

# An Analysis of Obstacles to Peace Between Iran and Israel

2019

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AN ANALYSIS OF OBSTACLES TO PEACE BETWEEN IRAN AND ISRAEL

by

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A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors in the Major  
Program in Political Science in the College of Sciences  
and in the Burnett Honors College  
at the University of Central Florida  
Orlando, Florida

Summer Term 2019

Thesis Chair: Daniel Marien, Ph.D.

## **Abstract**

The history of confrontation and cooperation between Iran and Israel is considered a volatile sequence. With the transformative impact of the 1979 Iranian Revolution on Iranian leadership and ideology, as well as Israel's metamorphosis from a newly independent state to a regional rival, there is much to unpack in this relationship. From regime changes to nationalistic awakenings, Iran and Israel's conflict is comprised of infinite layers brimming with historical and political implications. For the past 70 years, Iran and Israel's diplomatic relationship has encountered numerous shifts, thus forming an axis of hostility, regional contention, and damaging rhetoric. This study analyzes changes in the Iranian-Israeli dynamic through the lenses of foundational ideologies backing both countries, regional rivalries and vulnerabilities, and finally, leadership choices and personalities. The research at hand holds political significance, as both states exhibit intense animosities incomparable to previous conflicts in the Middle East. As Iran and Israel lash out against one another, the international community has eyed this conflict as one of the largest hindrances to peace in the Middle East. Therefore, this study is concerned with analyzing failures and obstacles in this notoriously ambiguous duo.

## **Acknowledgments**

First and foremost, thank you to my parents for their unconditional motivation, no matter what. I appreciate every ounce of it.

I would like to thank my thesis chair, Dr. Daniel Marien, for his continuous support every step of the way. My thesis would not be possible without your advice and wisdom.

Thank you to both Dr. Marien and Dr. Bruce Farcau for serving on my thesis committee and providing me with the best suggestions and ideas that allowed me to conduct this project to the best of my abilities.

Finally, thank you to the handful of loving friends that have provided me plenty of comic relief and late-night chats to keep me going as I embarked on this journey. Your efforts have not gone unnoticed and I appreciate you with all that I have. My experience would not have been the same without all of you.

...

“Life has everything in store for you...There is nothing that you, with your extraordinary looks, will not be able to do.” – The Picture of Dorian Gray

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

### **Hypothesis**

While the conflict between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Israel is far from ignored, further studies regarding the factors behind such animosity is one stone left unturned. Although both states share a unique, enigmatic relationship that transitioned from peaceful to hostile seemingly overnight, it is possible to understand what exactly caused this diplomatic alliance to sour. Using a comparative, qualitative methodology and literature review, I explore the various perspectives to pinpoint the precursory factors leading to such disdain.

This study focuses on the catalysts behind such a drastic change in foreign policy between Iran and Israel before and after the 1979 Iranian Revolution, which resulted in an overturn in regime and society for Tehran. I argue that there are three obstacles to peace for Iran and Israel: foundational ideologies, regional rivalry, and choices in leadership. These three concepts are essential in analyzing why the previously cooperative relationship crumbled and the potential for peace or warfare between the two. In a time of intense diplomatic and regional conflict, it is impertinent to locate the underlying obstacles to rapprochement before any instance of war breaks out. If we master these variables, paving a pathway to peace and decreasing the potential for all out warfare will ultimately be more attainable.

### **Political Significance**

Iran and Israel's political structures vastly differ from one another. One is fueled by a theocratic authoritarian system, prolonged by the embers of a dramatic 1979 revolution. The other is built off of a 1948 declaration for independence and recognition for its sovereignty,



observed in a democratic parliamentary system. While both states thrived off of some form of paradigm shift from earlier periods, the aforementioned factors have contributed to their growing schism.

Politically, Iran prides themselves on the basis of Shiite revivalism and the words of revolutionary and first Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini. Armed with the idea of uniting the world under a common Islamic identity succeeding leaders in the Iranian government have holistically impacted how the country is viewed by not only Israel, but the rest of the world. As a Shiite state where 90% of the world's Muslims are Sunni, Iran faces religious vulnerabilities that are in a way, comparable to Israel, the only Jewish-majority state in the world.<sup>1</sup> Tehran compensates this isolation by establishing satellite armies in states that align with their agenda, such as Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, and more.<sup>2</sup> In regards to studying Iran, this research holds political significance in the sense that one revolution remarkably impacted Tehran's position in the international community. This change from a secular, Westernized society that embraced modernity shifted to a government that rules with religion as their iron fist, and exhibits isolation and animosity towards most of their former allies. This was once a country that once endorsed the manufacture of nuclear facilities for purely environmental and medical purposes. Now, it argues for its right to become nuclear as a method of boosting their status and mechanism of confrontation towards Israel, the United States, and much of the Middle East.

Israel's significance in this study lies in the state's upbringing from its 1948 independence despite regional enmity, to a seemingly inseparable bond with the United States. As the only Jewish-majority state in the world, the country's path to development is unique in respect to its region. Israel's series of Prime Ministers have also aided in shaping Israeli society and politics, drastically changing its agenda with Iran as the Iranian Revolution was in full force.

This volatile relationship with Iran, from cooperation to confrontation, is also unique in regards to other diplomatic dynamics observed in the Middle East, as this sharp change occurred seemingly overnight. Israel's defensive tactics against its Arab neighbors are primarily in place to protect Israel from destruction, an agenda desired by much of the region. Given Iran's prior cooperation with Israel as a non-Arab ally, it is significant to analyze how nationalism and the politicization of religion has impacted this dynamic.

A combination of these three factors has made the prospect of war between Iran and Israel a likely possibility, especially if we consider the United States' relationship with both countries and their presence in Middle Eastern affairs. However, in the discussion of warfare, it would be executed by proxy, as Iran has faced international scrutiny for its financial and political endorsement of surrogate armies in Syria, Yemen, Iraq, and Lebanon. To name a few, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Badr Organization in Iraq, the Houthis in Yemen, and the Syrian Arab Army all share a similar view advocating for the destruction of Israel and the expansion of Iranian influence in the Persian Gulf. All of which renders the possibility of numerous proxy wars more plausible than ever before.<sup>3</sup>

## **Research Design**

The evidence presented in this study is based off of a comprehensive literature review comprised of secondary peer-reviewed sources. These sources come from academic journals and online databases, while others are based off of current events from a variety of American and Middle Eastern news sites in order to fulfill a well-rounded perspective.

This research is organized into five chapters. My second, third, and fourth chapters detail the three obstacles to peace outlined earlier in the introduction. Chapter two outlines the first

obstacle to reconciliation between Iran and Israel relates to foundational ideologies. I explore the impact of the Iranian Revolution igniting a Shiite awakening, as well as a shift back to traditionalism and further away from westernization and secularism. Iranian ideology will entail the usage the nationalism and religion in decision-making and diplomacy with Israel and the international community, particularly the United States. For Israel, I discuss the birth of modern Zionism and Jewish nationalism in Israeli society. This depiction of Israeli ideology will mirror that of Iran's, as I will also discuss the usage of nationalism and Jewish self-determination in diplomacy and strategy. The latter part of the chapter will discuss the relationship between Iran and Israel's ruling political parties: Moderation and Development Party and the Likud Party, respectively. In this half, the agendas of each political party will be unpacked, as it concludes with analyzing the similarities of Shiite and Jewish nationalism as exhibited in the political sphere.

Chapter three introduces rivalry and vulnerabilities shared by Iran and Israel. In this section, I will discuss how the United States plays a vital third-party factor in shaping the geopolitical climate of Iran and Israel, given the country's individual relationship with both states.<sup>4</sup> Here, the paradigm shift between the United States and Iran through the Iran hostage crisis of 1980, Iran's sponsoring of terrorism through proxy groups, and Washington's initial support for Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's invasion of Iran in 1980 is elaborated on. Consequently, such events led to the permanent closure of Washington and Tehran's embassies. Iran and Israel's status as religious minority states (Shiism and Judaism), economic competition, and Iran's quest to become nuclear are analyzed in regards to shared vulnerabilities. Iran's long-running nuclear program is initially discussed in this chapter, as Iran desires to go nuclear for the purpose of gaining status in the Middle East, providing a defensive mechanism towards

adversaries, and environmental/medical purposes. The nuclear question is discussed in chapters three and four, as chapter four also explains the birth of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action during the Obama administration, as well as the impact of Washington's 2018 departure from the deal on Iran's path to nuclear threshold.

The fourth chapter of my research details leadership choices and behaviors. While I primarily elaborate on the political behaviors of current Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, part of this chapter will discuss the impact of Rouhani and Netanyahu's predecessors on shaping the geopolitical climate of Iran and Israel.

Finally, chapter five will analyze limitations and gaps in the research, as I suggest topics that would benefit from further research and analysis. This conclusion will also comment on the prospects for war or peace between Israel, and is reconciliation is ever going to be possible.

## Chapter Two: Foundational Ideologies

### Introduction

The notion of ideology and the behavior of political parties is a pivotal factor to understanding the Iranian-Israeli dynamic. Two of the countries' parties in office have molded their foreign policy objectives either drastically different than the preceding party, or as an extension of previous administrations. Israel's Likud Party has intermittently dominated the Knesset, or parliament, and the opinions of their orthodox-nationalist constituency has as much of a voice as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. President Hassan Rouhani of the Moderation and Development Party has marked the party's first presidential representation in the country's history. In the Middle East, religion is not only a major form of identity for civilians, but also as a facet of political behaviors and processes. Since religion is a significant part of Iranian and Israeli culture, it is significant to understand its role in constraining leadership and geopolitical relations.

Judaism in Israel and Islam and Iran tend to overlap in how the states' respective leaders utilize religion to their advantage in order to push legislation and maintain their following. Israel's Likud Party under Benjamin Netanyahu has experienced significant shifts to the right in foreign policy both under his term in 1996 and in 2009. On another note, the Rouhani administration under Iran's Moderation and Development Party has experienced a pragmatic, realist metamorphosis – a stark contrast to President Rouhani's predecessor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. While both Iran and Israel possess different reasons for maintaining their respective ideologies in politics, there are nearly as many similarities that have affected Netanyahu and Rouhani's political motives. For Prime Minister Netanyahu, his usage of Judaism

and Zionism as a mechanism of nationalism has mobilized the Orthodox Jews to maintain the bulk of his following. In the case of President Rouhani, his and Ayatollah Khamenei's interpretation of Islam has contributed to the leverage observed by Iran's theocratic government and status as an Islamic Republic.

The ideological forces behind Iranian and Israeli society and politics today involves the notions of nationalism and in Shiite Islam, Iran's majority religion, and Zionism, the mobilization of Jewish nationalism and self-determination.

### **Iranian Ideology and Political Impact**

Since the 1979 Revolution, the Iranian government has experienced a paradigm shift in foreign policy from a conciliatory approach under the Shah, to a confrontational strategy, and now to a pragmatic approach under President Rouhani. This change is due to a combination of factors, including the political personalities of specific Iranian leaders, previous conflicts with neighboring states, regional vulnerabilities, and notably, religion. In previous years, Iranian foreign policy based itself on the preservation of Tehran as an Islamic Republic and the expansion of such ideals.<sup>5</sup> Khomeini's revolutionary prospects was a result of his distrust towards the Western world and Israel, accusing them of attempting to undermine Shiism and Islamic revivalism. His ideological revolution was fueled by Islamic nationalism and the prospect of achieving "ummah", or a community united under Islam, in order to recollect the world's Muslims to follow "true Islam" instead of "American Islam". Khomeini's disdain towards "American Islam" references the Shah's encouragement for westernization and secularism, all of which the Supreme Leader sought to reverse.<sup>6</sup> Khomeini's establishment of a theocratic government was the first step towards his prospect of Muslim unity, which had

succeeded in mobilizing a Shiite awakening in Iran. Although Shiism still stands as a regional and global religious minority, Iranian politicians has focused on religious outreach to other minority states for coalitions. This has been observed in the form of Tehran establishing military proxies to fight surrogate wars without direct Iranian involvement, often concentrated in Iraq and Lebanon.

What can be observed in Iran's post-revolutionary history of contending ideologies is a nearly equal mix of hardliner and reform presidents. Although the powers of President Rouhani are limited by the overreaching authority of Supreme Leader Khamenei, the Moderation and Development Party claims to be an establishment of reform and economic growth. Similar to any other Iranian political party, the agenda of Moderation and Development are bound to the authority of Iran's clergy, specifically the president's relationship with the Supreme Leader. In an interview with Iran's most popular reform newspaper, Shargh, Rouhani exemplifies his desire for a moderate government and alluded to the dangers of extremism, indirectly under his hardliner predecessor, Ahmadinejad.<sup>7</sup>

In 2018, Erdbrink describes the chronology and impact of protests in the Rouhani administration, namely the popular outcry against the mandatory wearing of the hijab. This mandatory restriction was mandated under Khomeini's leadership as Supreme Leader, which was one instance of Khomeini's overturn of the Shah's policies. In pre-revolutionary Iran, women enjoyed the choice of donning or forgoing any form of head covering. Rouhani's attempt at weaning the government from controlling cultural affairs has connected with Iranian citizens, as the majority were in favor of this. However, widespread protests against his failure to maintain economic promises in late 2017 and early 2018 raged on.<sup>8</sup> These protests were a backlash against Iran's religious agenda that has disrupted the balance between moderation and

religiosity as desired by Khomeini. Such protests had not been seen since the Green Movement in 2009 after an immense demand for Ahmadinejad's removal following his first electoral win against Mir Hossein Mousavi. The Green Movement, also known as the Persian Spring, was a result of the widespread discontent of Ahmadinejad's victory.<sup>9</sup> Amidst claims of government corruption, thousands of Iranians protested against the results, which led to hundreds of arrests.

