Enemy of Our Making?
Navigating the Iran-US-EU Relationships from 1953 until 2023

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Abstract

The Islamic Republic of Iran is a country where a Shiite theocracy, a ruling body made by Shia Muslims ministers, has controlled the population since 1979. For the US, the state is a menace to the global order. Commentaries focus on the link between nuclear power and nuclear weapons. The EU has a more nuanced view of Iran, and its relationship has continuously evolved. Though the block prefers avoiding turning an entire state into a caricature of villainy, it has been critical of its human rights record and has called for improvements in this area. The paper analyses the history of modern Iran and whether and how US and EU's foreign policies impacted it. The author applied Neo-institutionalism, which underlines the role of national and international, formal and informal institutions, and their interplay, in shaping a nation's future. Results suggest that Washington has often been biased in its approach to Tehran, focusing on its geopolitical goals rather than seeking to comprehend the competitor's perspectives and needs. The Anglo-American coup in 1953 against the democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh and the instalment of an autocracy left a deep mistrust of the West. For many people, the events set the stage for the civil war in 1979. Outcomes imply that the Islamic Republic has squandered its citizens' resources and contributed to the region's destabilisation. Finally, findings show that the EU has eschewed military options and sought a strategic compromise between the parties to keep the Middle East into the diplomatic fold.

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1. Introduction

The Islamic Republic of Iran is a country in the Middle East ruled by a Shiite theocracy – a type of government based on Shia Islam and where Muslim intellectuals known as Ayatollahs have the highest authority (Kazemipur & Rezaei, 2003). For several decades, the United States of America (US) has considered it a rogue state because its rulers have frequently made anti-American statements and have been involved in what Washington describes as terrorist activities (Fisk, 1996). The European Union (EU) has generally approached the country more nuancedly (Parsi, 2006). Though it has been one of its largest trading partners, Brussels has never stopped being critical of human rights abuses and violations of international law (Cronberg, 2017). One crucial factor we should keep in mind to comprehend Iran's current positions vis-à-vis the West is that before 1953, the state was a constitutional monarchy pivoted by the duly elected Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh, whom the US and the United Kingdom (UK) destroyed for creating an absolute monarchy (Masoodnia & Khani, 2012). For most Iranians, the statesman was a beloved paternal figure; however, he was disliked in the West. The issue was twofold: after the 2nd World War, European and American resource-hungry heavy industries needed cheap petroleum (Shiri, Tanhaei, & Shiri, 2020), which the British monopoly of Iranian energy sources guaranteed, at least until 1951, when Mossadegh nationalised them. The second problem was that US President Dwight Eisenhower disliked the Iranian statesman's growing flirtation with the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), even if he approached Moscow motivated by business rather than ideology (Potter & Sick, 2004).

In 1953, the US and the UK took him down to instate the Shah (king) Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, a Western-friendly despot who was to remain in power for another twenty-six years before fleeing in January of 1979. History teaches us that the ruler designed and implemented reforms that concentrated wealth in the hands of the urban middle-upper classes but not the rural poor. They also enriched foreign companies and investors over local factories and entrepreneurs (Summitt, 2004). Lastly, they alienated Muslims who felt they did not adequately respect the country's Islamic heritage (Kinzer, 2010). Eventually, governance deficits fueled resentment, pushing Iranians to organise strikes, sit-ins and later violence. There were many avoidable mistakes. There was obvious Western interference. There was an increasing number of persons oblivious to the threat of Islamic fundamentalists. Furthermore, there was an uncontrolled flow of weapons into the cities and towns. In 1979, a civil war exploded, and though it was not rooted in religion, it expressed itself in religious symbols and values (Shorish, 1988). The rebellion replaced the Imperial State of Iran with the present-day Islamic Republic. Many in the Middle East expressed sympathy for the democratic aspirations of the Iranians and their fight against authoritarianism (Kinzer, 2007).

However, soon after, it became evident that only Ayatollahs (senior and highly praised religious leaders), Imams (clerics with deep knowledge of the Quran and who care for congregational prayers in a Mosque), and Mullahs (clerics trained in Muslim law and theology) would rule, often with an iron fist.

This article examines the evolution undergone by Iran from 1979 until (February) 2023, how the US and the EU navigated it and if their strategies have aided, hurt or been irrelevant to it. The manuscript does not offer definitive answers because research is an iterative process where new studies build on existing knowledge and generate new questions that can be explored in further endeavours. However, it unveils how collective power can bring about social eruptions with unpredictable consequences or gradual transformations of the body politic. Iran is relevant to global citizenship because while the country is highly centralised, it still has popular participation via elections, public debate, and vibrant grassroots activism.

