

The Iranian Revolutionary Regime and US-Led Non-Proliferation Policy in the Middle-East

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ABSTRACT

The 1979 Iranian Revolution replaced the Shah's Western-backed monarchy with an Islamic Republic grounded in clerical authority, transforming U.S.–Iran relations from cooperative nuclear development to entrenched hostility. Atomic energy shifted from a symbol of modernisation to an emblem of sovereignty and resistance, with decades of sanctions, diplomatic breakdowns, and strategic escalation deepening antagonism and threatening both regional stability and the global non-proliferation regime. This study analysed the interplay between Iran's nuclear ambitions under the revolutionary regime and U.S.-driven non-proliferation strategies through Brodie's (1946) Nuclear Deterrence Theory, grounded in political realism. Adopting a qualitative design, it employed the documentary method and textual analysis to examine policy statements, official reports, international agreements, UN resolutions, think-tank studies, scholarly works, and credible news accounts. Findings show that since 1979, U.S.-led non-proliferation policy in the Middle East has shifted from multilateral, diplomacy-driven approaches to unilateral, coercive, and increasingly militarised strategies centred on Iran's nuclear programme. Initiatives such as the JCPOA demonstrated that sustained diplomacy backed by coordinated sanctions could constrain nuclear development, yet the U.S. withdrawal in 2018 fractured international consensus, spurred Iranian enrichment, and heightened insecurity. This trajectory culminated in U.S. military strikes in 2025, undermining NPT norms and risking legitimisation of preventive warfare. The study concludes that overreliance on sanctions and force paradoxically strengthens the appeal of nuclear deterrence for targeted states. It recommends re-establishing a multilateral diplomatic framework with robust verification, reciprocal sanctions relief, inclusive regional security dialogues, and calibrated incentives to de-escalate tensions while preventing further proliferation.

Keywords: Iran, Revolution, Non-proliferation, Middle-east

INTRODUCTION

The 1979 Iranian Revolution represented a profound rupture in Iran's political trajectory, replacing the Shah's pro-Western monarchy with an Islamic Republic under clerical leadership. This transformation was rooted in both immediate socio-economic discontent and deeper historical grievances, including foreign intervention and authoritarian rule (Lema, 2016; Afary, 2025). Ayatollah Khomeini emerged as a unifying figure capable of mobilising a broad coalition, from urban workers to rural clergy, against the Shah's rapid modernisation agenda, which had alienated traditional constituencies and exacerbated inequality (Doğan, 2012; Eisenstadt, 2011). The revolution's aftermath institutionalised clerical dominance through bodies such as the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Basij, embedding ideological and strategic priorities that would define Iran's domestic and foreign policy for decades.

One of the most consequential shifts following the revolution was in U.S.–Iran nuclear relations. Under the Shah, Washington had actively supported Iran's civilian nuclear programme, providing training, technology, and infrastructure as part of a broader energy diversification strategy (Kibaroglu, 2007; Sahimi, 2004; Bazoobandi, 2020). However, the revolution and the subsequent U.S. embassy hostage crisis severed this cooperation, with contracts cancelled and projects abandoned (Etemad, 1987). Initially opposed to nuclear development on ideological grounds, Khomeini's government reversed its stance during the Iran–Iraq War, seeking nuclear expertise from non-Western partners such as Argentina, China, and Russia (Cordesman, 2000). This pivot laid

the foundation for Iran's gradual nuclear self-reliance and transformed the programme into a symbol of national sovereignty and resistance to Western pressure.

Since 1979, U.S. policy toward Iran has been increasingly defined by nuclear non-proliferation objectives within a shifting regional security environment. Early sanctions targeted Iranian assets after the hostage crisis but expanded during the 1980s and 1990s to include terrorism, missile development, and nuclear research (Arslanian, 2023; Fayazmanesh, 2003; Maloney, 2015). Regional arms control initiatives, such as the proposed Middle East Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone (NWFZ) advanced by Egypt and Iran in 1974, failed to gain traction due to deep-seated mistrust and the absence of commitment from key states, including Israel and the United States (Hamel-Green, 2011; Fahm & Lewis, 2011; Mendenhall, 2020). By the early 2000s, revelations about undeclared Iranian nuclear facilities triggered a coordinated international sanctions regime, setting the stage for eventual negotiations.

