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## Iran's Nuclear Program and Its Implications on Global Security: A Way Forward

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### Abstract

The nuclear program of Iran has been a point of heated debate on the international level for a long period of time. Iran's diplomatic relations with the global community, regional rivalries, and the role of the Western world have shaped much of its trajectory. This paper aims to relate historical, regional, and global factors to take into account the historical evolution of Iran's Nuclear Program in the reign of Shah, during the Cold War, post-Cold War, Iran-Iraq war, and efforts of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in arranging negotiations, and the contemporary challenges faced by Iran. The study also considers the role of major agreements, action plans, and global security concerns in relation to Iran's Nuclear Program. A critical focus is placed on the implications of Iran's nuclear program for regional stability, particularly in relation to Gulf countries, whose security perceptions have influenced both diplomatic negotiations and military stance. The paper employs a mixed-methods approach, drawing on official IAEA reports, policy analyses, think-tank publications, and recent developments to provide a comprehensive assessment of risks, motivations, and strategic calculations about the issue. The central argument emphasises that Iran's nuclear program is not solely a technical or energy issue, but a complex geopolitical challenge embedded in regional rivalries, domestic politics, and great-power competition. The study concludes by outlining a feasible way forward, advocating a combination of transparency, multilateral verification, regional dialogue, and calibrated incentives to achieve long-term stability, prevent proliferation, and create a framework for sustainable coexistence between Iran and the international community.

**Key words:** Iran's nuclear program, Global security, JCPOA, IAEA

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## 1.1 Introduction

The contemporary international, especially Western, political world sees Iran's nuclear program as a global threat and a consequential challenge. The program that initially started in the 1950s, with the support of the

Western world, as an energy production project for civilians, gradually converted into a contentious and suspicious nuclear proliferating program. Iran believes that its nuclear program and its development are its sovereign fundamental right and are aligned with the agenda of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Still, neighbouring Gulf countries (predominant monarchies), Israel, and the United States perceive it as a global security threat. In account of all this, over the last two decades, several negotiations, sanctions, and other pressure strategies have been put into play; the EU-3 negotiations of 2000, and the Landmark Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015 (R. J. Reardon 2011).

Iran's nuclear program and perception of the world about its consequences have several implications and explanations; regional-historical rivalry of the Gulf States, and great powers competition (US, Russia, and China) have complicated the situation for Iran over the last two decades. Failure of JCPOA in 2018, in which the US withdrew from the deal, led to intensified miscalculations and fear of nuclear proliferation of Tehran's expanding influence since its emergence.

This paper aims to provide an overview of the historical, regional, and international explanations and later implications of the program in the global political context. This paper also puts forward some politico-psychological explanations of the Iranian government's stake in its very close attachment to its nuclear program.

The deep-rooted historical, regional, and political setups shaped Iran's nuclear program over its decades-long international, domestic, economic, and strategic struggle. It's not possible to eradicate it through sanctions, coercion, and technical restrictions. The only rational and justice-based way forward is Iran's economic and diplomatic engagement within the region and with the rest of the world that perceives it as a security threat.

## 1.2 Historical Background of Iran's Nuclear Program

Iran's program of Nuclear-Energy Ambition initiated in the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi in the

