

REEXAMINING THE NARRATIVE OF US-IRAN DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS FROM THE 1979 ISLAMIC REVOLUTION TO CURRENT DEVELOPING ISSUES

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Abstract : This paper examines the narrative of US-Iran diplomatic relations from the 1979 Islamic Revolution to the present war footing in early 2026, arguing that the relationship is defined by a fundamental and permanent crisis of trust rooted in historical trauma and reinforced through successive cycles of negotiation and betrayal. The study covers four key phases: the rupture of 1979-1981, the oscillation between covert engagement and hostility during the 1980s-1990s, the nuclear diplomacy era (2002-2018), and the current period of maximum pressure and military confrontation (2018-2026). Attention is paid to the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), its 2018 unilateral abrogation by the USA, and the subsequent pattern whereby diplomatic talks have been overtaken by military action—most recently in February 2026. Drawing on official sources, regional analysis, and contemporary reporting, this paper concludes that the prevailing narrative of US-Iran relations as a bilateral strategic dispute obscures a deeper structural pathology.

Keywords: US-Iran relations, nuclear diplomacy, Middle East security, trust deficit, coercive diplomacy.

RÉEXAMINER LE RÉCIT DES RELATIONS DIPLOMATIQUES ENTRE LES ÉTATS-UNIS ET L'IRAN, DE LA RÉVOLUTION ISLAMIQUE DE 1979 AUX ENJEUX ACTUELS

Résumé : Cet article examine la narrative des relations diplomatiques entre les États-Unis et l'Iran, de la révolution islamique de 1979 à la situation de guerre actuelle qui a commencé en début 2026. Il soutient que cette relation est caractérisée par une crise de confiance fondamentale et entretenue, ancrée dans un traumatisme historique et renforcé par des cycles successifs de négociations et de trahisons. L'étude retrace quatre phases clés : la rupture de 1979-1981, l'oscillation entre coopération secrète et hostilité durant les années 1980 et 1990, l'ère de la diplomatie nucléaire (2002-2018) et la période actuelle de pression maximale et de confrontation militaire (2018-2026). Une attention particulière est portée à l'Accord de Vienne sur le nucléaire iranien (JCPOA) de 2015, à son démantèlement unilatéral par les États-Unis en 2018 et à la tendance subséquente à remplacer les négociations diplomatiques par des actions militaires, comme en témoigne la récente intervention militaire de février 2026. S'appuyant sur des sources officielles, une analyse régionale et des reportages contemporains, cet article conclut que le discours dominant présentant les relations américano-iraniennes comme un différend stratégique bilatéral masque une pathologie structurelle plus profonde.

Mots-clés : Relations américano-iraniennes, diplomatie nucléaire, sécurité au Moyen-Orient, déficit de confiance, diplomatie coercitive.

Introduction

For more than four decades, the relationship between the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran has been defined by mutual hostility, ideological confrontation, and a nearly complete absence of formal diplomatic relations. Since the severing of ties in 1980 following the 444-day hostage crisis, the two nations have engaged in proxy conflicts, naval engagements, sanctions warfare, and most recently, direct military exchanges that have drawn the entire Middle East into escalating conflict. Yet throughout this period, times of intense hostility have alternated with moments of diplomatic engagement—from the Iran-Contra arms deals of the 1980s to the multilateral nuclear negotiations that produced the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), and from the Oman-mediated talks of 2025 to the abortive discussions that preceded the outbreak of war in February 2026.

The main question informing this paper is the narrative framework through which US-Iran relations are understood. Official Washington has consistently framed Iran as a revisionist power whose nuclear ambitions, support for regional proxies, and anti-American ideology is seen as an existential threat to US interests and allies. Tehran, for its part, portrays the United States as a hegemonic power whose history of intervention—from the 1953 coup that overthrew Iran's democratically elected government to the 2020 assassination of General Qasem Soleimani—demonstrates a systematic pattern of lack of trust. These competing narratives, each rooted in genuine historical grievances, have become increasingly entrenched, creating what this paper terms a "trust deficit" that renders conventional diplomacy exceptionally difficult.

The significance of this topic has intensified with recent developments in the ongoing war. As of March 2026, the United States and Israel are engaged in active military operations against Iran, with airstrikes targeting nuclear facilities, energy infrastructure, and military installations. Yet simultaneously, President Donald Trump has claimed that very good and productive conversations are underway with Iranian officials, claims that Tehran vehemently denies. This contradiction—war and diplomacy proceeding in parallel, with each side accusing the other of deception—epitomizes the pathological state of US-Iran relations in the contemporary period.