As previously observed, many Iranians have grown tired of the religious stronghold imposed by the Iranian government, which has sparked exponentially larger protests for each incoming administration.<sup>10</sup> Much of this collective exasperation is concentrated within Iranian adolescents and young adults. This demographic is becoming increasingly secular: an antithesis to their elders.<sup>11</sup> As observed in other states inside and outside of the Middle East, religion is becoming less of a priority for younger generations, partially because of a gradual detachment from organized religion. In the case of Iran, fewer adolescent men are ordered to study in seminaries, unlike many of Iran's past presidents. Khamenei and former president, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, spent much of their teenage life studying in Qom Seminary, with religion playing a major role in the lives of the other five presidents. In present times, religion is becoming more of an option for civilians to follow, rather than a familial requirement. This shift towards secularization as seen in the Iranian youth has already proved troublesome for Iran's overreaching clergy. With time, Iran's hardline conservatives and clergy will continue to face an increasingly growing Goliath threatening to dismantle everything the Iranian Revolution fought for. A clash of generational differences may spark larger and more violent protests akin to the 2005 Green Movement, or even the 2017-2018 protests during Rouhani's present administration, where hundreds of thousands of Iranians are displeased with the lack of accountability towards the rising unemployment rate, inflation, and censorship in the media. The impact of protests in



Iran reflects a growing divide between modernity and tradition, which will only lead to an increase in ideological strife in upcoming decades.

### **Zionism: Israel's Driving Force**

“Palestine is our unforgettable historic homeland. . . The Jews who will it shall achieve their State. We shall live at last as free men on our own soil, and in our own homes peacefully die. The world will be liberated by our freedom, enriched by our wealth, magnified by our greatness. And whatever we attempt there for our own benefit will redound mightily and beneficially to the good of all mankind.”

– Theodor Herzl, founder of modern Zionism

Zionism, the official movement for Jewish nationalism, is centered around Jewish self-determination and entitlement to Israel as the Jewish homeland.<sup>12</sup> The founder of modern Zionism, Theodor Herzl, urged his Jewish followers all over the world to conduct a mass return to Palestine and establish Israel as a Jewish state. Overwhelmingly, Jewish individuals from all corners of the world migrated to Palestine as Israel gained independence in 1948. As a result, Jewish nationalism took its place in Israel and since 1948, Zionism has been used as a driving force for succeeding Prime Ministers to build coalitions, propose legislation, and attract voters, as it became a unifying entity for Jewish individuals, regardless of their location.

Politically, Zionism reached beyond party lines and found its way into all aspects of Israel's political spectrum, but depending on the political party, it was molded into a different light to attract various crowds. For instance, Benjamin Netanyahu and the Likud Party have aligned themselves with “revisionist Zionism”, a branch of Zionism primarily concerned with territorial expansion, or a “Greater Israel” mentality. Revisionist Zionism was coined by Vladimir Jabotinsky in the early 1900s, which was based off of Theodor Herzl's general idea of Zionism, but with a specialization in settlement and Jewish emigration into *Eretz Yisrael*.<sup>13</sup> To elaborate, this mentality pertains to the expansion of Israel's sovereignty to their desired borders

past settlements in Judea and Samaria and Palestinian territories. This ideology has motivated previous occupations in the West Bank, Golan Heights, and the construction of settlements in Judea and Samaria, a practice that has come under international condemnation because of its illegality. Revisionist Zionism is found among right-winged and centrist parties, specifically the Likud Party. This branch of Zionist thought became a key motive behind the party's construction under former Prime Ministers Menachem Begin and Ariel Sharon in 1973.

This ideology gained traction under the Likud Party as a major opponent to the notion of Labor Zionism, under their eponymous party. Labor Zionism, founded by Nachman Syrkin, attempts to combine Zionism with socialism to facilitate the emigration of Jewish people to Israel. This differs from Revisionist Zionism and Likud Zionism, as Labor Zionism emphasizes the empowerment of the Jewish proletariat.<sup>14</sup>

During Netanyahu's first term as Prime Minister (1996-1999), the Likud Party attempted to remove themselves from the "Greater Israel" mindset as it was beginning to alienate other factions. In the aftermath of territorial compromises with the Palestinian Authority, namely the Oslo Accords, Camp David Accords, and support of a two-state solution, hard-lined allegiants to revisionist Zionism waned.<sup>15</sup> Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip in 2005 marked another decrease in territorial zeal within the Knesset. While Netanyahu still supports the construction of settlements in Judea and Samaria, he and the Likud Party have appeared to move away from this extreme maximalist ideology. However, the Likud Party still maintains a staunch Orthodox following, which entails an overwhelming majority of staunch nationalists who still desperately cling to settlement expansion. This has negatively impacted the Likud Party's relationship with Iran, as the Iranian government champions the rights of Palestinians over Zionism, which has been demonstrated by several Iranian politicians in the past. As a party supported by the notion

of nationalism, Netanyahu must maintain the support of nationalists in order to keep the Likud Party's dominance within the Knesset.

While Zionism has impacted the collective unity of the Jewish population under a singular identity based on religious pride in Israel's eyes, it has done little to ease tensions with the Palestinian Authority and Iran. Due to Zionism's exclusionary implications when viewed in the extremist perspective, Iran and Palestine have continuously branded Zionism as a toxic ideology that only promotes the advancement of Jewish identity at the expense of Palestinian existence. These ideological differences are instrumental in analyzing the breakdown of the Iranian-Israeli dynamic.

### **Break in Iranian-Israeli Cooperation**

The break between Iran and Israel's diplomatic cooperation occurred after the outbreak of the Iranian Revolution. Before revolution, and even the time of Iran's Shah, was Iranian Prime Minister Muhammad Mossadegh. He was frequently noted as "the closest thing Iran has ever had to a democratic leader", noting his emphasis on social security and secularism.<sup>16</sup> His nationalization of the oil industry upset the United Kingdom, as they and the Western world had large stakes in Iran's oil wealth. This led to the U.K. coordinating an overthrow of the Mossadegh government with the United States. Citing their loss of control in Iranian oil profits, the U.S. and U.K. prompted the coup, known as Operation Ajax, in 1953. Both governments aided in massive protests against the Mossadegh government. Mossadegh was arrested, while many of his supporters were executed.<sup>17</sup> After Mossadegh's overthrow, the Iranian monarchy was installed, which allowed the Islamic Republic to draw legitimacy from the reinstatement. This occurred after the Shah's overthrow in 1979, as clerics of the Islamic Republic cited the

Shah's human rights abuses and government corruption. His secret police, known as Savak, was active in repressing dissidence and protests during the Shah's tenure.<sup>18</sup> In 1979, the religious class in Iran mobilized against the Shah's activities, bringing together those who disapproved of Mossadegh's removal, as his democratic attitudes were favored among most Iranians. Such a revolution overturned the Western-installed monarch in replacement for the authoritarian theocracy experienced today.

### **Impact of Previous Israeli Prime Ministers**

Previous to the rise of Netanyahu, Israeli Prime Ministers have held similar attitudes about Iran and Israeli ideology. Israel's first Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion, advanced the Alliance of the Periphery, which called for Israel to establish relations with non-Arab states in the Middle East. As Israel's 1948 establishment led to the enmity of much of the Arab world, Ben-Gurion depended on this periphery alliance. At one point, the periphery included Iran when it was under the rule of the Shah, who was fond of both the Western world and Israel. However, Iran's involvement in the periphery crumbled after the regime change following the 1979 revolution.<sup>19</sup> Each Israeli leader up until the 1979 revolution maintained a cooperative relationship with Iran's Shah, as both countries allied together against Soviet influence in the Middle East.

One monumental instance of compromise between Israel and the Palestinian authority was the historic meeting of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat known as the Oslo Accords. In this series of agreements, Palestine's authority over Gaza, the conflicted status of Jerusalem as the capital city, and the mutual recognition of one another were discussed.<sup>20</sup> Rabin's support of the Accords upset the Likud Party, as the agreement was

also concerned with the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza and the city of Jericho, allowing a transfer of power to the Palestinian authority. As an opponent of the Oslo Accords, a peace negotiation between Israel and the PLO, the Likud Party is more hesitant to accept a two-state solution allowing the recognition of a Palestinian state. Rabin's assassination by a right-winged nationalist in 1995 symbolized the death of a potential for peace and an end to decades of hostility.



**Photo 1:** From left to right: Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, U.S. President Bill Clinton, and Palestinian Liberation Organization Chairman Yasser Arafat meeting in Washington D.C. (1993).<sup>21</sup>

Shimon Peres became the unofficial acting Prime Minister in 1995, as his predecessor Yitzhak Rabin stepped down during a scandal as the 5<sup>th</sup> Prime Minister. In a 2006 interview, Peres responded to at-time Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's remarks about "wiping Israel off of the map", stating that "the president of Iran should remember that Iran can also be wiped off the map,". While Peres was not Prime Minister at the time of the interview, this attitude reflected deep rifts in the Iranian-Israeli divide.<sup>22</sup>

## **Analyzing the Likud Party in Israel**

Founded by former Prime Ministers, Menachem Begin and Ariel Sharon in 1973, the Likud Party was Israel's first right-leaning party in the Knesset, with Begin serving as the first Likudnik Prime Minister in 1977.<sup>23</sup> Historically, the Likud Party has not always reigned the dominant party in the Knesset as the Mapai and Labor Parties have had their shares of sweeping the ballots. However, the predominance of Likud ideals in parliament has caused Israeli politics and society to experience a paradigm shift in ideology. While Ehud Barak narrowly defeated Benjamin Netanyahu in the 1999 election, he failed to fulfill promises of an Israeli-Palestinian compromise. To worsen his reputation, Prime Minister Barak's remarks in the 2000 Camp David Summit compared to Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's left the Labor Party in perpetual disapproval by the Israeli public.<sup>24</sup> In 1996, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu led the Likud Party as Prime Minister, but was succeeded by Ariel Sharon in 2001. Since 2009, Netanyahu has regained power as Prime Minister, allowing Likud to retain parliament prevalence for the past decade.

Likud's right-center affiliation has coincided with the longstanding pattern of right-winged voting in the Knesset. Israeli society has generated an increasingly secular, moderate generation with left-winged ideals, but a habit of leaning electorally right.<sup>25</sup> This means that there is an incongruency between Israeli society and Israeli politics, which often leads to disagreements between citizens and government. While past Israeli parties have maintained a continuous vow of prioritizing national security measures and protection against anti-Israel attacks stemming from Hamas across the Gaza Strip, the Likud Party and Prime Minister Netanyahu has gathered the electoral consensus more than most other parties. While Israelis are increasingly becoming ideologically left-leaning, Prime Minister Netanyahu and the Likud Party

has continuously dominated the ballot due to his hard-lined attitude towards terrorism and threats to Israeli society from neighboring countries. His low tolerance for terrorism and anti-Semitism has amassed the collective respect of members from all over the political spectrum, but such power in his party is not met without consequence.

Similar to other Israeli Prime Ministers, Netanyahu has served as Prime Minister twice, but his 2009 term has proven to be the most dynamic. Amassing the support of conservatives and centrists, the Likud Party once again became the leading party in the Knesset with a quarter of the available 120 seats in parliament. However, the party's demographic is overall reluctant to compromise, especially with rival states. Their emphasis on national security and military prowess upon provocation broadcasts the party as unable to negotiate with others due to their prioritization on defense, as opposed to diplomacy.

To further aggravate the issue of negotiation within the Likud Party, Prime Minister Netanyahu has to tread lightly in regards to his stance on a sovereign Palestinian state, not only due to his personal reservations, but also those of his Orthodox and nationalistic constituency. Such conflict experienced between Netanyahu and his Jewish nationalist following leads to a lack of negotiation between the Palestinian Liberation Organization and the Israeli government. While this obstacle to peace is evidently not one-sided, the ideological disposition of Israel's Jewish nationalists has maintained a staunch roadblock, which is nearly mirrored in the Palestinian government. The party's support of expanding settlements in Judea and Samaria has expanded the schism between moderates and ultra-religious sects of the voting demographic, as the religious nationalist group is ultimately less likely to compromise or sway their views.<sup>26</sup>

The Likud Party is a vehement opponent of the Iran Nuclear Deal, which has fueled tensions with the Rouhani administration, as the Iranian government believes their proliferation

of nuclear weapons is a sovereign right. Prior to the JCPOA, Netanyahu had experienced diplomatic differences with President Obama, as Netanyahu based much of his previous campaigns on an emphasis on national security and confrontation towards Iran, rather than rapprochement. Playing to Netanyahu's Likud Party and their emphasis on national security towards enmity, the party is unlikely to negotiate on such a matter. President Donald Trump's departure from the deal in 2018 not only heightened tensions between Washington D.C. and Tehran, but also between Israel and Iran, given the United States and Israel's historically close alliance. Since Israel views Iran's military and nuclear capabilities as an impending threat to Israeli society, the Likud Party has accepted a moral and political obligation to maintain the internal safety of the state. This led to Israeli airstrikes on Iranian infrastructure based in Syria, a country home to a plethora of Iranian proxy groups.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, Netanyahu's approval rating regarding Netanyahu's Syria policy increased to 69 percent.<sup>28</sup> In conjunction to his rising approval, it also gave Netanyahu hope to bomb Iran's budding nuclear infrastructure. Such justification is drawn from previous Prime Minister Menachem Begin's eponymous doctrine, which outlines Israel's preemptive strategy to destroy the nuclear facilities of peripheral enemies. In 1981, Israel used the Begin Doctrine as reason to destroy an Iraqi nuclear reactor through the first air strike against a nuclear site in history. In the surprise raid, Israel reasoned that reactors near Baghdad were being built to destroy the Jewish state, as Israel likened the potential of the Iraqi bomb to the U.S. nuclear strike on Hiroshima in 1945.<sup>29</sup>

However, an attack in accordance with the Begin Doctrine is not possible without the diplomatic and military backing of the United States, which was originally refused by President Obama. In the current administration, President Trump has stated his disinterest in war with Iran,



but is still susceptible to being convinced by his neoconservative foreign policy officials (see Chapter 4).<sup>30</sup>

While the Likud Party was no pioneer in the idea of an Iranian threat to Israel (**Porter, 2015**), such a notion was emphasized particularly under the Netanyahu administration due his image as “Mr. National Security”. Likud’s following of nationalist center-right individuals has led to this perpetuation, as Likud leaders find themselves in a Catch-22 situation in pursuing their own agenda, as well as maintaining their following so their party does not collapse. Since Menachem Begin’s founding of the party, Likud has braved a tumultuous voting record, alternatively winning and losing plurality in the Knesset over a 40-year period. What sets Likud apart from Israeli parties is partially its history of representatives in the most powerful position in the Israeli parliament. Equally worth noting is the Likud Party’s responsibility for spreading revisionist Zionism for forthcoming generations of Israelis, most notably under Israel’s second longest-running Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu.