2. Methods and Methodology

The author used Google Scholar (GS) to find articles, books and book chapters in English. Some search strings were (Iran AND EU AND US) OR (Iran AND E3 AND P5+1), (Iran AND sanctions AND United States) OR (Iran AND nuclear program), (Iran AND arms control) OR (Iran AND regional security) OR (Iran AND human rights) and (United States AND Europe AND Iran AND foreign policy) OR (Iran AND negotiation AND agreement). The author adopted content analysis (CA) as a research method. Though time-consuming, it facilitates the identification of recurring themes, patterns, and trends in the body of and between texts (Krippendorff, 2018). Moreover, thanks to it, he could identify influential actors and agendas within the EU, US, and Iranian contexts. CA also permitted the author to cross-reference data from various sources. This triangulation enhanced the validity and reliability of the findings.

3. Theoretical Framework

The author adopted Neo-institutionalism, a theoretical approach in the social sciences. The doctrine emerged as a response and refinement of classical institutionalism, which focused on studying formal institutions like governments, laws, and organizations. Neo-institutionalism broadens the scope to include informal institutions, norms, and beliefs as crucial factors in understanding social behaviour and related outcomes (Lounsbury & Zhao, 2013). There are three major branches: Rational Choice Institutionalism (RCI), Sociological Institutionalism (SI) and (the newest) Historical Institutionalism (HI). The first views institutions and states as the result of rational choices made by individuals or groups to set goals to maximise symbolic and material productivity. The second stresses

the value of culture, history, and norms in people's agency. The third emphasises how past events and decisions impact personal, relational and collective actions. Neo-institutionalism does not primarily address issues related to international relations. However, we can still use it as a toolkit to decode how the conflict between formal and informal historical legacies and the calculations of various stakeholders in Iran have made an unmade society and people's ideas.

The author was especially interested in Theda Skocpol (1979), an American sociologist famous for delineating revolutions' pull and push factors in France, Russia and China. The essential feature of her work involves the interactions that exist independently of individuals' awareness or intentions. Concerning popular revolts, she identifies three stages: the dissolution of the ancient regime, the peasantry's mobilization into a class-based uprising and the reconciliation of state power by a new elite. Her formulations can shed some light on the Islamic Revolution. There were many grievances towards the Shah in Iran, especially during the spike in inflation, stagnation and unemployment that befell the state in 1979 (Gasiorowski & Byrne, 2015). The crisis caused unrest, which the authorities met with repression and not dialogue, hence vanquishing their legitimacy in people's eyes (crisis of authority). Religious leaders, most notably Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and his followers, were central in uniting disparate groups under the banner of Islam (social and religious movements). The perception of the US and UK as inimical entities backing the House of Pahlavi fueled antimonarchic sentiments (state weakness and external factors). The clash between citizens and the state marked a significant evolution of the Iranian institutional settings (national transformation) (Gasiorowski, 1993). Skocpol would have argued that the revolutionaries took down the structures of domination. They comprise the state, which is paramount, but they also include other institutions and corporate entities with some measure of autonomous authority in the religious, judiciary or economic spheres. The record of Khomeini post-1979 is also instructive. The Ayatollah wanted to convey his message to Shia communities outside Iran (Bakhash, 2004). Because the project threatened the status quo in the Middle East, favouring Sunni Muslim nations, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein launched a full-scale invasion of Iran while moving to dismantle Shia institutions and social services networks in the region (Fisk, 2007). Saddam also mobilised Iraqis for a counter-revolution. Using Skocpol's formulations, we cannot fail to observe that women in Iran have a rich history of advocating for their rights. However, their situation worsened under the Islamic theocracy, which introduced mandatory veiling in government offices. Before the revolution, they had more freedoms, including the right to vote and work outside the home, and the veil was not obligatory in public.

The author also appreciated American sociologists DiMaggio and Powell (1983), who underscore how organizations and states often conform to norms and

practices to gain legitimacy and resources. The process can depend on public expectations (coercive isomorphism). It can be based on mimicking strategies deemed successful (mimetic isomorphism) or driven by pressure triggered by professionals (normative isomorphism). Furthermore, the writers assert that organisational structures often serve symbolic and ritualistic functions rather than purely practical ones.

We can adopt DiMaggio and Powell's arguments to study to expand our rationale beyond Skocpol. Iran was a constitutional monarchy from 1941 to 1953 and an absolute monarchy from 1953 to 1979 (coercive isomorphism). After the Islamic Revolution, people who disproved the secularism promoted by the House of Pahlavi established what, at first glance, can resemble the US: a republic with a president elected by the citizens, an active legislative branch, and a judiciary. However, a significant contrast emerges from the fact that Iran operates as an Islamic theocracy, where ultimate ideological and political authority rests with a single individual, the Ayatollah. This figure wields control over a system primarily led by clerics who exert influence over all primary functions of the state. Said differently, the Iranians gave life to a government inspired by Sharia, or more precisely, the Vilayat-e Faqih (Guardianship of the Faqih, or the Islamic Jurist) (normative isomorphism) (Bakhash, 1989). The President, Parliament (known as Majles), and the Assembly of Experts are chosen via direct elections, while the Ayatollah (Supreme Leader), the Guardian Council, and the Expediency Council are appointed by the clergy. The President serves as the head of the government and is responsible for day-to-day affairs but does not hold the position of head of state. The Supreme Leader wields the most influence in the country, serving as Iran's political and spiritual ruler. The presidential terms last four years, and presidents cannot have more than two consecutive terms. While the election process is generally transparent and fair, there have been disputes, such as in the 2009 elections (and the success of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad). However, all candidates are vetted by the Guardian Council, which frequently disqualifies most of them. The Islamic Consultative Assembly, consisting of 290 members, can legislate. Nevertheless, all bills passed by the Majles undergo scrutiny by the unelected Guardian Council to ensure they align with the Islamic Constitution.

