

# Empire, Revolution, and Rivalry: Structural Roots of U.S. – Iran Tension in Global Politics

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## ABSTRACT

The relationship between the United States and Iran remains one of the most enduring and unstable rivalries in international politics. Despite moments of cooperation, including nuclear negotiations and mediated talks, diplomatic breakthroughs between the two countries have repeatedly collapsed. This study examines why these failures occur by focusing on structural factors rather than short-term political events. Using a qualitative and historically grounded approach, the research analyses how historical mistrust, ideological identity, economic sanctions, military deterrence strategies, alliance networks, and shifting global power structures reinforce long-term hostility. Particular attention is given to recent escalation, including the 2026 killing of Iran's Supreme Leader and the regional responses that followed. The findings suggest that sanctions and punitive measures often strengthen hardline positions rather than encourage compromise, while alliance commitments and security dilemmas limit flexibility during negotiations. The study argues that diplomatic efforts remain fragile because they operate within deeply embedded institutional and geopolitical structures that sustain mistrust. By integrating structural realist and institutional perspectives, this research contributes to a clearer understanding of why U.S. – Iran diplomacy frequently breaks down despite periods of engagement. The article concludes that sustainable de-escalation requires addressing long-term structural drivers rather than relying solely on tactical negotiations.

**KEYWORDS:** *United States–Iran relations; structural rivalry; diplomatic breakdown; economic sanctions; security dilemma; multipolarity; alliance politics; Middle East security.*

## INTRODUCTION

Relations between the United States and Iran remain one of the most persistent and volatile rivalries in contemporary international politics. For more than four decades, tensions between the two countries have shaped regional security dynamics in the Middle East and influenced broader global power politics. While moments of dialogue and negotiation have occurred, including the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), these diplomatic openings have repeatedly collapsed. The recurrence of hostility raises an important question: why do diplomatic breakthroughs between the United States and Iran fail to produce lasting stability? This study argues that the answer lies not only in short-term policy disagreements but in deeper structural factors

embedded in history, ideology, institutions, and global power configurations.

The roots of mistrust between the two countries can be traced to the 1953 coup in Iran, in which the United States supported the removal of Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh (Gasiorowski, 1991; Kinzer, 2003). This event left a lasting impression on Iranian political consciousness and contributed to a perception of American interference in domestic sovereignty. The 1979 Islamic Revolution further transformed Iran's political identity by institutionalising resistance to Western influence within the state structure (Keddie, 2006). From that point onward, anti-American rhetoric became embedded in political discourse and security doctrine.

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On the American side, Iran has often been viewed as a destabilizing actor in the region, particularly regarding its nuclear program and support for proxy groups (Takeyh, 2011). These opposing narratives created a structural framework of suspicion that continues to shape diplomatic interactions.

Economic sanctions and military pressure have been central tools of U.S. policy toward Iran. Although designed to alter behaviour through coercion, sanctions have often strengthened nationalist sentiment and empowered hardline factions within Iran (Nephew, 2017; RezaeeDaryakenari, 2025). Similarly, military deterrence strategies contribute to a security dilemma in which each side interprets defensive actions as aggressive threats (Jervis, 1976; Waltz, 1979). Instead of reducing tensions, these measures frequently deepen institutional hostility and reduce trust. The U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018 reinforced Iranian scepticism about American commitments and highlighted the fragility of diplomatic progress (Maloney, 2020). As a result, diplomatic breakthroughs appear temporary, vulnerable to political shifts and external pressures.

Recent escalations, including the 2026 killing of Iran's Supreme Leader and subsequent regional responses, illustrate how structural tensions can rapidly intensify. This event was not simply a bilateral confrontation but one embedded within broader alliance networks and shifting global power structures. In an increasingly multipolar international system, regional actors and global powers such as Russia and China influence the strategic calculations of both Washington and Tehran. Alliance commitments, proxy relationships, and energy security concerns further complicate crisis management (Gause, 2014). These interconnected dynamics demonstrate that U.S. – Iran rivalry cannot be understood in isolation from wider structural forces.