### **Israel’s Status as a Jewish State**

“Those who think they can revive the stinking corpse of the usurping and fake Israeli regime by throwing a birthday party are seriously mistaken. Today the reason for the Zionist regime's existence is questioned, and this regime is on its way to annihilation.”

- Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Sixth President of Iran

Israel’s situation as a predominantly Jewish state is not only a unique phenomenon in the Sunni-majority region of the Middle East and North Africa, but also on the global scale as it is the only country that boasts the label as a “Jewish state”. Their independence came after extensive international conflicts not only between Arab neighbors, but with the United Nations following the end of World War Two in 1945. However, to conclude territorial disagreements,

the British government issued the Balfour Declaration in 1917 that would support the establishment “...in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people...”.<sup>31</sup> This declaration essentially symbolized secondary support for Jewish self-determination and independence after thousands of years of discrimination and genocide. Such ideas quickly evolved into the birth of Zionism through Theodor Herzl and others. After Israel declared independence in 1948, a long road of international challenges was ahead of the newfound state, many of these issues still occurring seventy years later. One of these issues was the failure for Israel and Palestinians to compromise on a territorial agreement through several failed peace negotiations, such as the Arab Peace Initiative. Combined with external pressures from peripheral states including Syria, Iran, Lebanon, and others, Israel’s persistence of statehood has been anything but simple. While Israel has had instances where an acting Prime Minister was unable to negotiate an adequate agreement with Iranians and Palestinians, it appears that relations between Israel and the Middle East are not growing easier with time.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has pushed Palestinians and other Arab neighbors to recognize Israel as a Jewish state before any deal is to be made. Despite the issuing of a British mandate to internationally recognize Israel through the Balfour Declaration in 1917, as well as the United Nations General Assembly confirming this declaration in 1947, Israel still faces not only a disputed existence, but a disputed capital.<sup>32</sup> Regardless of the UN’s confirmation of Israel existing as an independent Jewish state, Iranian officials consistently deny the state’s very existence, with both the former and current Supreme Leaders possessing blatantly toxic rhetoric regarding Jewish individuals and Israelis.

As a lone Jewish state in the Arab and Muslim world, Israel focuses on perceiving itself as an ally and extension of the United States and their values. Since its upcoming in 1948, Israel

has faced several opponents, which has led to Israel's deterrence strategy to prevent Arab states from teaming up and attacking Israel at once. While Israel boasts a considerable Arab population, with even 18 Arab members in the Knesset parliament, it still reigns as a Jewish-majority state. Given that many Arab states doubted the longevity of Israel as a state, Israel has focused on solidifying relations with the United States, and preventing Arab states from doing the same. In the first 30 years of Israel's statehood, their main foreign policy strategy was deterrence, given the country's proximity to regional enemies, such as Lebanon, Iran, and Syria. Israel's objective as a new state has been to prevent extensive wars with other countries so that any loss of resources would not be exposed to the enemy. Militarily, Israel has used their Air Force as a mode of defense as it requires less manpower and there is less risk for casualty compared to ground combat. As a consequence to the deterrence strategy, Israeli forces must respond to those who challenge them, but must take care to not outwardly challenge an enemy so they do not diminish their own resources. Due to the size of Israel, it initially needed support from a major superpower such as the United States in order to sustain their military and was initially doubted by the British to survive for long without continued support as a "permanent pensioner".<sup>33</sup>

Although the Arab-Israeli conflict does not inherently affect Iran due their lack of geographic and historical relevance towards Israel and Palestine, Iran has continued to destabilize the situation through the funding and military training for Hamas and martyr funds. However, Iranian officials possess a polar opposite view of Israeli society as many Majlis and Guardian Council members denounce the existence the Israel. Ayatollah Khomeini's successor, Ayatollah Khamenei, has heavily criticized Israel, even likening Israel to a "tumor".<sup>34</sup> Self-identifying moderate President Rouhani separately compared Israel to "an old wound that should

be removed”.<sup>35</sup> Incidentally, Iranian officials have also referred to Israel as “The Little Satan” while the United States is labeled “The Great Satan”. While religious extremists in Israel have their own harmful rhetoric towards Iran, it is painfully obvious that any form of fiery dialogue from either sides does nothing more to alleviate tensions. At the end of the day, the two groups affected the most by such painful discourse are evidently the typical Israelis and Iranians who can do little to stop fiery exchanges between both world leaders.

### **Hassan Rouhani: Moderation and Development Party**

“What I truly wish is for moderation to return to the country. This is my only wish. Extremism pains me greatly. We have suffered many blows as a result of extremism.”

- Iranian President Hassan Rouhani

Due to inconsistencies in political parties in Iran, little information is found on the Moderation and Development Party. The pragmatic, reformist ideology expressed under Rouhani’s administration and political party is a sharp contrast from the political visions proposed by his predecessor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and his Alliance of Builders of Islamic Iran Party. Moderation and Development’s foreign policy approach is based off the idea of pragmatism and realism. The party claims to operate on an attitude of rapprochement, rather than confrontation, as experienced in the Ahmadinejad administration. Antithetically, Rouhani’s party has demonstrated a less impulsive version of animosity and criticism towards the United States and Israel. However, this does not necessarily mean Rouhani is looking for peace with the United States and Israel. Rouhani’s pragmatic sense simply means that criticism towards Israel, regional rivals, and much of the Western world is more downplayed and less explosive than preceding leaders. On the topic of recognizing Israel in Iranian society, ordinary Iranians are

more concerned with issues remaining in their own government, as opposed to what is going on in Israel. Most citizens understand that an attack on Israel would result in “huge destruction in return” and destabilization of the region.<sup>36</sup>

Since the administration still vows to make Iranian nuclear proliferation a reality, a complete transfiguration in Iranian policy towards Israel is extremely unlikely, if not unimaginable. For this unlikely circumstance to occur, it is sensible to assume a total reconstruction of the Iranian constitution must occur. Contradictorily, the Iranian Constitution contains many similarities to constitutions belonging to a democratic government, particularly the United States. The most obvious discrepancy amidst the frameworks of Washington and Tehran is the inherent mutual exclusion of religion and politics within the United States government.

### **Shiite Islam and the Iranian Theocracy**

“We shall export our revolution to the whole world. Until the cry ‘There is no God but God’ resounds over the whole world, there will be struggle.”<sup>37</sup>

- Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, first Supreme Leader of Iran

Ayatollah Khomeini’s ambitious declaration of global unification under Islam reflects Iran’s will to export Islam through government measures. This drive is observed in today’s Iranian government, as Iran’s theocracy aims to shape society and politics under Islamic interpretations. At all costs, both the Iranian and Israeli governments seek to prolong their personal agendas through legislation and societal influences. While both agendas have different origins and definitions, ideology follows a “survival of the fittest” sequence where the objective is to survive and reproduce.<sup>38</sup>

In the same perspective as Zionism, Iran's religious vulnerability as a Shiite-majority state in a region dominated by Sunni Muslims has become fertile ground for nationalism. As mentioned in Chapter Three, vulnerability induces competitiveness, especially in a geographically and political influential state such as Iran. What sets Iranian nationalism apart from Jewish nationalism and Zionism is Iran's motive of preserving their revolutionary government and unifying pride as Persian people. If we analyze past Iranian presidential administrations, more conservative presidents such as Khamenei and Ahmadinejad, their ideological mobilizations were inherently more successful and sustaining due to their alliances with the Supreme Leader. However, the blend of religion and politics within the Iranian government is not the sole contributor for such persisting ideology. In both Israel and Iran, ideology, regardless of where it stems from, is generational. While both societies are experiencing a rise in secularism, religion continues to be a focal point in both political structures.

While a new election may bring in an entirely new school of thought or political party, it is important to note that the leaders within the Iranian and Israeli government merely introduce the ideology. It is the tasks of civilians to continue the teachings and proliferation of such thoughts. This explains the persistence of hardliner mentality even under a reformist president in Iran, just as much as it explains the relevance of modern-day Zionism in Israeli politics. Both countries experience concrete belief systems that are unwavering. Iran and Israel's solidified ideological systems have perpetuated a cycle of identifying conflict, projecting their inability to find a solution upon one another, and evidently, violence.

## **Similarities in Ideological Extremism**

Despite fundamental religious differences within the realms of Judaism and Shiite Islam, both schools of thought share several commonalities that are implemented in different ways. Regardless of their contrasting governmental structures, religion and political ideology has impacted both Iranian and Israeli politics and relations. Vulnerabilities play a key factor in the analysis of Iran and Israel's shifting relationship (see Chapter 3) as well as in the analysis of how ideology can impact two politically dissimilar states. While religion is not the sole factor in the study of ideology, it is a fundamental aspect that branches off into diplomatic behaviors, the politicization of religion, and the notion of leadership.

Given the most important position in the Iranian government being a religious expert, known as the Ayatollah, it is evident that religion plays a distinguishable role in Iranian politics. This in turn relates to Israeli perceptions of Iran and vice versa, as Iran's theocratic government and attitudes has negatively contributed to Iranian-Israeli relations after the revolution. The hostilities experienced between Iran and Israel originated with the establishment of Iran as an "Islamic Republic" by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979. While this was not the sole contributor to their long-running animosities observed today, Iran's radical ideological shift not only prompted instabilities in a once-functional diplomatic relationship, but also within the domestic politics of Tehran. Internally, Iranian presidents struggle with maintaining simultaneous support from reformists, religious hardliners, and the upcoming Iranian youth, who will eventually control Tehran's political narrative and perceptions in the international community. Such a struggle is not only observed in Rouhani's current presidential term, but with any preceding president who demonstrated at least one feud with Ayatollah Khamenei. Ironically, even conservative presidents, such as Ahmadinejad, has experienced disagreements with the Supreme Leader. The

reason for this is simply because of the ongoing power struggle in the hands of any given Iranian president and the Supreme Leader. Aforesaid feuds are not new to Iranian politics, as this circumstance predates to Khomeini's time as Supreme Leader. In Khomeini's period of leadership, he insisted on a balance between the religious experts and the political leaders, as he called for a restoration of Islam to Iranian society. However, this is not necessarily play out to Khomeini's vision considering the practical aspects of power imbalance and the degree of authority in the hands of a Supreme Leader being entirely open to interpretation. As mentioned earlier, Iran would have to undergo a total transformation in regime before it is sacrificed to the hands of the Iranian youth, who are making strides towards secularization. With the rise of women's empowerment and non-religious movements taking place in Iran, the government's grasp on Iranian society will falter with time. With time, we can speculate that a stronger, perhaps more violent Persian Spring will occur at the hands of the exhausted youth.

In Israel's circumstance, a change in leadership would not necessarily create an opening for the thawing of diplomatic tensions. This is due to the longstanding role of Zionism in the administrations of every Israeli Prime Minister since 1948 as it serves as a driving force for Jewish unity and mobilization, both religiously and politically. The political behaviors exhibited by Prime Minister Netanyahu is an example of this phenomenon, but his actions are not unique to Israeli politics. With time, Israeli leadership has shifted the Theodor Herzl's implication of Zionism to fit each Prime Minister's succeeding agenda, and will most likely continue to do so. Overall, the notion of unifying Jewish people and building coalitions within the Knesset has become a survival tactic in every Israeli politician's arsenal, a flame that is unlikely to die down. However, it will continue to alienate those who may not entirely subscribe to this ideology and provide even more difficulties in finding common diplomatic ground for the Palestinian



Authority, Iran, and Arab countries. For Israel, similarities lie in the political reliance on beliefs that originated in both countries' creation. Although Israel is not based off of a theocratic government, with Israelis being widely secular, the country still utilizes religion as a justification for numerous political decisions. While Iran existed far before Israel's 1948 independence as a remnant of the Persian Empire, Iran's rebranding of an Islamic Republic was based solely off of Shiite nationalism and Khomeinism. Similarly, Israel's birth was fueled by an undying Zionist ideology, which facilitated the return of Jewish individuals to Israel, as it was deemed their homeland. Zionism, in turn, provided a sort of nationalism that is comparable to the spark that fired Iran's revolution. While Israel's "revolution" simply resulted in Israel's independence, rather than a violent overthrow of a former leader, as seen in Iran, Zionism has persisted as a source of Jewish identity and perseverance, which has become widely politicized. Since revisionist Zionism contributed to the birth of the Knesset-dominated Likud Party, the politicization of Zionism as a justification for territorial expansion, reluctance to compromise with the Palestinian Authority, and disagreements with Iran has risen. Netanyahu's usage of Zionist ideology as a mechanism of mobilization for his center and right-winged constituents has contributed to the outline of Iran and Israel's animosity. His actions as Prime Minister has succeeded in gaining the support of wealthy and politically driven Orthodox Jews, but at the same time prompted the alienation of leftist and centrist parties.