context of the Cold War, when the United States helped Iran in the construction of its first step as the "Atoms for Peace Program" in 1957, when Washington and Tehran signed the agreement of atomic energy for civilian purposes in terms of energy production (Aljazeera 2025). Later in 1967, Tehran Nuclear Research Centre (TNRC), which also had the Tehran Research Reactor (TRR), which was a research reactor with a capacity of 5 megawatts of electricity production from nuclear energy, was established with US cooperation (Bhagat 2006). This program provided a foundational setup for research and nuclear infrastructure (Tehran 2004). All this development laid the foundation of the Atomic Energy Organisation of Iran (AEOI), which was initiated in 1974 by Iran's energy sector, which further announced nationwide installation of more than 20 nuclear power reactors in the upcoming years (Albright and Sticker 2010). Germany also helped Iran in building light-water reactors at Bushehr, which began construction by the mid-1970s. Iran prospected possibilities of the mining of Uranium, ore processing, and manufacturing of fuel elements so that the Iranian government could be able to support civilian energy demand and its latent fuel-cycle capacity (Kerr 2016). But this ambitious momentum was disrupted by the 1979 Islamic revolution of Iran that intimidated any Western cooperation plans and terminated existing contracts, which also included Bushehr's reactor, and that led to the suspension or dormancy of all the other nuclear programs too, at least publicly (Smyth 2015). The Iraq-Iran war of the 1980s further escalated the sense of vulnerability in the Iranian government when Iraq used chemical weapons against Iran. That war made Iran think and rely again on apparently abandoned nuclear program in which the West was completely out in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution (J. Ali 2001).

### 1.2.1 Cold War and Post-Cold War Iranian Resurgence

Then, in the 1990s, the Atomic Energy Organisation of Iran (AEOI) allowed, without Western support, Iranians to start rebuilding their nuclear infrastructure for enrichment and conversion of Uranium independently. The Russian reassurance in 1995 for the completion of the Bushehr reactor turned the whole situation for Iran. Although that reenactment of the reactor was within the international safeguards framework that ensured transparency and peaceful use of nuclear energy for civil use only (Watch 2023). However, in the early 2000s, this narrative of the Iranian government became suspicious when some external intelligence reports and internal leaks pointed out clandestine activities of fuel

conversion plants. In August 2002, a dramatic revelation — made by an exiled Iranian opposition group — exposed previously undisclosed facilities: a uranium-enrichment plant near Natanz and a heavy-water production plant near Arak. This disclosure triggered a major international crisis. The revelation led to intense diplomatic pressure and brought the nuclear file into the centre stage for global proliferation debates (Kerr 2016).

### **1.2.2 Sanctions, Confrontations, and Negotiations in the 1990s and 00s**

Iran entered into the phase of negotiation with the EU-3-United Kingdom, Germany, and France and signed two agreements of an interim nature in 2003 and 2004, which led to the suspension of the enrichment of Uranium and acceptance of inspections of IAEA. But these agreements were dissolved when mutual distrust grew due to Iran's undisclosed work on Uranium enrichment. The United Nations (UN) and Security Council (SC) imposed sanctions on Iran as a result of diplomatic failure on Iran's behalf. Meanwhile, Iran's nuclear program has been conducted with reduced international transparency in a secret manner, which escalated distrust of Iran by the global community and major Western powers (J. Ali 2001). In 2013, under the presidency of Hassan Rouhani, Iran initiated renewed diplomacy with the world's major powers. After prolonged negotiations, on 14 July 2015, the parties concluded the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) (Tehran 2004). Under its terms, Iran agreed to significant limitations: uranium enrichment was suspended, stockpiles of low-enriched uranium were dramatically reduced, and some centrifuges were dismantled or put under IAEA seal as monitoring was enhanced by the global community (Ramesh and Tsegaye 2011). However, the progress under JCPOA proved fragile. In May 2018, the United States withdrew from the agreement, re-imposed wide-ranging economic sanctions on Iran, and significantly increased pressure on Tehran. In response, Iran began to step back from its JCPOA commitments (Watch 2023).

### **1.2.3 Iran's Nuclear Enrichment and Contemporary Tensions: 2018 to Present**

As the US withdrew from the JCPOA in 2018, Iran's nuclear program gradually moved back toward the capabilities it had before the agreement, and in several areas even surpassed them. By the early 2020s, many states and international observers argued that Iran was once again operating at levels that raised serious proliferation concerns. Increased enrichment to higher

purity levels, expansion of centrifuge installations, and a steady reduction in the IAEA's access to monitoring equipment contributed to renewed fears of a possible "breakout" scenario. Iran, however, continued to assert that its activities remained within the bounds of peaceful nuclear development (R. Reardon 2012).

