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## THE CHALLENGES OF IRAN'S FOREIGN POLICY AFTER THE ISLAMIC REVOLUTION

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines the transformation of Iran's foreign policy and international relations in the aftermath of the 1979 Islamic Revolution. It also reconstructs the pre-revolutionary period, focusing on U.S.-Iran relations and demonstrating the extent to which the two states were bound by a close strategic partnership. The study analyzes the reorientation of Iran's external behavior following the Revolution, a process that began in earnest with the U.S. embassy hostage crisis and has continued to shape bilateral relations up to the present day. The article places particular emphasis on the evolution of U.S.-Iran relations, the formation and consolidation of anti-American ideology, and the gradual institutionalization of a sanctions-based regime. It offers an in-depth examination of how pre-revolutionary Iran, under the rule of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, came to occupy the position of one of the United States' principal strategic partners in the Middle East. This partnership rested on far-reaching political, economic, and military cooperation, including U.S.-UK involvement in the 1953 coup, support for the peaceful development of nuclear energy under the "Atoms for Peace" program, substantial American investment in Iran's oil sector, and extensive military-technical collaboration. The article also explores the post-revolutionary period, focusing on the systematic dissemination of the Islamic Revolution's ideas both within Iran and across the broader region. At its core, the article seeks to explain how profoundly Iran's external orientation was transformed in the wake of the Islamic Revolution. U.S.-Iran relations shifted from a *de facto* strategic partnership to a relationship characterized by open hostility and rivalry. From the hostage crisis onward, successive U.S. administrations progressively tightened sanctions against Iran. Under these conditions, the post-revolutionary leadership in Tehran has grounded the country's foreign policy in explicitly anti-American and anti-Western rhetoric and practice, while simultaneously deploying this ideology domestically as a key instrument for consolidating personalized, centralized rule.

**Keywords:** Islamic Revolution; foreign policy; United States; Iran; sanctions nuclear program; governance.

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## INTRODUCTION

The Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979 did not begin as a religious revolution. At that time, the economic stagnation in Iran, the disillusionment of the middle class with the Shah's corrupt and repressive regime were important factors that led to the revolution. These internal factors were accompanied by the rise of nationalist sentiments as a result of unequal partnership relations with the United States (US). This period of the 20th century is characterized by the emergence of nationalist sentiments and interests. The Islamic Revolution in Iran gave a very strong impetus to the strengthening of the Shi'a branch of Islam. Iran's Shi'a population was an active and growing supporter of the revolution, and it can be said that here the religious factor played a major role. The religious factor and the involvement of the Shi'a united completely different elements and social groups into a single fist around a common goal. The symbol of this unity and the consolidation of different social strata became the clearly defined, charismatic leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini<sup>2</sup>. It can be said that, unlike other revolutions in the world, the Iranian Revolution was a truly popular revolution. The final victory and the achievement of the set goals became possible only thanks to the unprecedented activity of the broad masses.

## MAIN PART

Prior to the 1979 Islamic Revolution, relations between Iran and the United States were exceptionally close and strategic. Their mutual cooperation began in the aftermath of the Second World War, and especially intensified following the 1953 coup d'état in Iran, during which the United States and the United Kingdom supported the overthrow of Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh<sup>3</sup> and facilitated the consolidation of power by Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. Subsequently, a strategic alliance was forged between Iran and the United States, which for Washington also functioned as a counterweight to the Soviet Union in the Middle East during the Cold War. In addition, they shared significant

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<sup>2</sup> Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini - (1902-1989) Iranian Shiite spiritual leader. Political and spiritual leader of the 1979 Iranian Islamic Revolution, which led to the overthrow of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the last Shah of Iran.

<sup>3</sup> Mohammad Mossadegh - (1882-1967), democratically elected Prime Minister of Iran from 1951 to 1953, who attempted to implement progressive reforms, including the nationalization of the oil and gas sector, but was overthrown by US and British intelligence services in a coup d'état.

economic interests, largely tied to the oil sector. The United States played an active role in Iran's petroleum industry and was one of the largest investors in this domain. Iran, for its part, was heavily dependent on American capital and technology, which it actively employed in an effort to transform the country from a regional actor into a global player. U.S.-Iranian relations also encompassed intensive military cooperation. The United States supplied Iran with advanced weaponry and equipment, which made Iran's armed forces among the most powerful in the region.