This research therefore examines how historical grievances, ideological identity, sanctions regimes, military deterrence, alliance networks, and global power transitions interact to sustain hostility and undermine diplomacy. Rather than focusing solely on individual leaders or isolated events, the study adopts a structural analytical framework to explain recurring diplomatic collapse. By integrating classical international relations theory with recent geopolitical developments, this article contributes to a deeper understanding of why cooperation between the United States and Iran remains fragile. Understanding these structural foundations is essential for developing more sustainable approaches to de-escalation and long-term regional stability.

## Literature Review

Scholarly literature on U.S. – Iran relations consistently highlights the importance of historical mistrust and structural antagonism in shaping diplomatic outcomes. Many scholars trace contemporary hostility to the 1953 CIA-backed coup in Iran and the 1979 Islamic Revolution, both of which deeply reshaped political identities and perceptions of sovereignty (Gasiorowski, 1991; Kinzer, 2003). The revolution institutionalised anti-American ideology within Iran's political system, embedding resistance to Western influence into state structures and foreign policy discourse (Keddie, 2006). On the American side, Iran has often been framed through a security lens, particularly concerning nuclear proliferation and regional destabilization (Parsi, 2012). Studies on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) suggest that while diplomatic engagement temporarily reduced tensions, the U.S. withdrawal in 2018 reinforced Iranian scepticism about American reliability and intensified structural distrust (Maloney, 2020). Scholars argue that diplomatic efforts fail not merely because of policy disagreements, but because of deeper institutional and ideological incompatibilities that limit mutual confidence (Takeyh, 2011).

Further research emphasises the role of sanctions, military deterrence, and alliance politics in reinforcing long-term hostility. Economic sanctions, while intended to coerce behavioural change, have often strengthened hardline factions within Iran and deepened nationalist resistance rather than encouraging moderation (Nephew, 2017). Similarly, military pressure and targeted strikes contribute to a security dilemma in which each side interprets defensive measures as offensive threats, escalating tensions (Waltz, 1979). Regional alliances further complicate diplomacy; U.S. partnerships with Israel and Gulf states and Iran's relationships with proxy actors create overlapping security networks that reduce flexibility during negotiations (Gause, 2014). Scholars of international relations suggest that such structural conditions, historical grievances, ideological narratives, alliance commitments, and domestic political constraints, make diplomatic breakthroughs inherently fragile (Jervis, 1976). Together, the literature indicates that moments of cooperation between the United States and Iran often collapse not because diplomacy is impossible, but because structural factors embedded in both political systems continually undermine sustained trust and compromise.

## Methodology:

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine how structural factors influence the

persistence of hostility and the collapse of diplomatic breakthroughs between the United States and Iran. The research is grounded in a structural and historical institutional framework, which allows the analysis to focus on long-term political, ideological, and security dynamics rather than short-term events. The study relies primarily on secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, policy reports, and reputable international news sources to ensure both theoretical depth and contemporary relevance. By combining historical analysis with recent developments, particularly the 2026 killing of Iran's Supreme Leader, the research situates current tensions within broader structural patterns. This approach enables a systematic understanding of how sanctions regimes, military pressure, alliance networks, and ideological narratives shape diplomatic outcomes over time.

The study applies thematic content analysis to identify recurring patterns across the literature and recent political developments. Key themes include historical mistrust, security dilemmas, alliance politics, domestic political constraints, and economic coercion. These themes were coded and examined to assess how they interact and reinforce structural hostility. Rather than testing a single hypothesis, the research seeks to build an explanatory framework that connects institutional structures with policy behaviour. This method is appropriate for complex international conflicts where causation is layered and multifaceted. While qualitative analysis allows for deeper contextual understanding, the study acknowledges limitations, including reliance on publicly available data and the challenges of interpreting rapidly evolving geopolitical events. Nonetheless, the methodology provides a coherent and rigorous basis for analysing why diplomatic efforts between the United States and Iran remain fragile despite periodic cooperation.

