Reinterpreting Nuclear Consequences:

Realism, Constructivism, and the Iranian Crisis

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Abstract

The mainstream neoconservative perception of the persisting global conflict surrounding Iran's nuclear program generally casts the nation as pursuing nuclear weaponry with the nefarious intentions of undermining western security interests and using these capabilities against Israel or European nations. Conversely, realist and constructivist scholars suggest that Iran's alleged pursuit of nuclear weapons is anything but irrational. Instead, Iran's foreign policy represents a logical reaction to regional insecurities and collective identity formed by Iran's history of past glory and subsequent marginalization, the mutual distrust between the U.S. and Iran following the ousting of the Shah, and Iran's domestic political dynamics all contribute to the repeated failure to resolve current crisis. Assuming a realist and constructivist analytical framework, it is argued that efforts to coerce Iran into altering its foreign policy have failed due to a lack of understanding of the extent to which Iranian national identity affects its attitudes towards nuclear development and openness to cooperate with western powers. In this sense, mutual animosity and confrontational engagement continues to prevent the achievement of any meaningful diplomatic progress.

Introduction

Since the invention of the atomic bomb, the modern world has become acutely aware of the potentially severe consequences stemming from a nation's acquisition of nuclear capabilities. Used an offensive tool, such weapons allowed the United States to end its bloody war against Japan in moments, the sheer power demonstrated by the first nuclear offensive dissuading any further aggression. The scope of destruction witnessed in Hiroshima and Nagasaki shifted the emphasis on nuclear weaponization from a viable wartime option to a strategy of deterrence, with the looming threat of mutual destruction enough to ensure the non-proliferation of disputes beyond convention warfare. While nuclear armament dramatically changed the way in which nations approach armed conflict and brought about a new era of relative peace between nation-states, the potential for nuclear engagement remains perhaps one of the most pressing concerns facing the international community.

The Treat on Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) reflects the near-unanimous agreement that the use and distribution of nuclear weapons should be limited and regulated by the international community. The permanent members on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), The United States, Russia, The United Kingdom, France, and China, along with the vast majority of states, are signatories to the NPT. Although the nations represented on the UNSC have since ceased production of nuclear weapons, they still maintain current stockpiles unwilling to forgo the degree of deterrence and relative security such weapons assure. While the global anti-nuclear armament consensus prohibits other nations from developing their own means of nuclear deterrence, it does not extinguish such aspirations or provide them with an alternative means to prevent foreign military incursions of their potential destruction. Israel, Pakistan, India, and North Korea are the only known nations to have defied international norms by refusing to adhere to the NPT and succeeding in the production of nuclear warheads.

Yet in the last 30 years, no nuclear program has received such international attention and condemnation as that of the Islamic Republic of Iran. As a signatory to the NPT since its conception in 1968, Iran contends that its nuclear development is strictly civilian-oriented in nature, the pursuit of which is permitted without prejudice to all states that have ratified the treaty. Since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, however, the western world insists that Iran is in pursuit of weaponization, and have consistently applied diplomatic and economic pressure with the aim of curtailing Iran's nuclear aspirations. Even though international outcry has existed ever since the toppling of the Shah, the west has yet to see any tangible changes in Iran's nuclear policy regardless of the tactics and strategies employed. Iran's leaders and populace have consistently demonstrated support for nuclear development, despite the severity of economic sanctions or the regularity of denunciations in international forums. Such behavior appears irrational to onlookers that assume Iran's policy should align with its economic and security interests. Accordingly the west continues to pursue the same 'dual track' policy of engagement, pushing for

more stringent sanctions paired with limited diplomatic outreach (Takeyh & Maloney 2011).

As tensions escalate between the west and the Iranian regime, a reconceptualization of both the realistic scope and consequences of Iran's nuclear pursuits and the west's strategy of engagement becomes increasingly imperative in order to avoid the instigation of another significant conflict in the Middle East. U.S. and Israeli politicians and pundits suggest that a preemptive strike is increasingly necessary, assuming an alarmist attitude in declaring that Iran's nuclear development portends dire consequences for regional and global stability. Iranian leaders suggest that any foreign incursion on Iranian soil will result in unyielding and determined military retaliation, a serious threat given Iran's sizeable conventional military and sway over the global supply of petroleum.

Neoconservative political actors, through discursive posturing and hawkish policies, partially co-opt realist notions of regional hegemony and balance of power security concerns to construct of the image of an irrational Iranian regime hell-bent on developing nuclear weapons as a means to destroy the 'Zionist' state of Israel and assert itself as a regional hegemon. They assert that Iran must not be allowed to acquire nuclear capabilities, as such a development would surely work against U.S. interests in the Middle East and pose an 'existential' threat to the state of Israel (Freilich, 2012). Through this lens, military action is preferred over diplomatic engagement, as the goals of the religious fundamentalists comprising the Iranian regime are irreconcilable with western reason. However, inflammatory rhetoric and calls for the ousting of the current regime not only decreases the prospects of reaching a peaceful solution, but also serves to strengthen Iranian support for a nuclear deterrent and increases the likelihood of weaponization.

Conversely, realist and constructivist scholars suggest that Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons is anything but irrational. Instead, its foreign policy represents a logical reaction to the regional insecurities brought on by an increasing U.S. military presence in the Middle East and a slew of unfriendly regional neighbors that possesses nuclear arms and have yet to ratify the NPT. While security-seeking calculations motivate Iran's foreign policy and the west's response, a deeper understanding of the ever-changing domestic political climate within Iran and the United States reveals a more nuanced understanding of the underlying forces behind what is perceived as united foreign policy. The collective identity formed by Iran's history of past glory and subsequent marginalization, the mutual distrust between the U.S. and Iran following the ousting of the Shah, and Iran's domestic political dynamics all contribute to the repeated failure to resolve current crisis.

Thus, efforts to coerce Iran into altering its foreign policy have failed due to a lack of understanding of the extent to which Iranian national identity affects its attitudes towards nuclear development and openness to cooperate with western powers. In this sense, mutual animosity and confrontational engagement continues to prevent the achievement of any meaningful diplomatic progress. Furthermore, the alarmist conception of a nefarious Iran determined to develop nuclear weapons in order to carry out an attack against Israel or to leverage its way into a position of

regional dominance fails to acknowledge the sense of logic and reason that have dominated both Iranian and American policy thus far. In weighing realist conceptualizations of Iranian intentions against the doomsayer cries of neoconservative commentators, the fallibility of the mainstream formulation of the Iranian crisis becomes remarkably transparent.

This thesis first surveys the scholarly contributions and commentary associated with the neoconservative, realist and constructivist schools of thought, creating an analytical framework in which the theories of realism and constructivism guide our exploration of the Iranian nuclear issue. We review the development of Iran's nuclear program before delving into the factors that contribute to the Iranian national myth, focusing on the nation's history and the genesis of its revolutionary narrative. We then turn to the Iran's domestic struggles, motivations and intentions, unpacking the ways in which these elements interact and culminate in the formulation of Iranian policy and the west's conception of the Islamic Republic. Finally, our analysis explores the United States' reaction to Iran's nuclear aspirations and foreign policy, focusing on the various domestic political currents that have shaped the U.S. approach since the 1979 Iranian Revolution. On the basis of this analytical framework, potential policies and solutions to Iranian nuclear issues are posited, emphasizing the ways in which current and future leaders can enhance diplomatic efforts to bring about a peaceful conclusion to this prolonged conflict.

