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## **MASTER'S THESIS**

### **From Dominance to Isolation: Analyzing Iran's Regional Influence in the 21st Century**

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## INTRODUCTION

Two opposing interpretations dominate the study of the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran. For instance, some scholars emphasize the ideological determinacy of the Iranian strategy, while others highlight its rationality and adaptability. Unfortunately, neither perspectives can fully explain why Iran, despite its unique set of geopolitical resources and favourable international environment after 2001 (downfall of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and Saddam's regime in Iraq) failed to realise its potential as a regional leader (Juneau, 2015). Moreover, its proxy warfare in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon, and even Azerbaijan has resulted not in the expansion of influence, but in increasing isolation and strategic exhaustion. This dissertation proposes to view Iranian foreign policy not as a linear path of rise and fall, but as an attempt to compensate for internal vulnerability with external expansion, often improvised and contradictory.

Behind the façade of the “axis of resistance” lies a regime forced to export instability to maintain domestic legitimacy. The study employs a hybrid of theoretical framework that combines neoclassical realism and constructivism. The first theory explains how domestic institutional “pathologies” hinder the rational implementation of foreign policy potential (Juneau, 2015). The second theory reveals how revolutionary identity and ideological narratives shape threat perceptions and the choice of foreign policy partners (Kamrava, 2022).

Iran thus emerges not as a classic revisionist hegemonic power, but as a hybrid political system in which spiritual and military elites compete for control over strategy, using ideology as an instrument domestic political mobilization. Kamrava's work emphasizes that since 1979, the Islamic Republic has faced cyclical waves of triumph and despair in which each foreign policy victory has been followed by a domestic crisis and a new round of authoritarian tightening.

This dissertation therefore attempts to move beyond descriptive analysis and integrate domestic institutional and ideological factors with the international context. This allows to better understand why Iran, despite its considerable resources and strategic capabilities, repeatedly faces limitations on influence and growing isolation.

### **Relevance of the Study**

The relevance of the study relies on the need to rethink the nature of Iran's foreign policy behaviour in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Despite the long-standing dominance of the concepts of “expansionism” or

“revolutionary idealism” in the academic literature, reality shows that Iran’s foreign activity is largely determined by more internal crises and the need to maintain regime stability. As Juneau emphasizes, Iran consistently missed historical opportunities to legitimately strengthen its influence, preferring short-term expansion to strategically calibrated institutionalization (Juneau, 2015).

The transformation of the regional security architecture after 2003, the failure of reforms in the 2000s, and the consequences of strategic overload after 2015 require a new approach to the analysis of Iran’s foreign policy. Kamrava rightly notes that the Islamic Republic exists in a constant tension between revolutionary ideology and the realities of the regional competition, which gives rise to cycles of political mobilization and repression at home, accompanied by external activism as a compensatory mechanism.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is a comprehensive theoretical and analytical analysis of the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran from 2001 to 2025 through the prism of neoclassical realism and constructivism. The study aims to explain the transformation of Tehran’s regional strategy from the phase of conditional strengthening to the period of strategic overload and relative isolation. The focus is on identifying the reasons why Iran, despite its structural capabilities and resources, was unable to consolidate sustainable regional leadership and found itself drawn into conflicts that undermine its own security. The dissertation aims to show that Iran’s foreign policy is shaped not only by the international environment, but also as a result of internal institutional fragmentation, ideological dogmas and a crisis of legitimacy.

### **Structure of the Thesis**

The dissertation consists of seven chapters. Each of them reveals a certain aspect of the topic under study.

The first chapter provides an overview of the current scientific literature on the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The main approaches are presented - ideological expansionism, neoclassical realism and proxy strategies. Both theoretical findings and empirical studies are taken into account. Key achievements and gaps in current knowledge are identified.

The second chapter contains the theoretical and methodological basis of the analysis. The choice of neoclassical realism and constructivism as an analytical framework is substantiated. The methods of data collection and processing, including case studies and discourse analysis, are described.

The third chapter reflects the evolution of Iran's foreign policy at the beginning of the 21st century. The transition from the pragmatic line of the Khatami period to a more rigid and ideological policy under the presidency of Ahmadinejad is presented through the analysis of domestic political and ideological factors.

Chapter 4 examines two watershed events: the US withdrawal from the JCPOA and the assassination of Qasem Soleimani. It shows how these events affected Iran's strategic behavior and caused a shift from an offensive to a defensive model.

Chapter 5 examines Tehran's response to the strengthening of Israeli Azerbaijani relations, especially in the context of the Second Karabakh War. It examines the consequences of Iran's exclusion from the South Caucasus and the growing crisis of trust in the region.

Chapter 6 focuses on the economic dimensions of foreign policy. Against the backdrop of sanctions pressure, it analyzes the transition to a strategy of "resistance economy" and the role of the IRGC in the regime's adaptation to external isolation.

Chapter 7 examines the consequences of the October 7, 2023 attack and the subsequent regional escalation. It assesses the weakening of Iran's proxy networks and the changing configuration of forces in the Middle East.



## CHAPTER 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

There are competing scholarly interpretations of Iran's regional objectives. Tabatai (2020) argues that Tehran seeks to export the 1979 Islamic Revolution and champion Islamist causes. Iran's constitution explicitly mandates the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps to protect the Islamic system at home and at the same time "export the revolution abroad (Takeyh & Maloney, 2011). These perspectives highlight ideational fervour in Iran's foreign policy.

Some scholars consider Iranian politics to be more pragmatic and based on Realpolitik (Parsi, 2007). These scholars suggest that Iran's post 2001 policies reflect pre-1979 national security priorities, mainly focusing on preserving regime security and broadening strategic depth (Lindsay & Takeyh, 2010). Iran's anti-Israel rhetoric and propaganda of the Palestinian cause, while often perceived under an ideological motive, has also a pragmatic function, asserting leadership within the broader Muslim world (Parsi, 2006).

Iran's foreign policy has undergone significant changes over the past two decades. Under President Mohammad Khatami, the late 1990s and early 2000s took a path towards moderation and engagement. Iran sought rapprochement with the West and regional actors (Takeyh & Maloney, 2011). However, rapprochement efforts were toppled by the Bush administration's "Axis of Evil" rhetoric regarding Iran's covert nuclear activities (Posen et al. 2010).

The 2005 election of Mahmoud Ahmedinejad took a more confrontational approach in policies, including the resumption of uranium enrichment and intensified support for regional proxies (Lindsay & Takeyh, 2010). In contrast, the 2013 election of Hassan Rouhani led to the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Actions (JCPOA), which temporarily de-escalated frictions with the West. However, the 2018 U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA ruined all efforts of appeasement and rapprochement, which in turn made Iran resume enrichment activities and bolster its regional alliances (Takeyh & Maloney, 2011).

Ansari (2006) offers another perspective to this historical shift, claiming that post-9/11 foreign policy completely changed the dynamics of U.S.-Iranian relations. The Bush administration's hostile rhetoric of the "Axis of Evil" reinforced Tehran's perceptions of existential threats, leading to bolder foreign policy decisions. Furthermore, Iran sought to exploit the instability created by the U.S interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan to assert its influence in the region. (Ansari, 2006.).

Takeyh (2009) examines the ideological and pragmatic duality of Iran's foreign policy, emphasizing the shifts from revolutionary ideas to calculated pragmatism, particularly under different administrations. He draws attention to discrepancies in Iran's rhetoric and diplomatic

engagements, particularly during the Ahmedinejad era, where Iran simultaneously engaged in defiant posturing while seeking negotiations with global powers.

### **1.1.Theoretical Framework**

This study applies neoclassical realism and constructivism to analyse Iran's foreign policy. According to Gideon Rose (1998) neoclassical realism takes its root in classical realism by combining both systemic pressures and domestic political dynamics in explaining state behaviour. Structural realism (Waltz,1979) views states as rational actors acting in accordance with anarchic international system. Neoclassical realism, on the other hand foreign policy is shaped not only by international constraints, but also by internal political structures, elite perceptions, and national identity (Rose, 1998).

External factors such as U.S. sanctions, Israeli deterrence measures, and regional rivalries interact with domestic elements of Iran, including Supreme Leader Ali Khomeini's ideological stance, the influence of the IRGC and intra-elite power struggles (Kazdal, 2024). Iran's strategic choices like nuclear deterrence or proxy warfare are thus mediated by both international threats and internal political constraints (Tabatai, 2023). This is in accordance with Rose's assertion that leaders' perceptions and domestic institutional structures act as intervening variables between systemic imperatives and foreign policy decisions.

Alexander Wendt (1992, 1999) challenges realist assumptions by emphasizing the role of identity, discourse and social norms in shaping international relations. Wendt (1992) argues that "Anarchy is what states make of it". This statement claims that state behaviour is influenced not only by material capabilities, but also by shared beliefs, historical narratives and constructed identities.

Iran's foreign policy is deeply affected by revolutionary ideology, as could be seen from its support for the "Axis of Resistance" (Hezbollah, Hamas, Houthis), its anti-imperialist rhetoric, and its formulation of U.S. and Israeli policies as existential threats (Pay & Omond, 2023). The IRGC, as key actor, plays a constructivist role by reinforcing Iran's ideological commitment to Anti-Western resistance through domestic propaganda and external military engagements (Menashri, 2007). Tehran's discourse around "strategic patience" and "resistant economy" reflects its constructed identity as a defiant revolutionary state (Bazoobandi et al. 2023).

By combining neoclassical realism and constructivism, this paper provides an analysis of Iran's foreign policy. Neoclassical realism explains Iran's strategic adaptations to external pressures, constructivism, on the other hand, accounts for the ideological commitments and identity-driven narratives that influence its policy choices. This dual framework is extremely useful in examining

Iran's shift from dominance to isolation in regional influence, especially after October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023, when Tehran's ideological alliances came under threat.

## CHAPTER 2. METHODOLOGY

This study is based on qualitative research of Iran's shifting regional influence in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, particularly in response to U.S. and Israeli policies post-October 7<sup>th</sup> incidents. It is a theory-driven qualitative research project using case studies to examine Iran's regional influence.

The research encompasses historical analysis, discourse analysis and case study methodology through neoclassical and constructivist perspectives. These approaches give a comprehensive understanding of Iran's strategic behaviour, balancing constraints with ideational and ideological factors. It follows a multi-method approach combining historical analysis, discourse analysis, comparative case study analysis.

The study focuses on 4 key themes: political influence, military strategy (Iran's use of proxies and deterrence tactics), economic factors and ideological dimensions.

### **2.1. Data Collection Methods**

Official Iranian Statements-translated speeches and policy documents from Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, the Iranian Foreign Ministry and the IRGC

U.S. and Israeli Open-Access Documents-Statements from the U.S. State Department, Israel's Ministry of Defence and security think tanks.

UN and International Reports-Documents from the United Nations, International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the EU regarding sanctions, nuclear agreements and Iran's military activities.

Secondary Sources:

Academic Books & Journals- Literature from leading scholars on Iranian foreign policy, security studies and Middle Eastern Geopolitics.

Media & Think Tank Reports-Analysis of reports from RAND Corporation, the Brookings Institution and Chatham House for contemporary perspectives on Iran's strategies.

Historical Records-Examination of declassified intelligence reports (U.S. and Israel) related to Iran's nuclear and military activity.

### **2.2. Case study selection:**

Iran's role in Iraq (Post-2003)-Iran's role in Iraq after the U.S invasion.

The 2015 Nuclear Deal (JCPOA) and Its Collapse in 2018-The U.S withdrawal and Iran's policy afterwards.

Iran's proxies in Syria, Lebanon and Yemen-Hezbollah, Syria intervention, and Houthis.

These case studies will provide insights into Iran's adaptability to international pressures, and dynamics of relations with U.S and Israeli policies.

### **2.3. Research Limitations**

While this study provides a comprehensive qualitative analysis, it has following limitations: limited access to Iranian government documents, reliance on western or translated sources, and dynamic geopolitical landscape that requires continuous updates.

This study adheres to academic integrity and ethical standards ensuring transparency in source selection, avoidance of political bias, and proper citations.

This methodology is based on a theory-based analysis of Iran's regional influence and combines historical context, ideological narratives and geopolitical shifts. Neoclassical realism and constructivism will help to capture both material constrains and ideological commitments that influence Iran's foreign policy.

## **CHAPTER 3. IRAN AT THE TURN OF THE MILLENIUM**

### **3.1. Iran's Regional Influence from 2000 to 2010**

As Iran was entering the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it was still struggling with the consequences of the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-1988, while simultaneously dealing with a shifting geopolitical landscape. The war has profoundly affected Iran's strategic outlook, reinforcing a defensive mindset, pushing for self-reliance in military and economic policies and strengthening the Revolutionary Guards role in foreign and security affairs (Tabatai, 2020). Mohammad Khatami during his ruling period from 1997 to 2005 have pursued dual-track strategies that have pushed for economic reconstruction and controlled political liberalization at home and diplomatic engagements with other countries (Takeyh, 2009)

The early 2000s, however, have witnessed intensified Israeli and U.S. efforts to contain Iran which led to geopolitical struggles that would shape the coming decades. This chapter examines Iran's post-war recovery, its political and military restructuring and its aspiration for regional dominance.

### **3.2. Post-war reconstruction and pragmatic reforms of Rafsanjani (1989-1997)**

The end of the Iran-Iraq War in 1988 and the death of the Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989 marked a turning point for Iran. The period of the so-called "second republic" began under the leadership of President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. His priority was to rebuild the war-torn economy and stabilize the system after the revolutionary turbulence. Rafsanjani initiated two five-year development programs reconstructing the infrastructure, increasing production and attracting domestic and foreign capital. As a pragmatic politician and at the same time a spiritual leader, he understood the need for "secular" measures for the development of the country and gradually moved away from the harsh revolutionary mobilization in the economy.

