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# Iran–US Relations Since the 1979 Revolution

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**Abstract:**
Since Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution, relations with the United States have been defined by rupture, conflict, and stalled diplomacy. The overthrow of Iran's US-backed Shah led to the 1979–81 hostage crisis, ending decades of partnership[1] . In the 1980s the US pursued dual containment: backing Iraq in the Iran–Iraq War, facing Iranian-backed terrorism (e.g. the 1983 Beirut barracks bombing that killed 241 US Marines [2]), and even secret arms sales to Iran (the Iran–Contra affair) despite public hostility[3] [4] . US sanctions in this period formalized Iran's isolation (designating Iran a State Sponsor of Terrorism in 1984[5]).
During the 1990s and 2000s, nuclear issues dominated. Presidents Clinton and Bush enforced tighter sanctions and issued warnings (Bush's 2002 "Axis of Evil" speech labeled Iran a nuclear threat[6]). In 2015, moderate Iranian leaders struck the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), curbing Iran's enrichment program in exchange for sanctions relief[7] [8]. Yet this breakthrough proved fragile. In 2018 President Trump withdrew the US from the JCPOA, reimposing "maximum pressure" sanctions[9]. Iran responded by breaching JCPOA limits (enriching uranium beyond agreed levels). Escalation followed: in January 2020 the US killed IRGC Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani; Iran retaliated with missile strikes on US bases (wounding troops but no fatalities[10]).
Economically, US sanctions have severely harmed Iran's economy and society. By late 2020 Iran's oil exports had fallen dramatically under sanction, GDP contracted sharply, and inflation soared. Officially, humanitarian trade is exempt, but in practice banks avoid any Iran dealings. Human Rights Watch reports that sanctions have caused shortages of medicines and essential goods, threatening Iranian citizens' health[11][12]. Iran's leaders respond by denouncing the US as the "Great Satan" and scapegoating sanctions for economic pain. Meanwhile, Iran's regional strategy – the so-called "Axis of Resistance" – has proliferated pro-Iranian proxies: Hezbollah in Lebanon, Assad in Syria, Shia militias in Iraq, and the Houthis in Yemen. The US counters by bolstering allies (Israel, Gulf states, NATO partnerships) and conducting strikes on Iranian-backed forces.
Diplomatically, Iran and the US have no formal relations. Contacts have been limited to ad hoc talks (hostage negotiations, nuclear deal talks, prisoner exchanges) mediated by third parties. For instance, in 2023 Qatar brokered a prisoner swap: five US detainees for $6 billion in frozen Iranian assets[13]. In 2021–23, Vienna talks sought to revive the JCPOA, but stalled over sanctions relief demands[14]. As of 2025, Iran's nuclear program continues advancing (with near-60% enrichment), and direct conflict remains possible in the Middle East. Mutual mistrust – cemented by decades of crises – persists on both sides.

**Keywords:** Iran–US relations; 1979 Revolution; hostage crisis; sanctions; JCPOA; nuclear program; Middle East proxies; "Axis of Resistance"; economic impact; political conflict; diplomacy.

## Introduction

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, relations between Iran and the United States have been profoundly adversarial. Before 1979, the US had counted Iran as a key ally (backing the Shah and his Western-aligned government), but the revolution upended this. Ayatollah Khomeini's clerical regime took power, repudiated US influence, and even branded America the "Great Satan." The seizure of the US embassy in Tehran in November 1979 – where 52 Americans were held hostage for 444 days – formalized the rupture[1]. Over the following decades, the relationship would oscillate between crises and brief detentes, but never fully normalize.

The purpose of this essay is to trace the arc of Iran–US relations from 1979 to the present, underlining key events and themes. We will examine how the hostage crisis and ensuing decade of crisis set the tone, how nuclear and regional issues dominated the 2000s, and how alternating US administrations have combined pressure and limited engagement. We will discuss the impact of US sanctions on Iran's economy and people, and the growth of Iran's regional "Axis of Resistance." Throughout, we cite a wide range of sources: US government archives, academic studies, think-tank analyses, and reputable news reports. The goal is a comprehensive, factual account of this complex relationship.

## Historical Background (Pre-1979)

In the mid-20th century, the US and Iran were strategic partners. The 1953 CIA/MI6-led coup that ousted Iran's nationalist Prime Minister Mosaddegh (and reinstated the Shah) is a notorious example[2]. Under the Shah, Iran's oil wealth and strategic location made it a linchpin of US policy in the Cold War Middle East. Iran joined the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) and hosted US military personnel. By the 1970s, US military sales to Iran were enormous.