The Guardian Council comprises 12 members, including six religious experts appointed directly by the Supreme Leader and six Islamic legal jurists nominated by the Chief of Justice (who is, in turn, appointed by the Supreme Leader). The Supreme Leader's office holds both direct and indirect control over the Guardian Council, which oversees elections, candidate vetting, and holds a veto over the Parliament. The Supreme Leader in Iran has a unique position. Unlike the President, there is no fixed term for this role. Since 1979, only two individuals have served as Supreme Leaders: Khomeini, who passed away in 1989, and Khamenei. The country's constitution specifies that the 88-member

Assembly of Experts is responsible for selecting the Supreme Leader. This council has the authority to elect, supervise and potentially remove the Supreme Leader. While its members are chosen directly by the Iranian people through elections, it is crucial to note that candidates for the Assembly are under the close and continuous watching of the Guardian Council. In cases where legal disputes arise between the elected Majles (Parliament) and the unelected Guardian Council, the 45-member Expediency Council steps in. This committee advises the Supreme Leader and holds the ultimate authority to resolve such disputes. All 45 members of the Expediency Council are appointed by the Supreme Leader, who also serves as the Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces. In essence, the 1979 Constitution of Iran ensures that the Supreme Leader and the clerical establishment maintain a firm grip on all branches of the state. Finally, there are different political groups in Iran. Nevertheless, the political class is broadly divided into principlists or conservatives and reformists. The first comprises the conservative bloc, and the second of individuals advocating reforms. The primary sources of division typically revolve around whether to actively or passively promote the spread of the Islamic Revolution and its political influence in the region, differing approaches to interpreting and applying Islam in society, and varying levels of government control in the economy.

From a Neo-institutional standpoint, we can notice that Khomeini was against exploiting nuclear energy and only in the 1980s, due to the Iraqi invasion, he reportedly approved the establishment of a nuclear program with the hope of providing his people with new energy sources (coercive isomorphism). His successor, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, maintained support for civilian plants but also expressed uneasiness about the potential misuse of modern technology (Milani, 2008). His concern was related to the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons (normative isomorphism). DiMaggio and Powell's thesis can clarify the motive behind the White House's withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and how the decision affected Iranian institutional decision-making. In 2018, US President Donald Trump unilaterally exited an international accord with Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi to limit Iran's nuclear program (Milani, 2018). On one side, Saudi Arabia and Israel lobbied Washington against Tehran (coercive isomorphism). On the other side, there was malcontent in US Congress among Republican lawmakers who feared the JCPOA did not go far enough in preventing their historical foe from acquiring weapons of mass destruction (WMD) (normative isomorphism) (Aggestam & Hyde-Price, 2019). What is clear is that the rebuttal and the lack of substitutes for the JCPOA deepened the divide between the West and the East (Parsi, 2020) and strained relations between the US and the European Union (EU).

To make matters worse, Washington started issuing more sanctions amid stalled diplomacy. The punitive measures blocked Iranian entities' assets abroad

and restricted other companies from doing business with them. The goal was regime change. However, DiMaggio and Powel would have been sceptical about the plan. Sanctions can hurt Iran, but they can hardly take down the government (coercive isomorphism) because they do not address the institutional factors that sustain it. Even if they could do so, there is no guarantee that the new regime would be more liberal and secular, as this would also depend on the alternative structures and norms underpinning such a rearrangement. Most Iranians are not necessarily against the West. Still, they conceive Iranian nation-building and institution-building as reflecting their views of society (normative isomorphism). Furthermore, one of the most common misconceptions about sanctions is that their relief is simply a reward for the targeted government, as if the millions of people who endure the crippling effects of economic war do not benefit when they cease. Ordinary citizens bear the heaviest burden and reap the most benefits. Opposing relief due to concerns about assisting oppressive rulers is fundamentally mistaken. History has shown that when they face sanctions, they often respond by strengthening their control and increasing repression. The Iranian situation is a prime example, where an authoritarian leader can solidify their hold on power while their population suffers. Sender states should not appraise sanctions relief as extending a hand to dictators but rather as offering aid to those who have endured life under their yoke.

We can borrow DiMaggio and Powel's concepts to document the relationship between Iran and Israel. The countries had diplomatic relations in the areas of defence and intelligence until 1979; nevertheless, their alliance was not always smooth, as the Shah often complained about Jewish immigration into Palestine (Beck, 2020). After 1979, they became bitter enemies (institutional shift), with one presenting itself as a leader of Shia Islam and the other as the defender of Judaism (coercive isomorphism). Since the 1990s, Tehran has accused Tel Aviv of bankrolling the Mujahedin-e Khalq (MeK) (Bahgat, 2003), an Iranian political-militant cell calling for the removal of the Shiite theocracy and allegedly behind the murder of former Iranian President Mohammad-Ali Rajai. The US designated MeK as a foreign terrorist organisation (FTO) in 1997 but delisted it in 2012. Question of International law aside, Iran viewed it as a diplomatic insult.