In summation, ideology has taken the simultaneous roles of commonality and polarization in the study of Iranian-Israeli relations. Shiism and Zionism has separately contributed to nationalism and political behaviors within their respective governments. While it is not the only obstacle to reconciliation, religion has provided the largest contribution to Iran and Israel's ideological contrasts. The politicization of religion and ideology in the Iranian and

Israeli governments has wedged both political institutions further away from diplomatic restoration. Without due time, it is nearly impossible to predict exactly if a change in beliefs will occur in either country, but it is safe to assume a change in political culture is necessary for both countries to practice cordiality.

## Chapter 3: Regional Rivalry and Vulnerabilities

### Introduction

A significant aspect to the Iranian-Israeli conundrum is the notion of both states acting as regional rivals competing for international prominence as minority countries. While Iran and Israel possess several fundamental differences pertaining to political structures, historical upbringings, and diplomatic priorities, Tehran and Tel Aviv's shared similarities amount to nearly as many. The notion of rivalry within Israel and Iran an enigmatic, multi-faceted concept that contains historical, political, as well as American implications that must be discussed beforehand.

While analyzing the politics of rivalry between Iran and Israel may appear profound and overwhelming, certain historical and political instances are significant to note. The Iran hostage crisis led to the intervention of the United States in not only the bloody Iran-Iraq war, but as a third party member in the feud between Tehran and Israel. As Israel's largest ally in the Western Hemisphere, the United States is heavily involved in Iranian-Israeli affairs, especially considering Washington's historical reservations against Tehran. Therefore, it would be a disservice to omit the United States from the analysis of rivalry between Iran and Israel and how it has molded the trifecta of foreign policy relations for all three states.

The regional competition experienced between Tehran and Israel is unique to other Middle Eastern conflicts in the sense that revolutionary history plays the largest factor in analyzing the origins of such a profound relationship. Events preceding and succeeding the 1979 Revolution and the ousting of Shah Pahlavi was critical in forming Iran and Israel's open animosity observed in the present. While the revolution marked the most irreversible turning point in souring Iranian-Israeli relations, the actions of the United States, notably the Ronald

Reagan and George W. Bush administrations played a quintessential role in defining the rivalry as we see today.

### **Historical Analysis on Rivalry**

The spontaneous 1979 Revolution that shocked not only Iran's allies, but the rest of the world, ensued in a lasting thirst for regional rivalry and power struggle in the Middle East. After the Shah was exiled, Ayatollah Khomeini's followers demonized the United States for perpetuating Western beliefs on what should be an Islamic republic, while Israel experienced a new wave of existential criticism and anti-Semitism which had never occurred until Khomeini's regime. In the aftermath of the revolution, Iran's relationship with two of its closest allies crumbled as the clerical authority continued to antagonize those who were on good terms with the Shah's regime.

Seemingly overnight, the strategic relationship experienced by Israel and Iran fell apart indefinitely. Iran began to no longer acknowledge Israel as a state, as well as sponsor anti-Israel terrorist organizations to emphasize their agenda. For instance, Iran's continued funding of Lebanese-based terrorist group, Hezbollah, has only increased tensions with Israel as Hezbollah consistently denies Israel's existence, as well as champions the Palestinian Authority.<sup>39</sup> Iran's continuation of funding terrorist organizations against Israel and the United States is not a lone occurrence. From Khomeini's regime onward, Iran has consistently provided billions to aid Hamas, Hezbollah, Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria, and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad.<sup>40</sup> All of these organizations and regimes have expressed vehement anti-Israel beliefs, which does nothing but fuel regional tensions between Israel and the rest of the Middle East. These actions snowball

into rivalry between Iran and the United States, as these organizations are evidently anti-American in tandem.

In the realm of the United States, the incoming wave of anti-American sentiment following Khomeini's rise to power led to the seizure of 52 American hostages within the same year of the revolution American support for Saddam Hussein's invasion of Iran in 1980, and finally, the eventual closure of the Iranian embassy in 1979. It is prevalent to note that when discussing the notion of regional rivalry, it is ultimately a product of vulnerability.

### **Iran's Position as a Shiite State**

The position Iran holds as a minority religious state has historically influenced Iran's endeavor into becoming a regional power, which did little to thaw tensions with Israel. Much of Iran's motives for regional dominance and rivalry with Israel draw from the country's vulnerabilities in a region that is predominantly Sunni. This has led to communication discrepancies not only between Iran and Israel, but towards the rest of the Middle East. As a result, Iran has gone through extreme lengths to portray regional prominence in order to compensate for the country's disadvantaged dispositions, which is not only the heart of Iran's nuclear endeavor, but also its antagonistic attitudes towards Israel due to an inherent feeling of being threatened. In the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution, Tehran has rebranded itself as a contender in the regional limelight, forcing Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt to share the spotlight. In 2006, Trita Parsi wrote in *World Policy Journal* that the main motive for Iran to persevere in its efforts at becoming a Middle Eastern hegemon is to replicate the distinguished outlook once held by the Shah.<sup>41</sup> However, post-revolutionary Iran has essentially flipped the conquest of imitating the Shah's superiority on its head by adding a clerical, theocratic flare to its

countenance. As an ancient Shiite theocracy, Iran thrives off of promoting their revolutionary regime, even if it results in burning bridges with surrounding areas, especially their previously longstanding relationship with Israel in the Shah's time.

Alternatively, Iran has exhibited an uptake in regional rivalry with Israel by maintaining financial and diplomatic coalitions with peripheral states who share a common anti-Israel terrorist belief. Organizations such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria, and Shiite extremists have experienced a dramatic increase in funding for their terrorist actions against Israel nearly entirely by the Iranian government as a means of increasing the preexisting anti-Israel sentiment within the Middle East. Arab countries that have already encountered historical and diplomatic conflicts with Israel are able to thrive under the immense monetary compensation provided by the Iranian government, as well as military training and spending from the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps. This has led to a flourish of anti-Israel activity within Lebanon, Syria, and the Palestinian Authority. Iran's coalitions with smaller, hostile states have also maintained instability within the region and provided extraneous obstacles to peace in regards to the Arab-Israeli conflict. However, when considering Iran's strides in their nuclear program and their collective activities with other Shiite states, another state this scenario has seriously alarmed is secondary regional rival, Saudi Arabia. As a hegemon producer in the Organization for Petroleum Exporting Countries, as well as a strategic ally with the United States, the monarchical Sunni state has expressed similar issues with Iran as Israel is experiencing now. While the Saudi royal family harbors their reservations regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict and support for the Palestinian Authority, both of these countries share a common regional rival in the Middle East. Notably, this has led to the birth of a still extremely new strategic partnership between Israel and Saudi Arabia in solidarity against Iran. While the

diplomatic relationship between Israel and Riyadh will certainly never amount to the partnership Israel and the United States possess, it is still one to keep in mind considering the core of Saudi Arabia and Israel's newfound coalition occurring due to a shared fear of Iranian proliferation and regional influence.

Iran's regional enemy outside of Israel, Sunni-dominated Saudi Arabia, is another motivator for Iran to pursue its goal of becoming a nuclear threshold state given the immense influence exhibited by the Saudi royal family. It would not be extreme to consider the ramifications of a nuclear Iran initiating an arms race with Saudi Arabia in an effort for Riyadh to preserve the state's influence over the Middle East. Such speculation is not uncommon in the international community, especially within the Israeli government given their justified concerns of a fallout with Tehran. In this scenario, a hypothetical arms race between Riyadh and Tehran could evidently lead to a Middle Eastern Cold War. While the classic rivalry experienced between the United States and the former Soviet Union marked the climax of existential anxiety in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, both countries were distanced continents apart. Despite Israel and Iran lacking a shared border, the peril of even a missile attack shakes the Netanyahu administration to the core. Hypothetically, if Iran's nuclear program is dissolved, the potential for an intercontinental ballistic missile ambush is far more plausible to occur.

Although both states' religious differences can be traced back thousands of years, these are still relevant struggles experienced all over the region, as both schools of Islam result in different structures of government and tolerance towards Westernization. Diplomatically, the United States boasts stronger relationships with Sunni-states, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, rather than Shiite states, such as Lebanon or Iran, for instance. This coincidence is partially due to a greater acceptance of the United States and their ways of life. If we consider Saudi Arabia in this

scenario, while the Kingdom displays several holes that prevent it from being seen as a “progressive society”, they still utilize many forms of Western technology, both economically and militarily. To an extent, Iran is at a massive diplomatic disadvantage compared to Tel Aviv or Riyadh’s situation partly due to the Islamic Republic as a Shiite theocracy that refuses to back down, for the sake of post-revolutionary era.

### **Washington and Tehran: For Better or Worse?**

As previously described, the Iranian hostage crisis, which occurred within the same year as the 1979 Revolution, was essentially the last straw for the United States and Iran to pursue a relatively stable relationship post-revolution. Although the Shah was remarkably pro-Western and pro-Israel, such notions went out the window alongside the concept of a secular government in lieu of Khomeini’s rise to power. In 1980, the invasion of Iran by Saddam Hussein’s government was ultimately due to the inherent threat Hussein felt by the Islamic Republic of Iran, as well as Khomeini’s rising following. Saddam Hussein’s secular rhetoric held by the Ba’athist Party was antithetical to that of Ayatollah Khomeini’s revolutionary religious beliefs, which, in due time, sparked extreme aggression that did not take long to lead to warfare.

President Ronald Reagan’s intervention in the Iranian-Iraqi crossfire conclusively brought about American backing of Baghdad against Tehran. At the time, President Reagan’s declared support for Hussein’s actions due to Islamic Iran’s ballooning animosity towards the United States consequently resulted in victory for Iraq. This vindictive move on President Reagan’s part meant Iran would face global isolation as the United States sided with Hussein militarily and diplomatically. The new Islamic Republic of Iran took this personally as Iraq’s invasion resulted in devastating economic and military casualties. Despite Saddam Hussein’s



usage of chemical attacks on Iranians and Iraqi Kurds and numerous pleas to the United Nations from Iran to alleviate this issue, the United States continued to back Baghdad. The U.S. continued to allot Hussein's regime intelligence, military equipment, and supplies which prove more than enough ammunition to defeat Iran.<sup>42</sup> President Reagan made it an initiative to increase American presence in the Persian Gulf as a means of fighting back against Iran's Islamic regime and hopefully dismantling Khomeini from power. In reality, the Iran-Iraq war was intensified in terms of casualties, military destruction, and regional instability with the inclusion of the United States in the eight-year war. Iranian officials argue that the United States chose to side with Iraq despite Saddam Hussein's heinous actions as a means of suppressing the new Islamic Republic the U.S. had so vehemently disapproved. Unsurprisingly, American involvement with Saddam Hussein in the Iran-Iraq war proved to be a monumental mistake and hindrance for the restoration of diplomatic ties between Washington and Tehran.

Equally difficult to overlook is how the Iran hostage crisis acted as another barrier between Iran and the United States. This historically devastating instance was yet another justification for the lack of stability for Washington and Tehran, as this was the last straw for the Washington D.C. embassy. Soon after the hostages were released in 1981, the United States and Iran severed formal diplomatic ties and has yet to be restored. The seizure of 52 Americans on their home territory marked a period in American-Iranian history that will never be forgotten and serves as a reminder to current and future U.S. presidents that the Iranian government is no friend of the United States.

In 2001, Washington and Tehran initiated conversation on strategies to defeat the rising influence of the Taliban in Afghanistan. American and Iranian representatives supplied one another with intelligence pertaining to the politics of the Taliban and how they could halt the

Sunni extremist movement. In the midst of such cooperation, Tehran began to see light at the end of the tunnel with the United States, as such teamwork in the post-Shah era was unheard of. Soon afterwards, stability in Afghanistan was made possible, and major Taliban leaders were evicted.<sup>43</sup> However, the tunnel of hope began to close for Iranians due to the actions of one American leader in particular. In 2002, President George W. Bush generalized Iran with other hostile states, including Iraq and North Korea, as part of the “Axis of Evil”.<sup>44</sup> President’s Bush’s 2002 State of the Union address labeled Iran as an addition to this Axis because of Tehran’s notoriety of “...arming to threaten the peace of the world”.<sup>45</sup> National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice later censured Iran for their “...direct support of regional and global terrorism...”.<sup>46</sup>

Such rhetoric from President Bush and his administration generated unanimous shock from Iranian diplomats as they believed their efforts were all for nothing. Conservative Iranian officials argued that instances such as this one is enough evidence to never pursue a functional alliance with the United States in order to avoid further trickery. Reformist President Mohammad Khatami’s strategy of extending the olive branch towards the United States when they were fighting against the Taliban in Afghanistan was seemingly for nothing. In the aftermath of such betrayal, succeeding Iranian presidents have focused their foreign policy tactics on American resistance and maintaining an aura of Persian prevalence in the Middle East.

### **Significance of Nuclear Thresholds in Rivalry**

In regards to Iranian nuclear proliferation, the significance of the country’s quest for weapons of mass destruction is due to the regional prominence it would gain if their endeavor is successful. Historically, countries who have acquired the technology and political innovation to

have nuclear plants are typically viewed with higher standing in the international community given their possession of the world's most destructive technology.

