NO COMPROMISE WITH THE "GREAT SATAN"? ANTI-WESTERNISM AND THE ONTOLOGICAL LIMITS OF RECONCILIATION IN U.S.-IRAN RELATIONS

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Abstract: This article examines how anti-Westernism constrains reconciliation between the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran. It adopts a theory-guided qualitative descriptive case-study design and analyses academic scholarship, official and institutional documents, elite discourse and verified accounts of U.S.–Iran relations from 1979 to 20 August 2026. Drawing on ontological security theory, the article argues that opposition to Western hegemony—especially to the United States—has become a constitutive narrative of the Islamic Republic's regime identity. This narrative has been institutionalized through political structures, elite socialization and official discourse, increasing the domestic and institutional costs of diplomatic compromise. The analysis nevertheless distinguishes the Iranian state and political regime from heterogeneous ruling elites and the diverse Iranian population. It also treats U.S.–Iran antagonism as relational: the U.S. alliance with Israel, non-proliferation and regional-security objectives, the U.S. withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, sanctions and the joint U.S.-Israeli military action in 2026 have amplified Iranian threat perceptions and reinforced the regime's narratives. The article therefore does not claim that Iran alone caused the conflict or that the 2026 Iran War was inevitable. Rather, it concludes that anti-Western regime identity interacted with mutual security concerns and contingent strategic choices to narrow diplomatic options and increases the fragility of negotiated agreements.

Keywords: *Anti-Westernism, Ontological Security, Iranian Foreign Policy, U.S.–Iran Relations, Revolutionary Ideology*.

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"BÜYÜK ŞEYTAN" İLE UZLAŞMA YOK MU? ABD-İRAN İLİŞKİLERİNDE BATI-KARŞITLIĞI VE UZLAŞININ ONTOLOJİK SINIRLARI

Öz: Bu makale, Batı karşıtlığının Amerika Birleşik Devletleri ile İran İslam Cumhuriyeti arasındaki uzlaşmayı nasıl kısıtladığını incelemektedir. Çalışma, kuram yönlendirmeli nitel ve betimleyici bir vaka analizi benimsemekte; 1979'dan 20 Ağustos 2026'ya kadar uzanan döneme ilişkin akademik çalışmaları, resmî ve kurumsal belgeleri, yönetici elitlerin söylemlerini ve doğrulanmış güncel kaynakları analiz etmektedir. Ontolojik güvenlik kuramından hareketle makale, Batı hegemonyasına—özellikle de ABD'ye—karşı muhalefetin İslam Cumhuriyeti'nin rejim kimliğini oluşturan temel anlatılardan biri hâline geldiğini ileri sürmektedir. Bu anlatı, siyasal kurumlar, elitlerin sosyalleşme süreçleri ve resmî söylem aracılığıyla kurumsallaşmış; diplomatik uzlaşmanın iç siyasi ve kurumsal maliyetlerini yükseltmiştir. Bununla birlikte çalışma, İran devletini ve siyasal rejimini, kendi içinde farklılaşan yönetici elitlerden ve çoğul İran toplumundan analitik olarak ayırmaktadır. Ayrıca ABD–İran çatışmasını ilişkisel bir süreç olarak ele almaktadır: ABD'nin İsrail ile ittifakı, nükleer silahların yayılmasını önleme ve bölgesel güvenlik hedefleri, Kapsamlı Ortak Eylem Planı'ndan çekilmesi, yaptırımları ve 2026'daki ortak ABD–İsrail askerî harekâtı İran'ın tehdit algılarını güçlendirmiş ve rejimin anlatılarını pekiştirmiştir. Dolayısıyla makale, çatışmanın tek sorumlusunun İran olduğunu veya 2026 İran Savaşı'nın kaçınılmaz olduğunu ileri sürmemektedir. Bunun yerine, Batı karşıtı rejim kimliğinin karşılıklı güvenlik kaygıları ve koşullara bağlı stratejik tercihlerle etkileşerek diplomatik seçenekleri daralttığı ve müzakere edilmiş anlaşmaları daha kırılgan hâle getirdiği sonucuna ulaşmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Batı Karşıtlığı, Ontolojik Güvenlik, İran Dış Politikası, ABD-İran İlişkileri, Devrim İdeolojisi*.

Introduction: The Puzzle of Persistent Hostility

Few bilateral relationships in contemporary international politics have proved as persistently antagonistic as that between the United States (U.S.) and the Islamic Republic of Iran (Iran). Since the 1979 Revolution, the relationship has fluctuated between limited diplomatic engagement and recurrent confrontation without producing a durable framework for peaceful coexistence. This pattern escalated dramatically on 28 February 2026, when the U.S. and Israel launched military strikes against Iran, killing Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and targeting Iranian nuclear, missile, military and political infrastructure. Iran retaliated by attacking Israel and U.S. military facilities in the region and by restricting passage through the Strait of Hormuz. A two-week pause was announced on 8 April, followed on 17 June by a 14-point Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed by U.S. President Donald Trump and Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian following mediation led by Pakistan with Qatari support. The MoU established a 60-day period for negotiations concerning sanctions, Iran's nuclear program and navigation through the Strait of Hormuz. Its implementation, however, rapidly unraveled, and the negotiation period expired on 17 August without a final agreement or extension. As of this study's cut-off date of 20 August 2026, the conflict remained unresolved. These developments surely demonstrate the fragility of diplomatic engagement, albeit they do not by themselves establish either a single cause of the war or the inevitability of escalation.[2]

For decades, scholars and politicians have sought to elucidate the enduring nature of the adversarial relationship between the U.S. and Iran. A significant portion of the literature has concentrated on strategic and material considerations—analysts emphasizing Iran's disputed nuclear program, its backing of non-state militant groups (e.g. Hezbollah in Lebanon) in the Middle East and its overarching rivalry with the U.S. (and Israel) for dominance in the region.[3] From this viewpoint, U.S.–Iran tensions are primarily perceived as a regional

[2] Philip Loft (2026), "US–Iran Ceasefire and Nuclear Talks in 2026", House of Commons Library Research Briefing CBP-10637, 02.07.2026; Parisa Hafezi & Katharine Jackson (2026), "Iran Threatens New Offensive While US Rules Out Extending Ceasefire Deal", *Reuters*, 17.08.2026, Date of Accession: 20.08.2026 from https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-threatens-go-offensive-strait-hormuz-if-diplomacy-with-us-fails-2026-08-17/; *Reuters* (2026), "The 14-Point US–Iran Pact White House Sent to Congress", 17.06.2026, Date of Accession: 01.07.2026 from https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/14-point-draft-us-iran-deal-2026-06-17/.

