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Iran's Nuclear Ambitions and the Fragility of Non-Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction

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ABSTRACT

The proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs) poses a significant threat to international peace and security. The paper investigated the security implications of Iran's nuclear project and the fragility of non-proliferation. The study adopted a historical research design, and secondary sources of data were used. The study is premised on realism, which has its assumption that nations act only out of self-interest and their major goal is to advance their position of power in the international community. Iran's effort towards building a nuclear programme was its quest for national security and its power projection in the Middle East. This becomes a threat to Israel and other regional power blocs due to Iran's aggressive nature in the Middle East. The response of global actors and institutions was negotiation, which ended in a stalemate from 2003-2013. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was concluded, effectively bringing the Iran nuclear agreement to a close. While the deal had its achievements and setbacks, the U.S. withdrawal under the Trump administration in 2018 significantly undermined its stability and revived concerns over nuclear proliferation. The fear of Iran's 60% enrichment of uranium led Israel to declare war on Iran to neutralise Iran's nuclear capabilities. The conflict has led to the death of over 628 Iranians, including nuclear scientists, generals, and commanders. Iran's retaliatory defences have penetrated Israel's defence system and killed over 28 Israelis. On June 22, the U.S. conducted an assault with seven B-2 bombers, each equipped with two GBU-57A/B MOP bombs, on three Iranian nuclear facilities: Fordow, Natanz, and Isfahan, in an operation designated "Midnight Hammer". This caused a misreaction on the future of Iran's nuclear ambitions. The study recommended that the U.S. should rejoin the JCPOA and demonstrate a genuine commitment, helping rebuild trust with Iran and enhancing regional security.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The world has become a dangerous place to live in today, not because it is dangerous in itself, but the people who live in it have made it dangerous. The ingenuity of man in the quest to dominate and subdue one another has brought about inventions that threaten the corporate existence of man. The example that readily comes to mind is the invention of Weapons of Mass destruction. The proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs) poses a significant threat to global peace and security. Weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), which include chemical, nuclear, radiological and biological weapons, can significantly damage human life and the environment, and disrupt global peace and stability (Saraki & Oladele, 2025). Their proliferation presents significant threats to the international community, as it may intensify regional conflicts, bolster rogue regimes, and undermine global security frameworks (Ahmed et al., 2024). Thus, the containment and ultimate elimination of WMD proliferation have emerged as crucial issues in international relations, necessitating collaborative efforts through sanctions, diplomacy, treaties, and multilateral frameworks (Kristensen & Norris, 2014). The Iran Nuclear Deal is among the nuclear projects that have raised serious concerns among scholars in international relations.

Iran, a key regional actor in the Middle East, began its efforts to build a nuclear programme on 5 March 1957 (Seyed & Mohammed, 2018). It agreed to civil nuclear collaboration with the United States under the Eisenhower administration's "Atoms for Peace" program. During that period, Iran intended to diversify its energy sources, whilst the United States aspired to strengthen Iran as a countermeasure against the Soviet Union. In the following year, Iran became a member of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). In 1963, it ratified the Partial Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, reflecting its political and military stance against weapons of mass devastation (Rowberry, 2013).

In 1967, the United States constructed Iran's first nuclear plant, the Tehran Research Reactor (TRR). Seyed and Mohammed (2018) said that the facility was a 5-megawatt nuclear research reactor powered by highly enriched uranium (HEU). On July 1, 1968, Iran signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), and by 1970, it was ratified by the Iranian Parliament. The Atomic Energy Organisation of Iran was founded in 1973 to educate professionals for its nuclear program and to promote collaboration with other nations (Rowberry, 2013). From 1974, the West made efforts to support Iran's nuclear development. Contracts were signed with the German company Siemens, France, and the United States. Siemens was tasked with building a 1,200-megawatt light water reactor in Bushehr, southern Iran (Mousavian & Mousavian, 2018; Ogunnoiki & Adeyemi, 2021). The Massachusetts Institute of Technology also agreed to train Iranian nuclear engineers, while France entered a joint venture with Iran for nuclear fuel production (Seyed & Mohammed, 2018).

The support of the Western countries for Iran's nuclear ambitions, led by the U.S., France, and Germany, was formalised under U.S. President Gerald Ford. He issued "Security Memorandum 324" recognising Iran's right to enrich and reprocess uranium. The U.S. State Department (1976) noted that the rationale for the memorandum was to ensure Iran would notify the U.S. "on its prospective reprocessing plans before making any firm decision" (US State Department, 1976). Eventually, Iran moved away from multinational nuclear fuel efforts and pursued a comprehensive national nuclear programme (Shajari, 2014). Following the 1979 Iranian Revolution, further development of the nuclear programme was halted, as it was seen as a symbol of U.S. dominance in Iran's domestic affairs. The U.S. and its Western allies did not accept this policy shift. Consequently, they withdrew from all nuclear agreements with Iran and imposed sanctions, despite receiving substantial payments for undelivered contracts (Pieper, 2019).