As noted above, the Shah rose to power with the support of the British and U.S. intelligence services and, throughout his reign, benefited from Washington's active backing. In turn, he was regarded as a loyal ally of the United States. However, it is important to underline that the Shah's authoritarian rule, coupled with deeply entrenched corruption, generated a grave socio-economic environment, which progressively intensified public discontent with his regime. In summary, until 1979 U.S.-Iranian relations were characterized by profound political, economic, and military cooperation. Yet this partnership also contributed to the escalation of popular dissatisfaction, which became one of the main driving forces behind the Islamic Revolution.

Active U.S. support for the Shah was followed by the launch of a large-scale nuclear program in Iran in the first half of the 1970s. Iran's nuclear energy program initially began in the late 1950s, at the level of scientific research only, with the encouragement of the United States. At that time, the U.S. was implementing the "Atoms for Peace" program, within the framework of which, in March 1957, the United States and Iran signed an agreement "On Cooperation in the Civil Uses of Atomic Energy," which was subsequently renewed in 1964. Under this agreement, the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission transferred a 5-megawatt nuclear reactor to the Nuclear Research Center of the University of Tehran<sup>4</sup>.

The analysis of the historical context of U.S.-Iranian bilateral relations discussed above is considered essential for drawing analogies with contemporary dynamics, since the role

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<sup>4</sup> Lasha Bazhunaishvili, "Nuclear Syndrome and US Strategy in the Persian Gulf", Universal Publishing House. Tbilisi 2014.

of the United States in shaping Iran's domestic and security policy is not only a subject of debate among various expert circles, but has also been decisive at different stages of history, particularly in the period following the Second World War and up until the Islamic Revolution.

The Islamic Revolution of Iran, which began in January 1978 and ended with the overthrow of the Shah in April 1979, was an attempt at religious, ideological, political, and social transformation in Iranian history.

At the forefront of this revolution stood Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, whose influence was grounded both in his charismatic leadership and his innovative politico-theological doctrine. From exile in Najaf and later from Paris, Khomeini mobilized a broad opposition through a populist interpretation of Shi'a Islam, criticizing the Shah's authoritarianism, Western cultural penetration, and economic inequality, while simultaneously calling for the restoration of Islamic values and governance.

The overthrow of the last Shah in Iran inflicted a significant blow to Washington's influence in the Middle East. In the aftermath of the revolution, the policies pursued under Ayatollah Khomeini's leadership, combined with the revolutionary zeal displayed by the new authorities and the countermeasures undertaken by the United States against Khomeini, further exacerbated bilateral tensions between the U.S. and Iran. Revolutionary Iran initially adhered firmly to a policy of "neither East, nor West," rejecting the prevailing bipolar global order.

On November 4, 1979, students supporting Ayatollah Khomeini stormed the premises of the United States Embassy in Tehran and took the majority of the embassy staff hostage. In the morning of November 4, hundreds of young Iranian students, backed by a crowd of 3,000–5,000 people, scaled the embassy walls and entered the compound. They blindfolded and detained dozens of U.S. citizens—members of the embassy staff—many of whom remained in captivity for 444 days. Naturally, this attack resulted in a severe deterioration of U.S.-Iranian relations and triggered a major diplomatic crisis. The hostage-taking of U.S. Embassy staff in Tehran was followed by the freezing of Iranian assets in the U.S. banks.

These were the sides' immediate actions and countermeasures. Added to this was the support extended by the United States and the broader West to Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War, which further exacerbated the resentment of Iran's revolutionary leadership and rendered U.S.-Iranian relations increasingly strained.

The Iran-Iraq War proved extremely burdensome for the revolutionary leadership. Following the deterioration of relations with the United States and the West, the architects of the Islamic Revolution under Ayatollah Khomeini increasingly lost diplomatic footholds on the international stage. The war with Iraq inflicted enormous damage on the economy of the Islamic Republic, leading to the impoverishment of ordinary Iranians and a drastic decline in living standards. Individual incomes fell by at least 35-40% compared to 1978.

On the other hand, however, the war became an important factor in consolidating national unity: ordinary Iranians developed, and increasingly internalized, a sense of citizenship of the Islamic Republic. This was the first conflict since the nineteenth century in which large numbers of ordinary Iranian citizens were directly involved<sup>5</sup>.