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), concluded in 2015, represented a landmark in U.S.-led non-proliferation diplomacy, imposing strict limits on Iran's nuclear activities in exchange for sanctions relief under IAEA verification (Babar et al., 2021; Robinson, 2023). Its partial success was short-lived, as the U.S. withdrawal in 2018 under President Trump prompted Iran to exceed enrichment limits, with IAEA data confirming enrichment close to weapons-grade by early 2023 (Mills, 2024; IAEA, 2023b). Diplomatic revival efforts under President Biden faltered amid disputes over sanctions relief, missile testing, and Iran's cooperation with inspectors (U.S. Department of State, 2022). Heightened domestic unrest, closer alignment with Russia, and obstruction of IAEA verification further eroded trust, casting doubt on the agreement's survival.

By June 2025, U.S. policy had shifted toward overt military intervention, with strikes authorised against Iranian nuclear sites despite intelligence assessments indicating no active weapons programme (Landay, 2025; Moore & Pratz, 2025). From Tehran's perspective, such actions reinforce the strategic rationale for pursuing a nuclear deterrent (Jan, 2025). This escalation signals a broader shift from arms control and diplomatic containment toward pre-emptive force, with profound implications for the global non-proliferation regime. The politicisation of intelligence, breakdown of negotiated agreements, and deepening Iran–Russia–China alignment underscore the urgent need to re-examine the interplay between the Iranian revolutionary regime and U.S.-led non-proliferation policy in the Middle East. The central problem this study addresses is how the entrenched mistrust, shifting strategies, and escalating confrontations between Tehran and Washington undermine regional stability and challenge the normative foundations of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Rise of the Iranian Revolution

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 has been extensively examined as one of the most significant political transformations of the late twentieth century, fundamentally altering Iran's political structure, ideology, and position in the international system. Lema (2016) argues that the revolution's materialisation was largely spontaneous, rooted in rising unemployment, worsening economic conditions following the 1973 oil crisis, and disillusionment with a corrupt political system favouring the merchant elite. The religious clergy, as the most organised and credible opposition, became the natural leaders of this resistance, with Ayatollah Khomeini emerging as the central figure opposing the Pahlavi monarchy. The revolution's roots, however, extend deeper into Iran's twentieth-century political history. Afary (2025) traces its antecedents to the Constitutional Revolution of 1905–1911 and subsequent episodes of foreign intervention, notably the Anglo-Russian removal of Reza Shah in 1941 and the Anglo-American coup against Prime Minister Mosaddegh in 1953. These events entrenched authoritarian rule and foreign dependency, intensifying nationalist and religious opposition to the monarchy. My own reading suggests that these longer historical trajectories ensured that the 1979 revolution was not merely a reaction to the crises of the 1970s but rather the culmination of decades of unresolved socio-political grievances.

The Shah's "White Revolution" of 1963, described by both Doğan (2012) and Eisenstadt (2011), represented a transformative but ultimately destabilising programme of modernisation. Designed to weaken traditional landowners and consolidate support among peasants and the working class, it included land reforms, female enfranchisement, profit-sharing for industrial workers, and literacy initiatives. While these reforms were intended

to modernise Iran and legitimise the monarchy, they alienated key constituencies, especially the ulama, whose influence was curtailed. Afary (2025) observes that although the White Revolution achieved economic success in some areas, it exacerbated inequalities, disrupted rural economies, and accelerated urban migration without adequate planning. Doğan (2012) notes that the reforms created both “winners” and “losers,” generating resentment among those who blamed the Shah for their misfortunes, while his alignment with the United States further undermined his legitimacy. From my perspective, this pattern is consistent with the failure of “revolutions from above” observed in other contexts, where rapid state-led modernisation produces societal dislocation without building genuine political legitimacy.