Furthermore, it should not take too giant a leap of imagination to see how delisting MeK signalled to Tehran that Washington favoured its geopolitical goals over peace (international dynamics). Israel viewed Iran's anti-Western institutional outlook with deep suspicion and concern. It also responded to 1979 by adopting a policy of containment and, at times, covertly undermining Iran's regional influence. DiMaggio and Powell's schemata are also valid for investigating Iran's reaction to the Arab Spring. Triggered in the 2010s by the self-immolation of Tunisian street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi, the once-in-a-generation youth protest movement covered the Middle East, ousting strongmen

like Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, Tunisian President Zine al-Abidine and President Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh. The wave of uprisings across the Middle East presented a significant institutional challenge to the existing order (Dabashi, 2012). As the Arab Spring unfolded, Iran and Syria faced pressure to respond to the rapidly transforming environment in the region, characterized by requests for democracy, political reforms, and accountability. Under President Bashar al-Assad, Syria attacked demonstrators, thus attempting to maintain its institutional structure (coercive isomorphism). On the other hand, Iran initially favoured some uprisings in the Arab world, especially in countries like Tunisia and Egypt, aligning itself with the demand for reform (mimetic isomorphism). However, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad later assisted Syrian President Bashar al-Assadin in breaking riots in Syria because it was an ally and Syrian elites belonged to the Alawite Sect, an offshoot of Shia Islam. Moreover, Iran needed a land bridge to reach Hezbollah in Lebanon (regional alliances) (Ahmadian & Mohseni, 2019).

4. Results

The US made too many blunders in Iran before and after 1979. It has never been fully conscious of Iranian institutional logic and countered Iranian domestic and foreign policies with harsh rhetoric and unilateralism. If such an approach has been meant to mollify its adversary, history teaches us that the method cannot function. At best, it provides short-term gains, such as reducing the Islamic Republic's international reputation and economic well-being. At worst, it does the opposite of what it is supposed to do. Namely, it institutionalises authoritarianism and xenophobic sentiment. To comprehend the fallacy of the American strategy, we can engage in an exercise of reverse thinking a la Chomsky. Suppose Iran organised a coup against a democratically elected policymaker in the US in an attempt to establish a Muslim autocracy; what would the response of the White House be? Washington's wrongdoings do not justify Iran's numerous crimes but give them context. The EU has sought to achieve its objectives in the Middle East less confrontationally than Washington. Engagement with Iran grew under President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, and with Mohammad Khatami, it solidified even more. There was a downturn with Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and his provocative style, but contrary to most expectations, the EU did not avoid diplomacy, even when it accepted the proposal of the US to pursue a regime of bilateral sanctions. The coming of President Hassan Rouhani and his desire for dialogue created expectations that the Iran-EU partnership could be resumed, and that Iran-US antagonism could be peacefully solved. The signing of the JCPOA by Iran and the P5+1 symbolised this new ray of hope. Unfortunately, the US, one of the signatories, decided to pull out, altering Tehran's security and foreign policies. From there on, suspicion of the West probably outweighed faith in its

good intentions. In 2022, the tragic death of the Kurdish-Iranian woman Mahsa Amini ignited mass protests in the Islamic Republic. It is a unique event not because the participants spoke truth to power, which is not unheard of, nor because they are women, but because the actors are persons from all walks of life. As ever, in situations like this, media prove indispensable in capturing the call to reforms. However, it is doubtful whether the Iranians can overcome the hegemony of the Ayatollah. Nor is it known if any proposed regulation by the Shiite theocracy could satisfy their hunger for progress. What is evident is that society has changed dramatically since 1979, but the philosophy of the tight-knit fraternity of Muslim experts has not. One possible future for Iran is to carve out a more liberal political and religious arena. This would involve the gradual strengthening of civil society, the rule of law, and the promotion of human rights, which could permit more competitive elections, greater press freedom, and more independent parties. Then again, Iran could continue toward despotism, with authorities retaining power and limiting political dissent, media agencies, and civil society. This could cause greater top-down control of the public sphere, increased isolation from the international community, and, imaginably, even more public suffering. Another scenario is instability, either internally or externally. Internally, it could involve widespread unrest, as seen in 2009 and 2023, taking the form of half-civil war and half-ceasefires, which have happened in Lebanon for many years. Externally, it could mean a clash with the US, Saudi Arabia or Israel. Iranians can teach us several lessons about global citizenry. They have shown remarkable resilience, perseverance, and a deep commitment to their nation. Despite restrictions on political speech and Assembly, they have never abandoned grassroots activism and civic engagement. Looking at the youth and the notoriety of reformist politicians, we should still be optimistic about the prospects for democracy. Nonetheless, the latter must be tied to the institutions of Iran to achieve substantive and enduring change. Moreover, Iranians must not forget pro-poor strategies. The wealthier people are, the less they deal with the realities of life on the bottom, and the more they are excited about success, the less they want to worry about someone's failure. This is wrong and must be avoided.

