

THE PROLIFERATION CRISIS IN THE MIDDLE EAST – A VIEW FROM IRAN

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Abstract: Although significantly slowed by the Israel-US military attacks, the Iranian nuclear program is not completely eliminated. The paper examines the nature of the international crisis related to the Iranian nuclear energy development and the main variables that might further drive this development, including in the military domain by developing nuclear weapons. Following a constructivist approach to international relations, the authors identify four main ideational variables that determine the possible development of Iranian nuclear weapons: External actors' interest and policies in the Middle East till 1970s, including the introduction of nuclear energy in the Middle East; Regime type or the character of political system, including the decision-making on nuclear energy and weapons; Relation of the power-holders toward the Iranian past, and Nuclear energy policies of other actors in a region that are perceived as enemies of the Iranian regime, in particular the Israel policy of nuclear ambiguity. The authors conclude that, from Tehran's perspective, nuclear development is not solely a security strategy aimed at deterrence but also a powerful symbol of national pride, defiance against foreign intervention, and a testament to the country's resilience in the face of external pressure. They suggest that the efficient non-proliferation policy toward Iran would have to address all four variables, and that the instruments designed so far to address these issues lacked comprehensiveness that would include all four aspects of Iranian relation toward nuclear issues.

Keywords: *Non-proliferation; Proliferation Crisis; Iranian Nuclear Program; Nuclear Energy; Nuclear Weapons*

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Introduction

Amid ongoing negotiations between Iran and the United States over the future of Iran's nuclear program in 2025 – talks that began with the U.S. showing openness to limited enrichment as defined under the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), but later shifted toward a demand for complete zero enrichment – on 15 June 2025 Israel launched a surprise attack on Iran, targeting key military figures and nuclear scientists in what appeared to be a coordinated campaign of assassination and air strikes. Since some of the Iranian nuclear facilities like Fordow were deeply underground, and only the US had the capability to reach it, the US involved on 23 June 2025 conducting an air-strikes on Natanz and Fordow facilities by using bunker-busting bomb, known as the Massive Ordnance Penetrator, or GBU-57, dropped by a B-2 Spirit bomber. However, after the end of hostilities, three major concerns still remained: an estimated 400 kilograms of uranium enriched up to 60% which is allegedly stored at an undisclosed location; there has been no international inspection or verification to confirm the full extent of the damage to Iran's nuclear facilities and, the technical expertise within Iran is largely indigenous, and it is widely believed that Iran retains the capacity to rebuild its program – meaning the bombings may have only delayed progress, not eliminated it. In parallel, there were thoughts that regime change was a secondary goal of the Israel-US campaign, as evidenced by the support of Iranian opposition media abroad by networks with links to Israeli state narratives. But, this objective was not pursued at the moment. As an internal result, the foreign attack might have created a rally-around-the-flag effect, temporarily strengthening nationalistic sentiments and even increasing public support for acquiring nuclear weapons as a deterrent. Thus, questions, that this article also addresses, persist regarding what drives Iran's nuclear policy – whether its uranium enrichment is solely for civilian purposes or part of a broader strategy to develop nuclear weapons. If Iran is not actively pursuing nuclear arms, why would it continue to enrich uranium and is not accepting a “zero” option?

In order to answer these questions the article will first refer to the issue of how has Iran's nuclear program evolved from the era of the Shah to the Islamic Republic, and what significant changes have occurred within its political system? What role do key decision-makers, such as Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, play in shaping nuclear policy? Additionally, where does Iran stand on international agreements like, Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and regional initiatives such as the Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction-Free Zone (MEWMDFZ)? Finally, how do the nuclear programs of regional countries mutually influence one another to initiate or accelerate their own nuclear capabilities?

The paper is addressing these issues through a constructivist perspective thus examining how Iran's historical grievances, national identity, ideology and political discourse influence its nuclear decision-making, both before and after the Islamic Revolution. It also analyses the structure of the Islamic Republic's political system and the role of key stakeholders – including the Supreme Leader, as a key

player – in determining Iran’s nuclear trajectory. In this endeavor, we identify four main ideational variables that determine the possible development of Iranian nuclear weapons:

(1) External actors’ interest and policies in the Middle East till 1970s, including the introduction of nuclear energy in the Middle East;

(2) Regime type (and the new “friends-enemies” equation), character of political system, including the decision-making on nuclear energy and weapons;

(3) Relation of the power-holders toward the Iranian past (pursuing Persian glory or creating a national state that recognize borders in the region; revisionist or status quo character of the regime);

(4) Nuclear energy policies of other actors in a region that are perceived as enemies of the Iranian regime, in particular the Israel policy of nuclear ambiguity.

The authors suggest that the efficient non-proliferation policy toward Iran would have to address all four variables, and that the instruments designed to address this issues lack comprehensiveness that would include all four aspects of Iranian relation toward nuclear issues so far. Thus, the article will first examine all four variables in separate sections and drew a conclusion on the future of Iranian nuclear program.

Theoretical Framework

A comprehensive understanding of the motivations behind Iran’s nuclear strategy extends beyond the nuclear issue itself. Scholars have approached the issue of Iranian nuclear program from diverse theoretical frameworks, leading to contrasting interpretations of Iran’s nuclear ambitions and their broader implications.

One of the most influential voices in this debate is Kenneth Waltz, a prominent neorealist scholar and proponent of nuclear optimism, who links Iran’s nuclear program to external constraints, especially the anarchic nature of the global system. He asserts that states operate in a self-help environment where ensuring their survival is the top priority. From his perspective, Iran’s nuclear aspirations are a logical reaction to external security threats, particularly from regional rivals and powerful states such as the United States and Israel. He further argues that Iran’s acquisition of nuclear weapons could, in fact, contribute to regional stability rather than pose a security threat. He dismisses the prevailing Western fears surrounding a nuclear Iran, asserting that nuclear deterrence by nature discourages reckless military action and ultimately fosters stability.¹ However, this viewpoint is far from universally accepted. From Sagan’s nuclear pessimist perspective, the presence of nuclear weapons in Iran could increase the chances of miscalculation, misperception, and accidental escalation, thereby exacerbating regional tensions rather than mitigating them.²

Other scholarly works have attempted to analyze the motivations behind Iran’s nuclear program by considering both international pressures and domestic factors, aligning with the principles of neoclassical realism. One notable example

¹ Kenneth N. Waltz, “Why Iran Should Get the Bomb,” *Foreign Affairs* 91, no. 4 (2012): 2.