This paper will assess the narrative of US-Iran diplomatic relations through three analytical lenses: firstly, the historical roots of mutual distrust; secondly, the trajectory of nuclear diplomacy from the JCPOA to its collapse; and thirdly, the current crisis in which diplomatic engagement has been subordinated to coercive pressure. The study draws on congressional reports, expert analysis, regional media, and contemporary reporting to construct a comprehensive account of how the narrative of US-Iran relations has been shaped—and how it continues to evolve amid ongoing conflict.

1. Historical Foundations : From Alliance to Antagonism

The US had long history of interaction with Iran, dating back to the 19th century, with period of mutual fascination. This seemingly solid alliance was built on a founding of deep-seated Iranian resentment, stemming directly from a CIA-led operation in 1953. The deep-seated Iranian grievances erupted in 1979 with the Iranian Revolution, led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

1.1. The 1953 Coup and Its Long Shadow

The origins of the contemporary US-Iran antagonism cannot be understood without referring to the 1953 CIA-backed coup, Operation Ajax. In August 1953, the United States and the United Kingdom orchestrated the overthrow of Iran's democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, who had nationalized the country's oil industry (D. Yergin, 1991, p. 137). The coup reinstated the Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who ruled with increasing authoritarianism for the subsequent 26 years (M. Gasiorowski, 2000, p. 3). For Iranians, the coup represented the United States' willingness to subvert democracy and to protect its economic interests; for the United States, the Shah remained a reliable Cold War ally, providing access to Persian Gulf oil and serving as a bulwark against Soviet expansion (D. Wilber, 1954, pp. 39-42).

The idea of overthrowing the Iranian government was first initiated by the British when the government of Mohammad Mossadegh undertook the nationalization of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. Mossadegh rejected the unfair exploitation of the Iranian people. Indeed, the people derived no benefit from the substantial reserves of this precious resource, as they received only a tiny fraction of the profits from their own oil. For this reason, Mossadegh compared the nationalization of the company to the opening of a hidden treasure chest upon which a dragon rested. This analogy clearly expressed the difficulties in achieving his objective of nationalizing the company. In fact, he was fully aware of the stakes involved for the British, who would not easily abandon.

The inherent danger, according to Dulles, was that Iran was an extremely oil-rich country, yet it shared a border with the United States' sworn enemy, the Soviet Union. Thus, President Eisenhower ordered the CIA to overthrow Mossadegh and replace his government with an ally of the United States. The CIA then orchestrated a coup against Mossadegh, who was deposed and replaced by the pro-American Shah on August 19, 1953, making him the first victim of a CIA-organized coup. Despite the support of most of the Iranian population for Mossadegh, the Americans succeeded in overthrowing him in favor of their young friend, the Shah (E. Well-Sutton, 1955, p. 258). As early as July 1952, it is estimated that more than 100,000 people took to the streets to demonstrate their support for Mossadegh and express their disapproval of both the Americans and the Shah (S. Landau, 1998, p. 63).

This American intervention stemmed from both economic and political considerations. Mossadegh clearly demonstrated his nationalist leanings by nationalizing the Anglo-Iranian company, even though American authorities maintained they intervened to save Iran from communism. In reality, Washington's intentions were primarily driven by the following: "Iran served as a bulwark against Soviet expansion into warm-water ports. As an oil-producing country, Iran readily

supplied oil to Israel. The United States aimed to make Iran the guardian of the Gulf. This is why they supplied it with massive quantities of weapons” (R. Barry, 1981, p. 29).

Under the Shah, the country's situation was alarming, marked by growing poverty and a policy of torture and terror. Thousands of people were executed under the pretext of combating the spread of communism. The Shah of Iran became the closest friend and ally of the United States in the entire developing world. 80% of Iranian oil belongs to the Americans and British, 40% each, while Iran is content with the remaining 20% of its own oil (D. Yergin, 1991, pp. 137, 140-142.).