[3] See, for example; Gawdat Bahgat (2023), "US-Iran Relations: Challenges and Opportunities", *The Muslim World*, 113, pp. 108–119; James G. Blight et al. (2012), *Becoming Enemies: U.S.-Iran Relations and the Iran-Iraq War, 1979–1988*, Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield; Akan Malici & Stephen G. Walker (2017), *Role Theory and Role Conflict in U.S.-Iran Relations: Enemies of Our Own Making*, New York & London: Routledge; Seyed Hossein Mousavian & Sina Toossi (2017), "Assessing U.S.–Iran Nuclear Engagement", *The Washington Quarterly*, 40(3), pp. 65–95; Nihat Ali Özcan & Özgür Özdamar (2009), "Iran's Nuclear Program

"*security dilemma*", wherein each party interprets the other's actions as menacing and reacts by augmenting its own deterrent capabilities. Accordingly, conflict endures while both parties perceive collaboration as a possible threat to their security interests.[4] Although these hypotheses certainly address significant aspects of U.S.-Iran relations, they do not provide a systematic explanation for the decades-long conflict.

Despite substantial advancements via diplomatic engagement, the resultant agreements have often proven to be tenuous. Negotiations have often elicited significant political reaction in Iran, especially from those who consider compromise with the U.S. ideologically intolerable.[5] The limited durability of diplomatic efforts indicates that elements beyond traditional strategic assessments may be influencing the actions of the Iranian government. This article contends that the enduring animosity between Washington and Tehran cannot be comprehensively analyzed just via the framework of geopolitical rivalry or security issues. It must also be analyzed in connection to the ideological underpinnings of the Iranian revolutionary state. The article suggests that anti-Westernism serves as a fundamental component of the political ontology of the Islamic Republic. Since the 1979 Revolution, the regime's identity and legitimacy have been intricately linked to a mythologized narrative of struggle against Western hegemony, with the U.S. serving as the primary symbol of "*foreign imperialist authority*".[6] The U.S., after all, was famously described by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini as the "*Great Satan*" (*Shaytan-e Bozorg* in Persian) alongside public chants of "*Death to America*" in many demonstrations across the country throughout the 1980s.[7]

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and the Future of U.S.-Iranian Relations", *Middle Eastern Studies*, 16(1), pp. 121–133; Ray Takeyh (2002), "Re-Imagining US-Iranian Relations", *Survival*, 44(3), pp. 23–36; Süleyman Elik (2018), "The United States' Strategic Relationship with Iran and Turkey", in *US Foreign Policy in the Middle East: From American Missionaries to the Islamic State*, London: Routledge, pp. 118–137.

[4] Nihat Ali Özcan & Özgür Özdamar (2009), "Iran's Nuclear Program and the Future of U.S.-Iranian Relations"; Süleyman Elik (2018), "The United States' Strategic Relationship with Iran and Turkey".

[5] Syed Rizwan Haider Bukhari (2026), "From Negotiation to Escalation: Coercive Diplomacy, Military Force, and the 2026 Iran–US Nuclear Conflict", *Journal of Development and Social Sciences*, 7(1), pp. 304–315.

[6] Peyman Asadzade (2019), "Faith or Ideology? Religiosity, Political Islam, and Anti-Americanism in Iran", *Journal of Global Security Studies*, 4(4), pp. 545–559; Ehsan Bakhshandeh (2014), "How Mainstream Iranian Newspapers Portray the West: The Influence of Anti-Westernism and Anti-Americanism", *The Journal of International Communication*, 20(2), pp. 184–199; Ehsan Bakhshandeh (2016), *Occidentalism in Iran*, London: IB Tauris; Kylie Baxter & Shahram Akbarzadeh (2008), *US Foreign Policy in the Middle East: The Roots of Anti-Americanism*, London: Routledge; Patrick Clawson (2004), "The Paradox of Anti-Americanism in Iran", *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, 8(1), pp. 16–24; Oğuzhan Göksel (2019), "Defying the System: The Origins of Anti-Westernism in the Non-Western World and the Case of Iran", *Turkish Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 6(2), pp. 13–42.

[7] Mohammad Rezaie Yazdi (2016), *Khomeinism, the Islamic Revolution and Anti-Americanism*, Birmingham: University of Birmingham; Saeed Hajinaseri & Hamed Anvarianasl (2021), "Anti-Americanism in Ayatollah Khamenei"s Thought", *Islamic Revolution Research*, 10(3), pp. 147–169.

Resistance to Western imperialist hegemony has therefore evolved into an essential element of the regime's self-identity.

Grasping this ontological aspect of regime identity elucidates why reaching a compromise with the U.S. has been politically challenging for Iranian leaders. Diplomatic reconciliation threatens to undermine the ideological narrative that legitimizes the revolutionary Islamic regime by challenging Iran's self-portrayal as the leader of resistance against Western hegemony. In this context, rapprochement with the U.S. entails potential domestic political repercussions that transcend ordinary strategic policy considerations. The Tehran government must always weigh the practical advantages of diplomatic engagement against the ideological dangers of undermining a fundamental aspect of its revolutionary character.

This article aims to enhance discussions in International Relations (IR) theory by analyzing the connection between regime identity and foreign policy behavior. Utilizing the notion of "*ontological security*", first formulated by Anthony Giddens[8] and subsequently modified for IR by Jennifer Mitzen[9], the theory contends that political regimes need not just material security but also the continuation of their identity narratives.[10] When these narratives are jeopardized, political leaders may prioritize the preservation of identity—even if it contradicts evident strategic interests. The ontological security approach, when applied to Iran, indicates that the ongoing conflict with the U.S. is driven not just by geopolitical competition but also by the regime's need to maintain the revolutionary narrative that supports its legitimacy.