During the war between Iraq and Iran, the U.S. and the West supported Iraq with logistical assistance and materials for the use of chemical weapons against Iran, resulting in over 100,000 civilian casualties (Ashton & Gibson, 2013; Murray & Woods, 2013). Harris and Aid (2013) argued that this Western support left Iran vulnerable. This altered Iran's security calculations and prompted it to enhance its military and defensive capabilities. As self-preservation is a fundamental principle of international relations, Iran responded by signing an $800 million contract with Russia's Ministry of Atomic Energy to complete the Bushehr plant under IAEA safeguards (Seyed & Mohammed, 2017). The United States' rejection of Iran's rights to peaceful nuclear technology exacerbated Tehran's quest for nuclear self-sufficiency within the NPT framework. By 2002, revelations that Iran had developed a nuclear enrichment programme shocked the global community, particularly the United States.

The crisis escalated when, in 2003, it was reported by the IAEA that Iran had acquired enrichment capability but remained in compliance with the NPT. A subsequent report revealed traces of highly enriched uranium at the Natanz facility. In response, the Iranian Supreme Leader issued a fatwa declaring nuclear weapons production and use forbidden. Between 2004 and 2005, Iran engaged in serious negotiations with the EU3 (UK, France, and Germany), presenting several proposals. Although the EU3 responded positively, the United States insisted that Iran must cease all enrichment activities. President George W. Bush reiterated that military intervention against Iran was still an option. Following the collapse of negotiations, Iran returned to uranium conversion at its Isfahan plant under the Khatami government.

There is no gainsaying that the treatment of Iran's nuclear project by the US and its allies has affected how the Iranians who believe in the project view Iran's nuclear project. It is imperative to note that Iran has been deprived of its rights bestowed on it as a signatory to the NPT. To this end, this raises critical questions: Why should Iran be singled out for non-enrichment under the same treaty meant to ensure equal rights for all signatories?

2. Statement of the Problem

The resumption of the nuclear programme by Iran raised concerns from world powers, notably those from the West, about Iran's ability to use its nuclear power for civil purposes rather than diverting it to military objectives. This concern stemmed from the

view that the regional context of Middle Eastern countries, such as Iran, and its quest for regional hegemony might portend danger for global stability. It was feared that the possession of nuclear weapons by Iran could fall into the hands of terrorist networks, for which some Middle Eastern countries provide a haven (Kaye & Wehrey, 2023; Khan, 2024).

Given the instability and religious and sectarian divide in the Middle East, Iran could potentially utilise nuclear weapons against its enemies, leading to heightened international and regional security implications. Furthermore, it was feared that Iran's meddling influence in the domestic affairs of its neighbours' using proxies such as Houthis and Hezbollah to advance its goals by intervening directly in conflicts, such as in Syria and Yemen could increase, thereby sowing instability, undermining rival governments, and enabling it to become the dominant power in the region (Juneau, 2021; Mason, 2021).

Moreover, considering that Israel is surrounded by volatile states. Iran's possession of weapons of mass destruction would pose a severe threat to Israel and, by extension, to the West. Consequently, Iran's acquisition of nuclear power might trigger regional competition to acquire similar weapons, since any nation in possession of them is militarily empowered to fend off international pressure. Given the global nature of private procurement networks, the dissemination of sensitive nuclear, biological, and chemical information across borders is increasingly likely. This is due to technology diffusion, global markets, and interconnected networks, all of which have contributed to making the issue of nuclear weapon possession a global concern. Efforts must be intensified to deter states from acquiring these weapons, and regulatory frameworks and intelligence networks must be strengthened to prevent non-state actors from accessing them. It is against this backdrop that this study sought to investigate Iran's nuclear ambitions and the fragility of non-proliferation of WMD.

3. Conceptual Clarification

A. Weapon of Mass Destruction

The history of WMDs indicates that a significant consequence of their use is the mass mortality of civilians, as evidenced by the events in Hiroshima and Nagasaki (Ahmed et al., 2024). The term "weapon of mass destruction" refers to nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons (Sidel & Levy, 2017); however, in the 21st century, WMDs may encompass any new generation of weapons capable of causing mass fatalities, either directly or indirectly (Albedwawi, 2022). Initially, WMDs encompassed all contemporary armaments, particularly aircraft, which served as delivery systems for chemical and biological agents (Corrody & Wirtz, 2005). The criterion for classifying a weapon as a WMD is the total number of fatalities resulting from its use (Corrody, 2005).

WMDs are predominantly defined as nuclear, biological, chemical, and other weapons that produce comparable effects (Davis & Purcell, 2006). Socioeconomic transformations have made it possible to use indirect agents to reduce populations without direct physical coercion significantly. Additionally, the rising interest in acquiring poisonous chemicals, as well as biological and radiological materials for integration with explosives, underscores the need for interdisciplinary collaboration among emergency services, as well as knowledge and practical skills exchange. Conversely, a significant challenge with WMDs is mitigating aggregate hazards. A common concern is a terrorist attack involving a "dirty bomb," which incorporates chemical, biological, or radioactive material along with explosives. Addressing such a threat requires specialised civil protection expertise and the cooperation of multiple agencies at the incident site.

