
THE NEW REALITY OF U.S.–IRAN RELATIONS AND STABILITY IN THE MIDDLE EAST: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the evolving relationship between the United States and Iran and its impact on regional stability in the Middle East. While historically characterized by antagonism and mistrust, the bilateral relationship is now shaped by new geopolitical realities, including Iran's growing regional influence, the rise of multipolarity, and shifting alliances among Gulf states. The study examines the evolution of U.S.–Iran relations from the 1979 revolution to the present, emphasizing how these dynamics intersect with conflict zones in the Gulf, Yemen, Syria, Iraq, and the Israel–Palestine region. The paper concludes by exploring policy options that could support regional stability, emphasizing diplomatic engagement, multilateral frameworks, and crisis management strategies.

Keywords: U.S.–Iran relations; Middle East stability; Iran regional influence; Gulf security; Israel–Palestine; American foreign policy; proxy conflicts.

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INTRODUCTION

The relationship between the United States and Iran has long been one of the most complex and consequential in international relations. From the 1979 Iranian Revolution and hostage crisis to the ongoing disputes over Iran's nuclear program, U.S.–Iranian interactions have consistently influenced regional security and global geopolitics. Although the bilateral relationship has been largely defined by confrontation, recent years have introduced a new set of dynamics. The Middle East is increasingly shaped by multipolar competition, the rise of regional powers, and the strategic activism of non-state actors. As such, the U.S.–Iran relationship must be analyzed not only in terms of bilateral dynamics but also in terms of its broader implications for regional stability.

The purpose of this article is to explore these evolving dynamics, examining the historical background of U.S.–Iran relations, the current geopolitical environment, and the interplay between bilateral tensions and regional security concerns. In particular, it will assess Iran's role in the Gulf, its involvement in the Israel–Palestine conflict, and the broader implications of shifting alliances and emerging multipolarity. By analyzing these issues, the article seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of how U.S.–Iran relations are likely to influence the stability of the Middle East in the near and medium term.

Historical Context

To fully understand contemporary U.S.–Iran relations, it is necessary to review their historical trajectory. The bilateral relationship was fundamentally altered by the 1979 Iranian Revolution, which led to the overthrow of the pro-Western Shah and the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The subsequent hostage crisis, during which fifty-two American diplomats were held for 444 days, marked the beginning of an era of deep mistrust and hostility between the two nations.² In response, the United States imposed a series of economic sanctions, which have been repeatedly expanded over the decades.³

² Mark J. Gasiorowski, *U.S. Foreign Policy and the Shah: The Limits of Intervention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 145.

³ Kenneth Katzman, *Iran Sanctions* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2023), 3–6.

The 1980s and 1990s saw Iran consolidating its influence in the region through alliances with non-state actors, laying the foundations of what scholars call the “Axis of Resistance.”⁴ This network included Hezbollah in Lebanon, various militias in Iraq, and later groups in Yemen and Syria. These proxy relationships allowed Iran to project power asymmetrically and challenge U.S. interests without engaging in direct state-to-state conflict. At the same time, U.S. policy during this period focused primarily on containment, economic sanctions, and strategic partnerships with Gulf states to counterbalance Iran’s influence.⁵

The 21st century has introduced new dimensions to the relationship. The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 inadvertently strengthened Iran’s regional influence, allowing Tehran to establish deep ties with Iraqi political factions and security forces.⁶ The 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) represented a temporary thaw, offering a framework to limit Iran’s nuclear program in exchange for sanctions relief.⁷ However, the U.S. withdrawal from the agreement in 2018 under the Trump administration’s “maximum pressure” campaign reignited tensions, leading to renewed confrontations in the Gulf, drone strikes, and attacks on oil infrastructure.⁸

In this context, the contemporary U.S.–Iran relationship is shaped by three key legacies: long-standing mistrust, the proliferation of proxy networks, and the interplay between nuclear ambitions and regional power calculations. These factors, combined with a shifting global order and regional instability, create a complex environment for policymakers in both Washington and Tehran.