Methodologically, the article employs a theory-guided qualitative descriptive analysis of a single longitudinal case. It draws on peer-reviewed scholarship and academic monographs, official and institutional documents, political speeches and verified contemporary accounts of

[8] Anthony Giddens (1991), *Modernity and Self-Identity*, Cambridge: Polity.
[9] Jennifer Mitzen (2006), "Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma", *European Journal of International Relations*, 12(3), pp. 341–370.
[10] For examples of the ever-growing literature on ontological security in IR in recent years, see; Umut Can Adisonmez & Recep Onursal (2020), "Governing Anxiety, Trauma and Crisis: The Political Discourse on Ontological (In)Security after the July 15 Coup Attempt in Turkey", *Middle East Critique*, 29(3), pp. 291–306; Umut Can Adisonmez & Helin Sari Ertem (2025), "'A Tale of Love and Hate': A Lacanian Lens on Turkish Foreign Policy towards the West", *Critical Studies on Security*, 25(3), pp. 295–307; Catarina Kinnvall (2004), "Globalization and Religious Nationalism: Self, Identity, and the Search for Ontological Security", *Political Psychology*, 25(5), pp. 741–767; Jennifer Mitzen (2018), "Anxious Community: EU as (in)Security Community", *European Security*, 27(3), pp. 393–413; Catarina Kinnvall & Jennifer Mitzen (2020), "Anxiety, Fear, and Ontological Security in World Politics: Thinking with and beyond Giddens", *International Theory*, 12(2), pp. 240–256; Jennifer Mitzen (2006), "Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma"; Brent J. Steele (2008), *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-Identity and the IR State*, London: Routledge; Bahar Rumelili (2020), "Integrating Anxiety into International Relations Theory: Hobbes, Existentialism, and Ontological Security", *International Theory*, 12(2), pp. 257–272.

the 2026 conflict. The analysis traces how anti-Western narratives emerged, became embedded in regime institutions and were invoked or contested during periods of diplomatic engagement and military escalation. The principal timeframe extends from the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979 to 20 August 2026, while selected pre-1979 developments—particularly the 1953 coup and Western support for the Pahlavi monarchy—are examined as historical antecedents. The study is interpretive rather than statistical and does not treat ontological security as an independently sufficient cause of conflict.

Several conceptual distinctions are necessary. The Iranian state refers here to the durable legal, administrative and coercive apparatus through which the Islamic Republic conducts domestic and foreign policy. The political regime denotes the post-1979 rules, institutions and legitimating doctrines through which authority is organized, particularly the office of the Supreme Leader, the Guardian Council and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Ruling elites are the heterogeneous officeholders and factions operating within these institutions, including hardliners, pragmatists and reform-oriented actors whose preferences do not always coincide. Iranian society, finally, refers to a diverse population whose political attitudes cannot be inferred from official rhetoric or regime-sponsored practices. The argument therefore concerns the identity and legitimating narratives of the political regime and its core institutions; it does not assume that all Iranian citizens share an anti-Western worldview. When "*Iran*" is used as shorthand, it refers to the state acting internationally rather than to an undifferentiated national community.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 1 reviews Realist, Liberal Institutionalist, Constructivist and ontological-security explanations of U.S.–Iran relations. Section 2 establishes the theoretical framework and specifies how ontological-security claims are applied to regime identity. Sections 3 and 4 trace the historical origins and institutionalization of anti-Westernism following the 1979 Revolution. Section 5 integrates the analysis of regime-sponsored political culture, diplomatic negotiation and the escalation and continuing consequences of the 2026 Iran War. The conclusion evaluates the article's theoretical contribution and identifies directions for comparative research. The central claim is not that anti-Westernism mechanically produces conflict, but that its institutionalization raises the political cost of reconciliation and narrows the repertoire through which Iranian decision-makers can justify compromise.

1. Literature Review: Explaining the U.S.–Iran Conflict

For the last forty years, a substantial body of scholarship has attempted to explain why U.S.-Iran relations have consistently been antagonistic. The literature may be categorized into three main frameworks: Realism, Liberal Institutionalism and Constructivism. Realist IR theory has largely shaped the mainstream interpretation of U.S.–Iran relations, perceiving the conflict as a consequence of the regional balance of power. Iran's strategic location in the Persian Gulf, its aspirations for regional dominance and the existence of American military and economic interests in the Middle East generate a persistent security problem.[11] This perspective suggests that U.S.–Iran antagonism is almost unavoidable as the U.S. aims to maintain its strategic supremacy and safeguard Israel's interests, whilst Iran endeavors to ensure its sovereignty and augment its influence in a competitive landscape. Realist interpretations emphasize material capabilities and the principles of deterrence, illustrating instances such as the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Iran's nuclear program and proxy wars in Lebanon, Syria and Yemen as expressions of structural rivalry. Realist scholars have emphasized the asymmetric dynamics of the U.S.–Iran relationship, highlighting that Iran's significant material deficiencies compel it to use asymmetric methods—including the financing of proxy organizations such as Hezbollah.[12] From this viewpoint, the U.S.–Iran conflict is mostly a rational reaction to structural incentives as animosity arises from foreseeable security rivalry rather than irrational policy decisions or ideological inflexibility.

Any explanation centered on Iranian regime identity must nevertheless treat U.S.–Iran antagonism as a relational phenomenon. Washington has independent strategic and domestic reasons for maintaining pressure on Tehran, including its alliance with Israel, concerns about nuclear proliferation and ballistic missiles, the protection of U.S. forces and regional partners, freedom of navigation in the Persian Gulf and the preservation of a U.S.-led regional order. These interests interact with historically formed American representations of Iran as an untrustworthy or revisionist actor.[13] Conversely, the 1953 coup, American support for the

[11] James G. Blight et al. (2012), *Becoming Enemies: U.S.-Iran Relations and the Iran-Iraq War, 1979–1988*; Süleyman Elik (2018), "The United States' Strategic Relationship with Iran and Turkey"; Oğuzhan Göksel (2025), "The Shia Crescent and Sectarianism: Iran's Grand Strategy in the Middle East and Its Regional Opponents", in *Contemporary Issues in the Middle East,* Sakarya*:* Sakarya University Press, pp. 1–20; Akan Malici & Stephen G. Walker (2017), *Role Theory and Role Conflict in U.S.-Iran Relations: Enemies of Our Own Making*; Seyed Hossein Mousavian & Sina Toossi (2017), "Assessing U.S.–Iran Nuclear Engagement"; Nihat Ali Özcan & Özgür Özdamar (2009), "Iran's Nuclear Program and the Future of U.S.-Iranian Relations".
[12] Akbar Khan & Han Zhaoying (2010), "Iran-Hezbollah Alliance Reconsidered: What Contributes to the Survival of State-Proxy Alliance?", *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, 7(1), pp. 101–123.
[13] Akan Malici & Stephen G. Walker (2017), *Role Theory and Role Conflict in U.S.-Iran Relations: Enemies of Our Own Making*.