² Vipin Narang and Scott D. Sagan, eds., *The Fragile Balance of Terror: Deterrence in the New Nuclear Age*, Cornell University Press, New York, 2023, 25.

is Thomas Juneau who examines Iran's nuclear ambitions through systemic international pressures, leadership perceptions and state capacity.³ Likewise, Shahram Chubin adopts a multidimensional framework that merges realism, constructivism, and domestic political analysis, offering a holistic understanding of Iran's nuclear strategy.⁴ With a more explicitly pluralistic perspective, Tagma and Lenze argue that no single international relations theory can fully explain Iran's nuclear program. Instead, they advocate for a pluralistic approach that synthesizes multiple theoretical lenses.⁵

While some studies highlight international constraints, anarchy, and the self-help system as key determinants of state behavior – and others incorporate these elements, attempt to integrate various theories, or place greater or lesser emphasis on domestic and bureaucratic factors to explain the complexities of Iran's nuclear program – we will consider constructivist approach to best suit the explanatory endeavor of this article. The constructivist theory emphasizes the subjects and processes of international relations, takes into account interests and identities, ideas and perceptions as the drivers of states' policy choices and consider the interaction of actors concerned. One of the greatest proponents of this theory, Alexander Wendt consider anarchy to be social construct. This means that states shape the international system through shared ideas, identities, and interactions, rather than being inherently driven by self-help behaviors.⁶ Onuf challenges the conventional view of anarchy by asserting that even without a central authority, rules and norms create an underlying structure, making international relations more organized than entirely chaotic.⁷ As Kostić explains the power itself cannot tell us more on the nature of actor's policy choices, only its interests, identity and ideas on the structure of the world order and its role in it.⁸

In the holistic constructivist approach taken by Richard Price and Christian Reus-Smit foreign policy results from the continuous interaction between domestic and international factors.⁹ These interactions are constantly shaping and reshaping each other, meaning that the conception of "self" and "other" remains in a state of constant transformation. In this context, states perceive each other as either allies or rivals, shaping their assessment of threats and opportunities accordingly. Based on these evolving perceptions, their foreign policies may shift or remain unchanged.

Building on this argument, it may explain why some countries, shaped by different sociohistorical identities, opted not to advance their nuclear programs

³ Thomas Juneau, *Squandered Opportunity: Neoclassical Realism and Iranian Foreign Policy*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2015, 17.

⁴ Shahram Chubin, *Iran's Nuclear Ambitions*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, D.C., 2006, pp. 7-26.

⁵ Halit M. E. Tagma and Paul E. Lenze, Jr., *Understanding and Explaining the Iranian Nuclear 'Crisis': Theoretical Approaches*, Lexington Books, Lexington, 2020, pp. 1-32.

⁶ Alexander, Wendt, "Anarchy is what States Make of it: The Social Construction of Power Politics", *International Organization* 46 (2): 391-425, Spring, 1992.

⁷ Nicholas Greenwood Onuf, *World of Our Making: Rules and Rule in Social Theory and International Relations*, University of South Carolina Press, Columbia, 1989, p. 1.

⁸ Marina Kostić Šulejić, *Koncepcije svetskog poretka u politikama bezbednosti Sjedinjenih Američkih Država, Ruske Federacije i Evropske unije na početku XXI veka*, doctoral thesis, Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Belgrade, 2019, p. 10.

⁹ Richard Price and Christian Reus-Smit, "Dangerous Liaisons? Critical International Theory and Constructivism," *European Journal of International Relations* 4, no. 3 (1998): 265.

despite having the capability. Their decision was likely driven by the belief that they did not face a significant threat or perceive themselves as targets for destruction by other nations, as well as by broader historical experiences, values, diplomatic relationships, and strategic considerations. Factors such as past conflicts, regional stability, alliances, and commitments to international norms and values of disarmament may have further reinforced their choice to refrain from nuclear weaponization.

From Tehran's perspective, nuclear development is not solely a security strategy aimed at deterrence but also a powerful symbol of national pride, defiance against foreign intervention, and a testament to the country's resilience in the face of external pressure. Caroline F. Ziemke explores Iran's nuclear ambitions through the lens of its national myth and strategic identity.¹⁰ She argues that Iran's foreign policy and nuclear strategy are deeply influenced by its historical self-perception and ideological beliefs. As she describes it, Iran sees itself as the rightful leader of the Persian Gulf but attributes its decline to centuries of foreign interference, including invasions by Arabs, Mongols, and colonial powers. Western powers, particularly the U.S. and Britain, are viewed as key actors in Iran's suffering, with events like the 1953 CIA-backed coup reinforcing this distrust. As a result, Iran interprets counter-proliferation efforts as direct attempts to weaken its sovereignty and limit its autonomy on the global stage.

On the other hand, a defining characteristic that sets Iran apart from other states is its unique historical and ideological transformation brought about by the 1979 revolution. When examining Iran, it is essential to recognize that it is not just an ordinary geopolitical actor but characterized by a revolutionary regime – one that has undergone a fundamental shift in its identity, political ideology, and governance since the Islamic Revolution. This transformation continues to shape Iran's strategic vision, foreign policy, and its engagement with the international community.

Mohammad Nia highlights the influence of domestic social discourses in shaping Iran's ideological stance, particularly in its engagements with the West, most notably the United States.¹¹ He explains that as foreign policy challenges intensify, Iran's responses tend to become increasingly ideological rather than pragmatic. Additionally, he argues that Western confrontational strategies have further solidified Iran's revolutionary identity, reinforcing mutual antagonism and perpetuating a cycle of misunderstandings and missed diplomatic opportunities.

Before the 1979 revolution, Iran was a pro-Western country and the United States' primary ally in the region, governed by the Shah's secular monarchy. During this period, Iran's foreign policy was largely shaped by its strategic alliance with Western nations, positioning itself within the broader Cold War structure. However, the Islamic Revolution in 1979 fundamentally altered Iran's ideological orientation and global positioning. The Post-revolutionary Iran redefined itself as an anti-imperialist, anti-Zionist, and pro-revolutionary regime, embedding Islamic rhetoric and ideology at the core of its governance and foreign policy.

¹⁰ Caroline F. Ziemke, "The National Myth and Strategic Personality of Iran: A Counterproliferation Perspective," in *The Coming Crisis: Nuclear Proliferation, U.S. Interests*, ed. Victor A. Utgoff and Lawrence D. Welch, MIT Press, Cambridge, 2000, p. 92.

¹¹ Mojtaba Mahdavi Nia, "Understanding Iran's Foreign Policy: An Application of Holistic Constructivism," in *Turkish Journal of International Relations* 9, no. 1 (2010): 170.