5. Discussion

Before 1953, Iran looked at the US positively and wished it could attenuate British dominium over the Iranian petroleum industry. The Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC), later the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC), was one of the first foreign companies to invest in the local oil reserves. Iran granted APOC a concession in 1901, and by the 1920s, the company had a monopoly over production, refining, and transportation. Whereas it generated profits for the UK, it caused underdevelopment in Iran, forcing the latter to renegotiate the concession terms (Torbat, 2020). London rejected the demands and threatened to cut off

exports. However, in a showdown of nationalism, Prime Minister Mohammed Mosaddegh nationalised the whole oil industry in 1951. The UK then sanctioned Iran and organised a boycott through a coalition of Western countries. In the beginning, the US praised Mossadegh's sovereignty decision. Nevertheless, as the confrontation between Tehran and London intensified, it began to worry about the Iranian administration's ability to manage an oil-less economy and that a downturn would push Mossadegh to seek help in the USSR (Gasiorowski, 2019). In 1952, London convinced Washington and Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (back then, he was not a forceful ruler) to oust Mossadegh and nominate royalist General Fazlollah Zahedi as the Prime Minister. It also persuaded them to spread propaganda and fake news to swing citizens' opinions, which the relatively open free press made easy (Gasiorowski, 2013).

In 1953, the coup-makers destroyed the Iranian parliamentary system and installed the Shah, who, soon thereafter, purged Mossadegh and his ministers from the executive (Balaghi, 2013). Therefore, the shift from a constitutional into an absolute monarchy was complete. Under Reza, Iran became a pillar of American security architecture in the Middle East. In 1959, the country inaugurated the Tehran Nuclear Research Center (TNRC) at the University of Tehran; in 1967, it opened the first nuclear research reactor, and in 1968, it signed the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) (Quester, 1977). In 1963, it witnessed the White Revolution or the Shah and People Revolution, a series of sweeping social and economic impulses aimed at modernising the country, from land reform and the expansion of education and healthcare to the enfranchisement of women. While some described it as a positive step, many others denounced it as a missed opportunity or a tentative to deflect attention from the despotic nature of the House of Pahlavi (Cabi, 2020). Apropos, the Shah was behind the Intelligence and Security Organization of the Country (SAVAK), which notoriously tortured political prisoners and human rights activists. In 1970, Iran ratified the NPT (Gohardani & Tizro, 2019), and in 1974, it entered into a contract with Germany to build the Bushehr Nuclear Power Plant (BNPP) (from 1974 to 1987, Iraq twice bombed it). In 1974, Iran and Egypt set the basis for the Middle East Nuclear Weapon Free Zone (MENWFZ), an accord boosting nuclear non-proliferation. In the 1970s, the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) decision to implement oil embargoes to solve the Arab-Israeli animosity (that would cause the Yom Kippur War in 1973), together with a global market flooded by cheap Saudi Arabian petroleum, devastated Iran's revenues, forcing the Shah to cut social spending and pro-poor programs (Cooper, 2008).

In 1979, the Mullahs and the Imams, Marxist thinkers and other anti-royalist factions toppled the Shah and founded the Islamic Republic of Iran (Namazi, 2019). The novel regime was a unique fusion of religion and politics, with Islam serving as both a source of legitimacy and a background for

governance. Although the revolutionaries contemplated multiparty governance, they ultimately set up a regime based on the Wilayat Al-Faqih (Rule of the Jurist), where the highest-ranking Shia cleric is entrusted with almost total authority to guide the state (Saikal, 1983). At the culmination of the civil war, that person was Ruhollah Khomeini. The international reaction to the civil war was mixed. Several Muslim nations with Shia majorities or significant Shia populations initially liked it. However, over time, they became attentive to fundamentalist zeal and the dangers it posed to the Middle East. Many European countries, like France under President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, were lukewarm until Tehran embraced anti-Western and anti-Israel/Zionism rhetoric (Krais, 2022).

For the US, the triumph of the 'sacred' over the 'secular' was a frightening turning point. The disarray worsened when Iranian students stormed the American embassy in Tehran and took diplomats and citizens hostage. They did so to force the White House into bringing back Reza to Iran and have him stand trial. In parallel, the group wanted Washington to apologise for interfering with Iran's affairs (Seliktar, 2021). In 1981, Abolhassan Bani-Sadr, the first President of the Islamic Republic and a member of the reformists, accused Khomeini of having forgotten the principles of inclusion, equality and emancipation he swore to uphold before 1979 (Irish & Cabrera, 2019). The Majlis impeached and removed him from office (in absentia). Bani-Sadr, who fled abroad a few days before his removal, would then receive asylum in France and continued to be a vocal critic of what he called a pseudo-dictatorship and an enthusiast of Islamic democracy. The Khomeini-Bani-Sadr rivalry is emblematic of Iran's broader divisions that continue to this day.