Historically, during their early development, WMDs, primarily nuclear weapons, played a central role in the defence strategies of leading global powers. They were deeply embedded in the military doctrines, operational tactics, and security frameworks of both the United States and NATO, as well as the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact (Jones, 2021; Suchy & Thayer, 2014). These arms underpinned the international balance of power and deterrence strategies, paradoxically contributing to the preservation of global stability. Their presence acted as a powerful deterrent, discouraging military aggression by Warsaw Pact nations against NATO allies. However, an increasing number of agencies and organisations are responsible for ensuring public safety and reducing risks related to chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) agents and materials. All personnel carry out duties in line with applicable laws and participate in rescue efforts focused on prevention, response, health and life protection, and recovery after threats are mitigated.

Before 2014, Poland's efforts to combat terrorism and CBRN threats were based on contradictory legislation. No coherent laws existed to govern strategies against terrorist threats or threats involving CBRN agents. As a result, the lack of regulation was considered highly dangerous. In response to public and governmental concerns, comprehensive legislation was introduced in 2015 to systematise

existing laws and draft new ones capable of addressing emerging risks.

Nuclear weapons, known for their destructive impacts, have not proven to be effective military assets but instead serve as psychological and political deterrents. The fear of the catastrophic consequences of nuclear conflict contributed to global stability during the Cold War. This awareness kept the superpowers from engaging in nuclear warfare. Today, malicious propaganda in mass media has emerged as a novel form of WMD with global implications, showing that conflict does not always require physical violence. Civilians can be weaponised through misinformation used to promote authoritarian ideologies.

Modern WMDs also include digital tools used to incite hate and violence. Mainstream media, through fabricated information, often distracts from genuine threats and issues, leading to the oversight of signals that precede major crises. Mass media have influenced social behaviour in ways that have incited terrorism, hate crimes, and violence. Contemporary WMDs are significantly more dangerous than those recognised in the 1940s or 1950s. Scientific and technological advancements continue to enable the development of diverse WMDs based on novel principles aimed at consolidating political power. The new generation of WMDs represents a fast-spreading propaganda tool designed to incite hostility against a "common enemy." Today, the common adversaries in many societies are minority groups, ethnic, religious, sexual, or others, who become the targets. The rapid dissemination of hate propaganda online has increasingly turned social media platforms into battlefields (Pukallus & Arthur, 2024). In the same light, online reportage plays a major role in the polarisation of society as people tend to naturally be attracted or repulsed by ideas, beliefs, and practices (Coleman, 2021).

4. Theoretical Framework

The study adopted the realist theory as a theoretical framework to guide its analysis. Realists incorporate both theological and biological doctrines concerning the apparent weakness and individualism inherent in human nature. For them, the starting point for any explanation and analysis of a conflict situation in society is the individual level. The realist theory, according to Faleti (2009) and Ogonor (2000), highlighted the nature of man and traces the root causes of conflict to a flaw in human nature, namely, the self-engagement in the pursuit of personal interest defined as power. Nduba (1998, p. 26) described the realist or political realism as "the power political school". He further opined that "the realist accepts the distribution of power as a critical element in the interaction between the units of international society." We align with this third line of thinking, as the acquisition of capabilities (economic, political, military power) is the driving force for attaining the national interests of states.

Guzzini (1993), as cited in Nduba (1998, p. 26), stated that "very often, the power argument in the interaction of the units of the international system is too powerful as to close (ignore) the debate." In a similar vein, Waltz (1990), as cited in Ogonor (2000, p. 53), concluded that "the struggle for power and control over territory leads to anarchy (conflict) in any political system." In his analysis of what he called the 'reality of conflict,' Carr (1939), as cited in Ogonor (2000, p. 54), noted that "the world is torn apart by the particular interests of different groups." In such a conflictual environment, he contends that "order is based on power, not on morality."

Hans (1978, p. 13), the leading exponent and apostle of the realist school in the twentieth century, noting the importance of power, said: "All politics is a power struggle. Whatever the ultimate aims of international politics are, power is always the endpoint." According to Hans (1978, p. 15), "the power struggle is universal in time and space, regardless of social, economic and political conditions; states have always met each other in the contest of power." The assumptions of the realist theory are as follows:

1. States are the primary actors in the national system, although there are other actors.
2. The national interests of states are what dictate a nation's behaviour in world politics, and states can go to war to preserve them.
3. Sovereignty of nation-states is not negotiable.
4. International politics is anarchic, and the country that has power dictates the tone of the game.
5. It believes in high politics as a means of international relations.

