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Understanding coercive nuclear reversal dynamics: a comparative case study of US coercive diplomacy against the nuclear programs of Iran, Libya, and South Africa

Ndzana Ndzana, J.Y.

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THE US AGAINST IRAN

In any war, the readiness to suffer and die, as well as to kill, represents the single most important factor. Take it away, and even the most numerous, best organized, best trained, best-equipped army in the world will turn out to be a brittle instrument. — Martin Van Creveld, Israeli military historian and theorist.



The main goal of this chapter is to analyze the coercive dynamics between the US (supported by the other Great Powers in the EU and the UN) and Iran to explain the positive or negative outcome of the coercive strategies adopted by Washington against Tehran's nuclear program. As previously highlighted, we hypothesized that coercive diplomacy could compel a State to abandon its nuclear (weapons) program under two conditions: if the coercer's strategy exploits the weaknesses of the target and if the coercer demonstrates a motivation to have a sustained campaign to compel the target. Hence, our research analysis will be carried out against the background of our hypotheses; more precisely, we will always consider to what extent the US coercive strategy exploited the weaknesses of Iran, and to what extent the US demonstrated a motivation to implement a sustained campaign to compel Iran to adopt less controversial nuclear policy. Specifically, the chapter will assess **how the Iran's decision to comply or resist the US request relates to the political and economic effects of the Washington's coercive diplomacy**. Additionally, the chapter shall examine **how the Washington's escalation's tactics may have influenced Tehran's ultimate decision regarding the coercer's demands**.

Considering the propositions of our theoretical framework (proportionality, reciprocity, and credibility) and the choice of the structured-focused method, the chapter will be divided into sub-sections which aim at answering the following questions: **what were the objectives pursued by the US when implementing its coercive policies against the Iranian nuclear program? What were coercive strategies adopted to achieve these objectives? What were the expected outcomes of the US after implementing its coercive strategies? What were the actual outcomes at the end of the process, and why such outcomes?** The answer to these questions will help us to demonstrate the validity of the following four elements regarding the effectivity of a coercive strategy in the nuclear realm: the display by the coercer of strategic empathy towards its target, the formulation of clear and acceptable demands to the target, display by the coercer of a higher resolve than the target to achieve his/her objective, and the offer of credible incentives to the target if the target complies. The chapter is divided into five sections: we will first briefly analyze the history of the relations between the US and Iran (section I). We will then stress the context of the emergence of the Iranian nuclear program (section II) and the characteristics of Iranian decision-making (section III). The fourth section will analyze the coercive dynamics between the US and Iran, while the fifth section will highlight the theoretical lessons from the previous coercive dynamics.

4.1 SECTION I – A SHORT HISTORY OF IRAN'S RELATIONSHIP WITH THE GREAT POWERS.

Due to its strategic position in Central Asia and its natural resources, Iran has been subject to massive competition from its rivals and opponents, both from the East and the West. However, our research is focused only on Iran-Western relations. Indeed, thanks to its strategic geographical position, Iran straddles two continents (Europe and Asia), which makes it an essential crossroad for international trade. Accordingly, Iran gradually found itself at the heart of an imperialist rivalry between the major global powers of the time, like France,³⁹⁵ the Soviet empire, and the British Empire. Yet, Russia and the British Empire are the Great Powers which substantially influenced Iranian politics from the 19th to the 20th Century. Indeed, they planned to use the Persian Empire as a significant asset in their respective geopolitical agenda; the subsequent rivalry between these two great powers of the time is better known as “the Great Game”, which lasted for about ninety-four years (1803 to 1907).

The two Powers mentioned above have had complex relationships, sometimes peaceful, often acrimonious. As previously mentioned, the geographical position of Iran made it a strategic crossroads for international trade and a rear base for the conquest of Asia. As Lord Curzon, viceroy for India, put it, Persia was “the pieces on a chessboard upon which is being played out a game for the domination of the world.”³⁹⁶ Consequently, the two Great Powers mostly had conflicting geopolitical agendas. However, it is noteworthy that Persian (Iranian) natural resources were not yet the prominent bone of contention between foreign powers. Instead, the geopolitical calculations were more political (in terms of zone of influence) and economic (in terms of markets and domination of seaports for trade). In this regard, Chris Paine and Erica Schoenberger spoke of the “strategic and economic advantage” of Persia.³⁹⁷ Russia did not hide its geopolitical appetite in this regard.

Russia's ambition was to control Central Asia and the surrounding regional seaports, enabling it to access the Indian market. Establishing a naval base in the Persian Empire was a decisive first step in this regard. However, Moscow had to overcome two main obstacles: on the first hand, it was confronted by the Persian empire and its vast

³⁹⁵ MALEK, Gabriel : **La place géopolitique de l'Iran des Qâdjârs au sein du Grand Jeu, 1800-1946**, Les Clés du Moyen-Orient, April 24, 2018. An information accessed on the 15th of June 2020 from the link <https://www.lescledumoyenorient.com/La-place-geopolitique-de-l-Iran-des-Qadjars-au-sein-du-Grand-Jeu-1800-1946-1-2.html>

³⁹⁶ GILLIARD, David: **The Struggle for Asia, 1828-1914. A study in British and Russian imperialism**. New York: Holmes and Meier, 1977, p. 214

³⁹⁷ PAINE Chris and SCHOENBERGER Erica, **Iranian nationalism and the Great Powers: 1872-1954**, Middle East Research and Information Project, 1975, p 3.

territory, and India was already under the control of the British Empire on the second hand. To politically weaken the Shah, Russia forced the Persian Empire to sign the humiliating treaty of Golestan in 1813 and then the treaty of Turkmentchai in 1828, by which it annexed the territories in the northern part of the Arras River. However, Russia's politics in Iran became a source of concern for the British Empire after annexing the western parts of Afghanistan. As Daniel Yergin points out, *to Britain, Russia's expansion was a direct threat to India and the routes thereto*.³⁹⁸ To counter Russian military and political influence in Iran, the British sought to gain significant economic impact in the Persian Empire, a leverage they obtained thanks to the Anglo-Persian treaty of 1857. In fact, taking advantage of the Crimean war, which pitted the British (France, the Ottoman Empire) against Russia, Nasser-ed-din Chah decided to seize the city of Herat in Afghanistan. The British were hostile to the Persian plans and consequently declared war against the Persian Empire. The war ended with the signing of the previously mentioned Anglo-Persian treaty.

The Anglo-Persian Treaty of 1857 marks the beginning of the economic and political influence of the British Empire in Persian internal affairs. Thanks to this treaty, England was granted numerous rights and concessions, with the most important of them being the concession rights granted to Reuter. The first concession right, in the infrastructure sector, gave the British the exclusive right to build railway lines and exploit mines. Meanwhile, the second concession allowed Reuter to construct the Imperial Bank of Persia. In response to this initiative, Russians successfully called for the creation of a parallel bank: The Bank of Discount. Those banks, which were actual relays of the States to which they belonged, had developed a system of patronage among the Persian elite thanks to an ingenious strategy; Basically, they lent money to the Iranian elite class, and if they could not pay back, they were almost obliged to serve the State to which the bank belonged. It usually involved lobbying the Shah to obtain even more concessions. Nevertheless, Russia had a clear advantage over its British rival. Thanks to an agreement signed in 1880, the Tsar had a military regiment called Cossack in Iran, which received orders only from Russian officers. Russia used this military unit to leverage the Shah to obtain concessions.

Significantly weakened after the war against Japan in 1905, the Russians gradually reduced their imperial ambition until their partial international withdrawal following internal disturbances, notably the Bolshevik revolution of October 1917. As we will see later, this partial withdrawal of Russia from the Persian political landscape allowed the British to increase their influence in Iran, especially during the interwar period, precisely thanks to the concession of D'Arcy and the British oil exploitation that was

³⁹⁸ YERGIN, Daniel: **The Prize: The Epic quest for oil, money & power**, The US, Free Press, 2008, p.136

permitted. Although lacking the significant political influence of the British, the Soviets still had the opportunity to impact Persian political life and harm British interests. Thus, for example, they supported and financed the 1920 Gelan revolt. This revolt had been defeated by Reza Pahlavi, at the time, minister of war and future shah of Iran from 1925. However, after discovering its large oil reserves, Iran will be of even greater strategic importance.

The discovery of oil wells in Iran was a real strategic and geopolitical revolution. For, if Iran had been so far an economic and political asset for great powers, its current energy and oil capabilities made it the hunting ground of many states. It is important to remember that the Iranian oil potential had been first exploited by D'Arcy, a British (seller) who obtained, through a concession,³⁹⁹ the exclusive right to use Iran's oil wells, mainly in the country's south. From the political perspective, thanks to D'Arcy's benefit, the British obtained more significant regional political influence. Indeed, it enabled them to prevent foreign interference in Iran's domestic politics as much as possible. Hence, for the British government, losing this concession meant inviting its regional rivals to Iranian internal affairs. As Daniel Yergin noted, *the Treasury's rejection of D'Arcy's loan application seemed terribly short-sighted to the Foreign Office, and Lord Lansdowne immediately expressed concern that « there is danger of whole petroleum concession in Persia falling thus under Russian control. » Moreover, the Russians were not the only worry. D'Arcy's visit to Cannes to see the Rothschilds, with the threat that the concession might pass under French control was another geopolitical nightmare the British could not afford to have.*⁴⁰⁰

From a strategic point of view, Iranian oil, albeit in small quantities then, was already a viable source of energy for the British navy, which competed with the German fleet.⁴⁰¹ Having regained political stability, especially with the accession of Stalin to power, the Russians (Soviets) revived an incisive imperial policy in Iran (Persia). Consequently, despite its official neutrality, Iran was invaded again by the Red Army in the north and the British in the south during WWII; The reason for the invasion was due to the economic links between Iran and Germany. This dual occupation led to the abdication of Reza Shah in 1941 in favor of his son Mohammed Reza, and a tripartite agreement that legitimized the presence of foreign troops in Iran was signed in the wake on January 29, 1942. However, Russian militarism and English political influence led to the

³⁹⁹ More information is available on *the d'Arcy oil concession*. A document accessed from <http://www.teach-mena.org/themes/movements/handout-arcy-oil-concession.pdf> on October 2nd, 2019.

⁴⁰⁰ YERGIN, Daniel: *The Prize: The epic quest for oil, money & power*, *Op. Cit.*, p.141

⁴⁰¹ PAINE Chris and SCHOENBERGER Erica: *Iranian Nationalism and the Great Powers: 1872-1954*, *Op. Cit.*, p.8

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Iran-Soviet crisis of 1945-1946. This crisis was clear evidence of Russian imperial policy's failure in Iran and the entry of a new player on the Iranian chessboard: the US.

Unlike their contemporary bilateral diplomatic relation, the US and Iran have not always been foes. Considering the Russian-British interference, the Iranian authorities sought an alternative power to arbitrate or balance the geopolitical game between Russian and British on Iranian soil. Faithful to their *third power strategy* or *positive equilibrium* strategy,⁴⁰² the Iranian turned to the Americans, who still enjoyed a good reputation in the eyes of the Iranian nationalists. Given the absence of American imperialism in the Middle East at the time, despite heightened US imperial aggression in Latin America and East Asia during the ending years of the nineteenth century, Iranian nationalists considered the US as a benign imperial power, disinclined to encroach upon their sovereignty. However, great was the disappointment of the Iranian leaders with the hesitation of the US to step into the Iranian political game. This American reluctance was explained by its isolationism during the first years after WWII and the Wilsonian sovereignty idealism. However, the almost monopolistic British grip on Iranian affairs, particularly in terms of oil concessions and internal social changes in Iran, forced the US government to adopt a much more pragmatic Iranian policy.

With the end of WWII, the international system slowly but surely entered the American century. Regarding the Middle East, the US considered Iran and Saudi Arabia as the two secular arms of their regional policy. Their goal was to achieve a regional balance, considering the acrimonious relations between these two countries. Consequently, Iran passed under American influence amid the nascent Cold War. However, the dictatorship of Shah Pahlavi sparked several protests, ultimately leading to his regime's collapse and paving the way for the democratic election of Mohammed Mossadeck. The nationalization of the Iranian oil company by the nationalist Premier forced the United States and the British to foment a coup in 1953 against the democratically elected PM and thus restored the Shah, who remained in power until the 1979 revolution. The 1979 revolution and the US hostage crisis a few months later had profound consequences on Iran's domestic politics. On the first hand, it disrupted Iran's internal political order while it led to a geopolitical reorientation of Iran towards the East on the second hand. In other words, Iran deepened its relations with Russia and China.

The relationship between post-1979 Iran and Russia (the Soviet Union until 1990) was very suspicious initially, mainly because of the historical legacy of Tsarist Russia and its harmful influence on Iran's domestic affairs. Therefore, former Supreme Guide Khomeini described Russia as the "lesser Satan" compared to the "great Satan" the US

⁴⁰² The free library, **U.S.-Iranian relations, 1911-1951**. An information accessed on October 3rd, 2019 from <https://www.thefreelibrary.com/U.S.-Iranian+relations%2C+1911-1951.-a0236631106>.

was. Nonetheless, there was a rapprochement between Iran and Russia during the 1989/99 decade. With the end of the Iran-Iraq war between 1980-1988, the death of Supreme Leader Khomeini, as well as the withdrawal of the Soviet empire from Afghanistan, and finally, the implosion of the Soviet bloc in 1989, relations between Moscow and Tehran warmed up noticeably despite few disagreements (like sharing the resources of the Caspian Sea).⁴⁰³

Subsequently, Tehran's opening to Russia was followed by the visit of Iranian President Ali A. Rafsanjani to Moscow in 1989. During Putin's first term, Russia and Iran had challenging relations, especially during the presidency of nationalist president Ahmadinejad. This relationship continued during international talks on Iran's controversial nuclear program. Nevertheless, notwithstanding the complexity of their bilateral relations, Iran is an essential asset in the Russian regional strategy, especially when it came to jeopardizing US interests in the region; Iran was not a strategic asset only for Russia but for China in terms of fighting against American interests.

Unlike Russia, Iran has had good relations with China since ancient times. Since 1970 when they officially resumed their bilateral relationship, Beijing and Tehran maintained warm bilateral ties in several domains, including infrastructures, economic/trade and strategic or military.⁴⁰⁴ The excellence of Sino-Iranian relations has been visible during sensitive periods or crises that Iran was going through. For example, unlike the foreign powers that supported Iraq during the war against Iran in 1980, China provided secret military support to Tehran by delivering weapons. Moreover, although China has supported adopting the Security Council's coercive resolutions against Iran over its nuclear program, it has refrained from implementing them, preferring to continue its trade relations with Iran. This is undoubtedly due to the strategic importance of Iran to China. Indeed, since 2013, China's main aim has been to achieve its vast one-road one belt geopolitical agenda connecting Central Asia, Europe and Africa. Consequently, because of its geostrategic position, Tehran plays a pivotal role in the Chinese plan.

Moreover, unlike Saudi Arabia, whose foreign policy is influenced by the United States, Iran conducts an independent foreign policy and manages its natural resources differently from its regional rivals. Consequently, China needs stable and reliable energy suppliers due to its huge energy needs, precisely 1.2 million daily barrels. In this

⁴⁰³ KATZ N., Mark, *Russia and Iran*, Middle East Policy Council, Volume XIX, 2012 Fall N.3. Accessed from <https://www.mepc.org/russia-and-iran> on October 2, 2019.

⁴⁰⁴ LIU Jun and WU Lei, *Key Issues in China-Iran relations*, Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic studies, 2010, 17 pages.

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regard, Iran plays an instrumental role in *fueling the dragon's flame*.⁴⁰⁵ For instance, China imported 7% of its oil needs from Iran in 2017.⁴⁰⁶ But energy security is not the only reason Iran is a strategic partner for China. In fact, Iran also helps China to balance the US regional hegemony. Unlike its regional rivals, Iran has an acrimonious relationship with the US, which is a strategic guarantee for China's interest in the region. In other words, just like Russia, Iran is a strategic shield for China against Western and US regional hegemony in the Middle East.

Several lessons can be learned from this short history of the relations between Iran and the Great Powers. First, modern Iran and Ancient Persia share a common political culture of pride and leadership in the region. Second, irrespective of the form of the State, or the nature of the political regime, there have always been foreign interferences in Iran's domestic politics. Third and consequently, Iranian leaders negatively perceive their region, as they are convinced that they are surrounded by allies of their historical adversaries, especially the US. Therefore, the nuclear and ballistic programs (after the war against Iraq, as we will see later) ensure the country's independence and deter Iran's regional adversaries. Consequently, the next section will analyze the emergence of Iran's nuclear program with an emphasis on its origin, rationale and implications for the region.

⁴⁰⁵ DOUGLAS K., John, et al: **Fuelling the Dragon's Flame: How China's Energy Demands Affect its Relationships in the Middle East**, presented to U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission In fulfilment of Contractual Obligations, September 14, 2006

⁴⁰⁶ China oil imports. Data from **The Observatory of Economic Complexity**. Accessed on 20th of June 2020 from <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2019/sep/11/irans-increasing-reliance-china>

4.2 SECTION II – THE EMERGENCE OF THE IRANIAN NUCLEAR PROGRAM: ORIGINS, RATIONALE, AND REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS.

Why did the Iranian authorities decide to build a nuclear program, and what implications does such a strategic asset have for the region? The objective of this section is to answer the previous questions substantially. Building and maintaining a nuclear program has human, political, and economic costs, and certainly strategic implications. Investigating these elements in the context of Iran will help us understand the importance of the nuclear program for Iran and explain its positions during negotiations with the US.

4.2.1 Iran's nuclear program: origins and rationale.

Ironically, Americans are the Godfathers of the Iranian nuclear program. Considering the significant risks of horizontal nuclear proliferation, but also in the context of the strategic rivalry with the USSR, US President Dwight Eisenhower adopted the “Atom for Peace” agenda. As Michelle Gaietta points out, “realizing that the United States had lost the scientific monopoly on this (nuclear) technology, Eisenhower attempted to shrink the predominant military connotation of atomic energy to revamp the image of the United States and strengthen its influence on the delicate balance of power of the Cold War.”⁴⁰⁷ The *Atom for peace* agenda was based on the idea that the US would share the nuclear secret with its allies. This nuclear cooperation was concretized by constructing civilian nuclear programs to prevent US allies from building endogenous nuclear programs and falling under Soviet influence.

Consequently, Iran, then an ally of the Americans in the Middle East, signed a nuclear cooperation agreement with the US in 1957. Under this agreement's framework, the Tehran Nuclear Research Centre hosted the Tehran Nuclear Reactor ten years later (1967) with a capacity of 5 megawatts. The Americans pledged to supply the reactor with fuel, while Iran committed to signing the Non-Proliferation Treaty, thus guaranteeing the exclusively civilian or peaceful nature of its nuclear program.⁴⁰⁸ However, following several domestic and international factors, the Americans began to doubt the Iranian government's sincere intentions regarding its alleged peaceful use of nuclear energy. Among the external factors are the building of the Brazilian and Indian nuclear programs, while internal factors refer to the logistical capabilities of the Iranian nuclear program.

⁴⁰⁷ GAIETTA, Michele: **The trajectory of Iran's nuclear program**, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, p.6

⁴⁰⁸ REARDON, Robert: **Containing Iran: strategies for addressing the Iranian nuclear challenge**, *Op. Cit.*, p.10

As one of America's main allies in the region, with Israel, Iran under the Shah undoubtedly played a strategic role in shielding the expansion of communism in the Middle East. However, the Shah aspired to render his empire a more prominent actor in the international game, beyond the simple pawn it was in the American chessboard (regional prestige and syndrome of grandeur). In this regard, he envisioned endowing Iran with an energy potential which shed light on his secret ambition to produce nuclear weapons; Moreover, according to Shiam Bhatia, he had reportedly declared during an interview with a French magazine that Iran would *undoubtedly* have nuclear weapons and that will happen *sooner than it is believed*.⁴⁰⁹ Although these remarks were later denied, the immense resources allocated by the Shah to carry out his pharaonic project to build thirty-three reactors fueled suspicion of a military nuclear program hidden behind an official civilian nuclear program. For instance, a 15-billion-dollar contract was signed between Iran and the United States for the construction of eight nuclear reactors which could produce 8000 MWe.⁴¹⁰

In addition, an agreement had been signed with MIT to train Iranian experts. In terms of nuclear infrastructure, a contract of \$4.3 billion had been signed between the Iranian Atomic Energy Agency and the German company Kraftwerk Union to construct two pressurized water reactors capable of supplying 1.196 MWe.⁴¹¹ Regarding the Uranium supply, \$700 million contracts were signed with Namibia and South Africa to deliver 600 tons of uranium.⁴¹² However, George Quester argues that *beyond the reactors themselves, the Iranian government has announced an intention to invest in domestic plutonium reprocessing facilities, a move that has raised eyebrows abroad and brought some concerned questions from the United States government*.⁴¹³

External factors, notably regional political and security dynamics, also explained American concerns regarding the Iranian nuclear program. The American government did fear that Iran would embark on a military nuclear program in response to regional military nuclear programs. Indeed, although the Brazilian nuclear program and the risks of a horizontal proliferation from the Argentine rival constituted credible sources of fear of a general proliferation dynamic, the atomic test carried out by India in 1974 aroused more vigilance in Washington regarding its "Atom for peace" agenda.

⁴⁰⁹ BHATIA, Shyam: **Nuclear rivals in the Middle East**, London, Routledge, 2017, p.6 (1st ed.)

⁴¹⁰ MUSTAFA, Kibaroglu, **Good for the Shah, banned for the Mullahs: The West and Iran's quest for nuclear power**, Middle East journal, Vol. 60, N.2, 2006, p.214

⁴¹¹ ZAKIR AHMAD, Nazir, **Aryamehr to Ayatollahs** (Karachi: Royal Book Co., 1988), p 135. Cited by K. Sadjadpour and A. Vaez in SADJADPOUR Karim, VAEZ Ali: **Iran's nuclear odyssey, costs and risks**, Washington, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2013, p.5

⁴¹² ALBRIGHT, David et al, **Is Iran running out of yellowcake?** Institute for Science and International Security, Feb. 11, 2009. Accessed on the 15th April 2020 at 16h44 from the website https://isis-online.org/uploads/isis-reports/documents/Iran_Yellowcake_11Feb2009.pdf

⁴¹³ QUESTER H., George, **The Shah and the bomb**, Policy Sciences, Vol. 8, No. 1, 1977, p. 22

According to Robert Reardon, “India’s first nuclear test explosion in 1974 sparked reconsideration in Washington of nuclear export policies and greater scrutiny of foreign nuclear programs, including Iran’s.”⁴¹⁴ Similarly, George Quester argues that *the Indian move raises concern about proliferation to any threshold nations. [...] It raises concern about states geographically near India, because of the mutual fears and potential rivalries for influence. The combination of geographical proximity and material ability to pay for a bomb project, therefore, focuses attention directly on Iran.*⁴¹⁵ Notwithstanding the controversies over the real intentions of the Shah, the Islamic revolution led by Ayatollah Khomeini had a profound impact on the development of the Iranian nuclear program.

The 1979 Iranian revolution profoundly influenced the development of the Iranian nuclear program. On the one hand, the new Iranian authorities perceived the nuclear program as the vestiges of the old regime; on the other hand, the precarious economic situation of post-revolution Iran did not rationally permit sustaining such an onerous project. As Farhad Rezai points out, “the provisional government of Prime Minister Bazargan felt that the economy faced too many pressures to allow for a costly and seemingly purposeless nuclear program.”⁴¹⁶ However, the primary cause of the political disinterest in sustaining the nuclear program is undoubtedly the fatwa of Supreme Leader Khomeini. Ayatollah Khomeini considered that possessing nuclear weapons and, more broadly, weapons of mass destruction was not in line with the Islamic precepts. However, this vision of the Supreme Leader was not consensual in the Iranian political establishment; in fact, several influential decision-makers shared the opinion that Iran should acquire weapons of mass destruction, first to achieve the goal of exporting the ideals of the Islamic Revolution, but also to protect itself against potential regional adversaries. “Other core leaders, however, held diametrically opposed views. [...] Ayatollah Mohammad Beheshti, second in command to Khomeini, was a keen advocate of weaponization. [...] Once in power, Beheshti was eager to restart the shuttered civilian project, a plan that Rafsanjani, whose relations with Beheshti were generally competitive, supported wholeheartedly,” Farhad Rezai recalls.⁴¹⁷ Unfortunately, the Iraqi war had proven the weaponization camp right.

⁴¹⁴ REARDON, Robert: **Containing Iran: strategies for addressing the Iranian nuclear challenge**, *Op. Cit.*, p.11

⁴¹⁵ QUESTER H., George, **The Shah and the bomb**, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 22-23

⁴¹⁶ REZAI, Farhad: **Iran’s nuclear program. A study in proliferation and rollback**, Cham, Springer, 2017, p.26

⁴¹⁷ REZAI, Farhad: **Iran’s nuclear program. A study in proliferation and rollback**, *Ibid.*

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The Iran-Iraq war was a strategic turning point for Iran. When the war began in 1980, the new Iranian authorities were still focused on laying the foundations of the Islamic republic. As a result, Iran was relatively weak on many fronts, such as national defense. This was due to two main factors. First, the army's personnel inherited from the Shah lacked warrior experience, notwithstanding the sophisticated military weapons the Shah had equipped the army with between 1954 after the coup d'état against Mosaddeq (1953) and 1977. According to Ervan Abrahamian, "the military budget grew twelvefold, and its share of the annual budget went from 24 to 35 per cent. [...] By 1975, the shah had the largest navy in the Persian Gulf, the largest air force in Western Asia, and the fifth largest army in the whole world. His arsenal included more than 1,000 modern tanks, 400 helicopters, 28 hovercraft, 100 long-range artillery pieces, 2,500 Maverick missiles, 173 F4 fighter planes."⁴¹⁸

Despite these tremendous military capabilities in terms of equipment, the Iranian armed forces did not have a seasoned warlike experience. Furthermore, the balance of power on the battlefield clearly favored Saddam Hussein's troops, which had logistical support from the West and weapons of mass destruction, including chemical and ballistic weapons. Conversely, the Iranian defense forces did not have equivalent equipment, not only because of the arms embargo imposed by the Americans but also because of the Fatwa mentioned above by the supreme guide Khomeini. Pierre Razoux declares in this regard that "Iran did not have any ballistic missiles at its disposal and could only rely on its artillery and a few dozen Phantoms to strike back at Iraqi cities."⁴¹⁹ Based on alarming reports on the strategic imbalance on the battlefield, the Iranian Supreme Guide lifted his fatwa. Hence, he authorized the production of strategic weapons like ballistic missiles and weapons of mass destruction (chemical).

