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# Seizing Nuclear Tehran: Obstacles to Understanding Iranian Nuclear Activities

Clément Therme, Kjølvs Egeland, and Hebatalla Taha

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*In this article, we interrogate some of the central assumptions in the literature on Iran's nuclear behavior, including the role of the United States as a benevolent hegemon, the revisionist character of the Iranian government, the utility and efficacy of sanctions, and the widespread assumption that Iran is bent on obtaining and even using the bomb. We maintain that contemporary debates on the Iranian nuclear issue display similarities to Kremlinology during the Cold War, being deeply politicized and subject to bias and self-censorship. We conclude by high-lighting ways for scholars to recast the discussion.*

Iran's nuclear behavior is one of the most intensively examined topics in the field of security studies. Ever since 2002, with the discovery of undeclared nuclear facilities under construction in Arak and Natanz, Iran's nuclear activities have been the subject of an enormous volume of research and analysis. Media interest has also been immense. Between 2017 and 2019, the *New York Times* alone published 101 articles on Iran and nuclear weapons. After all this attention, what has the public learned about nuclear Iran? Apparently not much. A 2021 poll by the University of Maryland finds that 60 percent of respondents in the United States falsely believe that Iran possesses nuclear weapons.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, according to a large 2019 survey conducted in nine European countries, 46 percent of the adult population in Europe is convinced that Iran maintains a nuclear arsenal.<sup>2</sup> No other nonnuclear state was falsely believed to possess

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1. Shibley Telhami, "Most Americans, Including Half of Young Democrats, Disapprove of Biden's Handling of Recent Gaza Crisis," Brookings Institution, *Order from Chaos*, July 29, 2021, <https://brook.gs/3BQ01gZ>.

2. The survey was conducted in 2019 by the Ifop Group for the European Research Council–funded project NUCLEAR (grant agreement no. 759707) and involved 6,928 respondents in representative

nuclear weapons at even remotely similar rates; Australia was the second-most likely to be misidentified as a nuclear-armed state with 8 percent false positives. By comparison, only 34 percent of the European public could correctly identify Pakistan as a nuclear-armed state, and just 36 percent knew the same to be true of India. Even more strikingly, the percentage of Europeans who falsely believe Iran has nuclear weapons is higher than that who are able to correctly identify the United Kingdom as possessing such weapons (41 percent, which drops to 36 percent when British respondents are excluded from the sample).

In this article, we review and critique the expert discourse on Iran in order to account for this knowledge gap. We do not enforce a sharp distinction between “scholarly” and “policy” discourse. After all, the boundaries between policy and academia can often be blurry, not least in the realm of strategic studies. In the first part of the article, we identify obstacles to greater understanding of Iranian nuclear behavior and outline sources and avenues for future scholarship. In the second part, we discuss the central assumptions underpinning much of the literature on Iran and nuclear proliferation. In the third part, we investigate the effect of “imagined futures”<sup>3</sup> and the debate over the extent to which the current Iranian government can be trusted. Then, in the final part before the conclusion, we narrow down on one of the central foci of the literature on Iran and nuclear proliferation: the utility of economic sanctions. We find that the efficacy of the sanctions against Iran’s nuclear program has been exaggerated. Our overall argument is that the difficulty of conducting research on nuclear politics and technology inside Iran has left the field wide open to politically motivated speculation and deductive theorization that has produced more heat than light. While there is much high-quality research on Iran, the wider discourse has clearly failed to educate the public. Lastly, we conclude that the acute politicization of the field fosters self-censorship and bias.

### *“TEHRANOLOGY” AND OBSTACLES TO UNDERSTANDING IRANIAN NUCLEAR POLITICS AND HISTORY*

During the Cold War, the geopolitical rivalry between the Soviet Union and the West led to the emergence in the latter of a field of expertise known as Kremlinology. Eager to supply decision-makers with policy-relevant knowledge, Kremlinologists made the most of what was often very limited empirical data to understand and explain Soviet culture and politics, particularly in the realm of international security and strategy. Developments in the Soviet Union in the late 1980s left many of these ex-

samples from Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Sweden, Turkey, and the United Kingdom. For detailed analysis, see Fabrício M. Fialho, “Measuring Public Knowledge on Nuclear Weapons in the Post–Cold War: Dimensionality and Measurement Invariance across Eight European Countries,” *Measurement Instruments of the Social Sciences* 3, no. 10 (2021): 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s42409-021-00028-5>.

3. Benoît Pelopidas, “The Birth of Nuclear Eternity,” in *Futures*, ed. Sandra Kemp and Jenny Andersson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 484–500; Benoît Pelopidas, *Repenser les choix nucléaires: La séduction de l'impossible* [Rethinking nuclear choices: The seduction of the impossible] (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2022).

perts perplexed. As former Kremlinologist Arnold Beichman, a research fellow at the Hoover Institution, would later acknowledge: “We were all wrong. And we know it.”<sup>4</sup> The paradox, of course, was that by the time the Soviet archives were opened, many Kremlinologists had retired or moved on to other issues.

Today, a field of expertise similar to Kremlinology has emerged in Western universities and think tanks to make sense of Iran. This field, which may usefully be labeled *Tehranology*, is afflicted by many of the same problems as its predecessor. As we see it, there are at least three crucial impediments to a deeper and more accurate understanding of Iranian nuclear politics. First, many analysts lack basic linguistic skills and fieldwork experience. This applies not only to those analysts whose primary expertise lies in nuclear security or technology but also those whose primary expertise is supposed to be Iran itself. In fact, according to political anthropologist Negar Razavi, around half of the “Iran experts” based at think tanks in Washington, DC, between 2014 and 2016 could not read, write, or speak Persian. A similar number had never stepped foot inside Iran.<sup>5</sup> Many Iran analysts rely on deductive theories that ostensibly do not require much knowledge of the cultures or languages of the country being investigated, yet these theories have often proved to seriously overpredict the attractiveness of nuclear weapons possession and, by extension, the rate of proliferation.<sup>6</sup>

Second, since its 1979 revolution, there has been a deep hostility toward Iran in Washington and American public life more broadly. The same hostility exists, albeit in a weaker form, in much of Europe. As a result, nuanced views on Iran risk being disqualified as support for the Iranian government, incentivizing hawkish takes and self-censorship. As diplomatic historian Ron Robin put it with regard to Kremlinology, the acute politicization of the field had profound implications for its integrity, fostering “moral aphorism and judgmental condemnations of communism.”<sup>7</sup> A similar dynamic is clearly at play in the discourse on Iran’s nuclear activities. It should also be mentioned that much of *Tehranology*, particularly in the United States, is produced by institutions funded by states and corporations with significant interests in policy toward Iran,<sup>8</sup> be it to contain and confront the Islamic Republic in the region,<sup>9</sup> to sell more weapons on the back of belligerency, or to pursue business opportunities with or

4. Quoted in William H. Honan, “Sovietologists, Years after the Collapse, Cope with a New Reality,” *New York Times*, March 13, 1996, <https://nyti.ms/3BKpTNZ>. See also Richard Ned Lebow and Thomas Risse-Kappen (eds.), *International Relations Theory and the End of the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

5. Negar Razavi, “The Systemic Problem of ‘Iran Expertise’ in Washington,” *Jadaliyya*, September 4, 2019, [www.jadaliyya.com/Details/39946](http://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/39946).

6. Benoît Pelopidas, “The Oracles of Proliferation: How Experts Maintain a Biased Historical Reading that Limits Policy Innovation,” *Nonproliferation Review* 18, no. 1 (Mar. 2011): 297–314. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10736700.2011.549185>; Pelopidas, *Repenser les choix nucléaires* [Rethinking nuclear choices].

7. Ron Robin, *The Making of the Cold War Enemy: Culture and Politics in the Military-Intellectual Complex* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 78.

8. Richard Ned Lebow, *A Democratic Foreign Policy: Regaining American Influence Abroad* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 175.

9. Kjølv Egeland and Benoît Pelopidas, “No Such Thing as a Free Donation? Research Funding and Conflicts of Interest in Nuclear Policy Analysis,” *International Relations*, forthcoming (2023).

inside the country.<sup>10</sup> Such conflicts of interest are pervasive and rarely commented on. Criticism is typically reserved for the most overt partisans, such as the Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD), while legacy think tanks escape criticism for accepting donations from vested interests so long as they do not express explicit support for either of the major political parties in Washington.<sup>11</sup> The boundaries between politics and analysis are blurred, with academics taking part in political debates and former policy-makers taking positions at universities and in think tanks. There is an ongoing struggle, taking place everywhere from social media to peer-reviewed journals and policy events, to define and seize the narrative around Tehran's nuclear interests.