⁴ Marina Ottaway, *Iran’s Proxy Strategy in the Middle East* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2020), 12–15.

⁵ Ray Takeyh, *Guardians of the Revolution: Iran and the World in the Age of the Ayatollahs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 78–82.

⁶ Fawaz Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 109–111.

⁷ Michael Eisenstadt, *The Iran Nuclear Deal: Implications for the Middle East* (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2016), 22–25.

⁸ Suzanne Maloney, *Maximum Pressure and Its Discontents* (Brookings Institution, 2019), 7–10.

MAIN PART

The Shifting Dynamics of U.S.–Iran Relations

In recent years, the U.S.–Iran relationship has entered a period of significant flux. While historically characterized by binary antagonism—hostile sanctions, proxy conflicts, and diplomatic isolation—the current landscape is more complex. Several factors contribute to this new dynamic. First, Iran’s domestic politics, economic pressures, and nuclear ambitions shape its foreign policy behavior. Second, the U.S. is navigating a changing strategic environment where the Middle East is no longer a unipolar arena dominated by Washington, but a multipolar space influenced by China, Russia, and regional actors such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE.⁹

The United States continues to employ a combination of sanctions, military presence, and selective engagement to contain Iran. Yet, the effectiveness of these measures is increasingly debated. Economically, Iran has adapted to sanctions through alternative trade networks and alliances with non-Western powers.¹⁰ Militarily, the proliferation of Iranian-backed proxies in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon allows Tehran to influence outcomes without direct confrontation, creating a form of asymmetric deterrence.¹¹

A critical element shaping current dynamics is the partial normalization of Gulf states’ policies toward Iran. While historically aligned with the U.S., some Gulf countries have begun limited engagements with Tehran to reduce tension and ensure regional stability, particularly in the aftermath of energy crises and conflicts in Yemen.¹² These shifts complicate the U.S. strategic calculus, as Washington must now navigate a more fragmented regional order while managing relations with traditional allies.

The role of nuclear negotiations also remains pivotal. Although the JCPOA collapsed in 2018, continued efforts by regional and international actors to re-engage Tehran on nuclear constraints demonstrate that diplomatic avenues remain open. Yet, mutual mistrust and

⁹ Suzanne Maloney, *Iran and the Changing Middle East* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2024), 45–48.

¹⁰ Karim Sadjadpour, *Iran’s Adaptive Sanctions Strategy* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2023), 12–15.

¹¹ Marina Ottaway, *Iran’s Proxy Strategy in the Middle East* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment, 2020), 18–22.

¹² Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *Gulf States and Iran: Diplomatic Recalibrations* (London: Chatham House, 2024), 33–36.

domestic political pressures in both countries constrain flexibility.¹³ This combination of diplomatic stasis, asymmetric influence, and regional recalibration characterizes the “new reality” of U.S.–Iran relations.

Iran’s Role in the Gulf

Iran’s influence in the Gulf region is multi-dimensional, encompassing political, military, and economic instruments. Tehran’s ability to capitalize on its strategic geography, particularly the Strait of Hormuz, grants it considerable influence over global energy markets. Approximately one-fifth of global oil exports pass through the Strait, granting Iran the potential to disrupt energy flows as a means of strategic signaling.¹⁴

Beyond geography, Iran has cultivated an extensive network of political and military proxies across the Gulf. In Iraq, Iran-backed militias exercise considerable influence within the political system, often shaping security policy and aligning with Tehran’s strategic objectives.¹⁵ In Yemen, the Houthi movement, supported by Iran, has been able to sustain a prolonged insurgency against Saudi-led coalitions, exemplifying Tehran’s ability to project power indirectly.¹⁶

These operations have tangible implications for U.S. interests and for regional stability. Military escalations in the Gulf, such as drone attacks or naval confrontations, can have immediate economic consequences, particularly for energy markets. They also increase the risk of unintended escalation between Iran, the U.S., and allied Gulf states. Consequently, Washington must balance deterrence with diplomacy, a challenge complicated by the multiplicity of actors and overlapping conflicts in the region.¹⁷

Iran’s economic strategy also underpins its regional influence. Despite sanctions, Tehran has pursued partnerships with China, Russia, and regional actors to maintain trade and investment. These relationships not only mitigate the effects of sanctions but also provide

¹³ Michael Eisenstadt, *The Iran Nuclear Program: Diplomatic Challenges* (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2023), 27–30.