Iran's war against Iraq deeply impacted Tehran's collective consciousness. Indeed, bolstered by multifaceted Western support, particularly in intelligence and armaments, Saddam Hussein inflicted considerable human and material damage on a less-armed Iran. As Tytti Erästö stressed, "the role of ballistic missiles in Iran's national security was highlighted in the 1980s, when its cities were left defenseless against Scud missile and air attacks from Iraq under President Saddam Hussein."⁴²⁰ More precisely, Farhad Rezai estimates that "the cost of war to the Iranians was enormous; some 222,085 dead,

⁴¹⁸ ABRAHAMIAN, Ervand: **A history of modern Iran**, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2008, pp.124- 125

⁴¹⁹ RAZOUX, Pierre: **The Iran-Iraq war**, Cambridge, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2015, p.303

⁴²⁰ ERÄSTÖ, Tytti, *Time for Europe to put Iran's missile program in context*, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), October 30, 2017. Accessed on April 24, 2020 from the website <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/topical-background/2017/time-europe-put-irans-missile-programme-context>

320,000 wounded and 2 million left homeless by Scud missile attacks on cities.”⁴²¹ This tactical weakness made Iran aware of the strategic importance of ballistic weapons, thus rekindling their interest in the continuation of the nuclear program temporarily suspended for the reasons mentioned above. Unfortunately, given American international pressure, few countries were willing to sell ballistic missiles to Iran; in fact, only Syria and Lebanon had agreed to deliver these missiles to Iran, notwithstanding their technological gap compared to the weapons possessed by Saddam Hussein's troops. Despite these efforts, Iran failed to fill the strategic deficit it had with Iraq. As a result, Iranian authorities learned two critical lessons from the war against Iraq that will influence Iran's strategic culture.

Iran's post-1979 strategic culture was deeply affected by the war against Iraq, especially because of the behavior of the great powers and the UN. While it is undeniable that any war inevitably leads to human casualties and environmental catastrophe, the impressive number of victims listed above was mainly due to the use of chemical weapons by Saddam Hussein. As Pierre Razoux argues, *Iraqi leaders would not hesitate to make massive use of chemical weapons to push back Iranian assault.*⁴²² It was a more traumatic experience for Iran as not only did several western governments support Iraq in the production of its chemical arsenal, but they turned a blind eye to the many victims who succumbed to the harmful gases of the chemical weapons used by Saddam's troops. Hence, an endogenous and/or autonomous ballistic program became vital for Iran. As Kamran Taremi argues in this regard, *the lesson the Iranian leadership drew from this war experience was that a strong retaliatory capability was vital if Iran were to be able to deter missile. [...] From then on, establishing an indigenous ballistic missile industry became a top priority for the Islamic regime, as the clerical leadership came to perceive missiles in general as “the most important.”*⁴²³

Another important lesson the Iranian authorities learned from the war against Iraq is the ambivalence of the international system and its major actors concerning respect for international treaties and conventions. Notwithstanding the taboo against the use of chemical weapons since WWI, notably with the Geneva Protocol of 1925, several Western and non-Western governments materially and technically supported Iraq in its chemical weapons production. According to Pierre Razoux, “Spain sold the Iraqi regime containers adapted for spreading chemical products, and Egypt sold it large quantities of empty shells. [...] According to the accounts of former Iraqi generals, German, Belgian, Danish, Dutch, and even Lebanese companies provided chemical

⁴²¹ REZAI, Farhad: **Iran's nuclear program. A study in proliferation and rollback**, *Op. Cit.*, p.19

⁴²² RAZOUX, Pierre: **The Iran-Iraq war**, *Op. Cit.*, p.234

⁴²³ TAREMI, Kamran, **Beyond the axis of evil: Ballistic missiles in Iran's military thinking**, Sage Publications, Security Dialogue, Vol. 36, N. 1, March 2005, p.98

substances essential to the realization of this clandestine program, notably for the development of neurotoxic agents.”⁴²⁴ The indifference of the United Nations to the overt use of chemical weapons by Saddam Hussein strengthened Iranian authorities’ distrust and contempt for international law and the standards underlying it.

Consequently, they decided also to produce such weapons, which they rightly or wrongly considered the only credible shield capable of protecting Iran against any external attack. In this regard, President Ali Akbar Rafsanjani observed that: “with regard to chemical, bacteriological and radiological weapons training, it was clear during the war that these weapons are very decisive. It was also made clear that the moral teachings of the world are not very effective when war reaches a serious stage and the world does not respect its own resolutions and closes its eyes to the violations and all the aggressions which are committed in the battlefield.”⁴²⁵ Like the US, Iran’s reaction to external threats is also driven by its strategic culture.

According to J. Matthew McInnis, Iran’s strategic culture cannot be easily assessed for at least two main reasons: on the first hand, the absence of a philosophical, military legacy from the Persian Empire; on the other hand, the lack of academic interests in Iranian strategic studies from Western scholars.⁴²⁶ Nevertheless, two main patterns can be identified as the main drivers of Iran’s strategic culture: ideologies and strategic interests. Anthony Downs defines an ideology as *a verbal image of the good society and the chief means of constructing such a society*.⁴²⁷ At the same time, Maaïke Waarnar considers it to be *interrelated ideas (such as norms, values, perceptions, and meanings) that create, recreate, and sustain a socio-political order, while being recreated and sustained by this order*.⁴²⁸ Both definitions highlight the representation of the ideal society.

In the specific case of Iran, the ideological aspects of the Iranian strategic culture were shaped by several factors, starting with its historical relations with foreign powers. Iran’s history was characterized by constant foreign interference in Iran’s domestic affairs, as we highlighted previously. From the Sassanid dynasty to the Pahlavi’s, including the Qajar’s, foreign Powers have always tried and, to some extent, successfully influenced the internal dynamics in Iran in a wide array of political and economic areas.

⁴²⁴ RAZOUX, Pierre: **The Iran-Iraq war**, *Op. Cit.*, p.298

⁴²⁵ SEITZ C., Adam and CONDESMAN H., Anthony: **Iranian Weapons of Mass Destruction: The birth of a regional nuclear arms race?**, California, Praeger, 2009, p.10

⁴²⁶ MCINNIS J., Matthew: **Iran’s strategic thinking origins and evolution**, American Enterprise Institute, May 2015, p.1

⁴²⁷ Cited by MARTIN J., Levi: **What is ideology?**, Sociologia, Problemas e Práticas, 2015, N. 77, p.12

⁴²⁸ WAARNAR, Maaïke: **Iranian foreign policy during Ahmadinejad: Ideology and actions**, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, pp.35-36

From the political perspective, for example, thanks to the support of British intelligence, the Americans masterminded the coup d'état, which toppled the government of the nationalist Prime Minister Mohamed Mossadegh in 1953. This was not the first time. Western powers mingled in Iranian internal affairs. Indeed, after paving the way for the rise of Reza Pahlavi (the father of Mohammed Reza), the British also played an instrumental role in his downfall.⁴²⁹

Furthermore, Iran has been involved in several wars against Russia, which ended up with Iran losing parts of its territory through humiliating peace agreements such as the treaties of Gulestan (1813) and Turkmenchay (1828). Regarding the former, Abbas Amanat argues that "Russia had left several articles of the treaty deliberately ambiguous as a pretext for making further territorial and concessional demands. (While the treaty of) Torkamanchay has often been deemed the most disastrous treaty in modern Iranian history."⁴³⁰ From the economic perspective, British and Russian were granted advantageous concessions to exploit Iran's oil resources, as Daniel Yergin described.⁴³¹ Considering the spiritual and material legacy of such a great empire as Persia, all these foreign Powers' interventions in Iran's domestic affairs fostered a sense of great pride among modern Iranians and explained their firm rejection of international action belittling them.

Another shaping element of Iran's strategic culture is its diversity and probably contradicting philosophical legacies inherited throughout its history. Indeed, while the Persian culture can be rightly considered the primary identifying characteristic of modern Iran, other cultural identities also influence how Iranians view themselves and how they view the world and react to external pressures accordingly. One of the most important, if not the essential cultural identity which challenges the Persian one is the Shia Islamic identity of Iran. As Matthew J. McInnis declares in this regard, *the reconciliation of Persian nationalism to Islamic cultural and political pre-eminence after the Arab conquests has been a long, and perhaps still incomplete, process*.⁴³² Nonetheless, Shiism precepts undoubtedly play a strategic role in Iran's foreign policy. Although a large majority of Sunni countries surround Iran, it considers itself the leader of the Shiite minorities living in neighboring countries. For instance, this is one of the reasons why Iran supports many Shia para-military groups in Iraq and Syria. But more important in Iran's foreign policy is the ideal of martyrdom. Considering the sacrifice of Hussein, who adamantly fought against the troops of Yazid during the battle of Karbala,

⁴²⁹ BAKHASH, Shaul: **The fall of Reza Shah: The abdication, exile, and death of modern Iran's founder**, London, I.B. Tauris, 2021, 184 pages.

⁴³⁰ AMANAT, Abbas: **Iran: A modern history**, London, Yale University Press, 2017, pp. 196 and 211. Consulted online

⁴³¹ YERGIN, Daniel: **The Prize: The epic quest for oil, money & power**, *Op. Cit.*

⁴³² MCINNIS J., Matthew: **Iran's strategic thinking: origins and evolution**, *Op. Cit.*, p.4

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Iranians have always tried to follow the example set by their hero. This notion of Martyrdom was demonstrated, for instance, in 1982 when Supreme Leader Khomeini rejected the cease-fire with Iraq, with his troops being emboldened by the slogan “war, war until victory.”⁴³³

Regarding vital national interests, post-revolution Iranian leaders have set clear redlines that Iran considers as its vital interests. Although such elements can be described as objective interests emboldened by the revolution ideals, Iranian leaders sometimes surprisingly display a suicidal zeal that could be described as adventurism. This was the case, for example, with the rejection of the peace agreement offered during the Iran-Iraq war, as we previously mentioned. Nonetheless, irrespective of their loyalty to the revolutionary precepts or Persian nationalism, the regime’s survival stands at the top of the priorities when addressing or challenging the external world. During the Iran-Iraq war, Ayatollah Khomeini bitterly accepted the cease-fire agreement when he realized the decreasing popular support for the war and the clear battlefield imbalance between his troops and Saddam’s. A move he compared to drinking the cup of poison.

Ayatollah Khomeini later established the principle of Maslahat, which constitutes the core philosophical underpinning of the creation of the Council of Expediency. According to this principle, Iranian leaders should first and foremost consider the supreme interest of the regime when dealing with (external) threats, even if it means overlooking the five pillars of Islam. Michael Eisenstadt maintains that “in establishing this principle, Khomeini formalized the supremacy of *raison d’état* over the tenets of Islam as the precept guiding Iranian decision-making.”⁴³⁴ The observance of the Maslahat principle transpired in many actions or declarations of the Iranians later. For example, Supreme Leader Khamenei reportedly declared that he was eager to cooperate with the US (Great Satan) for the sake of Iran. Considering the Council of Expediency, many actors play an instrumental role in Iran’s decision-making. We will emphasize the battle among Iran’s domestic constituencies when we analyze the characteristics of its political system in the next section.

One of the main regional goals of Iran is to be not only the leader of the Shia communities but also a leading, if not the leading power in the region. This goal is mainly rooted in the Persian Empire origin of modern Iran. Being the inheritors of one of the greatest civilizations in the world has always nurtured a sense of prestige and grandeur among Iranians. Consequently, Iranians have a high esteem of themselves and

⁴³³ TAKEYH, Ray, **The Iran-Iraq war: A reassessment**, Middle East Journal, 2010, Vol, 64, N.3, p.374

⁴³⁴ EISENSTADT, Michael: **The strategic culture of the Islamic republic of Iran. Operational and policy implications**, MES Monographs, N.1, 2011, p.5

an exceptionalist perception of their role in regional affairs, and to some extent, in global affairs. Kamran Taremi describes this Iranian superiority complex: “Iran has a long history that goes back at least 3,000 years. This long history is rich in experiences that have exercised an important influence on the Iranian national psyche. These historical experiences are one of a glorious past. (...) Although Iran is no longer the major power it was in the past, Iranians still feel proud of this ancient glory and consider themselves superior to their neighbors.”⁴³⁵ Combined with its distrust of foreign powers, as we previously analyzed, the Persian syndrome fostered Iran’s desire to be self-reliant in defense and security areas.⁴³⁶ Yet, irrespective of their glorious past and the greatness of their ambitions, Iran’s foreign policy goals cannot exceed their actual capabilities. Hence, Iran’s regional policy is based on a network of allied States and proxies aimed at counter-balancing pro-Western regional allies.

The Islamic regime’s survival stands at the top of the hierarchy of the drivers behind Iran’s international behavior. This survival can be threatened both from inside and outside Iran. Hence, Iranian leaders rely on both military (IRGC) and economic strengths to prevent a regime collapse due to internal upheavals. Indeed, a stable economy is crucial for the regime’s legitimacy and survival. Regarding the external threats, the IRGC (including the Quds forces) and several pro-Iran paramilitary groups oversee and address the external security challenges to the government. In addition, Iran has strong political ties with several States in the region like Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. A common denominator among those three States is the presence of pro-Shia governments, especially in Lebanon. While Iran has always had historical ties with some of them, like Syria, the Iran-Iraq bilateral relationship has seriously improved after the downfall of Saddam Hussein in the aftermath of the 2003 US military intervention. Concerning Lebanon, Iran’s support for the Hezbollah organization stems from its will to maintain a deterrent force in the neighborhood of Israel. However, Iran’s political ties with those States are not only driven by security imperatives since economic interests also constitute an essential driver behind Iran’s bilateral relations with its regional allies. For example, its trade relations with Bagdad rose from \$1.5 billion (2006) to \$8 billion (2010),⁴³⁷ while since 2013, Iran has provided Syria with three lines of credit for the import of fuel and other commodities, with a cumulative value of over \$6.6 billion.⁴³⁸

⁴³⁵ TAREMI, Kamran, **Iranian perspectives on security in the Persian Gulf**, Iranian Studies, 2003, Vol. 36, N. 3, p.383

⁴³⁶ TABATABAI, Ariane: **Nuclear decision-making in Iran: implications for US non-proliferation efforts**, New York, Columbia University CGEP, 2020, p.19

⁴³⁷ VENETIS, Evangelos: **The rising power of Iran in the Middle East: forming an axis with Iraq, Syria and Lebanon**, Middle Eastern Studies Programme, working paper, N. 21, 2011, p.24

⁴³⁸ HATAHET, Sinan: **Russia and Iran: economic influence in Syria**, Middle East and North Africa Programme, Chatam House, March 2019, p.6

The previously mentioned Iranian strategic interests are shaped by many factors, starting with its geographic location. The northern part of Iran is characterized by the Caspian Sea and a chain of mountains (Zagros and Alborz). These mountains are a double edge sword for Iran; thanks to the difficulties of access, these geographical characteristics constitute a natural shield for Iran, providing at the same time a deterrent capability against threats from the northern part of the country. However, they also foster a sense of isolation in Iran, especially considering the characteristics of the southern border of Iran. Unlike the north, Iran's security on its southern border is more delicate. Not only is Iran surrounded by pro-West neighbors, but the US is also keeping an active military presence in the Persian Gulf to guarantee a stable flow of oil through the Strait of Hormuz, controlled by both Oman and Iran. Consequently, one of the main goals of Iran since 1979 has been to chase away hostile foreign presence from the region, especially the US.⁴³⁹ But the geographical environment does not only shape Iran's interest in the area; it also plays a strategic role in Iran's way of war. As Aycan Özer Ayşe stresses, *ideas about war and strategy are deeply influenced by the physical and geographical environment one is placed in and molded. Because this environment shapes the culture, culture, in return, gives context to act within.*⁴⁴⁰

The presence of hostile neighbors in its southern border, combined with the unmatched military capabilities of the US, undoubtedly impacts Iran's military doctrine. Iran has a deterrence-oriented defensive military doctrine which, according to Michael Eisenstadt, is based upon four main pillars: first the reliance on proxies, second is the use of calibrated violence, third is an emphasis on the psychological, moral, and spiritual dimensions of conflict, and fourth, strategic patience.⁴⁴¹ Iran's preference for proxy warfare stems from its relative capabilities compared to the US's and its tendency to outsource or delegate warfare issues to its subordinates. Michael Eisenstadt confirms it when he declares that "for Tehran, war is a job for its Arab surrogates and not, to the extent possible, for its military. When Iran has wanted to strike out at its enemies, it has done so by commissioning or facilitating operations by others."⁴⁴²

⁴³⁹ MALONEY, Suzann, **The roots and evolution of Iran's regional strategy**, Atlantic Council, 2017, p.8

⁴⁴⁰ AYCAN Ö. I., Ayşe, **Iranian strategic culture**, Ortadoğu Etütleri, Middle Eastern Studies, vol 8, n. 2, Dec.

2016, p.54

⁴⁴¹ EISENSTADT, Michael: **The strategic culture of the Islamic republic of Iran. Operational and policy implications**, *Op. Cit.*, p.8

⁴⁴² EISENSTADT, Michael: **The strategic culture of the Islamic republic of Iran. Operational and policy implications**, *Op. Cit.*, p.8

Regarding the calibrated use of violence, Iranian (military and political) leaders prefer a proportional use of violence when addressing internal and external security challenges. For instance, in 2009, when two Israeli warships (the Saar 5) were heading to the Persian Gulf through the Canal of Suez, two Iranian warships (frigate Alvand and the Khar) did the same but were heading toward the Eastern Mediterranean.⁴⁴³ The spiritual dimension of the war in Iran's strategic culture is rooted in religious beliefs, especially the verses of the Quran which recommend *to prepare against them what you 'believers' can of 'military' power and cavalry to deter Allah's enemies and your enemies as well as other enemies unknown to you but known to Allah*.⁴⁴⁴ Strategic patience refers to Tehran's preference for indirect confrontation and attrition warfare strategies. Iranians usually opt for long terms actions over short time aggressive ones. It is essential to highlight that despite its defensive approach and military doctrine, the recent regional upheavals led Iranians to act beyond their borders to defend their allies, as was the case with Syria. Suzanne Maloney maintains that those Iranian foreign interventions affected not only Tehran's core foreign policy underpinnings but also its defensive military doctrine.⁴⁴⁵ What are the implications of the Iranian nuclear for the Middle East and the US?

4.2.2 The implications of the Iranian nuclear program for the Middle East and the United States.

The Middle East has always been a strategic region for the United States during and after the Cold War. The Americans mainly maintain a network of strategic alliances with the regional States to protect their interests. Whether the goal was to limit the expansion of communism during the Cold War or to confront emerging security challenges, this network of alliances has always occupied an important place in the American regional security strategy. Historically, the United States has always had two primary interests: the security of Israel and free access to the region's tremendous energy reserves. These two main interests constitute the central nucleus that gravitates all the other regional interests of the United States in the Middle East. In other words, American policymakers perceive and/or define the nature of threats to their regional strategic interests primarily through the lens of Israeli and energy. Regarding Israel in particular, the security and survival of the Jewish State in a deleterious and bellicose regional environment has always been a top priority of the US since Israel's independence in 1948. According to several researchers, this America's attention vis-à-

⁴⁴³ **Israeli warships' use of Suez Canal causes a stir.** Accessed from the website <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2009-jul-24-fg-suez-warships24-story.html> and **Egypt allows Iranian warships 'can use Suez Canal'** accessed from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-12493614> on the 30th of October 2020.

⁴⁴⁴ **Surah Al Anfal Ayat 60.** Accessed from <https://quran.com/8/60> on the 31st of October 2020. This verse even constitutes the motto of the IRG.

⁴⁴⁵ MALONEY, Suzann, **The roots and evolution of Iran's regional strategy**, *Op. Cit.*, p.11

vis Israel is rooted firstly in the remorse of Americans and Westerners for their inability to prevent the Jewish holocaust during the Nazi era.⁴⁴⁶

Beyond this US emotion-driven foreign policy toward Israel, the “special partnership” between Washington and Tel Aviv can also be explained by three main factors, according to Eran Lerman. These include the commonality of interests, the affinity of values, and the impact of politics.⁴⁴⁷ Common interests refer to regional adversaries who threatened American and Israeli interests. The main objective was initially to contain the spreading of communism and the Soviet support to leaders such as Nasser or even the Arab countries during the war of attrition between 1968 and 1970. Concerning the affinities of values, the United States share the same spiritual and biblical values generally transposed in the political life of each of these states. Unlike other states in the region, Israel is the only state in the Middle East with a homogeneity of spiritual values with the United States, such as the precepts of the Jewish faith. As Eran Lerman puts it, “today, this powerful aspect of affinity with Israel - sometimes translated into whole-hearted support for full control of the Jewish people's ancestral homeland - is a cornerstone of dispensational belief for many millions of Americans.”⁴⁴⁸

The third root, the impact of politics, refers primarily to lobby groups' influence on US foreign policy. Among them, AIPAC is undoubtedly the most influential. Its lobby is mainly effective in the US Congress and the White House, especially during election campaigns. According to John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, *AIPAC's success is due in large part to its ability to reward legislators and congressional candidates who support its agenda and to punish those who do not, based mainly on its capacity to influence campaign contributions. Money is critical to U.S. elections, which have become increasingly expensive to win, and AIPAC makes sure that its friends get financial support so long as they do not stray from AIPAC's line.*⁴⁴⁹

⁴⁴⁶ SNOW M., Donald: **The Middle East, oil, and the U.S. national security policy: Intractable conflicts, impossible solutions**, Maryland, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2016, p.133

⁴⁴⁷ LERMAN, Eran: **The three roots of the special relationship: What makes U.S.-Israeli ties so strong?**, Sino- Israel Global Network and Academic Leadership (SIGNAL), 2017, p.1. Accessed from <http://sino-israel.org/bb-roots-us-israel/> on the 14th of June 2020.

⁴⁴⁸ LERMAN, Eran: **The three roots of the special relationship: What makes U.S.-Israeli ties so strong?**, *Ibid*, p.14

⁴⁴⁹ MEARSHEIMER John and WALT Stephen: **The Israel lobby and US foreign policy**, London, Penguin Books, 2008, p.154. Janice Terry explained, for example, how pro-Israel interests groups lobbied many key US decision-makers to undermine the Arab-led boycott campaign against Jewish products after the establishment of the Jewish State in 1951. Read TERRY J., Janice: **U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. The Role of lobbies and special interest groups**, London, Pluto Press, 2005, p.93

The intensity of bilateral relations between the United States and Israel is visible at the political, economic, and military levels. Politically, the United States has always strongly supported the State of Israel, notably at the UN, where the US has never hesitated to veto any UN resolution hostile to the interests of the Jewish state. In addition, even during the Arab Israeli wars, the Americans always displayed a neutral position that hardly obscured their tacit support for Israel. This American ambivalence was an essential source of tension between the Gulf monarchies and the US. Toby Craig Jones confirms it in these terms, “historically, the United States struggled to balance its support for Israel with its support for the region’s oil producers, who had long considered the Israel-friendly foreign policy of the United States as an irritant.”⁴⁵⁰ Economically, Israel has received significant financial support from the US government since the independence of the Jewish State. For example, Tel Aviv received substantial budgetary support from Washington, estimated at \$5.5 billion between 1948 and 1980.⁴⁵¹ Even though American economic support to Israel has fluctuated over the decades, the Jewish state remains the first recipient of US international aid, estimated at \$34,265,675 million between 1946 and 2016.⁴⁵² However, the bilateral relationship between the United States and Israel is more intense at the military level.

Israel’s undeniable military superiority in the Middle East is mainly due to the assistance of the United States. US military assistance to Israel is threefold: financial, logistical, and intelligence. Regarding the financial aspect, it usually takes the form of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), where the US allocates a budgetary envelope to improve Israel’s economic and defense capacities. The first American MoU in favor of Israel, worth \$26.7 billion, including \$21.3 billion for military spending, was signed during the presidency of Bill Clinton for a decade (1999-2008).⁴⁵³ The two MoUs were signed during the presidencies of Bush and Obama for an amount estimated at \$30 billion (2009-2018) and \$38 billion (2019-2028).

Regarding logistics, Israel is the first recipient of the US military technological prowess, allowing it to maintain an unmatched strategic edge over its potential regional adversaries. In this regard, Israel could access state-of-the-art military equipment in supersonic aircraft or patriotic missiles.⁴⁵⁴ However, the Israeli government receives

⁴⁵⁰ JONES C., Toby: **America, Oil, and War in the Middle East**, Oxford University Press, The Journal of American History, Vol. 99, No. 1, 2012, p.211

⁴⁵¹ TILLMAN P., Seth: **The United States in the Middle East. Interests and obstacles**, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1982, p.53

⁴⁵² SHARP M., Jeremy: **U.S. Foreign Aid to Israel**, Congressional Research Service Report, April 10, 2018, p.1

⁴⁵³ SHARP M., Jeremy: **U.S. Foreign Aid to Israel**, *Ibid*, p.5

⁴⁵⁴ COHEN A., Stuart, **Light and shadows in US-Israeli military ties, 1948-2010** in FREEDMAN O., Robert (Ed): **Israel and the United States. Six decades of US-Israeli relations**, Colorado, Westview Press, 2012, p.145

not only entirely American-made equipment but also participates in manufacturing certain strategic weapons such as the F-35 aircraft or the Iron Dome defense military system. The second strategic interest of the US in the Middle East is free access to abundant regional energy resources, notably petroleum.

Although oil is present on the American continent, its strategic role increased considerably in international affairs after its discovery in the 19th century in the Persian Gulf. Long before the United States' interest in the Middle East, oil was the main contention between the major Powers at that time: the Russians and the British. Daniel Yergin describes this *Great Game* in these terms: "the rivalry between Britain and Russia turned Persia into a major issue in Great Power diplomacy. [...] The two great powers wrangled for influence over Persia through (oil) concessions and loans and other tools of economic diplomacy."⁴⁵⁵ According to Daniel Byman and Sara Moller, oil represents the second strategic interest of the United States in the Middle East and perhaps the most constant and the most important.⁴⁵⁶ Indeed, the strategic rivalry with the Soviet adversary was not limited to the military plan with an arms race or military alliances like the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) or the Warsaw Pact. The economic sector also played a decisive role in the strategic competition between the former two giants. Hence, The US needed abundant and easily accessible energy resources. In this regard, Yakub Halab argues that "[The US] needed access to oil in friendly countries that could and were ready to increase their production within a short period. The US also understood that controlling these resources was a source of power through which it could claim world leadership."⁴⁵⁷

To guarantee privileged access to these energy resources, the US formed a network of "allies" constituted of the oil monarchies of the Persian Gulf. Initially, this network of "allies" revolved mainly around pre-1979 Iran and Saudi Arabia, which together formed the "twin pillars" of the American regional foreign policy at that time. Since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, South Arabia has been the United States' leading petro-monarchy partner. This status cannot be explained only by the fact that Riyadh remained the only pillar between the two previously mentioned, but also thanks to the McQuincy agreements signed on February 14, 1945, between then President Franklin D. Roosevelt and then King Abdelaziz ibn Saoud. Riyadh agreed to sell oil at a lower cost to the United States in return for Washington's protection of the Saud regime.

⁴⁵⁵ YERGIN, Daniel: **The Prize: The Epic quest for oil, money & power**, *Op. Cit.*, p.136

⁴⁵⁶ BYMAN Daniel and MOLLER B. Sara, **The United States and the Middle East: interests, risks, and costs** in SURI Jeremi and VALENTINO Benjamin, **Sustainable security: Rethinking American national security Strategy**, The Tobin project, New York, The Oxford University Press, 2016, 34 pages.