Shah, successive sanctions regimes, the 2018 withdrawal from the JCPOA and later military operations have given Iranian actors material as well as narrative grounds for regarding the United States as threatening. Iranian nuclear, missile and regional policies have, in turn, reinforced American and Israeli threat perceptions. The resulting conflict is therefore better understood as a mutually reinforcing security relationship than as the external expression of Iranian ideology alone.[14]

Although Realist theories provide a persuasive rationale for certain observable actions—such as military posturing, nuclear aspirations and regional proxy involvement—they fail to adequately explain the enduring ideological fervor of the relationship. Realist theories believe that nations essentially want to maximize security and material gain, yet the U.S.–Iran relations often exhibits behavior that contradicts immediate material objectives. For instance, Iranian officials have consistently intensified hostilities with the U.S., even when such actions had substantial economic and security repercussions.[15] Likewise, negotiating periods, exemplified by the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, have shown significant fragility, indicating that structural incentives alone cannot entirely explain the pattern of animosity. Realist interpretations, however, analytically rigorous in evaluating power dynamics, often downplay the influence of ideology, identity and home legitimacy on foreign policy choices.

Liberal Institutionalist researchers provide contrasting viewpoints that highlight the significance of international institutions, norms and domestic political processes in conflict mediation.[16] From this perspective, U.S.–Iran relations are analyzed through the lens of the achievements and shortcomings of diplomatic engagement and global governance frameworks. Organizations such as the United Nations, the International Atomic Energy Agency and agreements like the JCPOA are seen as instruments that might diminish ambiguity, cultivate trust and limit the motivations for unilateral escalation. Failures in U.S.–Iran reconciliation are often ascribed to domestic political restrictions and inadequate institutional enforcement mechanisms. Analysts observe that in both Washington and Tehran,

[14] Morgan Thomas Rees (2023), "Ontological (In)Security and the Iran Nuclear Deal—Explaining Instability in US Foreign Policy Interests", *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 19(3), pp. 1-21; James G. Blight et al. (2012), *Becoming Enemies: U.S.-Iran Relations and the Iran-Iraq War, 1979–1988*; Akan Malici & Stephen G. Walker (2017), *Role Theory and Role Conflict in U.S.-Iran Relations: Enemies of Our Own Making*.

[15] Alireza Rastkar & Saied Shokoohi (2025), "The Impact of Iranian Political Elites' Perception and Misperception on Iran-U.S. Relations (2012-2020)", *Journal of Iran and Central Eurasia Studies*, 8(1), pp. 53–76.

[16] See, for example; Michael W. Doyle (1986), "Liberalism and World Politics", *The American Political Science Review*, 80(4), pp. 1151-1169.

domestic constituents impose considerable pressure on politicians, influencing the spectrum of viable foreign policy options.[17] In the U.S., party polarization, the presence of interest groups and the legacy of previous conflicts limit the potential for engagement with Iran. In Iran, hawkish elements, the religious establishment and entities like the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps exert considerable influence, often portraying concessions as ideological compromises that jeopardize the revolutionary narrative.[18] Liberal analyses emphasize significant procedural and structural limitations but often see ideological narratives as secondary, viewing them as tools for domestic politics rather than as fundamental to regime identity. Opposition to U.S. is often seen as a mechanism used by Iranian leaders to garner support or safeguard political objectives, rather than as a core tenet inherent in the regime's self-identity. Liberal Institutionalist theories provide insufficient understanding of the persistence of antagonism, despite substantial pecuniary incentives for compromise and the existence of institutional procedures designed to promote collaboration.

Constructivist analysts provide a distinct perspective, highlighting the importance of ideas, identity and normative frameworks in influencing state behavior.[19] In the Iranian context, constructivists emphasize the importance of the 1979 Revolution as a pivotal event, instilling anti-Westernism inside the ideological framework of the state.[20] The U.S., historically an ally of the Shah and emblematic of Western supremacy, is seen as an existential foe, a view that influences strategic considerations and domestic political discourse. Constructivist research indicates that anti-Westernism is not only a strategic discourse but a profound element of political culture. Many Iranian leaders, institutions and individuals adopt a perspective whereby conflict with the West is seen ethically and politically imperative. Historical occurrences, including as the MI6 and CIA-supported coup in 1953, the U.S. Embassy hostage crisis and other U.S. involvement in the area have solidified this narrative. Academics such as Vali Nasr and Ray Takeyh have highlighted the significance of identity

[17] Gawdat Bahgat (2023), "US-Iran Relations: Challenges and Opportunities"; Kylie Baxter & Shahram Akbarzadeh (2008), *US Foreign Policy in the Middle East: The Roots of Anti-Americanism*; Ray Takeyh (2002), "Re-Imagining US-Iranian Relations".

[18] Hesam Forozan (2016), *The Military in Post-Revolutionary Iran: The Evolution and Roles of the Revolutionary Guards*, London: Routledge; Bayram Sinkaya (2016), *Revolutionary Guards in Iranian Politics: Elites and Shifting Relations*, London: Routledge; Afshon Ostovar (2016), *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Irans Revolutionary Guards*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[19] See, for example; Alexander Wendt (1999), *Social Theory of International Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[20] Tamer Badawi (2016), *The Role of Identities and Interests in Iran's Foreign Policy Towards Syria and Iraq: A Constructivist Approach*, Budapest: Central European University; Mahdi Mohammad Nia (2010), "Understanding Iran's Foreign Policy: An Application of Holistic Constructivism", *Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations*, 9(1), pp. 148–180.

and narrative in limiting Iranian foreign policy, contending that the regime's legitimacy is intrinsically linked to its resistance against perceived existential external threats.[21]

A substantial Iran-specific ontological-security literature has developed beyond the general Constructivist accounts. Dehghani Firoozabadi conceptualizes the preservation of the Islamic Republic's Islamic and anti-hegemonic identity as a continuing motive in foreign policy.[22] Behravesh similarly interprets Iran's nuclear conduct through the relationship between revisionism and ontological (in)security, showing that opposition to the prevailing international order may produce identity coherence while simultaneously generating exclusion and material insecurity.[23] These studies establish that Iranian foreign policy cannot be reduced either to strategic calculation or to revolutionary rhetoric alone.