Literature Review

Neoconservative Views

The mainstream characterization of the Iranian regime, following the tumultuous aftermath of the 1979 Islamic revolution, is one driven by unpredictable religious zeal and intent on both the destruction of the Israeli state and the ascension to a position of regional hegemony. This viewpoint, championed by neoconservatives in the United States, Israel, and Europe, contributes to the alarmist account of Iran's nuclear aspirations and fuels the bellicose rhetoric touted by pundits and politicians warning of the catastrophic repercussions of a nuclear Iran. From this perspective, the main concern is that a nuclear Iran will stop at nothing to regain a dominant regional position in order to forward the underlying goals of the Islamic Revolution (Davis 2005). Neoconservative scholars refute the efficacy of diplomatic efforts, asserting that the religious ideology integrated into the Islamic Republic's political structure dooms negotiations based on rationality and pragmatism. They also reject the argument that a strategy of ex post facto deterrence could mitigate the negative repercussions of a nuclear Iran given that such a program would come at too high a cost in terms military/intelligence personnel and financial commitments (Kroenig 2012). Framing Iran as a pariah nation that cannot be made to see reason or respond logically to western-centric strategies of engagement bolsters the arguments of those who advocate for military intervention and increasingly stringent sanctions.

Eric Edelman, Andrew Krepinevich, and Even Montgomery (2011) assert that while some suggest that Iran would inherently become more cooperative if it would to develop nuclear capabilities, Iran's tendency to ignore international standards and to actively seek increased regional influence predicts that its tenacious and intransigent qualities will become more pronounced following its procurement of nuclear weapons. They contend that economic pressure and diplomatic engagement will continue to fail to produce tangible adjustments in Iran's nuclear policies, instead advocating for increased military encirclement as a concrete demonstration of the potential consequences of Iran's continued intransigence. The fear that Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons will spur a Middle Eastern arms race underlies general anxieties surrounding a potential upset of regional stability and the erosion of the security interests of the United States. The prevailing sentiment is that the prospect of a nuclear Iran is unacceptable due to the dangers it would pose to the regional balance of power, and the potential inability of the United States to effectively contain the proliferation of nuclear weapons through the Middle East.

As the nation that feels most threatened by Iran's rhetorical posturing and ideological condemnation, Israel assumes the most belligerent attitude towards the prospect of a nuclear Iran. Dima Adamsky (2011) suggests that while three different schools of thought are likely to emerge in a scenario in which Iran succeeds in weaponization, the conception of Iranian leaders as willing to sacrifice the nation's security interests on the basis of religious ideology leads the majority of Israelis to advocate for a full-on military offensive. Given the scars of past historical conflicts and persecution, national security is of paramount importance and represents a fundamental element of Israeli identity. Because Israeli leaders have sought to consolidate public support by exacerbating public fears through the characterization of Iran as a belligerent and irrational nation that seeks to instigate a second holocaust, the destruction of Iranian capabilities, regardless of the potential political and security costs, has emerged as the prevailing sentiment. The conviction that Israel cannot rely on the hesitant U.S. to effectively defend its superior position in the regional balance of power runs parallel to the neoconservative preference for military intervention over diplomatic negotiations. Yet, a recent poll conducted by *Haaretz,* a left-leaning Israeli magazine, found that 58% of Israelis oppose unilateral military intervention without U.S. support, providing evidence that the 'go-it-alone' rhetoric of the political leadership is seemingly at odds with the prevailing attitudes of the Israeli public (Pfeffer 2012).

While Matthew Kronenig (2012) refutes the conception of Iran's leadership as irrational and self-destructive, he comes to the archetypal neoliberal conclusion that the U.S. must strike militarily before Iran is able to weaponize its stores of uranium in order to avoid the imminent threat to American security interests. He shrugs off the critics' view that an attack would lead to severe retaliation and only solidify Iranian resolve to develop an effective means of deterrence, instead placing faith in the ability of the United States to anticipate the most damaging counterattacks and to minimize the risk of the Iranian response. Kronenig's notion of "strike now or suffer later" embodies the neoconservative assumption that Iran not only aspires to achieve nuclear militarization, but also intends to use its

newfound power as a means to hamper U.S. operational capabilities in the Middle East, further entrench the current regime's political monopoly, and make possible conventional military offensives without the specter of international intervention.

Politicians and public figures have come to favor the neoconservative conceptualization of the Iranian nuclear crisis. The media seeks the sensationalist portrait of a belligerent and irrational Iran as a means to whip the public into a frenzy and sustain general interest, consistently reiterating that a nuclear Iran necessarily poses a novel and especially dire threat to American or Israeli life. While several pundits and publications have demonstrated a commitment to depicting the Iranian issue from a plurality of viewpoints, the mainstream media has generally framed the conflict in accordance to the abovementioned alarmist formulations and sowed bias within the discourse by: ignoring the effect of a potential military clash on civilian populations, discussing Iran's nuclear weapons as if their existence is already confirmed, emphasizing Ahmadinejad's rhetoric despite his waning hold on domestic power, and disregarding the motivations behind Iranian policies (Walt 2012). Political figures elicit existential fears by referencing a nuclear holocaust, creating a moral panic in order to garner support for tangentially related policies, appealing to a wider swath of the electorate, or distracting from other, less flattering political issues (Heir 2002). However, assuming a more factually oriented and less ideologically influenced analytical frame reveals a far more nuanced understanding of the inherent attributes and potential outcomes associated with Iranian nuclear aspirations.

Realist Views

In debating the structural and geopolitical forces which drive Iran's nuclear development policy, the realist school of thought encompasses the majority of scholars who step back from the mainstream neoconservative conception of Iran as a dangerous existential threat, instead adopting a different theoretical lens that focuses primarily on security considerations as the main driver of the Iranian nuclear crisis. These authors operate under the assumption that the nation-state should be the primary level of analysis, taking precedence over notions of domestic political concerns, norms, and ideas (Ferrero 2009). The behavior of a state, given this theoretical construct, is derived from state to state interactions in the current international system, where the balance of power and the drive for optimal wealth and influence shape foreign policy (Walt 2008). The realists' primary rationale for Iran's controversial nuclear development program and the prolonged international conflict resulting from its unyeilding pursuits is based on the assumption that the state of Iran, as a rational actor, seeks nuclear armament as a means of deterrence against foreign incursions on its independence. While Iran asserts that its nuclear aspirations are solely aimed at providing civilian power and lessening its reliance on fossil fuels, realists view such a motive as irrational and thus operate under the theory that Iran must be pursuing nuclear weapons. Rejecting the neoconservative belief that a nuclear Iran represents a significant security threat to the United States, realists suggest that the motives behind American foreign policy are mainly to prevent Iran from ascending to a position of regional hegemony.