During the same period, Iran's only functioning nuclear power plant at Bushehr became fully operational. Although the plant is based on a Russian light-water reactor and operates under strict international safeguards—with Russia providing fresh fuel and retrieving spent fuel—it nonetheless underscored the broader dual-use dilemma. Any large civilian reactor has the theoretical potential to produce plutonium if the spent fuel is diverted, even if such diversion remains unlikely under current monitoring arrangements.

Taken together, these developments have placed Iran in a state of strategic ambiguity. The country now maintains a highly developed nuclear infrastructure, enhanced enrichment capabilities, and ongoing fuel-cycle activities, yet operates within an environment marked by incomplete transparency and strained diplomatic engagement. This combination has left the international community uncertain about Iran's long-term intentions and the future trajectory of its nuclear program.

### **1.3 Regional Rivalry of the Gulf Countries and Iran's Nuclear Program**

Iran's nuclear program is not merely for the neighbouring Gulf Countries a technical matter of Uranium enrichment, but it's a challenge to the balance of power in the region. Arab states perceive it as a potential threat to their hegemony in the region that could lower their strategic weight. Saudi Arabia sees into this matter through the lens of Shia-Sunni geopolitical rivalry, too.

That spreads to Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, and Syria (Landau 2008). States like the United Arab Emirates (UAE), even though smaller in size, put forward the same apprehensions about Iran's nuclear program. These two states have old territorial disputes with Iran and the UAE over the islands of Tunbs (greater and lesser) and Abu Musa. These states perceive Iran's Nuclear Program as an influential factor having the upper hand in negotiations of these territorial disputes (Tehsin 2017). This security dilemma reflects deep regional aggressive interventions in each other's trust deficit; Iran perceives military bases of the US in these Gulf Countries as a security threat, and justifies its

ongoing nuclear fuel cycle and acquisition of missile capabilities (Chrisafis 2025).

In sum, Iran's nuclear program sits at the centre of a larger geopolitical contest in the Gulf. For Tehran, nuclear development symbolises autonomy, deterrence, and scientific achievement. For the Gulf monarchies, it represents a power shift that threatens their security, political stability, and regional influence. As long as the underlying political tensions and ideological divisions persist, Iran's nuclear trajectory will continue to be interpreted through the prism of rivalry. Any sustainable diplomatic solution, therefore, must address not only technical aspects of the nuclear program but also the broader regional security environment that amplifies mistrust between Iran and its Gulf neighbors.

### 1.3.1 Iran-Israel Conflict

Iran and Israel have been engaged in proxy-state conflicts since 1985, as Iran supported Lebanon in the Israel-Lebanon conflict. Israel also accuses Iran of supporting Hamas and Hezbollah in the Israel-Palestine conflict. The Iran-Israel regional conflict needs a special focus when discussing Iran's nuclear program. Although both countries don't share a border, the conflict between them cannot be ignored. Israel is situated in the west of Iran, and between them are Iraq, Jordan, and Syria. After the nuclear deal with Iran, Israel remained consistent in its efforts to highlight and prevent Iranian nuclear capability. Not all Israeli key decision makers are against Iran's nuclear program, but their political security establishments are largely opposed to it, and see it as a major destabilising regional activity (Kaye 2016). Israel in the region is surrounded by unfriendly and unwelcoming neighbours, strongly capable of military capacity and willing to show it off, and expects the United States to play a central role in using force against Iran (Ben-Meir 2010). Iran is in no mood or position to step back from its ambitions of being a nuclear power in the region due to its own reasons, culture, and historical background. Israel has the US backing and other European ties, but Iran has geographic fortune in the form of the Hormuz Strait that controls roughly 25% of the distribution of petroleum and its products by providing passage of the trade to other Gulf countries as well. Both countries have their own geographic and alliances advantages and disadvantages, and are manipulating these factors in their favour where it suits them.