The third and most profound obstacle to understanding the nuclear trajectory of Iran before and after the Islamic Revolution of 1979 is the difficulty in accessing Iranian diplomatic archives and Iranian actors willing and able to give interviews. While there are real reasons to be skeptical of Iran's announced activities and official talking points, there are also reasons to be suspicious of intelligence reports and leaked information from inside the Iranian nuclear program. After all, several actors both within and outside of Iran have interests in inflating the nuclear threat as a means of strengthening opposition to the government in Tehran. In fact, the debate on Iranian nuclear weapons is often a cover for larger debates on the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic as a political regime. Of course, Iran remains an authoritarian regime that has prevented free debate and transparency regarding its nuclear activities and foreign policy more broadly. While elsewhere there may be a problem of self-censorship, in Iran there is an acute problem of outright censorship.<sup>12</sup> The Iranian regime also has a public relations strategy of presenting itself as victim of sanctions, which is also taken up in the academic world.<sup>13</sup>

Noting these limitations and shortcomings, what are the sources available to Western researchers eager to study the history of the Iranian nuclear program? Of course, researchers can analyze accounts produced by Iranian nuclear actors themselves.<sup>14</sup> This corpus is worth studying because we have the ability to analyze work produced by political actors and technical experts involved in the Iranian nuclear program during two different periods, 1957–1979 and 1982–2020. A handful of people have experience working for the Iranian nuclear program during two different political regimes: the Pahlavi monarchy and the Islamic Republic.<sup>15</sup> Our knowledge of the history of the program before 1979 is well documented, based on interviews with former

10. Gregory Shank, "Anatomy of a Done Deal: The Fight over the Iran Nuclear Accord," *Social Justice* 42, no. 1 (2015): 10.

11. For example, see Barbara Slavin, "How Think Tanks Influence the Debate on Iran," Bourse and Bazaar Foundation, July 11, 2016, [www.bourseandbazaar.com/articles/2016/7/6/how-think-tanks-influence-the-debate-on-iran](http://www.bourseandbazaar.com/articles/2016/7/6/how-think-tanks-influence-the-debate-on-iran).

12. See "Iran," *Amnesty International Report 2021/22: The State of the World's Human Rights* (London: Amnesty International, 2022), 197–98.

13. Faramarz Davar, "Why Tehran Is Rolling Out the Red Carpet for the UN Sanctions Rapporteur," *IranWire*, April 25, 2022, <https://iranwire.com/en/politics/103355-why-tehran-is-now-rolling-out-the-red-carpet-for-a-un-special-rapporteur>.

14. Kamal Kharrazi, "The View from Tehran," *Middle East Policy* 12, no. 1 (Mar. 2005): 25–30. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1061-1924.2005.00184.x>; Seyed Hossein Mousavian, *The Iranian Nuclear Crisis: A Memoir* (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2012).

15. Sadegh Shajari, *Chain Reaction and Chaos: Toward Modern Persia* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2015).

representatives of the Iranian nuclear program, especially the testimony of its founding father, Akbar E'temad,<sup>16</sup> and documents from US and British archives.<sup>17</sup> For the nuclear program since the revolution, there are also contributions of former members of the US administration under President Barack Obama involved in the negotiations of the 2015 nuclear deal, i.e., the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA),<sup>18</sup> as well as European diplomats involved in nuclear negotiations with the Islamic Republic from 2003 onward.<sup>19</sup> That said, there is an obvious problem of self-censorship, both in the political and academic worlds.

Since the 1970s, the internal Iranian debate regarding the country's nuclear ambitions has been focusing on the economic cost of the development of an independent nuclear program. This economic angle concerns both the financial burden of acquiring nuclear technology and developing a comprehensive nuclear program per se as well as the need to reorient Tehran's foreign policy away from nuclear ambitions to focus more on socioeconomic development.<sup>20</sup> Iranian sources provide a deeper understanding of the country's side of the story in presenting the nuclear issue in terms of national interests both before and after 1979. Therefore, the public debate around the nuclear program has been focused primarily on financing and opportunity costs, including both

16. For examples, see Ali M. Ansari, "The Curious Case of the Nuclear Company of Britain and Iran," *Iran* 55, no. 1 (2017): 73–86. <https://doi.org/10.1080/05786967.2016.1277098>; David Patrikarakos, *Nuclear Iran: The Birth of an Atomic State* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2012); Clément Therme, *Les relations entre Téhéran et Moscou depuis 1979* [Relations between Tehran and Moscow since 1979] (Geneva: Graduate Institute Publications, 2012); Leonard S. Spector with Jacqueline R. Smith, *Nuclear Ambitions: The Spread of Nuclear Weapons, 1989–1990* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 205–19; "First Person: Akbar Etemad," interview with David Patrikarakos," *Financial Times*, July 11, 2009, <https://on.ft.com/3zAAAQv>; "Etemad, Akbar: Oral History Interview," interview by Farrokh Ghaffari and Gholam Reza Afkhami, Foundation for Iranian Studies, November 1982, <https://fis-iran.org/en/content/etemad-akbar>; Abbas Milani, *Eminent Persians: The Men and Women Who Made Modern Iran, 1941–1979*, vol. 1 (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2008), 134–38.

17. Malcolm Byrne and William Burr (eds.), "Iran's Nuclear Program — Then and Now," National Security Archive, *Electronic Briefing Book* no. 521 (July 2015), <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/nukevault/ebb521-Irans-Nuclear-Program-1975-vs-2015>. See also Malcolm Byrne (ed.), "Documenting Iran-U.S. Relations, 1978–2015," National Security Archive, *Electronic Briefing Book* no. 692 (Dec. 2019), <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/iran/2019-12-19/documenting-iran-us-relations-1978-2015>.

18. See John Kerry, *Every Day Is Extra* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2019), 485–523; "Wendy Sherman: The Iran Nuclear Deal's Grandmother Negotiator," Belfer Center, YouTube, April 3, 2017, <https://youtu.be/IM-RJmkFdIo>; Wendy R. Sherman, *Not for the Faint of Heart: Lessons in Courage, Power and Persistence* (New York: Public Affairs, 2018); Wendy R. Sherman, "How We Got the Iran Deal: And Why We'll Miss It," *Foreign Affairs* 97, no. 5 (Sept./Oct. 2018): 186–97; William J. Burns, *The Back Channel: A Memoir of American Diplomacy and the Case for Its Renewal* (New York: Random House, 2019).

19. For the French diplomats involved in the Iranian nuclear negotiations, see François Nicoulaud, "La France et la négociation avec l'Iran" ["France and the Negotiations with Iran"], *Confluences Méditerranée* 96, no. 1 (2016): 47–60. <https://doi.org/10.3917/come.096.0047>; Laurent Fabius, "La genèse de l'accord du 14 juillet 2015 sur le nucléaire iranien" ["A History of the International Agreement on Iran's Nuclear Program"], *Revue internationale et stratégique* 102, no. 2 (2016): 6–37. <https://doi.org/10.3917/ris.102.0006>; Gérard Araud, "Un regard sur les négociations nucléaires avec l'Iran" ["A look at the nuclear negotiations with Iran"], *Les Carnets du CAPS* no. 22 (Spring 2016): 87–95.

20. For a critical view of the Iranian nuclear program in the 1970s, see Bijan Mossavar-Rahmani, "Iran's Nuclear Power Revisited," *Energy Policy* 8, no. 3 (Sept. 1980): 189–202. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0301-4215\(80\)90019-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/0301-4215(80)90019-1).

its economic and environmental footprint. The official narrative is that Iran has spent \$7 billion on its nuclear program, but other sources mention a cost as high as \$100 billion.<sup>21</sup> The cost of the Bushehr power plant alone has been estimated at \$11 billion,<sup>22</sup> and the duration of the construction of the first reactor was the second-longest in the history of the civilian nuclear industry.<sup>23</sup>

The difficulty of accessing Iranian archives and interviewees means that it is challenging to corroborate claims of nuclear “guilt” and “innocence.” With respect to the presumption of guilt, i.e., that Iran is actively attempting to obtain nuclear weapons, there are at least five sites of uncertainty that can be interpreted as demonstrating the intent to proliferate. First, inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) may not have access to, or knowledge of, all nuclear facilities. Second, inspections are based on samples of nuclear material, the choice of which can be disputed. Third, technical deficiencies can be such that there are cracks in the monitoring of nuclear sites. Fourth, any discrepancies between the state’s inventory and its output, known as materials unaccounted for (MUF), can either result from the normal working of centrifuges but also be treated as liable to have been smuggled out for military purposes.<sup>24</sup> Fifth, Iran is suspected of biding its time, waiting for the opportune moment to “break out.” With respect to the assumption of innocence, many will be reluctant to trust US intelligence given the projection of false evidence about Iraq’s possession of weapons of mass destruction in the run-up to the US invasion in 2003. Since both a suspicion of proliferation intent and an assumption of innocence have considerable policy implications, it is crucial to start the analysis of the Iranian case without assumptions regarding Tehran’s intentions.