Ray Takeyh (2003) understands Iran's desire for nuclear development as a reaction to perceived encirclement by its enemies. American troops in the Persian Gulf, Afghanistan, and Iraq represent constant threats to Iranian security, while a hostile Israel has already carried out preemptive strikes on nuclear hopefuls in the region and has a clandestine nuclear program of unknown size. These pressures, coupled with the Bush-era rhetoric labeling Iran as part of the 'axis of evil', logically result in Iran's pursuit of a means to defend its strategic interests. However, he argues that the U.S.'s hard-liner posturing is based on the faulty assumptions that Iran would use a nuclear weapon if given the chance to do so. Takeyh challenges the generally accepted formulation of Iran as a dangerous and potentially violent state, noting that the country has been the victim in the majority of its military conflicts and has demonstrated caution with respect to direct confrontation with its enemies. For example, Iran refrained from utilizing chemical weapons against the Iraqi state during the Iran-Iraq war, even though Iraqi forces used chemical warfare against the Iranian populace. In suggesting that Iran's hostile rhetoric towards the 'Zionist' Israeli state diverges from actual policy considerations, Takeyh reinforces the realist concept of placing the behavior of the state above consideration of its values and norms.

Bruce Riedel (2010) explains the consequences of Iran's ascension to the nuclear club by utilizing a realist perspective to suggest that nuclear armament would not result in catastrophic regional consequences and would have a negligible impact on the balance of military power in the Middle East. In drawing from the realist formulation of security seeking behaviors in international relations, he notes that Iran's aspirations would be solely for increased deterrence, autonomy, and greater regional influence. Contrary to claims that Iran would distribute nuclear weapons to Hezbollah or Hamas as a means of waging a proxy war against Israel or that its emphasis on Shia Islamist doctrine extoling the values of Muslim conquest would increase the likelihood of nuclear proliferation, Riedel points to Iran's history of victimization rather than aggression, Israel's conventional military dominance, and the harsh sanctions choking off the inflow of advanced weaponry as indicating that Iran would resist using nuclear force. Additionally, the Syrian insurrection has displaced Hamas and resulted in the erosion of Iran's influence over the organization, suggesting that the potentiality of a nuclear proxy offensive seems less realistic (Scham 2012). Through this lens, it is argued that Iran's behavior is simply reactionary given that the overall balance of regional power renders any offensive action unlikely. Riedel challenges the assertion that a nuclear Iran poses a legitimate existential threat to both the Israeli state and regional stability, qualifying Iran's behavior as rational and justified given the environmental context in which Iranian foreign policy exists.

While Riedel and Takeyh focus mainly on Iranian security concerns, Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer (2007) utilize realist theory in order to challenge the commonly accepted justifications behind contemporary U.S. policies and attitudes towards Iran. Realists suggest that since the behaviors of states are solely motivated by either security or the pursuit of power, given the anarchical state of global affairs, the interactions between the United States and Iran should be directly related to and

explained by such considerations. Iran's geographical distance from the U.S. combined with America's vast military superiority precludes the possibility of Iran posing a legitimate security threat to the United States. Realistically, the majority of Iran's most aggressive political rhetoric has been aimed at Israel, while their geographical proximity makes a nuclear Iran a far greater threat to Israeli security concerns. Walt and Mearsheimer controversially assert that the Israeli political lobby in the U.S. has prevented the nation from improving diplomatic relations with Iran, even though reconciliation would be in both nations' best interests.

Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons or increased power and prosperity resulting from normalized U.S.-Iranian relations would both challenge Israel's strategic dominance and increase Iran's regional standing in the eyes of other Gulf states. While the authors note that the U.S. does have a vested interest in preventing any single Middle Eastern nation from assuming the role of regional hegemon, they suggest that better diplomatic ties with Iran would be the premier strategy to ensure peace and work towards improving America's image in the eyes of the Iranian public. America's refusal to take the threat of preemptive war off the table also serves to undermine its interests, as an attack on Iran's nuclear sites would result in retaliation or increased support for the development of a nuclear deterrent. Additionally, levying increasingly stringent sanctions, the preferred modus operandi of the United States, has a tendency to backfire: increasing the price of crude oil and curtailing American businesses that profit from trade with Iran (Torbat 2005). By framing American interests in terms of realist objectives, Walt and Mearsheimer highlight the extent of Israeli influence within U.S. domestic politics and also open the door to changes in foreign policy that they postulate would better reflect American security interests.

In exploring the ways in which the pursuit of material gains and security considerations drive the behavior of both the U.S. and Iran, realist theory can help us conceptualize how states are prone to behave under certain conditions. However, realist thought tends discount the role of ideas, values, and norms within and between states in dictating how states actually conduct foreign policy. Such scholars tend to simplify international relations to the detriment of a more nuanced understanding of the role of domestic politics and values in shaping the terms of engagement and predicting cooperation or conflict. The internal political structure of a state and the positions taken by of its ruling regime strongly influence a nation's foreign policy, and must be assessed in order to gain a holistic understanding of both U.S.-Iran relations and the Iranian nuclear crisis.

Constructivist Views

To delve more deeply into the role of societal norms, values, and beliefs in dictating a nation's foreign policy, other scholars analyze the conflict between the United States and Iran from a constructivist standpoint. Constructivist theory holds that the ideas and values of political actors derived through mutually constitutive discourse with the rest of the world dictate a nation's foreign policy beyond the basic considerations of power-seeking and security motivations. It is the way in which an issue or foreign entity is perceived that explains both domestic attitudes

and the interaction between nation-states (Ferrero 2009). Contrary to the underlying tenets of realist thought, constructivism questions the validity of using rationality to explain the behavior of states. It asserts that rationality is relative to each actor or society's social goals and norms, and that "value-rational" behavior differs between and within states in the international system. Thus the notion of an Iranian nuclear 'crisis' is fallacious, as an objective reality cannot exist given the subjective nature of each individual actor's perception. Instead, the ideologies and identities within a state contribute to its ideational structure, which in turn affect its interactions with other states.

Seyed Shafaee (2010) refutes the popular "superficial objectivist approach" taken by many international relations scholars, instead advocating for the constructivist assertion that the inter-subjective realities created through foreign relations, diplomacy, and conflict shape the way in which states perceive of one another – and can shed light on the nuanced and seemingly irrational outcomes of international relations. The essence of the ideational underpinnings of the current Iranian regime's animosity towards the west is thought to have stemmed not from strategic or self-interested considerations, but instead from a "counter-discourse" that rebukes and contradicts the ousted Shah's core social and political values. Because the ideology of the Islamic Revolution was formed in direct opposition to the previous regime's emphasis on secularism, modernism, and nationalism, values that are similar to if not parallel with those touted by the western world, Iran's current ideological orientation irreconcilably renounces the essence of modern western culture. In juxtaposing Iran's ideological resistance and enmity to western values, it seems likely that such a mismatch of ideals contributes to the impediment of productive and amicable foreign relations and diplomacy.