In 1981, Mohammad-Ali Rajai became President after serving as a Prime Minister under Bani-Sadr. His tenure was short-lived because he died in 1981, along with Prime Minister Mohammad Javad Bahonar, in a bombing presumably by the Mujahedin-e-Khalq (MeK) or the People's Mujaheddin of Iran (PMOI), a Marxist-Islamist cell born in the 1960s to fight the Shah, and, after the downfall of Bani-Sadr, to oppose the republican government (Farzaneh, 2021). In 1997, Washington designated MeK as a terrorist organisation, citing deadly ambushes against Iranian and American citizens. In 2012, the White House delisted it, arguing that MeK accepted responsibility for past transgression and closed Camp Ashraf, its historic paramilitary base. In 2017, US National Security Advisor John Bolton spoke at a MeK annual conference in Paris, calling for regime change in Iran.

After the murder of Rajai, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei temporarily filled the position of President for two terms (1981 and 1985) until 1989, when he replaced Khomeini as a Supreme Leader. At that time, he selected Mir Hossein Mousavi as Prime Minister because of the insistence of Khomeini himself. As a Head of State, Khamenei has been a cautious decision-maker who struggled for primacy with

President Ayatollah Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, a member of Khomeini's inner cycle and the alleged maker of Khamenei's career. Putatively, Rafsanjani coalesced support for his protegee amidst the intense turmoil that beset the country after the ouster of the Shah (Siavoshi, 1992). Khamenei was nominated Ayatollah the same year Rafsanjani assumed the presidency, echoing via their friendship-cum-antagonism the Khomeini-Banisadr strife and divine sovereignty vs. secular power (Navabakhsh, Motaghi, & Jamshidi, 2022). The US has been ambivalent towards Khamenei, holding him a reformist but also responsible for incidents in the Middle East, including the 2019 raids on the Saudi oil fields of Abqaiq and Khurais and the Hezbollah 2020 missile strike on the US Embassy in the Iraqi Green Zone (Adebahr, 2017).

From 1980 to 1988, Iraq was at war with Iran, presumably to halt the spreading of Khomeini's fundamentalist ideology to the Persian Gulf States. Albeit rarely acknowledged in mainstream media, the US facilitated the Iraqi military buildup via the sale of dual-use technology (chemical and biological precursors). With the abduction of embassy personnel in the not-so-distant past and fearing a disruption in energy supply, the White House thought that collaborating with Iraqi President Saddam Hussein (conceived as a bulwark against Shiite extremism) would have brought Teheran to the negotiation table and guaranteed unrestricted access to its petroleum (Blight, Banai, Byrne, & Tirman, 2012). In 1983, US Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld met with Saddam to define the terms and conditions of engagement. Sadly, in 1988, Saddam gassed the Kurdish village of Halabja in the Iraqi northern region bordering Iran, killing thousands of innocent men, women and children. During the Iran-Iraq War, the Kurds sought Iranian support for their insurgency. The Arab Socialist Baath regime, which dominated Iraq, responded by destroying Kurdish villages in strategic zones, and resorting to ethnic cleansing. Consequently, US Senator Claiborne Pell tabled a resolution against Saddam. President George Bush (Senior) vetoed it.

In the 1990s, Iran partnered with Russia to finish, expand and fuel the BNPP (whose construction would stall again in 2018 as Moscow honoured US sanctions concerning Tehran). Tehran also assisted various Shiite or pro-Shia guerrilla factions in the Middle East: Lebanese Hezbollah, the Palestinian Hamas, and the Yemeni Houthi (Alcaro, 2018). In 1995, the US and the EU pressured Iran not to manufacture nuclear weapons and reduce aid to foreign militia. They envisioned restrictions on trade, investment and transactions between the US, the EU and Iran and a ban on exporting certain goods and services to the Islamic Republic. In 1997, Mohammed Khatami, another reformist, succeeded Rafsanjani. The new incumbent put forward a humanist interpretation of Islam and, through his so-called 'dialogue of civilisations', thought to ameliorate his country's international reputation while fostering tolerance between Muslims and

Christians (Mirbagheri, 2007). However, his tenure was battered by clashes with principlists Khamenei and Mohammad Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi (the founder of the ultra-orthodox Haghani Circle), who desired to stymie his agenda. Khatami's closeness to Shia communities in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen caused friction with Sunni-dominated Saudi Arabia and Israel, making it hard for him to form new coalitions. In the 1990s and early 2000s, there were efforts to engage in diplomatic dialogue and promote a more constructive relationship between the EU and Iran. Brussels played a crucial role in the negotiations surrounding the Iran-Iraq War and sought to address concerns over Iran's nuclear ambitions through diplomacy.