Prime Minister Netanyahu of Israel has expressed vehement distaste towards the possibility of Iran acquiring a nuclear stockpile. In the past, Prime Minister Netanyahu has openly criticized the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, namely because he views it only as a postponing measure for Iran to go nuclear. He notes that the deal fails to acknowledge measures that will be taken to monitor Tehran's WMD activity after acquisition and that one way or another, Iran will become a threshold state. Prime Minister Netanyahu openly criticized President Obama for not allowing more consideration and empathy for the needs of the Israeli people who will be affected more by Iran's nuclear mission given the country's geographic proximity compared to the United States'. In 2015, Prime Minister Netanyahu addressed Congress in a joint meeting where he touched on the possibility of a Palestinian peace deal, as well as cautioning American legislators against striking a nuclear compromise with Iran. He notes that a nuclear Iran "...would ignite a nuclear arms race in the Middle East. It would give terrorists a nuclear umbrella. It would make the nightmare of nuclear terrorism a clear and present danger throughout the world."<sup>47</sup> Netanyahu goes on to discuss the grave ramifications of permitting Iran access to nuclear weapons and how it is the ultimate threat to Israeli society and Jewish people. He then slams leaders in the Iranian government for their notorious history of Holocaust denial claims and support of proxy terrorist organizations, where he argues that Israel cannot negotiate with those spewing hatred towards his state. As a whole, Netanyahu praised the United States for their undying hospitality towards the Israeli people, but simultaneously pleads Congress to view Iran's nuclear situation from his point of view and how impending it is for the U.S. to join Israeli in alliance against Iran acquiring nuclear weapons.

On the regional scale, it would allow Tehran immense influence over the Persian Gulf due to the rest of the region lacking WMDs, although Israel has hinted at a strategic collection of warheads that has yet to be disclosed. However, Israel and Iran would continue their power imbalance rivalry as Israel is suspected to have an arsenal, which Tehran is threatened by. In the Shah's time, Israel originally consented to arms sales with Iran since the Shah insisted that the purpose of Iran needing nuclear power was for environmental and developmental purposes. As previously stated, the paradigm shift in Israel and nuclear rhetoric following the 1979 Revolution left the question of proliferation up in the air for not only Israel, but the United States, a former ally. In pre-revolutionary times, Iran and Israel allied themselves with one another as Iran was another non-Arab state in the Middle East.<sup>48</sup> Given Israel's disposition as a lone Jewish state, and Iran as a Shiite, both states shared a concern of inferiority as two fish in a sea of Sunnis.

While Iran and Israel are not geographically bordering one another, both states expressed similar motives in defending themselves against Arab states before the revolution, with Khomeini's tenure adding a hostile edge to Iranian foreign policy. President Rouhani's pragmatic diplomatic approach may theoretically appear far less radical compared to the policies of hard-liner precedents such as former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's policies. Ironically, President Rouhani's stance on nuclear technology and the prospects of a stable relationship with Israel are nearly symmetrical to that of his predecessors.

Besides a long-running pursuit for WMDs, Iran has engaged in establishing military proxies to assist Hamas and Hezbollah as a means of increasing strategic influence. Among the most concerned is obviously Israel, as the government views Iran's nuclear program and allies with terrorist establishments as a threat to national security. As Iran continues the cycle of funding and providing military advantages to terrorist organizations, Iran magnifies regional

instability due to their actions. With the support of a state with over 80 million citizens, terrorist organizations are able to thrive without consequence, multiplying anti-Israel and anti-American beliefs for current and upcoming generations of Iranians and Arabs.<sup>49</sup> Post-revolutionary Iran has viewed nuclear and regional endeavors as vital to preserving their regime, which is ultimately prioritized over potential relations with neighboring states. The real indicator in Iran's compliance towards the United States and Israel will be if the country will continue to act as one of the largest sponsors of state terrorism, which ultimately does nothing more than preserve the post-revolutionary regime under Khamenei's agenda. Such demonstrations of violence through proxy military groups in Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria shows Iran's true motives as much as these three states show. This only emphasizes the minute level of obedience towards international law and diplomacy Tehran is willing to exude.<sup>50</sup> Evidently, these crimes will consequently isolate the state and be counterproductive to Iran's efforts of regional expansion, but the Iranian government does not view it that way due to an isolationist mindset frequently exhibited by their leadership.

### **American Influence in Iranian-Israeli Affairs**

Internationally, Israel continues to focus on maintaining good relations with the United States. Prime Minister Netanyahu has concentrated the majority of his diplomatic efforts with the Trump Administration in the U.S. as Israel symbolizes an extension of Western values within the Middle East. President Donald Trump's declaration of Tel Aviv as the capital of Israel along with the transition of the American embassy out of Tel Aviv is a massive diplomatic success for the Israelis.<sup>51</sup> As Netanyahu's alliance with Trump strengthens with time, their diplomatic

priorities align as Trump begins to prioritize Israeli national security over potential peace agreements with Palestinians.

Another instance of Israeli and American values coinciding with one another is President Trump's sudden departure from the 2015 Iran Nuclear Deal originally crafted during the Obama Administration. While these instances represent the reinforcement of the historically close alliance between the United States and Israel, it further ostracizes Iran from the equation. Although Israel and the United States have consistently possessed many of the same values in terms of political and personal priorities, the necessity for the United States to maintain ideological independence from that of Israel's is vital. The standards Netanyahu upholds for his Israeli people often rub off on Trump's values for the American society and Western model of development.<sup>52</sup>

As a result of Trump's departure from the nuclear deal due to personal and Israeli influence, Khamenei and Rouhani will be forced to resort to persuading the remaining signatories in the P5+1 to maintain faith in Iran's nuclear program.<sup>53</sup> If this fails, not only will Iran's efforts at becoming a lawful nuclear threshold state will wither away, so will Tehran's opportunity to become regionally prominent through a stable relationship with the United States. Since Israel rose to shocking regional relevance in only 70 years through their beneficial alliance with the United States, one of the most foolproof methods for Iran to do the same would be to culminate a similar relationship with the United States. Examples of this option being successful are plentiful, including countries from Canada to much of the European Union. However, as the Trump Administration turns a blind eye to the actions and instabilities of the Iranian government, Tehran is rapidly running out of options to impose regional leverage in the Middle East.

The long-running prestige of the United States as a global superpower essentially entails that states who possess a stable, benevolent affiliation with the U.S. is bound to reap a plethora of financial, diplomatic, and security benefits. On the contrary, adversarial countries who have proven themselves as belligerents will come to find it nearly impossible to display an image of stability and sufficient international support given the United States' relations with other developed powers in Europe and North America. In essence, those who walk the path paved by hegemony will never stray from the international limelight, but countries who go against the United States and much of the developed world will ultimately fail in gaining global prominence.

While it is still possible for Iran to undergo a regional metamorphosis into a Shiite superpower without the assistance of the United States and most of the countries in the P5+1 committee, this will ultimately prove to be much more difficult and less rewarding. Due to the United States' immense military strength and global influence in decision-making, forgoing efforts of compromise with the United States and Israel may very well come back to haunt Iran and the foreign policy tactics of future Iranian presidents and Supreme Leaders.

## **Conclusion**

While the notion of regional rivalry is not a unique concept in any area of the world, the ruthless competition placed between Tel Aviv and Tehran differs from colloquial situations of rivalry in the sense that it occurred suddenly and unexpectedly. Although much of the rivalry persists between the Israel and Iran's lies in the polarization in political structures and priorities, Tehran's nuclear objective is yet another massive wedge further widening the diplomatic schism. Considering the inclusion of the United States in the equation, the issue of rivalry becomes exponentially more difficult to discern.

In 2014, Natan Sachs, Director for the Center for Middle East Policy spoke to the House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs on the notion of Israel and Iran's role in Middle Eastern affairs. Sachs mentions "Few regimes evoke such concern..." to the magnitude Iran exudes.<sup>54</sup> The director alludes to the ongoing trend of animosity towards Israel that was entirely conceived after Khomeini's seizure to power in 1979. He concludes that despite such hostilities, many Israelis are optimistic that any animosity and tensions will thaw out and relations will restore to that of pre-revolutionary times.<sup>55</sup> What makes Israel and Iran's regional rivalry unique from rivalries with Saudi Arabia, the Palestinian Authority, or Lebanon is that unlike these three examples, this belligerent parallel differs because it is surprisingly new. This dispute experienced between Iran and Israel occurred seemingly spontaneously due to the sudden rise of the Iranian Revolution which resulted in the immediate expulsion of the Shah. Unfortunately, the possibility of rapprochement for Iran and Israel strays further from the light seemingly by day. Combined with the deeds and attitudes of various American, Iranian, and Israeli politicians, Tehran and Jerusalem's relations have yet to restore to that of the Shah's era. In fact, they appear to worsen almost by day given the open animosity Iran displays towards Israelis, and the difficulty in negotiation portrayed by the Israeli government.

While Iran has encountered a political revolution, two Supreme Leaders, and seven presidents, it appears that the dust has yet to settle and the country's desire to inflate their schema as a regional hegemon shows no signs of slowing down. Armed with the glory of their 1979 revolution, as well as an adamant demand to become a nuclear state for hopes of regional prominence, Iran is doing little to appease anxieties from the United States and Israel. Despite the revolution occurring nearly four decades earlier, Iran continues its toxic habit of viewing



Israel as a regional competitor, rather than a former ally. As specified earlier, such habits will undoubtedly avert any possibility of reconciliation if sustained.

## **Chapter 4: Leadership Choices and Behavior**

### **Introduction**

Leadership differences between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Israel have posed a major obstacle in peacemaking processes due to contrasts in regimes, political history, and the exchanges of fiery rhetoric between Iran and Israel's past and present leaders. The president of Iran, Hassan Rouhani, and the Prime Minister of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu have repeatedly showed contrast in how they run their respective countries. Most significant to note is how their attitudes towards one another have become a major obstacle to peace between the two countries.

### **The 1979 Iranian Revolution**

One factor that has affected the leaders' relationship with one another was Iran's political revolution in 1979, which resulted in the exile of their pro-Western and pro-Israel leader, Shah Reza Pahlavi. Many argued that the last Shah was overzealous towards Western ideals and the United States, so the religious conservative community sought to put an end to his regime, which thus marked the beginning of theocratic rule under a Supreme Leader, or Ayatollah. The Iranian Revolution symbolized the populace's chance to bring religion back into politics and rebel against Westernization and modernization.<sup>56</sup> The most significant effect of the Iranian Revolution was the replacement of Shah Pahlavi with a religious leader known as Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who vowed to transform Iran into a theocracy where government and religion are seamlessly blended. His strict interpretation of the Quran facilitated oppressive Islamic laws that disproportionately affected women, minorities, and secular audiences. It is unanimously agreed that Islam plays a key part in the sparks of the revolution. Since Shiite Islam

is the majority religion in Iran, this has played an essential role in how Iran is perceived by the international community as 90% of the Middle East, with the exception of Israel, practices Sunni Islam. Khomeini's anti-Israel attitude stemmed from his championing of Palestinians and his disbelief that there should be a Jewish state such as Israel.

During the Shah's reign (1941-1979), it was noted that he was much more accepting of Israel, and was extremely progressive in his legislation regarding religion, but this upset the religious community as the Shah ruled secularly. During the Shah's time, fears of Soviet Union military interests, as well as the commonly shared view of Iraq as a common threat brought Israel and Iran together. In 2011, Kaye, Nader, and Roshan wrote in "A Brief History of Israeli-Iranian Cooperation and Confrontation" that the two countries bonded over a common agenda of keeping Soviet influences out of the Middle East, along with trading arms and military powers.<sup>57</sup> In fact, Israel was content with the idea of Iran possessing nuclear weapons as the Shah desired them for purposes of renewable energy and medicinal purposes. However, this all changed for the worst when Ayatollah Khomeini came into power following the revolution, as his fiery rhetoric towards Israel soured relations since Khomeini ruled Iran with strict religious laws and his thirst for nuclear weapons as a means of manipulating its neighbors.<sup>58</sup>

### **Changes in the Iranian-Israeli Relationship**

In 2010, Simon wrote that since Israel's independence in 1948, Iran and Israel have constantly interacted with one another, but the uproar of the Iranian Revolution and the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran souring diplomatic relations.<sup>59</sup> Simon condenses the Israeli-Iranian conflict by discussing the chronological interactions between the two countries, along with catalysts to the downfall of their relationship. Simon writes that since Israel's

independence in 1948, there has been a constant interaction between the two countries both before and after the 1979 Iranian Revolution, but before 1979, the two countries had a much better relationship given that Iran's Shah Pahlavi was much more progressive and accepting of Israel and of obtaining nuclear weapons for renewable energy and self-defense.

Initially, the two countries bonded over a common agenda of keeping Soviet influences out of the Middle East, along with trading arms and military powers. However, when Ayatollah Khomeini came into power following the revolution, the relationship soured since Khomeini ruled Iran with strict religious laws and wanted nuclear weapons as a means of manipulating its neighbors.

When there was no longer a Soviet threat in the Middle East, Iran and Israel's relationship was strained as both leaders pitted against one another. The ouster of the Shah was a result of growing discontent towards the Shah's alleged corruption and secular attitudes, which resulted in widespread upset from the clerical community who strived to bring Iran back to its religious glory. As a theocracy, much of Iran's clergy is anti-Israel and not willing to cooperate with Israel, and many government members happen to be pro-Palestine, which has been criticized by a portion of the international community.<sup>60</sup> When Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982, Iran influenced Lebanese anti-Israel group, Hezbollah, to mobilize against Israel and to fight back. Since then, Iran has armed itself with various weapons to promote jihadist ideals and terrorist attacks against Israel. As a whole, anti-Israel sentiment only progressed through Iran's succeeding leaders, along with anti-Americanism due to the United States' historically close relationship with Israel.<sup>61</sup>

Before and after the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Iran has exhibited an interesting history of religious and autocratic leaders, each of them taking a part in molding Iranian life and politics

into how others perceive it today. Historically, Khomeini was the most noticeable and life-changing leader in post-revolutionary Iran, but there have been other notable leaders that have played a significant role in shifting Iranian politics and thought. For instance, President Rouhani's predecessor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, was most remarkably known for his aggressive and colorful rhetoric, which was often anti-Western and anti-Israel. His harsh treatment towards political and religious dissidents branded him as an explosive figure in Iranian government and politics.