However, the Shah's authoritarian rule and rapid Westernization generated resentment among many Iranians, especially religious conservatives. Ayatollah Khomeini condemned the Shah as a US puppet. Widespread protests culminated in the Shah's departure and Khomeini's return from exile in early 1979[1]. Within months, the Islamic Republic was declared. The new government labelled the US the "Great Satan," reflecting deep hostility. In the words of a US intelligence report: Iran's revolution unleashed "a potentially significant force which could impair U.S. strategic interests"[12]. Thus began the rupture.

## The 1979 Hostage Crisis and Diplomatic Break

The diplomatic break was immediate and total. On November 4, 1979, Islamist students stormed the US Embassy in Tehran, taking 66 Americans hostage (52 remained captive)[1]. They claimed this act was to defy US support for the ousted Shah. The hostage-taking violated the Vienna Convention on diplomatic immunity. The crisis lasted 444 days, ending only on January 20, 1981, the day Ronald Reagan was inaugurated[1] [15]. In effect, the embassy seizure destroyed any prospect of normal relations.

The Carter administration responded with economic sanctions and a failed rescue mission (Operation Eagle Claw) in April 1980 – a mission that ended in a helicopter crash and further embarrassment. In diplomatic analysis, the hostages were released not because demands were met but due to shifting politics in Tehran[16]. The Algiers Accords formally concluded the crisis, but by then the US had already severed ties. The American embassy in Tehran was closed and remains so today; Iran's own embassy in Washington was never reopened. No Iranian or American ambassadors have been exchanged since 1979.

The crisis embedded mutual distrust: in Congress, overwhelming support for hardline sanctions on Iran became U.S. policy.

**Containment and Proxy Conflicts (1980s–1990s)**

With formal ties broken, US strategy became one of containment. A 1980 State Department memo explicitly laid out measures against Iran, such as closing consulates and isolating the government[17]. By 1984, Reagan labelled Iran a State Sponsor of Terrorism for backing groups like Lebanon's Hezbollah[5], a designation still in place today.

Regionally, the US and Iran clashed indirectly. When Iraq invaded Iran in 1980, the US (along with Arab Gulf states) subtly supported Iraq to prevent an Iranian victory. The Reagan administration provided Iraq with intelligence and material support. Ironically, in 1985–86 the US secretly supplied arms to Iran itself – ostensibly to secure release of Western hostages held by Hezbollah – in a deal that funded Nicaraguan Contras. This was revealed in the Iran–Contra affair, a major scandal[3][4]. As one historian notes, Reagan's aides "tacitly believed" that an Iranian defeat might empower radicals, so the US kept Iran from total collapse – at the expense of strategic coherence[3].

Meanwhile, Iran was expanding its influence through proxies. In 1983, Hezbollah – a Lebanese Shia militia formed with Iranian support – bombed the US Marine barracks in Beirut, killing 241 Americans[2]. This horror underscored Iran's reach: Tehran provided funding, training and weapons to Hezbollah, making it a vital Iranian asset in Lebanon[16]. Public opinion in the US hardened against Iran.

In 1988, tragedy struck when the US cruiser Vincennes shot down Iran Air Flight 655 over the Persian Gulf, killing all 290 aboard. The Reagan administration later apologized for the "tragic accident"[17], but Iranians saw it as proof of US hostility. Ayatollah Khamenei (then President) later remarked this incident sped Iran's acceptance of a cease-fire with Iraq[18].

Through the 1990s, containment remained constant. President Clinton expanded sanctions: a 1995 executive order forbade virtually all US trade and investment with Iran. The Iran and Libya Sanctions Act of 1996 (later Iran Sanctions Act) targeted foreign investment in Iran's energy sector. Still, Iran's economy endured by selling oil via clandestine means and courting Asian partners. However, these sanctions contributed to Iran's international isolation.

There were moments of thaw. In 1998 Secretary of State Madeleine Albright met Iran's deputy foreign minister at a UN meeting – the highest-level US-Iran contact since 1979. After 9/11, Iran cooperated somewhat on Afghanistan (it shared intelligence against the Taliban). But such limited engagements never led to real rapprochement. In Iran, leaders continued to cast the US as an imperial threat; in the US, Iran was increasingly seen as a regional "rogue state."