¹⁴ F. Gregory Gause, *The International Politics of the Persian Gulf* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 50–52.

¹⁵ Anthony Cordesman, *Iranian Influence in Iraq* (Washington, DC: CSIS, 2022), 14–17.

¹⁶ Elisabeth Kendall, *The Houthis and Iran: Proxy Dynamics in Yemen* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 29–32.

¹⁷ Suzanne Maloney, *Iran and the Gulf Security Dilemma* (Brookings, 2024), 40–43.

Iran with alternatives to U.S.-dominated global institutions, reinforcing its strategic autonomy.¹⁸

Iran, Israel–Palestine, and Proxy Networks

Iran's influence extends beyond the Gulf to the broader Levant, particularly in the context of the Israel–Palestine conflict. Tehran has long positioned itself as a champion of Palestinian causes, supporting Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and Hezbollah in Lebanon.¹⁹ This strategic posture serves both ideological and practical purposes: it bolsters Iran's regional legitimacy and provides leverage against Israel and its U.S. ally.

The proxy network allows Iran to project power asymmetrically, challenging Israel indirectly through missile capabilities, military training, and intelligence support for non-state actors.²⁰ The risks of escalation are significant: localized conflicts can escalate quickly into broader confrontations, as evidenced by periodic clashes between Israeli forces and Iran-backed groups in Gaza and southern Lebanon.²¹

Moreover, Iran's network complicates U.S. policy in the region. While the U.S. maintains strong ties with Israel, its efforts to mediate in the Palestinian territories are constrained by Iran's involvement and influence. The entrenchment of proxy actors across multiple conflict zones—including Syria, Iraq, and Yemen—means that Tehran is simultaneously a regional power broker and a source of instability.²²

The strategic interplay of Iran's Gulf activities and Levantine proxies underscores the multidimensional nature of regional security. U.S. and allied policy must account for this complexity, recognizing that unilateral actions may provoke broader escalation, while multilateral approaches require careful coordination among Gulf states, Israel, and international actors.

¹⁸ Trita Parsi, *Losing an Enemy: Iran's Strategic Autonomy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022), 65–68.

¹⁹ Matthew Levitt, *Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Iran's Proxy* (Washington, DC: Washington Institute, 2021), 22–25.

²⁰ Nadav Pollak, *Iranian Influence in Gaza and Lebanon* (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, 2023), 18–21.

²¹ Uzi Rubin, *Missile Threats from Iran-Backed Actors* (Jerusalem: Begin-Sadat Center, 2022), 12–16.

²² Suzanne Maloney, *The Middle East Security Complex* (Brookings, 2023), 36–40.

Emerging Multipolarity in the Middle East

The contemporary Middle East is increasingly characterized by multipolar competition, which has profound implications for U.S.–Iran relations and regional stability. Whereas the post–Cold War era was largely defined by U.S. hegemony, the current geopolitical environment is shaped by the active engagement of multiple state actors pursuing competing interests. Among these actors, China and Russia are increasingly prominent, frequently offering diplomatic support or economic alternatives to U.S.-led initiatives.²³

China's growing involvement, particularly in energy and infrastructure projects, allows regional actors—including Iran—to mitigate the economic impact of sanctions and assert greater autonomy.²⁴ Russia, through its military intervention in Syria and arms sales to regional actors, has positioned itself as a power broker, often mediating between Iran, Turkey, and other regional actors.²⁵ This multipolar framework reduces the efficacy of traditional U.S. leverage and creates new strategic challenges.