⁴⁵⁷ HALABI, Yakub: **US foreign policy in the Middle East: From crises to change**, Farnham, Ashgate, 2009, p.30

Both States have close relations in many areas, mainly in defense and security. In this regard, Saudi Arabia is the leading purchaser of American arms, with many contracts estimated at \$112 billion between 2013 and 2017.⁴⁵⁸ The United Arab Emirates is the second largest purchaser of American weapons among the Gulf's oil monarchies, with an import volume of American weapons estimated at 6.7% between 2014 and 2018.⁴⁵⁹ In addition, the US also has an impressive number of military bases in the region, notably in Qatar (Al Udeid Air Base), Kuwait (Ali Al Salem Air Base) and even in Bahrain (Shaikh Isa Air Base). Paradoxically, the Americans do not have military bases in Saudi Arabia or Israel, which does not alter their commitment to protecting their regional allies, as evidenced by the military exercises frequently organized to counter any regional threats, mainly the Iranians.⁴⁶⁰

Post-1979 Iran poses a strategic threat to American interests in the Middle East. Western countries, mainly the US, were first worried about the Iranian authorities' desire to export the revolutionary ideals that brought down Shah Pahlavi. Farhad Rezaei describes President Ronald Reagan's firmness towards the Iranian regime in these terms: "when Ronald Reagan came to power in 1981, he made it abundantly clear that Washington would not tolerate revolutionary adventurism against Saudi Arabia and other American allies in the Gulf. To increase the "cost of doing business" for the regime, the White House enacted a series of sanctions in Iran starting in 1979."⁴⁶¹ However, as we will see later, Iran did not have the means of its policy from economic and military perspectives. Nonetheless, Tehran also had credible leverages that could harm American interests in the region.

As previously noted, free and secured access to oil is a vital issue for the US, as President Carter pointed out in his State of the Union address in January 1980. Consequently, Tehran can impact the global oil flow trade by closing the Strait of Hormuz, through which 21% of world oil flows.⁴⁶² There is also the network of Iranian-funded "terrorist" militias in Iraq and Lebanon. The risk of nuclear proliferation in the Middle East undoubtedly represents the greatest Iranian threat to American interests in the region.

⁴⁵⁸ VITTORI, Jodi, **American weapons in the wrong hands**, Carnegie Endowment for international peace, 19 February, 2019. Accessed from <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/02/19/american-weapons-in-wrong-hands-pub-78408> on 12th of May 2020.

⁴⁵⁹ WEZEMAN D., Pieter et al: **Trends in international arms transfers-2018**, SIPRI, March 2019, p.2. Accessed from https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2019-03/fs_1903_at_2018.pdf on 12th of May 2020.

⁴⁶⁰ BLECHMAN Barry et al: **Engagement, coercion, and Iran's nuclear challenge**, Report of a Joint Study Group on US-Iran Policy, Washington, USIP, The Stimson Center, 2010, p.48

⁴⁶¹ REZAI, Farhad: **Iran's nuclear program. A study in proliferation and rollback**, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, p.17

⁴⁶² Global oil flow through the Strait of Hormuz. **Data from the U.S. Energy Information Administration and ClipperData, Inc.** Accessed on the 12th of May 2020 from the link <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=39932>.

Indeed, the ideological rivalry between Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shiite Iran could encourage several states, including Saudi Arabia, to acquire nuclear weapons. Ray Moseley shares this point when he argues that “members of the Saudi leadership, for example, have already suggested that they would pursue a nuclear capability should Iran acquire weapons.”⁴⁶³ Irrespective of the likelihood of their behavior, the reaction of the US and Iran is driven by their strategic culture as we will see later. But the following section will first analyze the characteristics of the Iranian political system.

4.3 SECTION III- THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE IRANIAN DECISION-MAKING SYSTEM.

Following the analysis of the importance and rationale of the nuclear program for the Iranian authorities and its implications for the region in general and the US in particular, we will dwell on the characteristics of the Iranian political system. This will help us to understand the power distribution within Iran’s polity and identify the key stakeholders regarding the nuclear program, thus revealing the actors who could be subject to the coercive measures adopted by the US.

Considering its different philosophical identities inherited (Persian, Arab) throughout its history till today, Iran’s political system and decision-making process are logically very complex. While the secular Persian institutions are still present in modern times, they are now coupled with post-revolution institutions, which not only play the same role but also have an overseeing function over them. For example, the Council of the Guardians is the Iranian post-revolution parliament whose primary function is to oversee the activities of the *Majles* (the Iranian secular parliament) and watch over the conformity of their decisions with the Islamic law and Constitution. Regarding the national defense sector, Iran has two armies: the regular army or *Artesh* and the Revolutionary Guard, whose primary function is to defend the Islamic Republic against internal and external existential threats. Consequently, there is always an overlap among those institutions, making it hard to unveil the interplay among them when analyzing the decision-making in Iran. It is essential to highlight that despite those non-democratic institutions, the Iran political system is very dynamic, with competing factions battling for control of key power centers in Iran.⁴⁶⁴

However, the Supreme Guide is undoubtedly the most prominent symbol of the Post-1979 Iranian political system. He is the ultimate decision-maker in Iran; no issue can be

⁴⁶³ Ray Moseley, cited in REARDON J., Robert: **Containing Iran: Strategies for addressing the Iranian nuclear challenge**, California, RAND, 2012, p.4

⁴⁶⁴ Read SEIFZADEH S., Hossein, **The landscape of factional politics and its future in Iran**, Middle East Journal, Winter 2003, Vol. 57, N.1, 19 pages.

discussed, or no strategic decisions made without his consent. Ariane Tabatabai argues that *the supreme leader's veto power grants him the ability to remove any item he does not wish to see executed from the deliberation's agenda*.⁴⁶⁵ Yet, being the ultimate decision-maker does not make the Supreme Guide the sole decision-maker. The prominent role of the Supreme Guide has misled certain observers into thinking he was ruling the country autocratically, without any institutional constraint. This a view that Ariane Tabatabai challenges as she declares: "far from a top-down exercise by a single individual, Iran's decision-making process is, in fact, the outcome of intense feedback loops within and between different power centers."⁴⁶⁶ Among those power centers are the *Majles*, Arm forces, the President and the Iranian Atomic Energy Organization (IAEO) and several other actors with more or less power in the process. As described in the table below, the inputs of those actors are channeled through the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC). Yet, irrespective of their perceptions regarding their divergent view regarding an issue, there is a consensus on Iran's core interests. After analyzing the features of the Iranian political system, we will focus on the coercive dynamics between Iran and the Great Powers. The previous information clearly demonstrate that Iran's political regime falls in the *compromise-hybrid* category (Etel Solingen). This means that one would expect the Iranian authorities to send mixed nuclear signals, navigating between proliferation and non-proliferation.

⁴⁶⁵ TABATABAI, Ariane: **Nuclear decision-making in Iran: Implications for US non-proliferation efforts**,
Op. Cit., p.23

⁴⁶⁶ TABATABAI, Ariane: **Nuclear decision-making in Iran: Implications for US non-proliferation efforts**,
Op. Cit., p.23

Chapter 4

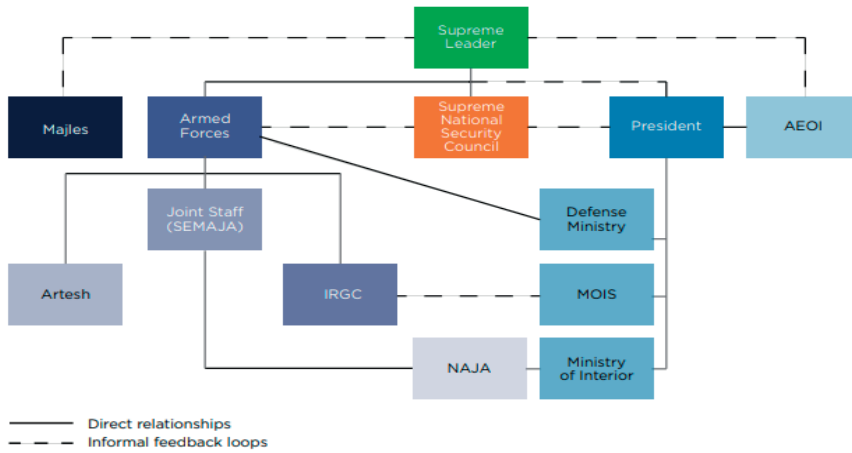


Figure 5: Structure of Iran's nuclear decision-making.⁴⁶⁷

⁴⁶⁷ TABATABAI, Ariane: **Nuclear decision-making in Iran: Implications for US non-proliferation efforts,** *Ibid.*, p.24

4.4 SECTION IV- THE COERCIVE DYNAMICS BETWEEN THE US AND IRAN.

As previously mentioned, this section will deeply analyze the coercive dynamics between Washington and Tehran. This will be done against the backdrop of our hypotheses. In other words, when addressing the Iranian nuclear challenge, did the US coercive strategies exploit the Iran's weaknesses? Did the US demonstrate a motivation to have a sustained campaign to compel Iran to reverse its nuclear policy? Also, were these coercive strategies and threats credible, proportionate and reciprocal to the Iranian response? In essence, **how the Iran's decision to comply or resist the US request relates to the political and economic effects of the Washington's coercive diplomacy.** Additionally, the chapter shall examine **how Washington's escalation's tactics may have influenced Tehran's ultimate decision regarding the coercer's demands.**

Considering our theoretical lens (neoclassical realism), we will highlight the transmitting-belt role played by the intervening variables between the independent variable (systemic pressures/international demands) and the dependent variable (foreign policy). In other words, we will demonstrate how the perceptions of the Iranian leaders, the strategic culture of the country, the nature of the regime, and the configuration of the domestic institutions or domestic balance of power among the institutions and the State-society relations shaped the nature of the nuclear responses of Iran to the coercive demands of the US. This will enable us to emphasize the relevance of the four ingredients of an effective coercive strategy in the nuclear realm: the display by the coercer of strategic empathy towards its target, the formulation of clear and acceptable demands to the target, the display by the coercer of a higher resolve than the target to achieve his/her objective, and the offer of credible incentives to the target if the target complies.

Following our structured-focused comparative methodology approach, our research design will be based on the following questions: what were the objectives pursued by the US when implementing its coercive policies against Iran? Which coercive strategies were adopted to achieve these objectives? What were the expected outcomes of the US after implementing its coercive strategies? What were the actual results of the coercive dynamics, and why such outcomes? In the case of Iran, under the lead of the US, other Great Powers resorted to different coercive instruments to compel Iran to comply with their demand. Those coercive instruments encompassed economic, military and political instruments. This sub-section is divided into key time frames which characterized the (coercive) Iranian nuclear dynamics. This will enable us to highlight and account for the set of events which progressively led to the outcome of the coercive

nuclear dynamics between the US and Iran during the time scope we previously specified. However, it is essential to highlight that before those sanctions were imposed upon Iran, three European countries – France, Germany and Great Britain – unsuccessfully attempted to solve the Iranian nuclear issue through traditional diplomacy. But before dwelling on the nuclear diplomacy between Iran and the Europeans (A) and the E3+3 group⁴⁶⁸ (B), we will first analyze the foreign policy of the US and the Iranian presidents, George Bush and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

4.4.1 George Bush's foreign policy: beliefs and actions.

George W. Bush was the 43rd US president, a position he assumed from the 20th of January 2001 till the 20th of January 2009. Though he had inherited a relatively stable international system from his predecessor Bill Clinton, George Bush's foreign policy tremendously impacted international affairs during and after his mandate. He differed not only from Bill Clinton's approach in his actions but also in his beliefs. But before stressing his actions at the international level, we will first analyze his views regarding the international system and America's role in global politics. George Bush had a superficial knowledge of the international system and the main factors shaping its dynamics. This ignorance of international affairs was not due only to his business affairs background but also to a personal disinterest in the topic. As Ronald E. Powaski put it, "he was surprisingly uninterested in the broader world around him. In college, he virtually ignored the war in Vietnam - until he realized that he could be drafted and sent there once his college deferment ended. Bush also admitted that he is disinclined to think about complex subjects."⁴⁶⁹ Nevertheless, George Bush had precise and clear philosophical and political ideas about the role of the US in global affairs, outlined in his doctrine.

According to Robert Jervis, Georges Bush's doctrine was based on four key pillars: (first) a strong belief in the importance of a State's domestic regime in determining its foreign policy and the related judgment that this is an opportune time to transform international politics; (second), the perception of significant threats that can be defeated only by new and vigorous policies, most notably by preventive war; (third,) a willingness to act unilaterally when necessary (fourth) an overriding sense that peace and stability require the United States to exert its primacy in world politics.⁴⁷⁰ While those principles were similar to Ronald Reagan's, the first years of George Bush's

⁴⁶⁸ **The E3+3 group** refers to the three European States (France, Germany and the UK) which together with China, Russia and the US negotiated with Iran on its controversial nuclear program.

⁴⁶⁹ POWASKI E., Ronald: **Ideals, interests, and U.S. foreign policy from George H. W. Bush to Donald Trump**, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, p.106

⁴⁷⁰ JERVIS, Robert, **Understanding the Bush doctrine**, The Academy of Political Science, Political Science Quarterly, Vol. 118, N.3, 2003, p.365

foreign policy were mainly peaceful and stable, following the precepts of James Monroe's doctrine. Consequently, following his interpretation of "American internationalism," President Bush was interested in limiting as much as possible the US involvement in multilateral organizations and consolidating the international position of the US by deepening its relationship with its allies in key regions of the world.⁴⁷¹

However, the 9/11 terrorist attack perpetrated by the Al-Qaida organization dramatically reshaped George Bush's perception of the international role of the US. Emboldened by the new Neo-conservative generation, George Bush embarked on a campaign to impose American values and thwart threats in the regions considered to be the breeding grounds of terrorism. Seyom Brown described it in these terms: "the shock of 9/11 provided just the opening the neoconservatives had been seeking - a responsiveness by the president and his professedly realist Vice President, Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense, and National Security Advisor to the assertive international agenda the neoconservatives had been urging on their bosses."⁴⁷²

Consequently, driven by the evangelical beliefs of the neoconservatives, the foreign policy of the Bush administration after the 9/11 events were based on the core opposition between American liberal values that needed to be exported and non-liberal values which George Bush considered to be the main threats to the international peace and security. Logically, George Bush progressively shared the opinion that the regime's nature played a strategic role in the State's foreign policy, especially those challenging the US-led international order. Hence, toppling the regimes that implemented a defiant foreign policy vis-à-vis the US and the liberal values, it stood for became the core precept to promote international peace and security in the White House. It is important to highlight that the influence of the neoconservative beliefs in shaping US foreign policy did not start with the Bush administration. For instance, the neoconservatives were very active during the Cold War era and played a strategic role in torpedoing several initiatives of rapprochement between the US and the USSR.⁴⁷³ Yet, this Manichean approach to international relations started with clearly identifying the states that supported terrorism. Indeed, during his famous speech on the State of the Union in 2002, George Bush identified three States: Iran, Iraq and North Korea, as the

⁴⁷¹ MCCORMICK M., James, *The foreign policy of the Bush administration: terrorism and the promotion of democracy* in SCHIER E., Steven: **Ambition and division: legacies of the George W. Bush presidency**, Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009, p.242

⁴⁷² BROWN, Seyom: **Faces of power: constancy and change in United States foreign policy from Truman to Obama**, New York, Columbia University Press, 2015, p.610 (3rd ed.)

⁴⁷³ BROWN, Seyom: **Faces of power: constancy and change in United States foreign policy from Truman to Obama**, *Ibid.*, p.611

members of the *axis of evil* that posed the greatest threat to the liberal world through their *terrorist* activities.⁴⁷⁴

Subsequently, the National Security Strategy (NSS) released a few months later was very informative regarding the means the US would rely upon to confront its new challenges. "We must be prepared to stop rogue states and their terrorist clients before they are able to threaten or use weapons of mass destruction against the United States and our allies and friends."⁴⁷⁵ These words undeniably reflected the new international perception of George Bush, who had clearly expressed his readiness to respect its military tradition to act pre-emptively and for legitimate purposes only. He added that "the purpose of our actions will always be to eliminate a specific threat to the United States or our allies and friends. The reasons for our actions will be clear, the force measured, and the cause just."⁴⁷⁶

Despite those guarantees, many experts feared that there would be a shift in the US military doctrine, with the Americans striking preventively, as would be the case with Iraq later. Although he had personal reasons to target Saddam's Iraq first, George Bush was convinced by his close aid to start his *war on terror* with Afghanistan first. This choice can be explained mainly because the 9/11 attacks had been perpetrated by terrorist groups based in Afghanistan. After the Taliban-ruled government refused to hand over Al-Qaida members, Washington launched a war against Kabul, and three months later, the Taliban regime was toppled. The next target was Saddam Hussein, with whom George Bush had scores to settle.

The 9/11 events gave George Bush a windfall to physically get rid of Saddam Hussein and topple his regime. Indeed, Saddam Hussein fomented an assassination against George H. Bush (the father) during an official visit to Kuwait in 1993. Even though the Clinton administration had taken retaliatory measures for the plot against his predecessor, George Bush still had a grudge against the Iraqi leader. Ronald Powaski confirms it in these terms, "Bush believed the intelligence officials who told him afterwards that Hussein had planned to murder not just his father, but also his mother, his wife, and his two youngest brothers, Neil and Marvin. According to family intimates, the Bushes felt they were not safe as long as Hussein remained in power."⁴⁷⁷ Saddam

⁴⁷⁴ **George Bush Address on the State of the Union** on January 29, 2002. Accessed on 9th of September 2020 from <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html>.

⁴⁷⁵ **The National Security Strategy of the United States of America**, 2002, p.14. Accessed from <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/63562.pdf> on the 9th of September 2020.

⁴⁷⁶ **The National Security Strategy of the United States of America**, 2002, *Ibid.*, pp.14-16.

⁴⁷⁷ POWASKI E., Ronald: *Ideals, interests, and U.S. foreign policy from George H. W. Bush to Donald Trump*, *Op. Cit.*, pp.110-111

Hussein was also a source of concern for the United Nations (UN) and the Great Powers, especially the US.

Regarding the US, Iraq's troops invaded Kuwait on August 2, 1990, to seize the tremendous oil resources of this wealthy emirate of the Arabian Peninsula. This invasion was as brisk as the reaction of the Great Powers. Indeed, the UNSC immediately ordered the withdrawal of Saddam Hussein's forces (Res. 660) and imposed worldwide economic (financial and trade sanctions) on Iraq. Saddam Hussein's refusal to comply with the demands of the SC led the latter to adopt additional Resolutions to compel him to retreat from the invaded territories. Resolution 661, for instance, called upon other States not "to import into their territories of all commodities and products originating in Iraq or Kuwait exported there from after the date of the present resolution and not to make available to the Government of Iraq, or to any commercial, industrial or public utility undertaking in Iraq or Kuwait, any funds or any other financial or economic resources."⁴⁷⁸ Despite the negative impact of those economic sanctions from the humanitarian perspective, the US launched a military operation, *Desert Storm*, under UN Resolution 678, which called upon Member States to recourse to "all necessary means to uphold and implement Resolution 660 (1990) and all subsequent relevant resolutions, and to restore international peace and security in the region."⁴⁷⁹

Already facing enormous economic and military pressures, Saddam Hussein first agreed to a UN mission to monitor its controversial nuclear program concerning his alleged Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) program. However, after the end of the military intervention, with Iraq being freed from some of the devastating sanctions it faced, Saddam Hussein repelled the UN inspection team. These actions seriously increased the suspicions of the Great Powers and added an extra layer to Bush's argument about the necessity of toppling Saddam's regime.⁴⁸⁰ However, despite Saddam Hussein's controversial actions, no clear and objective evidence of WMD had been found in Iraq. Indeed, considering the imminence of the US military invasion and the faith of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, Saddam backtracked and welcomed a UN inspection team again to assess the credibility of his alleged WMD program. Unlike George Bush's declaration, it was clearly established that there was "no evidence or plausible indication of the revival of a nuclear weapons program in Iraq."⁴⁸¹

⁴⁷⁸ UNSC Resolution 661 adopted on August 6, 1990. Accessed on the 13th of September 2020 from <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/661>.

⁴⁷⁹ UNSC Resolution 678 adopted on November 29, 1990. Accessed on the 13th of September 2020 from <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/678>.

⁴⁸⁰ COLLINS J., Joseph: **Choosing war: the decision to invade Iraq and its aftermath**, Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University Press, Occasional Paper 5, April 2008, p.4

⁴⁸¹ KAUFMANN, Chaim, *Threat inflation and the failure of the market place of ideas: the selling of the Iraq war*, cited by RECORD, Jeffrey, **Why the Bush administration invaded Iraq: making strategy after 9/11**, Strategic Studies Quarterly, 2008, Vol. 2, N. 2, p.69

Nonetheless, George Bush's hankering to eliminate Saddam Hussein led him to bypass the UN recommendation and implement his agenda. Consequently, Operation *Iraqi Freedom* was launched on March 20, 2003, and less than two months later, Bagdad fell with Saddam's abscond. However, George Bush was not the only president driven by a neo-conservatism approach to foreign policy; Iran's sixth president, Ahmadinejad, also had a very ideologically driven understanding of Iran's international role.

4.4.2 Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's foreign policy: beliefs and actions.

The political and economic context in Iran in 2005 was characterized by widespread solid criticism of the ruling Mullahs, symbolized by the richness of former President Rafsanjani.⁴⁸² Emboldened by the Revolutionary's ideals of social justice and equity, Tehran's then Mayor Mahmoud Ahmadinejad capitalized on the political room offered by the aforementioned social context and was ultimately elected President. Conversely to the prediction of many observers, Ahmadinejad developed a very assertive foreign policy once in office. Maaïke Waarnar maintains that *during Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency, this ideological context was characterized by a revival of revolutionary discourse, with "change" as a central theme.*⁴⁸³

Ahmadinejad wanted a change in Iran's foreign policy both at the regional and the global level. Concerning the former, his main goal was to embellish Iran's neighbors' perception of the country, especially after its international reputation had been tarnished by concerns over Tehran's controversial nuclear program and its perceived negative role in critical regional issues like the Palestine-Israeli conflict. Consequently, Iran embarked on a soft power campaign which started with the visits in 2006 of high-ranked officials in neighboring countries: for example, then foreign affairs minister Manoucher Mokkati visited Bahrain, Oman and Qatar; in addition, president Ahmadinejad visited Kuwait while Ali Larijani travelled to Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Egypt.⁴⁸⁴ However, all those diplomatic initiatives were unsuccessful, as many countries, including Saudi Arabia, remained very sceptical regarding Iran's true intentions.

Despite its neutral foreign policy principle of "neither East nor West," Iran's historical relationship with foreign powers is more intense with Eastern powers like Russia and China, compared to Western powers like Germany or France. Considering this historical trend, deepening Tehran's bilateral relationship with Moscow and Pekin was an

⁴⁸² REZAI, Farhad: **Iran's nuclear program. A study in proliferation and rollback**, *Op. Cit.*, p.119

⁴⁸³ WAARNAR, Maaïke: **Iranian foreign policy during Ahmadinejad: ideology and actions**, *Op. Cit.*, p.81

⁴⁸⁴ WAARNAR, Maaïke: **Iranian foreign policy during Ahmadinejad: ideology and actions**, *Ibid.*, p.115

essential goal of Ahmadinejad. Concerning Russia, a key driver behind Tehran-Moscow bilateral relationship is their shared animosity toward Washington. Russia and Iran being two of the most significant global natural energy producers, the new Iranian leadership attempted to create a Russian/Iranian version of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) to counterbalance the US-led energy international order. But Russia had a more cautious approach to Iran's project. Mark Katz describes it in these terms: "Moscow's response, though, has been ambiguous -- calling for some form of coordination among gas producers on the one hand, but not to the extent that OPEC regulates its members on the other."⁴⁸⁵

As we will see later, Russia and Iran also had bones of contention in other issues like nuclear, especially regarding Moscow's support for UNSC Resolutions which imposed sanctions upon Iran. Concerning China, Ahmadinejad also deepened Tehran's bilateral relationship with Pekin, especially in the military area. According to Ehsan Razani and Nor Azizan Bin Idris, China exported \$470 million in arms to Tehran between 2005 and 2012; that means an average of \$67.1 million/per year.⁴⁸⁶ However, if there was an area, President Ahmadinejad adamantly criticized and resented, it was the US-led global system.

According to Maaïke Waarnar, "the worldview communicated by Iran's leaders during Ahmadinejad's presidency was one that draws on the historical experiences, primarily the experiences with what has been perceived as a meddling West, and the continuous attempts by Western powers to undermine the interest of the Iranian people."⁴⁸⁷ This means that the Iranian president had a very sceptical perception of global politics, and it will be reflected in his answer to the US coercive nuclear demands, as we will analyze later. Consequently, based on the tumultuous history of Iran, combined with his revolutionary beliefs, Ahmadinejad's foreign policy was mainly rooted in a clear distinction between two conflicting camps which stood for two opposing visions of the world. Hossein Karimifard described it in these terms: "during Ahmadinejad's presidency, the desire to otherness, being different from others, was cumulatively increased. (...) Extreme otherness means to create and make two separate poles by drawing boundaries which oppose these poles."⁴⁸⁸ The forces of the 'Good' were incarnated by the oppressed nations suffering under the yoke of the forces of the 'Evil'

⁴⁸⁵ KATZ, Mark, **Russian-Iranian relations in the Ahmadinejad era**, Middle East Journal, Spring, 2008, Vol. 62, N.2, p.208

⁴⁸⁶ SIPRI data cited by RAZANI Ehsan and BIN IDRIS N., Azizan, **Iran's conventional military relations with China under Ahmadinejad (2005-2013)**, International Journal of Advanced Studies in Humanities and Social Science, Vol 3, Issue 1, 2014, p.4

⁴⁸⁷ WAARNAR, Maaïke: **Iranian foreign policy during Ahmadinejad: ideology and actions**, *Op. Cit.*, p.82

⁴⁸⁸ KARIMIFARD, Hossein, **Iran's foreign policy approaches toward International Organizations**, Journal of World Socio-political Studies, Vol. 2, No. 1, January 2018, p. 49

incarnated by the arrogant Western Powers. In Ahmadinejad's view, just like within Iran, the international system was characterized by structural injustice, which he identified as one of the main threats to international peace. He criticized the UN system, especially the veto power that granted tremendous political power to a minority of countries, therefore undermining the democratic nature of the whole organization.⁴⁸⁹

However, Ahmadinejad did not only criticize the UN legal order but also blamed Western Powers for what, in his opinion, constituted a will to prevent developing powers from having access to cutting-edge technology. While in the past, the oppressors had denied developing nations their political rights (sovereignty), Ahmadinejad shared the opinion that technology denial was the new strategy used by Western powers to maintain third-world countries in poverty. "Can nations be deprived of scientific and technological progress through the threat of use of force and based on mere allegations of possibility of military diversion? (...) Such access cannot be restricted to a few, depriving most nations and, by establishing economic monopolies, use them as an instrument to expand their domination," Ahmadinejad asked during his UN Speech in 2005.⁴⁹⁰ Concerning **Jacques Hyman's NIC** notion, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had a nationalist and exceptionalist vision of his country's international role and can be rightly considered as an **"oppositional nationalists."** The next part will analyze the diplomatic negotiations between the E3 (France, Germany, and the UK) and Iran.

The previous analysis clearly highlights the international perceptions of the two presidents. While both had an ideological and Manichean approach to the external world, the theme of injustice, oppression and imperialism is more present in Ahmadinejad's apprehension of the international system. To what extent did this sceptical perception shape his response to US coercive demands? The following pages will provide an insightful answer to the previous question. But before that, as we previously mentioned, we divided the analysis into time frames that reflect the evolution of the Iranian nuclear negotiations. Hence, the next sub-part will analyze the talks between the EU and Iran between 2002 and 2006.