## *NUCLEAR DESIRE AND BENEVOLENT HEGEMONY*

The authoritarian character of the Iranian government and sensitivity of the nuclear issue have made it virtually impossible to conduct research on nuclear politics inside Iran. While Iranian authorities’ hostility to research on the country’s nuclear program and history could indicate that they have something to hide, Iranian antipathy to freedom of research is not limited to the nuclear sphere alone. Furthermore, many states in the Middle East not assumed to be building a bomb also close off or severely limit access to their archives, as secrecy is widespread and institutionalized throughout the region. Moreover, the Iranian government’s suspicion of foreign researchers has unquestionably

21. Umud Shokri, “Iran’s Nuclear Program Might Not Be Worth the Cost,” Gulf International Forum, April 25, 2021, <https://gulffif.org/irans-nuclear-program-might-not-be-worth-the-cost>; Ali Avez and Karim Sadjadpour, *Iran’s Nuclear Odyssey: Costs and Risks* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2013).

22. Kourosh Ziabari, “Coronavirus Crisis: Lessons for the Iranian Government,” *Responsible Statecraft*, April 10, 2020, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2020/04/10/coronavirus-crisis-lessons-for-the-iranian-government>.

23. On the question of the safety of the first hybrid Russian-German power plant, constructed in the Persian Gulf city of Bushehr, and on the public debate inside Iran on the opportunity to pursue nuclear cooperation with Russia, see Clément Therme, “The Iran-Russia *Entente*: Marriage of Convenience or Strategic Partnership?” in *Iran after the Deal: The Road Ahead*, ed. Paolo Magri and Annalisa Perteghella (Milan: Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale, 2015), 95–115.

24. Henry D. Sokolski (ed.), *Nuclear Weapons Materials Gone Missing: What Does History Teach?* (Carlisle, PA: United States Army War College Press, 2014).

been aggravated by the high-intensity foreign intelligence operations and sabotage missions carried out against the Islamic Republic and its nuclear program.<sup>25</sup> The tremendous delicacy of the nuclear issue in Iran means that would-be scholars of Iranian nuclear affairs are, broadly speaking, prevented from undertaking field research or elite interviews and, by implication, obliged to either focus on other issues, engage in speculation, or rely on deductive theories or secondary sources.

The expert literature on Iranian nuclear politics is far from monolithic. However, certain tendencies are widely shared across the field. A first and crucial premise shared by most contributors to the literature is that Iran wants the bomb or is liable to develop such ambitions in the near future.<sup>26</sup> While most Iranian officials and religious authorities have insisted that Iran is not seeking a bomb, some have occasionally threatened that they might be interested in obtaining nuclear weapons in the absence of concessions from the United States or Israel.<sup>27</sup> The assumption of an Iranian nuclear “desire” is widespread in nuclear security studies, including the subfield of critical security studies,<sup>28</sup> and is reproduced in mainstream media coverage.<sup>29</sup> Iranian nuclear desire has been taken as a point of departure: indeed, an Iranian will to acquire nuclear arms is straightforwardly asserted as fact, albeit without corroborating empirical evidence; simply, “Iran wants the bomb.”<sup>30</sup> Other times, analysts bracket the question of Iranian policy-makers’ actual drives and intentions and conduct their analysis based on theoretical assumptions. For example, according to Alexandre Debs and Nuno Monteiro, who advance a “strategic security-based approach,” Iran is “likely to possess the willingness to nuclearize” due to its relative weakness in conventional defense.<sup>31</sup> This could be true of Iran’s behavior in the 1980s, when the Islamic Republic restarted the pre-revolutionary nuclear program while fighting a conventional war with Iraq. Yet it is not clear that Iran is currently particularly fragile or conventionally weak compared to many non-nuclear-weapon states in the Middle East or elsewhere. There is a curious tension in the discourse on Iran and nuclear proliferation between the image of Iran

25. David E. Sanger, “Obama Order Sped Up Wave of Cyberattacks Against Iran,” *New York Times*, October 19, 2012, <https://nyti.ms/3Qb1Bkv>.

26. According to one account, Iran is practicing a strategy of “nuclear hedging,” involving the material condition of status as a “threshold state” combined with “proliferation intent.” See Wyn Q. Bowen, Matthew Moran, and Dina Esfandiary, *Living on the Edge: Iran and the Practice of Nuclear Hedging* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 7.

27. For example, see Rick Gladstone, Farnaz Fassihi, and Ronen Bergman, “Iran Suggests It May Seek Nuclear Weapons, in New Escalation of Threats,” *New York Times*, February 16, 2021, <https://nyti.ms/3BQWtNY>.

28. For example, see Shampa Biswas, “Iran v ‘the International Community’: A Postcolonial Analysis of the Negotiations on the Iranian Nuclear Program,” *Asian Journal of Political Science* 26, no. 3 (2018): 333, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02185377.2018.1481441>.

29. Johannes Scherling, “‘Trust, but Verify’: The Framing of the Nuclear Conflict between Iran and the West in UK and US Media,” *Colloquium* 1, no. 1 (2016): 18–46. <https://doi.org/10.23963/cnp.2016.1.1.2>.

30. Clifton W. Sherrill, “Why Iran Wants the Bomb and What It Means for US Policy,” *Non-proliferation Review* 19, no. 1 (2012): 31–49. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10736700.2012.655084>. See also Surulola James Eke, “Rethinking US Policy towards Iran’s Nuclear Programme,” *Central European Journal of International and Security Studies* 8, no. 4 (2014): 178–95.

31. Alexandre Debs and Nuno P. Monteiro, *Nuclear Politics: The Strategic Causes of Proliferation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 173.



as weak and vulnerable and an equally popular image of the Islamic Republic as a formidable power with sprawling networks and influence throughout the Middle East and Persian Gulf area. This contradiction was particularly prevalent in the strategic narratives projected by the administrations of Presidents George W. Bush (2001–9) and Donald Trump (2017–21), both framing Iran as simultaneously teetering on the brink of state failure and as a mighty regional hegemon and foe. In line with the latter image, Iran and the US are frequently framed as “strategic competitors,” notwithstanding the fact that the US spends about 75 times more on its military than does Iran.<sup>32</sup>

Taking one step back, one could also argue that the underlying assumption that Iran is a unitary actor with coherent, singular nuclear beliefs and desires conceals more than it illuminates. Reducing the state to a representative agent with ideas and motivations is of course common in International Relations scholarship but should only be done with great care.<sup>33</sup> In the case of Iran, nuclear policy and energy issues are frequently debated and subject to contestation.<sup>34</sup> As elsewhere, the output of Iran’s decision-making process is often compromises and policies designed by committee. The Iranian nuclear state might thus be best understood not as a unitary actor but rather as a field or, perhaps, a “field of fields.”<sup>35</sup> Indeed, speaking of a single Iranian interest risks disguising the multitude of preferences and agendas that exist within Iranian society and the Islamic Republic’s state agencies. Ironically, the Trump administration’s vilification of Iran and its intentions, aided by many think tanks and analysts, has contributed to a self-fulfilling prophecy by strengthening Iranian hard-liners and ideological opposition to the US.<sup>36</sup>

A second premise shared by most contributors to the literature on Iran and nuclear proliferation is that US hegemony is a force for good and necessary to curb the spread of nuclear weapons throughout the world. Indeed, a large chunk of the literature is written from an American or “Western” point of view and is often addressed overtly to policy-makers in Washington. Some experts argue explicitly that US policy-makers bear a “special” responsibility to combat nuclear proliferation.<sup>37</sup> The result is frequently that Iran expertise reinforces, rather than challenges, the ideas that are intrinsic to the mechanisms of US hegemony. Of course, this is not unique to the literature on Iran and nuclear proliferation. As international political theorist Ned Lebow put it, much

32. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, “Military Expenditure by Country, in Constant (2018) US\$ m., 1988–2019,” 2020, [www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/Data all countries from 1988–2019 in constant \(2018\) USD.pdf](http://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/Data%20all%20countries%20from%201988-2019%20in%20constant%20(2018)%20USD.pdf).

33. Christian Olsson, “Warfare and Recognition in IR: On the Potential Inputs of the Historical Sociology of the State,” *Global Discourse* 4, no. 4 (2014): 539, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23269995.2014.917037>.