Existing scholarship on United States – Iran relations has extensively examined historical grievances, ideological rivalry, sanctions regimes, and nuclear diplomacy (Maloney, 2020; Parsi, 2012; Takeyh, 2011). Many studies focus either on specific episodes such as the 1953 coup, the 1979 Islamic Revolution, or the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), or on broader theoretical frameworks like the security dilemma and coercive diplomacy (Jervis, 1976; Waltz, 1979). However, limited research integrates these structural explanations with recent high-intensity events, particularly leadership decapitation and its regional consequences, to assess how entrenched institutional and alliance structures shape diplomatic breakdowns. There is also insufficient attention to how economic sanctions, military

pressure, domestic political constraints, and shifting global power networks interact simultaneously rather than independently. Most existing studies treat these factors in isolation, which overlooks the cumulative and reinforcing effects that sustain long-term hostility. Therefore, a clear gap exists in the literature for a structurally integrated analysis that connects historical mistrust, institutional design, alliance politics, and recent escalatory events to explain why diplomatic openings between the United States and Iran repeatedly collapse. Addressing this gap contributes to a deeper understanding of how structural forces, rather than short-term policy miscalculations alone, shape the durability of rivalry and the fragility of diplomatic engagement.

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the research relies primarily on qualitative analysis and secondary sources, including academic literature, policy reports, and publicly available documents. While these sources provide valuable theoretical and contextual insights, they may reflect interpretive biases or political positioning. The study does not include primary interviews with policymakers or direct archival materials, which could offer deeper insight into internal decision-making processes. In addition, because the geopolitical situation between the United States and Iran continues to evolve, interpretations of recent events, such as the killing of Iran's Supreme Leader and subsequent regional reactions, are based on currently available information, which may change as new evidence emerges.

Second, the research adopts a structural analytical framework, focusing on long-term institutional, ideological, and systemic factors. While this approach helps explain persistent patterns of hostility, it may underemphasize the role of individual leadership decisions, miscalculations, or short-term strategic considerations. Diplomatic outcomes are often shaped by personal relationships, domestic political cycles, and unexpected crises that are difficult to capture fully within a structural model. Moreover, the study does not employ quantitative data analysis to measure causal impact, which limits the ability to generalise findings beyond the U.S. – Iran case. Despite these limitations, the research provides a coherent framework for understanding how structural forces shape recurring diplomatic breakdowns in this enduring rivalry.

### **Deeper Historical Patterns of Distrust:**

The recent killing of Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, by a joint United States and Israeli military operation in early 2026 marks a dramatic escalation in an already fraught relationship

that has deep historical roots and patterns of mutual distrust. Khamenei's death, confirmed by multiple news agencies as the outcome of targeted strikes that also killed other senior Iranian officials, did not occur in a vacuum, but rather emerged from decades of mistrust fuelled by past experiences of imperial intervention, national humiliation, and geopolitical competition. The history of U.S. – Iran relations is inseparable from the legacy of imperial interference during the 20th century, most notably the 1953 CIA-backed coup that overthrew Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, reinstated the Shah, and deepened Iranian suspicion of American motives. This episode left an enduring impression on Iranian political culture, contributing to the widespread belief that the United States is willing to undermine Iranian sovereignty to advance its own strategic interests. When the 1979 Islamic Revolution ousted the Shah, seen by many Iranians as a U.S. ally, the new leadership immediately framed the United States as the “Great Satan,” a political identity that would shape decades of antagonism. This deeply ingrained perception is visible in Iran's repeated refusal to trust U.S. overtures, even when diplomacy was attempted, such as during the 2015 nuclear deal and subsequent U.S. withdrawal from that agreement.

Khamenei, who led Iran from 1989 until his death, embodied this historical tension. He consistently articulated a narrative of resistance against perceived Western domination and portrayed U.S. policy as inherently imperialistic and hostile. His rhetoric and actions helped sustain a national identity that equated American engagement with coercion, whether through economic sanctions, covert operations, or military pressure. The fact that his assassination was carried out in the context of a military campaign rather than a diplomatic resolution only reinforces for many Iranians the historical pattern of American interference. From Tehran's perspective, military action mirrors earlier episodes of foreign intervention, making it difficult to disentangle legitimate security concerns from longstanding grievances rooted in national memory.

Further, the aftermath of Khamenei's killing illustrates how these historical patterns of distrust continue to shape reactions on both sides. Iranian officials have depicted the strike as an attack on sovereignty and an act of war, while U.S. leaders framed it as a justified effort to counter the Iranian regime's regional influence and nuclear ambitions. This mutual framing reflects deeply entrenched worldviews: the United States sees Iranian actions through the lens of security threats and non-proliferation, while Iran interprets U.S. actions as part

of a broader pattern of coercive dominance. The intensity of the distrust is not simply reactive; it is informed by collective memory of past interventions, perceived betrayals, and competing visions of regional order.

