war, given their dependence on oil exports, vulnerable to disruption by Iranian proxies like the Houthis.

Without direct involvement from Persian Gulf states, even U.S. military engagement may not guarantee victory. Iran's vast territory, human resources, and military capabilities present formidable obstacles. Meanwhile, Turkey, backed by the UK, seeks regional leadership and is unlikely to defer to Israel, even if Iran is weakened. History appears to be repeating itself: global powers are once again competing for control over the Middle East's vast natural resources.

Thus, the likelihood of resolving this crisis diplomatically remains slim. Further escalation seems inevitable.

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