Iran's post-revolution support of anti-Israel groups, such as Hamas in Palestine, and Hezbollah in Lebanon did not improve Israelis perspective of Iran as it appeared that Iran was suddenly going against Israel's very existence. Iran's cooperation with Hezbollah after the revolution has only increased tensions with the Israeli government and considering the Lebanese government is predominantly composed of Hezbollah members, this does nothing to dissolve hatred between Israel and Iran. When Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982, Iran influenced Lebanese anti-Israel group, Hezbollah, to mobilize against Israel and to fight back. Since then, Iran has armed itself with various weapons to promote jihadist ideals and terrorist attacks against Israel. Given that Israel is one of the highest functioning democracies in the Middle Eastern region, Iran's anti-Israel sentiment has only grown since the Revolution and in conjunction with Israel's criticism of Iran's theocratic system.<sup>62</sup>

### **Hassan Rouhani's Presidency**

Following the tumultuous presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Moderation and Development Party member and Islamic cleric, Hassan Rouhani, assumed his new position as the President of Iran in 2013. His election in the first term came to an utter surprise for Iranians

given the stark differences in political and ideological opinions against his forerunner, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.<sup>63</sup> Quite unlike his predecessors, President Rouhani presents himself as a moderate representative who appears to act more pragmatically on the topic of foreign relations.

After the inauguration of his first term, he promised a different approach to foreign and economic affairs that ultimately gave hope for Iranians that their quality of life would improve. During his first term from 2013-2016, he worked at improving Iran's overall perception as viewed not only by the United States, but the international community as a whole. As opposed to Iran's previous presidents, Rouhani has made a greater effort to familiarize himself and the Iranian government with Western values and affairs. However, Rouhani's presidency shows that Iran possesses many foreign policy continuities such as their longstanding support of Bashar al Assad's violent regime and civil war in Syria, as well as anti-Israel terrorist movements such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas within the Palestinian.<sup>64</sup> Remarkably, his first term also consisted of increased military spending for defense against Israeli intelligence, even though Iran's inflation and unemployment rate was exponentially rising. However, when it comes to interactions with Israel, there is little Rouhani is able to do to change relations between Tehran and Tel Aviv considering his limited capabilities in foreign affairs, as this is dominated by Ayatollah Khamenei and the conservative clergy. Due to previous damage done by Ahmadinejad and others in terms of referring to Israel as an illegitimate state, it will be difficult to establish trust and mutual respect between the two states as there once was before the 1979 Revolution.<sup>65</sup> Since the dawn of Rouhani's leadership, Iran has continued their unwavering support of Hezbollah, Hamas, and Mahmoud Abbas' presidency in Palestine, and if the Iranian government continues to do so, it will result in a greater obstacle to cooperation between Iran and Israel.

## **Benjamin Netanyahu's Leadership**

In 2009, Tel Aviv-born Benjamin Netanyahu became the Prime Minister of Israel. As a democratic-participatory system, Israel differs from Iran in that the populace has a larger say in legislation, which is discussed in their Knesset, or parliament. Netanyahu differs from Rouhani in the sense that while Netanyahu is the chairman of a center-right political party known as the Likud Party, his views on Iran, its nuclear program, and Palestinian territory are polar to Rouhani's opinions. The Netanyahu administration views Iran as an existential threat to Israel considering Iran's history of threatening rhetoric from past and current state leaders. Given Netanyahu and Rouhani's opposite party affiliations and political agenda, the possibility of the two state leaders reconciling and proposing an adequate compromise that will not put the other at a disadvantage appears bleak in the administrations of both countries.

On another note, Netanyahu has assessed that the Iranian-backed Lebanese terrorist organization, Hezbollah stands as an imminent threat to Israeli society and their existence as a Jewish state. The Israeli Defense Forces have made strides in improving intelligence gathering on both terrorist organization, as well as Iran, given the country's history of supporting anti-Israel groups. In regard to the prospect of improving relations between Israel and Iran, Netanyahu has stressed that if left to their own devices, Iran's support of Hezbollah, Hamas, and Assad's regime will evolve into a security threat for Israel, which will ultimately strangle any potential opportunity for both countries to cooperate in mutual harmony.<sup>66</sup>

## **Ayatollah Khamenei's Influence**

Even after Khomeini's death, this hatred carried on to succeeding leaders as conservatism and religiosity in Iranian politics has no competition, so there was little flexibility in Iran's

theocratic government. Shiite Islam is primarily based off of spiritual figures and a different interpretation of the Quran than Sunnis. After Khomeini's death, Iranian figures have continued to rely on Shiite Islam to guide legislation and political behaviors, but Iran's current president, Hassan Rouhani, has shown to be more moderate than his predecessors.

However, the fault in Iran's government becoming more progressive is that it doesn't matter how progressive the president may appear, their political opinions are nothing at the hands of the clergy members. Although President Rouhani is given some responsibility in legislation and the overseeing of other establishments, the current Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is essentially the one who is in charge of foreign policy decisions, nuclear proliferation, and diplomatic relations. The presence and dominance of religious conservatives in Iranian politics and decision-making despite the president coming from a more reform background symbolizes a major obstacle in any peacemaking processes to occur as only the voices of the religious elites are heard. Ayatollah Khamenei has consistently demonstrated his dominant influence over Iranian society and politics due to his strict religious views. Since Rouhani represents the Moderation and Development Party, a reformist party, and is ultimately more progressive than Khamenei, religious leaders like Khamenei and the Revolutionary Guard will uphold a conservative standard, even if it means entrenching on Rouhani's goals. After the 1979 Revolution, the Supreme Leaders have always wielded their dominance over any former and current presidents due to Iran's theocratic political structure.<sup>67</sup> Politically, Rouhani typically controls domestic policies, while Ayatollah Khamenei is essentially the face of Iran in the international community.



## **The Iran Nuclear Deal**

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, also known as the Iran Nuclear Deal, is a framework agreement formed between the United States, United Kingdom, France, Russia, China, and Germany, known as the P5+1. During the Obama administration, the objective of the deal was to curtail Iran's uranium enrichment, which would ultimately lengthen the time it would take for Iran to construct a nuclear weapon. According to the agreement, the end goal was to facilitate a compromise between the Islamic Republic of Iran. In exchange for Iran's cooperation and restrictions on nuclear activities, the participating countries would gradually lift economic sanctions. After nearly two years of meetings and negotiations, a deal was reached in 2015. On July 14<sup>th</sup>, 2015, the deal was announced after several meetings were held in Switzerland.

One of the largest compromises established in the nuclear deal was the reduction of Iran's uranium enrichment by 98%, leaving Iran to enrich at 3.67% of their previous uranium stockpiles until 2031.<sup>68</sup> Two of the enrichment facilities, Fordow and Natanz, were to be severely restricted, as well as the heavy-water reactor in Arak be disabled.<sup>69</sup> Any research developments are limited to one area in Natanz and is restricted until 2024. In the event of Iran producing excess fuel from nuclear reactors, Iran is required to export any enrichments that cross the 3.67% threshold.<sup>70</sup>

Another clause in the agreement pertains to the transparency of Iran's nuclear facilities to regular inspections conducted by the International Atomic Energy Agency. Under the conditions that Iran passes such inspections and follows up on previous agreements, restrictions and sanctions would be gradually lifted. If Iran does not agree to allow the IAEA access for inspection, the Joint Commission composed of the U.S., U.K., Germany, Russia, China, European Union, France, and Germany will have the final verdict. Consequences for Iran

refusing IAEA access to its nuclear facilities may result in the reappointment of economic and nuclear sanctions, and even the establishment of more severe ones.

The responsibility of the P5+1 countries includes the removal of specific sanctions and blacklisted Iranian businesses in exchange for Iran's participation in restrictions and cooperation. As a signatory of the Non-Proliferation Treaty since 1970, Iran had previously agreed to not pursue the creation of nuclear weapons, but rather maintain their nuclear energy for medicinal and environmental purposes.<sup>71</sup> In 2018, the secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council Ali Shamkhani declared that withdrawing from the NPT was a considerable option for Iran.<sup>72</sup> This came in response to the United States' withdrawal from the JCPOA in May of 2018.

### **Goals of the Obama Administration**

Under the Obama administration, former President Barack Obama's motive for participating in the JCPOA was to enact in positive confidence-building measures that would instill trust between Iran and world powers. In 2015, President Obama viewed the deal as an advancement towards a "more hopeful world".<sup>73</sup> This fulfilled his promise to enact compromises with enemies, such as Iran. Given the change in Iranian leadership from hardliner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, to pragmatist Hassan Rouhani as president, Obama and the rest of the P5+1 had found an opportunity to engage in building trust with a historic enemy once more. Prior to the ratification of the deal, Obama had pledged to veto any congressional disagreements with the deal, as he views the potential of the deal in a more optimistic light. Within the administration, the JCPOA was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to cease the historic hostilities between Washington and Tehran, and that not seizing this chance would be detrimental to the diplomatic future of the U.S. and Iran. This move was partially motivated by Obama's desire to reconcile

with opponents and to include Iran into the international economy apart from brutal sanctions that have decimated the country. Such a move was not entirely welcome with open arms, as many Americans were skeptical this would give Iranians the upper hand in negotiation.

### **Perspectives from the Trump Administration**

Before Trump's 2016 inauguration, he was a vocal opponent of the nuclear deal, labeling it as "terrible", and accusing Obama as striking the deal "from desperation".<sup>74</sup> Even before his presidency, he displayed extensive pessimism regarding the Iranian government's potential to abide by the deal, saying "You know the Iranians are going to cheat, they're great negotiators and you know they're going to cheat."<sup>75</sup> He displays an isolationist approach in Iranian foreign policy, often unwilling to participate in confidence-building measures with adversarial governments, an antithesis to his predecessor. After removing the United States from nuclear negotiations, he slammed the deal as "one-sided". As a former businessman, Trump's strategy towards the nuclear deal was to maximize benefits for the Americans while exerting a lower amount of effort. If the Iranians buckled under the force of American hegemony alone and completely abandoned the idea of becoming nuclear, Trump would consider such an action a monumental success. However, in a political standpoint, the P5+1 group is dealing with a country that has long expressed its desire to become a nuclear threshold state at any cost. However, since their previous actions have earned them a plethora of merciless sanctions, it was in Iran's interest to participate in the JCPOA, also in an attempt to regain the trust of world powers and to reintegrate themselves into the international economy.

Another vocal appointment of the nuclear deal was Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. As Israel views Iran's nuclear path as an existential threat to Israeli society,

Netanyahu opposes any compromise that provides Iran with any relative path towards nuclear acquisition. He also disapproved of the lifting of P5+1 sanctions in exchange for Iran's cooperation in their end of the deal. As Iran has previously called for Israel's demise and does not recognize Israel's statehood, Netanyahu views Tehran's nuclear obtainment as an existential threat to Israel and the Middle East's future for peace. Since Trump's perception of the deal was pessimistic and less opportunistic than Obama's, the change in American leadership negatively impacted Washington's relationship with Iran, but positively impacted the United States' relationship with Israel. This is due to a change in personality and policy between Obama and Trump. Netanyahu's firm stance on terrorism and emphasis on Israeli national security strikes several similarities to Trump's agenda. Therefore, Netanyahu realizes he has a larger impact on Trump's decision-making than that of Obama, given their history of disagreements of the nuclear deal and Middle Eastern foreign policy. With President Trump in office, Netanyahu is more comfortable with negotiating with Trump on tactics in the Middle East than with President Obama. Netanyahu's history as the longest sitting Prime Minister allows him to set Israel's agenda in the region, which is a make-or-break situation given its geographic proximity to historic opponents. Trump and Netanyahu have enjoyed a far closer relationship, than Obama had, as the United States made efforts to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital, as well as declaring the Golan Heights part of Israeli territory. Such decisions have continued to solidify the American-Israeli relationship, and as both figures proceed to complete diplomatic favors, Netanyahu and Trump's realms of influence into their respective government will continue to expand.

According to *Times of Israel*, a video clip shows Benjamin Netanyahu stating Israel's responsibility in Trump's decision to exit the Iran nuclear deal. He notes that "We convinced the

US president [to exit the deal] and I had to stand up against the whole world and come out against this agreement,”.<sup>76</sup> In the video, the Israeli Defense Force veteran acknowledges his role in pivoting Trump away from the deal, but also notes that Israel’s needs were not the only factor in the American withdrawal. Since Trump has been an active opponent of the deal prior to his election, his personal agenda and consensus from the Republican Party were other contributing factors to this historic and controversial decision.

Once Trump was voted into office, his take on the Iran deal only amplified, as his fiery rhetoric on social media began to undo efforts of rapprochement by the P5+1. While Trump’s voters and his own cabinet were well aware of his vocal disapproval towards the deal, the sudden departure from the deal in May 2018 came at a total surprise. Much to the Iranians’ dismay, his announcement of withdrawal came at a time where Tehran was actively complying with the deal and inspections were up to standard in the eyes of the IAEA. In 2019, tensions between the U.S. and Iran have continued to escalate after Trump’s scrapping of the deal. Mutual distrust has flared, as the United States is also defending Israel and Saudi Arabia against Iran, a regional enemy. Given the proximity of the 2020 American elections, the topic of Iran will be a widely discussed subject in the primary debates and campaign trails as it is becoming an increasingly global issue. As an incumbent, President Trump will have to tread lightly when discussing Iran and his strategy while on the campaign trail in order to maintain his constituency and secure a second term.