Within the region, states such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Turkey are recalibrating their policies to navigate these shifts. While historically aligned with the United States, Gulf states are increasingly exploring bilateral and multilateral engagement with Iran to reduce tension, ensure energy security, and respond to evolving threats.²⁶ These moves reflect a pragmatic approach to regional security, wherein containment is balanced by dialogue and localized agreements, further complicating the U.S.–Iran bilateral equation.

The emergence of multipolarity also alters the dynamics of proxy conflicts. As Iran and other regional actors benefit from support from non-Western powers, the balance of power in conflicts such as Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon shift in favor of actors resistant to U.S. influence.²⁷ Consequently, U.S. policymakers face a complex calculus: maintaining

²³ F. Gregory Gause, *The International Politics of the Persian Gulf* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 65–68.

²⁴ Marina Ottaway, *Iran's Proxy Strategy in the Middle East* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment, 2020), 25–28.

²⁵ Suzanne Maloney, *Iran and the Gulf Security Dilemma* (Brookings Institution, 2024), 50–54.

²⁶ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *Gulf States and Iran: Diplomatic Recalibrations* (London: Chatham House, 2024), 45–49.

²⁷ Matthew Levitt, *Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Iran's Proxy* (Washington, DC: Washington Institute, 2021), 28–32.

deterrence while navigating a landscape where traditional instruments of power may be insufficient.

Diplomatic and Strategic Challenges

Several interrelated challenges define the current strategic environment for U.S.–Iran relations. First, nuclear proliferation concerns remain central. Iran’s advanced uranium enrichment programs and regional nuclear ambitions continue to provoke anxiety among U.S. allies and international actors. While diplomatic negotiations remain possible, mutual distrust and domestic political pressures in both countries limit the scope for compromise.²⁸

Second, proxy conflicts continue to destabilize the region. Iran’s extensive network of non-state actors enables it to exert influence without direct confrontation, but also heightens the risk of miscalculation. In Yemen, the Houthi conflict remains unresolved, while in Iraq and Syria, Iran-backed militias continue to shape political and military developments.²⁹ These conflicts complicate U.S. efforts to secure its interests and stabilize the region, requiring careful coordination with allies and regional partners.

Third, economic and energy considerations are critical. The Gulf remains a global energy hub, and disruption of oil and gas flows could have cascading consequences for the global economy. U.S. policy must therefore balance sanctions and deterrence with mechanisms to prevent escalation that could threaten energy security.³⁰

Fourth, regional rivalries—particularly between Iran and Saudi Arabia—remain a persistent source of instability. While recent diplomatic efforts have attempted to reduce tensions, competition for regional influence continues to manifest in Yemen, Syria, and Lebanon. The complex interplay of sectarian, ideological, and strategic factors means that even localized conflicts have the potential to trigger broader regional crises.³¹

Finally, the Israel–Palestine conflict introduces additional volatility. Iran’s support for Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and Hezbollah ensures that any deterioration in the

²⁸ F. Gregory Gause, *The International Politics of the Persian Gulf* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 65–68.

²⁹ Marina Ottaway, *Iran’s Proxy Strategy in the Middle East* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment, 2020), 25–28.

³⁰ Suzanne Maloney, *Iran and the Gulf Security Dilemma* (Brookings Institution, 2024), 50–54.

³¹ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *Gulf States and Iran: Diplomatic Recalibrations* (London: Chatham House, 2024), 45–49.

situation could rapidly involve multiple state and non-state actors. The U.S., as Israel's principal security guarantor, faces the dual challenge of containing escalation while engaging in diplomatic initiatives aimed at conflict resolution.³²

Policy Options and Recommendations

Given these challenges, a multi-faceted policy approach is necessary to promote regional stability while addressing U.S.–Iran tensions. Several key options merit considerations:

Enhanced Diplomatic Engagement – Direct and multilateral diplomacy with Iran is essential. Reviving or revising nuclear agreements, even incrementally, can provide a framework for reducing tensions and verifying compliance. Engaging Gulf states in parallel discussions ensures that regional stakeholders retain a sense of ownership over security arrangements.³³