Rafsanjani carefully presented these changes within the ideological framework of Islam, arguing that the period of revolutionary "fever" was over, and the Republic was entering the phase "Thermidor"-recovery from the revolution. He emphasized the excessive radicalism on both the right and the left threatened the survival of the revolution, so in order to advance his reforms, he entered into a tactical alliance with the new Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei.

The constitutional amendments introduced at Rafsanjani's initiative strengthened his position by abolishing the position of prime minister and transferring powers to the president and at the same

time strengthening Khamenei's position as the "Absolute" leader. This consolidation of power allowed for a series of bold economic moves, liberalization, privatization, and deregulation. It is no coincidence that "Iran needs technology, knowledge, markets, and cooperation with the West", demonstrating a move away from its previous isolation.

### **3.2.1. The early years of Rafsanjani's rule-growth and difficulties**

The early years of Rafsanjani's rule did indeed bring significant growth. By the early 1990s, real incomes had grown significantly, social indicators had improved, like infant mortality had decreased and the country was able to borrow significant funds abroad for development. Alongside social growth, a softer and more pragmatic course emerged in foreign policy. Tehran effectively abandoned the export of revolution and began a policy of good neighbourliness-during the Gulf War of 1990-1991, Rafsanjani, despite pressure from radicals, refrained from opposing the coalition forces and even supported UN sanctions against Saddam Hussein. Iran improved relations with its neighbours in the Persian Gulf, seeking to emerge from international isolation.

Unfortunately, serious problems emerged in the second half of his eight-year presidency. By 1993-1997, factional differences within the regime had intensified, and the president's alliance with Khamenei had weakened. Conservative forces, which had gained a foothold in the parliament (Majlis) after 1992 elections, blocked significant reform bills, which brought legislative activity to a virtual standstill.

In addition, economic difficulties returned-foreign debt and imports reached record levels, inflation undermined household incomes, and large-scale privatization of state assets was halted by corruption scandals. In 1995, the situation was exacerbated by the introduction of a unilateral US embargo, which hit investment and sentiment. The masses who had hoped for rapid prosperity after the war, were disappointed by the continuing economic and social problems. Considering these factors, the conditions for public demand for deeper changes were ripe, which manifested itself in the 1997 elections.

### **3.3. Khatami's D tente**

The period of Mohammad Khatami's presidency represents a unique period in the history of the Islamic Republic, when internal liberalization, attempts at democratization, and the pursuit of international rehabilitation coincided with institutional resistance and ideological inertia.

From the perspective of neoclassical realism, Iranian foreign policy during this period was determined not only by the external system like lifting sanctions, attempts at rapprochement with

the West, but also by internal factors that include elite competition, institutional weakness, and ideological pressure from security forces (Juneau, 2015). Constructivism, on the other hand, explains why, despite the pragmatic discourse, Iran kept elements of a revolutionary narrative-the state identity remained rooted in anti-imperialist doctrine, which limited the possibility of “normalization”

### **3.3.1. Reforms, Internal Limitations and Criticism**

Rising on the wave of public demand for change, Khatami embodied the hope for a synthesis of Islam and democracy. His program included strengthening the role of law, expanding civil liberties and *The Dialogue of Civilizations and Internal Initiatives*. Within the constructivist approach *The Dialogue of Civilizations* is not just diplomatic rhetoric, but an attempt to reconstruct Iran’s identity in the eyes of the international community. Khatami sought to show that Iran could be a subject within the global order, rather than its opponent. The success of the initiative in the UN and the partial warming of relations with the European Union and the United States demonstrated the possibility of an identity shift. An important was the contacts with the administration of US President Bill Clinton and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright. Under Clinton, the White House adopted a moderate line towards Iran, based on acknowledging the mistakes of the past and searching for areas of cooperation. Speaking in 2000, Albright acknowledged the US involvement in the overthrow of Prime Minister Mossadegh in 1953 as a mistake and expressed regret over the long embargo. These statements were accompanied by proposals to partially lift economic restrictions and expand cultural exchanges, which was perceived as a tangible softening of the US course. The Iranians were not impressed, they found the proposals insufficient and more symbolic than structural.

In his revolutionary interview to Christine Amanpour in 1998, Mohammad Khatami said that Iranians have extended their hand to the world, but if there is no reciprocity at the other end, then this hand will remain in the air. This interview is considered to be revolutionary as it was the first time since the 1979 Revolution that Iranian leadership tried to directly speak to the Western World. However, Mohammad Khatami’s initiative faced a number of internal and external limitations. As Takeyh 2006 emphasizes, this discourse was not institutionalized-it remained Khatami’s personal project and did not transform the ideological basis of foreign policy as a whole. Moreover, within the country, his peace-loving rhetoric irritated security forces and ideologists of the regime, who suspected the president attempting to “secularize” the Islamic Republic through soft normalization.



As a result, the concept of a *dialogue of civilizations* remained at the level of symbolic diplomacy and did not become a stable part of Iran's strategic thinking.

### **3.3.2. Nuclear agenda and emerging confrontation**

It was during the Khatami era that Iran began to cautiously pursue nuclear technologies. Although the discourse was moderate, international partners began to suspect Tehran of strategic ambiguity. From a constructivist perspective, this was not just about technology, it was more about its status—Iran wanted to assert itself as a regional power, which was perceived as a challenge. From a neoclassical realist perspective, pressure from the IRGC and the nationalist wing of the regime meant that even under a moderate president, strategic guidelines remained rigid. It was at this time that Hillary Clinton's team as a Secretary of State in the Obama administration began to develop a two-tiered strategy for Iran: diplomatic engagement with increased sanctions pressure. As early as 2007, during her presidential campaign, Hillary Clinton emphasized that “If Iran acquires nuclear weapons, it will trigger an arms race in the Middle East and undermine global security.” Later, as Secretary of State, she supported the “two-track” policy, combining diplomatic initiatives and pressure through the UN Security Council and economic sanctions. These measures became the foundation of the containment policy implemented during the first Obama administration. However, Hillary Clinton's position on Iran's uranium enrichment was not always consistent, which became the subject of political controversy. In 2010, speaking to international partners, Clinton stated that under certain conditions Iran could retain the right to peaceful use of nuclear energy, including limited uranium enrichment. But already in 2014, in an interview with *The Atlantic*, she said: “I have always believed that Iran does not have the right to enrich. Contrary to their claims, such a right simply does not exist.” In 2011, speaking before the US Congress, Clinton acknowledged that in the case of strict control and dismantling of the military program, Iran could be granted such a right in the future under the supervision of the IAEA (PolitiFact, 2016). Thus, her statements represented a tonal rather than a political correction of the position, reflecting the evolution of the approach to negotiations with Tehran. Already in 2007, as part of her election campaign, Hillary Clinton emphasized that Iran, striving for nuclear weapons, poses a threat not only to Israel, but also to the global order. These statements reflected a new level of mistrust in Iranian policy after Khatami and pointed to the formation of a long-term containment strategy towards Tehran.

Khatami's presidency is a case in which a constructivist attempts to change the identity of the state encountered the realistic limitation of domestic control and

international mistrust. Despite bright initiatives and a sincere desire for dialogue, Iran's foreign policy remains hostage to deep ideological and institutional structures. This proves that sustainable change is possible only with a synchronous transformation of both external pressure and the internal consensus of the elites.

### **3.3.3. The "Axis of Evil" Speech and Its Impact on Iran**

After the tragedy of September 11, 2001, the United States did not even think about any dialogue, having declared a "crusade" against global terrorism. And the following year - 2002 - George W. Bush's famous phrase about the "axis of evil" came into circulation, uttered by him in his annual address to the US Congress, which included the main "sponsors of global terrorism" - Iraq, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and the Islamic Republic of Iran, which are suspected of developing weapons of mass destruction. (Baker P, Linzer D, 2003).

In addition, in November 2003, a 29-page IAEA report was published, which claimed that no evidence of Iran secretly developing an atomic bomb had been found. The conclusions of the report were questioned by the American administration, which stated that it had data on secret developments in enriching uranium and plutonium, which had been underway for 18 years. The American administration's firm belief in Iran's secret developments led to the beginning of the negotiation process between representatives of the international community, represented by the "European troika" (Great Britain, Germany, France), the IAEA, and the Islamic Republic. As US Deputy Secretary of State John Bolton stated in July 2004, Iran would be capable of producing nuclear weapons within the next three years, and enriching uranium for a nuclear bomb within a year. Under pressure from the "European troika", the government of M. Khatami declared a moratorium on any nuclear research under the supervision of IAEA observers. The September 11, 2001, against the United States led to the "War on Terror." America's intervention in Afghanistan against the Taliban government that would become its longest war. During the early stages of invasion, Tehran provided assistance to Washington politically and militarily by helping bring key stakeholders to the table (Tabatai, 2020). However, everything changed after George Bush's 2002 'Axil of Evil' speech, where president accused Iran of promoting terrorism weapons of mass destruction. Even though none of the terrorist were citizens of neither of the three "evil" countries, the 'Axis of Evil' became a hallmark of his foreign policy (Glass, 2019). In his famous speech Bush said: & "States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world. By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger. They could provide these arms to terrorists, giving them the means to

match their hatred. They could attack our allies or attempt to blackmail the United States. In any of these cases, the price of indifference would be catastrophic.” (Glass, 2019).

According to Amir Mohebian, the phrase itself was constructed by David Frum, a White House speechwriter, who came up with “Axis of Hatred” to describe the linkage between Iraq and terrorism. Frum’s boss, Michael Gerson, changed the phrase to Axis of Evil to make it sound “more sinister, even wicked.” (Jalaiepour, 2004). Later Condoleezza Rice, President Bush’s National Security Advisor, and Stephen Hadley, Deputy National Security Advisor, suggested adding North Korea and Iran as part of the Axis. Hadley had second thoughts about adding Iran, because it had a democratically elected president, but Bush liked the idea of including Iran. “‘No,’ the president said, ‘I want it in.’” (Farzin, 2004). In an interview with Bob Woodward, Bush later elaborated his reasoning behind including Iran: “And the fact that the president of the United States would stand up and say Iran is just like Iraq and North Korea — in other words you’ve got a problem — and the president is willing to call it, is part of how you deal with Iran. And that will inspire those who love freedom inside the country.” (Heradstveit & Bonham, 2004).

In the end, President Bush’s senior advisors, such as Karl Rove, thought that the Axis of Evil was a signature phrase, “a declaration ... that the country now would have a great mission. It was big, new, and different.” Although some doubted whether it would make sense to link the three countries, the metaphor was regarded by the President’s advisors as a “watershed” that would define the problem in “graphic, biblical terms without publicly committing to a particular solution.” (Ibid.).

Two other reasons for granting Iran membership in the Axis of Evil are probably first, the theocracy’s general hostility to the United States (opposition to Good must necessarily be Evil) and second, its attitude towards terrorism; generally, that Iran does not consider the Palestinians’ struggle against the Israelis to constitute terrorism, and specifically, the country’s support for Hezbollah in Lebanon. Bush used the word “evil” five times in this speech, three times referring to enemies. He also used it in his speech to the nation on September 11, 2001, and a week later he described terrorists to Congress as “planning evil.” In November of that year Bush told Newsweek that Saddam was also “evil.” These are clear examples of demonization, and one of the reasons the phrase the Axis of Evil attracted so much criticism and is said to have done so much damage is that calling other countries evil is not generally considered to be the language of diplomacy. There is probably an echo of Ronald Reagan’s label of “Evil Empire” for the Soviet Union, which was equally criticized at the time. It is possible that many Americans semi-consciously imagine that, since the Evil Empire is no longer with us, the application of such a label has a beneficent effect that can be repeated in the case of the new enemies. This may be connected with the rise of fundamentalist Christianity, which is encouraging them to see world politics in eschatological

terms. (Ibid.) The important thing about the “evil” component of the metaphor is that evil has no specific goal — except to produce evil. As an ontological force evil has no interests of its own except the interests related to its destination: that is why all negotiations with evil are fruitless. There is no way to make a deal with evil, except to include in this deal even a greater evil, not for you but for others. Therefore, the Forces of Evil have to be destroyed totally by the Forces of Good. Moreover, the absurd unity of such different political forces as Iran and North Korea seem not to be so absurd, if you agree with the principle of the Unity of Evil. If there is only one evil, all of its incarnations are simply the different forms of one force — an argument which is very easy to understand when you accept the dualistic ontology. Here the ontological changes produced by metaphor are obvious (Nabavi, 2003). A third and related level is that the Axis metaphor implies the alliance of the countries included in it. Given the intense antipathy between Iraq and Iran, and the lack of much visible connection between either and North Korea, the trope has occasioned much ridicule, with TV and internet wits grouping together triplets of countries allegedly offended at being left out of the Axis. In theory, we might speak of the world revolving around an axis of inveterate enemies, in the sense that their quarrel is what powers international politics. That would be a reasonable use of the metaphor and using it for pre-2003 Iran-Iraq (without North Korea) would not be inappropriate, but the public consensus seems to be that this is not in fact what President Bush meant. Nor would such a use have much mobilizing power. It appears rather that Bush was using the Axis metaphor in the original sense, to suggest that Iraq, Iran, and North Korea were not only Evil countries in themselves but were in alliance with one another against the rest of us. In other words, this is not merely Evil but a conspiracy of Evil. Demonization and conspiracy theories always go hand in hand; the human mind appears to be naturally inclined to weave all perceived threats into a single pattern (Heradstveit & Bonham, 2004).