Drawing from Alexander Wendt's seminal work, *Social Theory of International Politics*, Maysam Behravesh (2011) stresses the importance of identity, normative values and especially historical factors in shaping the current animosity between the United States and Iran. Constructivist theory does not reject realist focus on power and the structural relevance of the international state system outright, but emphasizes that a holistic analysis must take into account the impact of ideology and social relations on state interactions. Assuming a realist perspective, he suggests, leads to misunderstandings and the development of false assumptions, which serve to impede communication and conflict resolution. Approaching state behavior as a singular, unified entity ignores the multitude of varying opinions present within both the ruling regime and the populace at large. Finally, overlooking the significant ramifications that historical conflicts have upon the psyche of a nation's populace and the ways in which national identity is created and perpetuated serves as a barrier to understanding the forces that affect the potential outcome of inter-state interactions. The scars created by Iran's perceived victimization by western forces and by the U.S.'s residual resentment after the 444 day Iran hostage crisis have contributed to the animosity still preventing reconciliation.

Homeira Moshirzadeh (2007) takes the position that a realist-centric understanding of Iran's behavior in relation it to its nuclear policy cannot effectively account for its past and present decisions. Instead, she argues that domestic discourses stemming from Iran's history account for its seemingly erratic and uncooperative behavior. The author identifies two-meta discourses in which Iran's subjective values and norms can be grouped: the discourse of (hyper) independence and the discourse of justice. The discourse of independence highlights Iran's past regional might, historical victimization, and detrimental relationship with both colonial and imperialist forces. Such discursive framing focuses primarily on Iran's perceived need for independence and autonomy. If Iranian leaders are perceived as ceding any power to international entities, they are viewed by society as once again shamefully capitulating to foreign demands.

Additionally, the discourse of justice focuses on the double standards held by the international community with respect to non-proliferation and leads to the rejection of western demands for the cessation of enrichment activities. As a signatory to the Non-Proliferation Treaty and the additional protocol, the agreement permits the enrichment of nuclear material for peaceful purposes. Iran believes that all parties should be held equally accountable and views the permissive attitude towards the acquisition of nuclear weapons by Israel, India, and Pakistan as unfair. This inequitable treatment is then framed through public discourse as yet another example of the west attempting to undermine Iran's progress. Within the hyper-independence discourse is the discourse of resistance, which the 'new elite' has reinvigorated as a means to renew sentiments associated with the 1979 Islamic Revolution, rallying the public under a unified ideology and preserving Iran's concept of rightful autonomy. The western demands for the cessation of enrichment activities are seen as overt attempts to retard or erode Iranian independence, and thus are vehemently resisted. Any form of compromise perceived as a sign of significant weakness in Iran's leadership.

Evoking Ayatollah Khamenei's 2004 fatwa in which he declared the use of nuclear weapons as "immoral" and "forbidden" under Sharia, Nina Tannenwald (2012) asserts the West should reinforce Iran's own proclamation as a means to constrain its leaders into adhering to their commitments. In framing Iran's concessions as in compliance with the fatwa and as beneficial to global stability and non-proliferation, its leaders could cooperate with international requests without losing legitimacy in the public and political sphere. Through what Tannenwald describes as political entrapment, strengthening the norms put forth by the Iranian leadership would make the violation of such promises more 'costly' in terms of political legitimacy. A policy of using ideas and discourse to threaten the regime's legitimacy and coerce strict adherence to the NPT stands in stark contrast to the realist-oriented policy of threatening sanctions and military action. The constructivist policy option takes into account the domestic pressures within Iranian politics and uses the reinforcement of subjective Iranian values as a forceful diplomatic tool.

Drawing from both constructivist and realist thought, Iran's foreign policy regarding nuclear development can be considered as the product of both security-seeking and ideological considerations. The international response towards the current crisis and the enduring diplomatic impasse between Iran and the rest of the global community flow from the complex interactions that have occurred since the Islamic Revolution pitted the current Iranian regime against the western world. In order to properly understand the variables that have culminated in the runaway escalation of tensions, we must explore the historical basis for the inter-subjective disjunction between the Iranian Republic and the United States. In the following sections, Iran's nuclear aspirations shown to be linked with its prevailing national myth, while the reason for its seemingly irrational defiance of international pressures will be explained by focusing on the domestic struggles and disagreements present in its political structure. Finally, the U.S. response to Iran under both George W. Bush and President Barack Obama will be examined, focusing on the power struggle between those actors who promote military intervention as the next necessary step to resolve the impasse between Iran and the west and those who believe that diplomacy remains the best solution for all involved parties.

The Islamic Republic of Iran's Nuclear Aspirations

A Brief History Of Iran's Nuclear Program

The instinctive view that contemporary attitudes towards Iran's nuclear development have been consistent demonstrates the historical shortsightedness of both the general public and policymakers alike. After the 1953 United States-backed coup d'état toppled Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh and reinstated the western-allied Mohammed Reza Pahlavi as the Iranian monarch, nations such as the U.S., U.K., France, and Germany agreed with Iran's wish to develop nuclear technology and granted assistance in terms of technical expertise and physical infrastructure (Lotfian 2008). Ironically, these nations laid the foundation for Iran's modern nuclear program in helping to build the Tehran Research Reactor in 1967, prompting the Iranian government to ratify the Nonproliferation Treaty in 1970.

There was a dramatic reversal of the west's permissive attitude towards Iran's nuclear program in the aftermath of the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Iran was immediately isolated, the west withdrew financial and technical support, and halted the construction of the partially completed Bushehr nuclear reactor. Uranium enrichment and associated research was at a standstill until the mid-1990's when Russia signed an $800M deal to develop the still unfinished reactor (Bowen & Kidd 2004: 261). However, the fall of the Soviet Union in 1999 served to further ostracize Iran from the rest of the international community and fed its deeply ingrained paranoia of western powers as the United States emerged as the unilateral world hegemon after the culmination of the Cold War (Bahgat 2006: 129).

Serious debate over the legitimacy of Iran's claims that it only sought nuclear technology for civilian purposes began in 2002, when an exiled political party opposed to the regime, the National Council of Resistance of Iran, exposed an undisclosed uranium enrichment facility in Natanz that had been hidden from IAEA

inspectors (CRS 2007). Though Iran allowed inspectors to survey the site and ratified the Additional Protocol to the NPT in 2003, this did little to allay suspicions of foul play. Then U.S. President George Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice further exacerbated the tensions with inflammatory public statements, labeling Iran as part of the 'Axis-of-Evil' and igniting rabid anti-US sentiments in an already anti-west nation (Jones 2010). With concerns growing, Western European powers called for Iran to increase transparency and suspend enrichment activities pending further review by the IEAE. The Iranian leadership, under reformist President Mohammad Khatami decided to suspend enrichment in 2004 while the IEAE assessed the situation.

However, in 2006, under pressure from U.S. diplomats, the IAEA, led by former Director General Mohammed El Baradei, voted to refer Iran to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) for failing to meet its requirements under the Additional Protocol of the NPT:

> *"While the Agency is able to verify the non-diversion of declared nuclear material in Iran, the Agency will remain unable to make further progress in its efforts to verify the absence of undeclared nuclear material and activities in Iran unless Iran addresses the long outstanding verification issues, including through the implementation of the Additional Protocol, and provides the necessary transparency."* (GOV/2006/64)

This referral acted as the impetus for many rounds rounds of increasingly stringent sanctions aimed at coercing Iran into suspending its enrichment activities until international confidence was regained and IAEA inspectors were provided with increased transparency.