The Shah effectively placed the country at the exclusive service of the United States, which used it for its own economic and political needs, especially during the Cold War, right on the border with the Soviets. This is why Iran was used as a base for surveillance aircraft and radar installations near the border with the Soviet Union. At the same time as all these deplorable things were happening, the Americans painted a rosy picture of Iran, saying that: The Shah had set his country on the path to modernization. Iran was becoming an industrialized country open to foreign investment. Oil revenues ensured undeniable prosperity for Tehran. The Iranian elite adopted the American way of life. Women were becoming emancipated, and young people from privileged backgrounds went to study in the United States (D. Yergin, 1991, p. 140).

1.2. The 1979 Revolution and Hostage Crisis

The reality is quite different, as veritable espionage and infiltration systems were established within the Soviet Union, including military bases. Iran was a central element in the United States' anti-communist policy (H. Brands, 1991, p. 240). The creation, with the CIA's assistance, of the secret police, SAVAK, in Iran led to an alarming catastrophe, even prompting a reaction from Amnesty International. In 1976, Iran was ranked as the country with the most alarming humanitarian crisis in the world, due to its systems of torture and the death penalty (Ghods, 1989, p. 186).

The 1979 Islamic Revolution fundamentally transformed the US-Iran relationship. The Shah, weakened by years of popular opposition and suffering from cancer, fled Iran in January 1979 (S. Landau, 1998, p. 63). Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini returned from exile to establish the Islamic Republic, a theocratic system explicitly hostile to US influence. The rupture became irrevocable on November 4, 1979, when student activists seized the US embassy in Tehran, taking 66 Americans hostage. Fifty-two were held for 444 days, a crisis that dominated American media and shaped public perceptions of Iran as a fanatical and untrustworthy adversary (S. Landau, 1998, p. 64).

The hostage crisis had several enduring consequences (D. Yergin, 1991, pp. 140-141). First, the United States formally broke diplomatic relations with Iran in April 1980, a status that has persisted for over four decades. Second, the failed rescue mission, Operation Eagle Claw, which resulted in the deaths of eight US servicemen in a desert sandstorm, created a lingering trauma within the US military establishment. Third, the timing of the hostages' release—minutes after Ronald Reagan's inauguration in January 1981—was widely interpreted as a calculated

humiliation of President Jimmy Carter and established a pattern of Iranian brinkmanship that would recur throughout subsequent decades (S. Landau, 1998, p. 63).

1.3. The 1980s : Covert Engagement Amid Hostility

The 1980s presented a paradoxical pattern: official hostility combined with covert engagement. During the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), the United States officially supported Iraq, providing intelligence and economic assistance to Saddam Hussein's regime in an effort to contain Iran's revolutionary influence (M. Gasiorowski, 1991, p. 75). Yet simultaneously, the Reagan administration secretly sold weapons to Iran through Israel in what became the Iran-Contra scandal—a complex operation that used arms sales to Iran to fund Contra rebels in Nicaragua while seeking to secure the release of American hostages held by Hezbollah in Lebanon (D. Yergin, 1991, pp. 140-142).

This period also witnessed direct US-Iran military confrontation. In April 1988 (M. Ghods, 1989, p. 187), following the mining of the USS Samuel B. Roberts, the US Navy launched Operation Praying Mantis, the largest surface naval engagement since World War II, sinking or damaging several Iranian vessels (M. Gasiorowski, 1991, p. 75). The downing of Iran Air Flight 655 by the USS Vincennes in July 1988, which killed 290 civilians, further deepened Iranian grievances against the United States (S. Landau, 1998, p. 63).

2. The Nuclear Dimension: Diplomacy, Collapse, and Consequences

The 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was the culmination of over a decade of intense diplomacy between Iran and the P5+1 (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany). This grand bargain aimed to verifiably constrain Iran's nuclear program in exchange for the lifting of crippling international sanctions. The JCPOA began to unravel in May 2018 when the Trump administration unilaterally withdrew from the accord, calling it the “worst deal ever” and launching a maximum pressure campaign of sweeping sanctions against Iran. In response, Iran began a methodical process of violating the deal's terms (U. Nation, 2025, p. 2).

2.1. The Emergence of the Nuclear Issue and the JCPOA Era (2015-2018)

Concerns about Iran's nuclear program emerged in the early 2000s following revelations about undeclared nuclear facilities. A 2011 International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) report concluded that Iran had “carried out activities relevant to the development of a nuclear explosive device” until at least 2003 (Congressional Research, 2025, p. 2), though Iran consistently maintained that its program was for peaceful civilian purposes. President George W. Bush's 2002 “Axis of Evil” speech, which grouped Iran with Iraq and North Korea, cemented Iran's status as a primary US adversary and framed its nuclear activities within a narrative of existential threat (G. Perkovich, 2005, p. 4; Congressional Research, 2025, p. 2).