During the following months, there were constant consultations between the parties on the negotiation process, but, as observers admit, they reached a dead end. This led to a hardening of the position of the "European troika" and the United States, which stood behind them, when at the May 2005 meeting in Geneva, the Iranian side was given to understand that if it did not provide solid evidence of its determination to put an end to any attempts to independently produce nuclear weapons, the so-called "Iranian dossier" would be transferred to the UN Security Council for consideration. And George Bush stated that otherwise he did not rule out launching missile strikes on the territory of the Islamic Republic. Such tough pressure from the European side, behind which the support of the United States was clearly visible, caused an unambiguous assessment inside the Iranian parliament. On June 1, the deputies of the Majlis sent a message to President M. Khatami,

in which they demanded that the government resume uranium enrichment activities as soon as possible. Moreover, the majority of deputies signed the message — 175 out of 290.

“The lack of results in the negotiations between Iran and the EU on the Iranian nuclear program is obvious,” the Majlis deputies stated in the message. “It is caused by pressure from the United States on European negotiators, who are not showing flexibility and compliance. Iran must immediately resume uranium enrichment, without waiting for the American authorities to revise the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and deprive the Islamic Republic and other states of the right to access to peaceful nuclear technologies guaranteed by this document.” This negatively affected the popularity of M. Khatami and his supporters from the reformist camp. (Iran.ru, 2005).

### **3.4. Radicalization of Iran's Foreign Policy under President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005–2013)**

In 2005, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's rise to power marked a dramatic turn in the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran. He became the antithesis of the moderate policies of President Mohammad Khatami, who promoted the idea of a "dialogue of civilizations" and sought to soften Iran's international image, including temporarily suspending nuclear development as part of agreements with the EU. In contrast, Ahmadinejad came to power with the support of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and Shia ideological circles. This allowed him to carry out a kind of "counter-reformation" in both foreign and domestic policy. The reformers, who had lost their unity, were pushed aside by a united camp of radicals who sought to recapture the spirit of the early years of the revolution. Ahmadinejad's election was perceived by society as "the second round of the revolution, the revolution of the dispossessed." He became a symbol of protest against the “fat rich” and “well-fed mullahs,” despite being from a poor family. As analyst A. Malashenko notes, Ahmadinejad came forward as a populist “revolutionary” who promised to cleanse the Islamic Revolution of the corruption and elitism associated with the rule of his predecessors, including former President Akbar Rafsanjani. (Naji, 2008)

Ideologically, Ahmadinejad combined radical Islamism with elements of social populism. In his speeches, he sometimes sounded like a leftist fighter for equality, promising to “return power to the people,” but his views remained ultra-conservative (Naji, 2008, pp. 70–71). He defended the thesis that the goal of the Islamic Revolution was to establish a fully Islamic government, without any borrowings from the West. In particular, Ahmadinejad openly rejected the Western concept

of democracy, calling it “anti-Islamic” and an imported poison that contradicted the ideals of Imam Khomeini (Naji, 2008, p. 71). According to the new president, Iran should not imitate Western political models; instead, state governance should be based exclusively on the principles of Shia Islam. This ideological foundation largely predetermined Ahmadinejad's course of confrontation with liberal values and the international order, which he perceived as a threat to Islamic identity. Many observers agree that Ahmadinejad's election was largely a reaction to the previous years of reforms, which, although they expanded freedoms, failed to meet the expectations of a significant part of the population in the socio-economic sphere. The victory of a radical populist reflected the demand of a part of society for a “strong hand” and a fair distribution of national wealth. At the same time, the first steps of the new president showed that his radical agenda would face serious tests in practice. Just a year after Ahmadinejad took office, analysts from the International Crisis Group described his rule as turbulent and contradictory: bold populist initiatives quickly encountered resistance from parliament and state institutions, which foreshadowed future conflicts within the ruling system (International Crisis Group, 2007).

Ahmadinejad carried out a major change in the state apparatus, seeking to rid the government of the influence of representatives of the previous, more moderate elites. Almost immediately after the inauguration, “purges” began in the upper echelons: hundreds of officials and technocrats who had worked under Khatami were dismissed or sent into retirement. The new president placed his supporters, who came from the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and religious conservative circles, in key positions (Naji, 2008, p. 227). For example, the apparatus of the Supreme National Security Council (the key body overseeing foreign and defense policy, including the nuclear issue) was renewed almost immediately: Ahmadinejad's team occupied the offices even before the staff of the previous administration had time to pack their bags (Naji, 2008, p. 227). This “revolutionary” rotation of personnel was presented as a cleansing of the government of corruption and alien elements. However, it also led to the removal of many experienced specialists, whose replacement by the president's ideological allies often lowered the professional level of public administration. In combination with economic experiments, such personnel decisions exacerbated the problems of planning and implementing policies.

Initial economic optimism gave way to growing negative trends. Despite record oil revenues in the mid-2000s, by the end of Ahmadinejad's first term, the economy's chronic problems had only worsened. Inflation was once again out of control, eroding household incomes at double-digit rates, unemployment remained high, and corruption scandals within the president's inner circle were undermining public trust (Maloney, 2015).

The confrontation between the president and the parliament intensified: Ahmadinejad publicly criticized the auditing bodies for “carelessness,” accusing them of undermining the authority of

the government, while the parliament accused the government of violating budget discipline and exceeding its authority (International Crisis Group, 2007). In 2008–2009, the parliament even rejected some of the ministers proposed by the president and threatened impeachment for arbitrarily merging ministries without the consent of the legislature. Thus, frictions were growing within the government, indicating that even among the conservative elite there was no unity regarding Ahmadinejad's radical management style. At the same time, political freedoms and human rights deteriorated. According to human rights activists, during Ahmadinejad's presidency, media censorship increased, political arrests increased, and treatment of prisoners in prisons such as Beria's Evin prison became even harsher (Human Rights Watch, 2005). Overall, Ahmadinejad's first term was characterized by a gradual curtailment of space for the opposition and civil society, creating an explosive situation in the run-up to the next elections.

#### **3.4.1. Foreign Policy and the Nuclear Crisis**

On the international stage, Ahmadinejad quickly established himself as a tough opponent of the West, which led to the aggravation of Iran's relations with a number of countries and international organizations. One of the key areas of foreign policy was the nuclear issue. If under President Khatami Iran agreed to temporarily limit its nuclear program for the sake of negotiations with Europe, then with the arrival of Ahmadinejad this compromise line was interrupted. Already in 2006, Iran resumed uranium enrichment, despite the concerns of the IAEA and the "European three". The new president took a confrontational position, insisting on the country's "inalienable right" to develop peaceful nuclear energy. Such firmness was largely calculated for a domestic audience - a demonstration of sovereignty and defiance of external pressure corresponded to his revolutionary image. However, the international reaction was extremely negative. In December 2006, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 1737, imposing sanctions on Iran for refusing to suspend enrichment. In the following years, the sanctions pressure only intensified: a series of UN resolutions, followed by unilateral sanctions by the US and the EU, significantly isolated the Iranian economy from world markets, culminating in the introduction of severe restrictions on Iranian oil exports and the disconnection of Iranian banks from the SWIFT system in 2012. Thus, Ahmadinejad's course to defend the nuclear program at any cost led to an unprecedented sanctions regime that seriously affected the country's economy (Maloney, 2015). In addition to the nuclear dossier, Ahmadinejad's foreign policy rhetoric has repeatedly caused international scandals. He has become famous for his harsh attacks on Israel and his denial or downplaying of the Holocaust, which instantly turned Iran into a target of condemnation around the world. In December 2006, the Iranian president initiated the "International Conference on

Reconsidering the Global Vision of the Holocaust” in Tehran, inviting notorious Holocaust deniers, neo-Nazis, and anti-Zionist activists from around the world. This event, which essentially became a “revisionist fair” with the participation of marginal extremists, finally alienated even those who called for dialogue with Tehran (Naji, 2008, pp. 164–165). As Kasra Naji noted, holding such a conference demonstrated the dangerous detachment of Ahmadinejad and his entourage from the reality of world politics: the willingness to befriend open racists and conspiracy theorists for the sake of an ideological gesture showed many countries that it was difficult to deal rationally with such a leader (Naji, 2008, p. 164). As a result, Iran under Ahmadinejad quickly found itself in international isolation – even some traditional partners distanced themselves from it, and the country's image was seriously damaged (Naji, 2008, p. 165).

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's eight-year presidency was one of the most remarkable and controversial periods in the history of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Beginning with loud promises of social justice and a return to revolutionary ideals, this period led to serious domestic and foreign consequences. In domestic politics, Ahmadinejad tried to implement a populist program, temporarily winning the sympathy of the poorest strata, but in the long term, his economic experiments and conflicts with government institutions exacerbated the country's structural problems. A permanent revolution in personnel policy and tightening control over society led to the consolidation of power in the hands of the conservative bloc, but simultaneously caused a surge in public discontent, culminating in the events of 2009. Ahmadinejad's foreign policy, built on confrontation and ideological maximalism, increased Iran's international isolation. The nuclear crisis and the sanctions that came with it caused economic damage that the country would have to recover from for many years. However, the Ahmadinejad era also played a certain cathartic role in Iranian politics: it highlighted the limits of what was acceptable in the struggle for power within the system itself and showed what risks adventurism could lead to even at the highest level. The historical significance of this presidency is that it became a lesson for all key actors in Iran – from the spiritual leadership to ordinary voters – about the price of radicalism and the value of stability. It is no coincidence that immediately after Ahmadinejad's departure, the country took a course toward relative moderation, concluding a nuclear agreement with Western countries in 2015, which meant a departure from the policy of isolation. In retrospect, Ahmadinejad's tenure appears to have been a time of sharp contradictions: it combined a declarative fight for social justice with the strengthening of the repressive apparatus, loud foreign policy slogans with growing international pressure, an appeal to revolutionary ideals with corruption scandals and internal divisions. As researchers note, this “roller coaster” of Iranian politics was one of the most unexpected turns since the 1979 revolution (Maloney, 2015). Ahmadinejad's legacy remains a subject of heated debate in Iran: for some, he still symbolizes a genuine spirit of resistance to the



West and concern for the poor, while for others, he symbolizes an era of isolation, missed opportunities, and growing authoritarianism. One thing is clear: the impact of these eight years on Iran's economy, society, and foreign policy was enormous. Ahmadinejad's presidency became a serious test of the resilience and adaptability of the Islamic republican system. The results of this period largely predetermined the further evolution of the Iranian leadership, which, learning from the crisis it had experienced, was forced to adjust the country's course in the following decade.

### **3.5. Influence in Lebanon and the 2006 Hezbollah–Israel War (proxy gains and regional prestige).**

The history of Israeli Iranian relations, which as a result of the change of regime in Iran were transformed from friendly to extremely tense, is an example of the action of ideological factors that form a new system of priorities and are capable of destroying a partnership based on common interests. The Shah's Iran was a natural ally of Israel in the region. The motives for mutual attraction that existed in both countries were objective in nature. Traditional rivalry with the Arabs, isolation in the region, coincidence of foreign policy orientations, the presence of common threats - all this together determined fairly close and trusting ties. The Iranian direction in Israel's foreign policy opened the door to the Muslim world, which, given the conflict with the Arabs, was of particular political importance for the Israeli leadership. (Maloney, 2010).

After the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the situation changed radically, but pragmatism in the foreign policies of Iran and Israel remained. During the Iran-Iraq War, which began in 1980 and lasted eight years, Israel made its choice. From the point of view of Israel, which hoped that the war would constrain the actions of two hostile regimes, Iran still looked less dangerous than Iraq, whose military machine was part of the military potential of the Arab world opposing the Jewish state. The Iraqi regime was oriented towards the USSR, with which Israel did not have diplomatic relations at that time, and which supported radical Arab forces. There is evidence that Israeli politicians not only reacted favorably to Iran's informal requests for spare parts for fighter jets but also took steps to draw representatives of the US Republican administration into the arms supply game, the exposure of which was called "Irangate". (Zvaqelskaya, 2010).

The situation changed after the 2003 Iraq War. Israel's concerns were caused by Iran's general policy in the region. The American operation in Iraq has led to the disappearance of the previous balance of power, when Iraq could constrain Iran. Without encountering any resistance, the Iranian leadership could afford to act more actively in the Persian Gulf and pursue its own course in the Middle East conflict. At its core is support for radical organizations and movements that are

fighting against Israel and are not inclined to political compromise, and the Shiite party Hezbollah, which operates from Lebanon. (Pollack, 2003).