Subsequent scholarship has applied the framework to more specific policy domains. Dolatabadi connects Iran's missile program to dignity, pride, mistrust and the avoidance of shame, while also demonstrating that ontological-security narratives can be modified when physical survival is endangered.[24] Shadunts examines how othering and the management of ambiguity reproduce Iranian subjectivity, Arghavani Pirsalami, Moradi and Alipour analyse sanctions and ontological insecurity in the post-JCPOA period, and Cingöz and his co-authors interpret the Axis of Resistance as a source of continuity and regime legitimacy.[25] Importantly, Rees reverses the U.S.ual direction of analysis by demonstrating that the JCPOA also activated competing American identity narratives—between the United States as a responsible international leader and as a state that should not negotiate with actors represented as terrorists or existential adversaries.[26]

This article builds on that scholarship but differs in three respects. First, it treats anti-Westernism as a longitudinal regime narrative connecting revolutionary origins, institutional

[21] Vali Nasr (2025), *Iran's Grand Strategy A Political History*, Princeton: Princeton University Press; Ray Takeyh (2002), "Re-Imagining US-Iranian Relations".
[22] Seyed Jalal Dehghani Firoozabadi, (2011), "Ontological Security and the Foreign Policy Analysis of the Islamic Republic of Iran", *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs*, 2(2), pp. 31–60.
[23] Maysam Behravesh (2018), "State Revisionism and Ontological (In)security in International Politics: The Complicated Case of Iran and Its Nuclear Behavior", *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 21(4), pp. 836–857.
[24] Ali Bagheri Dolatabadi (2022), "Ontological Security and Iran's Missile Program", *All Azimuth: A Journal of Foreign Policy and Peace*, 11(2), pp. 233–255.
[25] Alan Shadunts (2023), "From Knowledge to Wisdom: Uncertainty and Ontological (In)Security in Iran's Foreign Policy", *Global Studies Quarterly*, 3(3), pp. 1-12; Fariborz Arghavani Pirsalami & Arash Moradi & Hosein Alipour (2024), "A Crisis of Ontological Security in Foreign Policy: Iran and International Sanctions in the Post–JCPOA Era", *Third World Quarterly*, 45(3), pp. 531–547; Murat Cingöz & Fulya Özkan & Yavuz Selim Alkan & Ramazan İzol (2024), "Iran's Axis of Resistance through the Lens of Ontological Security", *Third World Quarterly*, 45(13), pp. 1963–1980.
[26] Morgan Thomas Rees (2023), "Ontological (In)Security and the Iran Nuclear Deal—Explaining Instability in US Foreign Policy Interests".

reproduction, negotiation and military escalation rather than examining only one program or regional policy. Second, it distinguishes the state, the political regime, heterogeneous ruling elites and Iranian society, thereby avoiding the assumption that official narratives constitute a uniform national identity. Third, it analyses Iranian ontological-security concerns within a relational framework that also recognizes U.S. and Israeli security interests, identity narratives and strategic choices. Its contribution is consequently not the claim that ontological security has previously been neglected in studies of Iran, but the integration of these strands into an explanation of why reconciliation repeatedly becomes politically vulnerable.

2. Theoretical Framework: Ontological Security and Regime Identity

Comprehending the enduring animosity between the U.S. and the Islamic Republic of Iran requires a theoretical framework that transcends traditional materialist or institutionalist interpretations. Although strategic competitiveness, security challenges and institutional fragility influence bilateral relations, they do not fully explain the ideologically rooted and persistent animosity, even when compromise seems financially beneficial. This article uses the notion of ontological security, initially formulated by Anthony Giddens and later modified for IR by experts such as Jennifer Mitzen, to encapsulate the intricate nature of Iranian foreign policy behavior. Ontological security theory elucidates how identity, narrative and ideological continuity restrict the actions of political entities, such as governments and regimes. Giddens proposed the notion of ontological security within individual psychology, asserting that humans want not just physical safety but also stability and continuity in their self-identity.[27] Ontological security denotes the assurance that one's identity, social duties and routines will endure across time, hence fostering a cohesive sense of self. The disruption of these narratives, whether due to social, political, or existential issues, induces anxiety and prompts behaviors intended to restore continuity. In essence, actors strive not just for financial survival but also to preserve a coherent and comprehensible identity and their relationship with the world.

In the IR framework of ontological security theory, governments and regimes are seen as entities that similarly desire for continuity in identity and narratives. Mitzen contends that states have "*national identities*" that are socially produced and historically ingrained.[28] These identities establish expectations on suitable conduct, guide threat assessment and affect the appraisal of possible actions. When a state's identity is jeopardized, its leaders may prioritize

[27] Anthony Giddens (1991), *Modernity and Self-Identity*.
[28] Jennifer Mitzen (2006), "Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma".

safeguarding that identity above financial benefits or strategic advantages. This theoretical framework elucidates the persistence of some disputes, even in situations where rationalist theories (i.e. Realism and Liberalism) would anticipate collaboration. In the context of Iran, ontological security theory highlights the significance of anti-Westernism in the self-identity of the Islamic Republic.[29] Since the 1979 Revolution, the government has established its legitimacy on the premise that Iran stands in opposition to Western hegemony—with the U.S. as its primary antagonist. Anti-Westernism is ingrained in the regime's self-perception as the leader of anti-imperialism, Muslim authenticity and revolutionary principles.[30] Any concession to the U.S. jeopardizes the integrity of this narrative and, thus, the ontological security of the regime.

This viewpoint offers several insights on the conduct of Iranian foreign policy. Initially, it elucidates why diplomatically and economically advantageous options for interaction with the U.S. have often been restricted or compromised. Compromises that seem sensible from a material standpoint pose considerable dangers to the regime's identity, which extends beyond traditional strategic assessments. Secondly, ontological security theory elucidates the persistent pattern of conflict and escalation seen in U.S.–Iran relations. The regime's legitimacy and identity are established in contrast to a clearly defined foreign enemy, therefore sustaining conflict, even at significant material expense, functions to preserve internal coherence and stability. Thirdly, it provides a framework for comprehending the longevity of ideological narratives over time. Institutional frameworks, elite socialization and political culture together reinforce anti-Westernism, establishing it as a lasting aspect of the state's character rather than a fleeting rhetorical tool. By positioning anti-Westernism as an essential element of ontological stability, the article seeks to transcend instrumentalist or propaganda-driven interpretations. The allegation is not that Iranian officials use anti-American rhetoric just to attain financial goals or to galvanize domestic support. Opposition to the U.S. constitutes the rationale by which the regime perceives its existence, legitimacy and purpose.