Crisis Management Mechanisms – Establishing hotlines, confidence-building measures, and military-to-military communication channels can reduce the risk of unintended escalation in hotspots such as the Gulf or Syria.³⁴

Proxy Conflict Mitigation – Coordinated efforts to reduce the intensity of proxy wars, including third-party mediation in Yemen and Lebanon, can stabilize conflict zones and reduce the risk of broader confrontation.³⁵

Economic and Trade Incentives – Incorporating economic incentives and sanctions relief in a calibrated manner can provide leverage for positive engagement while avoiding abrupt destabilization. This may include facilitating Iran's access to humanitarian goods and energy markets, contingent on compliance with agreed frameworks.³⁶

Regional Security Architecture – Developing a multilateral regional security framework, including Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, Iran, and external powers, could institutionalize conflict resolution and crisis management. Such frameworks would

³² Matthew Levitt, *Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Iran's Proxy* (Washington, DC: Washington Institute, 2021), 28–32.

³³ F. Gregory Gause, *The International Politics of the Persian Gulf* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 65–68.

³⁴ Marina Ottaway, *Iran's Proxy Strategy in the Middle East* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment, 2020), 25–28.

³⁵ Suzanne Maloney, *Iran and the Gulf Security Dilemma* (Brookings Institution, 2024), 50–54.

³⁶ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *Gulf States and Iran: Diplomatic Recalibrations* (London: Chatham House, 2024), 45–49.

complement U.S. security guarantees while promoting local ownership of security solutions.³⁷

These policy options highlight the necessity of a nuanced and multidimensional approach. Unilateral actions, excessive military reliance, or rigid sanctions may exacerbate instability, whereas calibrated engagement combined with regional partnerships offers a pathway toward sustainable stability.

Future Prospects for U.S.–Iran Relations

The trajectory of U.S.–Iran relations over the coming decade will largely be shaped by three interrelated factors: domestic politics, nuclear negotiations, and regional power dynamics. Domestically, Iran faces significant economic and social pressures, including inflation, unemployment, and public discontent. These internal challenges constrain Tehran’s foreign policy options, creating both incentives for cautious engagement and the risk of aggressive posturing to consolidate internal legitimacy.³⁸

In the United States, policymakers must balance domestic political considerations with international strategic interests. In the United States, policymakers face the challenge of reconciling domestic political pressures with broader international strategic interests. While there is bipartisan backing for sanctions and deterrence, there is also an acknowledgment that fully isolating Iran is neither practical nor beneficial for regional stability.³⁹ Consequently, future policy may involve calibrated engagement, selective sanctions relief, and multilateral frameworks to manage risk. The success of these initiatives will depend on sustained diplomatic efforts and credible verification mechanisms.⁴⁰

Nuclear negotiations remain the central pivot of U.S.–Iran relations. While the collapse of the JCPOA in 2018 heightened tensions, renewed talks—whether under a revised agreement or phased engagement—present a pathway to reduce the risk of nuclear

³⁷ Matthew Levitt, *Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Iran’s Proxy* (Washington, DC: Washington Institute, 2021), 28–32.

³⁸ Suzanne Maloney, *Iran and Domestic Pressures: Implications for Foreign Policy* (Brookings Institution, 2024), 60–64.

³⁹ Kenneth Katzman, *Iran: U.S. Policy and Strategic Interests* (Congressional Research Service, 2023), 15–19.

⁴⁰ Michael Eisenstadt, *Diplomatic Frameworks for Managing Iran* (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2023), 32–35.

proliferation. Such agreements could also offer a means to influence Iran's regional activities indirectly, by tying compliance to sanctions relief and broader economic integration.⁴¹

The influence of non-state actors will continue to complicate bilateral relations. Iran's support for proxies in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and Gaza ensures that regional conflicts are intertwined with Tehran's strategic objectives. Any negotiation framework must therefore consider these networks, incorporating mechanisms to reduce conflict intensity and prevent escalation.⁴²

Comprehensive Regional Stability Analysis

The stability of the Middle East depends on a combination of bilateral U.S.–Iran dynamics, intra-regional rivalries, and the influence of external powers. Iran's role as both a destabilizing force and a strategic actor highlights the duality of its impact. On one hand, Tehran's support for proxy actors contributes to violence, sectarian tension, and strategic uncertainty. On the other, its integration into diplomatic frameworks can provide avenues for regional conflict resolution and energy security.