The relevance of realism is that it helps us to understand the underlying factors that shape the behaviour of states in the conduct of international relations, namely, self-interest and the acquisition of power. It also assists analysts in identifying the source of global terrorism by focusing attention on the nation-state as the dominant actor in international politics, since the state provides a haven for terrorist groups. It is this analytical usefulness, to locate Iran's quest for power and its security in its foreign policy to safeguard national security, survival, and well-being, that we apply in this study.

5. Results and Discussion

A. Iran's Missile Programmes and Regional Power Projection

Iran's missile programmes pose an escalating threat to U.S. interests in the Middle East and beyond, necessitating a response from the U.S. Although precise figures are difficult to obtain from public sources, the Defence Intelligence Agency (2019) estimated that Iran possesses the most extensive missile arsenal in the Middle East. An estimate suggests that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Aerospace Force, with 15,000 airmen, possesses approximately 50 medium-range ballistic missile launchers and up to 100 short-range ballistic missile launchers (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2021).

An assessment by Iran Watch (2020) suggests that the number of missiles Iran possesses or has deployed may greatly exceed the available launch systems. With a vast inventory of Short-Range, Medium-Range and Close-Range Ballistic Missiles capable of reaching distances up to 2,000 kilometres, Iran poses a significant threat to U.S. allies and forces in the region, as well as certain NATO members in Southeastern Europe (Defence Intelligence Agency, 2019). This missile capability, which includes ballistic and cruise missiles along with potentially armed drones or Unmanned Combat Aerial Vehicles (UCAVs), allows Iran to exert regional influence and compensate for its ongoing limitations in traditional air power (Brookes, 2020)

Certainly, its missile programme has become pivotal in furthering Iran's hegemonic aspirations in the Middle East. The 2018 National Defence Strategy of the United States stated that "In the Middle East, Iran competes with its neighbours, asserting an arc of influence and instability while seeking regional hegemony through state-sponsored terrorism, an expanding network of proxies, and its missile program to fulfil its objectives." Beyond its attacks on Iran, Iraq, and its affiliated groups have launched missile and UCAV (Unmanned Combat Aerial Vehicle) strikes targeting Saudi Arabia, rival forces in Syria, as well as naval assets in the Persian Gulf, Red Sea, and Arabian Sea, with possible strikes also directed at the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Various groups aligned with Tehran, including the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Hezbollah, Iranian-backed militias in Iraq and Syria, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and the Houthi rebels in Yemen, have all utilised Iranian-supplied missiles in their military operations. The cessation of the U.N. arms embargo on Iran last year will facilitate Iran's transfer of missiles to its allies and proxy groups, potentially exacerbating the danger these missiles pose to U.S. objectives in the Middle East.

Regrettably, the Obama regime's 2015 nuclear agreement with Iran did not encompass Tehran's ballistic missile programme, parts of which can deliver a nuclear warhead. U.N. Security Council Resolution 2231, which ratified the nuclear agreement among the seven parties of the JCPOA, diluted the missile provisions of the proceedings of the U.N. Security Council Resolution 1929 that sought to limit Iran's nuclear ballistic missile development. Resolution 2231 softened the wording of Resolution 1929, which forbade "any activity related to ballistic missiles capable of delivering nuclear weapons," to a formulation that merely "called upon" Iran to abstain from activities "related to ballistic missiles designed to be capable of delivering nuclear weapons" (United Nations Security Council, 2015). Tehran has used this unfortunate rhetoric both rhetorically and practically, interpreting the "called upon" phrasing as a recommendation rather than an obligation to halt the advancement of missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads.

In February 2021, President Joe Biden's National Security Adviser, Jake Sullivan, remarked that Iran's missile capabilities had significantly progressed throughout the preceding eight years, encompassing both the Obama and Trump administrations (Brennan, 2021). A bipartisan congressional letter from March 2021, signed by 140 lawmakers and addressed to Secretary of State Antony Blinken, asserted that the "refinement and advancement" of Iran's missile technology over the preceding five years is "destabilising" and "increases the potential threat of a nuclear attack on nations within the region" (Brown & Waltz, 2021). The IRGC recently permitted select media access to a new underground missile base of the IRGC navy, reportedly one of several "strategic underground cities" along the southern coast containing ballistic and cruise missiles manufactured in Iran, notwithstanding international sanctions (Press TV, 2021). This public display served as an unequivocal admonition to prospective adversaries, particularly the U.S. Navy, whose vessels navigate the seas of the Persian Gulf. However, the worry extends beyond merely these regional missile systems.