⁴⁸⁹ KARIMIFARD, Hossein, *Iran's foreign policy approaches toward International Organizations*, *Op. Cit.*

p.49

⁴⁹⁰ Address by H.E. Dr. Mahmood Ahmadinejad President of the Islamic Republic of Iran before the Sixtieth Session of the United Nations General Assembly New York - 17 September 2005. Accessed from <https://www.un.org/webcast/ga/60/statements/iran050917eng.pdf> on the 06th of November 2020.

4.4.3 The nuclear negotiations between the EU and the Iranians (2002-2006).

Following the revelations of the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI) regarding the existence of a secret nuclear program in the city of Arak in 2002, three European countries, namely France, Germany, and Great Britain (E3) decided to engage Iran over its controversial nuclear program. The causes of this diplomatic move were threefold: first, the Europeans wanted to avoid a second American military expedition after the Iraqi's as it could trigger a broader regional conflict. Second, they also wanted to avoid a regional proliferation dynamic as we previously analyzed. Third, the Iranian dossier was the first serious issue the EU managed as an international actor. Since Iran had been described as a member of the "axis of evil" by George Bush – a description perceived in Tehran as a betrayal after Iran's instrumental role in the US objective of toppling the Taliban in Afghanistan, – the revelations of the secret nuclear plant in Arak led the Iranians to think that they were the second in line after the Americans had toppled Saddam Hussein's regime.⁴⁹¹

Consequently, the Iranian authorities proposed a Grand Bargain to the US through the Swiss ambassador to Iran; basically, Iran expressed its readiness to diplomatically address all the bones of contention with Washington, even those that were considered strategic to the country's regional position like Hezbollah. Trita Parsi describes it in these terms: "figuring that the regime's very existence could be at stake, the Iranians put everything on the table – Hezbollah; the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, including Hamas and Islamic jihad; and Iran's nuclear program."⁴⁹² Unfortunately, George Bush's ideologically driven foreign policy led him to turn down this offer, a move that the Obama's administration bitterly regretted afterwards, as we will see later.

When the existence of the Iranian nuclear program was disclosed in 2002, the related international concerns were threefold: firstly, the controversies over Iran past nuclear activities, secondly the issues over the scope of nuclear enrichment and thirdly the possibilities of signing a long-term nuclear agreement with Iran. Consequently, when the E3 States engaged with Iran in 2002, their main goal was to lift as much as possible any doubt regarding the peaceful nature of the Iranian nuclear program. This was not an easy task, since there was deep mistrust between the main protagonist (the US and Iran). Indeed, since the 1979 revolution, Iran has been suspecting and accusing the US of trying to topple the Islamic regime. From this perspective, isolating Iran at the

⁴⁹¹ It is also important to highlight that North Korea had announced its withdrawal from the NPT on January 11, 2003. Therefore, the international context at the time was characterized by a great proliferation risk.

⁴⁹² PARSI, Trita: **Losing an enemy: Obama, Iran, and the triumph of diplomacy**, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2017, p.48

international level was perceived as a steppingstone in achieving their alleged agenda. It is also important mention that when the negotiations between the Europeans and the Iranians started, Iran was already at the **second stage (nuclear program)** of Eleonora Mattiacci's and Benjamin Jones' model of nuclear reversal. Hence, the Western Powers could still confidently prevent Tehran from reaching a closer level to the nuclear threshold. However, as we will see later, they failed to offer credible incentives to Tehran.

On the other hand, Tehran's support of "terrorist" groups such as Hezbollah and pro-Shia militias in the region, combined with its nuclear program fueled the Bush's administration's suspicions of Iran trying to covertly achieve a nuclear capability, which could grant a credible deterrent leverage to Tehran. In order to achieve their confident-building based agenda, the E3 group proposed a bargain to Iran which Tehran accepted; basically, Iran agreed to provide answers to the questions of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) regarding its previous nuclear activities and to sign the additional protocol of the NPT which allows the IAEA to conduct intrusive and improvised inspections. In exchange of Iran's nuclear cooperation, *the EU3 agreed to recognize Iran's right to develop peaceful nuclear energy and to assist in its development, along with the promise to enter a more general dialogue about regional security and stability.*⁴⁹³ This agreement is called the Tehran agreement signed on October 21st, 2003.

Despite this first agreement, several key issues were still unsolved regarding Iran's nuclear program. In fact, the US government remained very cautious regarding the fate of the agreement the E3 States had just stroke with Iran, preferring to acquiesce the taste of the pudding only after having eaten it. As Scott McClellan, then White House Spokesperson declared in this regard, "we have been in close contact with the Europeans all along so we very much welcome the efforts by the British, German and French foreign ministers to obtain a commitment of full compliance by Iran with its IAEA and non-proliferation obligations; [...] full compliance will now be essential."⁴⁹⁴ Among the hot topics, if not the hottest that still existed between the Europeans and Iran was the issue over enrichment. In fact, the Europeans requested from Iran to completely suspend every enrichment activity, but the Iranian government objected. Mohamed ElBaradei, then Director of the IAEA overcame the stalemate by suggesting a minimal definition of suspension of enrichment which consisted of Iran not injecting

⁴⁹³ MAZZUCELLI, Colette, **EU3-Iranian Nuclear Diplomacy: Implications for US policy in the Middle East**, EUMA, Vol. 4 N. 6, March 2007, p.5

⁴⁹⁴ MACASKILL Ewen, DE LUCE Dan and BORGER Julian, **EU ministers strike Iran deal. Diplomatic coup on nuclear programme averts crisis**, The Guardian, October 22, 2003. Accessed online on July 5, 2020, from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/oct/22/iran.politics1>

gas into the centrifuges;⁴⁹⁵ this was known as the *Brussels agreement* signed on February 3, 2004. According to Michele Gaietta, the Brussels agreement allowed Iran to extend “the scope of the suspension of enrichment activities, including the manufacture of parts and assembly of centrifuges, as required by the IAEA and EU3 [...] and to provide new explanations on the nuclear activities that it had omitted in the declaration of October 2003.”⁴⁹⁶ In exchange, the Europeans pledged to assist Iran with issues related to its nuclear program and work for the removal of the Iranian dossier from the IAEA’s table.

However, this agreement did not last long; indeed, its survival was threatened less than six months after its signature due to several factors. One of them is the ambiguity related to the interpretation of the scope of the Iranian suspension of enrichment between Tehran and the Europeans. In this regard, Oliver Meier argues that “while Iranian negotiators insisted that ElBaradei had explained to them that suspension was to be understood merely as not introducing nuclear material into centrifuges, the E3 interpreted this promise to mean that all enrichment-related activities were to stop, including the testing and construction of new centrifuges.”⁴⁹⁷ The issue of enrichment in the Iranian context was as sensitive as thanks to Reza Aghazadeh’s letter to the IAEA in 2003, it was revealed that Iran had breached many of its obligations under the safeguards agreements it signed with the IAEA and carried-out more secret enrichment activities than it had reported. As Michele Gaietta put it, “although Aghazadeh’s statements gave a fairly accurate picture of Iran’s nuclear activities, it also increased the gravity and number of Iranian breaches of the Safeguards Agreement signed with the agency.”⁴⁹⁸

All the previous information strengthened what many, especially the US had suspected from the very beginning: first that Iran was not actually looking for a long-term agreement with Great Powers, rather was engaged in a deceptive strategy aimed at buying time and enabling Tehran to increase the nuclear capabilities by installing advanced centrifuges. Second, the purpose of all the agreements Tehran had signed so far was to avoid a referral of the Iranian nuclear dossier to the UN Security Council. As Mohamed ElBaradei recalled after the IAEA had proven that nuclear material had been used in the non-declared facility of Kalaye Electric Company (KEC), “I realized early on that we were dealing with people who were willing to deceive to achieve their goals and

⁴⁹⁵ CRONBERG, Tarja: **Nuclear multilateralism and Iran: Inside EU negotiations**, New York, Routledge, 2017, p.18. Accessed online.

⁴⁹⁶ GAIETTA, Michele: **The trajectory of Iran’s nuclear program**, *Op. Cit.*, p.99

⁴⁹⁷ MEIER, Olivier: **European efforts to solve the conflict over Iran’s nuclear program: how has the European Union performed?**, EU Non-Proliferation Consortium, Non-Proliferation Papers, N.27, Feb 2013, p.6

⁴⁹⁸ GAIETTA, Michele: **The trajectory of Iran’s nuclear program**, *Op. Cit.*, p.96

that we should not accept any attestation without physical verification.”⁴⁹⁹ Another cause of the failure of the Brussels agreement is the evolution of Iranian domestic politics, characterized by the rise of the far right movement spearheaded by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, then newly elected mayor of Tehran.

Despite the previously mentioned factors, negotiations between Europeans and Iranians were not suspended. To lift the controversies related to the scope of the suspension of enrichment Tehran should commit to, both parties signed a new agreement on the November 15, 2004: *the Paris agreement*. The main goal of this new agreement was to fix the loophole of the two first agreements, notably the scope and the duration of suspension of the enrichment activities in Iran’s nuclear program. The signature of this of the agreement was uncertain for at least two reasons: first the IAEA’s concerns regarding Iran’s nuclear activities in alleged non-declared sites; second the bargaining positions of both parties. Regarding the former, the IAEA and the Europeans wanted to avoid a repetition of the KEC’s precedent with the Lavisan-Shian site which hosted a controversial research center⁵⁰⁰ monitored by Iran’s Ministry of Defense and Arms Forces Logistics (MODAFL). Regarding the latter, both parties had two divergent visions about the finality of the negotiations. While the Europeans perceived the negotiations as a primary step toward a broader agreement, the Iranians considered the agreement as a confidence-building gesture. In addition, the US pressure on the Europeans increased gradually, as they requested from them an “unlimited duration” of the suspension of the enrichment. Consequently, any agreement that was to emerge from these fierce negotiations would be influenced by all those issues.

Accordingly, the enrichment activities Iran voluntarily agreed to suspend under the Paris agreement included “the manufacture and import of gas centrifuges and their components; the assembly, installation, testing or operation of gas centrifuges; work to undertake any plutonium separation, or to construct or operate any plutonium separation installation; and all tests or production at any uranium conversion installation.”⁵⁰¹ This was to avoid any repetition of the misinterpretation of the scope of the enrichment activities Iran should suspend; with regards to the “unlimited suspension”, the Europeans accepted a trade-off by requesting from Iran to provide

⁴⁹⁹ ELBARADEI, Mohamed: **The Age of deception: nuclear diplomacy in treacherous times**, New York, Metropolitan Books, 2011, p.118. (Accessed online.)

⁵⁰⁰ The National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI) had accused Iran of secretly building biological weapons at the Centre for Readiness and Defence Technology. Read GAIETTA, Michele: **The trajectory of Iran's nuclear program**, *Op. Cit.*, p.101

⁵⁰¹ IAEA-INFIRC/637: **Communication dated 26 November 2004 received from the Permanent Representatives of France, Germany, the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United Kingdom concerning the agreement signed in Paris on 15 November 2004**, 26 November 2004. An information accessed on the 1st of August 2020 from the website <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/publications/documents/infircs/2004/infirc637.pdf>.

“objective guarantees” regarding its nuclear program and this went through Iran’s acceptance of the resuming the interim enforcement of the Additional Protocol. In exchange, the Europeans acknowledged Iran’s right to a civilian nuclear program, pledged that the “Iranian dossier” will not be transferred to the UN Security Council but will stay on the IAEA’s table.

In addition, the EU promised to support Iran’s application for a membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO) and Iran’s participation in the IAEA Experts Group of Multilateral Approaches (EGOMA) to the Nuclear Fuel Cycle (NFC). This would indirectly acknowledge Iran’s nuclear rights and capabilities to master the fuel cycle.⁵⁰² Another major concession the Europeans made to Iran under the Paris agreement was to acknowledge Iran’s role in fighting international terrorist groups notably Al Qaeda and more importantly the Mujahedin-e Khalq which is considered to be the armed wing of the NCRI. Nonetheless, the Paris agreement ultimately collapsed despite its merits.

Although the terms of the Paris agreement satisfied both parties, its implementation was another story. The main stumbling block was yet again the substance of the “objective guarantees” Iran had to provide regarding its peaceful nuclear program. While the Europeans viewed the complete suspension of enrichment activities as the only objective guarantee, the Iranians perceived the objective guarantees under the frame of a deeper compliance with the NPT. The firm position of the Europeans was due to the increasing pressure of the US who posed the principle of “watertight guarantees” as the *sine que non* condition for their approval of any deal the Europeans could reach with Iran. Washington even considered joining the Europeans first to acquiesce the positive reports of the IAEA regarding the suspension of enrichment by Iran, but also to torpedo the negotiations from within in order to blame the Iranians for the failure of the negotiations.⁵⁰³

European’s reluctance to provide incentives deeply frustrated the Iranians who had hoped for concessions to alleviate the increasing domestic pressures Hassan Rouhani was facing. ElBaradei described it in these terms: “the negotiations were not making visible headway. Rouhani was under pressure from his government to show progress—in the form of concrete deliverables—for his cooperative approach.”⁵⁰⁴ The Europeans expected to have more concessions with the Khatami’s administration after the elections, but the Supreme Guide ruled-out the perspective of any change regarding the

⁵⁰² GAIETTA, Michele: **The trajectory of Iran’s nuclear program**, *Op. Cit.*, p.102

⁵⁰³ CRONBERG, Tarja: **Nuclear multilateralism and Iran: Inside EU negotiations**, *Op. Cit.*, p.34. Accessed online.

⁵⁰⁴ ELBARADEI, Mohamed: **The Age of deception: nuclear diplomacy in treacherous times**, *Op. Cit.*, p.143. Consulted online. Read also CRONBERG, Tarja: **Nuclear multilateralism and Iran: Inside EU negotiations**, *Op. Cit.*, p.35

Iranian nuclear stance irrespective of the outcome of the elections. In addition, Khatami had been defeated and Ahmadinejad elected to the great surprise and dismay of the Europeans.

Although they wanted to secure a long-term agreement with Iran before the new administration had officially taken office, the Europeans rejected the first proposal of the Iranians which focused mainly on the bilateral cooperation of both parties on regional issues like terrorism and WMD; rather, they requested from Iran to submit a clear proposal regarding the “objective guarantees” of the peaceful nature of its program. In lines with their original interpretation of the Paris agreement, the Iranians subsequently proposed a first package of actions they could undertake in relation with the NPT to demonstrate the exclusive peaceful nature of their nuclear program.

According to Michel Gaietta, the Iranians submitted a new package with three level of guarantees: the first one included “concrete limitations to the Iranian fuel cycle, such as a ban on reprocessing activities, qualitative and quantitative caps on the enrichment program that should not exceed the 3,000 centrifuges installed at Natanz”, the second level insisted on “legislative and regulatory measures: the ratification of the Additional Protocol; the implementation of a law that would include a permanent ban on the development of nuclear weapons; and the strengthening of export controls” and the third one stressed on “enhanced monitoring measures that were to be implemented during the negotiations: the voluntary enforcement of the Additional Protocol; the continued presence of IAEA inspectors at the Natanz and Esfahan sites; and the possibility of EU3/EU experts joining them.”⁵⁰⁵ The Europeans did not come up directly with a counter-proposal, instead they requested additional time to examine the new Iranian proposal. Hassan Rohani agreed and delayed the resume of the enrichment for two months.

The Europeans ultimately rejected the Iranian proposal on the grounds that it contained provisions which allowed enrichment activities and came-up with a counter-proposal instead. They also proposed technical solutions which they thought would meet Tehran’s expectations. In terms of incentives, the Europeans offered to supply light water reactors together with their nuclear fuel, to build a research reactor, bilateral cooperation on key regional issues like the stabilization of Afghanistan and Iraq, terrorism, drug trafficking and the strengthening economic cooperation in key sectors, including civil aviation.⁵⁰⁶ In exchange, the Europeans requested “a commitment by Iran not to pursue fuel cycle technologies, reviewable after 10 years, a legally binding commitment by Iran not to withdraw from the NPT and Iran’s adoption

⁵⁰⁵ GAIETTA, Michele: **The trajectory of Iran's nuclear program**, *Op. Cit.*, p.104

⁵⁰⁶ GAIETTA, Michele: **The trajectory of Iran's nuclear program**, *Op. Cit.*, p.106

of the Additional Protocol, arrangements for Iran to return spent nuclear fuel to supplier countries, to establish a buffer store of nuclear fuel located in a third country.”⁵⁰⁷ Iran vehemently rejected the Europeans proposal because it completely denied Tehran the possibility to domestically enrich the uranium which was an achievement of a great importance for the Iranians. “The Iranians tried to get the Europeans to consider the possibility of at least doing uranium conversion. Conversion would allow some face-saving with the Iranian public, a sign that the country had not altogether abandoned its nuclear achievements. [...] But the Western countries were not willing to allow Iran even this concession” lamented El Baradei.⁵⁰⁸ The negotiations between the two parties ultimately failed and Iran resumed the enrichment.

According to Tarja Cronberg, the negotiations between the Europeans and the Iranians failed due to two main reasons: first the European’s lack of strategic empathy, precisely their inability to understand the strategic importance of the nuclear program in general, and the enrichment issue for Tehran. As previously analyzed, the nuclear program and the enrichment capabilities represented an issue of pride and prestige for Tehran, considering its tumultuous historical relations with the external world, Russia, and Western powers alike. Second, the absence of a united European front in dealing with Iran. Indeed, as Tarja Cronberg argues, “in the EU there was a divide, in 2005, between the diplomatic/administrative and the political level. The former saw US participation as unavoidable as the Iran nuclear issue was a “tête-a-tête” with Americans. The expectation was that without the Americans on board there would be no deal. On the political level there seems to have been a will to conclude a deal. Two foreign ministers, the UK’s Jack Straw and Germany’s Joschka Fisher, have claimed that the US intervention prevented the Europeans from succeeding.”⁵⁰⁹

The failure of the nuclear talks combined with the discovery of “the alleged studies” which confirmed further breaches of Iran under the nuclear safeguards led the IAEA to adopt Resolution GOV/2005/77 on the 24th of September 2005 which resulted in the referral of the Iran to the Security Council under Art. XII.C of the safeguard agreements. Iran’s referral to the Security Council inaugurated an era of great tensions between Tehran and Washington who finally joined the other Permanent Members of the Security Council plus Germany (E3+3) to address the Iranian nuclear challenge. Together they formed the E3+3 group or the P5+1 group which refers to the five

⁵⁰⁷ Arms Control Association, **Official proposals on the Iranian nuclear issue, 2003-2013**, an information accessed from https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Iran_Nuclear_Proposal on 12th August 2020.

⁵⁰⁸ EL BARADEI, Mohamed: **The Age of deception: nuclear diplomacy in treacherous times**, *Op. Cit.*, p.159

⁵⁰⁹ CRONBERG, Tarja: **Nuclear multilateralism and Iran: Inside EU negotiations**, *Op. Cit.*, p.36. Accessed online.

permanent members of the UNSC plus Germany. It is important to highlight that the EU diplomatic attempt failed because their strategy lacked credible coercive threat and their incentive did not reciprocate the gestures of Iran, in terms of acknowledging its domestic enrichment right. The next sub part will analyze the coercive dynamics between the US, supported by the EU and UN on the one hand, and Iran on the other hand.

Regarding the nuclear reversal theories, the previous information demonstrate that the E3 group failed to capitalize the opportunity of the Iran's level of nuclear progress. This was a more wasted opportunity as the context back then was conducive for an agreement between the West and Iran that could serve as a credible economic incentive to Tehran. The E3 group will realize this strategic mistake with the arrival of Ahmadinejad at the Presidency.

4.4.4 The nuclear negotiations between US (E3+3 group) and Iran. (2006-2013).

The coercive dynamics between the US (supported by the other members of the SC plus Germany which formed the E3+3 group) and Iran began in a particular context. Regarding Iran on the one hand, the neoconservative wing incarnated by Ahmadinejad rose in 2006 as we have previously analyzed. With regard to the US on the other hand, there was a domestic consensus regarding the necessity to address the Iranian nuclear challenge through sanctions. Indeed, the Senate adopted a series of sanctions against Iran in 2006. The appeal for sanctions was also vivid in the White House. In fact, Iran's hitherto refusal to comply with the US and the E3 demands clearly illustrated the failure of the longstanding US defiant approach of the Iranian nuclear issue promoted by Dick Cheney. Consequently, George Bush opted for the diplomatic approach promoted by Condoleezza Rice.

Nonetheless, Georges Bush did not intend to rely on classic diplomacy; rather, he opted for a coercive approach, one that was mainly based on sanctions and threats. In fact, George Bush had only changed his approach toward the Iranian nuclear issue, and not his perception of Iran. As he declared in the 2006 National Security Strategy (NSS), "we may face no greater challenge from a single country than from Iran. For almost 20 years, the Iranian regime hid many of its key nuclear efforts from the international community."⁵¹⁰ In light of this approach, then Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice clearly stressed that Washington would negotiate with Tehran as soon as Iran fully and verifiably suspends its enrichment and reprocessing activities, (then only) the United

⁵¹⁰ **The National Security Strategy of the United States of America**, 2006, p.20 Accessed from the link <https://www.comw.org/qdr/fulltext/nss2006.pdf> on the 10th of September 2020.

States will come to the table with (its) EU-3 colleagues and meet with Iran's representatives.⁵¹¹ Hence, the interactions between the US (E3+3) and Iran began against this backdrop in 2006. Yet, before resorting to a coercive approach aiming at compelling Iran to abandon its enrichment activities, the US-led E3+3 group initially adopted a conciliatory approach vis-à-vis Iran. Indeed, they first proposed a set of incentives to Iran: this was known as the *2006 package of incentives to Iran*.⁵¹²

Under the 2006 package of incentives the P5+1 group basically acknowledged Iran's inalienable right to nuclear energy for peaceful purposes without discrimination and in conformity with Articles I and II of the NPT and committed to actively support the building of new light water power reactors in Iran through international joint projects, (...) using state-of the art technology.⁵¹³ In addition, they also committed to a legally binding fuel supply to Iran via a Russia-based nuclear facility and offered international cooperation with Iran in a several sectors, including regional security issues, economic relations with foreign investment and deeper integration of Iran in international institutions like the WTO, telecommunications and civil aviation. In exchange, they expected Iran "to suspend all enrichment-related and reprocessing activities to be verified by the IAEA, (...) and to resume implementation of the Additional Protocol of the IAEA."⁵¹⁴ As the UN nuclear watchdog, the IAEA's report on Iran's effective compliance with the terms of this proposal were strategic for the renewal and sustainability of the agreement. What was Iran's answer to this proposal?

The provision of the 2006 package of incentives seemed fair and balanced at glance, considering Iran's needs for nuclear energy. However, they failed to understand the scope of Iran's distrust vis-à-vis the external world, including both the West and the East, though to a lesser extent for the latter. As we previously analyzed, Iran's history is paved with several episodes of technology denial, and unfulfilled commitments from the external world during both the Shah and the Islamic regime. Consequently, Iranians have always sought to reduce their dependence on the world, and such strategic areas as nuclear energy was not an exception. Commenting on the importance of Iran's mastering nuclear enrichment, the Supreme Guide declared, "it represents our political independence and national self-confidence. We should not sell out this precious resource because of the enemies' threats and we should not be fooled by enemy

⁵¹¹ **Statement by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice**, Washington, May 31, 2006. Accessed from the link <https://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/rm/2006/67088.htm> on the 15th of November 2020.

⁵¹² **Elements of a proposal to Iran as approved on 1 June 2006 at the meeting in Vienna of China, France, Germany, the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom, the United States of America and the European Union**. An information accessed on the 5th of November 2020 from https://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/en/reports/90569.pdf.

⁵¹³ **Elements of a proposal to Iran as approved on 1 June 2006 at the meeting in Vienna**, *Ibid.*, p.1

⁵¹⁴ **Elements of a proposal to Iran as approved on 1 June 2006 at the meeting in Vienna**, *Ibid.*, p.1

bribes.”⁵¹⁵ Therefore, though the idea of a permanent foreign supply of nuclear fuel is appealing in many regards, having to depend on the foreign powers to produce nuclear energy was not acceptable for Iranians. Logically, the Iranian authorities rejected the P5+1 group package of incentives. Iran’s dismissal of the P5+1 group offer fueled international suspicions regarding its nuclear program, which led the P5+1 coalition under the US leadership, to explore tougher approaches to compel Iran to meet their demands.

This first round of negotiations confirms the veracity of the neoclassical assumption of the transmitting-belt effect of the intervening variable concerning a country’s foreign policy in the context of international/systemic demands. In this case, the Iranian historical records of the West’s inability to deliver what it had previously committed clearly shaped Iran’s decision to reject the first offer from the US. More importantly, as we will see later in the sub-part, Washington’s failure to acknowledge Iran’s right to a domestic enrichment capability will continuously maintain Tehran’s defiance of Washington’s demands. This firm stance of the US also highlights the **lack of strategic empathy** in their strategy. There was no objective evidence that Iran was pursuing a nuclear weapons program.

However, its non-cooperative behavior with the IAEA casts severe doubts regarding the peaceful nature of its nuclear program. (This is a confirmation of the **compromise-hybrid political regime** of Iran as predicted by Etel Solingen; it also confirms that Iran could have halted its nuclear activities had credible incentives granted.) More precisely, according to George Bush, Iran’s refusal to come into compliance with its international obligations by providing the IAEA access to nuclear sites and resolving troubling questions⁵¹⁶ was another proof of its desire to build nuclear weapons. This sceptical perception of President Bush illustrates the preponderant view of the neo-conservative wing of the Bush administration regarding the Iranian nuclear issue. Logically, addressing the Iranian nuclear challenge with “raw power” had become the primary goal of the US administration. However, the political room for such an initiative was relatively narrow, considering the Iraqi precedent and its related-failed military intervention from a political perspective.

Therefore, the UN sanctions appeared as the perfect stepping-stone toward this end. As Richard Nephew, former Director for Iran in the National Security Staff under the Obama administration, described during our interview, “the sense was not that

⁵¹⁵ **Iran’s Supreme Leader: “Using nuclear weapons is un-Islamic”**, Deutsche Welle (DW), June 04, 2006. Accessed from <https://www.dw.com/en/irans-supreme-leader-using-nuclear-weapons-is-un-islamic/a-2043328> on the 22nd of October 2020.

⁵¹⁶ **The National Security Strategy of the United States of America**, 2006, *Op. Cit.*

sanctions were going to work. The sense was that they were going to fail, and in getting them to fail fast, you got then the ability to do what you wanted to do, which was to have a credible military threat.”⁵¹⁷ This was the first escalation tactic of the US. Consequently, the actual goal of the US in pushing for the UN sanctions was not that much rooted in their willingness to address the Iranian nuclear challenge through a multilateral framework or to compel Iran to suspend its enrichment activities *per se*, but to use the expected failure of the UN sanctions to demonstrate that resorting to force was the last and only way to solve the Iranian nuclear issue effectively.