**Nuclear Controversy and the JCPOA (2002–2015)**

By the early 2000s, the new flashpoint was Iran's nuclear program. In 2002, President Bush named Iran part of an "axis of evil," accusing it of seeking WMD and sponsoring terror. Relations with President Ahmadinejad's Iran were bitter. Ahmadinejad even penned a personal letter to Bush in 2006 urging dialogue, but he refused to suspend enrichment. Meanwhile, the US lobbied the UN: from 2006 onward, the UN Security Council passed resolutions demanding Iran halt enrichment, leading to sanctions on Iran's nuclear and missile programs.

The standoff eased only briefly under President Obama. In 2013–2015, negotiations between Iran (then led by moderate President Rouhani) and the P5+1 powers yielded the **Joint Comprehensive Plan of**

**Action (JCPOA)**. The 2015 deal sharply curtailed Iran's nuclear activities: for instance, enrichment was capped at 3.67% U-235 and the enriched-uranium stockpile was cut by 98%. Iran dismantled thousands of centrifuges and granted unprecedented IAEA access to its facilities. In return, the UN and Western powers lifted nuclear-related sanctions. The deal was hailed as a major diplomatic breakthrough: one analysis notes it "cut off Iran's most likely paths to a bomb".

However, the JCPOA faced opposition. In 2018 President Trump unilaterally withdrew the US from the agreement, calling it flawed. He reimposed "maximum pressure" sanctions, banning foreign firms from dealing with Iran's energy and finance sectors. US secondary sanctions on Iran's oil customers led to an 80% plunge in Iranian oil exports by 2020. Iran retaliated gradually: it exceeded some JCPOA limits (expanding enrichment and installing advanced centrifuges) while insisting the deal's US withdrawal voided its obligations.

**Escalation and Conflict (2019–2020)**

The breakdown in 2018–2020 saw frequent confrontations. In April 2019, the US designation of the IRGC as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (the first time a national military was so labeled) provoked Iranian outrage. Over that summer, a series of mysterious attacks on oil tankers and drone shootdowns in the Gulf (e.g. June–July 2019) raised tensions, with both sides blaming the other. In September 2019, drone and missile strikes on Saudi oil facilities (claimed by Yemen's Houthis) were widely blamed on Iran, momentarily cutting Saudi output by half.

A flashpoint came on January 3, 2020: a US drone strike near Baghdad airport killed General **Qasem Soleimani**, commander of the IRGC's Quds Force and an architect of Iran's regional proxy network. Soleimani had been coordinating attacks on US forces in Iraq. In response, Iran launched missiles on January 7 at Iraqi bases housing US troops, causing dozens of injuries but no fatalities. Crucially, both sides declared they sought to avoid full-scale war. The week's chaos was compounded when, on January 8, 2020, Iran accidentally shot down a Ukraine International Airlines passenger jet, killing 176 people—a tragedy that stoked domestic protests in Iran (though this is beyond our main focus).

Elsewhere in 2020, Iran tested other capacities. In April, Iran launched its first military satellite (Noor-1), much to US alarm. That month, Secretary Pompeo also announced the US was seeking to "snap back" UN sanctions after the 10-year arms embargo expired, but Russia and China blocked the effort, leaving the US alone in enforcing the sanctions. In late 2020, Iran increased uranium enrichment to 20%, a step away from bomb-grade (higher enrichment was still limited under the JCPOA) after the assassination of nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh (blamed on Israel). Iran's parliament even passed a law to boost enrichment to 20% and expel UN inspectors if sanctions remained.

**US Sanctions and Iranian Economy**

Throughout these decades, US sanctions have been a constant pressure tool. Sanctions range from general embargoes (like Clinton's 1995 trade ban) to targeted measures: e.g. listing the IRGC or senior officials as terrorists (2019) and sanctioning Iran's Central Bank (2019). US law also penalizes foreign entities that engage with Iran's energy or financial sectors. The 1996 Iran Sanctions Act (renamed ISA) threatened oil-sector investors with penalties. After Trump left the JCPOA, the US reimposed secondary sanctions on all Iranian oil customers (notably India and China) in 2018–2019.