Since the initial IAEA report and the subsequent UNSC Resolution 1695, relations between Iran and the U.S. have only deteriorated, as the 'dual track' use of both sanctions and diplomatic outreach have failed to trigger any change in Iranian domestic policy. Very little evidence has emerged that legitimately predicts a specific timeline in Iran's nuclear progression, contrary to numerous 'red lines' drawn by Israeli officials since 1982 stating that Iran is just been years away from acquiring nuclear weapons. For example, in 2004 Israeli intelligence again anticipated Iran's nuclear readiness by 2005 (International Crisis Group 2012). Trying to surmise the exact point after which Iran's alleged nuclear weaponization advances past the so-called point of no return has not only led to more aggressive rhetorical vilification of Iran and its intentions, but also neglects a necessary analysis of the internal pressures within the Islamic Republic that are integral formulating well-informed and optimally beneficial policy approaches.

The Making of Iran's National Myth

Iran's national identity – the way in which it perceives itself and the outside world – provides key insights into its nuclear policy and explains the multiple discourses that comprise the subjective Iranian reality. While the pursuit of nuclear capabilities represents a relatively recent development in the course of Iran's domestic policy, the earliest formative elements of its ideational conception harken back to the nation's fall from a place of regional domination and subsequent marginalization. A clear understanding of Iran's current foreign policy must

incorporate the historical underpinnings of its revolutionary ideology and the process by which the inter-subjective meaning between itself and the western world originates.

Pre-Revolutionary Historical Factors

The most basic elements of Moshirzadeh's (2007) 'discourse of justice' stem from the idealized recollection of both the glorified Persian Empire and the expansive power enjoyed during the Safavid era in the post-Islamic invasion period. The significance of this retrospective conception of Iran's past glory is critical to the exploration of the societal and political ideational structures born from Islamic Revolutionary thought. Iran's past history of glory is coupled with the Iranian narrative of a long history of victimization originating from the period following the ascension of the weak and ineffectual Qajar Dynasty in 1794. After the Russians defeated the Qajar Empire in two major battles forcing Iran to cede large areas of land and access to the Caspian Sea, the nation's economy and independence diminished to the extent that imperial powers gained the ability to access and influence Iranian governance (Barzegar 2009).

The Constitutional Revolution in 1905 led to the fall of the Qajar Empire and represented the Iranian response to the visibly weak governing regime. What emerged was a semi-authoritarian regime with the Pahlavi Shah's leading the way towards modernization. However, the moderate form of governance was dismantled when the democratically elected Prime Minister, Muhammad Mosaddegh, was deposed during a coup d'état, backed by both the United States and The United Kingdom, codenamed Operation Ajax, as a response to the nationalization of the Iranian oil industry. Each of these defeats and incursions on Iran's sovereignty form the Iranian narrative of historical victimization by foreign entities, but it is the revolutionary ideology that emerged as a reaction to western imperialism that created a reactionary Islamic identity, contributing to the ideological conflict between itself and the west (Shafaee 2010).

The Ideology of the Islamic Revolution

The new Shah's model of rule was that of top-down autocratic governance that pushed for modern development reflecting the model of the western world. Mohammad Reza Shah's modernization attempts failed to modernize the country at large, with the consequences of destroying the traditional Islamic economy – the bazaar – and marginalizing the traditional social support systems of the Ulama (religious leaders) and the Waqf (religious endowments) upon which much of the populace depended for centuries. By nationalizing the waqfs and forcing the Ulama to become dependent on the state for operational funds, the Shah sent a message to the populace that secular modernization was to take precedence over the traditional institutions that previously served as core elements of the Iranian social and political identity (Amineh & Eisenstadt 2007).

Alienated by the Shah's attempts to mold Iran in the form of its imperialist oppressors, the Islamic clergy and the lower classes rallied around the charismatic and defiant voice of Ayatollah Khomeini. Because Reza Shah's semi-progressive

policies were aligned with western social and political values and beliefs, Khomeini's revolutionary ideology assumed a reactionary stance and decried all things associated with western states and society as necessarily un-Islamic. In doing so, the Ayatollah formed Iran's new identity in direct opposition to the west's subjective reality, blaming the impoverished and underdeveloped state of the greater Middle East on the failure of western styles of governance and social order (Shafee 2010). After the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the public that had believed itself to be so neglected and ostracized by the Shah's failed modernization programs flocked to this new reformulation of Islam and society as a return to the idealized 'true Islamic society.'

Khomeini strove to foster the image of a "global conspiracy" of "imperial domination," personally writing historians to urge them to "show how the people struggled against tyranny, and the oppression of stagnation and backwardness, and put the ideals…in place of Capitalist Islam, and false Islam, [and] in one word, American Islam" (Aghaie 2009: 238). He even went so far as to enshrine this general attitude of distrust with the western world within the Iranian Constitution, as outlined in Article 152:

> "The foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran is based upon the rejection of all forms of domination, both the exertion of it and submission to it, the preservation of the independence of the country in all respects and its territorial integrity, the defense of the rights of all Muslims, non-alignment with respect to the hegemonic superpowers, and the maintenance of mutually peaceful relations with all non-belligerent States." (Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ch. X, Art. 152)

Not only did opposition towards the west arise from a reactionary denunciation of its social and cultural norms, but was literally institutionalized in the ideological structure of the Islamic Republic of Iran since its conception in 1979. Additionally, one of the essential goals of the post-revolutionary Iranian state is "the complete elimination of imperialism and the prevention of foreign influence" (Constitution, Ch. I, Art. 3, no. 5).

Thus, the identity of the Islamic Republic of Iran as constructed in the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution vehemently opposes western influence in any form, conceptualizing European powers and the United States as nefarious enemies that actively seek to oppress the Revolution and erode Iran's newly acquired independence and freedom (Behravesh 2011). The constructivist formulation of the factors that led to the formation of Iran's deep seeded aversion to cooperating with western demands reveals the obstacles that have thus far excluded the possibility of compromise. Yet, if we operate under the assumption that Iran's leaders are rational actors and do not wish to jeopardize the regime's existence, it becomes clear that domestic political factors must play a part in the nation's refusal to budge on its nuclear policy. The following section addresses the interactions between Iran's socially constructed national identity and the realist considerations, which in turn hinder the regime's ability to act in accordance to what the rest of the international community perceives to be its best interests.

Motivations, Intentions & Domestic Struggles

Contrary to the alarmist formulation of Iran as an irrational soon-to-be member of the nuclear country club and intently committed to weaponization regardless of international pressure or its professed wish to only develop nuclear capabilities for civilian purposes, there is little to no evidence that Iran actually has decided to develop nuclear arms or that they intend to carry out some diabolical plot to destroy Israel and southern Europe in the name of Islam. In fact, as opposed to the claims of Israeli and American politicians and pundits alike, there a surprising lack of evidence supporting any of the projected timelines estimating when Iran will have crossed the 'red line' and buried their uranium enrichment facilities far enough underground to immunize themselves against foreign intervention. Furthermore, assuming that Iran plans to use this hypothetical weapon to ascend to a position of regional hegemony directly contradicts its past behavior. During its extensive history of conflicts with foreign states, the Islamic Republic has continuously been on the receiving end of external aggression, never once having initiated an offensive attack on its neighbors (Lotfian 2008).