The 1970s brought intensifying economic, political, and social pressures that accelerated the monarchy’s decline. Afary (2025) records that global economic instability and fluctuating oil revenues undermined Iran’s economy, while inflation and falling purchasing power deepened public dissatisfaction. Political repression became harsher, with opposition groups—such as the National Front and the Tudeh Party, outlawed or marginalised. By the mid-1970s, secular intellectuals, previously wary of religious authority, began to view Khomeini as the unifying figure capable of overthrowing the Shah. Khomeini’s exile did not diminish his influence; rather, his speeches, smuggled into Iran, resonated with urban migrants disillusioned by the cultural void of rapid modernisation. Eisenstadt (2011) highlights the regime’s reliance on military coercion but notes that its forces were unprepared for sustained internal unrest. This period marked the convergence of economic grievances, political repression, and religious mobilisation, which in my view created the revolutionary momentum that no reformist concession could reverse.

Events from January 1978 to February 1979 marked the decisive revolutionary phase. The initial spark came from protests in Qom following defamatory remarks against Khomeini in Ettelā‘āt, escalating through the Shi‘i tradition of forty-day mourning cycles, where each death inspired new demonstrations (Afary, 2025). Violence intensified with the September 8 “Black Friday” massacre, when security forces opened fire on protestors in Tehran. Strikes by oil workers in October 1978 crippled the economy, while Khomeini coordinated opposition from exile. By January 1979, the Shah, weakened by illness and indecision, left Iran, leaving a regency council and Prime Minister Bakhtiar unable to govern effectively. Khomeini’s triumphant return on 1 February was followed within ten days by the military’s declaration of neutrality, enabling the revolutionary takeover (Eisenstadt, 2011). From my standpoint, this sequence demonstrates how state violence, rather than quelling dissent, acted as a catalyst, transforming fragmented opposition into a unified revolutionary movement.

The consolidation of power in 1979 and 1980 saw the transformation of the revolution into an Islamic theocracy. Eisenstadt (2011) details how Khomeini’s leadership pursued a dual strategy: retaining elements of the armed forces while purging senior commanders, Islamicising the ranks, and establishing parallel institutions such as the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in May 1979. The November 1979 seizure of the U.S. Embassy by radical students, endorsed by Khomeini, precipitated the resignation of Prime Minister Bazargan and cemented clerical dominance. The Basij militia was later created to mobilise mass participation in defending the revolution. Doğan (2012) situates these developments within a broader ideological shift, arguing that the revolution’s uniqueness lay in its religious character, defying Western expectations shaped by secular revolutionary precedents. I would contend that this institutional consolidation was crucial in transforming the revolution from a popular uprising into a durable regime, albeit at the cost of political pluralism.

In sum, the literature converges on several key factors underpinning the rise of the Iranian Revolution: long-term grievances rooted in foreign intervention and authoritarian rule (Afary, 2025), the destabilising effects of rapid modernisation through the White Revolution (Doğan, 2012; Eisenstadt, 2011), and the fusion of economic crisis, political repression, and religious leadership in the 1970s (Lema, 2016). Scholars differ on the degree to which the revolution was spontaneous (Lema, 2016) or historically inevitable (Afary, 2025), yet both interpretations recognise the centrality of Khomeini’s leadership and the ulama’s organisational capacity. My analysis aligns with those who see the revolution as both the product of structural conditions and the contingencies of the late 1970s, where state miscalculations and symbolic religious politics transformed protest into revolution. The Iranian case thus challenges conventional theories of modernisation and democratisation, illustrating how rapid socio-economic change, when coupled with entrenched authoritarianism, can produce outcomes that defy Western political expectations.

United States-Iranian Nuclear Relations and the Iranian Revolution

The origins of Iran's nuclear ambitions are deeply embedded within the strategic and political context of the Cold War, where the United States played an instrumental role in shaping Tehran's initial nuclear trajectory. According to Kibaroglu (2007), the early 1950s marked a turning point when Mohammad Mossadeq's oil nationalisation policy angered Britain and triggered U.S. intervention to prevent perceived communist encroachment. This culminated in the 1953 CIA and MI6-backed coup, reinstating the Shah and solidifying Iran as a pro-Western ally. Huang (2016) notes that U.S. strategic calculations extended beyond oil security to fostering technological partnerships that could anchor Iran firmly in the Western bloc. This alignment bore fruit in 1957 when both states signed the Agreement for Cooperation Concerning Civil Uses of Atoms, under which the United States provided Tehran with training, research materials, and a 5-megawatt reactor installed at Tehran University in 1967 (Sahimi, 2004). Such cooperation coincided with Iran's accession to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which scholars like Etemad (1987) interpret as signalling Tehran's intent to embed itself in the legitimate structures of civilian nuclear development while benefiting from U.S. technological generosity.