Hezbollah was created in 1982 in southern Lebanon in response to the Israeli military invasion. At first, Lebanese Shiites expected the Israeli troops to defeat the armed groups of the PLO, which had established their bases in southern Lebanon and oppressed the local population, and did not show any particular hostility. But very soon the situation changed, and the Israeli army, bogged down in Lebanon, became the object of hatred from various religious forces, including Shiites. Hezbollah began to receive assistance from Iran and Syria and gradually turned into a powerful military and political force, which the weak Lebanese leadership was forced to reckon with. Being a political party and having a military wing, Hezbollah declared the continuation of the fight against Israel, while usurping the legitimate right of the state to use military force. (Zvaqelskaya, 2010). Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000 created additional opportunities for Damascus and Tehran to exert military and political pressure on the Jewish state. In the changed circumstances, Syria and Iran increased their support for the radical Shiite organization Hezbollah, which was expressed primarily in the build-up of its military potential. By providing assistance to Hassan Nasrallah's militants, Damascus and Tehran sought to turn Hezbollah into an effective instrument of military and political confrontation with the State of Israel. Hezbollah, unburdened by the duties of holding executive office, is able to maintain a greater level of ideological integrity than even the Islamic regime in Iran. Tehran takes pride in its backing of Hezbollah, which acknowledges the spiritual authority of Iran's supreme leader (Ayatollah Ali Khamenei) as reflected in Hizbollah's ideology and in the images of the Ayatollah frequently held by protesters and displayed in the offices of the movement's leaders. (Menashri, 2007). When preparing for military action against the Jewish state, the Hezbollah leadership took into account the fundamental gap in military and technical equipment between their militants and the IDF (IDF - Israel Defense Forces, or IDF), which was also increasing due to the Israeli army's use of high-precision non-contact weapons, taking the armed confrontation to a new level. To effectively counter its adversary, Hezbollah used asymmetric countermeasures to the IDF's military power, while shifting the armed confrontation to areas where the regular army's advantage becomes limited. (Kornilov & Ermakov, 2014). After the withdrawal of Israeli army units from the territory of southern Lebanon, Hezbollah created underground communications systems in this territory. The leadership of the "Party of Allah" understood perfectly well that during the military conflict, the IDF aviation would have complete air superiority, so underground communications were necessary for the Islamists both to hide weapons, ammunition and personnel, and for their safe movement. It should be noted that the military infrastructure of H. Nasrallah's militants was also covered by civilian objects in order to reduce the likelihood of IDF missile and bomb strikes on it,

thereby preventing the Israelis from fully realizing their military-technical superiority. Relying on a powerful infrastructure, Hezbollah militants prepared an asymmetric response to the military might of Jerusalem the use of missile weapons allowed the Islamists to move the war far into the territory of the Jewish state. The leader of the "Party of Allah" H. Nasrallah eloquently testified to this in an interview with the Al-Jazeera TV channel: "When time drags on, the north is experiencing stagnation, I mean the north of occupied Palestine - there are two million Zionists there who are either sitting in shelters or have left the territory, becoming refugees. The entire economy of the north has frozen. Factories, trade, tourism, economic development - everything has stopped." In order to confront the ground units of the IDF, Hezbollah militants have been increasing their arsenal of anti-tank weapons to combat Israeli armored vehicles, paying special attention to the effective use of both modern and outdated weapons. (Exum, 2006).

Iran's influence increased following Saddam's defeat, the challenges faced by the United States in Iraq, the rising authority of Shiite groups in the area, and the political void created by Arab nations in Iraq and elsewhere. (Menashri, 2007). In the 2006 war, Iran benefited from Hezbollah's actions, while Lebanon bore most of the consequences. (Menashri, 2007). Lebanon is crucial for Iran, as it aims to maintain a Shiite presence near Israel's borders. Through Hezbollah, Iran spreads its revolutionary ideology, showcases successful Islamic activism, and strengthens its regional and global influence. Hezbollah is Iran's most notable success in exporting its revolution, and Iran is committed to preserving this achievement. (Menashri, 2007)

In the summer of 2006, Hezbollah used tactics against the IDF that were unlike the guerrilla tactics of non-state actors that U.S. and allied forces were then facing in asymmetric conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. and Vietnam. For example, militants in Iraq and Afghanistan, blending into the civilian population, relied primarily on improvised explosive devices. Hezbollah militants, who relied on rocket attacks on Israeli territory, relied on a powerful infrastructure that concentrated manpower and concealed weapons and ammunitions.

During Operation Honourable Vengeance, Jerusalem sought to achieve the following goals: the return of the kidnapped soldiers, an end to rocket attacks on the territory of the Jewish state, and the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1559, which provides for the disarmament of Hezbollah militants. These goals were not achieved during Operation Honourable Vengeance and were clearly unachievable by Israeli military force alone. (Kornilov & Ermakov, 2014)

It was impossible to talk about stopping rocket attacks on Israeli territory even if full control over the territory of Southern Lebanon was established, because Hezbollah's missile arsenals were also located in other parts of Lebanese territory. Thus, a significant part of Hezbollah's missile arsenal was located in Southern Lebanon, but another large part of it was located in the Beirut area and in the Awali River area. (Menashri, 2007)

There could be no talk of disarming Hezbollah, since it is not only part of the Lebanese government, but also an important player in the Middle East, with Damascus and Tehran behind it. (Ibid.).

The statement by the Israeli Prime Minister about the absence of time limits for armed confrontation clearly demonstrates that during the military actions in the summer of 2006 against the "Party of Allah" Jerusalem did not have a pre-planned scenario for the development of the conflict. Instead, the Israeli leadership, wishing to protect its citizens at any cost, focused on conducting an air campaign against Hezbollah, after which a dilemma would inevitably arise either withdraw from military action or begin a ground operation. (Matthews, 2008).

Thus, the Second Lebanon War demonstrated serious imbalances in the foreign policy decision-making process of the Jewish state's leadership. Let us point out the most obvious problems: firstly, the Israeli National Security Council did not actually participate in the advisory process at the cabinet level or the narrow cabinet on defense issues, and, secondly, Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni was not invited to work out and present the diplomatic consequences of Operation Honorable Vengeance (Kornilov, 2007). A military operation aimed at temporarily capturing territory in southern Lebanon would have allowed Israel to change the "rules of the game" for Damascus and Tehran. A significant weakening of the military potential of Hezbollah and a partial return of armed confrontation to the level it was before the withdrawal of IDF units from southern Lebanon in 2000 would not have allowed Syria and Iran to use H. Nasrallah's militants as a powerful instrument of military and political pressure on Tel Aviv. In turn, the tactics resorted to by the Israeli leadership could only be effective if there was an anti-missile defense system in place to combat both short- and medium-range missiles. The use of such weapons would have neutralized most attempts to harm the civilian population of the Jewish state, while providing significant freedom of maneuver for the political leadership. Even today, its use has fundamentally changed the nature of military operations between Israel and non-state actors in military-political relations. In part, the budget cuts were also connected with the insufficient equipment of the IDF ground forces. In addition, the redistribution of funds in favor of the Air Force by the Ministry of Defense and the General Staff played a negative role here. The Chief of the General Staff, former commander of the Israeli Air Force, Dan Halutz, generally believed that future military conflicts would develop exclusively according to the "Yugoslav scenario", that is, the key role in them would be given to aviation. It should be recognized that the redistribution of funds in favor of the Air Force also had a positive effect. During the 2006 war, aviation proved its high efficiency. One of the manifestations of the effectiveness of the Israeli Air Force was the destruction of Zilzal missile launchers capable of reaching central Israel, including Tel Aviv. Israeli aviation was also quite effective in combating launches of other medium-range missiles. Various sources indicate

that Israeli aviation achieved significant success during military operations against Islamists in Lebanon in the summer of 2006.

On the other hand, the Israeli air force was hampered in its ability to effectively combat the missile threat by covering Hezbollah's military facilities with civilian infrastructure. "For example, Hezbollah builds a kindergarten, a basement, and an ammunition depot there - thus, it turns out to be an object that is not purely military... If you hit it from the air, you'll kill children." (Zvaqelskaya,2010).

Thus, Hezbollah gave an asymmetrical response to the IDF's military might, attacking the civilian population of the Jewish state and using civilians in the territory it controls as a "human shield". Israel was faced with the task of finding a balance between defensive and offensive means, while paying special attention to the ethical and legal aspects. This is convincingly demonstrated by the fact that the Israeli air force struck Beirut International Airport. The attack on this facility was a form of pressure from Israel on the Lebanese leadership, and such a step was to be expected. Thus, after the attack by H. Nasrallah's militants on an IDF patrol near Kibbutz Zar'it, the Israeli leadership stated that Israel considers the Lebanese government responsible for Hezbollah's actions. At the same time, Tel Aviv made a number of mistakes in the information war, which were repeated during Operation Cast Lead in the Gaza Strip in the winter of 2008/2009. For example, the Israelis did not make enough efforts to demonstrate their steps to minimize damage and loss of civilian life. (Voennyi vestnik Izrailya, 2008.).

The period of the protracted Syrian crisis. Israel is currently benefiting from Hezbollah's deep involvement in the fighting against opponents of the Bashar al-Assad regime. However, we should expect an increase in the threat on Israel's northern border, both from the radical Shiite organization and, possibly, from jihadists seeking to open a new front in the fight against the Jewish state in southern Syria.

In turn, the combat experience of the Party of Allah was skillfully used by its allied Palestinian radicals. During Operation Pillar of Defense in November 2012, Hamas, using the tactics of Hezbollah fighters and taking into account the peculiarities of the Gaza Strip, such as a very dense population and desert-like natural landscape, was able to successfully resist the military might of the Jewish state.

Like Hezbollah, Hamas was able to carry the war deep into the territory of its enemy, as a result of which even Jerusalem and Tel Aviv came under its missile strikes. Thus, during the events of autumn 2012, Palestinian radicals were able to largely repeat the scenario implemented by Hezbollah of waging an asymmetric war against the State of Israel. (Siboni, 2013).

In conclusion, Iran has held significant influence in Lebanon for an extended period, and its standing was strengthened by the exit of both Israel and Syria from the country. Additionally,

Hezbollah's declaration of a "victory" against Israel further cemented Iran's position, although interpretations of victory or defeat in this context largely depend on individual perspectives and collective public sentiment. In many ways, it is challenging to regard the war's outcomes as a true victory for Hezbollah (or Iran). The substantial losses incurred by Hezbollah, the damage to its military and organizational structure, and Nasrallah's retreat into hiding after the conflict do not signify victory in a traditional sense. (Menashri, 2007). However, the narrative of victory promoted by Hizbollah and Iran (along with Syria), contrasted with Israel's resulting disillusionment and reflection, has contributed to the perception that Hezbollah's strategy is an effective means of confronting Israel and the adversaries of Islam both regionally and globally. Iran clearly claims ownership of Hizbollah's unwavering resistance and its revolutionary ideology, and it has openly expressed its satisfaction with this influence.

### **3.5.1. Iran's Intervention in Syria: Proxy Warfare and Ideological Justification (2011)**

The Iranian government has explicitly outlined its desires and aversions regarding the Syrian crisis since the outset and has maintained a consistent approach towards this issue. The primary objective of this approach is to preserve Iranian influence in Syria, thereby sustaining the Iran-Syria alliance. From a geopolitical standpoint, Syria is viewed as Iran's most significant ally in the region, providing its "strategic depth" and serving as a crucial component of its defense strategy. Moreover, this alliance enhances Iran's regional power and supports its pursuit of regional prominence (Sinkaya, 2017).

Under the guidance of Iran, a number of Shia militia groups linked to Iran have engaged in the Syrian conflict. The most notable of these groups is Lebanese Hezbollah. Initially, they undertook limited military actions along the Syrian Lebanese border, but by 2013, Hezbollah began to actively participate in battles across various regions of Syria. Meanwhile, Shia militias from several countries, primarily Iraq, came together under the banner of the Abu Fadil al-Abbas Brigade to fight in Syria. (Orhan, 2015). Additionally, many Afghan militias have been dispatched to Syria under the name of the Fatemiyoun Brigade and have taken part in the hostilities (Sullivan, 2010).

One of Iran's objectives in Syria was to establish militia groups that would maintain Iranian influence even if the regime were to change in the country. As the Syrian army showed itself to be incapable of handling the armed opposition, militia forces aligned with the regime began to form. With support from Iran, Shiite militias from various countries were mobilized to protect the Sayyida Zaynab shrine, while the "National Defense Forces," primarily made up of Syrian Alawites, were created. Iranian officers played a crucial role in organizing and training this force. Revolutionary Guard Commander Hossein Hemedani, who oversaw Iran's military operations in Syria, referred to this structure as a "second Hezbollah." (Segal&Shapira, 2014).

An additional aspect worth noting is that Iran has compelled its other allies and partners in the region to back Assad. Both the Iraqi government and Lebanese Hezbollah have consistently supported Assad in different capacities. Furthermore, during this time, Iran's relationship with the Palestinian resistance group Hamas, which has not openly endorsed Assad, has worsened. (Sinkaya, 2017).

Iran's use of a proxy strategy in Syria exemplifies its “Divide-Empower-Control” method, although it is implemented differently than in Iraq. Given the limited number of indigenous Shi’a in Syria, Iran recruited fighters from various proxy groups and expanded its network gradually in accordance with available resources and political circumstances. The use of foreign Shi’a militias in Syria showcases a wider strategy in which Iran employs these factions as a foreign legion to fulfill significant geostrategic aims. There are already indications that similar methods are being utilized in Yemen, albeit on a smaller scale. This tactic might also be adapted in other areas as Iran continues to cultivate new proxies to extend its influence while minimizing direct strain on its domestic population. (Sinkaya, 2017). From a realist perspective, the strategy mentioned above reflected Iran’s desire for power, security and regional dominance in an anarchic system. By financing non-state actors, avoided confrontation with the United States, Israel and Saudi Arabia and ensured regime survival reducing internal political and human costs. From a constructivist perspective on the other hand, religious identity plays a crucial role in Iran’s actions. Mobilization of Shia militias is not only a strategic calculation, but also a reflection Iran’s self-perception as the defender of oppressed Shia communities and an anti-imperialist resistance axis. (Takeyh,2009)

## **CHAPTER 4. BROKEN PROMISES AND BLOODSHED: THE COLLAPSE OF THE JCPOA AND THE SOLEIMANI ASSASSINATION**

Between 2006 and 2010, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) enacted four resolutions (1737, 1747, 1803, and 1929) that imposed sanctions on Iran. Resolution 1929 significantly affected the Iranian economy. The most severe sanctions against Iran were implemented during the years 2011-2012. These sanctions led to a decline in Iran's oil exports by over 50%. Additionally, they resulted in a drastic drop in the value of Iran's currency (the Rial). Iran's economy was shrinking at an annual rate of 5 percent of GDP, with an inflation rate of 42 percent and unemployment at 18 percent. Throughout the sanctions era, Iran increased its uranium enrichment levels from 5 percent to 20 percent, boosted its enrichment stockpile from a few hundred kilograms to more than 8000 kg, and raised the number of centrifuges from 3000 to 22,000. Iran was only three months away from achieving a breakout capability (VOA, 2014).