34. See the reference to declarations of Hojjatoleslam Mohammad-Taqi Rahbar in 2004 on the religious-legal basis to possess nuclear weapons as a deterrent and the declaration by Ayatollah Mohammad-Taqi Mesbah Yazdi in a book published in 2005 that appeared to support the acquisition of nuclear weapons by Iran. Bowen, Moran, and Esfandiary, *Living on the Edge*, 86–87.

35. See Willem Schinkel, “The Sociologist and the State: An Assessment of Pierre Bourdieu’s Sociology,” *British Journal of Sociology* 66, no. 2 (June 2015): 222, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12120>.

36. For example, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps’ “central doctrine is that the hostility between the Islamic Republic and the US is unresolvable and eternal. Even [Supreme Leader Ayatollah ‘Ali] Khomeini is careful not to cross this IRGC red line.” See Shahir Shahidsaleh, “The Supreme Leader Doesn’t Want Détente with the United States,” Atlantic Council, *IranSource*, April 20, 2020, [www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/the-supreme-leader-doesnt-want-detente-with-the-united-states-ever](http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/the-supreme-leader-doesnt-want-detente-with-the-united-states-ever).

37. Robert Einhorn and Richard Nephew, *The Iran Nuclear Deal: Prelude to Proliferation in the Middle East?* (Washington DC: Brookings, 2016), ix.

of security studies is founded on the presumption that US hegemony exists “and is beneficial to almost everyone.”<sup>38</sup> Relatedly, scholarly and policy debates on Iran and nuclear weapons frequently proceed from the assumption that Iranian nuclear policy is determined exclusively or near exclusively by the strength of US threats and sanctions. An important and welcome dissent comes from East Asian politics specialist Il Hyun Cho, who has argued that mainstream discourse exaggerates the importance of the US and plays down the importance of regional dynamics.<sup>39</sup>

In mainstream security studies literature, the US is typically understood as a bulwark against the spread of nuclear weapons, which in turn is conceptualized as an inevitable tide that can be halted and curbed but not reversed.<sup>40</sup> It almost goes without saying that the literature on Iran and nuclear proliferation, despite often being addressed specifically to US policy-makers, often has little to say about the American nuclear arsenal or the ways that the US could be contributing to a climate that encourages proliferation, deliberately or inadvertently. Instead, the worldview in which most of the literature on Iran and nuclear weapons is couched frames the US as a liberal, democratic agent of anti-proliferation, pitted against a theocratic Iran that is moving, inescapably, toward the bomb. The policy objective is thus regularly defined as “curbing” or “halting” Iran’s pursuit of the bomb. In the final analysis of this view, the international community is obliged to face facts at some point and learn “to live with nuclear Iran”<sup>41</sup> and to develop “a policy framework for dealing with Iran both before and after, and indeed during its crossing of the nuclear threshold.”<sup>42</sup>

This imagined future of a nuclear-armed Islamic Republic is pervasive in the literature and was vividly on display in the debate about the “sunset provisions” of the JCPOA, also known as the Iran Deal, agreed between Iran and the P5+1 (i.e., the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council — China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the US — along with Germany) in 2015. While alternative views were also offered, the most prominent criticism of the agreement — and one of the arguments that would eventually be used to justify the US’s abrogation of the JCPOA in 2018 — was that Iran would inevitably bide its time and construct a nuclear arsenal once the constraints agreed to under the agreement expired after 10–15 years in force.<sup>43</sup> As one commentator put it: “Remember, folks: In ten years, Iran can slowly expand its nuclear program, and in fifteen years, it has no restrictions on the amount of uranium it wishes to produce . . . then what?”<sup>44</sup> Of course, the same applies to every other state on the planet — only these other states would not have to wait for 15 years. Yet this per-

38. Lebow, *A Democratic Foreign Policy*, 27.

39. Il Hyun Cho, *Global Rogues and Regional Orders: The Multidimensional Challenge of North Korea and Iran* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 1.

40. Pelopidas, “The Oracles of Proliferation.”

41. Peter Jones, “Learning to Live with a Nuclear Iran,” *Nonproliferation Review* 19, no. 2 (2012): 197–217. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10736700.2012.690960>.

42. James Dobbins, “Coping with a Nuclearising Iran,” *Survival* 53, no. 6 (2011): 37, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2011.636513>.

43. For an exception, see Alexander Glaser et al., “Building on the Iran Deal: Steps toward a Middle Eastern Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone,” *Arms Control Today* 45, no. 10 (Dec. 2015): 14–20.

44. Harry J. Kazianis, “How Iran Could Strike the U.S. Military in a War (and It Won’t Be Pretty),” *National Interest, The Buzz* (blog), May 6, 2019, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/how-iran-could-strike-us-military-war-and-it-wont-be-pretty-56127>.

spective, as well as the view that increased cooperation might fundamentally transform not only the US-Iranian relationship but also Iran itself, failed to gain traction.

Responding to the politically motivated attacks against the Iran Deal, many of the JCPOA's strongest defenders resorted to framing the agreement as an undisputed American/Western negotiation victory that thwarted the Iranian attempt at acquiring nuclear weapons in the nick of time. This framing may succeed in communicating the importance of the JCPOA, but it is also problematic for at least two reasons. First and most obviously, it is empirically dubious. According to a 2015 assessment of Iran's nuclear program by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), "before the end of 2003, an organizational structure was in place in Iran suitable for the coordination of a range of activities relevant to the development of a nuclear explosive device. Although some activities took place after 2003, they were not part of a coordinated effort."<sup>45</sup> Before that, the IAEA insisted in 2009 that it had "no concrete proof that Iran has or has ever had a nuclear weapons programme."<sup>46</sup> Indeed, since 2003, US intelligence agencies have consistently denied that Iran is actively attempting to acquire nuclear arms.<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, the JCPOA is frequently described as an agreement put in place to "curb Iran's nuclear weapons program."<sup>48</sup>

Second, the claim that the JCPOA defused an Iranian bomb at the last minute strengthens the narrative that Iran does in fact want nuclear weapons and thereby constitutes a major threat to its neighbors and the West. "Trump claims to want to stop Iran from getting a nuclear weapon," wrote one American expert, "but withdrew from the very deal that had stopped Iran from obtaining one."<sup>49</sup> According to a French scholar, the Iran Deal "stopped Iran from developing nuclear weapons."<sup>50</sup> Joe Cirincione — then president of the Ploughshares Fund and, according to later national security advisor John Bolton, the "high priest of US arms controllers"<sup>51</sup> — argued in 2016 that, by

45. IAEA, Board of Governors, "Final Assessment on Past and Present Outstanding Issues regarding Iran's Nuclear Program Report by the Director General," December 2, 2015, p. 6. See also IAEA, Board of Governors, "Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement and Relevant Provisions of Security Council Resolutions in the Islamic Republic of Iran Report by the Director General," Board of Governors, November 8, 2011.

46. "No Concrete Proof that Iran Has or Has Had Nuclear Programme: UN Atomic Watchdog," *UN News*, September 17, 2009, <https://shar.es/af26fR>.

47. Ken Dilanian, "U.S. Does Not Believe Iran Is Trying to Build Nuclear Bomb," *Los Angeles Times*, February 23, 2012, <https://lat.ms/3SC9Sj2>; Daniel R. Coats, *Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community* (Washington, DC: US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, 2019).

48. For examples, see Lisa Hager et al., "Selling the Iran Nuclear Agreement: Prospect Theory and the Campaign to Frame the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action," *Congress and the Presidency* 46, no. 3 (2019): 421, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07343469.2019.1600172>; J. Dana Stutser, "Debate over Iran Nuclear Deal Heats Up," *Foreign Policy*, July 15, 2015, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/07/15/debate-over-iran-nuclear-deal-heats-up>.

49. Michael H. Fuchs, "Chances of War with Iran Are Rising. And Donald Trump Is to Blame," *The Guardian*, May 9, 2019, [www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/may/09/donald-trump-iran-nuclear-deal-blame](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/may/09/donald-trump-iran-nuclear-deal-blame).

50. Pierre Guerlain, "US Foreign Policy of Chaos under Trump," *Revue LISA* 16, no. 2 (2018): para. 27, <https://doi.org/10.4000/lisa.10208>.

51. John Bolton, *The Room Where It Happened: A White House Memoir* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2020), 162.

concluding the JCPOA, “we just stopped Iran from getting the bomb.”<sup>52</sup> The White House at the time described the agreement as “the historic deal that will prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon.”<sup>53</sup> While the illocutionary intention behind all of these statements is seemingly to discredit alternative, more hawkish policies, their perlocutionary effect is to strengthen the hawks’ narrative that Iran is a serious adversary bent on acquiring nuclear arms.