3. Revolutionary Origins: Anti-Westernism in the Ideology of the 1979 Revolution

The direct roots of anti-Western sentiment in Iran were established prior to the creation of official institutions of the Islamic Republic of Iran, commonly traced to the wounds that

[29] Peyman Asadzade (2019), "Faith or Ideology? Religiosity, Political Islam, and Anti-Americanism in Iran"; Patrick Clawson (2004), "The Paradox of Anti-Americanism in Iran".
[30] Saeed Hajinaseri & Hamed Anvarianasl (2021), "Anti-Americanism in Ayatollah Khamenei"s Thought".

emerged within Iranian national pride after a series of confrontations with Britain and the U.S. throughout the 20th century.[31] The Iranian Revolution of 1979 was not merely a government takeover as its founders envisioned a civilisational endeavor intended to redefine Iran's global standing.[32] This effort focused on defining a moral, religious and political identity that distinctly opposed Western rule, culture and foreign influence. Ruhollah Khomeini, the Revolution's charismatic leader, described the Shah's removal as a freedom from both internal despotism and the extensive influence of the U.S., which had consistently backed the monarchy.[33] The 1953 CIA-coordinated coup that deposed Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh and restored the Shah is a pivotal event in the collective memory of revolutionary elites, serving as both a historical grievance and a moral story of Western treachery. Khomeini characterized the U.S. as the epitome of imperial oppression and ethical decay, Iran identifying itself in opposition to Western power, especially the U.S., as a matter of principle and legality.

The transformative ideology amalgamated political Islam with a comprehensive anti-imperialist perspective, establishing a narrative whereby foreign oppression and internal despotism were inextricably linked. Within this view, the Shah was not only a dictator as he supposedly served as a proxy for foreign interests and embodied the intrusion of Western ideals, culture and economic dominance into the Iranian political landscape.[34] Hostility to the Shah was inherently linked to struggle to Western influence and any conception of a viable post-revolutionary state required a continuous, ideologically rooted hostility to foreign control. Anti-Westernism thus arose as a fundamental premise connecting domestic political legitimacy to foreign stance. This intellectual stance was further solidified by the social and political mobilization of several revolutionary groups. Clerical networks, student groups and grassroots activists were incorporated into a narrative that depicted opposition to the West as both a moral obligation and a pragmatic need for protecting national sovereignty.[35] Khomeini's statements underscored the repudiation of American political and economic dominance while simultaneously highlighting the need to foster a genuine Iranian-Islamic identity, free from foreign contamination. This cultural component interlinked with political

[31] Ervand Abrahamian (2013), *The Coup: 1953, the CIA, and the Roots of Modern U.S.-Iranian Relations*, New York & London: The New Press; Ehsan Bakhshandeh (2016), *Occidentalism in Iran*.
[32] Mohammad Rezaie Yazdi (2016), *Khomeinism, the Islamic Revolution and Anti-Americanism.*
[33] Hajinaseri and Anvarianasl (2021), "Anti-Americanism in Ayatollah Khamenei"s Thought", pp. 149–157.
[34] Oğuzhan Göksel (2019), "Defying the System: The Origins of Anti-Westernism in the Non-Western World and the Case of Iran", p. 33.
[35] Behrooz Moazami (2009), "The Islamization of the Social Movements and the Revolution, 1963–1979", *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 29(1), pp. 47–62.

strategy, ensuring that anti-Western feeling became ingrained in the political awareness of revolutionary leaders and the general public.

The revolutionary movement used historical and theological symbols to emphasize the importance of anti-Westernism. Allusions to the extensive history of foreign meddling in Iran, including Anglo-Russian influence in the 19th century and 20th century oil concessions and political machinations, provided a historical rationale for conflict. The religious discourse that characterizes the U.S. as a corrupting entity opposed to Islamic ideals imbued the revolutionary narrative with moral significance and universality.[36] Through the amalgamation of historical grievances, religious symbolism, and political ideology, the revolutionaries established a resilient framework wherein opposition to the U.S. was not only strategic but integral to the regime's self-identity.

The Islamic Republic was established not just as a political regime but as a revolutionary initiative against Western power. Anti-Westernism fulfilled many roles—it justified the U.S.urpation of authority, consolidated various revolutionary groups and offered a narrative structure for the state to express its foreign policy objectives. This narrative framed conflict with the U.S. as an ideological imperative rather than a situational tactic. In essence, anti-Westernism was integral to the regime's character from its inception and it was neither an afterthought nor a sudden irrational reaction to foreign influences. This basic posture would eventually influence the institutionalization of anti-Westernism and its significance in Iranian political culture, delineating the limitations within which future diplomatic interaction may transpire.

4. Institutionalizing Anti-Westernism

From the inception of the post-revolutionary state in 1979, revolutionary leaders acknowledged that ideological convictions alone could not ensure the sustainability of anti-Westernism.[37] To maintain hostility to foreign influence as a core aspect of the regime's character, they aimed to integrate these values throughout the political, military and economic frameworks of the state. Over time, this institutional anchoring converted anti-Westernism from a revolutionary rhetoric into a persistent and structural characteristic of Iranian government—significantly influencing the regime's foreign policy conduct and its relations

[36] Peyman Asadzade (2019), "Faith or Ideology? Religiosity, Political Islam, and Anti-Americanism in Iran".
[37] Alireza Rastkar & Saied Shokoohi (2025), "The Impact of Iranian Political Elites' Perception and Misperception on Iran-U.S. Relations (2012-2020)".

with the U.S. The establishment and continuous expansion of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) was a pivotal mechanism in this institutionalization.

Formed in the wake of the revolution on 5 May 1979, the IRGC was intended to safeguard the revolution from internal and foreign dangers. In contrast to conventional armed units focused on territory defense, the IRGC was specifically tasked with safeguarding the ideological essence of the revolution. The mandate integrated military, political and economic tasks, illustrating the regime's recognition that maintaining anti-Western sentiment needed both coercive power and intellectual legitimacy. The IRGC, via its dominance in key economic sectors, its sway over domestic politics and its pivotal role in military strategy, emerged as a vital protector of the regime's anti-Western stance.[38] The Corps' extensive authority across all dimensions of state and society has guaranteed that any departure from countering the U.S. would encounter significant institutional opposition.

In addition to the IRGC's function, additional institutional frameworks bolstered anti-Western sentiment in political, legal and religious domains. The Guardian Council serves as both a gatekeeper for political positions and a validator of law, ensuring that policy choices conform to revolutionary ideals. By overseeing the ideological adherence of elected officials, the Council effectively limits political players from engaging in foreign policy endeavors that may jeopardize the regime's anti-Western character.[39] The position of the Supreme Leader has ultimate control over domestic and international affairs, establishing a centralized system for enforcing ideological conformity. This vertical unity of power guarantees that anti-Westernism is not only a rhetorical stance but a structural limitation entrenched in the state's official decision-making framework.