This transformation was not merely a regime change but a radical reconfiguration of Iran's self-conception and strategic outlook. Unlike many states that operate purely within the confines of material constraints and power calculations, Iran's foreign policy decisions are mostly influenced by its ideological commitments, revolutionary ethos, and historical grievances, but also external reactions to it. Iran looked for the recognition and respect of its new identity and interests, ambitions in the region and reconciliation of its revolutionary regime with the right to peaceful nuclear energy under international law.

*Discussing the Variables that Determine
Iranian Stance toward the Nuclear Energy and Weapons*

External actors' interest and policies in the Middle East until 1970s, including the introduction of nuclear energy in the Middle East

By the end of the 1970s, the influence of global powers in the Middle East had become clearly pronounced. The United States had established itself as the leading external actor, forming key alliances with Iran (until the 1979 revolution), Israel, Saudi Arabia, and, following peace efforts in the 1970s, Egypt. U.S. strategy was largely shaped by Cold War dynamics – aimed at curbing Soviet influence, safeguarding Western oil interests, and ensuring Israel's security. To pursue these objectives, the U.S. engaged in various measures including covert interventions (such as the 1953 coup in Iran)¹², diplomatic efforts (notably during the 1956 Suez Crisis)¹³, substantial arms sales, and mediation efforts like the Camp David Accords¹⁴.

Meanwhile, the Soviet Union built ties with states such as Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and South Yemen, supplying them with military aid to counter pro-Western governments and Israel. The USSR's ambitions – extending its reach over the region's oil wealth, accessing warm-water ports, and advancing socialist ideology met with mixed outcomes. While it gained significant ground during the 1950s and 1960s, its position weakened by the late 1970s, particularly with Egypt's shift into the U.S. orbit.¹⁵

In the realm of nuclear development, external powers indeed played a crucial role in shaping the nuclear landscape of the Middle East. The experiences of Israel, Iran, Egypt and Iraq reveal how this support or opposition influenced their nuclear paths. By 1970, it is supposed that Israel had effectively developed nuclear weapons, largely with the help of France during the 1950s and 1960s. Israel, unlike France or India, was not bound by formal nuclear agreements with the U.S. or Canada. Furthermore, following the U.S.'s lack of support during the

¹² Gregory Brew, "The Collapse Narrative: The United States, Mohammed Mossadegh, and the Coup Decision of 1953," in *Texas National Security Review* 2, no. 4 (2019): 41.

¹³ Rose McDermott, *Risk-Taking in International Politics: Prospect Theory in American Foreign Policy*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1998, p. 160.

¹⁴ The White House, *Camp David*, accessed April 24, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/about-the-white-house/camp-david/>.

¹⁵ Gawdat Bahgat, "Russia and the Middle East: Opportunities and Challenges," in *Russia's Global Reach: A Security and Statecraft Assessment*, ed. Graeme H. E. Sims, George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, Garmisch-Partenkirchen, 2021, p. 133.

1956 Suez Crisis, France eased its nuclear secrecy commitments, and made closer cooperation with Israel. At the same time, Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, aware that the U.S. offered no firm security guarantee and only limited political backing, believed Israel needed to develop its own nuclear deterrent to survive amid growing threats from neighboring Arab states and the Soviet Union.¹⁶ In the early 1960s, when Iran just began developing its nuclear program, it received support not only from the U.S. but also from other Western countries, including Germany, France¹⁷, the UK, and South Africa¹⁸. Some documents even suggest that Israel played a role in assisting the development of Iran's nuclear program during the Shah's reign.¹⁹ It is worth noting that nuclear program has been documented as the second most expensive investment project during the Shah's era, with the oil industry being the most significant investment.²⁰ Therefore, while the intention of Iran's nuclear program at that time remains a matter of debate, the Shah himself allegedly addressed this question, when asked about his intention of developing nuclear weapons, in an interview with a French newspaper in 1974, saying, "Without a doubt, and sooner than one would think." However, this statement was officially denied just a few days later.²¹

While these developments were taking place, the Shah promptly signed the NPT in 1968 as soon as it became available and ratified it just two years later in 1970. In 1974, along with Egypt, he initiated diplomatic efforts and formal proposals within the UN framework to establish a Middle East Nuclear Weapon Free Zone, positioning himself as an advocate for nuclear non-proliferation and actively working to prevent a regional arms race.^{22 23}

The pursuit of nuclear power in the early 1970s was entirely the Shah's personal decision. Etemad, the founder of the Atomic Energy Agency of Iran and the father of Iran's nuclear program stated: "He (Shah) alone had made the decision to launch a nuclear program with almost no government consultation; nuclear power had come to Iran not from political consensus or debate, but from one man's will".²⁴ Iran's geopolitical position – surrounded by Arab nations and facing the rise of pan-Arabism during the Shah's time – fueled its determination

¹⁶ Shlomo Aronson, *The Politics and Strategy of Nuclear Weapons in the Middle East: Opacity, Theory, and Reality, 1960-1991: An Israeli Perspective*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1992, p. 44.

¹⁷ Gawdat Bahgat, *Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons in the Middle East*, University Press of Florida, Gainesville, 2007, p. 10.

¹⁸ Seyed Hossein Mousavian, *The Iranian Nuclear Crisis: A Memoir*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, DC, 2012, p. 110.

¹⁹ Times of Israel, "A Generation Ago, Israelis Found Paradise in Iran," in *The Times of Israel*, September 28, 2016, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/a-generation-ago-israelis-found-paradise-in-iran/>

²⁰ Abbas Milani, "The Shah's Atomic Dreams," in *Foreign Policy*, December 29, 2010, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2010/12/29/the-shahs-atomic-dreams/>.

²¹ George H. Quester, "The Shah and the Bomb," in *Policy Sciences* 8, no. 1 (1977): 21, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01727599>.

²² United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR), *Iranian Narratives on a Middle East Free of Weapons of Mass Destruction* (2023), https://unidir.org/files/2023-07/UNIDIR_narratives_middle_east_WMDFZ_03_iranian.pdf.

²³ Nuclear Policy Research Institute (NPRI), *A Middle East Free of Weapons of Mass Destruction: Challenges and Opportunities* (2023), <https://npolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/2307-A-Middle-East-Free-of-Weapons-of-Mass-Destruction.pdf>.

²⁴ David Patrikarakos, *Nuclear Iran: The Birth of an Atomic State*, I.B. Tauris, London, 2012, p. 86.

to pursue its nuclear ambitions.²⁵ Hence, while the Shah saw nuclear development as a key symbol of technological advancement and national independence, he was likely also influenced by its potential for deterrence – motivated not so much by Israel’s nuclear weapons, but rather by the growing influence of Pan-Arabism and concerns about external interference.