By 2020, Iran's economy was deeply damaged: GDP had shrunk by ~10% in 2018–19, the rial collapsed, and inflation topped 40%. Oil exports were a fraction of pre-sanctions levels. In principle, food and

medicine were exempt, and the US Treasury publicly invites humanitarian trade. In practice, however, international banks refuse to process nearly any Iran-related transactions for fear of US penalties. Human Rights Watch reports that Iranians face shortages of essential medicines (e.g. cancer drugs, insulin) and that the "humanitarian exemption" has proved almost meaningless in reality. US officials argue sanctions target only the regime's revenue, not ordinary people, but even NGOs find it hard to deliver aid. Iranian leaders seize on sanctions as a propaganda tool, decrying them as "economic warfare" that harms children and patients (while downplaying their own economic mismanagement).

Iran has tried workarounds: it barter oil for goods with countries like China, invests limited funds in "resistance economy" industries, and uses clandestine financial networks. In 2020–2021, Iran briefly sent oil tankers to Venezuela to defy US sanctions, leading to further US punitive measures. Domestically, the regime uses subsidies and cash handouts to cushion ordinary Iranians, but the underlying economic pain persists. Publicly, sanctions are blamed by officials for unemployment and inflation, while critics point out Iran's own policies (e.g. subsidies, COVID missteps) also played a role.

**Iran's "Axis of Resistance" and Regional Proxy Conflicts**

Regionally, Iran has sought to counter US and Israeli influence by cultivating militant and political allies – often called its "Axis of Resistance." This network spans Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen.

**Lebanon (Hezbollah):**

Since the 1980s, Iran has been Hezbollah's main patron. Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) trainers and funds helped found Hezbollah, and Iran continues to provide an estimated $700–800 million per year. Hezbollah functions as Iran's most capable proxy against Israel. It won a brief war with Israel in 2006 and now controls significant power in Lebanon's government. The US has responded by sanctioning Hezbollah's financing (e.g. the Hezbollah International Financing Prevention Act, 2015) and keeps it designated as a terrorist group.

Figure: Hezbollah militants parade with their flag in Lebanon. Iran's support has enabled Hezbollah to become a powerful Lebanese militia and political party.

**Syria:**

Iran has been Assad's staunchest ally in the Syrian civil war. Beginning in 2011, Iran sent IRGC advisors and helped mobilize Shia militias (from Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan) to fight alongside Syrian forces. As one Iran analyst notes, "since the start of the Syrian civil war... the IRGC has actively propped up the embattled Assad regime by deploying its personnel and mobilizing an extensive network of Shiite militia groups". This intervention was crucial to keeping Assad in power. Iran's goal is not only to support an ally, but to maintain a supply route (the "land bridge") through Iraq–Syria–Lebanon that links Iran to Hezbollah and the Mediterranean. Israel has conducted hundreds of airstrikes in Syria targeting Iranian forces and arms shipments to Hezbollah, leading to near-daily skirmishes in the Israeli-Syria border area.

**Iraq:**

After the 2003 fall of Saddam Hussein, Iran's influence in Iraq grew enormously. Many Iraqi politicians and militia leaders have close ties to Tehran. Iranian-backed groups (such as the Popular Mobilization Forces) gained power and often clash with US forces. For example, in late 2019 Iraqi militias (mostly pro-Iran) attacked the US embassy in Baghdad. In Jan 2020, after Soleimani's killing (an Iranian general but

with Iraqi militias) Iran used its Iraqi allies to pressure the government: on January 5, Iraqi MPs – many aligned with Iran – voted to expel all US troops. Although this vote was nonbinding, it underscored Iran's sway. Washington sees some Iraqi factions as Iranian proxies, while Tehran sees its role as defending Shia interests in Iraq and preserving its strategic depth.

**Yemen (Houthis):**

Iran has supported the Houthi rebels in Yemen's civil war. While the Houthis are distinct from Iran's own Shia (they follow Zaydi Islam), Tehran provides them with weapons, training, and intelligence. As one analysis puts it, "Iran is the Houthis' primary benefactor, providing them with weapons transfers, training, and intelligence support." In recent years, the Houthis have launched drone and missile attacks on Saudi Arabia and shipping in the Red Sea, often seen as part of Iran's campaign to pressure its regional enemies. The US has carried out occasional strikes on Houthi sites (citing the Iranian connection), though has primarily backed Saudi and UAE efforts against them.

The US countered Iran's regional strategy by strengthening ties with Arab Gulf states and Israel. Massive US arms sales of fighters (F-35 jets), missiles (Patriots), and joint exercises reassure allies that Iranian influence will be countered. Diplomatically, the US has mediated agreements like the Abraham Accords (2020) to bring Israel closer to Gulf partners, partly to isolate Iran. In 2022 the US helped form a Middle East coalition (the Negev Forum) including Israel, UAE and others specifically to share intelligence on and deter Iran's missile threats.