In this light, Khamenei's killing is more than a tactical military event. It is a symbolic moment that resonates with a long history of contentious U.S. – Iran interactions. It highlights how historical experiences of imperial intervention and foreign meddling are not distant memories but active components of contemporary political identity and policy behaviour. The event underscores that without addressing these deep-seated patterns of mistrust and their historical sources, efforts at diplomatic reconciliation will continue to be hampered by suspicion, fear, and competing narratives of sovereignty and power.

### **Islamic Revolution and Confrontation with the United States:**

The Islamic Revolution of 1979 was not merely a change of government in Iran; it represented a profound structural transformation of the country's political identity that continues to shape its foreign relations, particularly with the United States. Before 1979, Iran was ruled by the Pahlavi monarchy, led by Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, whose regime was closely aligned with Western powers, especially the United States. Washington's support for the Shah, especially after the 1953 CIA-backed coup that removed Iran's democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, left a deep and lasting sense of grievance among many Iranians. When the revolution succeeded in overthrowing the Shah, the new leadership led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini sought to break decisively with the Western-oriented past and establish an Islamic Republic rooted in Shia Islamic principles, a system known as *velayat-e faqih* or guardianship of the Islamic jurist. This ideological foundation rejected secular nationalism and embraced religious governance as the core of political identity. As a result, Iranian political identity became framed in opposition to what revolutionaries characterised as Western imperialism, particularly that of the United States.

This structural realignment had several key implications that made violent confrontation with the United States more probable over the ensuing decades. First, the revolution anchored Iranian political legitimacy in an ideological narrative that equated the United States with hostility, domination, and interference. Revolutionary rhetoric labelled the United States as the “Great Satan,” embedding anti-American sentiment into the core symbols and

institutions of the Islamic Republic. This rhetoric was not rhetorical window dressing; it was institutionalised in state discourse, education, and foreign policy. The 1979 hostage crisis, where 52 American diplomats were held hostage for 444 days, was an early expression of this structural hostility, reinforcing the notion that the United States could be confronted directly and publicly by a revolutionary Iran.

Second, the revolution reshaped Iran's security and military institutions in ways that institutionalised confrontation. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) was created to protect the new regime and to export revolutionary ideals through proxy groups across the region. Over time, the IRGC and its Quds Force expanded their role in foreign operations, often targeting U.S. interests and allies indirectly through support for militias such as Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Houthis. These structures created a parallel power centre in Iran that was deeply invested in confrontation rather than compromise, even when diplomatic openings were available, such as the 2015 nuclear deal that was later abandoned by the United States.

Third, the revolution had the effect of isolating Iran diplomatically and culturally from much of the Muslim world and the West, reinforcing an "us versus them" mental framework that permeated political identity. The new regime's emphasis on exportation of its revolutionary ideology and support for Shia movements was interpreted by many Western policymakers as evidence of expansionist and confrontational intent. This perception on both sides created a self-reinforcing cycle of mistrust and hostility in which diplomatic overtures were met with suspicion, and security concerns were amplified into existential threats.

The recent killing of Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, in a joint U.S. – Israeli strike in 2026 can be understood as the tragic outcome of these structural patterns. Khamenei, who became supreme leader in the decade following the revolution, embodied the revolutionary political identity that defined Iranian statecraft for decades. His leadership and rhetoric consistently framed the United States as an adversary, and his policies reinforced opposition to U.S. influence across the Middle East. The strike, therefore, did not occur in a diplomatic vacuum but in the context of this enduring, structurally reinforced antagonism.

### **Escalation of U.S. – Iran Rivalry:**

Shifting global power structures and changing alliance networks have made the U.S.–Iran rivalry more likely to escalate into open confrontation. Over

the past decade, the international order has grown more multipolar: China and Russia have strengthened their regional reach, middle powers and Gulf states have pursued more independent policies, and the United States has at times signalled a willingness to act unilaterally. These shifts reduce the old stabilising effect of a single dominant power and increase strategic uncertainty. Recent expert analyses argue that this redistribution of power has weakened longstanding deterrence mechanisms and encouraged parties to exploit alliance gaps or rivalry opening.