Though initially peaceful, this program later raised proliferation concerns, especially with the regime change in 1979. The officially stated motivation behind the nuclear program was primarily economic – to satisfy domestic energy needs through nuclear power and thereby increase oil exports. Nonetheless, under both the Shah and the Islamic Republic, nuclear energy has also been perceived as a symbol of national advancement and prestige, reflecting a broader aspiration to align with technologically sophisticated nations.²⁶

Alignment with the West was also driven by growing concerns over the rise of Pan-Arabism – a regional movement supported by the Soviet Union and led by Arab nationalist leaders such as Egypt’s Gamal Abdel Nasser. Seeing Pan-Arabism as a threat to Iran’s sovereignty and regional influence, the Shah quietly strengthened ties with Israel, a regional adversary of many Arab states. Although Iran under the Shah never officially recognized Israel, the two countries maintained a discreet yet strategic relationship based on shared geopolitical interests. Iran became a key member of Israel’s “periphery alliance,” a strategy developed by Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion in the 1950s to build ties with non-Arab states as a counterbalance to hostile Arab neighbors.²⁷

As global tensions between the U.S. and the Soviet Union intensified, the Shah positioned Iran as a strategic ally of the West. Just a few years after President Eisenhower announced his intention to alleviate concerns surrounding nuclear weapons through the Atoms for Peace program, the initiative was met with a positive response across the Middle East.²⁸ By 1957, the Shah’s regime and the White House had established a legal framework for nuclear cooperation. The United States sought to ensure the program’s exclusively non-military nature, and the level of concern about Iran’s nuclear implications at the time was significantly lower compared to that of other countries, as Iran was a key U.S. ally.²⁹ In line with this, Linzer in *Washington Post* explains how the U.S. previously supported Iran’s nuclear program which could contribute to nuclear weapons development. As she claims, in 1976, President Ford authorized a deal allowing Iran to operate a U.S.-built plutonium reprocessing facility, effectively granting it a full nuclear fuel cycle. Ironically, this is the very capability the U.S. now seeks to prevent Iran from obtaining.³⁰ However, some scholars, such as Abbas

²⁵ Miguel Da Cruz, *Why Do States Acquire Nuclear Weapons? A Theoretical Framework in Assessing Nuclear Proliferation in Israel, Iran, and Saudi Arabia*, Seton Hall University, South Orange, 2013, p. 9, <https://scholarship.shu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1055&context=pa>.

²⁶ David Patrikarakos, *Nuclear Iran: The Birth of an Atomic State*, I. B. Tauris, London, 2012, p. 56.

²⁷ Dalia Dassa Kaye, Alireza Nader, and Parisa Roshan, *Israel and Iran: A Dangerous Rivalry*, RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, 2011, p. 10.

²⁸ David Patrikarakos, *Nuclear Iran: The Birth of an Atomic State*, I. B. Tauris, London, 2012, p. 30.

²⁹ Seyed Hossein Mousavian, *The Iranian Nuclear Crisis: A Memoir*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, DC, 2012, p. 49.

³⁰ Dafna Linzer, “Past Arguments Don’t Square with Current Iran Policy,” in *The Washington Post*, March 27, 2005, A15, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A3983-2005Mar26.html>.

Milani, reject this idea, and argues that recently declassified documents reveal that the key elements of today's standoff between the U.S. government and the Islamic Republic were already evident in the negotiations with the Shah.³¹

However, taking a step further back in history, it is essential to note that the Shah ascended to power after World War II, following his father's forced abdication due to the Russian-British invasion of Iran.³² This context is crucial, as throughout his reign, the Shah maintained a sense of skepticism toward the West's intentions regarding his own future. Hence, in an effort to strengthen his position and enhance his leverage, even in negotiations with key allies such as the United States, he likely saw nuclear ambitions as a means to achieving that goal or, at the very least, to command respect by demonstrating technological independence.

An analysis of declassified U.S. government documents from the early to mid-1970s – including embassy memoranda, intelligence briefings, and internal communications – reveals that U.S. officials held varied views on the Shah of Iran's nuclear ambitions. While concerns were raised, particularly in light of India's 1972 nuclear developments potentially influencing the Shah's stance, U.S. policymakers were never able to definitively conclude whether Iran sought to develop nuclear weapons.³³ By 1976, internal discussions on non-proliferation continued, with the Shah asserting that Iran had no strategic need for nuclear arms, citing the improbability of deterring the Soviet Union. He also repeatedly expressed frustration over persistent U.S. skepticism regarding Iran's stated commitment to a peaceful nuclear program.³⁴

Post-revolutionary Regime Type and the Formulation of Decisions on Nuclear Energy and Weapons

After the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran shifted from a secular monarchy to an Islamic autocracy led by a charismatic leader Ayatollah Khomeini. This new regime positioned itself in opposition to both Western and Eastern blocs, encapsulated in the well-known slogan: "Neither East or the West, but the Islamic Republic". Ayatollah Khomeini referred to the U.S. as the "Great Satan," Israel as the "Little Satan," and the Soviet Union as the "Lesser Satan".³⁵ Despite his broader rejection of both global powers, Khomeini's strongest opposition was directed internationally toward the United States and regionally toward Israel.

³¹ Abbas Milani, "The Shah's Atomic Dreams," in *Foreign Policy*, December 29, 2010, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2010/12/29/the-shahs-atomic-dreams/>.

³² U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976*, vol. IV, Document 180, Office of the Historian, accessed February 13, 2025, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve04/d180>.

³³ G. H. Nutter, "Memorandum from the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs to Secretary of Defense Laird (Document 222)," February 4, 1972, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976*, vol. E-7, U.S. Department of State, accessed April 24, 2025, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve07/d222>.

³⁴ R. C. Seamans, "Memorandum from the Administrator of the Energy Research and Development Administration to President Ford (Document 182)," March 15, 1976, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976*, vol. E-14, pt. 2, U.S. Department of State, accessed April 24, 2025, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve14p2/d182>.

³⁵ M. Omer-Man, "This Week in History: Ayatollah Khomeini Returns to Iran," in *The Jerusalem Post*, February 4, 2011, <https://www.jpost.com/features/in-thspotlight/this-week-in-history-ayatollah-khomeini-returns-to-iran>.