By the late 1960s and early 1970s, Iran's nuclear infrastructure had expanded significantly, supported by a cadre of Western-trained scientists and engineers. Iran ratified the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) in 1970, a move Bazoobandi (2020) sees as a diplomatic manoeuvre to allay proliferation concerns while pursuing an ambitious nuclear energy programme. In 1974, the Shah announced plans to generate 23,000 MW of nuclear electricity by the 1990s, commissioning reactors from Germany's Kraftwerk Union and France's Framatome (Iran Watch, 2023). This policy, driven by oil export maximisation and long-term energy diversification, enjoyed strong Western backing until political turbulence began to unsettle the strategic partnership. The period also saw intensified nuclear feasibility studies and expanded uranium exploration, which, as Cordesman (2000) highlights, laid the technical foundations for future autonomy. However, while U.S. officials saw Iran's nuclear plans as a hedge against future energy insecurity, later scholarship argues that this laid the groundwork for dual-use capabilities that would become contentious after the revolution.

The Islamic Revolution of 1979 fundamentally reoriented Iran's nuclear trajectory and its relations with Washington. The overthrow of the Shah and the ascent of Ayatollah Khomeini initially led to the suspension of nuclear activities, with Khomeini declaring nuclear power unnecessary and incompatible with Islamic values (Huang, 2016). However, the U.S. embassy hostage crisis (1979–1981) not only froze bilateral relations but also prompted Washington to halt all nuclear cooperation, lobbying other Western states to follow suit (Kibaroglu, 2007). Etemad (1987) records that contracts with Kraftwerk Union and Framatome were abruptly cancelled, leaving partially completed reactors in Bushehr idle. Scholars such as Vaziri (1986) link this shift not only to ideological antagonism but also to the exigencies of the Iran–Iraq War, which diverted resources and strategic focus away from nuclear development. At this stage, Iran's nuclear file transitioned from a sphere of U.S.-Iran technical cooperation to a symbol of geopolitical mistrust.

By the mid-1980s, the realities of prolonged war and energy vulnerability forced Iran to reassess its nuclear stance. Rafsanjani's government sought to revive abandoned projects, negotiating with German and French firms for reactor completion, though U.S.-led pressure blocked such deals (Huang, 2016). Consequently, Iran diversified its partnerships, turning to Argentina for fuel cycle cooperation, China for research reactors, and Pakistan for centrifuge technology (Vaziri, 1986). Cordesman (2000) suggests that this pragmatic shift reflected Iran's growing awareness that Western embargoes could be circumvented by engaging with states outside the U.S. strategic orbit. Importantly, the recruitment of expatriate Iranian scientists during this period signified a long-term commitment to domestic expertise, reinforcing the view of Kibaroglu (2007) that the mid-1980s laid the groundwork for Iran's eventual nuclear self-reliance.

The 1990s witnessed incremental but significant progress in Iran's nuclear capacity, despite persistent Western opposition. Agreements with Russia in 1995 to complete the Bushehr reactors underscored a realignment in Iran's international partnerships, as Moscow resisted U.S. pressure to abandon the deal (Bazoobandi, 2020). International suspicion grew amid revelations of undeclared enrichment-related activities, with Western intelligence claiming that Iran's nuclear intentions extended beyond civilian purposes (Cordesman, 2000). Scholars such as Huang (2016) argue that the persistence of the nuclear programme in the face of economic sanctions illustrates both the strategic symbolism of nuclear technology in Iranian statecraft and its perceived role

as a deterrent. The shifting security architecture of the post-Cold War era, coupled with regional instability, reinforced Tehran's narrative that an indigenous nuclear capability was essential for sovereignty and strategic parity. Thus, the breakdown in U.S.–Iran nuclear cooperation was less an inevitable product of Iranian intentions than of broader political estrangement, which transformed a once-celebrated nuclear partnership into one of the most enduring sources of mistrust in modern international relations.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Nuclear Deterrence Theory