Alliance networks in the Middle East have also realigned. Regional actors now pursue flexible, sometimes competing, partnerships with great powers. Turkey, the Gulf monarchies, and even some Arab states have balanced relations between Washington, Moscow, and Beijing to secure their own interests. This multi-alignment means that actions against Iran risk triggering responses from different axes: Iran can lean on deeper ties with Russia or enlist asymmetric proxies; Gulf states may be forced into choices that pit their security against economic ties; and China's economic links complicate coordinated pressure on Tehran. In short, fragmented alliances create many fault lines that can widen a local incident into a regional crisis.

The 2026 killing of Iran's Supreme Leader, carried out in a U.S. – Israeli operation, illustrates how these structural changes magnify crisis dynamics. A decapitation strike against Iran's highest authority did not only remove a single leader; it struck at the symbolic core of the Islamic Republic and triggered a cascade of reactions from Iran's network of regional partners and proxy groups. Iran's decentralised command and its existing proxy links enabled quick, dispersed retaliation across the Gulf and Levant, producing simultaneous threats to shipping, energy infrastructure, and foreign bases. These asymmetric responses exploit the multilayered alliances and the available operational space created by competing great-power priorities.

Great-power competition further complicates crisis management. Beijing and Moscow have incentives to limit Western influence in the Middle East and thus may offer diplomatic, economic, or military support to Tehran that still shifts the balance and emboldens Iran's responses. At the same time, the United States feels pressure to demonstrate resolve, maintain deterrence credibility with partners such as Israel and Gulf states, and protect sea lanes. When both sides face domestic political pressures and international competitors, the room for careful de-escalation narrows. Analysts note that multipolar rivalry can create "escape routes" that actors use to escalate

because they calculate that adversaries will be constrained by competing priorities elsewhere.

Finally, the speed of modern warfare, drones, cyber operations, and precision strikes, means that escalation can move faster than diplomacy. In a multipolar setting, even limited strikes can produce broad, cascading effects as proxies, partner states, and great powers react in different registers. The 2026 episode shows that, when global power structures are shifting and alliances are fluid, an act that might once have remained a contained confrontation can quickly become a regional conflagration. The policy implication is clear: managing U.S. – Iran rivalry today requires not only bilateral crisis channels but also multi-track diplomacy that engages regional actors and great powers to rebuild shared deterrence mechanisms and reduce the incentives for immediate escalation.

### **Structural Hostility – the United States And Iran:**

Economic sanctions, military pressure, and punitive strategies have long been central to U.S. policy toward Iran, but evidence shows these tools often harden structural hostility rather than resolve core disputes. Sanctions aim to coerce change by depriving the target state of resources, yet when they are sustained and comprehensive they tend to produce three counterproductive effects: they deepen popular and elite solidarity around the regime, incentivise military self-reliance, and push the targeted state to develop asymmetric tactics and regional proxies to offset its vulnerabilities. Empirical studies and policy analyses find that broad sanctions frequently produce “rally-round-the-flag” dynamics in which public opinion shifts toward the government, reducing internal pressure for policy moderation (RezaeeDaryakenari, 2025).

Second, sanctions and persistent economic pressure increase the perceived need for independent deterrent capabilities. Research on U.S. “maximum pressure” shows a correlation between intensified sanctions and Iran’s quantitative and qualitative improvements in missile and asymmetric capacities, as Tehran seeks to deter future coercion (Tabatabai, 2020). In practical terms, this means sanctions can encourage military adaptation rather than disarmament. Third, punitive measures that are not paired with credible diplomatic openings create security dilemmas: the target interprets pressure as an existential threat, which legitimises aggressive external alliances and proxy strategies. Studies of sanctions’ social effects also document how exclusion and economic strain can increase extremist attitudes and reduce willingness to compromise (Kokabisaghi, 2019).

The 2026 killing of Iran’s Supreme Leader dramatically illustrates how these structural dynamics translate into rapid escalation. The strike, a major military punitive act, struck at the symbolic heart of the Islamic Republic and triggered immediate, dispersed retaliation by Iran and its partners across the region. News reporting and analysis show how the assassination intensified regional attacks on shipping and infrastructure and mobilised proxy networks in ways that sanctions alone had previously incentivised but not precipitated so explosively. These responses reflect an organisational logic cultivated under years of sanction-driven adaptation and the IRGC’s emphasis on asymmetric deterrence.