The Gulf remains a critical theater. While Iran and Saudi Arabia have engaged in intermittent dialogue, competition over influence in Yemen, Iraq, and Syria persists. These rivalries are amplified by sectarian dynamics and differing strategic priorities. U.S. engagement must therefore strike a balance between supporting allies and facilitating conflict mitigation through multilateral frameworks.⁴³

The Levant, particularly the Israel–Palestine conflict, also remains a source of potential instability. Iran-backed actors, including Hezbollah and Palestinian factions, serve both as deterrents and as flashpoints for escalation. Regional stability requires coordinated

⁴¹ F. Gregory Gause, *The Gulf in a Multipolar Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 72–76.

⁴² Matthew Levitt, *Hezbollah and Regional Security Dynamics* (Washington, DC: Washington Institute, 2022), 44–48.

⁴³ Datu Al-Zahid Salik, „Constructed Sectarianism and Strategic Rivalry: The Iran-Saudi Conflict and the Crisis of Intra-Muslim Cooperation, <https://surl.lu/ppfuua>,

approaches that combine security guarantees, humanitarian support, and political initiatives aimed at conflict resolution.⁴⁴

Emerging multipolarity adds a further layer of complexity. The involvement of China, Russia, Turkey, and other external powers creates both opportunities and risks. While these actors can provide mediation and alternative economic engagement, their participation also reduces the relative influence of the United States, requiring Washington to adopt more flexible and coordinated strategies.⁴⁵

In sum, regional stability depends on a multidimensional approach:

- Diplomatic engagement with Iran and Gulf states.
- Crisis management mechanisms to prevent escalation.
- Proxy conflict mitigation through mediation and coordinated security measures.
- Economic incentives that complement sanctions and encourage compliance.
- Multilateral regional security architecture that institutionalizes cooperation and accountability.

This integrated strategy recognizes that no single actor can unilaterally stabilize the Middle East. The U.S., Iran, regional states, and external powers must coordinate to address shared security challenges while managing competition.

CONCLUSION

The U.S.–Iran relationship remains one of the most consequential and complex in contemporary international relations. Historically marked by confrontation, mistrust, and proxy conflicts, the bilateral dynamic has evolved under the influence of domestic pressures, regional rivalries, and global multipolarity. Iran's strategic behavior—leveraging asymmetric power through proxies, controlling critical energy chokepoints, and pursuing nuclear capabilities—creates both challenges and opportunities for U.S. policy.

⁴⁴Mahmoud Hamdy Abo El- Kasem „The Middle East Conflict and Indications of Change in the Strategic Environment“, <https://surl.li/pvmufh>,

⁴⁵ Marina Izoria, „Geopolitical Struggle for a Multipolar World Order“, International Scientific Journal "The Caucasus and the World, <https://surl.lu/gcjzvf>,

The Middle East itself is undergoing a period of transformation. Traditional U.S. dominance is being reshaped by multipolar competition, the recalibration of Gulf policies, and the ongoing complexity of proxy conflicts. Within this environment, the prospects for regional stability hinge on effective diplomacy, credible deterrence, conflict mitigation, and multilateral engagement.

Policy frameworks that integrate these elements can reduce the risk of miscalculation, limit the escalation of localized conflicts, and create conditions for sustained engagement with Tehran. While the challenges are substantial, the evolving U.S.–Iran relationship also presents the potential for constructive collaboration, particularly if grounded in careful negotiation, verification mechanisms, and coordinated regional strategies.

Ultimately, the “new reality” of U.S.–Iran relations is neither fully antagonistic nor entirely cooperative. It is a dynamic, multifaceted environment, in which regional stability will depend on the ability of multiple actors—state and non-state alike—to navigate a complex web of political, economic, and strategic interests.

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