B. Global Response to Iran's Nuclear Programme: Diplomacy, Sanctions, and the JCPOA

The Iranian nuclear enrichment programme elicited a nervous reaction from the international community, given the nature of the Iranian state. The initial response from the international community was a

negotiation between the EU-3 and Iran, where they agreed to sign the "Additional Protocol, cooperate with the IAEA and stop any further enrichment activities" (Robert & Richard, 2016). The negotiation experienced a stalemate from the year 2003 to 2009. However, the collapse of talks between Iran and the UK, Germany, and France (the EU-3) regarding limitations on Iran's nuclear program prompted these European nations to adopt coercive actions against the Iranian government

As pointed out by Takeyh and Maloney (2011), as cited in Waseem et al. (2017), U.S. President George W. Bush succeeded in mobilising support to refer the nuclear file from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). It was this scenario that led Iran to the United Nations Security Council. Following the UNSC's Resolution 1696 in July 2006, which demanded the suspension of uranium enrichment by Iran for at least one month, Iran complied. From then onwards, several resolutions have been passed on Iran by the United Nations Security Council and the Board of Governors. They have been reproduced verbatim thus:

> *"Recalling the Statement of its President, S/PRST/2006/15, and its resolutions 1696 (2006), 1737 (2006), 1747 (2007), 1803 (2008), 1835 (2008), and 1887 (2009) and reaffirming their provisions, Reaffirming its commitment to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, the need for all States Party to that Treaty to comply fully with all their obligations, and recalling the right of States Party, in conformity with Articles I and II of that Treaty, to develop research, production and use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes without discrimination". (UNSCR, 2010, P.1).*

Subsequent resolutions issued by the IAEA Board of Governors from the report dated February 27, 2006 (GOV/2006/15) through to May 31, 2010 (GOV/2010/28), highlighted that Iran had not implemented a complete or sustained halt of its uranium enrichment and reprocessing activities, nor had it ceased operations related to heavy water, as demanded by UN Security Council Resolutions 1696 (2006), 1737 (2006), 1747 (2007), and 1803 (2008). Additionally, Iran failed to re-engage with the IAEA under the Additional Protocol and did not adequately address outstanding concerns related to the potential military dimensions of its nuclear programme. Other directives from the IAEA Board and requirements set by the UN Security Council also remained unmet.

President Ahmadinejad declared plans for the construction of 10 more uranium enrichment plants (David & William, 2009, as cited in Waseem et al., 2017). In response, the U.S. House of Representatives approved new legislation in December 2009 to extend sanctions to firms involved in supplying gasoline to Iran. That same year, IAEA inspectors formally censured Iran for establishing the Fordow enrichment facility, urging the country to confirm that no additional undeclared nuclear sites existed. Iran was found to be non-compliant with the treaty as a signatory to the NPT, and it had undeclared facilities where uranium enrichment was being carried out for weapons purposes.

Iran was subsequently isolated by the international community through severe sanctions. Waseem and Syed (2017, p.4) stated that by mid-2010, the UNSC placed sanctions under UNSCR 1929. These sanctions were targeted at Iranian nuclear-related investments, including the Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines (IRISL). By 2011, the United States imposed more sanctions on Iran and seized control of some IRISL vessels (Supreme Court of New York County, 2011).

The U.S. and EU non-proliferation sanctions, spanning from 2006 to 2009 and 2011 to 2013, included a five-year arms embargo on specific conventional arms and restrictions on obtaining ballistic missile technologies or related systems for a duration of eight years. An oil embargo and financial sanctions were also applied to pressure Iran into negotiating a deal (European Council, 2017). The U.S. Congress passed the Iran Freedom Support Act (IFSA) in September 2006 (International Crisis Group, 2013). The ICG (2013, pp. 8–9) stated that:

> *"The IFSA sanctions package included targeted secondary sanctions against third states. It forced any third parties to endorse the US blacklisting of Iranian banks and refrain from any WMD technology transfer to Iran, and thus it essentially punished any financial, commercial, or technical assistance to Iranian persons and entities associated with proliferation-sensitive nuclear activities or the development of WMD delivery systems.*

Many Iranian assets were frozen by the international community in foreign banks as a result of numerous U.S. and EU sanctions. Iran's economy faltered, with skyrocketing inflation and unemployment. Oil production fell from 3.4 million barrels to approximately 1.4 million barrels per day. One notable response was an attempt at regime change by the United States when it appeared that the sustained international pressures and negotiations had failed to bring Iran to a complete halt in its nuclear facilities production. Several secret negotiations between the

P5+1 and Iran culminated in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). The JCPOA consists of three phases: "Adoption Day" on 18 October 2015, "Transition Day" after eight years on 18 October 2023, and "Termination Day" ten years later, on 18 October 2025.

In brief, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) outlines specific obligations for Iran and other signatories regarding Tehran's nuclear enrichment activities. Under the agreement, Iran must limit uranium enrichment to 3.67% for 15 years and reduce its centrifuge count from 6,104 to 5,060 IR-1 units for 10 years. Enrichment at the Fordow facility is prohibited for the full 15-year term. Additionally, Iran must decrease its uranium stockpile by 97%, maintaining a maximum of 300 kilograms over the same 15-year period. Throughout this time, all nuclear facilities are to be monitored and verified by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) (Arms Control Association, 2017).