Khomeini's stance against the U.S. and Israel was grounded in his unwavering support for the oppressed Muslims and his resistance to imperialism. He saw the United States as a symbol of global tyranny and moral corruption, while Israel was viewed as an unlawful, expansionist state imposed by Western powers to subjugate the Palestinian people. As a result, his revolutionary ideology prioritized Islamic unity and framed the Palestinian cause as a sacred duty for Muslims worldwide. This outlook became a foundational element of the Islamic Republic of Iran's foreign policy.³⁶

After Ayatollah Khomeini's death in 1989, Ayatollah Khamenei became Iran's Supreme Leader. Unlike his predecessor, who acted largely as an individual leader, Khamenei institutionalized the Islamic Revolution by creating various institutions to preserve and solidify the Islamic Republic's power. Under his leadership, anti-imperialist, anti-Zionist, and Muslim unity ideals have grown stronger. Khamenei maintains a consistently hostile stance toward Israel, frequently describing it as a "cancerous tumor" that should be removed.³⁷ Nevertheless, Khamenei emphasizes that his opposition targets the Israeli state and Zionism, not the Jewish people themselves, clarifying that Iran seeks only the end of what he calls the "imposed regime."³⁸

During his leadership, he has significantly expanded Iran's regional influence by strengthening, funding, and arming a network of allied militias across the Middle East. This includes support for Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad in the Palestinian territories, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilization Forces) in Iraq, as well as various groups in Syria and Yemen. From the other side, while former leader Ayatollah Khomeini aimed to remain equidistant from both the Western and Eastern blocs, Ayatollah Khamenei has taken a more pragmatic stance – likely as a result of sustained pressure from the West – which has pushed Iran closer to the Eastern bloc. Regarding the West, and especially the United States, Khamenei has continued to use the same hostile rhetoric as his predecessor.

The official website of the Supreme Leader of Iran features a page titled "The Logic of the Islamic Republic's Confrontation with America from the Perspective of the Leader of the Revolution,"³⁹ which presents a chronological collection of Ayatollah Khamenei's statements over the years regarding the United States and Iran-U.S. relations. These statements highlight Khamenei's consistent ideological stance, portraying the U.S. as a hegemonic force inherently hostile to the Islamic Republic and asserting that this conflict is fundamental and irreconcilable through negotiation.

³⁶ H. Ahad, "How Imam Khomeini's Support for Palestinian Cause Inspired Anti-Israel Resistance," *Press TV*, June 3, 2024, <https://www.presstv.ir/Detail/2024/06/03/726794/-Imam-Khomeini-Palestinian-cause-inspired-anti-Israel-resistance->.

³⁷ *Al Arabiya English*, "Iran's Khamenei Calls Israel a 'Cancerous Tumor' with Assured Destruction," *Al Arabiya News*, February 22, 2024, <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2024/02/22/Iran-s-Khamenei-calls-Israel-a-cancerous-tumor-with-assured-destruction>.

³⁸ H. Rettig Gur, "Khamenei: When Iran Speaks of Wiping Out Israel, It Refers to Regime, Not Jews," in *The Times of Israel*, November 15, 2019, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/khamenei-when-iran-speaks-of-wiping-out-israel-it-refers-to-regime-not-jews/>.

³⁹ "ایمان‌ماخ می‌مظعل‌الذات‌ای‌ت‌رض‌ح‌راث‌أ‌رشن‌و‌ظ‌ف‌ح‌ر‌ت‌غ‌د‌ین‌اس‌رع‌ال‌طا‌ها‌گی‌اب" accessed April 25, 2025, <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/>.

Regarding Europe, Ayatollah Khamenei adopts a milder tone in his discourse, though his positions fluctuate over time. For instance, in a 2019 speech addressing commanders and staff of the Air Force and Army Air Defence, he stated: “I have repeatedly said not to trust America, and today I say that Europeans are untrustworthy.” During the same speech, he further emphasized: “I advise the officials not to trust them either. Of course, we are not saying not to interact with them, but rather to look at the Europeans with pessimism.”⁴⁰

In Iran’s nuclear decision-making process, although key institutions such as the Supreme National Security Council (chaired by the President), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) play influential roles, the Supreme Leader holds the ultimate and decisive authority over all major nuclear policies.⁴¹

The Supreme Leader of Iran emphasizes that the country’s nuclear program is domestically developed and strictly for peaceful purposes. He reiterates Iran’s opposition to weapons of mass destruction based on religious principles and insists that nuclear energy is a national necessity. Responding to American skepticism over Iran’s need for nuclear power despite its oil reserves, he argues that reliance on oil is unsustainable and warns against future dependence on foreign energy sources. He also points out that U.S. sanctions are rooted in opposition to the 1979 Islamic Revolution rather than nuclear concerns. Rejecting the idea that nuclear concessions would resolve tensions with the U.S., he asserts that global politics operate within a system of domination, dividing nations into those who dominate and those who are dominated.⁴²

Furthermore, Ayatollah Khamenei argues that opposition to Iran’s program is not about non-proliferation but about maintaining Iran’s economic and political dependence. He stresses that self-sufficiency is essential for political independence, framing Iran’s pursuit of nuclear technology as a response to sanctions and perceived discrimination in access to nuclear energy.⁴³ Aligning with the stance of Iran’s leadership, former president Rouhani states that nuclear development is not solely a means of energy diversification but also a symbol of national dignity and international recognition.⁴⁴

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) may pressure the Supreme Leader to reconsider his religious Fatwa prohibiting nuclear weapons, potentially paving the way for Iran to pursue a nuclear arsenal, in the case of a military attack on Iran.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Islamic Consultative Assembly Research Center, “Statements of the Supreme Commander-in-Chief in a Meeting with Air Force and Army Air Defense Commanders and Personnel,” February 8, 2019, <https://rc.majlis.ir/fa/news/show/1109586>.

⁴¹ Anoush Ehteshami Tabatabai, “Nuclear Decision-Making in Iran: Implications for U.S. Nonproliferation Efforts,” in *Center on Global Energy Policy*, Columbia University, 2020, <https://www.energy-policy.columbia.edu/publications/nuclear-decision-making-iran-implications-us-nonproliferation-efforts/>.

⁴² Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, “Statements of the Supreme Leader on Nuclear Energy,” n.d., accessed March 13, 2025.

⁴³ Mojtaba Mahdavi Nia, “Understanding Iran’s Foreign Policy: An Application of Holistic Constructivism,” *Turkish Journal of International Relations* 9, no. 1 (2010): 148.

⁴⁴ Shahram Akbarzadeh and Dara Conduit, *Iran in the World: President Rouhani’s Foreign Policy*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2016, p. 45.

⁴⁵ *The Stimson Center*, “Israeli Actions Push Iran Closer to Nuclear Weapons,” September 1, 2024, <https://www.stimson.org/2024/israeli-actions-push-iran-closer-to-nuclear-weapons/>.

Relation toward the Iranian Past: Is Israel Supposed Nuclear Weapons only an Excuse for the Iran to Develop Nuclear Weapons?