During the Iran-Iraq War, the United States and Iran formally severed diplomatic relations; however, it later became known that secret negotiations regarding arms supplies were taking place between the two states. As a result of these talks, in 1986 Washington, through the mediation of Israel—whose interests did not include the strengthening of Saddam Hussein's regime—sold Iran spare parts for military equipment. The funds received from these transactions were then used by the United States to finance the opposition to the pro-communist regime in Nicaragua. The disclosure of this fact dealt a major blow to the then U.S. administration and caused serious resonance among American foreign-policy circles. This episode indicates that, despite the absence of formal diplomatic relations, when the strategic interests of great powers are at stake, they consistently find space and form for cooperation.

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<sup>5</sup> G.Sanikidze, Alasania G. Gelovani N. "History of the Middle East and its Relations with the South Caucasus" (XIX century - beginning of XXI century), Tbilisi 2011, pp. 317-320

With regard to the foreign policy priorities of the Islamic Republic of Iran, it should be noted that the new leadership, which came to power on a revolutionary wave, effectively and fundamentally transformed Iran's foreign policy priorities, characteristics, and geopolitical strategies from 1979 onward. Prior to the revolution, during the rule of the Pahlavi dynasty, Iran maintained a firm alliance with the West—particularly with the United Kingdom and the United States—and sought to preserve the regional leadership status quo.

After the revolution, the country's foreign policy trajectory changed dramatically: close cooperation and de facto strategic partnership with the West were replaced by a strategy of "maximizing revolutionary influence." This entailed reorienting the functioning of all state institutions, as well as education in universities and schools, from serving national/state interests towards the dissemination of revolutionary ideology within Iran. At the same time, the leadership set as a goal the export of the Islamic Revolution not only within Iran, but across the broader region—throughout the Middle East, primarily in its Shi'a spheres. Their aim was to extend this revolutionary approach and thereby promote a revision of the regional order. Another explicit objective was the export of the Iranian Revolution to neighboring countries in order to strengthen Islamic movements and, in turn, ensure the security and consolidation of the revolution itself.

Ayatollah Khomeini's well-known slogan—"Neither East nor West, the Republic only Islamic"—articulated the core line of Tehran's foreign policy: to refrain from joining any great power bloc and to preserve Iran as an independent Islamic republic.

It is noteworthy that anti-American sentiments in Iran did not originate with the Islamic Revolution; rather, they are conditioned by a range of historical-political factors. One of the main foundations is the Iranian collective memory of the 1953 military coup, when, as noted above, with the support of British and American intelligence services, the

democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh was removed from office and the Shah's rule was restored<sup>6</sup>.

U.S. interference in Iran's domestic politics and the subsequent active support for the Shah's regime, including in military and economic terms, generated among Iranians a profound sense of violated sovereignty. In the 1960s, the pro-Western reforms known as the Shah's "White Revolution" provoked protests from conservative clerical circles and the religious elite. The then opposition leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, openly declared that the Shah was a "poor, miserable man" and a "puppet of the American and Israeli governments." Iranians were particularly angered by the "capitulatory" agreements with the United States, which granted special immunities to American personnel in Iran—an arrangement perceived by many Iranians as an affront to the country's sovereignty.

As noted above, the hostage crisis further intensified the confrontational rhetoric between the United States and Iran. Anti-American sentiment became one of the ideological pillars of the Islamic Republic. Ayatollah Khomeini and his followers effectively instrumentalized anti-Americanism to suppress domestic opposition and consolidate their own power and legitimacy. Anyone who criticized the regime was branded an enemy of Iran and, first and foremost, an "agent" of the United States. In this way, anti-American rhetoric became a central ideological line for the regime in the Islamic Republic of Iran. On the one hand, it served to unify supporters of the Islamic Republic; on the other hand, against the backdrop of a crisis of legitimacy and diplomatic isolation, it redirected public attention from domestic problems to external threats through the construction of an enemy image. This approach left virtually no space for dissenting or critical opinion within the country.

In U.S.-Iranian relations, beyond political grievances and ideological factors, subsequent measures adopted by Washington further reinforced anti-American sentiments within Iran. One such example was the support extended by the United States to Iraq during the

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<sup>6</sup> Hasan, Moinul. Nuclear program of Iran and concerns of USA. Department of International Relations Jahangirnagar University. 2019.