The UNSC subsequently adopted its first Resolution (Res.) under the US leadership after then Security Council President César Mayoral had called upon Iran to fully and sustainably suspend all its enrichment-related activities.⁵¹⁸ Resolution 1696 was adopted on the 31st of July 2006 under Art. 40 of Chapter VII of the UN charter.⁵¹⁹ It required from Iran two main actions: first “to take the steps required by the IAEA Board of Governors in its resolution GOV/2006/14, which are essential to build confidence in the exclusively peaceful purpose of its nuclear program and to resolve outstanding questions,” [and to] “suspend all enrichment-related and reprocessing activities, including research and development, to be verified by the IAEA.”⁵²⁰ Despite the fact that those provision did not actually imposed economic sanction *per se*, rather was inviting Iran to a more cooperative behavior with the UN nuclear watchdog, Resolution 1696 nonetheless also contained coercive elements aimed at modifying Iran’s nuclear behavior.

To achieve its goal of leading Iran to cooperate with the IAEA, Res. 1696 had recourse to several (tacit) threats. First, by requesting from the IAEA to submit a report about the suspension or not by Iran of its enrichment activities thirteen (30) days after the adoption of the Res. on the 31st of August 2006, the UNSC aimed at creating “a sense of urgency” as it had set a deadline for Iran to comply with its demand. Secondly, Art. 5 of Res. 1696 which invited other States “to exercise vigilance and prevent the transfer of any items, materials, goods and technology that could contribute to Iran’s enrichment-related and reprocessing activities and ballistic missile programmed;” hinted at the future political isolation Iran would face. Furthermore, it clearly expressed its readiness to “adopt appropriate measures under Art. 41 of Chapter VII [...] to persuade Iran to

⁵¹⁷ Interview with Richard Nephew on the US coercive strategy with Iran.

⁵¹⁸ The Statement was accessed on the 25th of November 2020 through the link <https://www.un.org/press/en/2006/sc8679.doc.htm>.

⁵¹⁹ The provision of Art. 40 of the UN Charter is the following: “In order to prevent an aggravation of the situation, the Security Council may, before making the recommendations or deciding upon the measures provided for in Article 39, call upon the parties concerned to comply with such provisional measures as it deems necessary or desirable.” Accessed from the **UN Charter**, *Op. Cit.*

⁵²⁰ **UNSC Resolution 1696** adopted on July 31st, 2006. Accessed on the 26th of November 2020 from the link <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/1696>

comply with this Resolution and the requirements.”⁵²¹ Those measures usually imply any actions the SC deemed necessary for the implementation of its decision, except of military actions. By pointing out at the possibility to implement additional measures against Iran in case it did not comply with its demands, the UNSC implemented the “gradual turning of the screw” version of coercive diplomacy and relied on the risk-based strategy. Unfortunately, Iran under Ahmadinejad responded negatively to this first UNSC Resolution.

In line with his confrontational foreign policy toward the West, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad vehemently rejected the provision of Resolution 1696, claiming that it lacked legitimacy as nuclear energy was the sovereign right of Iran. As he declared in a television broadcasted speech, “if some think they can still speak with threatening language to the Iranian nation, they must know that they are badly mistaken. [...] Our nation has made its decision. We have passed the difficult stages. Today, the Iranian nation has acquired the nuclear technology.”⁵²² Although there was not a consensus on the relevance of adopting Res. 1696 under Chap VII of the UN charter,⁵²³ reflecting on the political dynamism of the Iranian polity, certain political factions inside Iran criticized the choice of the words of President Ahmadinejad. Even though those critics seemed more driven by a political revenge agenda than an actual warning against the president’s approach, they nevertheless illustrate the absence of consensus with respect to the nuclear strategy of the new Iranian administration. For example, then Secretary of the SNSC Hassan Rouhani invited Ahmadinejad to adopt a more cautious nuclear strategy, one that was based more on reason and less on emotions.⁵²⁴ In addition, Khatami warned that confronting the international community could ultimately affect not only the Iranian economy but also Iran’s very right to nuclear energy.⁵²⁵

⁵²¹ UNSC Resolution 1696, *Ibid*.

⁵²² The New York Times: **Iran rejects council's vote - Africa & Middle East - International Herald Tribune**, August 1, 2006. An information accessed on the 20th of October 2020 from <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/08/01/world/africa/01iht-iran.2356714.html>.

⁵²³ According to Michele Gaietta, even El Baradei criticized the fact that the Resolution had been adopted under Chap VII of the UN charter. Read GAIETTA, Michele: **The trajectory of Iran's nuclear program**, *Op. Cit.*, p.121

⁵²⁴ HERZOG, Michael: **Iranian public opinion on the nuclear program. A potential asset for the international community**, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Focus N.56, June 2006, p.8

⁵²⁵ SLACKMAN, Michael, **In Iran, dissenting voices rise on its leaders' nuclear strategy**, New York Times, March 15, 2006. An information accessed on 20th of October 2020 from <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/15/world/middleeast/in-iran-dissenting-voices-riseon-its-leaders-nuclear.html>. Cited by HERZOG, Michael: **Iranian public opinion on the nuclear program. A potential asset for the international community**, *Ibid*, p.8

Depending on his target, President Ahmadinejad adopted a twofold counter-attack strategy: with respect to the international audience, he basically ignored the demands of Res. 1696 and demonstrated Iran's defiance by inaugurating the Arak nuclear facility which could produce Plutonium, one of the chemical elements necessary to build nuclear weapons. (**Oppositional nationalism**) With respect to the domestic audience, President Ahmadinejad mainly criticized the former administration for having made too many concessions in return of no substantial incentives. The Iranian-American historian John Ghazvinian confirmed it during our interview as he declared: *when Ahmadinejad stepped in 2005, it was easy for him to tell "look, when you accede to their demands, they even increase the pressure; so, complying with the demands of the US did not serve our interests."* The idea was simply that the reformist had been too weak, they had suspended the program and made the country weaker.⁵²⁶ However, several factors explain the behavior of President Ahmadinejad.



Figure 6: Arak nuclear complex. Source: Nuclear Threat Initiative: Arak nuclear complex. Source: Nuclear Threat Initiative.⁵²⁷

President Ahmadinejad's defiant policy was not empty grounded, rather it was driven by several assets. Among those is first and foremost the support of the Supreme Guide who strongly rejected the provisions of Res. 1696. As we have seen earlier, although Iran has a consensual decision-making, the Supreme Guide has the last word on every single key decision in the Islamic republic. Enjoying the political support of the Supreme Leader constituted an undeniable asset in Ahmadinejad's confrontational strategy against the West.⁵²⁸ President Ahmadinejad's defiant nuclear policy also enjoyed

⁵²⁶ Interview with Dr John Ghazvinian on the US coercive strategy with Iran.

⁵²⁷ Accessed on November 29, 2020 from <https://www.nti.org/education-center/facilities/arak-nuclear-complex/>

⁵²⁸ Iran's Supreme Leader: "Using nuclear weapons is un-Islamic", *Op. Cit.*

widely public support. Also, as indicated in table 2 below, Iran at that time had good economic scores; citing data from the InterMedia Survey Institute, Judith Yaphe declares that “41% of Iranians interviewed strongly support the development of nuclear weapons. Among those supporters, 84% said they would be willing to face United Nations (UN) sanctions, and 75 percent would risk hostilities with the United States in order to develop them.”⁵²⁹ The country’s GDP was 3.2% while the unemployment rate was 11.8%.

Regarding our theoretical choices, several factors shed light on the failure of the first UN resolution against Iran’s nuclear program. From a neoclassical realist perspective, two intervening variables shaped Ahmadinejad’s continuous defiance: the balance of power among the Iranian domestic institutions considering the support of the Supreme Guide and the State-society relation considering the public support for the defiant nuclear policy. The former two intervening variables explain the Iranian response to international demands. It is also worth noting that threats wielded in Res. 1696 were not proportional to the envisioned objective, thus not credible to affect the nuclear calculus of the Iranians. In fact, the UN wielded the threats in an implicit tone which did not send the expected signals to Tehran. Also, credible reciprocal incentives did not support the demands to stop the enrichment, explaining Iran’s defiance. Consequently, after the IAEA’s report in August 2006 confirmed Iran’s failure to comply with the provisions of Res. 1696, the UNSC adopted a new Resolution to impose additional sanctions against Iran. From a nuclear reversal perspective, Ahmadinejad clearly displayed his oppositional nationalist style and enjoyed the support from the different factions in Iran (compromise hybrid), without forgetting the absence of credible incentives from the West (Rupal Mehta).

The UN Res. 1737 was adopted on the 23rd of December 2006 in response to Iran’s refusal to comply with the provisions of Res. 1696. The demands were the same as in Res. 1696, but Res. 1737 took the nuclear issue a step further. In other words, with the adoption of Res. 1737, the UNSC aimed at backing their declarations with actions and signaling their resolve to the Iranian authorities. In this regard, the “gradual turning of the screw” version of coercive diplomacy took shape by the recourse to a coercive denial strategy. As we have seen previously, denial strategies aim at decreasing the appeal of resistance of the target; this is usually done by undermining his strategy or destroying key assets of its military defense through the bombing of military bases. In the specific context of Iran, the denial strategy transpired through the sanctions inflicted to the Iranian nuclear industry. For instance, Art. 3 of Res. 1737 called upon all States to take “the necessary measures to prevent the supply, sale or transfer directly

⁵²⁹ YAPHE S., Judith: **Nuclear politics in Iran**, Institute for National Strategic Studies (INSS), Washington, May 2010, p.27

or indirectly from their territories, (...) of all items, materials, equipment, goods and technology which could contribute to Iran's enrichment-related, reprocessing or heavy water-related activities, or to the development of nuclear weapon delivery systems."⁵³⁰

In addition, Res.1737 also called upon the other member States not to cooperate with Iran on nuclear enrichment-related activities such as nuclear trainings, sale or transfer of item involved in nuclear activities (Art. 6) and identified a list of companies and individuals involved in Iran's ballistic and nuclear program which whom the other States should not interact (Vertical escalation). Among the companies listed were for example the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI), the Mesbah Energy Company (MEC), the KEC, and several Defense Industries Organization (DIO). Among the people sanctioned under Res. 1737 were Mohammad Qannadi, Vice President for Research & Development of the AEOI, Ali Hajinia Leilabadi, Director General of the MEC or Lt Gen Mohammad Mehdi Nejad Nouri, Rector of Malek Ashtar University of Defense Technology. Lastly, like Res. 1696, Res. 1737 also set a deadline (60 days) to Tehran to comply with its demands (Art. 23). It clearly shows that the "gradual turning of the screw" version of CD and the risk-based strategy remained at the core of the Great powers' strategy.

The adoption of Resolution 1737 was a surprise for the Iranian authorities who had expected Russia and China's veto against the Resolution. Supreme Leader Khamenei reflected his confidence with respect to the difficulty of sanctions being imposed on Iran as he declared "there is no consensus against Iran. It is only the Americans and some of their allies"⁵³¹ Abbas Milani, an American-Iranian historian argues that the Iranian authorities expected the increase of oil prices to be a credible deterrent argument to the West in the event of the imposition of sanctions against Iran. As he declared during our interview, *Ahmadinejad believed that the nuclear dossier would never come to the Security Council and if it comes, it will never pass because of two reasons: "China and Russia will veto it, they have promised us, and the West won't dare sanction us because if they sanction Iran's oil, the price of oil will go to \$200" Ahmadinejad believed. But the elasticity of oil had changed, Iran could be discarded as Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Petro monarchies increased their oil production. In addition, China and Russia didn't veto the Resolution, so the Iranian bet was proved wrong.*⁵³²

⁵³⁰ **UNSC Resolution 1737** adopted on December 23rd, 2006. Accessed on the 23rd of November 2020 from the link [https://www.undocs.org/S/RES/1737%20\(2006\)](https://www.undocs.org/S/RES/1737%20(2006))

⁵³¹ **Iran's Khamenei rejects nuclear demands**, Taipei Times, 5 June 2006. Accessed on the 22nd of October 2020 from <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/world/archives/2006/06/05/2003311820>

⁵³² **Interview with Abbas Milani on the US coercive strategy with Iran.**

However, the reception of the new set of sanctions in the Iranian political landscape was the same as it had been the case with Resolution 1696. The pragmatist conservative kept warning against Ahmadinejad's continuous defiant policy. For instance, then Chair of the Expediency Council and former president Rafsanjani disclosed a secret letter from the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran Ruhollah Khomeini, which (the letter) shed light on the circumstances under which the former Supreme Leader bitterly chose to end the war against Iraq, though military leaders had called for the continuation of the war. Rafsanjani's goal was to remind the new authorities about the pre-eminence of the national interests over ideological imperatives.⁵³³ Former Iranian nuclear negotiator Seyed Hossein Mousavian also warned President Ahmadinejad against the risks of underestimating the importance of UNSC Resolutions and the unreliable nature of the diplomatic support of China and Russia to Iran. As he put it, "the Security Council is the highest global-level authority, and its resolutions cannot be appealed before any other body. (...) We have our own [Iranian] position, [but] we must understand the international laws as well... If we reject [the Security Council resolution], it will only deepen [the crisis]. Therefore... we must think rationally [about how to] put an immediate end [to the crisis]. China and Russia attach supreme importance to their relations with Iran, but if forced to choose, they will choose America. So, we must not bring them to [a situation] in which they are forced choose."⁵³⁴

There were also critics of Ahmadinejad's nuclear policy from Conservative circles. Daily Jomhuri-e-Eslami, a famous hard-line media owned by the Supreme Leader Khamenei denounced the pervasiveness of the nuclear issue in Ahmadinejad's speeches, something which connoted a certain amateurism from the President.⁵³⁵ Certain religious leaders also criticized Ahmadinejad firm stance with respect to UN Resolution. Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, one of the founders of the Islamic Republic who was once considered to be the successor of former Supreme Leader Khomeini, expressed his concerns in these terms: "one has to deal with the enemy with wisdom. We should not provoke the enemy, otherwise the country will be faced with problems. We should get our (irrefutable) right in a way that will not create other problems, and without giving others an excuse."⁵³⁶ Considering the negative result from the recent Iranian

⁵³³ NAFISI, Rasool, **The Khomeini letter - is Rafsanjani warning the hardliners?**, Oct 11, 2006. Accessed from <http://www.payvand.com/news/06/oct/1114.html> on the 30th of November 2020.

⁵³⁴ MANSHAROF, Yossi, **Iranian domestic criticism of Iran's nuclear strategy**, Middle East Media Research Institute, Inquiry & Analysis Series, N.317, January 24, 2007. Accessed on the 1st of December 2020 from <https://www.memri.org/reports/iranian-domestic-criticism-irans-nuclear-strategy>

⁵³⁵ DAREINI A., Ali, **Conservatives, reformers increasingly challenge Ahmadinejad's nuclear diplomacy tactics**, The Taiwan News, 13 January 2007. Accessed online on the 1st of December 2020 from the link <https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/366269>

⁵³⁶ VAYNMAN, Jane, **Trouble for Ahmadinejad**, Arms Control Wonk, 24 Jan 2007. Accessed on the 3rd of December 2020 from the link <https://www.armscontrolwonk.com/archive/601368/trouble-for-ahmadinejad/>

legislative campaign, together with such domestic dissension regarding his nuclear policy, one would have expected President Ahmadinejad to a more conciliatory approach with respect to the nuclear issue; unfortunately, this was not the case.

President Ahmadinejad surprisingly rejected the new Resolution and, as an attempt to counter-escalate the coercive dynamics with the US (Great Powers), described it as “a piece of torn paper ... by which they aim to scare Iranians.”⁵³⁷ However, there were indications that he was secretly attentive to the effects of the new sanctions. During his campaign, President Ahmadinejad has always presented himself as the president of the destitute, unlike the former elites that he accused of serving their own interests. In this regard, he “democratized” many sensitive issues, including the nuclear’. Kayhan Barzegar confirms this as he declares: “the president’s key innovation with respect to the nuclear issue was to bring the matter before the public. Unlike past Iranian governments when the issue remained largely confined to policy elites, Ahmadinejad has managed to build unprecedented public support for his nuclear policy.”⁵³⁸

Therefore, Ahmadinejad paid a close attention to anything which could tarnish this perception in the public opinion. With respect to the consequences of the UN sanctions, he instructed mainstream media to frame the coming sanction policy as another attempt of the West to undermine the interest of Iran and deny it its sovereign rights. In fact, UN Res. 1737 inaugurated an era of victimization of the Iranian authorities. Emboldened by the economic stability and the support of Supreme Guide, President Ahmadinejad praised the Natanz new technological milestone and compared Iran’s nuclear program “to a train without breaks.”⁵³⁹

⁵³⁷ Reuters, **Ahmadinejad says U.N. resolution a “piece of torn paper”**, January 21, 2007. Accessed from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-nuclear-ahmadinejad-idUKHAF43083220061224> on the 1st of December 2020

⁵³⁸ BARZEGAR, Kayhan, **The paradox of Iran’s nuclear consensus**, World Policy Journal, Vol. 26, N.3, Fall, 2009, p.24

⁵³⁹ Jerusalem Post, **Ahmadinejad: Iran’s nuke program ‘like a train without brakes’**, February 25, 2007, Accessed online on the 2nd of December 2020 from <https://www.jpost.com/iranian-threat/news/ahmadinejad-irans-nuke-program-like-a-train-without-brakes>

Chapter 4

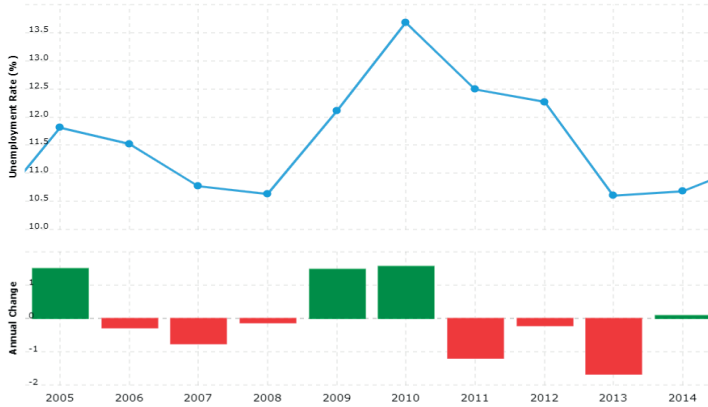


Table 3: Iran's unemployment rate. Source: Macrotrends - World Bank.⁵⁴⁰

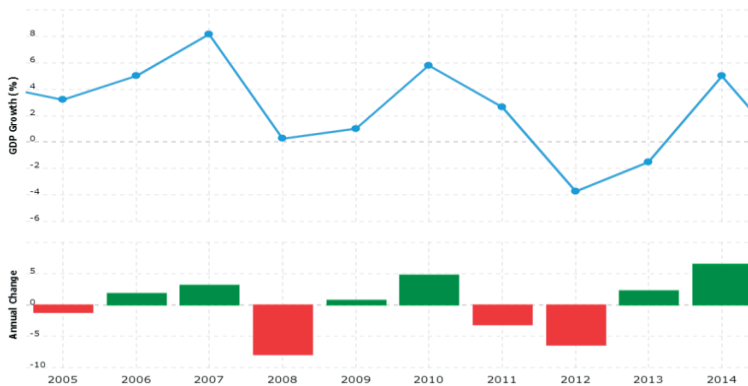


Table 4: Iran's GDP rate. Source: Macrotrends - World Bank.⁵⁴¹

⁵⁴⁰ Iran's unemployment rate from 2005 to 2013. Data accessed on the 2nd of December 2020 from <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/IRN/iran/unemployment-rate>

⁵⁴¹ Iran's GDP rate from 2005 to 2013. Data accessed on the 2nd of December 2020, from the website <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/IRN/iran/gdp-growth-rate>

Why did President Ahmadinejad maintain his nuclear defiant policy against the West despite the strained domestic context he was facing? Several factors provide insights to this question. From a domestic perspective, the Iranian authorities circumvented the sanctions by relying on procurement firms to continue the improvement of the country's nuclear facilities. This was the case with the Mesbat Energy Company (MEC) which was heavily implied in the construction of the Arak heavy water research reactor but was replaced by the Maro Sanat Company after it was sanctioned by UN Res. 1737.⁵⁴² In addition, his administration linked the demands of the suspension of the nuclear enrichment of the West with the long history of humiliation of Iran, especially by emphasizing on the Turkmenchai treaty, which is considered as one of the most humiliating chapter of Iran's history; Mousavi S. Rasoul, an Iranian diplomat, even described the West demands for Iran's nuclear suspension as a "a scientific Turkmenchai."⁵⁴³ By nationalizing the nuclear issue, Ahmadinejad reminded the Iranians of the *coup d'état* instigated by the American and British secret services against former Iranian Prime Minister Mossadegh. (**Oppositional nationalist**). The political calculus was quite clear: creating a rally around the flag effect which would not only shield the expected political effects of the sanctions, but also shut any defiant voice from within, especially from the reformist and pragmatist conservatives.

According to Judith Yaphe, "Iran's political culture allows leaders to frame the nuclear issue in the language of nationalism. Past experiences and historical grievances are selectively employed against the West with the emphasis on Iran as victim and not as perpetrator of similar deeds."⁵⁴⁴ In other words, Iran's painful past constitute a perfect breeding ground for opportunist nationalist leaders. Hence, the Mossadegh event was not only symptomatic of the long tradition of foreign interferences as we previously analyzed; combined with Iran's sense of grandeur, it nurtured Iran's sturdiness with respect to its independence and subsequently necessary resistance. Thanks to his discourse of resistance⁵⁴⁵ Ahmadinejad could easily criticize the dissident voices for their non-patriotism, accusing them of being the domestic relays of the West attempts to deprive the country of its sovereign country. As he declared after the adoption of Res. 1737, "unfortunately, certain people at home are counterfeiting information to tarnish the great pride of the Iranian people. (...) They are just repeating the enemy's slogans to compromise, but this will be fruitless."⁵⁴⁶ It is also noteworthy to highlight that the

⁵⁴² GAIETTA, Michele: **The trajectory of Iran's nuclear program**, *Op. Cit.*, p.83

⁵⁴³ MOSHIRZADEH, Homeira, **Discursive foundations of Iran's nuclear policy**, Security Dialogue, SAGE Publications, Vol. 38, N.4, 2007, p.532

⁵⁴⁴ YAPHE S., Judith: **Nuclear politics in Iran**, *Op. Cit.*, p.28

⁵⁴⁵ MOSHIRZADEH, Homeira, **Discursive foundations of Iran's nuclear policy**, *Ibid.*, p.537

⁵⁴⁶ **Ahmadinejad: Iran ready for threat over nuclear program**, China Internet Information Centre, January 19, 2007. An information accessed from http://www.china.org.cn/international/world/2007-01/19/content_1196642.htm on the 4th of December 2020.

US behavior was not conducive of a compliant attitude from the Iranian authorities. Indeed, Vice President Dick Cheney kept threatening Iran of a US military intervention by declaring that “all options are on the table” after the 60 days deadline had passed.⁵⁴⁷ Considering the *hitherto* good economic performance, Ahmadinejad’s nationalist discourse and the US threats, the Supreme Guide could only support Ahmadinejad’s policy and rejected Res.1737.

From a theoretical view, the US did not wield a credible leverage to influence the nuclear decision-making of Iran, as evidenced by the choice of the denial strategy which only targeted supplying companies of nuclear components. But the Iranian easily overcame this strategy. Thereof, the coercive leverage was not also proportional to the envisioned objective and there was not a credible incentive submitted to Iran. Furthermore, the US demands to stop the enrichment was perceived as a maximalist and unacceptable demands by the Iranians. From a neoclassical realism perspective, several intervening variables shaped Ahmadinejad’s defiant policy. Among them is the Iranian political and strategic culture, which were strategic as Ahmadinejad mobilized the previous painful and sorrowful experiences of Iran with the external world to extract the public support that he needed to oppose the US demands. In the same line, he framed his political opponents as traitors who were just echoing the imperialist demands of the US; this reflects the inputs of the State-society relations while the balance of power of domestic institutions was evidenced through the continuous support of the Supreme Guide. Iran’s firmness led the US-led UNSC to increase its pressure by adopting a new set of sanctions encapsulated in Res. 1737.

After Iran’s refusal to comply with the provision of Res. 1737, the UNSC adopted a new package of sanctions aimed at compelling Iran to stop its nuclear enrichment activities. This was the main goal of Res. 1747 which was adopted on the 24th of March 2007. The provisions of Resolution were almost the same as in Res.1737. Indeed, the goal was to compel Iran to suspend its nuclear enrichment activities and accept the incentives of the 2006 P5+1 proposal to Iran. The US led P5+1 coalition still relied on its denial coercive strategy as the Resolution imposed an arms embargo (horizontal escalation) upon Iran (Art. 5) and *called upon all States to exercise vigilance and restraint in the supply, sale or transfer directly or indirectly from their territories or by their nationals or using their flag vessels or aircraft of any battle tanks, armored combat vehicles, large caliber artillery systems, combat aircraft, attack helicopters, warships, missiles or missile systems*.⁵⁴⁸

⁵⁴⁷ FARHI Farideh and LEAVER Erik, **Keeping all options on the table: A roadmap to negotiation or war?**, Institute for Policy Studies, March 5, 2007. An information accessed on the 4th of December 2020. from <https://ips-dc.org/keeping-all-options-on-the-table-a-roadmap-to-negotiation-or-war/>.

⁵⁴⁸ Art. 6 of **UNSC Resolution 1747** adopted on March 24th, 2007. Accessed on the 23rd of November 2020 from the link [https://www.undocs.org/S/RES/1747%20\(2007\)](https://www.undocs.org/S/RES/1747%20(2007))

Another major difference with Res. 1747 is that it “called upon States and financial institutions not to enter into new commitments for grants, financial assistance, and concessional loans, to the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran, except for humanitarian and developmental purposes.”⁵⁴⁹ It also sanctioned the Bank Sepah and Bank Sepah International for their financial role in the controversial activities of the Shahid Hemmat Industrial Group (SHIG) and Shahid Bagheri Industrial Group (SBIG), which were already sanctioned by Res. 1737. Lastly, Res. 1747 aimed at creating a sense of urgency by setting a deadline of 60 days for Iran to comply with its provision and kept the door opened for additional sanctions shall Iran fail to comply. The EU also adopted a set of restrictive measures (sanctions) against Iran, especially financial (Art. 1.2b) and trade sanctions (Art. 2.2b) in the nuclear sector or Iran and individual sanctions. (Art. 4.1a and 1b).⁵⁵⁰

Just like with Res. 1737, President Ahmadinejad vehemently rejected the demands of Res. 1747, claiming that they won’t have any effect and that Iran will not stop the enrichment activities “even for a second.” Then Iranian Foreign Minister Manuchehr Mottaki described the Resolution as “illegal, useless, and unjustified” and considered the sanctions to be “too small” to comply and give-up “their rightful and legal demands.”⁵⁵¹ Despite these statements, there were clear signs that President Ahmadinejad considered the effect of the new Resolution more than he had declared. For example, Iran counter-attacked by reducing its cooperation with the AEIA inspectors. From a domestic perspective, President Ahmadinejad had just faced his first serious political blow with the election of Rafsanjani to the Assembly of Experts⁵⁵² over Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Mesbah Yazdi, Ahmadinejad’s spiritual mentor. The election of Rafsanjani to the Assembly of Experts paved the way for his election as the Chair of this powerful political body of Iran, a position he assumed with his position as Chair of the Expediency Council.