The 2015 nuclear agreement with Iran, commonly referred to as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), demonstrated that Iran was only willing to negotiate when confronted with substantial multilateral pressure and strong U.S. resolve focused on a specific, limited objective. Bill Burns, former Deputy Secretary of State and a pivotal player in the agreement, noted that it was achievable due to a U.S. strategy that blended tough diplomacy with sanctions, global backing, and the potential for military intervention. (Sadjadpour, 2022).

The main elements of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) were as follows: Iran would reduce the number of its centrifuges from 22,000 to 5,060 IR-1 models at the Natanz plant. The country would also reduce its uranium stockpile, with the enrichment level capped at 3.67%. Natanz would remain Iran's only enrichment facility, and Fordow would be transformed into a centre for nuclear physics and technology. The Arak reactor would be reprocessed, and Iran would commit to the Additional Protocol. These measures would ensure a win for the EU3+3 while extending Iran's time for a breakout to around one year (Mousavian, 2018).

### **4.1. The Weaknesses of the Obama Administration's Iran Nuclear Policy and the Failure of the JCPOA**

In 2015, the Barack Obama administration achieved a landmark agreement with Iran, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), designed to curb Tehran's nuclear program. The strength



of this policy was the use of multilateral diplomacy and international institutions: the agreement imposed strict and verifiable limits on uranium enrichment capacity, significantly increasing the breakout time before obtaining weapons (CRS, 2021, p. 47). According to the IAEA and independent monitors, Iran complied with the terms of the deal until 2018 (Davenport, 2016, p. 3). However, the JCPOA had vulnerabilities: first, key restrictions were temporary (so-called sunset clauses), after which Iran was entitled to expand its program (Kuperman, 2015, p. 21). Second, the agreement did not address Iran's ballistic missiles and proxy activities in the region, which alarmed Israel and the Gulf states (CRS, 2021, p. 51). Critics argued that the economic benefits of sanctions relief gave the Tehran regime additional resources to increase its regional influence (Kahl, 2018, p. 6). In addition, the lack of a bilateral ratification mechanism within the United States made the JCPOA vulnerable—the Trump administration withdrew from the agreement in 2018, and Iran began to violate its terms in stages (CRS, 2021, p. 55).

From a neoclassical realist perspective, this failure is explained not only by the international structure, but also by domestic constraints—in particular, the lack of domestic political consensus in the United States and the institutional fragmentation of the Iranian regime (Juneau, 2015, p. 56). Obama operated under domestic pressure from Congress, the Israeli lobby, and Arab allies that limited his ability to achieve a lasting outcome. Moreover, threat perceptions among Iranian elites—particularly the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps—distorted responses to the JCPOA incentives. A classic example is Supreme Leader Khamenei's view of the deal as a forced concession rather than an equitable compromise (Kahl, 2018, p. 5). It is precisely these distortions that undermine the agreements' effectiveness, as neoclassical realism emphasizes.

The JCPOA was a step toward reducing tensions and creating a trust within which the parties could negotiate a broader security agreement (Davenport, 2016, p. 4). However, the lack of strong legal mechanisms to preserve the agreement across administrations and the reluctance to include regional security issues within the JCPOA weakened its sustainability. As Waltz has written, sometimes “nuclear proliferation may stabilize rather than destabilize” the international system if a symmetrical balance of threats is created (Waltz, 2012, p. 3). Although Obama sought to avoid an arms race, his strategy failed to provide a durable deterrent. In the end, liberal faith in the power of treaty frameworks collided with realist limits on power and mistrust.

#### **4.2. The Trump Administration's Nuclear Policy- Realism and Deterrence Failure.**

The Donald Trump administration has fundamentally changed the US approach to Iran, abandoning the multilateral agreement (JCPOA) signed under Obama and relying on a policy of “maximum pressure”. On May 8, 2018, Trump officially announced his withdrawal from the deal,

citing that the JCPOA allegedly “does not prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons”, has unacceptable sunset clauses, and does not include restrictions on ballistic missiles and Tehran’s interference in the Middle East (Trump, 2018a, p. 517). In practice, this meant not only breaking off diplomatic contacts, but also re-imposing broad sanctions, including secondary measures against companies from third countries (Trump Memorandum, 2018).

From the perspective of neoclassical realism, this strategy reflected the perception of Iran as a hostile power that cannot be contained through treaty mechanisms. The US behavior was dictated by the perception of the Iranian threat as existential, rather than as an object of negotiations. Despite the fact that in 2017 all IAEA reports confirmed Iran’s compliance with the terms of the deal (IAEA, 2017), the Trump administration ignored objective data, acting on ideological and domestic political motivations. Trump’s approach reinforced the logic of anarchy in the international system: the US demonstrated that even agreements approved by the UN Security Council can be rejected during a change of power, which, in essence, undermined trust in international institutions (Afrasiabi,2020).

From a constructivist perspective, Trump’s policy restored the image of Iran as a “pariah”, thereby strengthening the anti-American identity of the Iranian regime. Increased pressure, including military threats and sanctions strangulation, allowed Tehran to mobilize domestic support by accusing the US of violating the international order. As Guterres emphasizes, the US withdrawal from the JCPOA “undermined one of the key successes in nuclear non-proliferation” and weakened faith in diplomacy (UN, 2018). At the same time, contrary to Trump’s statements, neither a “new deal” nor increased controls were achieved. As a result, by 2022, Iran had made significant progress in uranium enrichment, effectively approaching the nuclear threshold status.

### **4.3. The Biden Administration’s Approach**

By 2022, the diplomatic and coercive strategy that enabled the JCPOA had disappeared. While sanctions against Iran remained, they were not rigorously enforced, leading to a notable increase in Iran's oil exports to China. The Biden administration’s cautious method of seeking to revive the deal, coupled with its seemingly hesitant stance towards alternative strategies, convinced Tehran that it could ask for greater concessions without facing significant repercussions. Furthermore, Iran's skepticism regarding U.S. reliability was intensified by the political divisions within the U.S. and global incidents such as the American exit from Afghanistan, escalating tensions with China, and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. (Sadjadpour, 2022).

#### **4.4. Iran's Use of JCPOA Gains in the Region**

Proponents of the agreement contended that Iran would primarily utilize the financial gains to revitalize its faltering economy. They asserted that, given Iran was already financing its detrimental regional endeavors even amidst challenging economic conditions, it wouldn't require the new funds for those purposes. Nevertheless, two years post-agreement, these assertions seemed unfounded. Iran's defense spending had increased more than twofold, and its engagement in Iraq and Syria had escalated. (Takeyh, 2017).

#### **4.5. Iran's Nuclear Hedging Strategy**

While Iran's nuclear program has historically been shrouded in secrecy, its intentions have been explicit: to reap the benefits of being on the verge of acquiring nuclear weapons without fully constructing them. According to non-proliferation specialist Robert Litwak, Iran aims to maintain the possibility of developing nuclear weapons while sidestepping the political and regional ramifications that would come with actually pursuing them. (Sadjadpour, 2022).

In the end, the nuclear agreement granted Iran nearly all of its demands. It allowed Iran to maintain a significant uranium enrichment program, a heavy water facility, and a secure underground enrichment site that the U.S. had previously promised to eliminate. Additionally, the deal permitted advanced nuclear research and development while depending on an inspection system that lacked the critical "anytime, anywhere" access. Concurrently, the framework of sanctions was loosened, and the prospect of swiftly reinstating them after being lifted became unlikely. At the same time, the financial gains from the agreement contributed to the resurgence of Iran's aspirations for increased influence in the Middle East. (Takeyh, 2017).

#### **4.6. Assassination of Qassem Soleimani**

Soleimani has been described with almost every superlative imaginable, ranging from a globally recognized master strategist to a figure reminiscent of a prophet, driven solely by his unwavering commitment to the principles of the Islamic Revolution. He was regarded as a cult figure among the IRGC and its associated Shia militias, in addition to being a trusted advisor to Khamenei. Soleimani embodied the Islamic Republic's both admired and despised regional strategies, acting as an unofficial leader in their execution. Following the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, he emerged as the principal architect of Iran's growing regional influence, working to occupy the power void left

by the conflict. With traditional military capabilities limited by sanctions, Soleimani concentrated on enhancing Iran's asymmetric power through a network of regional allies and proxies, recognized by Tehran and its partners as the “Axis of Resistance.” Honored by both friends and foes, including high-ranking American and Israeli military strategists, Soleimani's approach, based on the principle that offense serves as the best defense, allowed Iran to establish itself as the essential power in the region. In Syria, Soleimani was crucial in aiding the beleaguered Bashar al-Assad to endure the Arab Spring, orchestrating a violent and reckless campaign against regime opponents. (Nejad, 2020). Soleimani was a key architect of Iran's Middle East strategy. Although he was not the commander-in-chief of the Revolutionary Guards, he was its most influential leader. His influence on the regime’s regional policies surpassed that of any elected official, including the president of Iran. (Veisi, 2024). This Iranian strategy persisted with Soleimani taking the lead, driving the regime's aspirations in the region. Nevertheless, increasing resistance is raising challenging questions within Tehran. The majority of the Iranian populace is against the regime's aggressive foreign policy, and recent protests against Iran in Iraq have highlighted the shortcomings of the “Axis of Resistance” initiative. Additionally, the fact that Soleimani was killed not within Iran but in Baghdad positions him less as a national icon and more as a militant Islamist who placed ideological pursuits above Iran's national interests. The assassination of Gen. Qassem Soleimani, the leader of Iran’s Revolutionary Guards Quds Force, dealt a significant and unforeseen setback to the Iranian authorities. It dismantled the sense of invulnerability and arrogance that had long defined Soleimani and his close associates. He was targeted mainly because he perceived himself to be untouchable—an illusion that caused him to let his guard down in Iraq, a nation hosting thousands of U.S. troops and a substantial American intelligence presence. His deadly misjudgment occurred shortly after he instructed an Iraqi militia, financed by his Quds Force, to breach the U.S. embassy—a daring and humiliating move that directly confronted a U.S. president known for reacting strongly to such challenges. (Slim, 2020). The choice to remove the architect of Tehran's growing military and political power—from Iraq to Lebanon and Yemen—showed that the ousting of one individual can destabilize an entire system and alter the relationships within a whole region (Veisi, 2020).

From a realist viewpoint, the killing of Soleimani represented an adjustment of deterrence via precise military action. Viewed through a constructivist framework, his elevation to martyrdom reflects the regime's strategy to maintain legitimacy and narrative consistency through symbolic influence.

U.S. officials viewed Qassem Soleimani as a significant threat, holding him responsible for considerable American casualties. Brett McGurk, the former Special Envoy for Combatting ISIS, believed that his elimination brought a just sense of retribution. Soleimani was linked to nearly all

illicit actions associated with Iran and was regarded as a primary instigator of regional turmoil. According to assessments by U.S. intelligence experts, if he was scheming against U.S. personnel or interests, then, in McGurk's opinion, the United States had a definitive duty to respond in self-defense. (Votel, 2020).

The assassination of Qassem Soleimani has unleashed a complex set of consequences for the U.S.—Iran tensions during a volatile period in the region, states Ali Fathollah-Nejad. In Iraq, it was highly probable that U.S. diplomatic and military establishments would face various forms of attack and covert intimidation. The killing of Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis alongside Soleimani galvanized tens of thousands of militiamen from the Popular Mobilization Forces against the American presence in Iraq more than ever before. Iran's quickest retaliation was expected to happen in Iraq, yet the situation was intricate. Weeks of demonstrations throughout the nation had exposed rising public discontent toward Iran, and in this newly heightened environment, Iranian proxies started to be regarded as a source of difficulties rather than solutions. (Lister, 2020). The killing significantly undermined Iran's influence in the area, especially affecting the Quds Force. It conveyed a strong warning to Tehran that any escalation would provoke a forceful response. Soleimani's assassination highlighted this approach and revealed weaknesses in Iran's framework of regional power (Veisi, 2024).

During his lifetime, Soleimani had a devoted following, with his likeness widely displayed. Following his death, his reputation was further enhanced, elevating him to the status of a martyr. Shia imagery portrayed him alongside Imam Hossein, the Shia figure who was martyred at the Battle of Karbala in 680 AD—also in Iraq, coincidentally. He was featured in state propaganda art and was posthumously elevated from major general to lieutenant general—marking the first such advancement within the IRGC. Within days of his passing, numerous streets, squares, buildings, and even border crossings were renamed in his memory, including a street in Lebanon. His family home in Kerman province was designated to become a museum. In July, the Iranian national broadcaster announced the production of *Commander of Peace*, a forty-episode docuseries detailing Soleimani's involvement in regional conflicts. In August, a permanent exhibit exclusively dedicated to him was opened in Tehran. By December, a new website was launched featuring over 9,000 articles and images in multiple languages to “increase public knowledge and awareness” of Soleimani. (Dagres, 2021).

The government's PR effort presented Soleimani mainly as a nationalist leader—credited with Iran's rise in regional influence and a key defender of national security due to his efforts against the Islamic State terrorist group. He was also portrayed as an exceptional regime member, free from the corruption that plagued the elite, a characterization that some embraced. Nevertheless,

the majority of Iranians were apprehensive about the repercussions of his assassination, especially the risk of a devastating war. (Nejad, 2020).

The assassination of Soleimani was a situation with multiple consequences. It conveyed a strong and impactful message to Tehran that its ambitions for regional dominance would face resistance, while also increasing the risk of escalating chaos and instability in the Middle East. This incident marked a shift into unknown territory, raising significant concerns among both regional and global stakeholders about the future. Any major military confrontation promised only to result in losses—throwing the region into disarray, disrupting essential oil supplies, and potentially undermining the ongoing peaceful movements in Lebanon, Iraq, and Iran itself. (Nejad, 2020).