Iran-Iraq War, which was perceived in Iran as a policy directed against the Iranian people themselves. U.S. backing of Saddam Hussein was interpreted by both the Iranian population and the country's leadership as an explicitly hostile political move. Moreover, even prior to the war, U.S. sanctions and security policies towards Iran contributed to the alienation of decision-makers on both sides. It should also be noted that within Iranian society there existed various strata and social groups—particularly among the younger generation—that were relatively well-disposed toward the United States and the West. Nevertheless, the official rhetoric of Tehran sought, at the national level, to vilify the United States and to promote a political and propaganda narrative according to which America behaved toward Iran as a "Great Satan." The regime pursued this approach in order to preserve internal cohesion and consolidate popular support.

Following the Islamic Revolution, the shift in rhetoric towards the United States and the regime's de facto designation of Washington as an enemy gradually led Iran into recurrent diplomatic crises and placed the country under an expanding sanctions regime. In the U.S. policy, sanctions became the main instrument of its external strategy towards Iran, with their goals and scope evolving over time. The initial U.S. sanctions imposed in response to the 1979 hostage crisis were aimed at pressuring Tehran to release the embassy staff held hostage and at punishing the revolutionary regime for its violation of international norms. Subsequently, during the 1980s and 1990s, the sanctions were broadened and came to serve several declared objectives: preventing Iran's support for terrorism and curbing its destabilizing role at the regional level. Later, from the 2000s onward, U.S. sanctions expanded further, with their primary declared aim becoming the limitation of Iran's nuclear program. Officially, the main purpose of these sanctions was to compel Iran to comply with international security measures in the nuclear domain. For example, after 2006 it emerged that Iran continued uranium enrichment despite multiple UN resolutions; in response, the UN Security Council and the European Union imposed a



wide array of sanctions on Iran, designed to force Tehran to allow experts from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to monitor and oversee its nuclear activities<sup>7</sup>.

As already noted, Khomeini's rise to power in 1979 brought about a radical ideological transformation in Iran's foreign policy. The new Islamic Republic proclaimed the rejection of both U.S. and Soviet influence in favor of Islamic independence and unity. Khomeini's Shi'i Islamist worldview depicted the United States as the "Great Satan" for the Muslim world, and he adopted an overtly hostile stance toward both superpowers of the Cold War. Initially, hostility was not directed solely against the United States; the other pole of the Cold War, the Soviet Union, was likewise deemed unacceptable.

The leaders of the revolution declared it their duty to support oppressed Muslims and to export the ideals of the Islamic Revolution to other Muslim countries of the Middle East. In a 1980 address, Ayatollah Khomeini stated: "We must endeavor to export our revolution to the world... Islam does not regard different Islamic countries differently and stands in support of all the oppressed peoples of the world." Indeed, after the revolution, the constitution adopted in Iran even codified the objective of disseminating the Islamic vision of the revolution beyond Iran's borders. This revolutionary zeal and religious mission shaped Iran's international conduct under Khomeini's leadership, reinforcing its confrontation with Western powers and its strategy of supporting Islamist movements across the Middle East.

The United States responded to the Islamic Revolution's attempts to disseminate its ideology by imposing economic sanctions on Iran. In April 1980, the U.S. oil corporations severed their ties with Iran within the framework of these sanctions. The economic and diplomatic isolation initiated by Washington was subsequently tightened. The crisis "enhanced Khomeini's prestige" domestically, while at the same time irreparably damaging Tehran-Washington relations. By 1984, matters had reached the point where the United States officially designated Iran as a state sponsor of terrorism and supported Iran's

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<sup>7</sup> D.Mohammadi, US-led economic sanctions strangle Iran's drug supply. 2013. <https://surl.lu/wuxogy>, (Accessed 08.12.25).

adversaries in regional conflicts<sup>8</sup>. Nevertheless, certain complications emerged—most notably the Iran–Contra affair of 1985–1986, when U.S. officials secretly sold arms to Iran (despite the existing embargo) in the hope of securing the release of American hostages held in Lebanon by pro-Iranian militants. This covert arrangement stood in stark contradiction to the prevailing atmosphere of enmity between the two nations. Overall, however, the period from 1979 to 1989 was characterized by relentless hostility: formal diplomatic relations were absent, while U.S. sanctions and a comprehensive trade embargo remained in force.

U.S. efforts were aimed at containing Iran's influence. Towards the end of the Iran–Iraq War, the United States even undertook military intervention in the Persian Gulf to protect oil shipments, bringing it into direct confrontation with Iranian forces. Tensions reached their peak in 1988, when the U.S. Navy shot down Iran Air Flight 655, a civilian airliner—an event that further underscored and deepened the antagonism between the two states<sup>9</sup>.