The 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) represented the most significant diplomatic achievement in US-Iran relations since 1979. Negotiated between Iran and the P5+1 (the United States, United Kingdom, France, Russia,

China, and Germany), the agreement imposed strict limits on Iran's nuclear program—including uranium enrichment levels, centrifuge numbers, and inspection protocols—in exchange for relief from multilateral and US sanctions (J. Pilat, 2015, pp. 44-45).

For proponents of diplomacy, the JCPOA demonstrated that engagement could produce verifiable constraints on Iran's nuclear activities while avoiding military conflict. IAEA inspectors repeatedly confirmed Iran's compliance with the agreement's terms. Yet from its inception, the agreement faced intense domestic opposition in the United States. Critics argued that it failed to address Iran's ballistic missile program, its regional activities, and the sunset clauses that would eventually allow some restrictions to expire.

2.3. Maximum Pressure and Unilateral Withdrawal

The narrative of US-Iran diplomacy shifted fundamentally on May 8, 2018, when President Donald Trump announced the unilateral US withdrawal from the JCPOA. Characterizing the agreement as a "decaying and rotten structure," Trump declared that "we cannot prevent an Iranian nuclear bomb under the decaying and rotten structure of this deal" (Al-Quds, 2026, p. 4). The administration subsequently imposed "maximum pressure" sanctions targeting virtually every sector of Iran's economy, including foreign companies doing business with Iran (U. Nation, 2025, p. 2).

From Tehran's perspective, the US withdrawal represented not merely a policy change but a fundamental betrayal—proof that American commitments could not be trusted. As a recent analysis, Al-Quds observed, the 2018 withdrawal "is still considered in Tehran as stark evidence of the fragility of American commitments" and "solidified the conviction that Washington does not hesitate to use agreements as temporary tools, subject to reversal when political calculations change" (Al-Quds, 2026, p. 4). This perception has become a central obstacle to subsequent diplomatic efforts. Iran responded to US sanctions by progressively reducing its compliance with the JCPOA's nuclear restrictions, resuming uranium enrichment beyond the agreement's limits and installing advanced centrifuges. By early 2025, US intelligence agencies assessed that Iran could enrich enough uranium for a nuclear weapon within weeks, though it had not yet resumed weapons-related activities.

3. The Current Crisis: War, Diplomacy, and the Erosion of Trust

The current crisis is qualitatively different: the familiar "shadow war" of proxies and covert action has given way to direct military strikes, the diplomatic track has collapsed into transactional crisis management and beneath it all, and bedrock of mutual distrust has hardened into certainty that the other's promises are worthless. Indeed, the collapse of credibility that makes meaningful diplomacy nearly impossible. Current developing issues—including the ongoing war, the fragmentation of Iran's leadership, and Gulf state mediation efforts—reflect not merely geopolitical competition but the consequences of a relationship in which negotiation itself has become weaponized

3.1. 2020-2025: Escalation and Abortive Diplomacy

The period following the JCPOA's collapse witnessed a series of escalating confrontations. On January 3, 2020, a US drone strike killed General Qasem Soleimani, commander of Iran's Quds Force, near Baghdad International Airport. Iran responded with missile strikes on US bases in Iraq, inflicting traumatic brain injuries on dozens of US personnel. The assassination, which Trump described as necessary to prevent an "imminent" attack, further entrenched Iranian convictions that the United States pursued regime change through military means.

Under President Joe Biden, the United States sought to revive the JCPOA through indirect negotiations in Vienna. These efforts foundered amid multiple obstacles: Iran's accelerated nuclear program, the election of hardline President Ebrahim Raisi, nationwide protests following the death of Mahsa Amini in September 2022, and Iran's provision of drones and missiles to Russia for use in Ukraine. By the time Trump returned to office in January 2025, the diplomatic landscape had shifted dramatically.

3.2. The 2025-2026 Negotiation Cycle

The most recent negotiation cycle, which began in April 2025 (U. Nation, 2025, p. 2) and continued through February 2026, exemplifies the structural pathologies of US-Iran diplomacy. High-level indirect talks, mediated by Oman, brought US special envoy Steve Witkoff and Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi together in Muscat. Multiple rounds followed, with mediators describing the third round in February 2026 as the "most intense" yet, characterized by "significant progress" and plans for technical follow-ups in Vienna (D. Yerepouni, 2026, p. 3).