#### **4.7. Iran's Energy Diplomacy**

In nearby Iraq, Iranian gas and electricity supply over a third of the nation's energy requirements, and Tehran leverages this power to demand payment in hard currency and exert political influence on Baghdad when it benefits them. The U.S. has even had to grant sanctions exemptions to Iraq for ongoing electricity purchases from Iran to prevent a failure in its energy grid. (Shanahan, 2021). Tehran supplied electricity to Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Turkey, although its ties with Ankara were complicated, especially concerning its past support for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Continuous pressure from Turkey regarding the price of natural gas had resulted in arbitration disputes and Iranian frustration with Turkey's attempts to hinder gas pipeline projects. While exporting electricity and gas, Iran faced domestic shortages caused by an inefficient and underfunded energy sector, particularly in hydroelectric power, which led to frequent power outages in the country. (Ibid.).

Beirut is experiencing severe fuel shortages, leading to long lines at gas stations, daily power outages, and the struggle to operate backup generators. In response, Iran, specifically through its Lebanese partner, Hezbollah, has declared the arrival of Iranian oil to Lebanon through Syria. Iran remains vigilant for opportunities, recognizing the energy advantages it possesses. While it might struggle to fulfill domestic demand during peak times, it possesses ample export capacity to sustain its energy influence internationally. (Ibid.).

##### **4.7.1. Gas Exports to Iraq Despite Domestic Shortages**

While millions of Iranians deal with significant gas shortages and have difficulty warming their homes, the regime persists in exporting gas to Iraq. This decision has generated anger and led to

scrutiny of the regime's priorities. With Iran's economy in tatters, citizens nationwide are facing regular power cuts and frigid living conditions, yet the government continues to emphasize its gas exports to Iraq. (National Council of Resistance of Iran, 2023).

#### **4.7.2. Russia-Iran Partnership in Energy**

Amidst the various difficulties arising from the weakening of its regional partnerships, Iran is grappling with a significant energy crisis. Poor management and U.S. sanctions have resulted in an underfunded and antiquated energy infrastructure in Iran, leading to power outages, energy deficits, and growing domestic discontent. (Abbas, 2024). The agreement between Iran and Russia demonstrates their increasing geopolitical collaboration and details the exploration of shared oil and gas fields in Iran and the Caspian Sea, along with initiatives to re-export Russian gas to third nations, such as Turkey, Iraq, and Pakistan. If successfully implemented, this partnership could position Iran as a key player in regional energy markets.

#### **4.7.3. Geographical Landscape and Politics**

The Persian Gulf holds significant value for both Iran and the worldwide economy. The Strait of Hormuz, which Iran shares control of with Oman, serves as a vital passage for the transportation of global energy resources. Iran's capacity to pose a threat to the closure of this waterway provides it with considerable geopolitical power, particularly regarding its interactions with the U.S. and the member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). (Hasanov, 2024). Iran possesses considerable natural resources, especially oil and natural gas. These resources are crucial to its economy and have historically served as tools in foreign policy. The nation's approach has frequently included utilizing energy exports to establish political alliances and shape regional dynamics.

#### **4.7.4. Sanctions and Economic Warfare**

The United States first implemented economic and political sanctions against Iran during the hostage crisis from 1979 to 1981, following Iran's Islamic Revolution. On November 14, 1979, President Jimmy Carter ordered the freezing of all Iranian assets "which are or become subject to the jurisdiction of the United States." Additional sanctions were introduced in January 1984 when

the Lebanon-based militant organization Hezbollah, an ally of Iran, was connected to the bombing of the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut. That same year, the United States labeled Iran as a state sponsor of terrorism. This designation, which is still in effect, activates a range of sanctions, such as limitations on U.S. foreign aid, a prohibition on arms transfers, and export restrictions on dual-use items.

Iran is subjected to global sanctions due to a secretive nuclear program that the IAEA and major world powers assert breaches its treaty commitments. Upon joining the Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1967, Iran pledged to refrain from becoming a nuclear-armed nation. In 1974, Iran ratified the IAEA Safeguards Agreement, an addition to the NPT where it agreed to allow inspections. In the early 2000s, the resurgence of activities related to uranium enrichment raised global concerns, leading to multiple rounds of sanctions imposed by the United Nations, the EU, and the U.S. government.

The United States, the United Nations, and the European Union have imposed various sanctions on Iran due to its nuclear program after the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the UN's nuclear monitoring body, determined in September 2005 that Tehran was not adhering to its international obligations. The U.S. has led worldwide initiatives to financially isolate Tehran and obstruct its oil exports in order to increase the costs associated with Iran's pursuit of a potential nuclear weapons capability and to compel its government to engage in negotiations. (Laub, 2015). In November 2013, a temporary agreement known as the Joint Plan of Action (JPA) was signed between Iran and the P5+1, providing some relief from sanctions and access to \$4.2 billion in assets that had been frozen, in exchange for Iran agreeing to limit uranium enrichment and allow international inspectors to visit sensitive sites. The JPA limited Iran's crude oil exports to 1.1 million barrels per day, which is less than half of what was exported in 2011. Washington and Brussels will maintain the provisions of the JPA until the IAEA confirms that Iran has complied with a set of agreed-upon measures to restrict its nuclear program. (CFR, 2015).

The U.S. Treasury Department has implemented sanctions aimed at cutting Iran off from the global financial system. In addition to banning U.S.-based institutions from engaging in financial transactions with Iran, the Treasury also enforces extraterritorial or secondary sanctions: According to the 2011 Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act (CISADA), foreign financial institutions or their branches that engage with sanctioned banks are prohibited from making deals in the United States or utilizing the U.S. dollar.

Oil exports: Before 2012, oil exports accounted for half of the revenue for the Iranian government and represented one-fifth of the nation's GDP; since then, exports have declined by more than 50%. Extraterritorial sanctions are aimed at foreign companies that might supply services or investment in the energy sector, including funding for oil and gas projects, sales of refining



equipment, and involvement in oil export activities such as shipbuilding, port operations, and transportation insurance. CISADA and related executive orders tightened existing restrictions that were in place before concerns about nuclear issues. (CFR, 2015).

Trump removed the U.S. from the 2015 Iran nuclear agreement — the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) — shortly after taking office and adopted a strategy of “maximum pressure,” which included economic and diplomatic actions aimed at forcing Tehran to restrict its nuclear program and diminish its harmful influence in the region. This strategy failed to deliver the desired results. (Katulis, Vatanka, & Karam, 2025). Congress has been instrumental in influencing U.S. policy regarding Iran by implementing extensive sanctions, supplying aid, and approving arms sales for allies at risk from Iran, while also attempting to affect discussions related to Iran's nuclear program.

Even though U.S. sanctions have caused significant economic hardship in Iran, the maximum pressure strategy failed to persuade Tehran to accept stricter controls over its nuclear program. Rather, it resulted in Iran increasing its nuclear operations and heightening its regional confrontations. (Abrams, 2021). Iran's economic strength should not be overlooked. The government has adjusted by creating widespread networks to evade sanctions, enhancing commerce with China, and strengthening connections with other countries facing sanctions, such as Russia.

The Islamic Republic of Iran encountered military and strategic defeats, primarily inflicted by Israel and the United States, which seem to significantly reduce the advantages and leverage Tehran had developed over years of investment. These setbacks, combined with mounting sanctions, underscore the limits of both coercive pressure and Iran's capacity to sustain its regional posture without adaptation.

## **CHAPTER 5. ISRAEL-AZERBAIJAN. STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP AND IRAN'S RESPONSE**

Tehran reacted extremely sensitively to Azerbaijan's military triumph and Israel's increased influence in the Caucasus. Iran, while officially supporting Azerbaijan's territorial integrity, was de facto dissatisfied with the outcome of the war, primarily due to the strengthening of its ideological adversary's positions on Iran's northern borders (Mamedov, 2021). Iranian military and officials soon deployed harsh rhetoric: Baku was repeatedly accused of allowing a "Zionist presence" on Azerbaijani soil, claiming that Israel was allegedly creating military bases and intelligence infrastructure on Azerbaijani territory to operate against Iran (Coffey, 2023). Although no evidence was provided, such statements became an element of Tehran's propaganda discourse. Under the pretext of "the inadmissibility of the presence of Zionists on our borders," the Iranian army conducted several demonstration exercises near the Azerbaijani border. In particular, in October 2021, for the first time in decades, large-scale military maneuvers of the Iranian Army were organized on the banks of the Araz River with the transfer of armored vehicles and artillery, and in October 2022, even larger "Mighty Iran" exercises were held near the border of Nakhchivan (Mamedov, 2021; Coffey, 2023). These steps were accompanied by direct threats: Iranian officials stated that they would not tolerate changes in the geopolitical reality in the region to the detriment of their interests and hinted at their readiness to use force if Iran's "red lines" were violated. Tehran also increased information pressure - stories about a "Zionist conspiracy" in Baku became more frequent in the Iranian media, and the Azerbaijani authorities were accused of secularism and an alliance with the "enemies of Islam". These attacks led to an unprecedented cooling of relations: in January 2023, a security guard was killed in an armed attack on the Azerbaijani embassy in Tehran, prompting Baku to evacuate the diplomatic mission and further fueling anti-Iranian sentiment. Overall, Iran's negative reaction manifested itself on the military, diplomatic and ideological fronts, demonstrating Tehran's deep-seated anxiety in the face of Azerbaijani Israeli rapprochement.

### **5.1. Israel as a Key Military and Strategic Partner of Azerbaijan**

The partnership between Israel and Azerbaijan is a comprehensive strategic alliance. Azerbaijan, a Shiite Muslim state, has paradoxically become one of Israel's closest allies in Eurasia, a unique achievement of Jerusalem diplomacy (Elmas, 2021). Since the mid-1990s, the two countries have

built close cooperation in the political, military and economic spheres. Israel covers a significant part of Azerbaijan's needs for weapons and technology, supplying modern drones, air defense systems and other precision weapons (Khanin & Grinberg, 2025). For its part, Baku provides up to 40% of Israel's oil imports, acting as Tel Aviv's most important energy partner (Mamedov, 2021). Experts note that Azerbaijan has become "a pillar of Israel's regional security architecture," being the only Muslim state with such deep and long-standing ties to the Jewish state (Khanin & Grinberg, 2025). In an effort to counter a common enemy-Iran-Jerusalem and Baku have effectively formed a tacit alliance, within which Israel not only supplies Azerbaijan with weapons, but also, according to media reports, receives strategically important opportunities to collect intelligence on the Iranian direction through Azerbaijani territory (Isaev, 2023).

### **5.1.2. Positive reaction in Azerbaijan and deepening partnership after the war**

In Azerbaijan itself, Israel's contribution to the 2020 victory was highly appreciated. Official Baku openly expressed gratitude to Israel for its military assistance in the conflict and the subsequent restoration of the liberated territories (Elmas, 2021). After the war, bilateral ties continued to develop rapidly: in 2021–2023, the parties intensified the exchange of visits and expanded the legal framework for cooperation. The Azerbaijani leadership describes relations with Israel as "strong, comprehensive, and multidimensional," emphasizing the mutual benefits of partnership in politics, security, trade, and technology (Elmas, 2021). An important step was the opening of the Azerbaijani embassy in Tel Aviv in 2023—almost thirty years after the establishment of diplomatic relations, Baku took this symbolically significant step, which indicates the final formation of the union at the institutional level (Coffey, 2023). In addition, in May 2023, Israeli President Isaac Herzog paid an official visit to Baku for the first time, which confirmed the highest level of trust between the two countries (Coffey, 2023). In Azerbaijan, strengthening ties with Israel is perceived positively not only by the authorities, but also by a significant part of society: against the backdrop of a chronic conflict with Armenia, Israel is seen as a reliable friend and a source of modern technology, and the absence of ideological divisions (due to the secular nature of the Azerbaijani state) contributes to a favorable attitude towards Israel among the population (Asgerli, 2025). Thus, the victory in Karabakh laid the foundation for an even closer rapprochement between Baku and Jerusalem in the following years.

### **5.2. Iran's Backlash-Accusations and Threats**

Tehran reacted extremely sensitively to Azerbaijan's military triumph and Israel's increased influence in the Caucasus. Iran, while officially supporting Azerbaijan's territorial integrity, was

de facto dissatisfied with the outcome of the war, primarily due to the strengthening of its ideological adversary's positions on Iran's northern borders (Mamedov, 2021). Iranian military and officials soon deployed harsh rhetoric: Baku was repeatedly accused of allowing a "Zionist presence" on Azerbaijani soil, claiming that Israel was allegedly creating military bases and intelligence infrastructure on Azerbaijani territory to operate against Iran (Coffey, 2023). Although no evidence was provided, such statements became an element of Tehran's propaganda discourse. Under the pretext of "the inadmissibility of the presence of Zionists on our borders," the Iranian army conducted several demonstration exercises near the Azerbaijani border. In particular, in October 2021, for the first time in decades, large-scale military maneuvers of the Iranian Army were organized on the banks of the Araz River with the transfer of armored vehicles and artillery, and in October 2022, even larger "Mighty Iran" exercises were held near the border of Nakhchivan (Mamedov, 2021; Coffey, 2023). These steps were accompanied by direct threats: Iranian officials stated that they would not tolerate changes in the geopolitical reality in the region to the detriment of their interests and hinted at their readiness to use force if Iran's "red lines" were violated. Tehran also increased information pressure - stories about a "Zionist conspiracy" in Baku became more frequent in the Iranian media, and the Azerbaijani authorities were accused of secularism and an alliance with the "enemies of Islam". These attacks led to an unprecedented cooling of relations: in January 2023, a security guard was killed in an armed attack on the Azerbaijani embassy in Tehran, prompting Baku to evacuate the diplomatic mission and further fueling anti-Iranian sentiment. Overall, Iran's negative reaction manifested itself on the military, diplomatic and ideological fronts, demonstrating Tehran's deep-seated anxiety in the face of Azerbaijani-Israeli rapprochement.