With regard to Iran's relations with Western Europe during this period, they were likewise confrontational in nature, albeit somewhat more attenuated. Initially, certain European states welcomed the Islamic Revolution in Iran—for example, France granted Khomeini asylum in exile in 1978—however, Tehran's subsequent actions soon alarmed European capitals. The hostage crisis and the execution of officials from the Shah's regime by the new authorities elicited strong condemnation from European leaders. In April 1980, the nine member states of the European Economic Community joined the United States in imposing sanctions on Iran, declaring an embargo on trade and threatening the withdrawal of diplomats unless the hostages were released. Throughout the 1980s, Iran remained largely isolated from Europe. European governments viewed Khomeini's revolutionary methods and human rights violations with caution, while Iran, for its part, regarded Europe with suspicion. The main point of contention was Iran's war with Iraq. Western European powers openly tilted towards Baghdad. France, the United Kingdom, and West Germany

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<sup>8</sup> M. M. Mottale, *The Islamic Republic of Iran: The Genesis of its Foreign Policy since 1979*. (2015).  
<https://surl.li/oqgadl>, (Accessed 08.12.25)

<sup>9</sup> Ibid,

became major arms suppliers to Saddam Hussein's regime, providing aircraft, missiles, and even components for chemical weapons—an issue to which Iran strongly objected. France, for instance, sold Iraq more than a hundred fighter jets and anti-ship systems that were subsequently used against Iranian oil tankers<sup>10</sup>.

By the late 1980s, relations had further deteriorated due to terrorism and ideological conflict. Iran was implicated in the assassination of dissidents on European soil. Europe consistently condemned Iran's sponsorship of terrorism and its violations of international norms in this regard. In sum, from 1979 to 1989, Iran's relations with the West were characterized by hostility and mutual distrust. In stark contrast to the Shah's era, the Islamic Republic under Khomeini positioned itself against Western influence, a stance that resulted in diplomatic isolation, sanctions, and recurrent crises in its relations both with the United States and with Europe.

Alienated from the West and effectively locked in a hostile standoff with it, Khomeini's Iran redirected its focus towards reshaping the regional order in the Middle East. In the post-revolutionary period, Tehran pursued an assertive, ideologically driven regional policy aimed both at safeguarding the revolution and at disseminating it across the broader Middle East. This strategy rested on two main pillars: Iran's prosecution of the Iran-Iraq War and its support for Islamist movements and militant proxies as instruments for the "export" of the revolution<sup>11</sup>.

## CONCLUSION

Thus, the present article analyzes the consequences of the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the foreign-policy challenges of post-revolutionary Iran. It examines the onset of a new phase in the country's history following the Islamic Revolution—both in terms of foreign policy and the military-political environment. The article offers a comprehensive analysis

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<sup>10</sup> M. M. Milani *The making of Iran's Islamic revolution: From monarchy to Islamic republic (2nd ed.)*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, (1994). <https://surl.li/nsdqar>, (Accessed 08.12.25)

<sup>11</sup> H. Safavi, *The crisis in relations between Iran and European countries: Future prospects*, (2023). <https://studies.aljazeera.net> (Accessed 08.12.25)

of the problems and challenges Iran faced under the sanctions regime, as well as the domestic political reforms it undertook in order to cope with international sanctions.

In a broader perspective, the article examines the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the new stage in revolutionary Iran's foreign policy. It covers the period from the Islamic Revolution up to the death of Ayatollah Khomeini, with the primary focus placed on the repercussions of the revolution in international politics: the diplomatic isolation triggered by the hostage crisis, the impact of the Iran-Iraq War on Iran's domestic and external affairs, and the evolution of Iran-West relations. The post-revolutionary decade, 1979–1989, may be regarded as the most challenging period for the revolutionary government, as multiple internal and external political factors coincided. On the one hand, Iran faced international isolation and U.S. sanctions on the other, the war with Iraq inflicted substantial damage on the country, both at the regional and global levels—particularly given that, during the Iran-Iraq War, the United States and the broader West largely assumed the role of supporters of Iraq.

In conclusion, it may be stated unequivocally that the Islamic Revolution in Iran, together with the political course pursued on the international stage, relegated the country to a state of international isolation. This isolation, in turn, led to the imposition of a multilayered sanctions regime, leaving virtually no sector of Iran's economy and public life untouched by restrictive measures.

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