However, less than 48 hours after the latest talks concluded, on February 28, 2026, the United States and Israel launched coordinated strikes against Iranian nuclear and military sites, sparking the current war. Omani Foreign Minister Badr Albusaidi, who had served as mediator, wrote in *The Economist* that the talks had been "on the verge of a real deal on the most difficult issue that divides them: Iran's nuclear energy programme." He continued: "So it was a shock but not a surprise when on February 28th—just a few hours after the latest and most substantive talks—Israel and America again launched an unlawful military strike against the peace that had briefly appeared really possible" (Yerepouni Daily News, 2026, March 23).

For Iranian officials, the February 2026 strikes confirmed a pattern: Washington uses negotiations to buy time, gather intelligence, or achieve tactical advantage before resorting to force. Iranian Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf has stated that no negotiations are underway, characterizing reports of talks as "fake news" designed to manipulate the financial and oil markets. This denial, however, coexists with reports from Pakistani, Egyptian, and Gulf officials that mediators continue to work to establish communication channels between the two sides.

3.3. The Current Military Situation

As of late March 2026, the United States and Iran are engaged in active armed conflict. Following the February 28 strikes, which Trump described as "major

combat operations," a sustained military campaign has unfolded across the region. Iran has launched multiple missile barrages targeting Israel, Gulf Arab states, and northern Iraq, while Israeli and US warplanes continue strikes on Iranian targets (Asianet Newsable, 2026, February 27).

The conflict has drawn in multiple regional actors. Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, and Shia militias in Iraq have conducted attacks in coordination with Iran. The United States has deployed approximately 5,000 additional Marines to the region, and reports suggest consideration of an amphibious assault on Kharg Island, a critical node in Iran's oil export infrastructure. Saudi Arabia has reported destroying Iranian drones targeting its oil-producing Eastern Province.

The humanitarian toll has been substantial. Iranian health authorities report over 1,500 deaths, while Lebanese authorities report more than 1,000 killed in Israeli strikes. Fifteen Israelis have been killed by Iranian strikes, along with 13 US military personnel and more than a dozen civilians in Gulf States and the occupied West Bank. The conflict has also disrupted global energy markets, with Brent crude prices rising above \$100 per barrel—an increase of approximately 40 percent since the war began (A. Quds, 2026, p. 1).

3.4. The Paradox of Simultaneous War and Negotiation

The most striking feature of the current moment is the simultaneous pursuit of war and diplomacy. On March 23, 2026, Trump posted on Truth Social that "the United States of America, and the country of Iran, have had, over the last two days, very good and productive conversations regarding a complete and total resolution of our hostilities in the Middle East"(A. Quds 2026, p. 3). Yet Iranian officials have categorically denied any such conversations, with Ghalibaf stating that "no negotiations have been held with the US" (A. Quds 2026, March 24, p. 3). Iran's foreign ministry has characterized Trump's remarks as "part of efforts to reduce energy prices and buy time" (A. Quds, 2026, March 24, p. 3). for military plans.

Analysts have interpreted Trump's statements as a form of "weaponized ambiguity" designed to achieve multiple objectives simultaneously. By claiming contact with unnamed Iranian officials, Trump aims to sow distrust within Iran's leadership, prompting hardliners to suspect their colleagues of seeking an off-ramp from the conflict. As Iran International observed, "In a system already shaped by fear and mistrust, public denials can deepen suspicion rather than contain it". Simultaneously, the suggestion of progress in negotiations provides an off-ramp for energy markets, temporarily easing price pressures.

This strategic use of ambiguity reflects a fundamental transformation of diplomacy itself. Rather than a mechanism for building mutual trust and reaching reciprocal agreements, negotiation has become an instrument of psychological warfare—a means of fracturing adversaries rather than reconciling with them. Whether any party retains sufficient credibility to make meaningful agreements possible remains an open question.

4. Analysis : The Trust Deficit and Its Consequences

The history of US-Iran relations since 1979 reveals a pattern that transcends specific disagreements over nuclear technology, regional influence, or sanctions relief (D. Wilber, 1954, p. 42). At its core, the relationship suffers from a structural trust deficit that makes conventional diplomacy exceptionally difficult (S. Landau, 1998, p. 63). This deficit has multiple sources: the foundational trauma of the 1953 coup, the humiliation of the hostage crisis, the experience of the Iran-Contra scandal, the unilateral abrogation of the JCPOA, the assassination of Soleimani, and most recently, the pattern of negotiations followed by strikes in 2025 and 2026 (Asianet Newsable, 2026 February 27).