Nuclear Deterrence Theory, as developed in early nuclear strategy by Brodie (1946) and grounded in political realism, seeks to avert conflict by shaping an adversary's choices through psychological pressure. The advent of nuclear weapons after World War II triggered intense debates over deterrence, particularly during the Cold War confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union. Foundational contributions by Brodie (1946), Schelling (1960), and Wohlstetter (1959) have framed the concept's development across four broad stages: the initial strategic disruption caused by nuclear weapons, the subsequent arms race, the move toward arms control, and, in the post-Cold War period, an emphasis on countering unconventional threats (Abbasi, 2020). According to the Council on Foreign Relations (2023), deterrence is effective only when it combines *severity*, the threat of retaliation exceeding any prospective gains, and *credibility*, reinforced by actions such as weapon demonstrations and military exercises to convince adversaries of the threat's authenticity.

Yet, the applicability of deterrence theory has been increasingly questioned considering emerging security challenges and changing modes of warfare. The dissolution of the Soviet Union and events such as the 9/11 attacks revealed the inadequacy of conventional nuclear deterrence in dealing with asymmetric threats. These developments have spurred calls for adapting deterrence strategies to address hybrid warfare, which often erases the boundaries between civilian and military domains (Abbasi, 2020).

The dynamics between the Iranian Revolutionary regime and US-led non-proliferation policy in the Middle East can be interpreted through the lens of nuclear deterrence theory, which emphasizes shaping adversary decision-making through credible threats of severe retaliation. In this context, the United States seeks to dissuade Iran from pursuing nuclear weapons by combining punitive measures, such as economic sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and the implicit or explicit threat of military action, with demonstrations of military capability to enhance credibility. However, the theory's limitations become apparent given Iran's asymmetric strategy, which employs proxy forces, regional influence, and hybrid warfare tactics that fall outside the traditional nuclear confrontation model. Much like post-Cold War challenges to deterrence highlighted by Abbasi (2020), the Iranian case reveals that non-state actors, ideological motivations, and diffuse threat structures undermine the classical deterrence logic, requiring the US to complement nuclear-focused non-proliferation measures with broader, adaptive strategies that address the regime's unconventional and non-military means of contesting American power.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design to critically examine the interplay between the Iranian Revolutionary regime and US-led non-proliferation policy in the Middle East. It also adopts the documentary method, which involves the systematic gathering of secondary sources such as official policy statements, government reports, international agreements, think-tank publications, United Nations resolutions, and archival records of US-Iran relations. Supplementary sources include peer-reviewed scholarly articles, books, and credible news reports to ensure triangulation and enhance the validity of findings.

The analysis employs the textual method, focusing on the interpretation of language, discourse, and framing in these documents to identify underlying assumptions, strategic narratives, and shifts in policy approaches. The study engages in thematic coding to extract recurring patterns related to deterrence logic, credibility of threats, severity of punitive measures, and Iran's counter-strategies, including asymmetric and hybrid warfare tactics. This interpretive approach facilitates the integration of theoretical insights from nuclear deterrence theory into the empirical examination of US-Iranian interactions, thereby enabling a clearer understanding of the limitations and adaptations of deterrence in the post-Cold War Middle Eastern security landscape.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, which replaced the Shah's pro-Western monarchy with the Islamic Republic, the United States has pursued a dominant role in shaping non-proliferation policy in the Middle East, particularly in relation to Iran's nuclear ambitions. The shift in Iran's political ideology under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, from a Western-aligned monarchy to an Islamic revolutionary regime, radically altered U.S.-Iran relations and intensified Washington's concerns about nuclear proliferation in the region. This concern was embedded in a broader Cold War-era framework, where the U.S. viewed nuclear control as both a strategic imperative and a means of reinforcing regional security. In the early years following the revolution, U.S. sanctions, initially reactive to the November 1979 hostage crisis, were narrow in scope, focusing on freezing Iranian assets and restricting trade (Arslanian, 2023; Congressional Research Service, 2024). However, by the late 1980s and early 1990s, Washington's policy widened to address Iran's alleged sponsorship of terrorism, ballistic missile development, and nuclear research, signalling the start of an enduring non-proliferation strategy that would come to be supported, at least in part, by European and international institutions (Fayazmanesh, 2003; Maloney, 2015).