Iran is also obligated to remove or render inoperable the original core of the Arak heavy water reactor, discontinue reprocessing activities and the collection of spent nuclear fuel, and suspend both the use and storage of heavy water at the site. By altering the Arak reactor core, the ability to produce weapons-grade plutonium is significantly diminished, as confirmed by the Joint Commission. Furthermore, Iran agreed to the permanent export of spent nuclear material. While the agreement permits Iran to continue research and development in uranium enrichment, it explicitly forbids enrichment to weapons-grade levels. Instead, the enrichment activities allowed under the JCPOA are limited to producing isotopes for medical, agricultural, and biological applications (Robert & Richard, 2016).

C. Emerging Results and Setbacks in Global Responses to the Iran Nuclear Deal

The outcome of the global response to the Iran nuclear deal was the signing of the JCPOA on 18 October 2015. Though this framework for addressing the issues concerning Iran's nuclear programme was welcomed by many countries, scepticism persisted in some quarters. One requirement for Iran's compliance was the lifting of all the U.S. and EU sanctions, while the five permanent members of the UN Security Council; China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, along with Germany (collectively known as the P5+1), were expected to adhere to the terms of the agreement.

Unfortunately, following the election of Donald Trump in 2016, the United States withdrew from the agreement in 2018, labelling it "the worst agreement ever made in the world." The U.S. withdrawal was attributed to Iran's continued development of its ballistic missile programme and financial support for terrorist organisations in the Middle East (U.S. House of Representatives, 2023). Trump re-imposed the previously lifted sanctions, casting doubt on the U.S. as a credible broker in the deal. His stance was not supported by the UNSC, the EU, and other actors, who feared it could derail the JCPOA's implementation.

Reports from the UN Atomic Watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency and Amnesty International confirmed: *"The nuclear-related commitments undertaken by Iran under [the 2015 deal] are being implemented."* They reiterated that, from a verification standpoint, this constituted a significant achievement (Al Jazeera, 2017). Without the JCPOA, gaining access to reliable information and inspection of Iran's nuclear programme would likely have been far more challenging. The decertification of the deal by Trump and his persuasion of other signatories to follow suit carried several implications. It undermined U.S. credibility as a steward of the global non-proliferation regime.

During the 2020 U.S. election campaign, Joe Biden promised to re-enter the JCPOA but failed to fulfil that pledge during his tenure (U.S. House of Representatives, 2023). His administration engaged in secretive talks and was not transparent with Congress or the American public, despite the disclosure mandates of the Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act.

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in March 2023 discovered traces of uranium enriched to 83.7%, which raised significant alarm, given that weapons-grade uranium typically requires enrichment levels of 90% or higher. At the same time, Iran has been advancing its ballistic missile programme in parallel with its nuclear activities. In May 2023, it unveiled its fourth-generation liquid-fuelled ballistic missile, which can carry a 1,500 kg payload over approximately 1,200 miles. The IRGC continues to support militias and terrorist entities in Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, and Yemen. In 2020, the U.S. State Department assessed that the IRGC provided $700 million annually to Hezbollah. The Trump Administration designated the IRGC as a terrorist organisation in 2019, citing that it was involved in vehicle bombings and missile attacks on U.S. personnel in the region. Since the assumption of President Biden as the 46th POTUS, Iran and its affiliates have conducted around 100 attacks on the U.S. forces stationed in the Middle East (U.S. House of Representatives, 2023).

In August 2023, the White House revealed negotiations with Iran to release $6 billion in frozen

assets in exchange for five detained Americans. On 11 September 2023, the Administration granted a sanctions waiver that facilitated this release (U.S. House of Representatives, 2023). While the White House insisted that the funds would be restricted to humanitarian use, Iran asserted that it would determine the expenditure. James Comer, Chairman of the Oversight Committee, asserted: *"It is essential to repatriate all unlawfully held American citizens overseas"* (U.S. House of Representatives, 2023). He emphasised that such substantial payments should not encourage adversaries to abduct Americans or fund terrorist entities.

D. Continuing Challenges of the Iran Nuclear Deal

After the U.S. withdrawal in 2018, new challenges emerged regarding the smooth implementation of the JCPOA. Key among these were procedural ambiguities and differing interpretations. Each party sought the most favourable terms, resulting in complications and inconsistent compliance. For instance, Iran's compliance with uranium stockpile limits depended on timely external shipments or dilution. Another major obstacle stems from internal opposition in both the U.S. and Iran. In Washington, debates reflected a complex of partisan politics and executive-legislative tensions, whereas in Tehran, resistance reflected deeper ideological divides. Iranian hardliners feared that reintegration into global markets might undermine their domestic dominance. IRGC officials, Majlis hardliners, and conservative clergy opposed the JCPOA, fearing Western infiltration and ideological compromise.