### 1.4 Politico-Psychological Explanation

The politico-psychological explanation of Iran's nuclear program and the reaction of the Western world, regional rivalries, and Iran's own struggle to protect its national identity need special attention. The Western world generally, and the US, especially, has grievances and security fears over the clandestine development of Uranium enrichment infrastructure. This fear of the US and the deterrence of Iran can be explained by understanding the Security Dilemma, which states,

*“The basic notion of the security dilemma is a simple one. Faced with what is perceived to be (either correctly or incorrectly) a threatening international security environment, national leaders take actions they perceive to be defensive ones (such as arms buildups, increased defence spending, fortification of borders, development of national missile defences, etc.) to protect themselves from these external threats. Knowing that their own motivations are peaceful, these leaders tend to assume that their true (peaceful) intentions are equally clear to all of their neighbors. However, unlike the relatively unthreatening steps (at least to law-abiding neighbors) that a homeowner might take to enhance the security of his or her own house from burglars (such as installing alarms or better locks, putting bars on windows, or buying a guard dog), equivalent actions taken by states to enhance their security vis-à-vis other states require the building of more imposing militaries or defenses, actions which inevitably undermine the security of their neighbors (Cottam, Mastors, et al., Introduction to Political Psychology 2016)”*

The above-quoted lines explain how the Western world perceives Iran's nuclear program and is offended by it, and how Iran, being concerned about regional rivalry and US presence in its neighbouring Gulf Countries, is an excellent example of *the Security Dilemma*.

After the 1979 Islamic Revolution, however, the meaning of the program changed dramatically. The revolution, the hostage crisis, and the war with Iraq created a strong sense of vulnerability among Iran's new leaders. In this environment, nuclear development came to represent national independence and resistance to outside interference. By the 1990s, the Islamic Republic promoted the program as a symbol of scientific self-reliance and a right that Iran must defend. This view gained public acceptance and helped create a form of “nuclear nationalism,” where technological

advancement became a point of collective pride (V. Ali 2013).

The negotiation of the JCPOA under President Rouhani changed the tone temporarily. Many Iranians hoped that diplomacy would bring economic relief and reduce tensions, but the U.S. withdrawal from the deal in 2018 revived deep distrust, validated long-held suspicions about Western intentions, and empowered voices arguing that compromise only invites more pressure. Subsequent assassinations of Iranian scientists and intensified sanctions fueled a sense of victimisation, reinforcing what scholars call “*reactive nationalism*” (Cottam, Mastors, et al., *The Political Psychology of Nationalism*)

Since then, Iran’s nuclear behaviour in the context of faster enrichment, insistence on autonomy, and a more risk-tolerant approach reflects leaders who feel trapped in a situation of constant deprivation. Public attitudes also remain mixed: economic frustrations coexist with strong symbolic attachment to the program as a matter of dignity and historical justice. Overall, Iran’s nuclear trajectory cannot be understood solely through strategic calculations; it is deeply rooted in its identity, collective memory, and political psychology.

The international media has been blaming Iran for decades for supporting Hamas in Palestine, a terrorist group of Palestinians fighting against Israel. It’s widely believed in the Western world that Hamas is the brain-child of Iran (Awwad 2024). Social Identity Theory of Political Psychology has its explanation in the way that shared Islamic culture history, generally, and having a common enemy in the form of Israel, exclusively made this alliance possible. Image Theory has its implication here too, that Iran and Palestine both perceive Israel as their enemy, and the shared Social Identity of both are overlapping here when we try to analyse the politico-psychological reasoning of this alliance.

### 1.5 Way Forward

Iran should ensure transparency and strive for deliberate efforts of trust-building. A long period of isolation and limited cooperation just for protecting state’s efforts to protect its nuclear program is unfair to common Iranian people who are facing direct and dire consequences of economic sanctions, limited trade opportunities with the near and far markets of global setup, and denied or long struggled access and mobility to several global platforms for education and research purposes-which are the fundamental rights of every global citizen. Iran should fully comply with the protocols of IAEA

monitoring and be transparent about its position to improve domestic and international confidence in its citizens.