### **5.3. Constructivist view: Ideological Enemy and Ethnic Factor**

From a constructivist analysis perspective, Iran's confrontation with the Azerbaijani-Israeli alliance is largely conditioned by perceptions and ideological constructs. Since 1979, the Iranian regime has built its foreign policy identity on opposition to the "Zionist regime" of Israel, which Tehran demonizes as an existential enemy of the Islamic revolution. In this discourse, any strengthening of Israel is viewed through the prism of ideology: the presence of Israeli advisers, technology, or influence in neighboring Azerbaijan is automatically interpreted by the Iranian leadership as a threat to its own security and values (Isaev, 2023). Iranian leaders regularly appeal to the image of Israel as an alien, hostile element in a Muslim environment, which in their eyes justifies aggressive rhetoric and violent demonstrations (Khanin & Grinberg, 2025). An additional

dimension of the conflict is the ethnic factor. Ethnic Azerbaijanis make up about a quarter of Iran's population, living primarily in the northwest of the country (East and West Azerbaijan provinces) adjacent to the Republic of Azerbaijan. This community has fueled long-standing fears of a "fifth column" and territorial separatism in Tehran. The successes of the independent Azerbaijani state – especially military victories and economic development – have served as a catalyst for awakening national consciousness among Iranian-Azerbaijanis (Coffey, 2023). Many Iranian Azerbaijanis were known to openly support Baku during the fighting in 2020, with footage circulating on social media of residents of the Iranian city of Ardabil gathering on the banks of the Araz River to applaud the advance of the Azerbaijani army. Such scenes have heightened concerns among Iranian authorities. President Ilham Aliyev, for his part, has added new urgency to the issue by declaring in 2022 that Baku will protect the secular lifestyle of Azerbaijanis "all over the world, including in Iran." In doing so, Azerbaijan has effectively positioned itself as a patron of the Azerbaijani diaspora, posing an ideological challenge to Tehran. The result is a situation in which each side uses the image of the other as a "significant other" to strengthen domestic legitimacy and justify its own security policies. For Iran, the Israeli-Azerbaijani alliance is a fusion of external (Zionist) and internal (ethnic) threats that could undermine the territorial integrity and ideological foundations of the IRI (Mamedov, 2021; Asgerli, 2025). For secular Azerbaijan, Iran's sharply negative reaction confirms Baku's long-standing suspicion of the theocratic regime, which is perceived as a source of religious radicalism and revanchism. Constructivist analysis highlights these underlying perceptions: in the minds of the Iranian leadership, Azerbaijan, by cooperating with Israel, has become a Western "Trojan horse" on Iran's borders, while in the Azerbaijani national narrative, Iran is presented as an ideological opponent that impedes the just restoration of historical justice and regional security (Limor, 2023). Thus, threat discourses on both sides fuel mutual hostility, complicating the search for compromises and reinforcing the importance of the Israeli-Azerbaijani partnership as a factor in containing Iranian influence.

## CHAPTER 6. THE “RESISTANCE ECONOMY”: STRATEGIC REALIGNMENT AND ADAPTIVE SELF-RELIANCE

Following the reintroduction of U.S. sanctions in 2018, Iran has aimed to reduce its reliance on Western economies by putting into practice its concept of a “resistance economy.” This idea, first articulated by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, prioritizes economic independence, resilience to external challenges, and a long-term departure from the dollar-centric financial system (Wiktorowicz, 2024). The shift towards self-sufficiency has coincided with Iran’s strengthening partnerships with Russia and China—two nations that experience similar economic grievances and share a strategic opposition to U.S. global dominance. Notably, Iran’s strategic partnership agreement with China (established in 2021) pledged \$400 billion in investments over the course of 25 years, concentrating on areas such as infrastructure, energy, and transportation. However, the execution has been gradual and inconsistent, with Iran expressing dissatisfaction over the limited tangible outcomes from Beijing (Chivvis & Keating, 2022).

The resistance economy extended beyond just economic factors, incorporating geopolitical aspects too. Iran’s pivot toward the East aligned with its participation in groups such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), both of which provide Tehran with a symbolic role in a multipolar alternative to the U.S.-dominant global framework (China Observers, 2023).

Beginning in 2022, Tehran’s increasing collaboration with Moscow involved military-industrial dealings, including drone transactions and cybersecurity cooperation, although the main focus was on establishing a trade and investment framework that could withstand sanctions. Nevertheless, despite political proclamations of partnership, real-world challenges continued to exist. Trade activities with Russia stayed relatively limited, and disputes over competition in the market and the logistics of payments sometimes hindered further integration (Vatanka, 2023).

Although some experts believe that Iran’s shift towards the East provides a crucial strategic opportunity, others warn that heavy reliance on China and Russia could limit Iran’s independence in the long run. For example, Beijing is still working to maintain good relations with Gulf States, and Russia poses competition for Iran in the global oil marketplace. Therefore, while the resistance economy has allowed Tehran to endure sanctions, its long-term viability is still uncertain (Chivvis & Keating, 2022; Vatanka, 2023).

In conclusion, the resistance economy functions as both a strategy for coping and a means of countering hegemonic influence, designed to diminish U.S. dominance over Iran’s economy while facilitating the creation of a new, multipolar geopolitical framework. The ability of this model to

achieve genuine economic autonomy or merely substitute one kind of dependency for another is still uncertain—particularly considering the cautious and interest-driven approaches of China and Russia.

### **6.1. Economic Isolation and Adaptive Strategy**

The United States has faced challenges in addressing Iran's proxy forces without resorting to military action. Since 1984 and through six different administrations, the U.S. has imposed sanctions on Iran's wide-ranging network of militia proxies in the Middle East to curb Tehran's influence in the region. The Trump administration accelerated the implementation and range of economic penalties from 2017 to 2021. However, sanctions have never achieved complete success. In 2020, the State Department assessed that Iran provided Hezbollah with \$700 million each year. Historically, Tehran has also allocated around \$100 million annually to Palestinian organizations, such as Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. (Lane, 2023)

Hezbollah's funding, including its provisions and armaments, is sourced from the Islamic Republic of Iran," stated Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah in 2016. In 2018, the Treasury Department estimated that Tehran was providing Hezbollah with over \$700 million each year. In 2020, funding from Iran saw a reduction due to U.S. sanctions, falling oil prices, and the economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, as noted by Matthew Levitt of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

### **6.2. Shadow Financial Networks**

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In response to sanctions imposed by the U.S., Western nations, and the UN, the Iranian government has created an illegal global network of shell companies, banks, and exchange houses that carry out transactions on its behalf. This clandestine network has recently come under scrutiny from the Treasury Department, which has issued a new set of designations targeting those aiding in Iran's evasion of sanctions. A notable number of entities within Iran's now-sanctioned "shadow banking

network” are situated in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), recognized as one of the leading financial centers globally. The sanctioned entities are engaged in the sale of Iranian oil and petrochemicals, which funds weaponry and proxy groups.

In March 2023, the United States implemented economic sanctions against 39 companies connected to a shadow banking network that obscured financial transactions between sanctioned Iranian entities and their international customers, specifically for petrochemical products originating from Iran. In June 2024, the Treasury Department revealed sanctions targeting 50 individuals and businesses across Hong Kong, the UAE, and the Marshall Islands, stating that they were functioning as an extensive shadow banking network supporting Iran's military.

### **6.3. Domestic Backlash and Economic Hardship**

Data from households reveals that economic sanctions have significantly reduced both the quality and quantity of food consumption in Iran. Consequently, it is not surprising that the Islamic Republic has witnessed several waves of protests over the past decade (Kozhanov 2022; Rivetti and Saeidi 2023). The regime has managed to withstand these uprisings through intense repression, leading to a structurally more regressive state. While these protests, fueled by sanctions, might seem like chances for change, they have not succeeded in dislodging the incumbent regime. Clearly, state repression has been a vital factor; however, the deep divisions within the opposition movement have also impeded the development of a cohesive transition agenda. In fact, our findings indicate that economic sanctions triggered a rally-around-the-flag effect in support of the Islamic regime, not just among its adherents but also, at times, among opposition factions. This may elucidate why uprisings like the 2019–2020 “Bloody November,” which primarily stemmed from economic discontent, did not receive considerable backing from the so-called “political elites” and ultimately failed, despite resulting in around 1,500 fatalities.

### **6.3. Strengthening of the IRGC**

U.S. sanctions policies over the years have only empowered the IRGC: “Ironically, the U.S. sanctions and antagonism towards the IRGC compelled the Iranian regime to depend on and bolster the IRGC. The IRGC served as a crucial mechanism for Iran to obtain sensitive items that were otherwise restricted by sanctions ... Consequently, as Iran became poorer and more susceptible to economic pressure, the IRGC became more powerful.” This result shouldn't have surprised U.S. decision-makers. Comprehensive sanctions act as a form of economic warfare,



leading to an inevitable reliance on military forces within targeted nations to resist economic blockades and covert military actions against them. Only substantial entities, such as the government or the military, can guarantee the uninterrupted flow of goods across borders as trade becomes increasingly perilous due to extensive sanctions systems. (Bajoghli, 2024)

The IRGC established strong connections with military and security organizations in Cuba and Venezuela to circumvent U.S. sanctions. In each of these nations, the political and domestic environments have become increasingly militarized and security-focused as a reaction to facing years of extensive U.S. sanctions, and as a consequence, they have continued to intensify oppressive actions against their citizens.(Bajoghli, 2024)

### **6.5. Alliances with Sanctioned States**

The State Department estimated that between 2012 and 2020, Iran allocated over \$16 billion to support the Assad regime and its affiliated groups. Countries under sanctions often continue to trade, and those with anti-imperialist revolutionary movements, such as Iran, seek methods to circumvent what they view as U.S. coercion. For instance, Iran dispatched tankers filled with oil and diesel to Venezuela in 2020 and to Lebanon/Syria in 2021, directly breaching U.S. sanctions. (Lane, 2023).

As a result, economic sanctions have considerably influenced Iran's foreign policy approach, constraining its resources but not entirely eliminating its capability to assist allies and proxy groups in the region. In spite of substantial economic challenges and internal dissatisfaction, Tehran was able to adjust to the new circumstances by establishing covert banking systems and enhancing the economic influence of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Contrary to Western assumptions, the pressure from sanctions has bolstered the IRGC's position and facilitated the emergence of an anti-Western coalition of sanctioned states. Therefore, the strategy of economic isolation has not fulfilled its primary objective—diminishing Iran's regional engagement—but has notably altered its nature and methods of execution.

### **6.6. Theoretical Perspective**

From the standpoint of neoclassical realism, the sanctions imposed on Iran have considerably diminished the nation's material resources, which has directly curtailed its capacity to exert regional influence actively. This theoretical framework highlights the significance of a state's material capabilities and its ability to support proxy forces and allies. The empirical analysis

indicates that falling oil revenues and challenging access to international financial markets have compelled Tehran to adjust, adopting a more cautious and prudent approach. While Iran has continued to finance its allies, it has had to turn to shadow banking structures and novel financial schemes, illustrating how economic restrictions influence threat perceptions and balancing strategies against its primary adversaries—the United States, Israel, and the Gulf monarchies.

## **CHAPTER 7. GEOPOLITICAL CONSEQUENCES OF THE OCTOBER 7, 2023, HAMAS-ISRAEL WAR**

The events of October 7, 2023, when the Palestinian movement Hamas carried out an unprecedented attack on Israeli territory, became a turning point not only for the Palestinian Israeli conflict, but also for the entire regional architecture of the Middle East. The focus was once again on the Islamic Republic of Iran, a state that for many years was seen as the main patron of the “axis of resistance” and a strategic sponsor of such quasi-state actors as Hamas, Hezbollah and various Shiite groups in Iraq, Syria and Yemen. From the very beginning, Iran officially welcomed the actions of Hamas, positioning itself as the moral and political protector of the Palestinian people. However, the further development of the conflict, accompanied by powerful Israeli strikes on Gaza, Lebanon and Syria, massive casualties among Iran's allies and a sharp increase in the American military presence in the region, revealed a number of acute contradictions and weaknesses in Tehran's strategy. Despite years of funding for proxy organizations and ideological messaging, Iran has shown itself unable to effectively protect its interests and allies from an Israeli military apparatus that exhibits advanced intelligence, precise targeted killings, and technological dominance.

A further setback to Iran's influence in the region has been the loss of pivotal figures. In May 2024, President Ibrahim Raisi and Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, who play key roles in shaping foreign policy and collaborating with allies, tragically lost their lives in a plane crash. At the same time, Israel has begun a coordinated campaign to disrupt Hezbollah's high-ranking leadership, which could involve targeting its long-time leader, Hassan Nasrallah, as well as possible operations against Hamas leadership outside of Gaza.

Against this backdrop, Iran's international isolation has deepened. Despite the rhetoric of support from China and Russia, no state has openly sided with Tehran in the face of large-scale escalation. Moreover, new waves of sanctions and attacks on the economic channels of proxy groups' financing have exacerbated domestic crises, accompanied by surges in popular discontent and weakening of the regime's legitimacy.