In earlier discussion, we examined the role of identity, historical evolution, and the influence of both regional and global powers – fashioned by a legacy of interventionism and colonialism – in shaping Iran’s approach toward nuclear policy. In this part, we argue that while these external and historical factors have been crucial, their impact has been further intensified by a strong sense of Persian nationalism and a collective memory of Iran’s imperial legacy. This sentiment was particularly pronounced during the Shah’s era, when national prestige and modernization efforts were closely tied to reclaiming Iran’s ancient grandeur. Although this emphasis on imperial identity appeared to diminish under the Islamic Republic, it never fully disappeared.

Over time, both during the Shah’s reign and to a lesser extent under the Islamic Republic, these dynamics helped shape a collective mind-set among Iran’s political elite and broader public. The nuclear program came to be seen not only as a strategic imperative but also as a powerful symbol of national pride and a vehicle for restoring Iran’s historic stature. In this context, Iran’s nuclear ambitions are driven by more than just security or political calculations – they reflect a broader vision of national revival rooted in ancient Persian civilization and the desire to reassert Iran’s position as a respected and influential power. Across the political spectrum, many Iranians see the advancement of nuclear technology as a reflection of the country’s potential to reclaim the greatness of its distinguished past. This perspective is captured in the remark that “ordinary, rank-and-file, workaday Iranians want a nuclear program. Even those who dislike their government... crave the prestige afforded by atomic power.”⁴⁶

It is important to note that following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the new regime introduced an ideological shift that layered Islamic identity over national discourse. While Persian nationalism was not entirely abandoned, it was deliberately downplayed in favor of promoting the values of Islam, revolutionary resistance, and opposition to imperialism. The Islamic Republic redefined national pride through a religious lens, presenting Iran not only as a historically rich nation but as the ideological leader of a wider Islamic awakening. In this context, Iranian officials often portray the nuclear program as evidence of the country’s scientific advancement and a critical move toward establishing Iran as a modern and technologically capable nation. In line with that, they argue that Western objections are not merely rooted in security concerns, but represent a deliberate attempt to suppress Iran’s progress and block its emergence as a leading power in the region and the broader Islamic world.⁴⁷

Despite the ideological tension between Persian imperial legacy and the foundations of the Islamic Republic, the regime has effectively mobilized national unity around the nuclear issue. Domestically, it has deliberately linked nuclear development to the preservation of the Islamic Republic, and promoted a form

⁴⁶ Kevin Vick, “Behind Iran’s Nuclear Quest: An Ancient Civilization’s Pride and Insecurity,” in *Time*, November 13, 2011.

⁴⁷ Patrick Clawson, “Iran’s Motives and Strategies: The Role of the Economy,” in *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, May 17, 2006.

of “nuclear nationalism” that merges patriotic pride with the regime’s revolutionary and religious identity.⁴⁸

Arshad places strong emphasis on the influence of cultural and religious factors as key drivers of the Islamic Republic’s external conduct.⁴⁹ From the very beginning of the Islamic revolution until today, one of the most important dimensions of Iran’s external conduct has been the export of the Islamic Revolution beyond its national borders, which is grounded in the principles of Muslim solidarity and strong opposition to imperialism and Zionism.⁵⁰ This revolutionary agenda has driven Iran to become deeply involved in regional conflicts and to support allied groups such as Hezbollah, Hamas, Houthi and Hashd al-Shaabi, which it sees as resisting U.S. dominance and Israeli occupation. At the same time, this Shia-influenced stance has placed Iran in opposition not only to Israel, but also to Gulf monarchies and other regional states with differing political systems and ideologies.⁵¹

In light of this, Iran views nuclear advancement as a means of enhancing its prestige and bolsters its standing among its allies. Alongside this, its capability for high-level uranium enrichment and the minimal time required to transition to weaponization serve as a strategic signal. In the event of provocation by Israel or the United States, Iran can demonstrate its ability to deter foreign intervention, thereby reinforcing its image as a strong regional power committed to defending both its sovereignty and its regional allies.

Moshirzadeh provides a more focused analysis of the ways in which Iran’s foreign policy influences its nuclear approach, placing particular emphasis on the principle of justice.⁵² This concept, rooted in Iranian nationalism and Shiite Islamic values, stresses fairness and challenges global inequalities. It critiques the double standards in nuclear policy, particularly the NPT, which divides nations into nuclear “haves” and “have-nots.”

Tehran indeed, sees the existing framework as a clear global double standard that favors established nuclear powers while denying equal rights to other nations, which undermines the very principle of equality that the treaty was meant to uphold. This disparity becomes even more evident at the regional level. Iranian leaders deem it unacceptable that a neighboring rival – regarded as an adversary – does not deny possessing nuclear weapons while the international community largely remains silent. In their view, such silence not only perpetuates inequality but also endangers Iran’s security and regional standing.

Nuclear Energy Policies of Other Actors in a Region

In case of Israel, its nuclear program began in the late 1940s, motivated by national security concerns after the Holocaust and the country’s founding in 1948. In 1952, Israel created the Israel Atomic Energy Commission (IAEC) to

⁴⁸ Christopher Griffiths, “Understanding the Islamic Republic of Iran’s Nuclear Nationalism,” in *Middle East Centre Blog*, September 8, 2018.

⁴⁹ L. Arshad, “Internal Dynamics of Iran’s Foreign Policy,” in *Pakistan Horizon* 57, no. 1 (2004): 50.

⁵⁰ Ali Ansari, *Ideology and Iran’s Revolution: How 1979 Changed the World*, Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, London, 2019.

⁵¹ Pew Research Center, “God’s Will: Iran’s Polity and the Challenges of the Future,” May 15, 2007.

⁵² Homeira Moshirzadeh, “Discursive Foundations of Iran’s Nuclear Policy,” in *Security Dialogue* 38, no. 4 (2007): 530.

oversee nuclear development. A key breakthrough came in the mid-1950s through cooperation with France, resulting in the construction of the Negev Nuclear Research Center near Dimona. Completed in the early 1960s, the facility included a reactor and reprocessing plant capable of producing weapons-grade plutonium.⁵³ Later on, the motivation for developing Israel's nuclear program can be attributed to two key factors: the perceived threat from Arab states toward its existence and a lack of confidence in the United States' long-term commitment to Israel's security.⁵⁴

Israel has long maintained deliberate silence regarding the existence of its nuclear program, neither confirming nor denying its possession of nuclear weapons. This policy of nuclear ambiguity is a long-standing and broadly endorsed aspect of its national security doctrine. It reflects a pragmatic and cautious approach, viewing nuclear capabilities as a deterrent reserved for extreme, existential threats rather than as a routine component of military operations. At the same time, Israel has chosen not to carry out any nuclear tests. This strategic posture has been sustained by several key factors: the absence of a nuclear-armed rival in the region, consistent support from the United States, and the ongoing lack of a comprehensive and stable peace in the Middle East.⁵⁵ Israel's policy of nuclear ambiguity led it to the refusal to sign the NPT, limited cooperation with the IAEA and hinder regional initiatives aimed at establishing a Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD)-free zone in the Middle East.