Although the Iranian economy had not yet been seriously affected by the UN sanctions, Ahmadinejad found himself in a delicate domestic position as even members of his team disagreed with his nuclear policy. This was the case with top Iranian nuclear negotiator

⁵⁴⁹ Art. 7 of **UNSC Resolution 1747**, *Ibid.*

⁵⁵⁰ **Council Common Position 2007/140/CFSP of 27 February 2007 concerning restrictive measures against Iran**, Official Journal of the European Union, 28 Feb 2020. Accessed from <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32007E0140> on the 5th November 2020.

⁵⁵¹ VAHID, Sepehri, **Tehran outraged by latest UN Resolution**, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, March 28, 2007. Accessed from <https://www.rferl.org/a/1347523.html> on the 5th of December 2020.

⁵⁵² The Assembly of Experts is one of Iran’s most powerful institutions in Iran’s political system. It is constituted of 8-year mandate 88 elected members, and their main role is to appoint, oversee and potentially dismiss the Supreme Leader.

Ali Larijani who distanced himself with Ahmadinejad's nuclear policy and was consequently dismissed from his position of Secretary of the SNSC and replaced by Saeed Jalili. A move described by Said Amir Arjomand as one of Ahmadinejad's "boldest challenge to the (Supreme) Leader, who was forced to fall back on his more modest constitutional power and immediately appointed Larijani as one of his two representatives on the Supreme National Security Council."⁵⁵³

As the international pressure kept increasing on Ahmadinejad, external events paradoxically helped him to secure the popular support for his firm nuclear policy. The first one was the threats of tightened economic sanctions on the Iranian energy and financial sectors. Then UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown was very explicit in this regard as he declared: "we will lead in seeking tougher sanctions both at the U.N. and in the European Union, including on oil and gas investment and the financial sector."⁵⁵⁴ The second main external factor which was capitalized by Ahmadinejad was the publication of the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE). The authors of the NIE estimated "with high confidence that in fall 2003, Tehran halted its nuclear weapons program."⁵⁵⁵ According to Tytti Erästö, the NIE report did not substantially change the US policy vis-à-vis Iran; instead, "it just made it harder to justify a military attack against Iran (cause for war), especially against the backdrop of Iraq."⁵⁵⁶ Nonetheless, Ahmadinejad capitalized on these two elements to accuse the West of using the nuclear issue as a pretext to implement its secret but actual goal which he thought, was to topple the Islamic regime in Iran.⁵⁵⁷

From a domestic perspective, he used those external elements not only to dismiss his internal critics, but even described them as "traitors" which clearly indicated that he explicitly identified them as the internal enemies to the Islamic revolution. It was in this context that he ordered the arrest of former Iran nuclear negotiator Mohammad Hossein Musavian, an ally of Rafsanjani, on the false basis of treason.⁵⁵⁸ In such context, the Supreme Leader did not oppose Ahmadinejad's nuclear policy and rejected Res. 1747.

⁵⁵³ ARJOMAND A., Said: **After Khomeini: Iran under his successors**, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009, p.202. (1st ed.). Accessed online.

⁵⁵⁴ WALKER, Sophie, **Britain threatens oil and gas sanctions against Iran**, Reuters, 12 Nov 2007. Accessed from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-britain-iran-brown/britain-threatens-oil-and-gas-sanctions-against-iran-idUSL1270031520071112> on the 5th of December 2020

⁵⁵⁵ **National Intelligence Estimate (NIE). Iran: Nuclear intentions and capabilities**, National Intelligence Council, November 2007, p.6

⁵⁵⁶ **Interview with Dr Tytti Erästö on the US coercive policy with Iran.**

⁵⁵⁷ MOHSENI-CHERAGHLOU, Ebrahim: **When coercion backfires: the limits of coercive diplomacy in Iran**, *Op. Cit.*, p.130

⁵⁵⁸ ARJOMAND A., Said: **After Khomeini: Iran under his successors**, *Op. Cit.* p.202

From a theoretical view, just like with Res. 1737 the US did not wield a credible threats to influence the nuclear decision-making of Iran, as evidenced by the comments of then Iranian Foreign Minister Manuchehr Mottaki was described “too small” to comply, without forgetting that the demands to stop the enrichment were still considered “unacceptable.” Also, just like in the previous Resolutions, this coercive denial strategy did not exploit the weaknesses of Iran as it did not target the pillars of the country’s economy. A shift to a punishment strategy was clearly needed. The release of the NIE report also undermined the credibility of the US strategy as it confirmed that the level of improvement of the Iranian nuclear program did not represent a vital threat to the US interests.

Thereof, the coercive leverage was not also proportional to the envisioned objective and there was not a credible incentive submitted to Iran. Furthermore, the US demands to stop the enrichment was perceived as a maximalist and unacceptable demands by the Iranians. From a neoclassical realism perspective, several intervening variables shaped Ahmadinejad’s defiant policy. Ahmadinejad kept framed his political opponents as traitors who were just echoing the imperialist demands of the US. In addition, there was no major domestic upheaval in the Iranian political landscape despite the rise of the pragmatist camp led by Rafsandjani. This reflects the inputs of the balance of power of domestic institutions evidenced through the continuous support of the Supreme Guide irrespective of Ahmadinejad’s challenges to the Supreme Guide. The State-society relations variable was highlighted by the continuous public support. Subsequently, the P5+1 group adopted a tougher package of sanctions against Iran: this was Resolution 1803.⁵⁵⁹

Resolution 1803 was adopted on the March 3, 2008. Its provision mainly broadened the scope of the sanctions imposed by Res. 1747. More specifically, it called upon other States “to exercise vigilance over the activities of financial institutions in their territories with all banks domiciled in Iran, in particular with Bank Melli and Bank Saderat, and their branches and subsidiaries abroad,” (Art. 10), expanded prohibitions on trade in sensitive nuclear equipment and materials (Art. 8a), banned travel by sanctioned individuals and expanded list of sanctioned individuals and companies. (Art. 7).⁵⁶⁰ The freeze of certain Iranian banks assets hinted at the punishment coercive strategy; however, the fact that the Banks were targeted by the P5+1 group because of their role in the development of the nuclear program clearly indicates that the great

⁵⁵⁹ **UNSC Resolution 1803**. Accessed from [https://www.undocs.org/S/RES/1803%20\(2008\)](https://www.undocs.org/S/RES/1803%20(2008)) on the 10th of November 2020.

⁵⁶⁰ SAMORE, Gary: **Sanctions against Iran: A guide to targets, terms, and timetables**, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, June 2015, p.7

powers still relied on the coercive denial strategy. The sense of urgency was still present as Res. 1803 granted only 60 days to Iran to comply with its provisions.

After Res. 1803 had been adopted, Tehran suggested a counter-proposal to the P5+1 group. Some of the major points in Tehran's proposal was "the establishment of enrichment and nuclear fuel production consortiums in different parts of the world-including Iran," improved IAEA supervision "in different states" and cooperation on nuclear safety and physical protection."⁵⁶¹ On the other hand, the P5+1 group offered an updated version of their 2006 proposal; after reaffirming their commitment to a legally binding nuclear supply facility, they also proposed the development of Iran's conventional energy infrastructure, an assistance with Iran's needs for the agricultural development.⁵⁶²

The P5+1 group rejected Iran's proposal during their meeting in Geneva in 2008, notably on the ground that it was not meaningful in terms of Iran's nuclear activities while Iran rejected Resolution 1803 because of its unacceptable demands. However, the domestic landscape in Iran was different when Res. 1804 was adopted. President Ahmadinejad was facing intense political criticism from different factions starting with the clergy. Indeed, President Ahmadinejad's ideological interpretation of Shia millenarianism and claims of direct contact with the hidden imam sparked harsh criticism from the clergy who accused him of political recuperation of religious precepts to divert the public opinion from his economic mismanagement.⁵⁶³

As the US also decided to impose unilateral economic (financial) sanctions and Res. 1835 being adopted, the economy of the country started to be impacted. For instance, the inflation rate of the country moved from 17.34% in 2007 to 25.41% in 2008 as illustrated in table 4 below. Hence, Ahmadinejad was also sharply criticized by the pragmatist who kept warning against his continuous defiant policy. But the most credible threat came from Ali Akbar Velayati, the foreign affairs advisor of the Supreme Leader who indicated that it would be in the interest of the country to accept the SC offer: "those who are agitating against our interests want us to reject the latest offer ... it is in our interests to accept it" he maintained.⁵⁶⁴ With such public critic from a close aid of the Supreme Leader, one would have expected Ahmadinejad to soften his stance and behave in a more conciliatory manner. Unfortunately, this was not the case.

⁵⁶¹ Arms Control Association, **Official proposals on the Iranian nuclear issue, 2003-2013**, *Op. Cit.*

⁵⁶² Bureau of International Security and Nonproliferation, **Updated P5+1 package**, Washington, June 16, 2008. Accessed from <https://2001-2009.state.gov/t/isn/rls/fs/106217.htm> on the 10th of December 2020.

⁵⁶³ ALFONEH, Ali: **Ahmadinejad versus the clergy**, American Enterprise Institute, N. 5, August 2008, 13 pages.

⁵⁶⁴ REZAI, Farhad: **Iran's nuclear program. A study in proliferation and rollback**, *Op. Cit.*, p.161

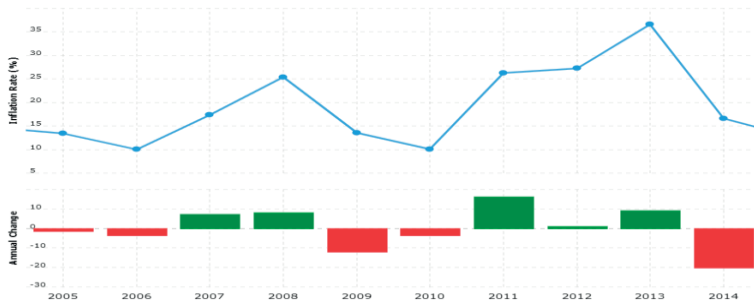


Table 5: Iran's inflation rate from 2006 to 2013.⁵⁶⁵

President Ahmadinejad's defiant policy toward the West can be explained by many factors among which the nature of the demands expressed in the UN Resolutions (this was an unacceptable demand formulated by the coercer and a lack of a strategic empathy from the US). As we have previously analyzed, the domestic enrichment constituted a red line for the Iranians, irrespective of the ideological beliefs of the political factions. Iran's collective memory is shaped by past episodes of undelivered promises which fostered the authorities' mistrust toward the external world (intervening variable of political/strategic culture). Then nuclear negotiator Ali Larijani shared this concern as he declared, "it is possible that other countries will one day decide to stop supplying nuclear fuel to Iran and we should therefore be capable of producing it ourselves as a manifestation of our national dignity and independence."⁵⁶⁶ In addition, President Ahmadinejad relied on his framing strategy to dismiss the internal critics to his policy reminding them of the danger of trusting the West. But more importantly, he enjoyed the support of the Supreme Leader who called for unity against foreign threats (intervening variable of the configuration of domestic institutions). He declared for instance that pursuing an aggressive spirit toward world bullies is a manifestation of the government's loyalty to revolutionary slogans and discourse.⁵⁶⁷

Hence, the UNSC unanimously adopted Resolution 1835 which did not impose additional sanctions on Iran, rather called upon Iran upon Iran to comply fully and without delay with its obligations under the above-mentioned resolutions of the

⁵⁶⁵ **Iran inflation rate from 2006 to 2013.** Data from Macrotrends - World Bank accessed on the 5th of December 2020 from the website <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/IRN/iran/inflation-rate-cpi>

⁵⁶⁶ YAPHE S., Judith: *Nuclear politics in Iran, Op. Cit.*, p.26

⁵⁶⁷ DAREINI A., Ali: **Iran's supreme leader defends Ahmadinejad**, Taiwan News, 24 Aug 2008. Accessed from <https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/724121> on the 13rd of November 2020.

Security Council, and to meet the requirements of the IAEA Board of Governors.⁵⁶⁸ The following 2009 year was decisive in Iran in many regards. From a domestic perspective, Iran had presidential elections while from an international perspective, there was a new US President in the White House: Barack Obama. Before analyzing his approach toward the Iranian nuclear program, just like with President Bush, we will first dwell on his conception of the US foreign policy.

4.4.5 President Obama's foreign policy: actions and beliefs.

Born on the 4th of August 1961, Barack Hussein Obama officially took office as the 44th American president on the 20th of January 2009. Obama had a realist vision of the US foreign policy, one with the protection of the US interests as the cardinal value of each of his international decisions. In this regard, he shared similar goals with his predecessor George Bush in areas like terrorism, human rights and WMD. However, the main difference with George Bush was at the level of the means of his policy. Indeed, unlike Bush, President Obama did not share the idea of the relevance of American Messianism and hence did not consider the American power as a panacea for all the political issues around the world, especially when it came to regimes hostile to the US. According to Ronald Powalski, President Obama “just did not think it was America's responsibility to remove them (hostile foreign leader) from power or, as President John Quincy Adams once said, go around the world seeking “monsters to destroy.”⁵⁶⁹

A second difference between Bush and Obama was the preference by the latter for multilateralism over unilateralism. In addition, unlike Bush and even Hilary Clinton, Obama preferred to engage his adversaries and not only confront them. Indeed, as we have previously analyzed, Bush did not want to interact with those he considered as devil⁵⁷⁰ unlike Obama who had made the Iranian nuclear issue a top priority of his foreign policy. Barack Obama expressed his commitment to resolving the Iranian nuclear issue in the early days of his mandate. But unlike President Bush, not only did he signal his readiness to engage Iran rather than confront them, but also acknowledged Iran's right to peaceful nuclear energy under the NPT. As he declared during his speech in Prague, “my administration will seek engagement with Iran based on mutual interests and mutual respect. We believe in dialogue. (...) We want Iran to take its rightful place in the community of nations, politically and economically. We will support

⁵⁶⁸ **Art 4 of Resolution 1835** adopted by the UNSC on 27 September 2008. Accessed on the 04th of January 2021 from <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/1835>

⁵⁶⁹ POWASKI E., Ronald: **Ideals, interests, and U.S. foreign policy from George H. W. Bush to Donald Trump**, *Op. Cit.*, p. 161

⁵⁷⁰ BROWN, Seyom: **Faces of power: constancy and change in United States foreign policy from Truman to Obama**, *Op. Cit.*, p.660

Iran's right to peaceful nuclear energy with rigorous inspections.”⁵⁷¹ He reaffirmed his belief two months later during his speech in Cairo when he was addressing the Arab world, especially the Middle East as he said, “any nation -- including Iran -- should have the right to access peaceful nuclear power if it complies with its responsibilities under the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.”⁵⁷² However, could those declarations of good intentions be enough to break the Iranian stalemate?

Despite the distrust against the US, Barack Obama's election was positively welcomed in Tehran, as it was proven by President Ahmadinejad's unprecedented congratulatory message⁵⁷³ to President Obama after his election as the 44th US president. Beyond his declarations, President Obama made several bold moves aimed at materializing his intentions regarding the Iranian nuclear program. Among them was his best wishes message addressed to the Iranian people and leaders on the celebration of Nowruz (Persian New Year). He specifically stressed the commitment of his administration to diplomatically tackle the bones of contention between the US and Iran. Mindful of the failure of the former administration approach, he emphasized that the process could not be achieved by “threats, instead engagement that is honest and grounded in mutual respect.”⁵⁷⁴ He later wrote two letters directly to the Supreme Leaders emphasizing on the US administration desire to improve its cooperation with Iran on both bilateral and regional topic of interests.

Obama's actions were unprecedented, especially with regards to the tumultuous bilateral relations between Tehran and Washington. With respect to the formal aspects of the videotaped message, the fact that the US President had resorted to public diplomacy by sending a video message that could be accessed by millions of Iranians -- without any official censorship -- prevented the Iranian leaders from framing the debate regarding the intentions of the Americans. Regarding the content of the message, many experts agreed upon the strategic importance of Obama's choice of words, referring to the great achievements of the former Persian civilization and his will to approach Tehran on mutual respect basis. For instance, Martin S. Indyk, a former US ambassador to Israel maintains that Obama's “wording is designed to demonstrate

⁵⁷¹ The White House: **Remarks by President Barack Obama in Prague as delivered**, April 5, 2009. Accessed on the 5th of January 2021 from <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-barack-obama-prague-delivered>

⁵⁷² The White House, **Remarks by the President at Cairo University**, 4 June 2009. Accessed on the 5th January 2021 from the link <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-cairo-university-6-04-09>

⁵⁷³ GAIETTA, Michele: **The trajectory of Iran's nuclear program**, *Op. Cit.*, p.154

⁵⁷⁴ The White House, **Videotaped Remarks by the President in celebration of Nowruz**, March 20, 2009. Accessed from the link <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/videotaped-remarks-president-celebration-nowruz> on the 6th January 2021.

acceptance of the government of Iran,”⁵⁷⁵ while Trita Parsi argues that “by rejecting the idea that the growing problems between the United States and Iran could be resolved through threats, Obama conveyed that the trigger-happy days of the Bush administration were over.”⁵⁷⁶ But what was the reaction of the Iranian leaders to these actions of President Obama?

Regarding the video-taped message, the Iranian leaders were surprised by Obama’s message. Nonetheless, they provided a lukewarm answer to the US President’s gestures of good will. On the one hand they welcomed the new administration shifting approach, but on the other hand remained skeptical about the sincerity of the words of the new President. In a mirror policy move, Supreme Leader Khamenei decided to respond to Obama’s video-taped message during a speech from the city of Mashhad on the Nowruz celebration. At a glance, the speech seemed to be a complete dismissal of Obama’s “extended hand” as the Supreme Leader first recalled all the historical grievances between the US and Iran, from the interference of Washington in Tehran’s domestic affairs to his continuous support for Israel, through the US support to Saddam’s war against Iran in 1980. “Before the Revolution, Iran was in the hands of the United States, its vital resources were in the hands of the United States. (...) They showed Saddam (late Iraqi president) a green light. This was another plan by the US Government to attack Iran,” Khamenei argued.⁵⁷⁷

However, probably because of the hope the election of Obama had sparked at the international level, and more importantly to avoid being blamed by the Iranians people who had listened to President Obama’s overture message, the Supreme Leader decided to give the benefits of doubt to the new President. As one Iranian official said, “if we can’t make nice with Barack Hussein Obama, who is preaching mutual respect on a weekly basis and sending us Nowruz greetings, it’s going to be pretty obvious that the problem lies in Tehran, not Washington.”⁵⁷⁸ Consequently, Ayatollah Khamenei conceded: “we do not have any experience with the new US President and Government. We shall see and judge.”⁵⁷⁹ Yet, he called for more actions than words regarding the change of policy promised by Obama to convince the Iranian leaders. “They tell us to negotiate, to start relations. They have the slogan of change. Where is the change? What

⁵⁷⁵ COOPER Helene and SANGER E. David: **Obama’s message to Iran is opening bid in diplomatic drive**, The New York Times, March 20, 2009. Accessed on the 6th of January 2021 from the website <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/21/world/middleeast/21iran.html>

⁵⁷⁶ PARSI, Trita: *Losing an enemy*, *Op. Cit.*, p.71

⁵⁷⁷ COLE, Juan: **OSC: Khamenei’s speech replying to Obama**, 23rd of March 2009. Accessed on the 6th of January 2021 from <https://www.juancole.com/2009/03/osc-khameneis-speech-replying-to-obama.html>

⁵⁷⁸ SADJADPOUR, Karim: **Reading Khamenei: The world view of Iran’s most powerful leader**, Washington, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2009, p.vi

⁵⁷⁹ COLE, Juan: **OSC: Khamenei’s speech replying to Obama**, *Ibid.*

has changed? Clarify this to us.” he stressed.⁵⁸⁰ He ended his speech by warning the US that Tehran would change provided Washington does first: “you (the US) change, and we shall change as well. If you do not change, our people became more and more experienced, stronger, and more patient in the past 30 years.”⁵⁸¹ However, the presidential election of 2009 tempered these positive dynamics between the US and Iran.

Four years after the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the Iranians were called upon to choose again their leaders on the 12th of June 2009. Among President Ahmadinejad’s challengers were Mohsen Rezaï a (Conservative) and Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi (Reformists). Considering the political tensions prior to 2009, there were high expectations with respects to the outcome of the elections as demonstrated by the voter turnout of 85, 21%.⁵⁸² A couple of hours after the elections polls had closed, the Ministry of Interior surprisingly announced the victory of President Ahmadinejad with 62.6%, while Mir Hossein Mousavi had officially obtained 33.8%, Moshen Rezai 1.7% and Mehdi Karroubi: 0.9%.⁵⁸³ In addition, the Supreme Leader also congratulated Ahmadinejad, emphasizing that *the honorable president-elect is a president for all the Iranian people and everyone, including his opponents in the election, should unanimously support him after the election*.⁵⁸⁴ Nonetheless, Hossein Mousavi also claimed the victory on the election. This was the beginning of the most unstable political situation in Iran since the 1979 Revolution, and the confirmation of Ahmadinejad’s victory by the Guardian Council did not improve the already strained political tension.

Mir-Hussein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi who enjoyed the political support of reformist leaders like former presidents Rafsanjani and Khatami, led a coalition of political parties under the name “the Green Movement.” Tara Nesvaderani defines it as *an informal movement that emerged spontaneously after the June 12, 2009, presidential poll over alleged vote-rigging. (...) Youth and women were critical in organizing the initial protests, sustaining public opposition for six months, and organizing a multifaceted civil disobedience campaign. Their activities included a boycott of consumer goods advertised on state-run media, anti-government graffiti on the national currency, and Web site campaigns to identify security forces involved in the crackdown*.⁵⁸⁵ The unrest movements that followed seriously shook the pillars of the Islamic regime and span

⁵⁸⁰ COLE, Juan: **OSC: Khamenei’s speech replying to Obama**, *Op. Cit.*

⁵⁸¹ COLE, Juan: **OSC: Khamenei’s speech replying to Obama**, *Ibid*

⁵⁸² Data accessed on the 6th of January 2020 from the link <https://irandataportal.syr.edu/2009-presidential-election>

⁵⁸³ JONES, Stephen, **The Islamic Republic of Iran: An introduction**, Research Paper 09/92, House of Commons Library, 11 December 2009, p.33

⁵⁸⁴ **Leader’s message after Presidential vote**, June 13, 2009. Accessed on the 07th January 2020 from the website <https://english.khamenei.ir/news/1133/Leader-s-Message-After-Presidential-Vote>

⁵⁸⁵ NESVADERANI, Tara: **Iran’s youth: The protests are not over**, USIP, June 8, 2010, p.3

across all the segments of the society. Indeed, not only leaders of the Iranian civil society, but powerful political and religious leaders also echoed popular demands not only for what they perceived as the actual results of the presidential elections (the victory of Mir Hossein Mousavi) but also democratic reforms of the political system; some even called for the Supreme Guide to step down. This clearly illustrated the shallowness of the political chasm not only between the political establishment and the population, but also among the elites.⁵⁸⁶

As the Head of State and guarantor of the political stability of the country, the Supreme Leader attempted to restore peace in the country. Though he acknowledged deficiencies in the system, especially with respect to the accusations of corruption, he nevertheless praised what he considered to be the achievements of the regimes since its foundation thirty years ago. As he declared, “we do not claim that financial corruption does not exist in our system. Yes, it does. (...) But I want to say that the Islamic Republic system is one of the healthiest political and social systems in the world today.”⁵⁸⁷ He also dismissed accusations of votes-rigging by not only blaming foreign agents whom he accused of sowing the seeds of the popular demonstrations, but also downplaying the relevance of the accusations of frauds by wondering how millions of votes could be changed. *They (the enemy) kept repeating and drumming it in that the elections were going to be rigged. They were preparing the ground. (...) Sometimes the difference is 100,000, 500,000 or even 1 million. In that case, one could say that there might have been vote-rigging, but how can they rig 11 million votes?* he wondered.⁵⁸⁸

The Supreme Leader ended his speech by warning the Iranian leaders who did not accept the re-election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as he said, *those — from politicians, heads of parties and directors of political currents — who can exert some influence on the public and are listened to by some groups, should be very careful of their conduct. They should be very careful of what they say.*⁵⁸⁹ This was a secret warning toward Ayatollah Rafsanjani who had called for the recognition of the victory of the Hossein Mussavi. But why did the Supreme Guide granted his support to Ahmadinejad who defied him on several occasions and called for democratic reforms? The Supreme Guide’s choice to support Ahmadinejad could be surprising, considering the political tensions between the two leaders over several issues as we previously analyzed. In fact, another important constituency within the Iranian political system played an

⁵⁸⁶ SUNDQUIST H., Victor, **Iranian Democratization Part I: A historical case study of the Iranian Green Movement**, Journal of Strategic Security, Vol. 6, No. 1, 2013, p.29

⁵⁸⁷ COLE, Juan: **Supreme Leader Khamenei’s Friday Address on the Presidential elections**, 19th June 2009. Accessed from <https://www.juancole.com/2009/06/supreme-leader-khameneis-friday-address.html> on the 07th January 2021.

⁵⁸⁸ COLE, Juan: **Supreme Leader Khamenei’s Friday Address on the Presidential elections**, *Op. Cit.*

⁵⁸⁹ COLE, Juan: **Supreme Leader Khamenei’s Friday Address on the Presidential elections**, *Ibid.*

instrumental role in the Supreme Guide's actions: the **Revolutionary Guards**. Historically the Revolutionary Guards Corps have been kept away from politics. Former Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini strictly limited their involvement in the political life of the country to basic activity of voting, as he wanted to ensure their loyalty to the new regime.⁵⁹⁰

However, the involvement of the IRGC in Iranian politics grew steadily even though then Presidents Khamenei and Rafsanjani attempted to walk across the lines of Ayatollah Khomeini. For instance, the Guards opposed the "dialogue among civilizations" foreign policy agenda promoted by former President Khatami. IRGC Gen. Yahya R. Safavi declared in this regard that: "can we withstand American threats and domineering attitude with a policy of détente? Can we foil dangers coming from [America] through dialogue between civilizations?"⁵⁹¹ Another visible action of the IRGC illustrating their increasing implications in Iran domestic politics was their closing down of Tehran's Imam Khomeini International Airport in May 2004, a move described by Anoush Ehteshami and Mahjoob Zweiri as the "greatest demonstration of the Revolutionary Guards' political influence."⁵⁹² However, their intervention in Iran's domestic affairs reached its climax with the election of Ahmadinejad. It's important to recall that Ahmadinejad has a revolutionary background though his actual role in battlefields during the Iran-Iraq war remains shady.

IRGC members have been enjoying economic advantages in Iran since the early days of the post-Revolution State. Indeed, they were involved in reconstruction of the country during the eight years' war against Iraq. While Revolutionary Guards-affiliated companies kept benefiting of public contracts, their rise as major actors in the economic life of the country became more visible with the election of Ahmadinejad. Thierry Coville confirms that when he argues that "after the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president in 2005, (...) important public contracts were then allocated to this company without any tender. (...) In 2006, Khatam signed a \$1.3-billion contract for the construction of a 900-kilometer pipeline aiming at delivering natural gas from Asaluyeh (Bushehr Province) and Bandar Abbas (Hormozgan Province), to Iranshahr (Sistan-Baluchestan)."⁵⁹³

⁵⁹⁰ WEHREY Frederic et al, *The IRGC in Politics* in WEHREY Frederic et al: **The rise of the Pasdaran. Assessing the domestic roles of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps**, California, Santa Monica, RAND Corporation, 2009, p.78

⁵⁹¹ RUBIN, Barry: **The tragedy of the Middle East**, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p.127. Consulted online.