## **7.1. Proxy Attrition and the Collapse of Deterrence**

The sudden and large-scale attack launched by Hamas against Israel on October 7, 2023, shook the status quo in the region and dealt a severe blow to Iran's proxy strategy. The ensuing Israel-Hamas war, as well as parallel clashes with Hezbollah on the Lebanese border, put unprecedented pressure on the network of non-state allies that Tehran had built up over the years. As a result, the alliance that Iran calls the "Axis of Resistance" suffered a series of crushing defeats, and Tehran was left without a key pillar of its regional power projection. This chapter analyzes how Iran's main proxy forces, Hamas and Hezbollah, have been weakened and how this has led to the collapse of Tehran's deterrence strategy

## **7.2. The Weakening of Hamas: The Defeat in Gaza**

Iran has strongly supported Hamas for many years in terms of weapons, training and finances; as a result, the group's military-terrorist infrastructure has been formed and strengthened. It is known that many Hamas commanders and fighters have been trained in special camps of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps. According to reports, hundreds of Hamas members even received specialized training in Iran a few weeks before the October 7 attack. Tehran officially denies its direct involvement in the October 2023 events, but experts emphasize that Hamas would not have been able to plan and carry out an attack of this scale without the training, weapons and hundreds of millions of dollars of assistance provided by Iran for many years.

In other words, Hamas occupies an important place in Iran's regional proxy network, and its October attack was indirectly related to Tehran's strategic calculations.

However, the war that began after October 7 has had serious consequences for Hamas. After months of intensive military operations by the Israeli army, Hamas's infrastructure and combat capabilities in Gaza have been sharply weakened. In October 2024, Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Galant stated that Iran can no longer use Hamas and Hezbollah as effective proxies as before. According to him, Hamas no longer operates as a single military network in Gaza, that is, it is organizationally paralyzed. This assessment is also confirmed by independent analyses: a study conducted in early 2025 notes that after the October events, along with the Iranian regime, its main allies Hezbollah and Hamas have also been "significantly weakened." Thus, Tehran's proxy front in Gaza has been almost neutralized, and Hamas's role in Iran's deterrence strategy has been minimized.

#### **7.4. Hezbollah's Weakening: Defeat on the Northern Front**

For decades, Lebanon's Hezbollah was considered one of the pillars of Iran's defense doctrine and an unofficial "protective buffer" against Israel, that is, the main means of deterrence. When the war with Hamas began in October 2023, Tehran hoped that Hezbollah's threat on the northern front would limit Israel's military maneuvers and force it to be cautious on two fronts. However, practice turned out to be different: from that time on, the Israeli army also showed determination on the Lebanese border and responded harshly to Hezbollah's offensive attempts. According to reports, starting on October 8, 2023, the Israeli Air Force began systematically bombing Hezbollah positions in Lebanon, followed by a series of high-precision strikes against the group's military-political leadership. As a result of these "decapitation" (destruction of the leadership) attacks, Hezbollah's power structure suffered a serious shake-up - many of the organization's leading commanders were neutralized, and the group was weakened to the point of being unable to fulfill its role as a "provocative shield." Hezbollah, considered the mainstay of Iran's defense doctrine, is in a virtually "completely destroyed" state and can no longer fully fulfill its former deterrent function against either Israel or the United States.

Specific reports of strikes on Hezbollah's commanding staff also show how weakened the group's position has become. In September 2024, an Israeli airstrike on a secret meeting of Hezbollah leaders in a southern Beirut neighborhood killed several senior commanders, including Ibrahim Aqil, head of the group's elite "Radwan" special forces; more than 30 people were reported killed in the attack.

The strike caused serious disarray and panic within Hezbollah, as the group's command infrastructure, which had been considered inviolable for years, was damaged to an unprecedented degree. At the same time, the Israeli military, through international mediators, was issuing warnings demanding that Hezbollah's frontline units withdraw from the border line.

Ultimately, the events on the Hezbollah front in 2023–2024 showed that even Iran's most powerful proxy on its northern flank had suffered heavy losses and been significantly reduced in effectiveness. For Iran, this meant that the most critical link in its deterrence strategy – the Lebanese front – became unreliable.

#### **7.5. The collapse of Tehran's deterrence strategy**

The setbacks on the Hamas and Hezbollah fronts have, in turn, weakened and effectively bankrupted Iran's overall deterrence strategy. Tehran has long sought to keep its adversary at bay

by simultaneously exerting pressure on Israel on several fronts (Palestine/HAMAS in the south, Lebanon/Hezbollah in the north, and other allies where possible). However, recent events have shown that this Iranian plan for “multi-front resistance” has not been able to become an effective reality. On the contrary, Israel has managed to neutralize each threat sequentially and in isolation over the course of a year – first neutralizing Hamas in Gaza, while simultaneously containing Hezbollah in Lebanon, and even not hesitating to strike Iranian targets when necessary. As Iran’s strategy of simultaneously creating a multi-pronged conflict has failed, Tehran has been deprived of the external layers of protection created by its “proxy” alliance and has become more isolated and vulnerable in the regional arena. In other words, with the weakening of Hamas and Hezbollah, the “protective buffer” that Iran relied on to protect its territory has also been significantly depleted.

This situation was also seen by Iran’s opponents as a collapse of Tehran’s deterrent power. Several observers note that the recent wars have revealed that the Iranian-led “Resistance Front” is in fact an exaggerated force – this alliance, which for years seemed formidable, has become a “house of cards”, and its sponsor Iran is a “house of cards”. However, experts also warn that it would be wrong to consider Iran’s proxy forces completely eliminated. Hezbollah and Hamas, although weakened, still have considerable local military power and influence in their respective regions, and even if their regional profile decreases, they can maintain their position against their opponents in the national-Sunni context. In other words, while these groups cannot be completely eliminated, the extent to which they can use force is questionable. Moreover, the current maximalist attempts by Israel and its allies to crush the Iranian alliance by relying on military force could backfire – some analysts believe that such harsh pressure could lead to a resurgence of the “resistance” ideology and its mass supporters. That is, the window of opportunity created by the collapse of the deterrence strategy could, in the long term, open the way for Iran’s supporters to mobilize in other ways.

The failure of proxy deterrence has also increased the risk of outright war in the region. Events in late 2024 demonstrate that this risk is real. For example, in September 2024, the Israeli military blew up thousands of Hezbollah communications devices in Lebanon as part of Operation Northern Arrows, killing dozens of fighters and wounding thousands; just two days later, on September 27, several of the group’s senior leaders, including Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, were killed in an Israeli airstrike. These events demonstrated that the conflict had now entered an intensive phase, not just indirectly through proxies, but directly targeting leadership and infrastructure targets. Against the backdrop of such bold steps by the Israeli forces, supported by the United States, the possibility of an escalation into a full-scale war between Iran and Israel began to be taken seriously. Indeed, the geography of the conflict expanded and began to

encompass deeper areas within Lebanon and Israel, and in the future it was assumed that Syria, Iraq, even Iran and other fronts would also directly enter the war. Thus, the collapse of proxy deterrence eliminated some of the previously existing "red lines" in the region and significantly lowered the barriers to a major power clash.

The situation presents Iran with a difficult choice. As its proxies weaken, Tehran must either accept its current losses and avoid escalating tensions or take more risky steps to restore its prestige and deterrence. The Iranian leadership may try to control the situation through diplomatic channels without engaging in direct military conflict—for example, Tehran’s efforts to pressure a ceasefire in Gaza to give Hezbollah a respite from regrouping. However, the collapse of its proxy “shield” encourages Iran to strengthen its strategic deterrence in a different direction. In particular, many analysts believe that the only effective deterrent left for Tehran may be to acquire nuclear weapons. In such a scenario, Iran would seek to quickly complete its work on nuclear weapons at the cost of “absorbing” the pain of direct military attacks. As a result, a nuclear-armed, but militarily and politically more isolated, economically weakened and paranoid Iran may emerge in the region. In conclusion, it can be noted that after the events of October 7, 2023, Iran’s regional power architecture has been severely tested. The network of proxy forces it has built over the years – especially Hamas and Hezbollah – has suffered heavy blows, and Tehran’s deterrence strategy has largely collapsed. As a result of Israel’s harsh and direct responses, the components of Iran’s “Axis of Resistance” have been dismantled one by one, and Tehran has been deprived of the tools it has long relied on to deter its adversaries. While this process has weakened Iran’s regional influence, it has not completely ended it – the proxy forces still exist and may adapt to operate with different strategies in the new circumstances. Thus, while the weakening of Iran's proxy forces and the collapse of the doctrine of deterrence have reshaped the balance of power in the region, how Iran and its allies respond to these changes in the future will be a key factor determining the course of regional security.

## **7.6. Future Scenarios: A Choice at a Strategic Crossroads for Iran**

The geopolitical reality that emerged after the events of October 2023 presents the Islamic Republic of Iran with a new strategic dilemma. Tehran, while experiencing the grave consequences of its regional activity to date, is forced to seek alternative ways to both maintain internal stability and restore its external deterrence. This section analyzes the main scenarios facing Iran: a policy of deterrence focused on nuclear weapons, a priority for internal consolidation, a reformatting of the axis of resistance, and the consequences of potential strategic miscalculations.

## FINDINGS

This study finds that Iran's foreign policy in the 21st century has been consistently shaped by the interaction of two principal forces: ideological identity and pragmatic adaptation. Rather than functioning purely as a rational actor pursuing strategic interests, or as a revolutionary power driven solely by dogma, Iran has exhibited a hybrid approach. On one hand, the Islamic Republic has continued to uphold a revolutionary foreign policy discourse grounded in Shi'a theology, anti-imperialism, and opposition to Israel and the United States. On the other hand, Iranian elites have frequently adjusted strategies in response to changing international constraints, sanctions, regional rivalries, and domestic political pressures. This duality reinforces the value of combining neoclassical realism and constructivism as complementary theoretical lenses.

Internally, the fragmentation of Iran's political structure—particularly the competing agendas of the Supreme Leader, the president, and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)—has constrained coherent long-term strategy. Neoclassical realism helps explain how this institutional disunity and elite competition distort Iran's ability to convert regional opportunities into sustained gains. Even during periods of diplomatic opening, such as under President Khatami or Rouhani, the enduring power of conservative elements and the IRGC often reversed or undermined those efforts.

These leadership cycles reflect Iran's pendulum swings between moderation and confrontation. The transition from Khatami's "Dialogue of Civilizations" to Ahmadinejad's defiant populism, and later to Rouhani's cautious engagement, shows that individual leadership and factional control strongly influence foreign policy orientation. Yet, despite these differences, Iran has remained ideologically rigid on certain core issues—particularly support for the Palestinian cause and hostility toward Israel—which continue to serve as instruments of regime legitimacy rather than strategic leverage.

Iran's use of proxy forces, including Hezbollah, the Houthis, and Shi'a militias in Iraq and Syria, has extended its influence across the region. However, these proxies have become both an asset and a liability. The 2020 assassination of Qassem Soleimani, the architect of Iran's proxy network, exposed the fragile personalization of this strategy. Proxy performance during recent conflicts, particularly the 2023 Gaza war, suggests that deterrence through proxies may be weakening under increasing Israeli military pressure and shifting regional alignments.

Economically, Iran's strategy of "resistance economy" has allowed it to weather prolonged sanctions through barter trade, Asian partnerships, and domestic substitution. Nevertheless, these



measures have failed to ensure sustainable growth, and economic hardship remains a major source of internal unrest. While pragmatism is evident in certain economic decisions, revolutionary ideology continues to shape public messaging and state narratives.

A critical finding of this research is Iran's strategic failure in the South Caucasus. During the Second Karabakh War in 2020, Iran's inability to counter the Azerbaijani–Israeli partnership underscored its declining influence near its own northern borders. Despite military exercises and hostile rhetoric, Tehran was unable to influence the outcome or post-war diplomacy, effectively sidelined in a region it historically sought to shape. This case demonstrates that Iran's rhetorical resistance often masks an absence of real leverage.

Lastly, the theoretical contribution of this thesis lies in demonstrating how neoclassical realism and constructivism, when applied in tandem, allow for a fuller understanding of Iranian foreign policy. Material pressures, elite perceptions, and institutional fragmentation intersect with identity-driven narratives to create a foreign policy that is neither coherent nor entirely irrational. Iran's regional behavior is best understood not as a linear strategy, but as a series of compensatory maneuvers shaped by vulnerability, ideology, and the persistent need to project strength in the face of systemic constraint.

## CONCLUSION

This dissertation has examined Iran's regional trajectory in the 21st century through the dual theoretical lenses of neoclassical realism and constructivism. It has argued that Tehran's foreign policy cannot be adequately understood through simplistic dichotomies of "revisionist" versus "status quo" power or "rational actor" versus "ideological rogue state." Rather, Iran behaves as a hybrid actor, balancing material constraints with identity-based imperatives.

Through in-depth case studies—from Iran's failed outreach under Khatami, to Ahmadinejad's radical assertiveness, to Rouhani's momentary *détente*, and Raisi's re-hardening—we see that foreign policy in Iran is often a reactive enterprise. Its successes, such as deep proxy penetration in Lebanon and Syria, have often been undercut by overextension, economic isolation, and domestic fragmentation. The assassination of Qassem Soleimani, the collapse of the JCPOA, and the October 2023 Gaza War are all moments that illustrate the fragility of Iran's regional posture. Crucially, Iran's inability to prevent the Israeli Azerbaijani strategic alliance during the Second Karabakh War demonstrates that its influence is not just under challenge in Arab-majority regions but also in the South Caucasus—an area historically within Iran's strategic neighborhood. Tehran's rhetorical protests and military exercises along the border failed to shift the outcome, highlighting a broader pattern of symbolic resistance masking strategic weakness.

In conclusion, the Islamic Republic's foreign policy has become increasingly defined by cycles of ideological ambition followed by strategic retreat. The dual frameworks applied in this thesis allow us to see how Iran's revolutionary self-conception continues to drive foreign engagement, even as its material capacity to influence outcomes steadily diminishes. Without internal reform or regional consensus-building, Iran's trajectory is likely to remain caught between isolated defiance and exhausted resistance.

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