## *THE PRESENT EFFECTS OF IRAN’S IMAGINED FUTURE*

Iran possessing nuclear weapons in the future is frequently treated as an inevitability or at least likely enough to warrant deep scholarly engagement with what would come after. This has given rise to a considerable literature hypothesizing about Iran’s future nuclear strategy. For example, some have speculated about whether Iran would conduct a nuclear test or instead copy the Israeli policy of covert weapons development and subsequent strategic “opacity.”<sup>54</sup> Others have suggested that “Tehran’s development of nuclear weapons would encourage Iranian adventurism,”<sup>55</sup> and yet others have said that Iran would most likely adopt “a relatively recessed assured retaliation posture.”<sup>56</sup> Relatedly, a number of learned pundits offer speculations about “what war with Iran could look like,”<sup>57</sup> “how Iran would fight America,”<sup>58</sup> or indeed “all of the ways America would crush Iran in a war.”<sup>59</sup> Thus, much like the prevailing nuclear discourse more generally, the narrative on Iran conjures up a future world “long on dangers and short on peaceful strategies.”<sup>60</sup> And by violating the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action and “confronting Iran,” as then US secretary of state Mike Pompeo put

52. Joe Cirincione, “Trump’s Nuclear Insanity,” *Politico*, March 30, 2016, <https://politico.co/3SBSAT0>.

53. The White House, “The Historic Deal that Will Prevent Iran from Acquiring a Nuclear Weapon,” January 16, 2016, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/issues/foreign-policy/iran-deal>. In his first post-presidential memoir, Barack Obama explained that “An Iranian nuclear arsenal wouldn’t need to threaten the U.S. homeland; just the possibility of a nuclear strike or nuclear terrorism in the Middle East would severely limit a future U.S. president’s options to check Iranian aggression toward its neighbors. The Saudis would likely react by pursuing their own rival ‘Sunni bomb,’ triggering a nuclear arms race in the world’s most volatile region.” He also underlined that “my team and I had spent much of the transition discussing how to prevent Iran from getting a nuclear weapon — ideally through diplomacy rather than by starting another war.” See *A Promised Land* (New York: Penguin, 2020), 490–91.

54. For examples, see Christopher Hobbs and Matthew Moran, *Exploring Regional Responses to a Nuclear Iran: Nuclear Dominoes?* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 12–15; Jacques E. C. Hymans and Matthew S. Gratiyas, “Iran and the Nuclear Threshold: Where Is the Line?” *Non-proliferation Review* 20, no. 1 (2013): 13–38. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10736700.2013.769375>.

55. Colin H. Kahl, “Iran and the Bomb: One Step Too Far,” *Foreign Affairs* 91, no. 5 (Sept./Oct. 2012): 160.

56. Vipin Narang, “Nuclear Strategies of Emerging Nuclear Powers: North Korea and Iran,” *Washington Quarterly* 38, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 74, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2015.1038175>.

57. Todd South et al., “What War with Iran Could Look Like,” *Military Times*, June 4, 2019, [www.militarytimes.com/news/2019/06/04/what-war-with-iran-could-look-like](http://www.militarytimes.com/news/2019/06/04/what-war-with-iran-could-look-like).

58. Kazianis, “How Iran Could Strike the U.S. Military in a War.”

59. Zachary Keck, “All of the Ways America Would Crush Iran in a War,” *National Interest*, April 25, 2019, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/all-ways-america-would-crush-iran-war-54117>.

60. Neil Cooper, “Putting Disarmament Back in the Frame,” *Review of International Studies* 32, no. 2 (Apr. 2006): 353, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210506007066>.

it,<sup>61</sup> that is precisely what US hawks have fostered in the Middle East. Indeed, as one scholar argued, our implicit and explicit visions of the future are constitutive of how we understand and regulate the present.<sup>62</sup> In the case at hand, the extreme focus on worst-case scenarios has helped discredit policy options centered on inducement and transformation rather than blunt coercion.

Of course, the question of what Iran should be called — a “hedging state,” a “threshold state,” an “ambivalent state,” a “latent nuclear power,” etc. — is crucial given the geopolitical context that the Iranian nuclear program exists in. As suggested, expert discourse often has (perlocutionary) effects beyond the authors’ (illocutionary) intentions. For example, there is an obvious risk that nuanced analytical categories are misperceived, instrumentalized, or exaggerated by political actors, justifying dramatic military interventions.<sup>63</sup> Prior to the adoption of the JCPOA, certain commentators contended that the United States’ only options vis-à-vis Iran were to accept it possessing nuclear weapons or to topple the Islamic Republic. For example, in 2012, security scholar Clifton Sherrill argued that the US was faced with only two options: “either accepting a nuclear-armed Iranian Islamist regime or committing US resources to a policy of regime change in Iran.” In this perspective, “it is beyond the reach of the United States to affect the motivations driving the nuclear ambitions of the Iranian Islamist regime.”<sup>64</sup> The conclusion of the Geneva Interim Agreement in 2013 and the JCPOA in 2015 made such arguments more awkward. Thus, in a book published three years after the adoption of the JCPOA, Sherrill maintained that:

Despite [Supreme Leader Ayatollah ‘Ali] Khamenei’s public disavowal of nuclear weapons, it is clear that the Islamic Republic wants some type of nuclear option in its security tool-box. This could be full-scale construction of an arsenal of nuclear weapons, development of a “virtual arsenal” that would consist of the unassembled components of weapons ready to be put together on short notice, or merely possession of the infrastructure necessary to build nuclear weapons . . . The new leader will have drawn lessons from the U.S. intervention in Iraq after Saddam [Husayn]’s nuclear program was dismantled in the 1990s and the fate of Muammar Qaddafi after Libya renounced its nuclear program in 2003. These stand in stark contrast to the lack of military action against North Korea.<sup>65</sup>

The trouble with such analysis, of course, is that it is not altogether clear that Iran wants what Sherrill and those who share his opinion claim. From the perspective of nuclear deterrence theory, it may be logical and reasonable for Iranian

61. Michael R. Pompeo, “Confronting Iran: The Trump Administration’s Strategy,” *Foreign Affairs* 97, no. 6 (2018): 60–71.

62. Pelopidas, “The Birth of Nuclear Eternity”; Benoît Pelopidas, “Nuclear Weapons Scholarship as a Case of Self-Censorship in Security Studies,” *Journal of Global Security Studies* 1, no. 4 (Nov. 2016): 330, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogw017>.

63. For a discussion of how nonproliferation policies have been used to justify violent counterproliferation operations, see John Mueller, *Atomic Obsession: Nuclear Alarmism from Hiroshima to al Qaeda* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 129–42.

64. Sherrill, “Why Iran Wants the Bomb,” 45.

65. Clifton W. Sherrill, *Losing Legitimacy: The End of Khomeini’s Charismatic Shadow and Regional Security* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018), 118.

leaders to want nuclear arms,<sup>66</sup> but we simply do not know which lessons Iranian strategists and politicians have and have not drawn from nuclear history. And indeed, these are not the only lessons one can extract, particularly in the Iranian context. For instance, Iranian leaders may want to reduce the likelihood that any future conflict involving their country goes nuclear. As nuclear politics scholar Paul Avey argued, conflicts between nuclear-armed states and non-nuclear-armed states are unlikely to turn nuclear as long as the nuclear power involved is not in danger of losing large swathes of its own territory or of having its core interests undercut.<sup>67</sup> Iranian policy-makers might also be wary that the acquisition of nuclear weapons might make Iran a target for preemptive strikes or render any form of sanctions relief extremely unlikely.

Any analysis of Iran and nuclear weapons inescapably takes place against the backdrop of an enduring debate in the US and a handful of other countries about the merits of violent regime change in Iran. Regime change constituted a central objective of the Bush and Trump administrations. In the view of hawks pushing a regime-change agenda in print and policy, the precise makeup of the Iranian nuclear program is of negligible interest so long as the heirs of the 1979 revolution remain in charge. Much like the US national security establishment's view of the Soviet Union and its leadership in the early phase of the Cold War,<sup>68</sup> US hawks today envision the Iranian government as an incorrigibly duplicitous and untrustworthy regime — and its alleged nuclear aspirations have been used as a form of fearmongering. Any constraints on Iran's nuclear program voluntarily agreed to by the Iranian government are by default seen as fig leaves for clandestine activities or, at best, stalling tactics or half measures. Along these lines, during his years as Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu maintained that Iran “cannot be trusted,” that the JCPOA “would all but guarantee that Iran gets those weapons, lots of them,” and that, unless Iran was confronted, the future would hold “a Middle East littered with nuclear bombs and a countdown to a potential nuclear nightmare.”<sup>69</sup> This fear of Iranian nuclearization is discursively mobilized in Israeli society in spite of the fact that Israel remains the only country in the Middle East that possesses nuclear arms.<sup>70</sup>

In line with the imagined future of nuclear threats and disorder, there is a large and continuously expanding trope in scholarly literature and media punditry about “dominoes,” “waves,” and “cascades” of nuclear proliferation involving Iran and

66. See Kenneth N. Waltz, “Why Iran Should Get the Bomb: Nuclear Balancing Would Mean Stability,” *Foreign Affairs* 91, no. 4 (July/Aug. 2012): 2–5.