In 2002, an Iranian émigré opposition cell, the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), the political wing of the MeK/PMOI, accused Tehran of having built a uranium enrichment site at Natanz and a heavy water plant at Arak (Vinocur & Dahl, 2013). In 2010 and 2013, it implicated the country in having undisclosed nuclear facilities without specifying what activity occurred there (Alexander, 2010). In 2003, confronted with the increasingly volatile situation in the Middle East, the EU and Iran signed a Trade Cooperation Agreement to strengthen economic ties. However, it was never fully implemented due to tensions and concerns over Iran's nuclear program. Kaussler (2008) writes that one might argue that the EU's application of soft power when engaging with other nations is a sign of weakness rather than strength. It could also be assumed that due to its proximity, dependence on Middle Eastern energy resources, and deeply interconnected history, the EU's future is more closely intertwined with the Middle East than that of the US. While these realities certainly play a pivotal role in shaping foreign policy decisions, they do not inherently undermine the effectiveness and long-term viability of the European strategy. In essence, it appears that, instead of employing coercive tactics, the EU influences the behaviour of other countries and secures concessions by offering the incentive of contractual agreements or the potential for membership. For nations like Iran, dealing with the administrative processes in Brussels might be challenging, but it is still preferable to not being able to engage with the EU. Membership and contractual relations with the EU are such compelling incentives that countries are willing to make significant changes to their economic, judicial, legal, and political systems just to gain entry or enter into such agreements.

In 2005, principlist Mahmoud Ahmadinejad obtained the presidential office, where he remained for almost a decade. The 'maverick' policymaker campaigned on a platform of social justice, economic equality, and a return to Islamic values, appealing to Iran's poorer and other disenfranchised segments of the population. Nevertheless, allegations of irregularities marred his victory, with observers disputing the outcomes and insisting that Rafsanjani, running for a third time, was the actual number one (at least in the runoff) (Fathollah-Nejad, 2021). It seemed that Khamenei's son, Mojtaba, manipulated the elections to ensure the

outcome of the victory of Ahmadinejad. Throughout the campaign, Rafsanjani faced harsh attacks, and with the support of the military and security forces, including the Basij militia and the Islamic Revolution Guard Corps, Ahmadinejad secured the presidency. Following the elections, Mehdi Karoubi, the former Speaker of the Majles and a presidential candidate, publicly addressed Khamenei with concerns about his son's interference. In protest, Karoubi resigned from the Expediency Council. Rafsanjani also raised objections and expressed his disappointment with the Guardian Council, which is expected to be impartial. Four years later, many in Teharn speculated that Ayatollah Ali Khamenei ensured that Ahmadinejad defeated Mir Hossein Mousavi in the new round of elections (Ansari, 2017). However, the contentious victory caused the Green Movement, a series of large-scale marches embodying people's frustrated democratic aspirations (Dabashi, 2017). Security forces were deployed to the cities, and people had to endure tear gas, batons, and live ammunition. The MeK tried to capitalize on the crisis but, unsurprisingly, did not weaken the hold on power of the dyad Khamenei-Ahmadinejad. Perhaps, more importantly, the demonstrators deplored Washing for having delisted MeK because they knew it gave the authorities an excuse and, more dangerously, a motivation to quell dissent.

In 2013, reformist Hassan Rouhani became the seventh President of the Islamic Republic, defeating Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf (Fathollah-Nejad, 2021). Determined to give his nation a better image abroad, he engaged with the West. Furthermore, he countered terrorist groups in the Middle East. In 2103, ISIS's chief Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced the merger of his organisation, which was then known as the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), with the Syrian jihadist group Jabhat al-Nusra, an affiliate of al-Qaeda. However, the leader of Jabhat al-Nusra, Abu Mohammad al-Julani, rejected the offer and pledged allegiance to the central leadership of al-Qaeda instead. After the botched attempt, ISIS began encroaching on Syria by taking over territory, fighting against national forces and exploiting the chaos of the civil war. In 2013, Iran began to deliver military and logistical aid to its regional allies, from government soldiers to militias. Iran's elite Quds Force, a special unit of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), trained and advised most of them (Esfandiary & Tabatabai, 2015).

In 2015, Iran, the EU and the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) five permanent members, namely China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the US, collectively known as the P5+1, signed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), with which Rouhani agreed to open nuclear facilities to international scrutiny for a reduction of sanctions (Mousavian & Mousavian, 2018). In 2018, Washington reneged on JCPOA and reintroduced punitive measures (to extend them in 2019 and 2020). The pullout violated international law because the UN Security Council Resolution 2231 authorised it. The scraping also vanquished any dreams inside Iran that its ideological conflict with the West

could be solved in a win-win situation. It also made Rouhani feel that the real problem with his country was not its theocratic system, but that Iran was a powerful state in the Middle East, and that fact disturbed Washington (Batmanghelidj & Rouhi, 2021). It is also worth remembering that some EU policymakers and US Congress members complained about the destructive effects of economic warfare on the targeted populations and condemned these policies for damaging democracy and the failure to achieve US goals. Their criticism reflected a growing awareness of the moral bankruptcy of economic warfare as a policy and their recognition that Washington could not show solidarity with the people living under authoritarian regimes by impoverishing them.