Egypt's nuclear program began with Soviet assistance in 1961, leading to the establishment of a 2MW research reactor at Inshas. While Egypt aspired to develop nuclear power for electricity and desalination, progress was delayed by financial and political challenges, and its late entry into the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1981. Despite delays in power reactor construction, Egypt developed significant research capabilities, including plutonium extraction and reactor operation training through its two research reactors, ETRR-1 and ETRR-2. Notably, ETRR-2 can produce enough plutonium annually for one nuclear weapon, though it remains under IAEA safeguards.⁵⁶ From 2015 onward, Egypt revitalized its nuclear ambitions, signing a major deal with Russia's Rosatom to build four large reactors at El Dabaa, with construction beginning in 2022. Egypt has also explored nuclear cooperation with China and South Korea and is identifying additional sites for expansion.⁵⁷

Although Egypt often frames its nuclear advancement as a response to growing energy needs, it is also closely tied to its enduring security concerns – particularly regarding Israel. Like many Arab countries, Egypt views Israel's suspected nuclear arsenal and its refusal to sign the NPT or engage with international oversight mechanisms as a key source of regional imbalance and

⁵³ Avi Cohen, "Israeli Nuclear History," in *The National Security Archive*, n.d., accessed April 3, 2025, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/nukevault/israel/>.

⁵⁴ M. A. Chaudhri, "The Nuclearization of the Middle East Conflict," in *Pakistan Horizon* 40, no. 1 (1987): 39.

⁵⁵ Raphael BenLevi, "The Evolution and Future of Israeli Nuclear Ambiguity," in *The Nonproliferation Review* 29, no. 4-6 (2022): 251, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10736700.2023.2215583>.

⁵⁶ Nuclear Threat Initiative, "Egypt Nuclear Facilities," February 13, 2012, <https://www.nti.org/analysis/articles/egypt-nuclear-facilities/>.

⁵⁷ World Nuclear Association, "Nuclear Power in Egypt," April 25, 2024, <https://world-nuclear.org/information-library/country-profiles/countries-a-f/egypt>.

insecurity.⁵⁸ In protest of Israel's non-compliance with global disarmament norms, Egypt has also declined to ratify or join international treaties banning biological and chemical weapons, emphasizing its position that meaningful arms control must be applied equally across the region.⁵⁹

In case of Saudi Arabia, the Kingdom first expressed its interest in nuclear energy in the 1960s and began developing its civilian nuclear program in the 1970s. The King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology (KACST), established in Riyadh in 1977, became the centerpiece of this effort. Later, in 1988, the Atomic Energy Research Institute (AERI) was founded to further advance the Kingdom's nuclear capabilities. That same year, Saudi Arabia signed the NPT and has since promoted the idea of creating a nuclear-weapons-free zone in the Middle East.⁶⁰

Although there is no concrete evidence that Saudi Arabia has pursued nuclear weapons, and it has official commitment to peaceful nuclear development, persistent speculation remains that the Kingdom financially supported the nuclear weapon programs of both Iraq and Pakistan in the past. These claims suggest that Riyadh may have sought arrangements to gain access to nuclear weapons from these countries, should it ever deem them necessary for its national security.⁶¹

Saudi Arabia has repeatedly made it clear that if Iran were to obtain a nuclear weapon, it would feel compelled to do the same.⁶² This highlights that Riyadh views Iran's nuclear ambitions as a far more serious threat than Israel's. While Israel's nuclear opacity remains a broader issue in the region, it is Iran's closeness, its rivalry with Saudi Arabia, and the underlying sectarian tensions that make it a more immediate concern.

Iran, in particular, has voiced growing concern over Saudi Arabia's intentions in developing a nuclear program, suggesting that Riyadh may be pursuing capabilities beyond peaceful civilian use. Iranian officials have also criticized Saudi Arabia for its limited cooperation with international regulatory bodies, such as the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and have accused the Kingdom of withholding critical information about its nuclear activities.⁶³ This perceived lack of transparency fuels fears in Tehran that Saudi Arabia's nuclear efforts could eventually shift toward weaponization, potentially triggering a regional arms race and undermining the already fragile balance of power in the Middle East.

The table below summarizes the nuclear capabilities of regional countries, their adherence to international agreements such as the NPT, BWC, and CWC, their positions on the MEWMDZF, and the broader geopolitical context, including the perspectives of major global powers on their nuclear programs. The information is drawn from the United Nations Institute for Disarmaments (Sabet 2023; UNIDIR n.d).

⁵⁸ Doreen Horschig, "Israel – Iran: The Nuclear Factor," *iMedD Lab*, February 25, 2025, <https://lab.imedd.org/en/israel-iran-the-nuclear-factor/>.

⁵⁹ Nuclear Threat Initiative, "Egypt," n.d., <https://www.nti.org/countries/egypt/>.

⁶⁰ Stefano De Michelis, "Saudi Arabia's Nuclear Program," *Nuclear Age Peace Foundation*, 2019, <https://www.wagingpeace.org/saudi-arabia-history/>.

⁶¹ Bruce Riedel, "Saudi Arabia: Nervously Watching Pakistan," *Brookings Institution*, January 28, 2008, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/saudi-arabia-nervously-watching-pakistan/>.

⁶² BBC News, "Saudi Arabia Pledges to Create a Nuclear Bomb if Iran Does," March 15, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-43419673>.

⁶³ SNN News Agency, "Iran Expresses Concern Over Saudi Arabia's Secret Nuclear Program," September 16, 2019, <https://www.snnnewsagency.com/iran-expresses-concern-over-saudi-arabias-secret-nuclear-program>.