67. Paul C. Avey, *Tempting Fate: Why Nonnuclear States Confront Nuclear Opponents* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019).

68. For example, see X [George F. Kennan], “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” *Foreign Affairs* 25, no. 4 (July 1947): 566–82.

69. Benjamin Netanyahu, remarks to the US Congress, March 3, 2015, available through the United States Institute of Peace, *Iran Primer*, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2015/mar/03/netanyahu-speech-text>.

70. Amir Lupovici, “Securitization Climax: Putting the Iranian Nuclear Project at the Top of the Israeli Public Agenda (2009–2012),” *Foreign Policy Analysis* 12, no. 3 (July 2016): 413–32. <https://doi.org/10.1111/fpa.12081>.

the Middle East.<sup>71</sup> For instance, works prophesying and speculating about Iranian nuclear proliferation as part of a “chain” initiated by the acquisition of nuclear weapons by India and Pakistan predate both the Iranian Revolution and either South Asian countries’ development of such arms.<sup>72</sup> By contrast, important parts of the greater Middle East’s actual nuclear history — technology transfers between Middle Eastern states and states from outside the region, US deployment of nuclear weapons in Morocco and Turkey, French nuclear testing in Algeria, British nuclear weapon deployments in Cyprus, and the possible Soviet introduction of nuclear weapons to Egypt — remain underexplored.<sup>73</sup>

It is important to note that the US demand for regime change in Iran is independent of the controversy about the country’s nuclear program. Across the American political spectrum, Iran’s alleged nuclear desire arguably functions primarily as a rhetorical instrument legitimizing coercive measures such as economic sanctions — which are often mobilized in the US context as a moderate compromise — and, for some, armed attack against Iran. It bears mentioning, however, that armed counter-proliferation operations and the use of the military option to provoke regime change or solve the nuclear issue can have the opposite of their intended effects. For example, we now know that the Israeli bombing of Iraq’s Osirak reactor in 1981 led to the militarization of the Iraqi nuclear program, which had until then been civilian in nature.<sup>74</sup> According to trade and security scholar Scott Jones and of doubtful utility in reversing proliferation.” At the same time, “future political change in a more democratic direction should increase the proba-

71. For examples, see Lewis A. Dunn and Herman Kahn, *Trends in Nuclear Proliferation, 1975–1995: Projections, Problems, and Policy Options* (Croton-on-Hudson, NY: Hudson Institute, 1976); Robert E. Harkavy, “Pariah States and Nuclear Proliferation,” *International Organization* 35, no. 1 (1981): 135–63. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300004112>; Graham Allison, “Nuclear Disorder: Surveying Atomic Threats,” *Foreign Affairs* 89, no. 1 (Jan./Feb. 2010): 74–85; Hobbs and Moran, *Exploring Regional Responses*; Kevin Chilton and Harry Hoshovsky, “Avoiding a Nuclear Arms Race in the Middle East,” *Defense News*, February 13, 2020, [www.defensenews.com/opinion/commentary/2020/02/13/avoiding-a-nuclear-arms-race-in-the-middle-east](http://www.defensenews.com/opinion/commentary/2020/02/13/avoiding-a-nuclear-arms-race-in-the-middle-east). For an argument against the cascade theory, see the introduction in William C. Potter and Gaukhar Mukhatzhanova (eds.), *Forecasting Nuclear Proliferation in the 21st Century, Volume 2: A Comparative Perspective* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 3–12.

72. For example, one 1976 prediction held that Indian nuclearization would precipitate a chain including Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Libya, Argentina, and Brazil by 1995. See Lewis A. Dunn and William H. Overholt, “The Next Phase in Nuclear Proliferation Research,” *Orbis* 20, no. 2 (Summer 1976): 497–524. See also Lewis A. Dunn, “India, Pakistan, Iran . . . : A Nuclear Proliferation Chain?” in *Asia’s Nuclear Future* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1977), 197–212; Michael Brenner, “The Strategic Consequences of Nuclear Proliferation in South Asia for Iran,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 8, no. 4 (1985): 59–66. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402398508437239>.

73. Stephanie Cronin, review of *Non-Conventional Weapons Proliferation in the Middle East: Tracking the Spread of Nuclear, Chemical, and Biological Capabilities*, ed. Efraim Karsh, Martin S. Navias, and Philip Sabin, *Middle Eastern Studies* 31, no. 3 (July 1995): 653. See also Matthew Fuhrmann and Todd S. Sechser, “Appendices for ‘Signaling Alliance Commitments: Hand-Tying and Sunk Costs in Extended Nuclear Deterrence’” (updated April 6, 2014), [www.matthewfuhrmann.com/uploads/2/5/8/2/25820564/fuhrmann-sechser-ajps-appendices.pdf](http://www.matthewfuhrmann.com/uploads/2/5/8/2/25820564/fuhrmann-sechser-ajps-appendices.pdf).

74. Bennett Ramberg, “Osirak and Its Lessons for Iran Policy,” *Arms Control Today* 42, no. 4 (May 2012): 40–43.

bility of a nuclear reversal, provided that the military has not yet fielded a working arsenal. But the type of regime provides no guarantee in itself.”<sup>75</sup>

Of course, many observers of the Iranian nuclear program are less aggressive in their policy recommendations than the most hawkish. Richard Nephew, a former Obama administration official who served as Deputy Special Envoy for Iran in the administration of Joe Biden in 2021, argued that the JCPOA was a good deal for all involved and a testament to the fact that “it is both feasible and sustainable to manage Iran’s nuclear ambitions.”<sup>76</sup> Nephew characterized the Trump administration’s violation of the JCPOA, however, as likely to fuel a perception of the US as an unreliable partner in international affairs.<sup>77</sup> At the same time, however, Nephew described Iran as a “latent nuclear-weapon possessor”<sup>78</sup> and contended that, once it established a basic nuclear infrastructure and know-how in the mid-2000s, “the problem of Iran’s nuclear program changed from the denial of a capability to the denial of an opportunity.”<sup>79</sup> A failure to manage nuclear Iran would consequently entail “risks beyond present imagination, both in terms of Iranian capabilities and the future of the Middle East.”<sup>80</sup> Thus, while diplomacy is framed as superior to military confrontation, a nuclear Iran is still portrayed as a peril of unimaginable proportions, one that can and must be tackled through robust supply-side proliferation measures and, in the absence of good behavior, economic sanctions.

It should be emphasized, however, that supporters of the JCPOA are doves in comparison to the agreement’s critics. In the view of John Bolton — onetime national security advisor under Trump and a longtime director for defense studies at the conservative American Enterprise Institute — the Iran Deal was “badly conceived, abominably negotiated and drafted, and entirely advantageous to Iran: unenforceable, unverifiable, and inadequate in duration and scope.”<sup>81</sup> According to political scientist Eliot Cohen and colleagues, the JCPOA “ranks as one of the most deficient arms control agreements in history.”<sup>82</sup> It must be said, though, that these are strange assertions to make about an agreement that objectively mandates stronger safeguards than the NonProliferation Treaty (NPT), an agreement that has traditionally been embraced by more hawkish commentators and is widely referred to as the “cornerstone” of the international arms control architecture.<sup>83</sup> As discussed, however, much of the opposition to

75. See Scott A. Jones and James R. Holmes, “Regime Type, Nuclear Reversals, and Nuclear Strategy: The Ambiguous Case of Iran,” in *Strategy in the Second Nuclear Age: Power, Ambition, and the Ultimate Weapon*, ed. Toshi Yoshihara and James R. Holmes (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2012), 201, 214.

76. Richard Nephew, “Nuclear Latency and Iran,” in *Nuclear Latency and Hedging: Concepts, History, and Issues*, ed. Joseph F. Pilat (Washington, DC: Wilson Center, 2019), 172.

77. Nephew, “Nuclear Latency and Iran,” 169.

78. Nephew, “Nuclear Latency and Iran,” 172.

79. Nephew, “Nuclear Latency and Iran,” 155.

80. Nephew, “Nuclear Latency and Iran,” 172.

81. Bolton, *The Room Where It Happened*, 162.

82. Eliot A. Cohen, Eric S. Edelman, and Ray Takeyh, “Time to Get Tough on Tehran: Iran Policy after the Deal,” *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 1 (Jan./Feb. 2016): 64–75.