The Aborted Middle East Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone (NWFZ)

The conceptual basis for regional nuclear disarmament found expression in efforts to create a Middle East Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone (NWFZ), an initiative rooted in earlier Cold War proposals such as Polish Foreign Minister Adam Rapacki's 1957 plan for Central Europe (Hamel-Green, 2011). The NWFZ idea gained momentum in 1962 when Israeli intellectuals voiced fears over nuclear escalation in the Middle East (Fahm & Lewis, 2011). By 1974, Egypt and Iran had jointly tabled a United Nations General Assembly resolution for such a zone, later expanded in 1990 to encompass all weapons of mass destruction (Hamel-Green, 2011; Fahm & Lewis, 2011). Although the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) began preparing a safeguards framework in 1988, political mistrust, especially between Israel and Egypt, stalled progress, culminating in the collapse of the Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) talks in 1995 (Fahm & Lewis, 2011; Luzio, 2021). The IAEA persisted in advocating full-scope safeguards and transparency, most recently under Director General Rafael Mariano Grossi, but major conferences such as the 2015 Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference failed to produce binding outcomes due to the absence of key players, notably Israel and the U.S. (Mendenhall, 2020).

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)

The most significant U.S.-led non-proliferation achievement in recent decades was the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which emerged after the election of Iranian President Hassan Rouhani on 14 June 2013. Diplomatic talks resumed in September 2013, producing the Joint Plan of Action on 24 November 2013 and a comprehensive framework by April 2015 (Almela, 2022). Finalised in July 2015 between Iran and the P5+1 nations, with EU involvement, and implemented in January 2016, the JCPOA placed verifiable restrictions on uranium enrichment and reactor designs, allowing the IAEA unprecedented inspection authority (Babar et al., 2021, pp. 126–127; Robinson, 2023). In exchange, Iran received nuclear-related sanctions relief from the U.S., EU, and UN. Despite opposition from Israel and Saudi Arabia, the JCPOA was initially effective in constraining Iran's nuclear activities. However, the U.S. withdrawal in May 2018 under President Donald Trump, branding the agreement as "disastrous" and reinstating sanctions, destabilised the arrangement, prompting Iran to breach enrichment limits and resume activities at previously restricted sites (Nair, 2018; Practical Law Commercial Transactions, 2018; Babar et al., 2021).

The period following the U.S. withdrawal saw heightened tensions, with Iran gradually increasing enrichment levels, culminating in the IAEA's November 2022 report confirming enrichment to 60% at Fordow, a figure alarmingly close to the 90% threshold for weapons-grade uranium (Mills, 2024; International Atomic Energy Agency, 2023a). By early 2023, Iran had produced uranium enriched to 83.7%, which it attributed to technical fluctuations, though international suspicion remained (Mills, 2024; International Atomic Energy Agency, 2023b). Production levels fluctuated, with temporary reductions in mid-2023 giving way to renewed increases by November. The E3 (France, Germany, and the UK) denounced these actions in December 2023 as lacking any credible civilian justification (Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, 2023). The U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence (2024) subsequently assessed that Iran could rapidly produce weapons-grade uranium if it chose to do so.

Efforts under President Joe Biden to restore the JCPOA encountered obstacles, particularly over sanctions relief and Iran's ballistic missile programme (U.S. Department of State, 2022). Iran's domestic unrest, its alliance with Russia during the Ukraine conflict, and its obstruction of IAEA verification, by denying visas and expelling veteran inspectors in September 2023, undermined trust and transparency (Mills, 2024). Unresolved issues about undeclared nuclear material and sites persisted, with the IAEA's Director General stressing the urgency of full cooperation. Although indirect talks and prisoner swaps facilitated by Oman signalled tentative diplomatic openings, the core dispute over enrichment limits remained unresolved, leaving the JCPOA's future in doubt (France 24, 2022).