### **European Perspective on the Accord**

Arguably, the European counterpart of the P5+1 (U.K., France, and Germany) has been more optimistic than the United States in regards to the nuclear accord. High Representative of

the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini expressed support for the deal, and in 2017, Mogherini traveled to Washington to defend the nuclear deal when President Trump first threatened to scrap it.<sup>77</sup>

In the past, European members of the P5+1 group have met with the United States to urge them to not pull out of the deal, as it could be disastrous for their relationship with Iran if the U.S. left. Considering Iran's previous compliance to the restrictions found in the accord, the EU encouraged the U.S. to remain in the deal, for the sake of postponing Iran's nuclear program and to assist in reintegrating Iran into the world's economy.

Given that the United States decided to exit the deal in 2018, such a decision left Europe and Iran scrambling to preserve the prospects of the nuclear deal. Since President Trump's announcement to leave the JCPOA, Iran has notified the remaining signatories of the P5+1 that it is their responsibility to hold up their part of the agreement and that if they fail to do so, they would quickly see Iran depart, as well. Previously, the EU has pledged to continue their support for the deal, with or without the United States, but Washington's absence evidently left a hole in communication between the two hemispheres.

Afterwards, Iran announced that it would enrich their uranium stockpile past the agreed limit by the end of June 2019 in response to the United States vowing to send over 120,000 troops to the Persian Gulf. This announcement comes after two Saudi Arabian oil tankers were damaged, which the American government announced that the attack was undoubtedly orchestrated by Iran. However, this information is still unclear, as the drone strike came from Yemen, so there is speculation that the Iranian-backed group, the Houthis, are behind it. Enraged by the United States pointing the finger at Iran, the country delivered an ultimatum to Europe, demanding they save the nuclear deal, or Iran would withdraw. As a result of increased tensions,

President Trump has vowed to send an additional 1,000 troops to the Persian Gulf as a warning towards the Iranian government. Unequivocally, this escalated animosities between Tehran and Washington, as the attack to the Saudi oil tankers especially infuriate the United States as Riyadh is a key ally in the region, as well as Israel.

Earlier in May 2019, Iranian officials alluded to withdrawing from areas of the nuclear deal if the remaining members are unable to maintain the agreement, as well as continue on without the United States.<sup>78</sup> Depending on how much Iran decides to enrich their uranium past the agreed threshold of 3.67%, as well as reinstall deactivated centrifuges in Fordow and Natanz, Iran could significantly shorten their path to becoming nuclear. The government added that they would continue to exponentially increase their uranium enrichment past July unless the European powers are able to lift long-promised sanctions. Despite Europe's pleas to continue abiding by the nuclear deal, Iran is gradually withdrawing from previous compromises, as a decry to the United States' actions. Without the United States' faith in the nuclear deal, Iran, in turn, loses faith that they will reap the eventual benefits states in the deal, as they view their path to becoming a nuclear threshold state in a blurrier lens after Washington's retreat. Also in May 2019, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei of Iran warned President Trump that he had "made a mistake" and that "I said from the first day: don't trust America", implying Washington's lasting skepticisms towards Iran's capabilities of becoming nuclear under the deal.<sup>79</sup> On the one year anniversary of the American exit from the JCPOA, the Iranian government announced that the remaining P5+1 countries will have ten days fix the deal, as they will surpass their enrichment limit within that time.<sup>80</sup> This has escalated European anxieties to save the crumbling deal and to postpone Iran's enrichment program, as well as balancing the pressure of lifting brutal economic sanctions on Iran's suffering economy. On June 17, 2019 the U.S. government announced the addition of

1,000 troops to the Gulf due to their accusation of Iran causing the attacks of six oils ships in the Gulf of Oman since May 2019.

For Europe, the U.S. withdrawal leaves the European Union with no other choice but to scramble towards making the deal appealing enough for Tehran to remain, while Iran is continuously becoming more disenchanted by the JCPOA, as their rival of nearly four decades had displayed little inclination towards rapprochement.

### **Russia and China's Perspective on the Accord**

The two Eastern countries of the nuclear deal possess similarities and differences with Europe in regards to the accord. On one side, both Russia and China support the deal, as it provides Iran a path to eventual nuclear proliferation, but at a postponed rate. However, Russia and China's relationship with Iran is not as clouded with American influence, given previous diplomatic and economic struggles with the United States.

In May 2019, Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif visited Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Beijing to plead cooperation on the deal. Zarif had also mentioned that Russia and China were instrumental in the prolongment of the deal, disparaging the European members as letting Tehran down.<sup>81</sup> China has expressed commitment to the nuclear deal and that it is the responsibility of the international community to uphold the contents of the agreement. This could lead to a closer relationship between Tehran and Beijing as they have found common ground in the deal, but both are experiencing pressure from the U.S. to cut ties with Iran as a result of the U.S. scrapping their end of the deal.<sup>82</sup> Due to this increased pressure to dismiss Iran from the roundtable, it may further isolate the United States from the international community if enough of the P5+1 sides with maintaining the deal with Iran.



Russia's relationship with the Iran nuclear deal ultimately blames the U.S. for scrapping the agreement, with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrow adding that "The U.S. is to blame for the situation and it makes it difficult for both Iran to fulfill its obligations and ... for the general state of the nuclear nonproliferation regime."<sup>83</sup> According to the *Washington Post*, the U.S. departure allows Russia to set the agenda for negotiation of the agreement and that that it gives Russia the opportunity to better its relationship with Tehran in Washington's absence.<sup>84</sup> While an improved relationship with Tehran comes with downsides with the United States, it simply wants to reap the economic and diplomatic benefits that comes from this partnership.

### **Iranian Cooperation in the Nuclear Deal**

In 2016, Iran had succeeded in dismantling a significant amount of major nuclear facilities, which resulted in the partial lifting of sanctions imposed by the United States. According to *Foreign Affairs*, Iran had shipped out over 25,000 pounds of uranium stockpile, showing its compliance with the enrichment threshold in 2016.<sup>85</sup> However, the decision in Iran's cooperation with the nuclear deal lies in the hands of the P5+1, as they are the ones to determine if Iran is genuinely attempting to normalize its status in the international community. Iran is awarded more privileges, such as invitations to talks on Syria and the lifting of brutal economic sanctions, as they continue to stand by their nuclear promises.

In April of 2018, Netanyahu announced from the Israeli Defense Ministry that the country had obtained hard evidence depicting Iran's deviance from the nuclear deal. Beginning his speech with "Iran lied. Big time", the Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu displayed 55,000 CD files during his presentation to legitimize his claim that Iran has not been abiding by the implications of the deal after all. As a means of persuading President Trump to back out of the

JCPOA, he concluded with saying that he hopes the American president will “do the right thing”.<sup>86</sup> Netanyahu’s presentation gathered mixed reviews with some arguing had Iran had agreed to the deal with an ulterior motive, while others noted Netanyahu’s pessimism towards Iran having a responsible nuclear program. Overall, his accusatory presentation comes across as trying to find faults in the JCPOA and Iran, another attempt to mobilize the international community to isolate Tehran and scrap its prospects of going nuclear.



**Photo 2:** Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu showcasing 183 CDs of information regarding Iran’s construction of nuclear weapons in an unseen warehouse.<sup>87</sup>

IAEA Director-General Yukiya Amano concluded in April 2019 that Iran has abided by its commitments in the nuclear deal. The IAEA’s quarterly report concluded that Iran’s uranium reserve has consistently stayed beneath the implemented threshold and that Iran has displayed transparency in IAEA snap inspections. While Tehran has been abiding by the clauses within the accord, Iran’s IAEA representative, Kazem Gharibabadi, noted that it is the responsibility of the remaining P5+1 states to maintain that Iran will continue to benefit from the compromises written within the deal.<sup>88</sup>

Iran's successful accordance to the deal comes as a result of following the confidence-building measures written within the JCPOA. The deal itself was drafted as a means of facilitating trust and open communication between Iran and the P5+1 powers. With the ongoing hostilities between Iran and much of the Western world since the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the deal was implemented as a means of putting an end to diplomatic unrest. The P5+1 and the Obama administration had hoped that this deal would curtail Iran's nuclear production for weaponized purposes, as well as a solid mechanism of rebuilding diplomatic bridges previously burned by past administrations and actions. However, the departure of the United States from the nuclear accord not only drastically impacted American-Iranian relations, but ultimately complicated the functions of the nuclear deal.

### **American Departure from the Nuclear Deal**

A large blow to the future of the nuclear deal, President Donald Trump formally announced the United States' decision to withdraw from the JCPOA in May 2018. President Trump noted that the deal was "decaying and rotten" and that Iran was "on the cusp of acquiring the world's most dangerous weapons".<sup>89</sup> Despite the European counterpart of the P5+1 advising the United States otherwise, President Trump not only departed from the deal, but vowed to impose "the highest level of economic sanctions" towards Iran, despite the IAEA verifying Iran's compliance to the JCPOA.<sup>90</sup> He also noted that any allies continuing to do business with Iran would also be subject to sanctions, as he planned to lift exceptions to those participating in trade with Tehran.

In response to the departure, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani commented "...we have to wait to see how the other five countries will react", in connection to the remaining countries in

the P5+1 group. As a result, the Iranian Majlis parliament set fire to a paper of the U.S. flag chanting “Death to America!”, while Rouhani also mentioned “I’m happy that the pesky being has left the [agreement]”.<sup>91</sup>

President Trump had gained support from exiting the deal from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin-Salman, with Netanyahu adding that he “fully supports” the withdrawal, and that the Crown Prince “welcomes” it. As a regional rival to Iran, Saudi Arabia’s response certainly escalated regional uneasiness between Riyadh and Tehran, as Saudi Arabia is a vocal opponent of the nuclear deal.

The European Union’s High Representative for Foreign Affairs Federica Mogherini pledged EU support for preserving the nuclear deal, despite the departure of one of the architects of the JCPOA.

The United States’ response to the nuclear deal is a massive gamble, as President Trump believes that the Iranians are “bluffing” when the government states that their compliance with the nuclear deal is their only method of offering peace. The eventual reinstatement of sanctions on the crippled Iranian economic has stressed already-fragile diplomatic relations between Tehran and Washington. This reversal of an Obama-era agreement symbolizes discontent between the Republican and Democratic parties, as even Republicans are split on the matter. U.S. National Security Advisor John Bolton, a massive supporter of the departure, added that such an exit solidifies the United States’ power over Iran as they were able to leave the deal in any instance that Iran was in violation.<sup>92</sup> The impact of John Bolton and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s rhetoric and neo-conservatist ideals greatly influences President Trump’s view of the nuclear deal, and ultimately paves the way for future involvement with Iran. This distrust of the Iranian nuclear agenda from the kickoff embodies a lack of American faith in Iran following the

agreements listed in the deal to begin with. Such skepticism on Washington's part does little to restructure diplomatic ties with Tehran, nor does it set the table for future confidence-building measures.

### **Impact of Neo-Conservatism on American Foreign Policy in Iran**

Since the nominations of John Bolton and Mike Pompeo for National Security Advisor and Secretary of State, the influence of foreign policy hawks in international affairs has remained rampant. Neoconservatism, a commonality between Bolton and Pompeo, essentially combines notions of conservatism, individualism, and a need to promote democracy and American values outside of the United States. In neoconservatism, there is a solid reliance on the American military and a need to showcase such power to the rest of the world as a mechanism for promoting American interests. This leads American foreign policy on an interventionist route, which aims to infiltrate regimes that are not welcoming to American values, such as Iran, and prompt a political revolution, which ultimately catalyzes instability and animosity.<sup>93</sup>

John Bolton, former United Nations Ambassador under President George W. Bush, has long held the label of neoconservative, due to his hawkish views on foreign policy and an unwavering focus on regime change in Iran and North Korea. On the topic of Iran, Bolton's push for regime change has angered many Iranian politicians, once predicting that he would be spending Christmas in Iran. This prompted Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei to dismiss several unnamed officials as "first class idiots".<sup>94</sup> Bolton's intense opposition to the nuclear deal is well known in Trump's cabinet, as he has displayed a long-standing distrust towards the Iranian government for nearly two decades.<sup>95</sup> His relationship with the anti-government exile group, Muhahideen-e-Khalq, came under scrutiny, as many said it should have disqualified him from

senior positions. Until 2012, MEK was designated as a terrorist organization, but in 2016, he declared that "...the regime in Tehran needs to be overthrown as the earliest opportunity!".<sup>96</sup>

His hawkish views on foreign policy and persistence for an overthrow of the Iranian theocracy is a side effect to his neoconservative agenda. Bolton's ability to actively influence Trump's agenda may be diplomatically detrimental to the future of the American-Iranian dynamic. President Trump, who is known for brutal honesty and rhetoric that is often perceived as undiplomatic, easily attracts Bolton's straight-talking militant approach to regimes that do not practice American values.<sup>97</sup>

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's neoconservative lens on American foreign policy is rather similar to that of John Bolton's. His support for the American exit from the nuclear deal matches that of Bolton, but as Secretary of State, he is able to promote neoconservative and American values outside of the country to a greater extent. He also supports a change in the Iranian regime, and in 2016, he even announced "Congress must act to change Iranian behavior, and ultimately, the Iranian regime."<sup>98</sup> The dismissal of former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson opened the door for an individual to share Trump's desire for a preemptive attack on Iran. As a proclaimed "Iran hawk", he has participated in the unification of neoconservative foreign policy interests within the Trump administration. His difference from Rex Tillerson was that Tillerson "doesn't respect the president", drawing back on Tillerson and Trump's previous disagreement on the fate of the nuclear deal.<sup>99</sup> Pompeo's shared view of imposing harsher economic sanctions on Iran coincide with that of President Trump's, as Pompeo once promised to bring "unprecedented financial pressure on the Iranian regime," alluding to any Iranian noncompliance.<sup>100</sup> The usage of sanctions as the colloquial "stick" without the addition of a "carrot", or benefit enjoyed by Iran, would consequently worsen regional tensions. As a result,

Iranians may eventually lose faith in the nuclear deal and may eventually depart from it themselves if they no longer have something to benefit from assuming they continue to hold up their part of the agreement.