⁵⁹² EHTESHAMI Anoushiravan and ZWEIRI Mahjoob: **Iran and the rise of its neoconservatives: The politics of Tehran's silent revolution**, London, I.B.Tauris, 2007, p.83

⁵⁹³ COVILLE, Thierry, **The Economic activities of the Pasdaran**, Revue internationale des études du développement, vol. 229, N. 1, 2017, p.94

With respect to the 2009 election, the economic interests of the Guards could have been threatened by the political ousting of Ahmadinejad. Indeed, Ahmadinejad's rivals from the Reformist camp clearly favored a more cooperative stance with the IAEA and the Great Powers regarding the nuclear program; even the Conservative candidate Mohsen Rezaei criticized Ahmadinejad's nuclear strategy: "continuing such nuclear policy will destroy all of our achievements. (...) if the current adventurous path continues, we will be heading towards a precipice."⁵⁹⁴ But a shift in nuclear policy was not a mere change of foreign policy, it implied totally new incomers in economic areas which were under the Guards' control because of the sanctions. Eventually they took actions to strengthen Ahmadinejad and hence prevent the advancement of the Reformist's agenda.

The Revolutionary Guards relied on two strategies to prevent the return of the Reformist camp to the stage. First, they intervened directly in the electoral process. According to Farhad Rezaei, the Head of the political bureau of the IRGC Brigadier General Yadollah Jafari admitted that the Guards intervened in the ballot: "the election was going to go to the second round, and then it's not clear what would happen"⁵⁹⁵ The second strategy consisted of emphasizing the negative role and threat the Reformist camp, especially their champion Rafsanjani had posed to the Conservative establishment. *Convincing* Ayatollah Khamenei to back Ahmadinejad was the next step, but one that was made easier because the memory of President Khatami was still fresh in conservative circles. Clearly, in spite of his erratic performance and an ailing economy, Ahmadinejad was seen as the lesser of two evils.⁵⁹⁶

As reward for their support in taming the streets riots, Ahmadinejad appointed several personalities with revolutionary backgrounds in key positions of his cabinet. For example, Mostafa Mohammad Najjar, the Interior Minister, was a long-term career Revolutionary Guards Officer and Masoud Mirkazemi the oil minister was a former Commandant in the Revolutionary Guards. Ali Alfoneh argues in this regard that "the strong cabinet presence of former IRGC officers who have a shorter acquaintance with Ahmadinejad (...) suggests that Ahmadinejad has had to reciprocate the IRGC's contribution to his re-election. Increased IRGC participation in the country's economic life and its seizure of publicly-owned economic enterprises is another price Ahmadinejad has had to pay to remain in office."⁵⁹⁷ But what was the US reaction to the political turmoil in Iran?

⁵⁹⁴ REZAI, Farhad: **Iran's nuclear program. A study in proliferation and rollback**, *Op. Cit.*, p.166

⁵⁹⁵ REZAI, Farhad: **Iran's nuclear program. A study in proliferation and rollback**, *Ibid.*, p.169

⁵⁹⁶ REZAI, Farhad: **Iran's nuclear program. A study in proliferation and rollback**, *Ibid.*, p.167

⁵⁹⁷ ALFONEH, Ali, **All Ahmadinejad's men**, Middle East Quarterly, 2011, p.84

When the public riots triggered in Iran in the aftermath of the June 2009 elections, the Obama administration firstly adopted a surprising neutral position. However, facing increasing domestic and international criticism, he ultimately condemned the repression of the riots in Tehran a week later. "The United States and the international community have been appalled and outraged by the threats, beatings, and imprisonments of the last few days. I strongly condemn these unjust actions, and I join with the American people in mourning each and every innocent life that is lost," he stressed.⁵⁹⁸ The cautious approach of the Obama administration in the early days of the repression was due his desire to avoid being accused by the authorities of intervening in Iran's domestic affairs. Nonetheless, his sharp criticism of the brutal repression of riots put a damper on the earlier appeased relations with Iran, as he acknowledged afterward. Even though he had been officially declared the winner of the election, President Ahmadinejad faced intense political criticism home. Unlike the previous years, the sanctions started to seriously impact the country, and Ahmadinejad found it more difficult to blame the Westerners for his economic mismanagement. In addition, the discovery of the hidden nuclear site in the city of Qom further complicated the nuclear issue.

Two months after the Iranian elections, together with President Sarkozy and Prime Minister Gordon Brown, President Obama revealed a hidden nuclear site in the city of Qom. According to President Obama, this was a clear sign of Iran's continuing unwillingness to meet its obligations under UN Security Council resolutions and IAEA requirements. Reflecting on the gravity of the issue, President Sarkozy clearly indicated that Iran would face sanctions if there was not an in-depth change by December 2009. In the same line, Prime Minister stressed that "the international community has no choice but to draw a line in the sand" and the UK "was prepared to implement further and more stringent sanctions."⁵⁹⁹ The Iranian authorities rejected the accusations of nuclear weapon activities in that site, claiming that it was a backup plant considering the possibility of an external military attack against the other nuclear sites. However, as tensions were rising between Tehran and its counterparts, an unexpected event occurred: Tehran requested nuclear fuel from the IAEA for its reactor.

Iran officially requested the provision of nuclear fuel to produce medical isotopes in Tehran Research Reactor in June 2009. Then IAEA Director General El Baradei

⁵⁹⁸ BORGER Julian and MACASKILL Ewen, **Barack Obama condemns 'unjust' crackdown on Iran protests**, The Guardian, June 23, 2009. An information accessed from on the 7th January 2021 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/jun/23/obama-condemns-crackdown-iran-protests>

⁵⁹⁹ The White House: **Statements by President Obama French President Sarkozy and British Prime Minister Brown on Iranian nuclear facility**, Sept 25, 2009. An information accessed from <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2009/09/25/statements-president-obama-french-president-sarkozy-and-british-prime-mi> on the 7th of January 2021.

immediately seized this diplomatic window to break the deadlock and progress with the Iranian nuclear issue. Consequently, rather than providing directly the nuclear fuel requested by Iran, he informed the US and Russia about Iran's demand. The latter responded positively and proposed a bargain to the Iranians. Basically, Iran would agree to ship out 1.200 Kg of its Low Enriched Uranium (LEU) to third country (ideally Russia), which will be reprocessed up to 20% and returned to Iran in forms of nuclear pads: this bargain was officially described as the **Tehran Research Reactor (TRR) proposal**.⁶⁰⁰

The terms of the TRR proposal would have been beneficial for both sides: indeed, the US would be satisfied by Iran move to get rid of its enriched uranium which was the main bone of contention between both parties, while Iran would obtain the nuclear pad. Although they agreed upon the very logic of the "swap" mentioned in the proposal, they did not agree upon the technical aspects. While the Americans expected Iran to ship out 70% of its nuclear stockpile in Russia at once, the Iranian objected; instead, they wanted a simultaneous swap without having to wait for a couple of months and this should have taken place in Iran and not abroad. This was another illustration of the Iranian distrust toward its international counterpart and their unwillingness to lose their main bargaining asset. Just like the previous proposals of the P5+1 group, the TRR proposal sparked criticisms within the Iranian political landscape. In fact, many personalities warned Ahmadinejad about the risk of being fooled by the P5+1, as they might not fulfil their part of the bargain. But Ahmadinejad dismissed those criticism in these terms, "if we send our enriched uranium abroad and then they do not give us the 20% enriched fuel for our reactor, we are capable of producing it inside Iran."⁶⁰¹

Ahmadinejad's dismissal of the critic against the TRR proposal hinted at his readiness to agree for the swap. Indeed, it seemed that the main objection lied with the technical aspects of the deal. In addition, considering the Iranian strained political landscape at the time, the proposal could have been of a great political help for Ahmadinejad who was subjected to sharp criticism from the Reformist camp. Surprisingly Turkey and Brazil struck a deal with Iran on the 17th of May 2010 concerning its controversial nuclear stockpile. Under this new Tehran Declaration, "the Islamic Republic of Iran agrees to deposit 1200 kg LEU in Turkey. While in Turkey, this LEU will continue to be the property of Iran."⁶⁰² But how did then Prime Minister Erdogan and President Lula

⁶⁰⁰ Arms Control Association, **Official proposals on the Iranian nuclear issue, 2003-2013**, *Op. Cit.*

⁶⁰¹ BBC: **Iran president Ahmadinejad accepts nuclear deal terms**, February 3, 2010. Accessed from http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/8494772.stm on the 7th of January 2021.

⁶⁰² **Art. 5 of The Tehran Declaration of May 17, 2010**. Read BORGER, Julian: **Text of the Iran-Brazil-Turkey deal**, The Guardian, May 17, 2010. An information accessed on the 7th of January 2021 from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/julian-borger-global-security-blog/2010/may/17/iran-brazil-turkey-nuclear>.

Da Silva managed to conclude a diplomatic deal with Iran where President Obama and his P5+1 colleagues could not. This diplomatic breakthrough was possible partly because of the nature of the bilateral relation the aforementioned countries have with Iran and the fact that they both belong to the non-aligned movement undoubtedly played an incremental role in Iran's decision to sign the deal.

Surprisingly, President Obama rejected this agreement signed by Brazil, Iran, and Turkey. Trita Parsi maintains that Obama's rejection of the 2009 Tehran Declaration was mainly due to the domestic pressure he was facing from the Congress and the appeal of sanctions as a better steppingstone toward Iran's acceptance of substantial negotiations. "Between instituting sanctions and getting one bomb's worth of LEU out of Iran, Washington had chosen the former, and Congress had made that choice a reality," Trita Parsi argues.⁶⁰³ Michele Gaietta challenges this point of view as he argued that, "although Iran had roughly accepted the demands made by the international negotiators for the TRR, any reference to the suspension of Iranian enrichment activities over and above 5 percent was completely absent from the agreement draft. This suspension was crucial to re-establish, ex-post, the substantive conditions to which the parties had agreed in October 2009."⁶⁰⁴ Richard Nephew goes further and adds that not only did that Tehran Declaration not met all the expectation of the US and the remaining P5+1, but also "it wasn't presented as a proposal that we could work on. It was presented as a take or leave it America, which America didn't do. Also worth noting, worry was that China and Russia will stick on this at the Security Council and endorse it, Europeans as well. But within an hour after we had talked with the Russian and Chinese, they all agreed it was complete nonsense, a ridiculous attempt by Turkey, Iran, and Brazil to undermine what we were doing in New York," he emphasized.⁶⁰⁵ After this failure, the UNSC adopted Res. 1929.

The UNSC adopted Resolution 1929 on the 9th of June, 2010, despite the opposition of certain countries like Brazil and Turkey. After recalling all the previous Resolutions and emphasizing Iran's failure to comply with its international obligations regarding its nuclear program, the SC decided to impose additional upon Iran. However, such a decision was not grounded on the failure of the TRR proposal; rather, to counter and add pressure on the P5+1 group, Iran unveiled new centrifuges capable of enriching

⁶⁰³ PARSI, Trita: **Losing an enemy**, *Op. Cit.*, p.110

⁶⁰⁴ GAIETTA, Michele: **The trajectory of Iran's nuclear program**, *Op. Cit.*, p.163. It is important to highlight that by 2009, Iran had already mastered the nuclear enrichment up to 20%, which seriously increased their nuclear weapon capabilities and lowered the "breakout" time to produce one nuclear warhead.

⁶⁰⁵ **Interview with Richard Nephew on the US coercive strategy with Iran**

Uranium up to 20%, which posed a severe proliferation concern.⁶⁰⁶ Indeed, a State can obtain a nuclear bomb through two chemical elements: either Uranium (235U) or plutonium (239Pu). For technical reasons, Iran opted for Uranium enrichment activities, and to get enough fissile material to produce one nuclear bomb with Uranium, a State needs Highly Enriched Uranium (HEU) which can be obtained when the enrichment activities reach 20%; beyond 90%, we obtain weapon-grade HEU..⁶⁰⁷

In line with the previous Resolutions, the UNSC continued to rely on a coercive denial strategy as it decided that all “States shall prevent the direct or indirect supply, sale or transfer to Iran, (...) any battle tanks, armored combat vehicles, large caliber artillery systems, combat aircraft, attack helicopters, warships, missiles or 5 missile systems as defined for the purpose of the United Nations Register of Conventional Arms. In addition, Iran shall not undertake any activity related to ballistic missiles capable of delivering nuclear weapons, including launches using ballistic missile technology.”⁶⁰⁸ Furthermore, Res. 1929 also called upon States to inspect all cargo to and from Iran, in their territory, including seaports and airports, *if the State concerned has information that provides reasonable grounds to believe the cargo contains items the supply, sale, transfer, or export of which is prohibited by paragraphs 3, 4 or 7.*⁶⁰⁹ All those articles referred to nuclear-related activities.

Resolution 1929 also broadened the list of individuals and entities sanctioned due to their role in Iran nuclear activities; the new list included henceforth among others: individuals like then Head of the AEIOI, Javad Rahiqi, entities like Defense Technology and Science Research Centre, the First East Export Bank, which is affiliated with Bank Mellat, the Ministry of Defense Logistics Export, the Khatam al-Anbiya Construction Headquarters.⁶¹⁰ By requesting from the IAEA to submit a report within 90 days on the compliance by Iran with the provisions of Res. 1929, the Security Council aimed at creating a “sense of urgency.”

⁶⁰⁶ France 24, **Tehran unveils faster enrichment centrifuge**, April 9, 2010. Accessed on the 7th of January 2021 from <https://www.france24.com/en/20100409-tehran-unveils-faster-enrichment-centrifuge>.

⁶⁰⁷ An information accessed from <https://tutorials.nti.org/nuclear-101/uranium-enrichment/> on the 7th of January 2021. Also read IAEA, **Management of high enriched uranium for peaceful purposes: Status and trends**, June 2005, 58 pages. Accessed from the website https://www-pub.iaea.org/MTCD/Publications/PDF/te_1452_web.pdf on the 7th of January 2021.

⁶⁰⁸ **Art 8 and 9 of UNSC Res. 1929**. An information accessed on the 8th of January 2021 from https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/unsc_res1929-2010.pdf.

⁶⁰⁹ **Art 14 of UNSC Res. 1929**, *Ibid*.

⁶¹⁰ **Annex I and II of UNSC Res. 1929**, *Op. Cit*.

To strengthen Res. 1929, the EU decided to also adopt a new set of sanctions against Iran under Council Decision 2010/413/CFSP.⁶¹¹ Relying on the coercive denial strategy as well, the EU imposed nuclear-related trade sanctions to Iran. For example, they prohibited the supply, sale, or transfer of “items, materials, equipment, goods and technology contained in the Nuclear Suppliers Group and Missile Technology Control Regime lists.” In addition, “any additional items, materials, equipment, goods and technology, determined by the Security Council or the Committee, which could contribute to enrichment-related, reprocessing or heavy water-related activities, or to the development of nuclear weapon delivery systems were also prohibited under this Council Decision.”⁶¹²

Despite the fact that the EU imposed trade and financial sanctions to Iran under Art.4 and Art.5, considering the fact that they both targeted the nuclear activities of Iran, they fall under the coercive denial strategy. For instance, on the one hand, Art. 4.1 of the aforementioned Council Decision targeted the oil and natural gas sectors of Iran and prohibited the sale, supply or transfer of key equipment and technology which play a strategic role in the following activities: refining, liquefied natural gas, exploration and production. Art. 6 On the other hand prohibited “the granting of any financial loan or credit to enterprises in Iran that are engaged in the sectors of the Iranian oil and gas industry referred to in Article 4(1) or to Iranian- owned enterprises engaged in those sectors outside Iran.”⁶¹³

The P5+1 leaders unanimously welcomed the adoption of UN Res. 1929. According to Barack Obama, the last UN Resolution against Iran aimed at sending “an unmistakable message about the international community’s commitment to stopping the spread of nuclear weapons and demonstrating the growing costs that will come with Iranian intransigence.”⁶¹⁴ However, he emphasized that “these sanctions are not directed at the Iranian people,” which clearly indicated that the Great Powers wanted to avoid civilian casualties. Although Tehran sharply criticized Russia for not having vetoed the Resolution, Moscow also stressed that “the sanctions would not be paralyzing, and therefore not affect ordinary people; the resolution would not contain permission to use force (and more importantly), Russia would be able to fully defend its economic interests allowing cooperation with Iran to continue in such areas as peaceful use of

⁶¹¹ CFSP refers to the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy.

⁶¹² **Art. 1a and 1b of Council Decision 2010/413/CFSP.** Accessed on the 7th of January 2021 from <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32010D0413&from=EN>

⁶¹³ **Art. 4.1 and Art 6 of Council Decision 2010/413/CFSP, *Ibid*.**

⁶¹⁴ American Rhetoric, **Barack Obama. Address on UN Security Council sanctions against Iran**, 9th of June 2010. An information accessed on the 7th of January 2021 from the link <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/barackobama/barackobamairansanctions.htm>.

nuclear energy and civil space research.”⁶¹⁵ Then British Foreign Secretary William Hague added that *nothing in recent months has given confidence to the international community that Iran's nuclear program is for peaceful purposes. The world won't just walk away in the face of a refusal to negotiate... This is a major toughening of the sanctions on Iran.*⁶¹⁶

Irrespective of the nuisance of those new sanctions, President Obama was perfectly aware that targeting only the nuclear establishment and the political elites did not represent a credible leverage to compel Iran to adopt a more conciliatory approach. However, there were two main obstacles to overcome in order to make sanctions more painful: on the one hand the political cost of getting the approval of Russia to vote for sanctions,⁶¹⁷ and on the second hand the reluctance of China and Russia to impose tougher sanctions which would have not only affected the civilians, but also undermined their economic relation with Iran. This is a clear illustration of the challenges related to multilateral coercion strategies as previously analyzed by Daniel Byman and Matthew Waxman. Consequently, President Obama chose a unilateral policy and, together with the Congress, started to impose US sanctions.

The first set of nuclear-related unilateral sanctions that the United States imposed upon Iran were the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act (CISADA) voted by the Congress and signed on July 1, 2010, by President Obama. The CISADA mainly targeted the oil and bank sectors, especially companies which were involved in both the ballistic and nuclear program of Iran. Foreign financial institutions were prohibited to pursue several activities related the Iranian nuclear program under this legislation. Among them were for example the act of “engaging in money laundering, or facilitating efforts by the Central Bank of Iran or any other Iranian financial institution, to carry out either of the facilitating activities described above (by the previous UN Resolutions on Iran); or the act of “facilitating a significant transaction or transactions or providing significant financial services for: the IRGC or any of its agents or affiliates whose property and interests in property are blocked pursuant to the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA).”⁶¹⁸ What made those

⁶¹⁵ PIKAYEV A., Alexander, **Why Russia supported sanctions against Iran**, James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies, June 23, 2010. Accessed from <https://nonproliferation.org/why-russia-supported-sanctions-against-iran/> on the 7th of January 2021.

⁶¹⁶ BLACK Ian and MACASKILL Ewen: **UN imposes new sanctions on Iran**, The Guardian, June 9, 2010. Accessed from the link <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/jun/09/un-sanctions-iran-nuclear-ahmadinejad> on the 7th of January 2021.

⁶¹⁷ BAKER Peter and SANGER E. David, **U.S. makes concessions to Russia for Iran sanctions**, New York Times, May 21, 2010. An information accessed on the 7th of January 2021 from <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/22/world/22sanctions.html>.

⁶¹⁸ The U.S. Treasury Department: **CISADA: The new U.S. sanctions on Iran**, 2010, p.2. Accessed on the 8th of January 2021 from https://home.treasury.gov/system/files/126/CISADA_english.pdf

sanctions binding at the international level and their extra-territoriality effective was the fine applicable to any infringer, estimated at “\$250,000 or twice the transaction value, and criminal penalties for willful violations of up to \$1 million and 20 years in prison.”⁶¹⁹ (Vertical escalation). But what was Iran’s reactions to those new sanctions?

By targeting the financial sector and limiting international trades with Iran, the adoption of the CISADA inaugurated the era of the **punishment coercive strategy** in the US coercive attempts to tame the Iranian nuclear challenge. The effects of its provisions were clearly visible. For instance, they substantially reduced the gasoline deliveries which Iran heavily depended upon that to produce its oil. As foreign partners were now reluctant to trade with Iran due to the sword of Damocles of sanctions, “gasoline deliveries to Iran dwindled from about 120,000 barrels per day before CISADA to about 30,000 barrels per day in the following months.”⁶²⁰ Nonetheless, Iran GDP was still above 5.7%, as clearly illustrated by the previous table 2.

Consequently, in line with their previous positions, the Iranian authorities rejected the new UN sanctions. “Nothing will change. The Islamic Republic of Iran will continue uranium enrichment activities” hammered Ali Asghar Soltanieh, then Iran’s envoy to the IAEA.⁶²¹ Consequently, the Iranian government expanded the scope of its nuclear enrichment capabilities by installing new centrifuges. This was a clear **counter-denial strategy** crafted by Tehran, as the goal was to demonstrate to Washington the ineffectiveness of their sanction policy. A Senior Iranian official described it in these terms: “we escalated our nuclear activities to show what pressure would produce. Perhaps we really didn’t need some of the nuclear facilities and activities we engaged in, but we deemed it necessary for breaking the mentality of the other side.”⁶²² (Iran’s counter vertical escalation). The intransigence of the belligerents greatly fueled tensions between both parties, especially as the specter of a military intervention loomed over the Iranian nuclear program.

As all the initiatives to solve the Iranian nuclear issue so far had not been successful, the Obama administration found itself in a very uncomfortable situation. Indeed, the nuclear deadlock was progressively leading the administration toward a dilemma between inaction and the recourse to military force, something President Obama wanted to avoid absolutely. Indeed, not only would this have meant a failure of one of his top foreign policy goals, but would have emboldened proponents of force against

⁶¹⁹ The U.S. Treasury Department: **CISADA: The new U.S. sanctions on Iran**, *Ibid.*, p.5

⁶²⁰ MACALUSO, Agnese: **The apparent success of Iran Sanctions Iran, Rouhani, and the nuclear deal**, The Hague Institute for Global Justice, Working Paper 2, August 2014, p.10

⁶²¹ BLACK Ian and MACASKILL Ewen: **UN imposes new sanctions on Iran**, *Ibid.*

⁶²² PARSI, Trita: **Loosing an enemy**, *Op. Cit.*, p.118

Iran like PM Netanyahu. Fortunately, a middle-ground was found with the recourse to covert actions which included activities such as cyber-attacks. (Horizontal escalation).

Launching a cyber-attack was an attractive foreign policy in many regards. From a political perspective, it was less costly than launching military strikes with unpredictable consequences. From a technical perspective, it would seriously damage the nuclear infrastructure of Iran, which would satisfy Israel regarding Iran's growing nuclear capabilities. Consequently, together with the help of Israel, the US developed what Kim Zetter described the world's *first digital weapon* under the code name *Olympic Games*: the Stuxnet malware.⁶²³ The malware was introduced in the nuclear infrastructures of Iran through a USB stick which infected computers that were connected to the centrifuges. Many experts agree that they destroyed around 1000 centrifuges which could be considered as a success, provided the original goal of the Stuxnet was to destroy a more limited number of centrifuges and set back Iran's progress in operating Fuel Enrichment Plant (FEP).⁶²⁴ Irrespective of the fact that it was in the cyber domain, the Stuxnet was the very first attack against Iran.

The second type of covert actions which impacted the evolution of the Iranian nuclear program were the killing of top Iranian nuclear scientists. One of them was Majid Shahriari, described as a member of the engineering faculty at the Shahid Beheshti in Tehran and linked with the nuclear program was killed during an attack by unidentified men on motorbikes. Fereydoun Abbassi Davani, another senior Iranian nuclear physician, was also the target of a similar attack but survived and appointed Head of the AEOI by President Ahmadinejad. The attack against Abbassi Davani was special as he had been formally identified in UN Res. 1747 as a "Senior Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics (MODAFL) scientist with links to the Institute of Applied Physics."⁶²⁵ Although there was no confirmation neither from the Israeli or the US government, many experts agreed that those attacks had been masterminded by the Mossad. The fact that Dr Mohsen Fakhrizadeh Mahabadi, a former IRGC Brigadier General and Head of the Organization of Defensive Innovation and Research was killed on November 27, 2020, after being mentioned by PM Netanyahu in a presentation of secret documents related to alleged purpose and goal of the Iranian nuclear program

⁶²³ ZETTER, Kim: **Countdown to zero day: Stuxnet and the launch of the world's first digital weapon**, New York City, Crown, 2014, 448 pages. SCHERPENISSE, Wouter, **The Stuxnet Operation: Why it is not plausible that Dutch intelligence and security services acted independently**, Erasmus School of Law, Jan 12, 2024.

⁶²⁴ ALBRIGHT David, BRANNAN Paul, and WALROND Christina: **Did Stuxnet take out 1,000 centrifuges at the Natanz enrichment plant?**, Institute for Science and International Security, Washington, 2010, p.1

⁶²⁵ Annex I of UNSC Res. 1747, *Op. Cit.*

confirms the *modus operandi* of the Israeli secret services.⁶²⁶ But how did the Iranian authorities react to all these covert actions?

The Iranian authorities acknowledged the cyber-attacks, although they downplayed their impact on the nuclear program. For instance, President Ahmadinejad declared that “they (the US and Israel) succeeded in creating problems for a limited number of our centrifuges with the software they had installed in electronic parts. But the problem has been resolved.”⁶²⁷ Regarding the killing of key nuclear scientists, President Ahmadinejad immediately accused Israel and the US government who had “undoubtedly” played a strategic role in the killing of those scientists but insisted that it would not deter Iran from improving its nuclear program. Despite the consensus over the condemnation of the killing of members of the Iranian scientific community, there were still political rifts among key elites, especially between Ahmadinejad and Khamenei. Indeed, despite his endorsement by the Supreme Guide, Ahmadinejad was still lacking political from many elites. But why did those covert actions not lead Iran to a more cooperative behavior?

With respect to the cyber-attacks, as we previously analyses in the literature review, the social and political conditions play a strategic role regarding the effectiveness of cyber coercion and the Iran case provides an empirical evidence to Christopher Whyte’s argument.⁶²⁸ Indeed, while the Stuxnet undoubtedly halted the nuclear progress of Tehran, yet the nuclear program was not stopped; indeed, not only did the Iranians learned from their mistakes, but also installed more advanced centrifuges in other enrichment sites in a retaliatory move. Regarding the killings of top nuclear scientists, the authorities described them as *martyrs* which triggered increasing public support and ushered more vocations in the scientific areas related to the nuclear program. Indeed, the notion of martyrdom is one of the core identity marker in Shia religion and a great catalyst of political resistance. As Adel Hashemi confirms it, “for the Shia, the martyr’s blood triumphed over the sword; it was a victory in defeat. The notion of martyrdom changed from being beneficial for the martyr in the afterlife to becoming a motivating factor in social and political movements. It turned out to be a vehicle of protest and a voice of discontent.”⁶²⁹ From a neoclassical realist perspective, the intervening variables of the political/strategic culture and the State-society relations

⁶²⁶ BBC, **Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, Iran's top nuclear scientist, assassinated near Tehran**, November 27, 2020. Accessed from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-55105934> on the 8th of January 2021.