83. Carla Anne Robbins, “U.S. Faces 2 Fronts at Nuclear Treaty Talks,” *Wall Street Journal*, April 29, 2005, <https://on.wsj.com/3wxuRdw>. See also Laura Considine, “Contests of Legitimacy and Value: The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons and the Logic of Prohibition,” *International Affairs* 95, no. 5 (Sept. 2019): 1085, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiz103>.



the JCPOA arguably has more to do with the character of the Iranian government than the deal itself. As such, one must wonder whether there is *any* nuclear agreement with Iran that would have satisfied those ideologically opposed to the Iranian government and bent on regime change.

## THE EFFICACY OF SANCTIONS

One of the central debates in the Iran proliferation literature is over the efficacy of economic sanctions. First applied in 1979 in response to the United States Embassy hostage crisis and then progressively strengthened, sanctions on Iran long predate the discussions on Iranian nuclear proliferation. US sanctions were only explicitly linked to the nuclear issue from the 1990s, thus preceding the 2002 revelations, and the first nuclear-related UN sanctions on Iran were passed in July 2006.<sup>84</sup>

For political scientists Alexandre Debs and Nuno Monteiro, Iran's continuing nuclear "forbearance" can be explained by robust international sanctions and repeated threats of armed counterproliferation action by Israel and, less explicitly, the US.<sup>85</sup> Indeed, the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action is commonly understood as an outcome of successful coercive diplomacy by the US.<sup>86</sup> However, according to analyst Trita Parsi, whose history of the JCPOA process constitutes arguably the most comprehensive study of the issue, the breakthrough in the negotiations came when US president Barack Obama made the decision to "play the enrichment card" in 2013. This "momentous" shift in US policy — or "concession," as critics would have it — involved an acceptance in principle of Iranian uranium enrichment, albeit significantly scaled back and under international inspections. The background for this shift, Parsi maintained, was quite simply that the Obama administration realized that "sanctions had not worked and no meaningful progress had been made in the P5+1 process."<sup>87</sup> Indeed, in the race between Iranian centrifuge expansion and international economic sanctions, "the centrifuges were winning."<sup>88</sup> It should be noted that Iran's pursuit of nuclear energy was securitized well before the 2002 revelations, challenging the well-established legal dichotomy between "civilian" and "military" applications of nuclear technology.<sup>89</sup> As early as the 1990s, the US under President Bill Clinton sought to limit Iranian access to civilian nuclear technology.<sup>90</sup>

84. Kenneth Katzman, "Iran Sanctions," *Congressional Research Service Report* RS20871 (updated February 2, 2022).

85. Debs and Monteiro, *Nuclear Politics*, 88.

86. Biswas, "Iran v 'the International Community'"; Sumitha Narayanan Kutty, "Dealing with Differences: The Iran Factor in India-U.S. Relations," *Asia Policy* 14, no. 1 (Jan. 2019): 106, <https://doi.org/10.1353/asp.2019.0014>.

87. Trita Parsi, *Losing an Enemy: Obama, Iran, and the Triumph of Diplomacy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 174.

88. Mark Fitzpatrick, "Assessing the JCPOA," *Adelphi Series* 57, no. 466/67 (2017): 20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19445571.2017.1555914>.

89. See Shampa Biswas, *Nuclear Desire: Power and the Postcolonial Nuclear Order* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014); Sonja D. Schmid, "A New 'Nuclear Normalcy?'" *Journal of International Political Theory* 15, no. 3 (2019): 297–315. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1755088218796674>.

90. Tytti Erästö, "Learning from the Past in the Iranian Nuclear Dispute," *Middle East Report Online*, April 16, 2014, <https://merip.org/2014/04/learning-from-the-past-in-the-iranian-nuclear-dispute>.

Some evidence suggests that the economic sanctions against Iran and its nuclear program may in fact have hardened the Iranian stance. In 2010, a group of psychologists led by Morteza Dehghani found that the sanctions had made a relatively small but politically significant portion of the Iranian population *more* supportive of the Iranian nuclear program (though not of the development of nuclear arms). Their survey results indicate that this “backfire effect” was related to many Iranians’ association of the right to peaceful uses of nuclear energy with national sovereignty.<sup>91</sup> In the view of another set of analysts, the sanctions were not the only factor provoking Iran’s decision to limit its nuclear ambitions.<sup>92</sup> However, some commentators argued that although the “biting sanctions” may not have curtailed Iran’s nuclear program directly, they “brought the Iranians to the table.”<sup>93</sup> This distinction — between bringing the Iranians to the negotiating table and forcing them to scale back the nuclear program — was introduced by President Obama himself.<sup>94</sup> Conveniently, this argument renders the actions of the Obama administration justifiable on both key counts: the “concession” on enrichment and the devastating economic sanctions, which caused considerable humanitarian devastation inside Iran,<sup>95</sup> were necessary to secure the deal. Yet it is not clear that sanctions were vital to the Iranians’ willingness to come to the negotiating table. After all, several observers of the diplomatic process have suggested that an agreement similar to the JCPOA may well have been within reach already in 2004 or 2005.<sup>96</sup> The hawks in the George W. Bush administration, however, saw an Iranian commitment to “zero-enrichment” as a precondition for initiating talks.<sup>97</sup>

According to nuclear proliferation scholar Nicholas Miller, the academic literature on the efficacy of sanctions has a selection bias: while sanctions are rarely successful once implemented, they are frequently effective as deterrents.<sup>98</sup> For Miller, the relative success of the nonproliferation regime since the 1970s owes much to the threat of

91. Morteza Dehghani et al., “Sacred Values and Conflict over Iran’s Nuclear Program,” *Judgement and Decision Making* 5, no. 7 (Dec. 2010): 540–46.

92. Clément Therme, “Le nucléaire iranien vu de France” [“The Iranian Nuclear Issue as Seen from France”], *Confluences Méditerranée* 113 (July 2020): 114, <https://doi.org/10.3917/come.113.0105>.

93. Emily B. Landau, “Obama’s Legacy, a Nuclear Iran,” *Middle East Quarterly* 24, no. 2 (Spring 2017): 3. See also Dov S. Zakheim, “The Case for Hard Power,” *Naval War College Review* 70, no. 4 (Autumn 2017): 2.

94. Zaki Shalom, “Israel, the United States, and the Nuclear Agreement with Iran: Insights and Implications,” *Strategic Assessment* 18, no. 4 (Jan. 2016): 25.

95. Fatemeh Kokabisaghi, “Assessment of the Effects of Economic Sanctions on Iranians’ Right to Health by Using Human Rights Impact Assessment Tool: A Systematic Review,” *Health Policy and Management* 7, no. 5 (May 2018), 374–93. <https://doi.org/10.15171/ijhpm.2017.147>.

96. Tarja Cronberg, “No EU, No Iran Deal: The EU’s Choice between Multilateralism and the Transatlantic Link,” *Nonproliferation Review* 24, nos 3–4 (2017): 252, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10736700.2018.1432321>.

97. Similarly, following the thaw in US–North Korea relations in 2018, the Trump administration eschewed an incremental peace and disarmament process in favor of all-or-nothing “complete, verifiable, irreversible [North Korean] denuclearization.” Chung-in Moon, “The Next Stage of the Korean Peace Process: Why Seoul Remains Optimistic after Hanoi,” *Foreign Affairs*, March 14, 2019, [www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/north-korea/2019-03-14/next-stage-korean-peace-process](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/north-korea/2019-03-14/next-stage-korean-peace-process).