The U.S. strategy of deterrence through sanctions has been integral to its non-proliferation agenda. Beginning with Carter-era asset freezes in 1979, these measures expanded significantly in the 1980s and 1990s but only gained coordinated international backing after the 2002 revelation of undeclared Iranian nuclear facilities (Congressional Research Service, 2024). From 2006 onwards, the United Nations Security Council imposed multilateral sanctions, joined by the European Union, which targeted Iran's financial, shipping, and especially oil sectors (Arslanian, 2023). These measures helped bring Iran to the negotiating table for the JCPOA. However, post-2018, sanctions again became unilateral tools of U.S. pressure, with Europe maintaining some nuclear-related restrictions domestically but failing to restore the multilateral unity of the pre-JCPOA era (Mills, 2024).

This trajectory of the U.S.-led non-proliferation policy in the Middle East since the Iranian Revolution reveals reached a critical point in June 2025, when Trump not only gave tacit and overt support for Israeli airstrikes on Iranian nuclear facilities but also authorised direct U.S. military involvement (Landay, 2025). On 21 June 2025, B-2 bombers targeted key Iranian nuclear sites at Fordow, Natanz, and Esfahan (Moore & Pratz, 2025), in a move that marked a decisive escalation in U.S.-Iran hostilities. These actions were preceded by contradictory presidential statements, threatening evacuation in Tehran on one hand, and hinting at diplomatic engagement on the other, revealing an unpredictable strategic posture (Psaropoulos, 2025). Crucially, Trump's public repudiation of U.S. Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard's verification that Iran was not pursuing nuclear weapons exposed the susceptibility of U.S. policy to politicised intelligence manipulation, eroding the credibility of non-proliferation claims (Landay, 2025).

From Iran's perspective, actions of the United States towards its nuclear programme, strengthen the rationale for acquiring a nuclear deterrent, as the principle of mutual vulnerability is foundational to strategic stability (Jan, 2025). While sanctions have slowed Iran's nuclear development, they have also incentivised strategic realignments. Tehran has deepened its ties with Russia and China, partly to mitigate economic isolation and partly as a counterweight to Western influence (Mills, 2024). This has complicated the deterrence calculus, as Iran can offset some sanction impacts through alternative markets and security partnerships. The West's challenge remains to balance coercive pressure with credible diplomatic engagement, recognising that an overreliance on sanctions risks entrenching Iran's defiance rather than incentivising compliance. In this light, U.S. policy since the rise of the Iranian Revolutionary Regime has shifted from containment through arms control to pre-emptive strikes justified on contested grounds, a shift that risks legitimising preventive warfare by nuclear-armed states and undermines the normative framework of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT).

CONCLUSION

The trajectory of U.S.-led non-proliferation policy in the Middle East since the 1979 Iranian Revolution reveals a shift from multilateral arms control diplomacy toward increasingly unilateral, coercive, and ultimately militarised strategies, with Iran's nuclear programme remaining the central axis of contention. Early efforts, including support for the Middle East Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone and eventual negotiation of the JCPOA, demonstrated that sustained diplomacy, backed by coordinated international sanctions, could verifiably constrain Iran's nuclear activities. However, the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018 fractured the multilateral consensus, emboldened Iranian enrichment, and heightened regional insecurity. The escalation to direct U.S. military strikes in 2025, justified amid politicised intelligence disputes, marked a decisive break from norms underpinning the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, risking the legitimisation of preventive warfare by nuclear powers. These developments have not only entrenched Iran's pursuit of strategic depth through alliances with Russia and China but also underscored the paradox that overreliance on sanctions and force can reinforce, rather than diminish, the perceived value of nuclear deterrence for states under pressure.

Therefore, to restore credibility and effectiveness in Middle East non-proliferation policy, the United States should prioritise re-establishing a multilateral diplomatic framework, potentially a revised JCPOA, anchored in verifiable enrichment limits, robust IAEA access, and phased, reciprocal sanctions relief. This should be coupled with regional security dialogues that address not only Iran's nuclear programme but also Israel's undeclared arsenal and broader WMD concerns, thereby reducing asymmetries that fuel proliferation incentives. Washington must also insulate intelligence assessments from political interference to maintain trust among allies and adversaries alike, while leveraging backchannel diplomacy and economic incentives alongside targeted, reversible sanctions to encourage Iranian compliance without pushing Tehran deeper into strategic alignment with Russia and China.

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