These proxy conflicts have erupted periodically. For instance, during the Oct 2023 Israel–Hamas war, Iran's network became active: Iran-backed Hezbollah and militias in Syria/Iraq exchanged rocket strikes with Israel, and Iran-allied Houthis fired drones at Israel (and US carriers in the Red Sea). Notably, Israel has even struck Iranian consulates in Syria (April 2024) as part of its campaign, killing IRGC generals and Iran calling it "a terrorist attack". Each such flare-up risks wider confrontation, with the US on high alert to defend its forces and allies.

**Nuclear Standoff and Diplomatic Efforts (2015–2025)**

Even after 2015's nuclear deal, the US–Iran nuclear standoff remained unresolved. Both sides began 2021 with indirect talks (in Vienna) to revive the JCPOA. However, mutual mistrust stalled progress. Iran insisted that all sanctions be lifted first, while the US demanded verifiable Iranian concessions. Iranian officials bluntly stated they would not dismantle their nuclear program before seeing sanctions relief. Meanwhile, Iran continued advancing its nuclear capabilities: it expanded its uranium stockpile (far above the JCPOA's 300 kg limit) and enriched up to 60% purity by mid-2021 – only a hair's breadth from weapons-grade, albeit produced for civilian reactor fuel under Tehran's claim.

Throughout 2021–2023, each side maintained preconditions. Under President Biden, US envoy Robert Malley engaged European intermediaries in talks, but direct US–Iran meetings remained off-limits. Periodic exchanges (through Oman or Iraq) occurred, but no breakthrough emerged. Notably, in 2022 massive protests in Iran after Mahsa Amini's death saw the US vocally support the protesters and sanction Iranian officials for human rights abuses. Such pressure made Iran less willing to compromise. Iran also deepened ties with other adversaries: providing military support to Russia's invasion of Ukraine (March 2022 onwards) further isolated Tehran from Europe. By late 2023, the US recovered diplomatic inroads only by mediating the prisoner swap (September 2023), but this was in the humanitarian realm, not policy.

As of 2025, Iran's nuclear program poses the thorniest issue. Without a revived JCPOA, Iran's breakout "breakout time" has shrunk; analysts warn it could build a bomb within months if it chose to enrich further. The US insists any deal must cover Iran's ballistic missiles and regional behavior, not just nuclear limits. Iran insists on full sanctions relief first. This impasse has continued, such that analysts say each side now views sanctions/nuclear progress as acts of war.

Diplomatic contacts between the governments remain minimal. Since 1979, there have been **no** ambassadors exchanged or formal dialogues. Channels have been indirect: in the 1980s–90s there were prisoner and hostage negotiations via intermediaries, in the 2000s limited UN and IAEA talks, and in the 2010s–20s intermittent shuttle diplomacy (Swiss or Qatari mediators). High-level phone calls were rare (e.g. Obama–Rouhani in 2013, the first since 1979). The only consistent point of direct diplomatic contact has been Iran's UN mission and the US mission to the UN. For now, any progress must be patient, mediated, and conditional.

**Humanitarian and Public Dimensions**

The prolonged hostility has deep social and humanitarian ramifications. US sanctions, as noted, have hurt the Iranian public's standard of living. Shortages of medicines and medical supplies have been widely reported. Human Rights Watch warns that sanctions are "causing serious hardships for ordinary Iranians and threatening their right to health". A UN expert in 2019 warned that banking restrictions will "unduly affect food security and the availability and distribution of medicines". Iranians point to rising infant mortality rates and drug scarcities as evidence. Iranian officials argue the sanctions are illegal collective punishment, though critics note that Iran also restricts some humanitarian imports and has domestic inefficiencies.

Public opinion in Iran is complex. Decades of anti-American rhetoric have left many Iranians (especially older and conservative) suspicious of US motives; survey data indicate very low trust in the US presidency. State media regularly blame the US for Iran's woes. Yet many Iranians, particularly youth, also resent their own government's mismanagement and want international engagement. Cultural ties persist: Iranian cities still have modest interest in Western culture (pop music, movies), and there is a sizable Iranian diaspora in the US. The US government for decades has run Farsi-language media (Voice of America Persian, Radio Farda) to reach Iranians, but with limited influence amid government censorship. Iran similarly broadcasts Persian-language propaganda aimed at US audiences and often sanctions US media.