Motivations & Intentions

President Ahmadinejad's colorful rhetoric tends to convey an Iranian drive for nuclear development that is rebellious, belligerent, and hostile towards Israel and the west. Yet, others stand behind the assertion that Iran only seeks to increase the amount of oil available for export by shifting its energy production from fossil fuels to nuclear power. The vast majority of onlookers doubt that Iran would incur the multitude of sanctions and international disapproval in order to pursue a program that is far more costly – both in terms of economic costs from sanctions and political costs from non-compliance – than relying on its vast natural gas reserves (Bowen & Kidd 2004: 363). While the true goal of Iran's nuclear development may not explicitly be to decrease dependence on domestic oil, its persistent attitude seems to fit nicely into the ideational narrative of independence from western pressures.

The nuclear program has come to be viewed as a symbol of national pride, the continued pursuit of which further represent its leaders' refusal to bow to international interference (Moshirzadeh 2007). The majority of the Iranian leadership vehemently assert the "inalienable right of all parties to the Treaty [NPT] to develop research, production and use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes without discrimination" as set forth in Article IV of the NPT (Baghat 2006: 130). The Iranian people feels that the denial of the rights accorded to it in the NPT represents another example of the U.S. and other western forces refusing to pay due respect, something which is in direct conflict with the narrative of past glory embedded in its ideological discourse of justice (Ben-Meir 2009).

In order to maintain legitimacy in the eyes of the populace, Iranian leaders must publically resist the will of foreign powers else loose popular support. The fear of the Iranian political elite is that back stepping at this point could open the door for a vote of no confidence and result in increased pressure for regime change

(Saikal 2006). The Iranian citizens and religious figures tend to intensely criticize leaders who are perceived as relinquishing independence regardless of the potential benefits, and glorify those who approach foreign policy with a "non-compromising totally independent identity" (Moshirzadeh 2007: 563). In a sense, the regime backed itself into a corner where little room for compromise exists and the option to reverse or amend Iran's push for nuclear development remains out of reach. However, the Iranian public has demonstrated a measure of disdain for clerical dogmas and stubborn leadership as manifested by the protests following the disputed 2009 elections (Economist 2012: Bombing Iran). While their attitudes towards the methods of the ruling elite rarely translate into populist political influence, the divergence of popular opinion from the party line reveals the potentiality for the economic and psychological consequences from U.S. sanctions and assassination of nuclear scientists to create even deeper rifts between the leadership the people.

The majority of foreign relations scholars view Iran's aspirations for nuclear development from a realist perspective, suggesting that the nation's past conflicts with its regional neighbors and paranoia of western incursions on its independence fuel the desire for a workable deterrent against future attacks (Dorraj 2006). The majority of analysts oppose the hawkish categorization of Iran as pursuing nuclear armament in order to rise to a position of regional hegemony, instead asserting that it only seeks to ensure its freedom from foreign intervention and the regime's existential anxieties. The encirclement of Iran by American troops stationed in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Gulf states paired with the numerous calls for military intervention by many U.S. politicians and policy makers further increase the sense that a means of deterrence is necessary to protect the revolution's survival (Takeyh 2003). In labeling Iran as part of the villainous 'axis of evil', the Bush administration reinforced the apprehensions created by those who openly lobby for the regime's dethronement.

Additionally, Iranian leaders are thought to look towards North Korean nuclear deterrence as a model; while the regimes of both Saddam Hussein and Muammar Gadhafi relinquished their regimes' nuclear programs and were subsequently overthrown by western forces, North Korea has remained immune to foreign impositions (International Crisis Group 2012). It is also well aware that its conventional military is no match against U.S. forces and offensive capabilities, and distinctly remembers the massive number of casualties (approximately 500,000) sustained in its last full-on military confrontation during the Iran-Iraq war in 1980 (Samuel 2011).

The combination between the ideological importance that the nuclear program has come to represent and the strategic security-seeking calculations of developing a nuclear program as a deterrent suggest that Iran's motivations are not so clearly driven by irrational religious-based policy considerations as many in the neoconservative camp imply. But approaching Iran's policy as originating from a unitary ideology overlooks the push and pull between the conservatives and reformists within its political elite.

Domestic Struggles

Some, like Iranian president Mohammad Khatami and other reform-oriented members of the ruling elite, appeared open to cooperation, believing that developing better ties with the international community and building goodwill with the western world must trump potentially damaging ideological stubbornness (Takeyh 2003). However, the rise of the Iranian neoconservatives, led by President Ahmadinejad, has signaled the end of the cooperative attitude towards western demands, instead reasserting the importance of resisting pressure and the pursuit of nuclear development regardless of the consequences. An issue that could have been solved easily and avoided the imposition of sanctions was instead transformed into a movement representing national pride and sovereignty through Ahmadinejad's aggressive rhetoric. His provocative statements during his speech at the UN in 2005 aimed to remind his followers and the Iranian elite that he intended to stay true to this political platform of making Iran a stronger nation, both domestically and internationally (Saikal 2006: 194). Ahmadinejad's positions can be viewed as a means to gain legitimacy and support from the Iranian theocracy that backed his conservative political campaign and helped him retain power in the face of a contentious election in 2009 (Barzegar 2009: 22).

Yet it appears that Ahmadinejad's attempts to rally increased support are floundering, with the Supreme Leader and his supporters gravitating away from his political posturing and aggressive rhetoric. Aside from public disagreements over the scope and limits of the powers of Iran's President, the Ayatollah's recent reappointment of pragmatist politician Hashemi Rafsanjani despite Ahmadinejad's vehement opposition indicates overt attempts to marginalize Ahmadinejad from mainstream Iranian politics (Salsabili 2012). Though Ahmadinejad's waning power has largely diminished his ability to dictate foreign policy, his contribution to the increasingly belligerent inter-subjective perceptual understanding between Iran and the U.S. has persisted to the detriment of diplomatic outreach efforts.

While Ayatollah Khamenei and President Ahmadinejad often find themselves disagreeing on domestic policies and allocations of power between the religious and political institutions, the Supreme Leader still strongly supports Iran's resistance to western demands as a means to ensure the survival of the current regime. To him the political cost of granting concessions in response to western pressure outweigh the damaging effects of economic sanctions, towards which the regime has always adopted a stance of "defiance, mitigation, aversion, insulation, and a self-serving public diplomacy campaign" (Takeyh & Maloney 2011: 1309). Yet, given the religious ideological formulation of Iranian politics, culture, and society, the fact that Ayatollah Khamenei issued a fatwa publicly denouncing the production and use of nuclear weapons as fundamentally against Islamic values and Sharia creates a significant obstacle for the more radically conservative policymakers within the regime who might otherwise increase the likelihood of conflict by openly pursuing weaponization (Lotfian 2008: 54). In fact, Khamenei reiterated his condemnation of nuclear weapons on February 22, 2012, further solidifying the regime's convictions

and making a reversal or defiance of his proclamation come at an even greater political cost.