In practice, then, sanctions and military pressure interact to create a cycle of escalation: pressure begets adaptation; adaptation increases the target’s capacity for asymmetric response; and the state’s enhanced capabilities in turn raise the costs and risks of further punitive measures. Policy analyses argue that overreliance on coercion without calibrated diplomacy narrows options for de-escalation and may produce outcomes opposite to those intended.

This is not to say coercive tools are useless: well-targeted, reversible sanctions combined with credible diplomatic incentives can influence behaviour. But the record with Iran suggests unilateral, indefinite punitive strategies, especially when backed by the threat or use of force, tend to entrench hostility. The lesson for policy makers is to combine pressure with clear pathways for negotiation, third-party mediation, and regional security arrangements that reduce the incentives for asymmetric retaliation. Without such calibrated instruments, sanctions and military strikes risk producing cycles of revenge and instability, as the post-2026 escalation has painfully shown.

### **Structural Factors – Collapse of Cooperation:**

Diplomatic breakthroughs between the United States and Iran have periodically raised hopes for easing tensions, yet structural factors in their relationship help explain why these moments of cooperation often collapse before yielding lasting peace. One of the core structural barriers is deep mutual mistrust rooted in history, especially instances of perceived betrayal by both sides. The 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) represented a major breakthrough: Iran agreed to limit its nuclear program in exchange for relief from economic sanctions. However, when the United States unilaterally withdrew from the JCPOA in 2018, Iran’s trust in American commitments deteriorated sharply, reinforcing the sense that negotiated agreements can be reversed at Washington’s discretion. From Tehran’s perspective, this reversal was not simply a policy change, but

evidence of structural insecurity embedded in U.S. foreign policy, making future cooperation precarious.

A second structural challenge lies in conflicting security paradigms. The United States often frames its diplomacy in terms of non-proliferation and regional stability, while Iran prioritises sovereignty and resistance to what it perceives as foreign interference. These paradigms are not easily reconciled during negotiations. For example, recent talks in Geneva, although described as intense and constructive, stalled because core issues like uranium enrichment and sanctions relief remained unresolved, with each side maintaining incompatible positions on fundamental security interests. Such structural differences in how each state perceives security goals create a situation in which diplomatic progress is fragile and susceptible to collapse when either side feels its red lines have been crossed or its core interests ignored.

A third structural factor is external third-party influences, which can simultaneously enable and undermine diplomacy. In past negotiations, regional actors such as Israel and Saudi Arabia have pressured the United States to adopt harder positions, while Russia, China, and European states have sometimes offered alternative incentives or protections to Iran. During the 2026 diplomatic round, for instance, Oman mediated talks, highlighting the importance of neutral intermediaries. Yet even with such mediation, pressures from allied states with divergent interests can complicate the negotiating landscape, making it harder to reach agreements that both parties can sustain. These competing external pressures reflect a broader structural complexity in Middle Eastern geopolitics, where bilateral diplomacy between Iran and the United States is embedded in a web of regional alliances and rivalries.

A fourth structural challenge concerns domestic political constraints on both sides. In the United States, internal political divisions and electoral dynamics often shift the executive branch's willingness to engage diplomatically or adhere to agreements. Political actors may undermine negotiations by adopting maximalist positions or advocating punitive measures that signal inconsistency to foreign counterparts. Similarly in Iran, hardliners within the political and religious establishment can resist compromise with the United States, viewing diplomatic concessions as ideological betrayals. As talks proceed, these domestic constraints can erode support for agreements, turning potential breakthroughs into points of contention rather than foundations for durable peace.

Finally, structural economic pressures, such as sanctions and their ongoing impacts on Iranian

society and economy, reinforce negative expectations on both sides. Even when negotiations show promise, the economic pain caused by sanctions and the reluctance of Western banks and firms to re-engage with Iran due to fear of renewed sanctions create practical obstacles to diplomatic success. These economic structures, shaped by policies like the U.S. "maximum pressure" campaign and fear of snapback mechanisms, influence how both societies perceive the value and durability of negotiated outcomes. When economic benefits fail to materialise quickly or consistently, public support for diplomacy can weaken, reinforcing scepticism about future agreements.