⁶²⁷ HAFEZI, Parisa, **Iran admits cyber-attack on nuclear plants**, Reuters, Nov 29, 2010. Accessed on the 8th January 2021 from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-idUSTRE6AS4MU20101129>

⁶²⁸ WHYTE, Christopher, **Ending cyber coercion: computer network attacks, exploitation and the case of North Korea**, *Op. Cit.*

⁶²⁹ HASHEMI Adel: **The making of Martyrdom in modern Twelver Shi'ism: From protesters and revolutionaries to shrine defenders**, London, I.B. Taurus, 2022, p.30 (consulted online)

helped the Iranian to alleviate the domestic effects of the systemic pressures (coercion) and maintain a defiant nuclear policy. Hence, this US strategy clearly failed to exploit the weaknesses of Iran; instead, it boosted their defiance by providing domestic drivers to their legitimacy and thus their resistance.

Nonetheless, Ahmadinejad was facing increasing critics, mainly due to the negative effects of the sanctions. Hence, the deal signed with Turkey and Brazil would have been a suitable way-out for Ahmadinejad to regain political legitimacy, as it could have reduced the economic pressure of the sanctions. However, the Supreme Guide's technical requirements prevented the success story Ahmadinejad had envisioned. In a way to strike back, he sacked then Foreign Affairs Minister Manouchehr Mottaki and appointed Ali Akbar Saheli in the spot. Baqer Moin, an Iranian journalist argued in this regard that, dismissing the Foreign Minister was "Ahmadinejad asserting his control over the foreign policy field. It is a challenge to Khamenei too because he would have expected to have been consulted. It is bound to increase tensions to a higher level. It is vintage Ahmadinejad – presenting others with a *fait accompli*."⁶³⁰

After the failure of the TTR proposal, the other major nuclear proposal aiming at building confidence between the belligerents and solving the Iranian nuclear stalemate was the step-by-step proposal suggested by Russia. Mainly based on the principle of reciprocity, the Russian proposal consisted of the US and Iran responding to each other gesture to break the nuclear stalemate. Basically, Iran would gradually address the IAEA's concerns regarding its nuclear program in exchange of the progressive lifting of the sanctions imposed on its economy. Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Serguei Lavrov described it in these terms: "the response to each specific step of Iran would be followed by some reciprocal step, like freezing some sanctions and shortening the volume of sanctions."⁶³¹ The Iranians responded positively to the broad terms of the Russian proposal but remained firm on the recognition of its "inalienable" right to nuclear enrichment. The US were no less sceptical about the outcome of the Russian proposal as then Secretary of States Hilary Clinton declared that "we are committed to our dual track of pressure and engagement and we want to explore with the Russians ways that we can perhaps pursue more effective engagement strategies."⁶³² Concretely, the US expressed its reservation regarding the absence of the construction of the heavy

⁶³⁰ BLACK, Ian, **Mahmoud Ahmadinejad sacks foreign minister in bid to assert control**, The Guardian, Dec 13, 2010. An information accessed on the 8th January 2020 from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/dec/13/iran-president-ahmadinejad-fires-foreign-minister>

⁶³¹ FAYAZMANESH, Sasan: **Containing Iran: Obama's policy of "tough diplomacy"**, Cambridge, Newcastle upon Tyne, 2013, p.293. Consulted online.

⁶³² FAYAZMANESH, Sasan: **Containing Iran: Obama's policy of "tough diplomacy"**, *Ibid.*, p.293

water reactor of Arak, or clear technical issues to be solved by Iran with the IAEA.⁶³³ Beyond those criticism, President Obama's rejection of the Russian proposal was more politically rooted than technical.

As the time was going and no concrete solution looming on the horizon, the Congress increased its pressure on the Obama administration, calling for additional sanctions against Iran. In a letter sent to the President, 90 Senators expressed their anxiousness regarding the evolution of the Iranian nuclear program. "We remain seriously concerned that Iran continues to accelerate its uranium enrichment and ballistic missile programs. (...) We must do more to increase the economic pressure on the regime. In our view, the United States should embark on a comprehensive strategy to pressure Iran's financial system by imposing sanctions on the Central Bank of Iran (CBI), or Bank Markazi."⁶³⁴ Considering Iran's gesture of good will regarding the Russian proposal, this was a clear sign that the US had skipped the diplomatic pattern and preferred the pressure track. Nonetheless, the increased pressure did not come only from the US, but also from Israel. Indeed, Israel had been contemplating the possibility of a nuclear strike against the Iranian nuclear infrastructure. "No option should be removed from the table," Ehud Barak, Israel's former Defense Minister declared in an interview with BBC.⁶³⁵ Nonetheless, the Great Powers privileged more economic sanctions over the military option.

To compel Iran to meet with the demands of the IAEA, the EU adopted Council Decision 2012/35/CFSP of the 23rd of January 2012. This Decision was also a clear coercive **punishment strategy**. Indeed, it mainly imposed trade sanctions to Iran as it prohibited among others "the import, purchase or transport of Iranian crude oil and petroleum products" (Art. 3a). In addition, "the sale, supply or transfer of key equipment and technology for the petrochemical industry in Iran, or to Iranian or Iranian-owned enterprises engaged in that industry outside Iran" were prohibited under Art. 4a. The EU also focused on non-petroleum sectors like gold and precious metals which the sale of was prohibited.⁶³⁶ The EU also imposed financial sanctions upon Iran: "the granting of any financial loan or credit to enterprises in Iran that are engaged in the Iranian petrochemical industry" (Art. 6a). But one of the strongest and most popular financial sanctions the EU had taken against Iran was probably the

⁶³³ GAIETTA, Michele: **The trajectory of Iran's nuclear program**, *Op. Cit.*, p.173

⁶³⁴ The Iran Primer, **90 Senators: Sanction Iran's Central Bank**, USIP, Aug 11, 2011. Accessed on the 9th of January 2021 from <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2011/aug/11/90-senators-sanction-irans-central-bank>

⁶³⁵ MARX Bettina, GOEBEL Nicole, **Iran warns West against military strike**, Deutsche Welle (DW), Nov 7, 2011. Accessed from <https://www.dw.com/en/iran-warns-west-against-military-strike/a-15515091> on the 8th January 2021.

⁶³⁶ The EU, **Council Decision 2012/35/CFSP**, Jan 23, 2012. Accessed on the 8th of January 2021 from <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2012:019:0022:0030:EN:PDF>

decision to ban Iran from the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT) system. In fact, the EU adopted Council Decision 2012/152/CFSP on the 15th of March 2012 which prohibited to supply specialized financial messaging services, which are used to exchange financial data, to the persons and entities referred to in paragraph 1 (Decision 2010/413/CFSP).⁶³⁷ Combined with the Executive Orders⁶³⁸ signed by President Obama at the same time, those sanctions had devastating effect in the Iranian domestic politics.

From an economic perspective, Iran was not able to export more than 1 million of barrels⁶³⁹ of oil per day upon the imposition of the EU sanctions. Consequently, the inflation rate in Iran skyrocketed from 10.25% in 2005 when Ahmadinejad stepped in to more than 25% in 2012 during his final years in office. In addition, the GDP nosedived from 3.20% to -7.445% for the same period.⁶⁴⁰ But the sanctions also affected the health and private sectors; regarding the former, then Head of the Society for Pharmacists of Iran, Rahbar Mozhdehi Azar, admitted that *“the majority of pharmacies are up for sale due” to a four-fold increase in taxation on pharmacies and serious delays in insurance payments.*⁶⁴¹ With respect to the private sector, due to US financial sanctions, many companies now refuse to sell auto parts to Iranian automobile companies. As a result, there has been a 36% decrease in car manufacturing, which will lead to widespread layoffs and could lead to serious labor unrest.⁶⁴² From a political perspective, President Ahmadinejad was subjected to sharp criticism both in the elite’ circles and ordinary citizens. Indeed, hardliners and Reformist alike vehemently blamed him for the economic situation of the country. For instance, the hard-line Prayer leader of Mashhad, Ayatollah Alameh, went as far as to say that the “present conditions were warlike.” Considering all those variables, one would have expected President Ahmadinejad to backtrack and adopt a more conciliatory approach. yet, he did not.

⁶³⁷ Art 1 of **Council Decision 2012/152/CFSP**, March 15th, 2012. Accessed on the 8th of January 2021 from <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32012D0152&rid=1>

⁶³⁸ For example, Section 1 of **Executive Order 13599** signed by President Obama on Feb 5th, 2012, blocked “all property and interests in property of the Government of Iran, including the Central Bank of Iran, that are in the United States, (...) including any foreign branch.” Accessed from <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/DCPD-201200083/pdf/DCPD-201200083.pdf> on the 8th of January 2021.

⁶³⁹ International Energy Agency, *Impact of sanctions on Crude Oil Exports*. Cited by SAMORE, Gary: **Sanctions against Iran: A Guide to targets, terms, and timetables**, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, June 2015, p.14

⁶⁴⁰ **Iran GDP Growth Rate 2005-2013, Op. Cit.** and **Iran inflation rate from 2006 to 2013, Op. Cit.**

⁶⁴¹ SADEGHI-BOROUJERDI, Eskandar: **Sanctioning Iran: implications and consequences**, Oxford Research Group, October 2012, p.13

⁶⁴² SADEGHI-BOROUJERDI, Eskandar: **Sanctioning Iran: implications and consequences, Ibid.**

Despite the poor economic situation that the country was facing, President Ahmadinejad surprisingly maintained a firm and assertive nuclear policy. This can be explained by several factors. Among them was yet again the support of the Supreme Leader (intervening variable of the domestic balance of power among the institutions). Indeed, notwithstanding the chorus of criticism against his nuclear and hence economic policies, President Ahmadinejad was still enjoying the political support of key political figures and the IRGC. This situation created a deep political hostility among key elites and could have ended up in a **power-base erosion** (coercive mechanism). But to avoid such outcome which threatened the survival of the regime, Ayatollah called for political unity and support for the Presidents irrespective of one personal and political opinion.

Indeed, the Supreme Leader basically relied on the framing strategy and described the sanction policy as a strategy of the West to topple the regime, a threat all the Iranians should fight against. (Intervening variables of the political/strategic culture and the State-society relations) Oliver Borszik confirms it as he argues that “by declaring the sanctions an external attack against the revolution and the entire system, the supreme leader evoked a “rally around the flag” effect. In this way, Khamenei used the sanctions as an external stimulus to prompt the political elite to do away with the latent intra factional disputes.”⁶⁴³ This argument was politically useful as many international medias echoed Israel’s plans to strike Iran’s nuclear facilities, as illustrated in figure 7 below. Although it was never considered a credible threat by the Iranian authorities, the Israel military threat was a perfect political springboard to keep the country united.

Furthermore, President Ahmadinejad wanted to avoid bargaining with the US and the other Great Powers from a weak position. It is worth emphasizing that the diplomatic door had not been completely closed, irrespective of the aforementioned tensions between the US and Iran. In fact, the P5+1 and Iran attended several meetings in different regions of the world to break the nuclear deadlock. Among them was the meeting in Bagdad in May 2012. Basically, the P5+1 group proposal consisted of the following: Iran had to “stop uranium enrichment up to 20% U-235, ship out all of the 20% enriched uranium already produced, and close the Fordow Fuel Enrichment Plant;”⁶⁴⁴ this was referred later as the 3S strategy: “stop, shut, ship.” In exchange they made bare promises regarding the lifting of the crippling sanctions that were imposed upon the economy.

⁶⁴³ BORSZIK, Oliver: **International Sanctions against Iran under President Ahmadinejad: Explaining regime persistence**, GIGA Research Paper, N. 260, November 2014, p.18

⁶⁴⁴ **Iran nuclear overview**, Nuclear Treaty Initiative, June 25, 2020. Accessed on the 8th of January 2021 from <https://www.nti.org/analysis/articles/iran-nuclear/>

The previous demands could not be accepted by Tehran and the American leaders were clearly aware of that. Why then engage in diplomacy if one knows the outcome in advance? Trita Parsi argues that “the more Iran asked for sanctions relief, the greater the West’s confidence that sanctions would eventually force Iran to back down — as long as the pressure wasn’t eased. With only one month left until the embargo was to come into effect, neither Washington nor Brussels was in the mood to compromise.”⁶⁴⁵ Nonetheless, Iranians proposed a 5 points counterproposal which included among others the acknowledgement by the West of its enrichment right, the cooperation with the IAEA, and bilateral cooperation on regional issues.⁶⁴⁶ As each party considered its nuclear strategy to be useful and effective, and stood firm on its position, the tensions continued. Consequently, Iran introduced additional centrifuges, while the US imposed more sanctions. What lessons should learn from the previous coercive nuclear negotiations?

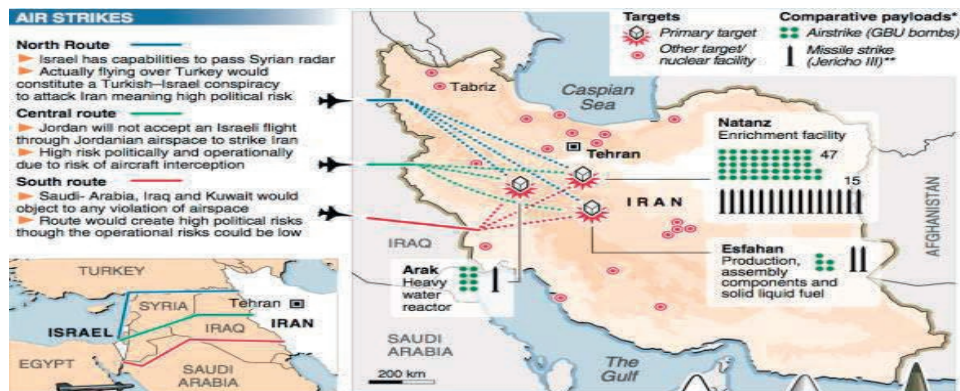


Figure 7: Israel's plans of attack against Iran's nuclear facilities.⁶⁴⁷

⁶⁴⁵ PARSİ, Trita: *Losing an enemy*, *Op. Cit.*, p.146

⁶⁴⁶ Arms Control Association, *Official proposals on the Iranian nuclear issue, 2003-2013*, *Op. Cit.*

⁶⁴⁷ HUDSON, John, *The playbook for an Israeli airstrike on Iran's nuclear facilities*, The Atlantic, Feb 21, 2012. Accessed from on the 8th of January 2021 from the link <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/02/playbook-israeli-airstrike-irans-nuclear-facilities/331450/>

4.5 SECTION V – THEORETICAL LESSONS FROM THE COERCIVE DYNAMICS BETWEEN THE US AND IRAN.

As previously highlighted, the main goal of this chapter was to answer to the main questions pertaining to our research design: **what were the objectives pursued by the US in implementing of coercive policies against Iran? What coercive strategies were adopted to achieve these objectives? What were the expected outcomes of the US in the aftermath of the implementation of their coercive strategies? What were the actual outcomes at the end of the process and why such outcomes?** But the analysis would be conducted against the backdrop of our hypotheses: the exploitation by the US coercive strategies of the weaknesses of Iran and the motivation displayed by the US to maintain a sustained coercive campaign aiming at compelling Iran to change its controversial nuclear policy. In essence, did Iran's response to US demands stem from coercive-related domestic changes or fear of heightened threats?

Also, we would consider whether or not the US coercive strategies and threats were credible, proportionate and reciprocal to the Iranian response? In light of our theoretical lens (neoclassical realism), we would also highlight the transmitting-belt role played by the intervening variables between the independent variable (systemic pressures/international demands) and the dependent variable (foreign policy). This research design would help us to confirm the relevance of the following four ingredients regarding the implementation of a successful coercive strategy in the nuclear realm: the display by the coercer of a strategic empathy towards its target, the formulation of clear and acceptable demands to the target, display by the coercer of a higher resolve than the target to achieve his/her objective, and the offer of credible incentives to the target if the target complies.

Regarding the goal pursued by the US in imposing coercive policies against Iran, both the Bush and the Obama administrations' goal was to prevent Iran from building nuclear weapons. However, while the later aimed at limiting the nuclear capabilities of Iran, the former implicitly explored the idea of toppling the regime. The empiric evidence which strengthens our conclusion are twofold: on the first hand the aggressive or confrontational approach adopted against Iran from the very discovery of the nuclear program in 2002 and on the second hand, the unrealistic demands formulated by the Bush administration which could be served as pretext to wage war against Iran considering their anticipated noncompliance with the US demands. Conversely, the Obama administration relied on a respectful and empathic approach with Iran, at least in the first hours of his mandate. This constituted a clear break with the Bush administration and sent signals to Iran with respect to the true intentions of the new administration.

Regarding the coercer's strategy, the two US administrations relied on similar but also different strategies, depending on the circumstances. Until 2006, the Bush administration relied essentially on coercive political isolation, notably by framing Iran as the representative of Devil the US (Good) does not exchange words with. After realizing the failure of this strategy, the Bush administration relied on the international power-based erosion by trying to distant Iran from its key partners (China and Russia). In addition, he adopted the denial coercive strategy by pushing for UN sanctions that would prevent Iran from improving its nuclear program. After realizing the limits of its engagement policy, President Obama, just like President Bush, first relied on the denial coercive strategy by targeting entities and individuals who played an instrumental role in the nuclear program of Iran. Considering the pitfall of such strategy, President Obama opted for a punitive coercive strategy. Instead of focusing on elites who could easily circumvent the sanctions, he decided to impose sanctions which will directly affect the population. All these strategies were implemented thanks to instruments like diplomatic isolation, economic sanctions (trade and financial), covert actions (cyber and probably nuclear assassination). The choice of one strategy or another depended on the expected mechanisms created by the coercive instruments.

Concerning the expected mechanism, we did not have substantial information regarding the expected mechanism of the Bush administration in relying on the international coercive political isolation. Yet, regarding the denial and punishment strategy, especially under the Obama administration, the expected mechanism were mainly the power-base erosion and unrest. Though these mechanisms could have effectively occurred, the reverse actually happened. Unlike what the Obama had envisioned, there were not major unrest in Iran, at least caused by his coercive nuclear strategy. Rather, Iranian citizens demonstrated a strong resilience, mostly during the first mandate of President Ahmadinejad, and this can be explained by the role played by the intervening variables we highlighted in our theoretical framework, the neoclassical realism theory.

The envisioned transmitting-belt effect the neoclassical realism theory clearly transpired in the coercive dynamics between Washington and Tehran. In fact, President Ahmadinejad had recourse to either the political/strategic culture of Iran, or the ability for the officials to mobilize public support to their nuclear policy (State-society relations). In addition, the balance of power among domestic institutions also played an instrumental role in Ahmadinejad's counter strategies, as he capitalized on the support of the Supreme Leader or the Revolutionary Guards to implement his defiant foreign policy regarding the demands of the US. And these intervening variables led to the creation of counter mechanisms that we identified thanks to the process-tracing method. These mechanisms set by the Iranians to counter the US nuclear strategy shed

an insightful light on the causes of the regime “persistence” regarding its nuclear program. The first mechanism was “**passive rationality**.” We decided to add the adjective passive because, as interviews and the literature demonstrated, the Iranian authorities did not consider the US military threat credible, especially after the military intervention in Iraq in 2003. Due to their damaged international reputation after 2003, the US would not confidently engage in another war, unless the vital interests were at stake. Did the Iranian nuclear program represent a vital threat for the US interests? We humbly argue “NO.” Despite the lack of transparency regarding its nuclear activities, no objective evidence of Iran’s plan to build a warhead had been found. And the publication of the NIE even worsened the issue, especially for the proponents of the military option.

The second mechanism used by Ahmadinejad to counter the US nuclear strategy was the “**lesson-learning**.” Indeed, by always reminding Iranians about their previous experience with the external world, especially Western powers, Ahmadinejad fostered Iran’s nationalism and increased its legitimacy regarding his nuclear policy. Consequently, he could easily use the “**framing**” (third mechanism) not only to describe foreign powers as historical enemies of the Islamic Republic, but also marginalized dissent voices in the political landscape of Iran by describing them as domestic relays of the enemies of the country. The fourth mechanism, and probably the most important finding of our research is the “**the nature of the Iranian political system**.” Conversely to the outlook, Iran’s Supreme Leader is not a check and balance free actor in the system. His political power also has constitutional limitations, and Ahmadinejad capitalized on these narrow political rooms to advance his personal agenda. In addition, by siding with IRGC, Ahmadinejad could easily reduce the political leverage of the Supreme Leader and implement his agenda. However, he paid closer attention to the Iranian public opinion, which was also his major weakness.

The inability of a Great Power like the US to tame a minor one like Iran is described by Todd Sescher as the *Goliath’s curse*.⁶⁴⁸ What were the main loopholes of the US coercive strategy, especially in light of the coercive theoretical model (credibility, proportionality and reciprocity) of Christopher Whitock and Bruce Jentleson? We humbly maintain that first, the US did not wield **credible** threats to Iran, as evidenced by the choice of denial and to some extent punishment strategies. But more importantly, the US didn’t have the upper hand over escalation dominance. Indeed, as we previously noticed, Tehran never considered the US threats credible enough to put the very existence of the regime at stake. Even covert actions like the cyber-attacks and political assassinations did not send costly signals to Tehran who was perfectly aware of the red

⁶⁴⁸ SECHSER S., Todd, *Goliath’s curse: coercive threats and asymmetric power*, Cambridge University Press, Vol. 64, N. 4, 34 pages.

line Washington would not dare cross (launch war and the subsequent regional consequences).

Although the US coercive threats did impact the economic performances of Iran, Tehran's ability to circumvent them and secure public support undermined US expect power-base erosion. Hence, the balance of motivation was clearly in favor of Iran as the US didn't have edge over escalation dominance against Iran over its controversial nuclear program. Second and subsequently, Washington did not back its demands with **proportional** threats and formulated unrealistic demands to Tehran. Third, Washington did not display any strategic empathy when addressing the Iranian nuclear challenge and did not **reciprocate** to the Iran's positive gestures. Otherwise, the US leaders would have understood the strategic importance of the international statute for such an exceptionalist and messianic country as Iran, and the subsequence importance of approaching it in a more respectful way.

Martin Van Creveld asserts that "in any war, the readiness to suffer and die, as well as to kill, represents the single most important factor. Take it away, and even the most numerous, best organized, best trained, best equipped army in the world will turn out to be a brittle instrument."⁶⁴⁹ The previous analysis of the coercive nuclear dynamics between the US and Iran demonstrated that Washington's coercive strategy against Tehran's nuclear program did not lift Iranians' "readiness to suffer and die" for their nuclear program and change their nuclear stance. Conversely, the American strategy fostered Tehran's defiance vis-à-vis Washington's demands. Furthermore, this coercive strategy's flaw transpired in the US's formal and substantial approach toward Iran. Regarding the formal aspect, Washington relied on an aggressive tone when formulating their demands. Considering Tehran's high sense of grandeur and pride, this approach was a strategic mistake. In this regard, Nader Entessar accurately described Iranian national pride during our interview in these words: "Iranians like to expound their views, but they don't like to be lectured to by the West."⁶⁵⁰ Regarding the nuclear reversal theories, all the previous loopholes of the US coercive strategy also consistently illustrate the coercer's inability to identify the political profile of the leader (oppositional nationalist - Jacques Hymans), to offer incentives that would break the challenging domestic coalitions (Etel Solingen), and to wisely combine sticks and carrots (Rupal Mehta).

⁶⁴⁹ VAN CREVELD, Martin: **The transformation of war**, New York, The Free Press, 1991, p.160. (Consulted online.)

⁶⁵⁰ **Interview with Nader Entessar on the US coercive diplomacy with Iran.**

Regarding the substantial aspect, the US failed to submit incentives to alleviate Iran's security concerns and increase its regional position. Therefore, by acknowledging the enrichment right, Washington could have solved the nuclear issue sooner and quicker (incentive). Of course, that would have been (politically) costly, but not as if Tehran had entirely gone nuclear. The US seemed to have known itself and not its enemy. While it did not suffer a defeat in every battle it was engaged in, Washington nevertheless ran the risk of being dragged into a useless war. This finding is not new, for another PhD research carried out by Ebrahim Mohseni-Cheraghloou had already reached the same conclusion.⁶⁵¹ Hence, this case study has confirmed our theory of the four conducive conditions for a successful coercive strategy in the nuclear realm. The next chapter will analyze the coercive dynamics between the US and Libya over Tripoli's nuclear weapons program.

Before analyzing the coercive interactions between the US and Libya over Tripoli's nuclear program, we summarized the findings of the coercive nuclear dynamics between Washington and Tehran in the following table. Indeed, table 15 encapsulates the substance of the previously mentioned interactions by highlighting the main actors (sender and target), the driving factors of the target's controversial actions (the building of the nuclear program), the international context under which the interactions occurred, the issue at stakes between the protagonist over time, the goals of the sender, its coercive strategy, the instruments used to implement its strategy, the expected outcomes of its strategy, the actual outcomes after the implementation of the coercive strategy, the reasons and mechanisms behind the actual outcomes of the coercive dynamics between the protagonists, and lastly, the nature of the demands formulated by the sender or coercer.

⁶⁵¹ MOHSENI-CHERAGHLOU, Ebrahim: **When coercion backfires: the limits of coercive diplomacy in Iran**, *Op. Cit.*

COERCER	TARGET	DRIVERS OF THE TARGET	INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT	ISSUE	OBJECTIVE	COERCIVE STRATEGY	COERCIVE INSTRUMENT	EXPECTED OUTCOMES	ACTUAL OUTCOMES	MECHANISMS	NATURE OF THE DEMAND
EU	Iran	M. Khatami (2002 – 2005)	Post - Iraq 2003	Controversies over nuclear activities	Stopping of the uranium enrichment	Political isolation	Diplomatic pressure	Compliance with the goal.	Resistance - continuity of the uranium enrichment	Uncler demands, Absence of incentives	Unacceptable - Lack of credible incentives
		Regional prestige (via technological progress)		Scope of nuclear enrichment						Absence of a credible coercive leverage.	
USA (UN and the EU)	Iran	G. Bush (2006 – 2009)	Post - Iraq 2003 - 2005	Nuclear enrichment	Stopping of the uranium enrichment	Denial political isolation naming and shaming	Trade sanctions Diplomatic pressures	Compliance with the goal.	Resistance - continuity of the nuclear enrichment.	Deep distrust, Lesson learning Framing	Unacceptable - Lack of credible incentives
		Syndrome of grandeur. Regional prestige									
USA (UN and the EU)	Iran	M. Ahmadinejad (2006 – 2012)	Post - Iraq 2005 - 2013	Nuclear enrichment	Stopping of the uranium enrichment	Denial Punishment (political isolation, military threats)	Trade and financial sanctions. Diplomatic pressures Cyber attacks	Compliance with the goal. Power-base erosion, Unrest.	Resistance or continuity of the uranium enrichment.	Distrust Lesson learning Framing Passive rationality Iranian political system	Unacceptable - Lack of credible incentives
		Syndrome of grandeur. Regional prestige									
USA (UN and the EU)	Iran	E. Obama (2009 – 2013)									

Table 16: Findings of the coercive dynamics between the US and Iran.