In 2020, a US drone killed the commander of Iran's Quds Force, Qasem Soleimani, along with Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, deputy commander of Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMFs) (also known as the People's Mobilization Committee or PMC and the Popular Mobilization Units or PMU) and leader of the Iraqi militia Hezbollah. The event escalated tensions between Washington and Tehran, with both sides engaging in retaliatory blitzes. One could reasonably assume that most experts knowledgeable about US military plans in the Middle East and the significant role General Soleimani had in coordinating Iranian proxies would have deemed him a prime target for targeted killing. Similarly, it is safe to say that most experts would not have anticipated his death occurring on Iraqi territory, especially while he was a guest of the Iraqi government. Moreover, the strike could be against US obligations under Article 6 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). However, since 1995, the White House has reiterated that the document does not protect persons outside the territory of a state party or who are not subject to their sovereignty (Ferro, 2021).

In 2021, principlist cleric Ebrahim Raisi was inaugurated as President of Iran. Like Khamenei, he has consistently preferred the sacred over the secular, the Church over the state (Ganji, 2013). Raisi took a hardline stance regarding Iran's nuclear energy, insisting that the country will not negotiate on its right to enrich uranium. This put him at odds with the US and EU, who have wanted to limit his nuclear adventurism. Besides, the West accused him of participating in the 1988 massacre of political prisoners. The number of those who died is still unknown, but it is estimated to be in the thousands. Some were due to being released, and scholars say, deciding which people were to be spared or eliminated was arbitrary (Segal, 1988). Raisi was the youngest of four members named to the so-called Death Committee for Tehran after Khomeini issued a fatwa (legal ruling) against thousands of opponents of the Islamic Republic at the end of the eight-year war with Iraq. The Ayatollah sanctioned the executions, which occurred while Mir-Hussein Mousavi held the position of Prime Minister. Mousavi, a staunch supporter of the Mullahs, initially served as the Islamic Republic's Foreign Minister and later assumed the role of Prime Minister from October 1981 to

August 1989. Compellingly, he argued that he had no clue what happened inside the detention centres, perhaps to defend his image of a reformer.

In 2022, the Gasht-e Ershad (Guidance Patrol or Morality Police), a unit of the Iranian police established by former hardline President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005, arrested and detained the 22-year-old Kurdish Iranian woman Mahsa Amini for improperly wearing her hijab. She died three days later while still in custody. Iranian policymakers initially denied that Amini had been mistreated but later acknowledged that officers beat her but stressed that there was no link between bodily harm and her death. In the days and weeks that followed, and after the news of the tragedy spread online, anti-government upheavals took place in Tehran and other cities like Isfahan and Shiraz (Ghomi, 2022). The US and EU sanctioned Iran. However, in contrast to Washington, Brussels did not make them broad nor open-ended or with an extraterritorial nature but targeted and under regular review by member states and only binding for European individuals and agencies. Since 2022, the international narrative has intensified the portrayal of the Islamic Republic as a rogue state.

6. Conclusions

The article demonstrates that the US has dealt with Iran in a very confrontational and unilateral way. Expressly, the White House has never accepted the existence of the Islamic Republic and continuously intervened in its domestic affairs out of sheer panic or geopolitical calculations. Examples are many and rather poignant, from the illegal overthrowing of Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh in 1953 to the withdrawal of JCPOA in 2018 and the assassination of General Qasem Soleimani in 2020. The last one was a terrible fax pau because the officer was a national celebrity second only to Khamenei. The killing made him a martyr. Because the danger posited by Iran to the world relates to nuclear weapons, creating a nuclear-free zone in the Middle East (MENWFZ) would prevent it, but, somewhat ironically, Washington had undermined the project since 1974 when Iran and Egypt proposed it. EU has always maintained a strategic attitude towards the Islamic Republic. However, it has never been silent on human rights violations. Conscious of the value of a rule-based global order, it has adopted restrictive measures, from asset freeze to travel ban against Iranian individuals and (public and private) entities guilty of transgressions, while showing solidarity with the people who oppose the theocratic regime. The EU is not without fault. The current stance of the US over MENWFZ is to guarantee Israel's exclusive possession of nuclear capabilities in the Middle East. This position is effectively endorsed by the EU, especially those European nations that knowingly supply Israel with weapons capable of carrying nuclear payloads and even provide financial support. Since 2023, the Gulf Sunni States have been showing signs of improving their relations with Iran, which has

not been well-received by Washington and Brussels. Notably, these countries are unlikely to be overly concerned about Iran's internal repression, as they have a history of autocratic rule. The EU could mediate talks via the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the Arab League, or the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). Above all, it must not put a range of very diverse actors into homogenous 'enemy' and 'friend' camps, as Lieven rightly noticed (2021). US attacks have severely harmed the Iranian society, incidentally, causing enormous suffering. However, that has been the goal since the Shah was deposed. For the EU, it should be a different matter. Regrettably, the author believes that because of the Russo-Ukrainian War, Brussels will lean more towards the maximalist strategies of Washington.

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