98. Nicholas L. Miller, “The Secret Success of Nonproliferation Sanctions,” *International Organization* 68, no. 4 (Fall 2014): 913, ç

US and multilateral economic punishment of proliferators. In this view, states that are vulnerable to sanctions are likely to be deterred from pursuing nuclear weapons in the first place. Actual sanctions, then, will succeed only in cases where the target state had not anticipated, and thus not factored in, the cost of sanctions in advance of initiating the nuclear weapon program. The Iranian case is particularly instructive, Miller argued, as “the case of Iran from the 1980s to 2015 illustrates the ineffectiveness of US unilateral sanctions against countries that lack dependence on the United States and also shows how unexpectedly harsh multilateral sanctions can succeed at restraining active proliferators.”<sup>99</sup>

For Miller, then, Iran’s nuclear ambitions during the 1941–79 reign of Mohammad Reza Shah were curtailed relatively easily through threats of unilateral sanctions by the US. Since his overthrow, the Islamic Republic has been less vulnerable to US threats, and a multilateral approach has thus been needed to restrain its ambitions. Yet, as suggested above, the influence of sanctions in the JCPOA process is far from straightforward. Moreover, the distinction between before and after 1979 seems somewhat exaggerated in Miller’s theory. Ostensibly, Iran was “dependent on the United States” under the shah and then, after the revolution, “entirely outside the US sphere of influence.”<sup>100</sup> Historical scholarship suggests that reality was far more complicated. Firstly, while Iran under the shah was dependent on the US in some aspects, the US was also dependent on Iran at certain points in time. After the oil crisis in 1973, in particular, the US relied on the shah for its energy supply as well as for the promotion of US security interests in the Persian Gulf region.<sup>101</sup> As demonstrated in recent historical research on Iran in the 1970s, the shah was not a dependent client of the US without agency or autonomy.<sup>102</sup> Secondly, as demonstrated by the economic downturn in Iran following the reimposition of sanctions by the US, the Islamic Republic is clearly vulnerable to US pressure, in particular through the extraterritoriality of US laws in international business.<sup>103</sup> On the other hand, Iran’s “Look East” strategy — culminating with the 25-Year Cooperation Program signed with China in 2021 and the strengthened ties with Russia after its invasion of Ukraine in 2022 — shows that the negative effects of unilateral US sanctions have their limits.<sup>104</sup> Of course, it remains to be seen if the Iranian economy can overcome its dependence on the US dollar as the international reserve currency, given Iran’s status as an exporter to the global oil market.

99. Nicholas L. Miller, *Stopping the Bomb: The Sources and Effectiveness of US Nonproliferation Policy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), 245.

100. Miller, *Stopping the Bomb*, 5.

101. On the American dependency on Mohammad Reza Shah, see Gary Sick, *All Fall Down: America’s Tragic Encounter with Iran* (New York: Random House, 1985).

102. In particular, see Roham Alvandi, *Nixon, Kissinger, and the Shah: The United States and Iran in the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

103. *Iran Economic Monitor: Weathering the Triple-Shock*, seventh ed. (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2020); Sascha Lohmann, “Extraterritorial U.S. Sanctions: Only Domestic Courts Could Effectively Curb the Enforcement of U.S. Law Abroad,” *SWP Comment* no. 5 (Feb. 2019).

104. Ghazal Vaisi, “The 25-Year Iran-China Agreement, Endangering 2,500 Years of Heritage,” Middle East Institute, March 1, 2022, [www.mei.edu/publications/25-year-iran-china-agreement-endangering-2500-years-heritage](http://www.mei.edu/publications/25-year-iran-china-agreement-endangering-2500-years-heritage); Clément Therme, *The Ukrainian Crisis and the New World Order* (Riyadh: Rasanah, 2022).

According to a third position, the sanctions regime may not have been effective either in bringing the Iranians to the table or in forcing concessions but, rather, in bringing about the election of a more moderate Iranian president, Hassan Rouhani, in 2013. In Miller's view, sanctions had "made the previous domestic political model unsustainable."<sup>105</sup> Again, however, the role of sanctions was arguably somewhat more complex. Firstly, there was no change of "political model" in Iran in 2013. Despite the change in heads of government, the country's most powerful person was and remains Supreme Leader Ayatollah 'Ali Khamenei, who has held his position since 1989. Secondly, both the election of Rouhani and apparent increased Iranian will to negotiate with the West were connected to sociocultural transformations that had manifested earlier with the emergence of the Green Movement in 2009.

In *Sanctions, Statecraft, and Nuclear Proliferation*, a 2012 edited volume dealing with nuclear-related sanctions and political economy, analyst Alireza Nader appeared ambivalent about the effects of sanctions for Iranian nuclear policy. He contended that, while targeted sanctions have led to internal disruptions, they do not seem to have fundamentally transformed policy at the top level.<sup>106</sup> Iran's apparent ability to resist or absorb "punishment" has often been explained as an outcome of the leadership's ideology or bullheadedness. But the inefficacy of sanctions should not simply be attributed to irrationality or Iranian psychology.<sup>107</sup> There is a need for nuanced analysis of Iranian society and economy under sanctions.

## CONCLUSION

The possibility that Iran might acquire or develop nuclear weapons has been treated as a unique concern within the field of nuclear security studies, which has been structured around the challenge of proliferation since the end of the Cold War. However, despite the significant decline in nuclear weapons development since the fall of the Soviet Union, by any metric, the discipline has yet to reevaluate the assumption of proliferation and the reproduction of nuclear desire more broadly. Uncertainty and unknowability, which characterize the Iranian case, have not urged a more careful prognosis or a sense of ambivalence. Instead, they have resulted in a situation where scholarship on the Iranian nuclear program is essentially unfalsifiable and consistently subject to a politicized form of ideological speculation. The problems of academic and policy literature that we have outlined have had significant implications for public knowledge (or lack thereof) on the Iranian nuclear issue.

Given the widespread mischaracterization of Iran as a nuclear weapons–possessing state or a state on the brink of acquiring or even using the bomb,<sup>108</sup> researchers could play an important role in contesting the parameters of the current debate. By embracing a more nuanced language at the least, researchers can counter

105. Miller, *Stopping the Bomb*, 240.

106. Alireza Nader, "Influencing Iran's Decision on the Nuclear Program," in *Sanctions, Statecraft, and Nuclear Proliferation*, ed. Etel Solingen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 211–31.

107. Ray Takeyh and Suzanne Maloney, "The Self-Limiting Success of Iran Sanctions," *International Affairs* 87, no. 6 (Nov. 2011), 1297–1312. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2346.2011.01037.x>.

108. In August 2022, Iran could still be one to five years away from being able to build nuclear weapons systems.

not only the assumptions of Iranian nuclear desire but also the role of the United States as a benevolent hegemonic actor and its sanctions regime as protecting the world from Iran. The current nuclear discourse on Iran obscures the possibility of choice, presenting a binary option of either supporting sanctions or supporting the Iranian government, or worse, its potential nuclearization. Foreclosing other options also carries the risk of transforming the situation into a self-fulfilling prophecy. In February 2021, an Iranian official said enduring US sanctions could “force Iran to revoke its pledge to not seek a nuclear weapon.”<sup>109</sup>

For a more multifaceted view of Iran, researchers interested in nuclear politics could seek collaboration and conversations with area studies specialists. As a result of the difficulty of accessing material on the subject in Iran and self-censorship among scholars in Western institutions,<sup>110</sup> specialized academic literature within Iranian studies has rarely dealt with the nuclear issue. However, scholars of Iranian studies have made key contributions thus far in analyzing political processes and perspectives in the country. There is further space to research grassroots thought and activism against the nuclear program in Iran, whether it is linked to environmental, economic, or political rationales. We should also consider the real impacts of the nuclear discourse and how the lives of ordinary Iranians have been disrupted by it, without overlooking the violent practices of the Iranian government.<sup>111</sup>

Too often Iran is treated like a black box, reinforcing its isolation.<sup>112</sup> A conceptual shift toward the de-securitization of Iran would still enable scholars within the subset of security studies to carry out critical and independent research on the country, rather than perceive it as uniquely irrational or an aberration within the global political system. To overcome these shortcomings, one can hope for a new trend in nuclear security studies toward investigating nuclear behavior based on both regional expertise and nuclear knowledge. Bridging the gap between regional and nuclear studies is therefore the only way to avoid the politicization of nuclear security studies. This is the sine qua non for new scholarship reflecting on the complexities of the nuclear ambitions of “the other” in general and on Iranian nuclear ambitions in particular.<sup>113</sup>

109. Rick Gladstone, Farnaz Fassihi, and Ronen Bergman, “Iran Suggests It May Seek Nuclear Weapons, in New Escalation of Threats,” *New York Times*, February 16, 2021, <https://nyti.ms/3T4RShB>.

110. For example, a multiauthored book about research methods relates, “At least one of us, our Iran researcher, has experienced a field trip that yielded negligible results: at that time, about that topic, respondents simply would not talk to him.” See Marlies Glasius et al., *Research, Ethics and Risk in the Authoritarian Field* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 91.

111. “Iran,” *Amnesty International Report 2021/22*, pp. 198–201.

112. Negar S. Razavi et al., “Rethinking US Policy toward Iran: A Forum,” *Middle East Report* no. 294 (Spring 2020), <https://merip.org/2020/06/rethinking-us-policy-toward-iran-a-forum-2>.

113. See Hugh Gusterson, “Nuclear Weapons and the Other in the Western Imagination,” *Cultural Anthropology* 14, no. 1 (Feb. 1999): 114, <https://doi.org/10.1525/can.1999.14.1.111>.