A further concern was that the JCPOA's 10-to-15-year restrictions merely postponed rather than permanently prevented Iran's nuclear ambitions. The allies of the U.S., such as Israel and Saudi Arabia, argued that the deal might prompt other states to pursue nuclear capabilities and this can trigger an arms race in the region (Maher, 2023). After the JCPOA's expiration, Iran's resurgence could leave neighbours like Saudi Arabia and the UAE vulnerable. Again, the persistence of global scientific knowledge transfers also poses a continuing threat to non-proliferation. As innovation and globalisation accelerate, black markets for nuclear materials increasingly link state and non-state actors. These loopholes have been exploited before, such as in the A.Q. Khan–Muammar Gaddafi network (Jonas & Swift, 2008).

Following the re-election of Donald Trump in November 2024 as the 47th POTUS, new negotiations resumed. Rinder (2025) noted that Iran acknowledged receiving a letter from Trump, but Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei dismissed further negotiations, citing mistrust stemming from the 2018 U.S. withdrawal. Trump proposed a solution to prevent Iran from the acquisition of nuclear weapons and to avert military conflict, but Khamenei labelled it *"a deception of public opinion"* (Rinder, 2025).

To this end, Iran's leadership, wary of external manipulation, often cites the fate of Libya's Muammar Gaddafi as justification for maintaining nuclear capabilities (Kawczynski, 2011). Iran views nuclear deterrence as vital to national security and remains sceptical of future U.S. commitments, even as it keeps diplomatic channels open with the UK, France, and Germany (Bhattarai & Yousef, 2025). According to Rinder (2025), an IAEA report indicates that Iran has amassed about 275 kg of uranium enriched to 60% purity, close to weapons-grade. This development alarmed the U.S. and Israel, both of which have pledged to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear arms. Israel, in particular, has threatened and now acted militarily. On June 13 2025, Israel launched airstrikes on Iranian nuclear sites, reportedly eliminating military leaders and nuclear scientists. This was followed by other attacks on Iran's strategic facilities and Iranians. The casualties are detailed in the table below.

Table 1: Key Iranian Military and Nuclear Figures Reportedly Killed in Israeli Airstrikes During June 2025 Escalation

S/N	Date of Assassination	Name of General/Scientist	Portfolio of a Military General
1	13th June 2025	Major General Mohammad Bagheri	Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces from 2016 to 2025.
2	13th June 2025	Hossein Salami	Commander-in-Chief of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps from 2019 until 2025
3	13th June 2025	Major General Gholam Ali Rashid	Commander of Khatam-al Anbiya Central Headquarters.
4	13th June 2025	Brigadier General Amir Ali Hajizadeh	Commander of the IRGC Aerospace Forces, 2009 – 2025
5	13th June 2025	General Davoud (Daoud) Sheikhian	Commander, IRGC Air Defense Command

6	13th June 2025	Gholamreza Mehrabi	Deputy Head, Intelligence of the General Staff
7	13th June 2025	Gen. Mehdi Rabbani	Deputy Head, Operations for the General Staff
8	13th June 2025	Fereydoon Abbasi-Davani	Head of Atomic Energy Organisation of Iran (AEOI), former MP; nuclear scientist
9	13th June 2025	Mohammad Mehdi Tehranchi	Nuclear scientist; former head of Islamic Azad University and key AMAD programme expert
10	13th June 2025	Abdolhamid Minouchehr	Nuclear scientist, expert in enrichment technologies
11	13th June 2025	Ahmadreza Zolfaghari Daryani	Dean, Faculty of Nuclear Sciences at Shahid Beheshti University; academic scientist
12	13th June 2025	Akbar Motalebizadeh	Faculty nuclear engineering lecturer and advisor; involved in weapons-system research
13	13th June 2025	Seyed Amir Hossein Feqhi	Deputy of Atomic Energy Org., full professor; led Nuclear Science & Tech Research Institute
14	15th June 2025	Brigadier General Mohammad Kazemi	Head, IRGC Intelligence Protection Organisation
15	15th June 2025	Brigadier-General Hassan Mohaqeq	Deputy Head of the IRGC Intelligence.
16	17th June 2025	Ali Shadmani	Commander of the Khatam al-Anbiya Central Headquarters
17	21st of June 2025	Saeed Izadi	Commander of the Palestine Corps of the IRGC's Quds Force.
18	21st of June 2025	Behnam Shahriyari	Commander, Quds Force Weapons Transfer Unit

Sources (Al Jazeera, 2025a; BBC News, 2025a; Time, 2025)

Table 1 above shows the stark aggression and resolves by Israel to eliminate all Iranian military generals and nuclear scientists to ensure Iran does not succeed in actualising 100% uranium enrichment, as this, according to Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, poses a serious threat to the existence and survival of Israel in the region (The Guardian, 2025; Al Jazeera, 2025). Israel believed that Western countries were not doing enough to stop Iran from acquiring nuclear capabilities and therefore took the bull by the horns to halt Iran's nuclear ambitions. Since the airstrike on 13 June 2025, Iran has recorded 628 deaths, including women and children, whereas Israel has recorded 28 deaths as at 24th June 2025 (Al Jazeera, 2025b; BBC News, 2025b).