It seems that the urgency and anxiety projected onto the Iranian nuclear debate not only serves as little more than speculative posturing, but also dramatically increases the risk and likelihood of a severely damaging confrontation (Walt 2012). Those within the Israeli leadership that view Iran's ambitions as a grave existential threat that must inevitably be addressed through military intervention are luckily beholden to the policy decisions of the United States, granted that Israel has the capability to initiate a unilateral conflict that would inevitably drag its western allies into a bloody and costly confrontation.

A holistic understanding of the Iranian nuclear conflict cannot simply focus on the factors within the Iranian state; one must also include the policies and behaviors of the United States. The inter-subjective identities mutually formed by the history of engagement between these two nations provide the foundational basis for the continued animosity and resistance to compromise that have thus far characterized the Iran-U.S. relationship. The changing U.S. response to Iranian non-compliance and the attitudes of various actors within the U.S. government both form America's self-conception in terms of its own security interests and its subjective perception of the Islamic republic of Iran. We see that Iranian identity and behaviors are inextricably linked to those of the U.S., with the co-constitution of beliefs representing an ongoing process facilitated by repeated interactions on the international stage.

The Response of the United States

America's response to Iran's nuclear aspirations has remained remarkably consistent ever since the fall of the Pahlavi dynasty and rise of Khomeini's Islamic Republic of Iran. As Takeyh and Maloney (2011) note, the U.S. has pursued the same 'dual track' strategy – the application of economic pressure accompanied by diplomatic outreach and negotiations – since the initial conflict resulting from the 1979 American hostage crisis, during which Iranian revolutionaries held the American embassy for 444 days before releasing the hostages back into U.S. custody. Aside from minor strategic changes, the administrations of President Carter, President Regan, President Bush senior, President Clinton, and President George W. Bush have adopted nearly identical foreign policies towards Iran. Yet, Iran's resolve has proved unyielding regardless of which U.S. President resides in the oval office.

Attitudes of the Presidency

Under the leadership of President George W. Bush, the United States assumed its confrontational posture towards the Iran, blatantly calling for regime change and ramping up efforts to secure additional sanctions by way of the United Nations Security Council. The Bush administration, under Israeli pressure, evoked some of the more curious aspects of the initial IAEA report and declared that Iran was not only pursuing weapons of mass destruction (an eerily similar message that was fallaciously used to justify declaring war against Iraq) but also represented a dire threat to both Israel and the United States' security interests (Fayazmanesh

2008). At the same time the American Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) ramped up its congressional lobbying efforts in order to incite existential fear of Iran as a means to legitimize the application of harsher sanctions and counter the shift in America's approach following the 2004 Paris Agreement.

The neoconservative efforts to maintain an alarmist framing of the Iranian nuclear issue were aided by the 2005 Iranian Presidential Elections, where the radically conservative candidate, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, won over the more moderate Rafsanjani. President Ahmadinejad, running his campaign platform on the premise of delivering Iran back to its rightful place of glory and to defending its sovereignty against the imperialistic western states, gave a controversial speech before the United Nations General Assembly in September of 2005. After outlining the evils of western hegemony, condemning the evil Zionist state of Israel, and pointing to the hypocrisy of NPT signatory nations with nuclear arms, Ahmadinejad announced that Iran was to pursue civilian nuclear programs regardless of western opinions or edicts (Ahmadinejad 2005). He had provided neoconservatives with ample ammunition to further demonize the Iranian nation, becoming the figurehead of a nation that allegedly sought to develop nuclear weapons in order to "wipe Israel off the map" and confront the U.S. and its allies (Jones 2010: 137). Surprisingly, former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice did her best to mitigate the warmongering inclinations of former Vice President Dick Cheney, working to construct the image of a U.S. that advocated multilateral diplomatic outreach towards Iran in reaction to the fallout associated with the Iraqi war.

Fortunately, President Bush finished his second term without the threat of a preemptive strike on Iran's nuclear facilities coming to fruition. Trita Parsi (2012) explains that incoming U.S. President Barack Obama has assumed a relatively fresh stance towards dealing with Iran, leaning heavily towards diplomacy as his main tool of outreach, and initially opposing the dominant notion that negotiations with Iran must be confrontational in nature. While he forwarded the policy that Iran should not be allowed to acquire nuclear weapons, he advocated for a strategy of engagement that sought to communicate a sentiment of mutual respect. This significant shift in tactics demonstrates an unprecedented understanding of Iran's ideational structure and national identity, appealing to their sense of pride and lessening the aggressive and hard-liner attitude assumed by previous administrations.

While political pressure has forced President Obama demonstrate solidarity with Israeli President of Netanyahu over collective concerns about Iran's nuclear pursuits, castigating the Republican politicians for opening "beating the drums of war" in regards to Iran denotes his understanding of detrimental effects such loose talk of aggression can have on the future success of diplomatic efforts (Calmes & Landler 2012). It appears that President Obama's strategies have proven more effective than those of past administrations, with Ayatollah Khamenei lauding his efforts to quell public talks of war and the dire economic consequences stemming from his application of pointed and all-encompassing sanctions producing tangible

shifts in the Iranian public's support for Ahmadinejad's brand of aggressive and defiant foreign policy (Economist 2012: "Ever-resilient...").

AIPAC and Domestic Political Struggles

Yet Israeli pressure groups and the more hawkish members of congress continually reiterate their fear that Iran cannot be contained once it passes the hypothetical "red line" of uranium enrichment, and that such a development necessarily spells out disaster for the Israeli state and the inevitable transfer of nuclear warheads into the hands of terrorist organizations worldwide. Walt & Mearsheimer (2007) view Israeli pressure groups as the primary obstacle to improved relations between the U.S. and Iran, as they represent one of the most powerful and aggressive lobbying constituencies in Washington. Ensuring peace through efforts to normalize U.S.-Iranian relations would serve America's best interests. Yet AIPAC has conflated the security issues of Israel with those of the U.S. in order to construct a fearful conception of the Iranian regime as an urgent threat that may become immune to intervention at any moment, thus rejecting the prolonged process of diplomatic outreach in favor of prompt military action (Oren 2012: 666).

The power struggle outlined by Ido Oren (2012) reveals a heated and prolonged conflict between various actors in Washington, with the U.S. Congress and AIPAC representing the pro-military action position, and the State Department, the U.S. intelligence community, and the American defense establishment comprising the anti-war/pro-diplomacy advocates. Congress, throughout America's contentious relations with the post-revolutionary Iranian state, has been the main political entity calling for war, and the reason behind the majority of economic sanctions imposed by the federal government thus far. AIPAC finds U.S. representatives and Senators much easier to lobby than the executive branch, and accordingly provide a platform upon which politicians compete to have the most stern and aggressive attitude towards the Iranian. This competition between political parties for the influential support of the AIPAC results in the verbalization of arguably the most aggressive and bellicose anti-Iranian statements (Ibid: 667).