The institutionalization of anti-Western sentiment functions via the amalgamation of ideology and material interests. Over time, prominent entities—especially the IRGC and its associated economic networks—cultivated significant political and economic clout, correlating their organizational endurance and success with the maintenance of an adversarial posture towards the West.[40] The amalgamation of ideological and financial incentives creates a formidable structural constraint as contesting the anti-Western narrative is not just politically perilous but

[38] Bayram Sinkaya (2016), *Revolutionary Guards in Iranian Politics: Elites and Shifting Relations*; Afshon Ostovar (2016), *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Irans Revolutionary Guards*; Hesam Forozan (2016), *The Military in Post-Revolutionary Iran: The Evolution and Roles of the Revolutionary Guards*.
[39] Syed Rizwan Haider Bukhari (2026), "From Negotiation to Escalation: Coercive Diplomacy, Military Force, and the 2026 Iran–US Nuclear Conflict".
[40] Tamer Badawi (2016), *The Role of Identities and Interests in Iran's Foreign Policy Towards Syria and Iraq: A Constructivist Approach*; Afshon Ostovar (2016), *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Irans Revolutionary Guards.*

also jeopardizes established economic and institutional interests. These institutional arrangements do not make policy change impossible, but they increase its organizational, political and reputational costs. The following section examines how these costs interact with regime-sponsored political culture, factional contestation, mutual security concerns and external military pressure in the JCPOA and the 2026 conflict.

5. Regime-Sponsored Political Culture, Negotiation and the 2026 Iran War

The institutions examined in the preceding section are accompanied by regime-sponsored practices of commemoration and political socialization. Anniversaries of the 1979 Revolution, official commemorations of the U.S. Embassy hostage crisis and ceremonies honoring those killed in conflicts involving the United States or Israel repeatedly position resistance within a longer narrative of sovereignty, sacrifice and revolutionary continuity. Official speeches, state media and educational materials reproduce this language by connecting contemporary disputes to the 1953 coup, Western support for the Shah and subsequent confrontations with the United States.[41] Such practices provide ruling institutions and their core constituencies with a familiar interpretive framework through which accommodation can be portrayed as either a tactical defense of national interests or an unacceptable surrender of revolutionary principles.

Regime-sponsored political culture must not, however, be equated with Iranian society as a whole. Evidence about state media, official ceremonies, school curricula or elite rhetoric demonstrates what governing institutions seek to reproduce, but it does not demonstrate that all citizens internalize the resulting narratives. Iranian society encompasses reformists, conservatives, secular constituencies, religious communities, younger generations and groups that have repeatedly challenged state policies. Even within the regime, presidents, diplomats, military commanders and clerical institutions have disagreed over the costs and benefits of engagement with the United States.[42] The relevant constraint is therefore not a uniformly anti-Western national culture. It is the ability of powerful institutions and regime constituencies to impose political, reputational and sometimes coercive costs on officials whose diplomacy can be represented as abandoning the revolution.

[41] Peyman Asadzade (2019), "Faith or Ideology? Religiosity, Political Islam, and Anti-Americanism in Iran"; Ehsan Bakhshandeh (2016), *Occidentalism in Iran*; Ehsan Bakhshandeh (2014), "How Mainstream Iranian Newspapers Portray the West: The Influence of Anti-Westernism and Anti-Americanism"; Golnar Mehran (2003), "Khatami, Political Reform and Education in Iran", *Comparative Education*, 39(3), pp. 311–329; Saeed Hajinaseri & Hamed Anvarianasl (2021), "Anti-Americanism in Ayatollah Khamenei"s Thought".
[42] Peyman Asadzade (2019), "Faith or Ideology? Religiosity, Political Islam, and Anti-Americanism in Iran".

The JCPOA illustrates both the power and the limits of this constraint. The agreement demonstrates that the Islamic Republic is capable of significant negotiation when its leaders judge that engagement protects economic interests, reduces immediate security risks and preserves recognized nuclear rights. Ontological-security theory does not require the prediction that established identities make change impossible. Political actors may reinterpret new policies through existing narratives, presenting compromise as an expression of dignity, prudence or resistance rather than capitulation. Iranian officials could consequently defend the JCPOA as recognition of Iran's sovereign rights while continuing to deny that it represented broader reconciliation with Washington. The need for such framing nevertheless made the agreement vulnerable to opponents who described it as evidence of misplaced trust in the United States.[43]

The subsequent weakening of the JCPOA cannot be attributed primarily to Iranian ideological inflexibility. The International Atomic Energy Agency continued to verify Iran's implementation of its nuclear commitments at the time President Donald Trump announced the United States' withdrawal from the agreement on 8 May 2018.[44] The United States then reimposed sanctions, while Iran began reducing its commitments in stages from May 2019 and eventually curtailed much of the verification framework. Washington justified withdrawal through concerns about the agreement's temporal limitations, Iran's ballistic missiles and its support for armed regional actors.[45] Tehran interpreted withdrawal and renewed sanctions as confirmation that American commitments could not be trusted.[46] Both sets of concerns were politically consequential. The American decision weakened Iranian advocates of engagement and strengthened the hardline claim that negotiations expose Iran to coercion without delivering dependable relief. The JCPOA's failure was therefore produced by sequential and interactive decisions, with ontological-security narratives shaping how each

[43] Ali Bagheri Dolatabadi (2022), "Ontological Security and Iran's Missile Program"; Alan Shadunts (2023), "From Knowledge to Wisdom: Uncertainty and Ontological (In)Security in Iran's Foreign Policy"; Alireza Rastkar & Saied Shokoohi (2025), "The Impact of Iranian Political Elites' Perception and Misperception on Iran-U.S. Relations (2012-2020)".

[44] International Atomic Energy Agency (2018), "Verification and Monitoring in the Islamic Republic of Iran in Light of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231 (2015)", GOV/2018/24, 24 May; White House (2018), "Remarks by President Trump on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action", 08.05.2018, Date of Accession: 01.08.2026 from https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-joint-comprehensive-plan-action/.

[45] International Atomic Energy Agency (2025), "Verification and Monitoring in the Islamic Republic of Iran in Light of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231 (2015)", GOV/2025/24, 31 May.