Ultimately, Bolton and Pompeo's neoconservative rhetoric and activities have impacted Trump's decision-making towards Iran significantly. Their ideals have solidified the President's emphasis on showcasing the strength of the American military as a means of exuding hegemonic power and democracy across the international community. In essence, this state of affairs is not one to be ignored. Given that Trump is still a political neophyte, he is vulnerable to persuasion by his neoconservative cabinet members. While President Trump has disclosed that his administration does not favor an outbreak of war with Iran, there is a possibility that the banter of Bolton and Pompeo can result in a change of direction in the Trump agenda, which runs a disastrous possibility.<sup>101</sup>

One must also consider the possibility of Israel partaking in military confrontation with the Iranian regime, given their longstanding rivalry and previous threats of violence. However, such an action could not be done with the assistance of the United States given Israel's significantly smaller military force in comparison with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, as well as Israel's dangerous proximity to Iran, which can easily be reached by an intercontinental ballistic missile. In particular, the actions of Bolton and Pompeo have contributed to the hostilities between Iran and the United States, as the U.S. appears unwilling to utilize other methods of compromise and communication. For Iran, the country is continuously disenchanted with the idea of complying with the nuclear deal, as one of the leading powers departed from it due to a lack of faith and an excess of mutual distrust between both states.

## **Implications of a Nuclear Iran**

After the drafting of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, the relationship between Israel and the United States drifted, as Prime Minister Netanyahu argued that the needs of Israelis were not met during the creation of this deal and since Israel has no placeholder in the P5+1 committee, he essentially depended on President Obama to account for his needs. Given the historically close diplomatic ties shared by Israel and the United States, it was significant to Netanyahu and the Israeli people that their fears and arguments against Iran becoming a nuclear threshold state were acknowledged. On the Israeli side, Iran's endeavors in possessing weapons of mass destruction increase the overall anxiety of the state as their enemy, who disputes Israel's existence as a Jewish state, may have access to these highly coveted weapons. An agreement that prevents Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons will cease these existential fears, along with the amount of preparation Israel will have to display as a precautionary measure in the event that Iran's nuclear status changes for the worst.<sup>102</sup>

The possibility of Iran obtaining status as a nuclear threshold state, which means the state has the required technology to produce nuclear weapons, is an increasingly plausible scenario if the country follows their word and has their sanctions lifted on them. A nuclear threshold state is essentially a country that possesses most of the necessary materials needed to manufacture a nuclear weapon, such as uranium. However, the P5+1 countries fear that under the nuclear agreement, Iran will gather the materials for manufacturing a nuclear bomb as quickly as possible, allowing the country a nuclear arsenal faster than any country could predict. If Iran obtained a nuclear arsenal, they would be able to provide what the article labeled a "defensive umbrella" towards its allies. The problem lies in how Iran would treat enemy countries, perhaps using its nuclear resources as a blackmail tactic.<sup>103</sup> However, the goal of the deal is to increase



the difficulty for Iran to acquire a nuclear arsenal, providing many obstacles for Tehran to combat before enough uranium can be enriched to complete the task.

The significance of a nuclear Iran is relevant for Israel because the Israeli government views the possibility of Iran obtaining nuclear weapons as an existential threat to society given their hostile relationship and violent rhetoric imposed by the Iranian government.<sup>104</sup> Before the revolution, Israel had little problem with Iran's proliferation because the Shah had entirely different nuclear priorities in contrast to the current theocratic regime. Given Israel's geographic proximity of hostile groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas within the Palestinian Authority, the Israeli Defense Force is forced to resort to defensive measures to protect the integrity of their country. Since Israel faces continuous threats from Iran due to the country's very existence, Israel has supported past United Nations deals on Iran's nuclear proliferation, such as the P5+1 deal. The P5+1 involves the United States, the United Kingdom, Russia, France, China, and Germany working with Iran on their nuclear program. However, Israel is not involved in this decision-making process. For almost a decade, Israel has expressed its utmost discontent at the idea of a nuclear Iran given the country's history of breaking sanctions and ties with former nuclear deals by continuing to maintain uranium enrichment and hard water facilities.

In addition to Israel's disadvantage of not being in the decision-making process, the P5+1 has recently put the nuclear subject in the backseat, as European members of the group, the United Kingdom and Germany, wish to continue doing business with Iran. This does little to ease Israel's stress regarding Iran's nuclear program not only because Israel doesn't have an active say in the P5+1 program, but also considering that their issues are no longer a priority in this group. Since Israel did not sign the non-proliferation treaty, it has succeeded in acquiring a

nuclear arsenal. However, Israel has practiced the notion of “strategic ambiguity”, where Israel will not fully confirm, nor deny its arsenal. Such an action is used for Israel’s own safety given its proximity to geopolitical enemies. Iran has suspected Israel of harboring nuclear weapons, providing Tehran justification for creating its own arsenal. As a result, the Netanyahu administration has no choice than to simply promote global awareness of the consequences a nuclear Iran could have on the Middle East and the international community as a whole.<sup>105</sup> Netanyahu’s objective to notify the international community of the negative aspects of Iran’s nuclear program have been successful for many countries, as this helped European P5+1 members to increase the severity of their economic sanction on Iran as a consequence for Iran repeatedly violating procedures they agreed upon in the JCPOA. In the past, Netanyahu has been unsuccessful in proposing a nuclear deal that will satisfy both sides and result on an equal compromise since Iran continues to violate the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty of 1968, which formerly had the objective of preventing the spread of nuclear weapons, as well as promoting disarmament. A state as politically fractured as Iran has evidentially committed to not continue the manufacturing of weapons of mass destruction.

### **Effects of the Nuclear Deal on Iranian-Israeli Leadership**

Sanctions positioned by the United States and Europe have severely suppressed Iran’s economy, which has increased public disapproval towards President Rouhani, as the Iranian people look up to their leader to alleviate issues in the country’s political system. In both elections Rouhani has participated in, he had promised to fix Iran’s crumbling economy, lower the country’s elevating unemployment rate, and improve global trade. According to the World Bank, as of December 2017, Iran’s unemployment rate stands at a steep 11.9%.<sup>106</sup> In terms of

leadership, this has reflected poorly on President Rouhani's abilities to act on behalf of the Iranian people, and as a result of Iran's worsening unemployment rate and prolonged economic sanctions, the populace has participated in public demonstrations towards Rouhani's inability to keep his political and economic promises to improve life for Iranians.

Likewise, if the populace loses faith that Prime Minister Netanyahu can effectively propose a deal with will protect the Israeli people, similar actions as done by the Iranians may follow in Israel. In all countries, if the majority of the population feels that their leader, regardless of the form of government, is unable to act on behalf of the population and their protection, then they will demonstrate disapproval. In some cases, violent revolts may take place as a result of widespread discontent towards particular political leaders, such as the demonstrations of the 2011 Arab Spring. This places pressure on both state leaders to compromise on a deal that will satisfy the polar opposite demands of both Rouhani and Netanyahu, as well as the needs of the Iranian and Israeli populations. However, finding a middle ground on a deal that will do just that is much easier said than done after a thorough analysis of the diplomatic and political differences each leader possesses towards one another.

The largest shortcoming of this agreement is that altogether, the JCPOA doesn't rid Iran's nuclear program. It simply buys times for Iran to become a nuclear state, and after the deal expires, there isn't anything preventing Iran from becoming a nuclear state if they follow the implications of the agreement, but such an instance is in the distant future. Iran's nuclear process is essentially limited instead of prevented, so either way, Iran technically still has a path to proliferation. The majority of Iranians and Americans still note that this agreement was necessary and a big step for cooperation between the two states. Supreme Leader Khamenei still warned the America was not to be entirely trusted and for that reason, that it would not be wise

to insert himself into the deal. Two years after the deal was signed, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani has been criticized for his inability to bring Iran's economy back to its former peak.<sup>107</sup> The issue of Iran becoming a nuclear state only furthers tensions between the two countries and combined with post-revolution of Israel from past Ayatollah Khomeini, Israel fears that if Iran is successful in their nuclear endeavor, it will result in a Middle Eastern edition of the Cold War.

## **Conclusion**

Given the paradigm shift suffered between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Israel following the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the relationship between Iranian and Israeli leaders possess an interesting, contrasting history. Both states exhibit nearly polar differences in political structures, historical milestones, and personalities of their respective leaders. The Iranian Revolution consequently altered Iranian-Israeli relations for decades to come as Iran went from viewing Israel as an ally, to an adversary seemingly overnight. Influenced by ideological allegiances and pattern of political behaviors, both states exhibit an unwillingness to compromise and adapt to each other's differences.

President Rouhani of Iran and Prime Minister Netanyahu of Israel portray immensely different personalities and foreign policy tactics which ultimately pins both states against one another since each country views the other as an imminent security threat. In terms of foreign policy, both leaders have contrasting priorities. For Israelis, their main objective is to maintain intelligence and surveillance procedures given Israel's geographic proximity towards enemy territories such as Syria, Palestine, and Lebanon. When it comes to Iran, Rouhani is concerned with obtaining a nuclear arsenal partially to intimidate Israel, while also to increase their status in the international community.



## Chapter Five: Conclusion

### An Overview

Since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, relations between Iran and Israel has suffered an immense paradigm shift from cooperation to confrontation. At one point, both states enjoyed a mutually beneficial dynamic, a spark of stability in a tumultuous region. A combination of factors has not only decimated this formerly functional relationship, but has also prolonged unnecessary animosity towards one another. As one state continues to embark on the path to nuclear threshold, the other views its proliferation as an existential threat to their government and society. Both states see themselves as a religious minority in a sea of Sunni states, and both experienced ideological revolutions that forever changed their respective societies. However, the aforementioned obstacles have continued to divide both states, rendering the future for rapprochement bleak.

My goal in this research was to understand and explain what exactly went wrong in this formerly peaceful relationship. Through the perspectives of foundational ideologies, regional rivalries and vulnerabilities, and finally, leadership choices and behaviors. My hypothesis stated that these factors provided the largest obstacles to peace between Iran and Israel. The impact of this relationship extends beyond the Middle East and North Africa, into the United States and European Union. The prospect of warfare in this region is plausible, given the mutual inability to compromise and putting ideological differences aside. Iran's usage of proxy groups in the Middle East pose a massive threat to Israel's sovereignty, and with the United States' historical support of Israel, such actions will ultimately destabilize the region beyond repair.

In the policy aspect, this research holds significance as it entails the prospect of Iranian becoming a nuclear state, the future of the JCPOA, and Israel's status in the Middle East. The

heart of the conflict lies in these struggles, and as the race for regional dominance looms large, the Iranian government vows for the destruction of Israel, while Netanyahu vows to never let Iran become nuclear. Additionally, both countries hail from different historical backgrounds and in terms of diplomacy, relations have become more aggressive than ever. In a time where a proxy war is very possible, the future of rapprochement between Iran and Israel strays further from optimism. If these three factors are given more consideration and analysis, it is possible to bring the two states closer together, but as time goes on, it may become nearly impossible to revert the relationship back to its prior state.

### **Further Study**

With any body of research, there is always material to elaborate on. That being said, the analysis of this relationship should not end with this study, and must be continuously explored and shaped. In order to fulfill the gaps in this research, it may interest potential researchers to conduct a separate analysis of Iranian and Israeli leadership. Understanding the individual impact of each Iranian president and Israeli Prime Minister on their respective countries may assist in clarifying differences in political behaviors. An application of various leadership theories, such as Barber's Model of Presidential Behavior, can be utilized on both countries to complete an individual level of analysis. As observed in Chapter 4, some leaders in Israel and Iran had a larger impact on the diplomatic relationship than others, some for better and some for worse.

Another opportunity for further study is how the change in leadership in the United States will impact not only Washington's relationship with Israel, but its involvement in the Iranian-Israeli conflict. In 2020, there is an opportunity for another candidate to be elected if President

Trump loses the election. If this does not happen, 2024 will ultimately define the future of American leadership, as President Trump will be unable to run for another term.

Finally, I anticipate what the future of the JCPOA will hold for Iran's path to nuclear acquisition. If the P5+1 is unable to hash the remainder of the deal together to appeal the Iranian government, it may very well fall apart. If this occurs, further research on what Iran will do without having to abide by a nuclear deal with the remaining P5+1 members should be conducted.

### **Final Thoughts**

Overall, this study has risen as many questions as it has answered. It has prompted a passion to explore deeper in to the Iranian-Israeli dynamic, and how the Middle East and international community will fare. Agreeably, this issue will not be solved by one person, nor can it be entirely answered by one body of research. This is a dynamic that has the potential to stabilize the Middle East and the possibility of resolve one less conflict in such a turbulent region should be enough to promote further research. I am optimistic that with time, both states will eventually see eye-to-eye, not entirely, but enough to end the hostilities. It will require a mutual understanding of one another, and acceptance of differences. Once the two states begin to use their differences as a way to bring each other together, I am sure that stabilization will triumph violence.



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