	Nuclear capabilities	NPT member	BWC Status	CWC Status	Position on MEWMD/FZ	Regional nuclear developments	Commitment to International Non-Proliferation agreements	Geopolitical context	Superpowers' stance
EG	No nuclear weapons; supports ME WMD/FZ	✓	Signatory (not ratified)	Non-signatory	Strong advocate; leads Arab states' stance	Leads advocacy efforts in Arab League	Strong; active in NPT & IAEA	Leads Arab stance; strategic cooperation with GCC	Supported by US & EU for disarmament leadership
IR	Advanced nuclear program; concerns about weaponization	✓	Party	Party	Supports but prefers nuclear-focused scope	Concerns over nuclear weaponization	Mixed; skeptical of NPT	Facing sanctions; regional rivalries, US opposition	Opposed by US, Russia & China engage selectively
IL	Nuclear ambiguity; widely believed to possess nuclear weapons	✗	Non-signatory	Signatory (not ratified)	Opposes in current form; conditional participation	Maintains nuclear opacity; regional deterrence strategy	Limited; outside NPT	Security concerns; US strategic ally; nuclear deterrence	US supports nuclear ambiguity; Russia cautious
SA	No nuclear weapons; civilian nuclear developments	✓	Party	Party	Supports; aligns with GCC policies	Developing nuclear energy; strategic partnerships	Committed; follows international guidelines	Influential in GCC; aligns with US and Western allies	US ally; regional nuclear security concerns
UA	No nuclear weapons; civilian nuclear energy program	✓	Party	Party	Supports; aligns with international norms	Civil nuclear expansion; international cooperation	Committed; aligns with nuclear security initiatives	Rising influence; nuclear partnerships; regional power	Western-aligned; nuclear energy cooperation

	Nuclear capabilities member	NPT member	BWC Status	CWC Status	Position on MEWMD/FZ	Regional nuclear developments	Commitment to International Non-Proliferation agreements	Geopolitical context	Superpowers' stance
TR	No nuclear weapons; aligns with NATO; civilian nuclear developments	✓	Party	Party	Supports; aligns with NATO commitments	No direct nuclear ambitions; regional stability focus	Committed; adheres to international norms	NATO ally; balances Middle Eastern dynamics	Supported by NATO; neutral on nuclear stance
SY	Previously pursued nuclear weapons; past program dismantled	✓	Party	Party	Supports, but weakened by conflict	Past nuclear ambitions disrupted; disarmament focus	Committed; limited capability	War-torn; limited regional influence; chemical weapons history	Sanctioned by US; Russia partially supportive
IQ	Former nuclear weapons program; dismantled	✓	Party	Party	Historically engaged; now inactive	WMD history; now non-proliferation supporter	Committed; past violations, now compliant	Post-war recovery; past nuclear history; non-proliferation	Post-war US rebuilding efforts; nuclear restrictions
LB	No nuclear weapons; supports regional non-proliferation	✓	Party	Party	Limited influence; supports diplomatic solutions	No active nuclear programs; regional security observer	Committed; minor role	Regional tensions; limited military influence	Limited US & EU engagement; Hezbollah concerns
JO	No nuclear weapons; promotes nuclear disarmament	✓	Party	Party	Supports; minor role in discussions	No nuclear activities; promotes non-proliferation	Committed; diplomatic engagement	Pro-peace stance; stable regional actor	US-supported; minor role in regional security

Conclusion

This paper examined the key determinants of Iran's nuclear energy policy through the framework of constructivist international relations theory, highlighting the significance of ideational factors in shaping its strategic choices. It explores four core variables driving Iran's nuclear agenda, considers its regional and international commitments, and evaluates the potential implications for nuclear weaponization. The following provides an overview of the four main variables and their implications.

With regard to the first variable and the role of external powers in the Middle East, it is evident that the nuclear development of regional states has largely been supported through collaboration with both Western and Eastern blocs during the Cold War and in subsequent years. However, the region continues to grapple with the unequal application of international non-proliferation norms, which has become a major point of contention in global arms control discourse. For decades, Middle Eastern actors have expressed concern over what they perceive as selective and politically driven enforcement of these standards. A particularly divisive issue is the persistent silence and tacit endorsement by the United States and other global powers of Israel's policy of nuclear opacity. From Iranian viewpoint, this apparent double standard has deepened mistrust among regional states and contributed to a broader sense of injustice. From Tehran's perspective, Israel remains the primary obstacle to the establishment of a Weapons of Mass Destruction-Free Zone in the region. Iran together with other Arab states believe that any serious effort toward establishing a WMDFZ must begin with addressing and curbing Israel's nuclear weapons program. The growing tensions among key nuclear powers – including the United States, Russia, China, the United Kingdom, and France – are eroding the strength of the NPT and the global arms control architecture which undermines its credibility in the Middle East as well.

Middle East is largely characterized by authoritarian forms of governance, regardless of their formal classifications – whether monarchies, kingdoms, Islamic republics, or nominally democratic republics. In such political environments, crucial decisions, including those related to nuclear development are not subject to public scrutiny. These matters are typically deliberated behind closed doors, within elite circles. Given the nature of the Iranian regime – marked by isolation, centralization, authoritarian governance, and ideological revisionism – it is evident that while Iran publicly endorses the establishment of a WMDFZ in the Middle East, the regime's internal structure and guiding principles may hinder the zone's effective realization. On one hand, Iran's revolutionary identity and Shia-driven expansionist policies may undermine regional trust and obstruct cooperative efforts and on the other, its isolationist posture and rhetoric centered on resistance complicate multilateral engagement and cast doubt on Iran's long-term commitment to disarmament, particularly in the absence of significant geopolitical transformations.

Reflecting on the third variable, relation toward the Iranian past, the legacy of Cyrus the Great remains a significant influence on Iran's diplomatic identity and its approach to international engagement. Iran's long history of foreign domination has reinforced a strong sense of sovereignty and a deep-seated

resistance to outside interference. It portrays Iranian nuclear program as a symbol of national progress and modernization, which it believes is being unfairly restricted by great powers. While this perspective fosters national pride and a strong sense of independence, it can also hinder Iran's full participation in multilateral efforts such as the disarmament or future nuclear negotiations – initiatives that depend on trust, reciprocity, and collaboration with international actors. In this context, Iran's historical identity acts both as a source of diplomatic motivation and a potential obstacle to broader cooperation.

Regarding the fourth variable – the nuclear policies of regional adversaries – the foremost and most persistent obstacle – for Iran and several Arab states – is Israel. Israel is widely believed to possess nuclear weapons, although it has never officially acknowledged or denied this, maintaining a policy of so-called “nuclear opacity.” Moreover, Israel is not a signatory to the NPT, and placing itself outside the comprehensive framework of international monitoring and verification mechanisms. This stance significantly hampers efforts to build regional consensus, including on the disarmament and arms control mechanisms, as both Iran and Arab countries have consistently asserted that any credible and equitable solution must include transparency and international oversight of Israel's nuclear capabilities.

Overall, the journey toward non-proliferation in the Middle East remains difficult, and current developments suggest the region is gradually moving in the opposite direction. The absence of a unified approach among nuclear-armed states, along with ongoing double standards in enforcement, weakens the credibility of non-proliferation efforts. Coupled with unresolved regional security challenges, these dynamics increase the likelihood of a nuclear arms race – one that could lead to serious and potentially catastrophic consequences.

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