In the US, Iran is widely seen through a lens of security threat. Coverage focuses on Iran's nuclear program, proxy wars, and human rights abuses. The idea of Iran as "pre-revolutionary ally turned mortal enemy" is ingrained in US strategic thinking. However, there is some sympathy for Iranian civilians under sanctions; NGOs in the US lobby for humanitarian exemptions and student exchanges. Within US policymaking, there are divergent views: some see engagement (as in 2015) as viable, while hawks insist on maximal pressure until Iran capitulates.

**Recent Developments (2020s)**

The mid-2020s have seen continued tension. Under Trump (2017–2021), US policy was explicitly hostile: maximum pressure sanctions, withdrawal from multilateral agreements, and symbolic moves like sanctioning Iran's supreme leader. In 2020, as COVID-19 devastated Iran (the first major outbreak outside China), the US offered limited humanitarian waivers but refused general sanctions relief. Iran accused the US of "economic murder" for not easing restrictions.

Under Biden (2021–present), the US has sought to manage conflicts without ceding new concessions. The administration has maintained sanctions, while keeping indirect channels open. For example, the 2023 detainee deal (negotiated via Qatar and Iraq) exchanged five American citizens for $6 billion in Iranian funds (held in South Korean banks), subject to strict use restrictions[13]. Critics on all sides denounce it as "ransom." President Biden's team has also quietly signaled willingness to lift some sanctions if Iran returns to compliance, but Iran demands the full 2015 deal restoration first.

Regionally, the Iran–US confrontation has at times flared. The October 2023 Hamas-Israel war, which Iran tacitly supported via arms to Hamas, drew the US and Iran further apart. The US fully backed Israel against what it saw as an Iranian-backed Hamas terror attack, while Iran denied direct involvement. The conflict spilled over: Hezbollah and Iranian proxies in Syria exchanged fire with Israeli forces, and the US shot down drones launched by Iran-allied militias targeting Israel. In April 2024, in a dramatic move, Israel bombed Iran's embassy (consulate) in Damascus, killing IRGC generals; Iran condemned it as a "terrorist attack" and vowed retaliation. The US publicly warned Israel to avoid broader war.

In May 2024, Iran's long-time president Ebrahim Raisi died in a helicopter crash. Raisi was a hardliner; his death raised questions about Iran's succession. The US immediately sent condolences (a diplomatic gesture, unusual in context) and emphasized support for Iranian civil society. An election is likely by June 2024; many analysts expect another hardliner to take power, continuing current policies.

As of mid-2025, no diplomatic breakthrough has occurred. The nuclear issue remains the core, as Iran's enrichment levels approach the threshold for a bomb. Israel and the US are increasingly concerned about the "day after" Iran acquires nuclear weapons. Meanwhile, US–Iran clashes via proxies and cyber operations continue quietly. Both sides publicly insist they are open to negotiations, but each demands the other move first. In sum, the relationship is very much a "cold war" of mistrust and mutual deterrence: Iran views US sanctions as an act of aggression, while the US views Iran's nuclear progress and regional actions as existential threats[15].

Conclusions

Over four decades, Iran–US relations have followed a pattern of intractable conflict with only sporadic detente. The 1979 revolution and hostage crisis shattered the alliance of the 1950s–70s. The 1980s saw war by proxy and covert dealings; the 1990s and 2000s featured sanctions battles and limited backchannels; and the 2010s alternated between nuclear diplomacy (2015's JCPOA) and renewed confrontation. Economic sanctions have been the US's chief lever, profoundly hurting ordinary Iranians, while Iran has leveraged its regional proxies to counter US influence.

Today (2025), the core divide remains nuclear: Iran insists on its right to enrich and demands end of sanctions, while the US insists on strict limits and verifiable compliance before lifting pressure. Neither side trusts the other enough to allow mutual steps without hard guarantees. Politically, hardliners dominate in both countries, and public opinion is largely negative on the other side. The war in Ukraine and shifts in global priorities have complicated multilateral diplomacy.

Without significant changes – such as a new Iranian political opening or a shift in US strategy – relations are likely to remain adversarial. As analysts note, this is essentially a "cold war" with the two adversaries projecting power and deterrence, yet avoiding full-scale war. Any lasting resolution would require mutual concessions: Iran abandoning its most sensitive nuclear and proxy programs, and the US easing sanctions and (perhaps) moving toward some form of normalized ties. So far, neither side's domestic politics make that scenario very likely.

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