For the International community, there is a strong need to understand historical, ideological, and regional makeup of the country to develop a better understanding of the viewpoint of the Iranian people about their decades-long attachment to their nuclear program, even at the expense of their freedom, economic liberalisation, and nerve-wracking spans of international isolation (Ayub 2014). Further sanctions and pressure on them would worsen the situation. The world has seen Iran’s response to the most recent Iran-Israel conflict. In June 2025, Israel attacked Iran’s military sites, missile infrastructure, and command control centres in a surprise air campaign-Operation Rising Lion. In retaliation for that air strike, Iran fired ballistic missiles and drones in Israeli territories without differentiating civilian or military sites, and gave a clear message to the world that they are fully capable of turning a conflict into an open interstate war (Motamedi 2025).

Coercion is a negative peace solution that doesn’t stay as a long-term solution; conflict will rise back once the situation is favourable for a hostile environment. Trust-based negotiations, setting non-proliferation objectives, and a sustainable roadmap for economic and strategic engagement with Iran should be considered seriously if the global community seriously wants to help Iran in balancing out this issue.

The way forward cannot ignore the security concerns of Gulf countries, which see Iran’s nuclear program as a potential threat to their strategic interests. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Israel remain particularly sensitive to developments in enrichment and fuel-cycle capabilities. Ignoring these perspectives risks triggering a regional nuclear arms race or proxy escalation. Therefore, any long-term solution should incorporate dialogue with Gulf States, emphasising transparency, confidence-building, and possibly regional frameworks for nuclear oversight. Although politically challenging, such engagement could reduce mistrust and foster collective security arrangements that address the concerns of all regional actors, rather than relying solely on international pressure on Iran.

Finally, the path forward demands strategic patience. Quick fixes or temporary compromises may reduce immediate tensions but rarely resolve underlying mistrust or structural insecurity. A sustainable solution involves a comprehensive framework in which Iran sees

its nuclear program as a source of peaceful progress, while the international community can be confident that proliferation risks are managed. Success requires a combination of diplomacy, technical oversight, regional engagement, and gradual normalisation of economic relations. By integrating these elements, it becomes possible to transform the Iranian nuclear challenge from a persistent source of tension into an opportunity for managed coexistence, stability, and confidence-building in the region. Seeking global security while integrating Iran in regional social and economic engagements should be the priority of those who are sincerely looking for a solution. Otherwise, there is no way forward. Iran, with all its efforts and resilience, despite all the regional and global resistance, has been pursuing what it wants on its way to becoming a Nuclear Power, and it shall continue it for the foreseeable future.

### 1.6 Conclusion

Iran's nuclear program represents a multidimensional challenge that extends far beyond technical questions of enrichment or reactor design. Its historical evolution, shaped by domestic politics, regional rivalries, and international interventions, reveals a pattern in which strategic ambition, national pride, and security concerns intersect with global non-proliferation norms. The repeated cycles of negotiation, sanctions, and temporary agreements demonstrate both the potential and the limitations of diplomacy in constraining nuclear ambitions. At the same time, the regional dimension, particularly the reactions of Gulf countries and Israel, highlights how Iran's nuclear trajectory is inseparable from broader security dynamics in the Middle East. Recent developments, including the 2025 Israel–Iran war, underscore the risks of escalation when transparency, trust, and multilateral oversight are absent.

Looking ahead, a sustainable way forward requires a nuanced combination of strategies: Iran must demonstrate genuine transparency, allow rigorous verification, and pursue civilian nuclear development responsibly; the international community must offer calibrated incentives, enforce safeguards, and engage in constructive dialogue; and regional actors must be included in mechanisms that build confidence and reduce the likelihood of arms races. Only by addressing the technical, political, and security dimensions in tandem can the Iranian nuclear issue be transformed from a source of tension into an opportunity for managed stability and cooperation. The path is challenging, but with patience, coordination, and mutual accountability, it is possible to achieve a framework that

balances Iran's sovereign rights with global security imperatives.

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