Notably, the neoconservative view that any form of reconciliation with the current Iranian regime appears impossibility runs counter to their push for increasingly stringent economic pressures, suggesting that their consistent calls to impose further sanctions are merely instrumental. The right-leaning U.S. administrations, in addition to the more hawkish congressional leaders, seem to use such policy initiatives to appeal to their conservative base given that they represent assertive and tangible action to oppose Iran's behavior. Yet the failure of these sanctions to result in any legitimate shifts in Iranian policy comes with few political costs to these politicians, who can point to their hardline legislative records while extolling the benefits of war in the face of unsuccessful economic and diplomatic pressures.

On the other side of the argument, the U.S. State Department has worked to reduce political hysteria, with Condoleezza Rice, Hillary Clinton, and other high-

ranking members consistently advocating for a reconceptualization of Iran as a vulnerable, isolated, and relatively weak state the behavior of which does not warrant military intervention. Additionally, the U.S. intelligence community strongly refutes the notions that Iran is definitely pursuing nuclear weaponization and that there is any evidence suggesting it is close to the development of warheads. Two National Intelligence Council documents released in 2007 and 2007 indicating a moderate level of certainty that Iran is not working to develop nuclear weapons, a seemly intentional decision by intelligence leaders given that these documents are rarely released to the public. Finally, and perhaps most convincingly, Joint Chief of Staff Michael Mullen and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates have both urged congress and the administration to avoid a war with Iran at all costs, suggesting that the potentially consequences far outweigh potential gains.

Despite the continual struggles between various entities in Washington regarding U.S. policy towards Iran, the hawkish urges of congress and neoconservatives has thus far been restrained. With President Obama in office and the leaders of the American armed forces opposing military action against Iran's nuclear program, it seems that diplomacy is prevailing over military action for the time being. Yet, it is unclear what would come of a unilateral preemptive strike by military forces, and if the United States and other European Allies would be dragged into another Middle Eastern conflict. Furthermore, it appears that a preemptive strike would provide minimum strategic gains, given that the clandestine nature of Iran's nuclear program and the limited intelligence on the exact location and number of enrichment facilities precludes the certainty that military action would actually hinder nuclear development efforts (Kreps & Fuhrmann 2012). However, unless Iran decides to increase the transparency of its nuclear program and strive towards building goodwill with the international community, there is no way to predict if the near future will be characterized by war, new diplomatic inroads, or continued political posturing and ever-tightening economic sanctions.

Conclusion

Despite the best efforts of international organizations, threats of military actions, diplomatic outreach, and economic pressure, Iran's nuclear program, specifically whether its enrichment activities are for peaceful purposes or the pursuit of nuclear weaponry, remains much of a mystery to the outside world. The realist perspective can shed light on the strategic considerations of the Iranian regime, painting a picture of a paranoid and isolated nation seeking to ensure its independence and security against incursions by foreign entities that have and continue to threaten its economic and political interests. It also explains the fears and anxieties of neoconservative politicians and pundits who believe that there is an imminent threat of Iran developing offensive nuclear capabilities and using such capabilities to destroy Israel and restore its previously held position of regional hegemony. However, closer analysis of Iran's past policymaking objectives reveals that the regime has and will continue to work towards insuring its survival and that of the revolution, which the development or use of nuclear weapons would seriously undermine.

A constructivist analysis reveals the ideational structures that form Iran's subjective identity and exposes the forces that have hindered efforts to reach diplomatic solutions between Iran and the western world. The national identity formed by its historical recollection and idealization debunks claims that the Islamic Republic must be irrational to continue pursuing its nuclear aspirations despite the fact that the economic losses from its continued obstinacy far surpass the marginal gains a self-sufficient civilian nuclear power program would bring. International pressures, condemnations, and demands have transformed the significance of its nuclear program from a means for additional economic development to a symbol of national pride, independence, and resistance. Its leaders cannot back down from their commitments unless the international community acknowledges the ideological pressures that have thus far prevented Iran from cooperating with international bodies, and strives to foster a new approach that keeps such limitations in mind.

The renewed emphasis on diplomatic cooperation supported by the Obama administration seems to reflect an evolving understanding that military intervention is not the answer to the continuing deadlock in negations, given the staggering financial and human cost of a conventional war between Iran and the United States. Similarly, the marginalization of Ahmadinejad and a measurable shift away from his bellicose rhetoric suggest that Iranians are becoming increasingly responsive to foreign calls for compromise. Contrary to those who doubt the efficaciousness of economic and diplomatic pressures, recent events may suggest a shift in Iran's openness to pursuing a diplomatic compromise (Economist 2012: Wink or Blink). U.S. and Iranian politicians alike have made a concerted effort to frame the most recent round of diplomatic talks in Istanbul in a positive light and emphasized that both sides have appeared more open to compromise than in past diplomatic forays (Risen 2012). It also appears that looming financial catastrophe associated with the implementation of the most recent round of sanctions, excluding Iran from the banking network dubbed the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT) and thus drastically limiting its ability to participate in international trade, has acted as an effective incentive for Iranian leaders to reassess their attitude of non-cooperation (Gladstone & Castle 2012).

While diplomacy may be progressing given the recent shifts in strategic engagement and changes in domestic politics within both the United States and Iran, pursuing policies that are sensitive to the differing ideational structures and subjective understandings within these two nations remains of paramount importance if this conflict is to be resolved without military force. The United States must continue to express its desire for a diplomatic solution, openly rejecting those who call for a preemptive strike, resisting the public characterization of the Iranian regime as nefarious, and continuously reaching out to both the Iranian people and leadership. The west should embrace Iran's right to generate its own nuclear power for peaceful purposes, and approach negotiations with a newfound sense of mutual respect that appeals to Iran's self-conception. Iranian leaders must express a willingness to cooperate with western demands and work within the international system, weighing its security considerations against its ideational bias towards

noncompliance and anti-western rhetoric. Only through compromise and cooperation can the security of the Iranian public and the longevity of the current regime be safeguarded, as even those opposed to military action as a viable solution contend that an Iran possessing nuclear weapons is an unacceptable outcome.

Realism and constructivism, in the case of the Iranian nuclear conflict, complement each other in helping to fuse the conceptualizations of a rational Iranian regime with its need for security, independence and recognition from the international community with the ideational structures that underlie Iran's subjective values and perception. A new understanding of the conflict emerges, where the primary source of contention stems from the mutual animosity formed by the repeated interactions between the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran. The failure to appreciate a realist-motivated Iranian regime focused primarily on self-preservation and the significant role of political posturing and discourse within both nations in escalating tensions has only hindered diplomatic efforts to the extent that negligible progress has been made in over 30 years despite changing leadership and fluctuating global concerns. In order to understand and address the ideological conflicts that create the foundational animosity between Iran and the west, the same process of fusing realist and constructivist theory must inform proposed diplomatic solutions. It is only after both Iran and United States understand their fundamental differences and the ideational basis for those differences that both parties can design a policy program that attempts to address these ideological conflicts as a means to reach a mutually satisfactory resolution to the Iranian nuclear crisis.

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