[46] Morgan Thomas Rees (2023), "Ontological (In)Security and the Iran Nuclear Deal—Explaining Instability in US Foreign Policy Interests".

side interpreted the other's conduct rather than replacing the material security issues at stake.[47]

This relational approach is equally necessary for understanding the 2026 War. The conflict followed earlier U.S.–Israeli strikes in 2025 and the breakdown of Oman-mediated negotiations in February 2026. On 28 February, the United States and Israel launched extensive strikes against Iran, killing Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and targeting nuclear, missile, military and leadership facilities. Iran responded with attacks against Israel, U.S. military facilities and targets in neighboring states and restricted traffic through the Strait of Hormuz. American involvement reflected several considerations beyond Iranian anti-Westernism: the U.S. alliance with Israel, non-proliferation objectives, protection of deployed forces and regional partners, and the effort to preserve freedom of navigation and a favorable regional order.[48] Iran, for its part, confronted both an immediate military attack and a symbolic assault on the institutions and leadership through which the Islamic Republic represented its continuity. The regime's resistance narrative helped render retaliation intelligible and legitimate to governing institutions, but it did not create the external attack or eliminate the possibility of alternative responses.[49]

Developments within Iran also demonstrate why the state and ruling elites should not be treated as a unitary actor. The death of Ali Khamenei and the accession of Mojtaba Khamenei altered the balance among the Supreme Leader's office, the elected presidency and the IRGC. President Masoud Pezeshkian subsequently endorsed diplomatic engagement, while other regime actors expressed reservations about the terms and implementation of the June MoU. These differences did not amount to a separation between wholly pragmatic and wholly ideological camps; actors combined security, economic, institutional and identity concerns in different proportions. They nevertheless show that "*Iranian preferences*" are produced through contestation among unelected institutions, the elected executive and military-security organizations rather than directly reflecting a single national identity.

The diplomacy that followed the initial military escalation was correspondingly fragile. Pakistan announced a two-week pause on 8 April. On 17 June, Presidents Trump and Pezeshkian signed a 14-point MoU that declared an end to military operations and created a

[47] Fariborz Arghavani Pirsalami & Arash Moradi & Hosein Alipour (2024), "A Crisis of Ontological Security in Foreign Policy: Iran and International Sanctions in the Post–JCPOA Era".
[48] Philip Loft (2026), "US–Iran Ceasefire and Nuclear Talks in 2026".
[49] Syed Rizwan Haider Bukhari (2026), "From Negotiation to Escalation: Coercive Diplomacy, Military Force, and the 2026 Iran–US Nuclear Conflict".

60-day period for negotiating sanctions, Iran's nuclear program, frozen assets, reconstruction and navigation through the Strait of Hormuz.[50] The agreement showed that severe conflict did not eliminate the possibility of compromise. Yet disagreement over implementation—particularly the Strait of Hormuz, the U.S. naval presence, sanctions relief and the scope of Iranian nuclear and missile restrictions—rapidly undermined the process.[51] President Trump declared the agreement effectively over on 7 July, and on 17 August rejected an extension when the negotiating period expired. By 20 August, talks had stalled, navigation remained severely disrupted and the conflict was still unresolved.

The 2026 War should therefore not be presented as the inevitable culmination of Iranian anti-Westernism. It arose from contingent decisions made within an escalating and mutually reinforcing security relationship. The Islamic Republic's regime identity narrowed the range of compromises that could be defended internally and encouraged officials to interpret American pressure through established narratives of domination and betrayal. At the same time, U.S. and Israeli military choices, alliance commitments and threat perceptions created material dangers that cannot be reduced to Iranian ideological representation. Ontological security contributed to escalation by making certain responses more politically intelligible and alternatives more difficult to legitimize; it neither predetermined the war nor absolves any actor of responsibility for its strategic choices.

Conclusion: Regime Identity, Relational Insecurity and the Limits of Reconciliation

Through a theory-guided qualitative descriptive analysis of U.S.–Iran relations between 1979 and 20 August 2026, this article has argued that anti-Westernism constitutes an important source of ontological security for the political regime of the Islamic Republic. Revolutionary narratives portraying Iran as the defender of sovereignty and resistance against Western domination have been reproduced through the office of the Supreme Leader, the IRGC, the Guardian Council, official discourse and regime-sponsored practices of political socialization. Their institutionalization raises the domestic and organizational costs of diplomatic compromise, particularly when engagement can be represented by hardline actors as abandonment of the revolution's historical purpose.

[50] *Reuters* (2026), "The 14-Point US–Iran Pact White House Sent to Congress", 17.06.2026, Date of Accession: 01.07.2026 from https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/14-point-draft-us-iran-deal-2026-06-17/.
[51] Parisa Hafezi & Katharine Jackson (2026), "Iran Threatens New Offensive While US Rules Out Extending Ceasefire Deal", *Reuters*, 17.08.2026, Date of Accession: 20.08.2026 from https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-threatens-go-offensive-strait-hormuz-if-diplomacy-with-us-fails-2026-08-17/.

This argument applies to the political regime and its principal institutions, not to an undifferentiated Iranian state, ruling elite or society. Iranian elites have repeatedly disagreed over foreign policy, while the JCPOA and the June 2026 MoU demonstrate that the Islamic Republic retains a capacity for pragmatic negotiation. Iranian society is also too diverse for official anti-Western discourse to be treated as evidence of uniform public belief. Ontological security should therefore be understood as a contested institutional and discursive constraint rather than as an immutable national mentality.

The analysis also rejects a mono-causal account of U.S.–Iran antagonism. The U.S. alliance with Israel, concerns about nuclear proliferation, ballistic missiles and Iran-aligned armed groups, domestic American political narratives and the protection of U.S. regional interests have independently shaped Washington's policies. The U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA, renewed sanctions and the joint U.S.–Israeli military action of 2026 reinforced Iranian perceptions of encirclement and betrayal. Iranian nuclear, missile and regional policies simultaneously intensified American and Israeli threat perceptions. The 2026 war was therefore not inevitable or simply the logical expression of Iranian regime identity. It emerged from contingent strategic decisions within a relational security dilemma in which material threats and ontological anxieties reinforced one another.

The article's broader theoretical contribution is the concept of an external-enemy legitimacy model: a political arrangement in which opposition to a particular foreign actor becomes one source of regime identity and domestic legitimacy. This model does not predict permanent war, but it suggests that reconciliation will be especially fragile unless political leaders can narrate accommodation without appearing to negate the regime's identity. Credible reciprocity and institutional guarantees are consequently important not only because they reduce material uncertainty, but because they may allow competing actors to present compromise as continuity, dignity and security rather than surrender.

Future research could test this model comparatively through cases such as revolutionary Cuba, North Korea and the Soviet Union. Such comparison should focus narrowly on the political mechanism through which external antagonism supports regime legitimacy; it should not presume ideological, historical or moral equivalence among otherwise profoundly different regimes. Comparative analysis would help determine when external-enemy narratives make conflict persistent, when leaders successfully reinterpret them and when material threats override the search for narrative continuity.

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