As Israel and Iran continued their hostilities towards each other, it was thought that the West, particularly the U.S., was silent or reluctant to address the situation. This brought about uncertainty in global affairs as many feared that the situation might escalate. However, in a swift but covert operation code-named Operation Midnight Hammer, the U.S. on June 21, 2025, bombed the Fordow and Natanz nuclear enrichment sites in Iran (Lopez, 2025). Recall that the U.S. is the only country that possesses a weapon that is capable of destroying or inflicting significant damage on the Fordow site. The extent of the effect of the 14 GBU-57 bombs, which contained Massive Ordinance Penetrator (MOP), that were dropped on the Iranian facilities has varied reports. Some claim that the nuclear enrichment facilities were completely and totally obliterated, as reported by President Donald Trump (Lopez, 2025). On the other hand, the U.S. defence secretary Pete Hegseth and General Caine claimed that the attack was 'incredible and successful'. It was aimed at derailing Iran's nuclear capabilities. Furthermore, in Israel, it was reported that the Fordow nuclear site was substantially damaged but not completely destroyed (Rodgers, 2025). This singular act by the U.S. brought a ceasefire and a de-escalation of the already charged atmosphere.

Beyond Iran's security considerations are the wider consequences of its nuclear aspirations. Should Iran continue on its present course may lead to a domino effect in the region. That is to say, other countries in the Middle East, such as the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia and could seek to acquire nuclear capabilities, further aggravating tensions and potentially leading to intense power struggles and instability in the region.

6. Conclusion

The denuclearisation of Iran was a logical outcome initiated by the West on 5 March 1957. Since then, Iran has undergone several transformations, owing to the 1977 revolution and shifting international and regional dynamics. It has experienced a civil war with

Iraq, during which the West colluded with Iraq to decimate the Iranians. These changing international environmental threats have, over the years, shaped Iran's perspective on its security. Iran's effort to procure nuclear weapons has met serious resistance from the West due to prevailing perceptions of the Iranian state. The West and Iran have been locked in deep negotiations, often resulting in stalemates and leading to severe unilateral and multilateral sanctions from the US, EU, and the UNSC (Kerr, 2018). Iran's posture has been informed by perceived threats from its neighbours, notably Israel.

The hegemonic tendencies of the West, often manifested through multilateral institutions and double standards, have provided further impetus for Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons. Despite the breakthrough achieved through the JCPOA, the possibility of Iran achieving highly enriched uranium remains uncertain, although Israel has alleged that intelligence reports show Iran has attained 60% uranium enrichment. However, there are misconceptions, misinterpretations and misinformation about the state of the U.S attack on the Iranian nuclear sites. The level of damage remains uncertain as no one has had access to the nuclear sites to assess the level of destruction by the B-2 U.S. bombers. With the cease-fire deal announced by U.S. President Donald Trump, all stakeholders in the agreement must demonstrate a strong commitment to the framework as a guide for maintaining regional and global order and stability. Iran must pursue nuclear power within the framework of the Non-Proliferation Treaty under continuous monitoring by the IAEA and the UNSC.

Preventing Iran's efforts to obtain nuclear weapons continues to be a key national security priority for the United States, Israel, and several other countries. Iran's advancing missile programmes represent an escalating threat to U.S. strategic interests, its allies, and regional partners across the Middle East. Failing to address the growth of Iran's missile arsenal could heighten the risk of future conflict and instability, as seen in June 2023 in the escalating tensions between Iran and Israel.

7. Recommendations

1. The US should return to the JCPOA agreement and show a genuine commitment to it. This will restore the trust of Iranians and ensure the security of the state of Israel
2. The international community, particularly the P5+1 (China, France, Germany, Russia, the UK, and the US), should establish stronger mechanisms to ensure Iran's compliance with the JCPOA or any future agreement. This includes empowering the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) with broader access to Iranian nuclear sites, conducting more frequent inspections, and implementing automatic corrective measures if violations occur.
3. Given Iran's scepticism towards negotiations, world powers should explore alternative diplomatic frameworks that incorporate economic incentives, regional security guarantees, and phased agreements. This could include confidence-building measures such as economic relief tied to Iran's adherence to incremental nuclear restrictions, reducing the likelihood of abrupt deal withdrawals.
4. To mitigate fears of nuclear proliferation among Middle Eastern nations like Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the US and its allies should pursue a comprehensive regional security framework. This could involve security assurances, arms control agreements, and non-proliferation pacts to prevent a regional arms race.
5. Given the airstrike on Iran by Israel, diplomatic channels must be reinforced to de-escalate the ongoing conflicts between Israel and Iran. Establishing a dedicated crisis communication mechanism between Iran and Israel, as well as regional actors and the Western powers, would be critical in preventing miscalculations that could plunge the entire Middle East into unnecessary war.

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