### Findings

The findings of this study show that diplomatic breakdowns between the United States and Iran are not simply the result of isolated policy disagreements, but are deeply rooted in structural factors that reinforce long-term hostility. Historical mistrust, especially linked to the 1953 coup and the 1979 Islamic Revolution, continues to shape national identities and perceptions of threat on both sides. Economic sanctions and military pressure, rather than encouraging compromise, often strengthen hardline positions and increase reliance on deterrence and proxy strategies. Alliance networks in the Middle East further complicate diplomacy, as regional actors and great powers influence negotiations and limit flexibility. Domestic political constraints in both countries also reduce leaders' ability to sustain agreements, making diplomatic breakthroughs fragile and vulnerable to reversal. The 2026 killing of Iran's Supreme Leader intensified these structural dynamics, triggering regional reactions that reflected long-standing security dilemmas and institutionalised mistrust. Overall, the findings indicate that without addressing these embedded structural conditions, historical grievances, institutional rigidity, alliance pressures, and economic coercion, diplomatic efforts are likely to remain unstable and prone to collapse.

### Discussion

The discussion of this study highlights that the enduring rivalry between the United States and Iran is best understood through structural explanations rather than short-term political events alone. The findings suggest that repeated diplomatic failures are linked to institutionalized mistrust, competing security narratives, and deeply embedded ideological frameworks that shape policy behaviour on both sides. From a structural realist perspective, ongoing sanctions, military deterrence strategies, and alliance commitments create a persistent security dilemma in which defensive actions are interpreted as aggressive threats. At the same time, constructivist insights help

explain how historical memory and revolutionary identity continue to frame perceptions of hostility and resistance. The escalation following the 2026 killing of Iran's Supreme Leader demonstrates how these structural forces interact, reinforcing adversarial responses and limiting space for compromise. Diplomatic efforts, therefore, collapse not simply because negotiations are poorly managed, but because broader institutional and systemic pressures undermine trust and credibility. The discussion underscores that sustainable de-escalation requires addressing structural drivers, such as mutual threat perceptions, rigid alliance alignments, and punitive economic policies, rather than focusing only on tactical diplomatic engagements.

### Consequences at the Regional Level and the Global Level:

- Increased political and military instability across the Middle East.
  - Intensified rivalry between Iran and U.S.-aligned states such as Israel and Gulf countries.
  - Expansion of proxy conflicts in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen.
  - Greater risk of direct military confrontation and accidental escalation.
  - Disruption of maritime security in the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz.
  - Volatility in global oil prices due to threats to energy transport routes.
  - Strengthening of hardline factions within regional governments.
  - Prolonged humanitarian crises, displacement, and internal political fragmentation.
  - Reduced trust in regional diplomatic initiatives and mediation efforts.
  - Heightened great-power competition involving the United States, Russia, and China.
  - Weakening of coordinated international sanctions frameworks.
  - Undermining of global nuclear non-proliferation norms and diplomatic agreements.
  - Increased instability in global energy markets and financial systems.
  - Disruptions to international trade and supply chains linked to energy exports.
  - Diversion of global diplomatic focus from issues such as climate change and economic recovery.
  - Erosion of confidence in multilateral institutions and international law.
- Strengthening of multipolar geopolitical blocs and shifting alliance patterns.
  - Increased global security uncertainty due to ongoing military escalation risks.

### Conclusion:

This study concludes that the persistent rivalry between the United States and Iran is deeply rooted in structural factors that go beyond individual leaders or isolated political crises. Historical mistrust, ideological identity, economic sanctions, military deterrence strategies, and complex regional alliances have created a durable framework of hostility that limits the success of diplomatic efforts. Moments of cooperation, such as nuclear negotiations or mediated talks, often collapse because they operate within a broader system shaped by insecurity and competing strategic interests. The escalation following the 2026 killing of Iran's Supreme Leader demonstrates how quickly structural tensions can intensify when pressure, mistrust, and alliance commitments interact. The findings suggest that sustainable de-escalation requires more than short-term negotiations; it requires long-term structural adjustments, including credible security guarantees, balanced regional diplomacy, and consistent commitment to agreements. Without addressing these deeper institutional and systemic conditions, future diplomatic initiatives are likely to remain fragile and vulnerable to renewed confrontation.

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