4.1. Structural Obstacles to Diplomatic Resolution

For Iran, the United States is a hegemon whose commitments are contingent on domestic political calculations. The experience of the JCPOA—painstakingly negotiated, ratified by the UN Security Council, and abandoned by a single presidential decision—demonstrated that even multilateral agreements offer no guarantee of US compliance. The more recent experience of negotiating in Oman while the United States and Israel prepared military strikes has reinforced this conviction. As an analysis, Al-Quds concluded, "the problem is no longer in the content of American proposals as much as it is in the credibility of the party presenting them" (A. Quds, 2026, p. 2).

For the United States, Iran is a revolutionary power whose ideological commitments preclude stable agreements. The Islamic Republic's rhetoric of "Death to America," provided its support for groups designated as terrorist organizations, and its continued pursuit of nuclear capabilities despite years of sanctions suggest to US policymakers that Iran's leadership cannot be trusted to uphold agreements when doing so would contradict its revolutionary ideology (Asianet Newsable, 2026, p. 4).

4.2. Regional Implications

The breakdown of US-Iran diplomacy has profound implications for the Middle East region. The February 2026 war has drawn in multiple Gulf states, with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, and Bahrain all affected by Iranian missile and drone attacks (D. Yerepouni, 2026, p. 2). The closure of the Strait of Hormuz, through which approximately one-fifth of global oil supply passes, has disrupted energy markets and threatens to trigger a global recession.

Regional actors have adopted divergent approaches to the crisis. Oman, which has historically served as a mediator between Washington and Tehran, has been critical of US policy, with Foreign Minister Albusaidi characterizing the war as "unlawful" and warning that it represents "a grave miscalculation". Pakistan has offered to host negotiations, while Egypt and Turkey have also served as communication channels (D. Yerepouni, 2026, p. 2). Saudi Arabia, which in recent years had pursued a rapprochement with Iran, now finds its territory targeted by Iranian missiles and its oil infrastructure threatened.

The war has also exposed divisions within Iran's leadership. Trump's strategy of ambiguous engagement appears designed to exploit these divisions, creating uncertainty about who within Iran's hierarchy might be seeking an off-ramp. Indeed, the problem is not only whether there is a channel. It is whether anyone on the Iranian side still has the authority to make that channel meaningful. The fragmentation of decision-making authority within Iran, compounded by the difficulty of secure communication among leaders living in hiding, makes coherent negotiation exceptionally challenging.

4.3. The Future of US-Iran Diplomacy

Prospects for near-term diplomatic resolution appear limited. The February 28 strikes have created a new set of grievances that will require years, if not decades, to overcome. Iranian distrust of US commitments has been deepened by what Tehran views as a systematic pattern of "deception" in which diplomatic engagement serves as cover for military action. US demands—including complete nuclear disarmament, cessation of missile development, and ending support for regional proxies—represent fundamental challenges to Iran's strategic posture that its leadership has consistently rejected.

Yet there are also factors that might eventually compel a return to diplomacy. The military conflict has imposed significant costs on both sides, with US casualties, Iranian infrastructure destruction, and disruption to global energy markets. Regional actors, particularly Gulf states whose economies depend on stability, have strong incentives to promote de-escalation. And both the United States and Iran have historically demonstrated the capacity to engage when perceived interests align, as they did during the Afghanistan and Iraq wars when cooperation on counterterrorism occurred despite broader hostility.

Whether such pragmatic engagement can overcome the deep-seated trust deficit remains uncertain. The pattern of the past decade suggests that even when negotiators reach the verge of a real deal, as Omani mediators reported in February 2026, the structural dynamics of US-Iran relations—domestic political incentives for confrontation, the influence of third parties such as Israel, and the accumulated weight of historical grievances—can undermine diplomatic progress .

Conclusion

This paper has assessed the narrative of US-Iran diplomatic relations from the 1979 revolution to the ongoing. The central finding is that US-Iran relations have evolved from a pattern of strategic competition into a structural pathology in which the conditions needed for successful diplomacy—mutual trust, credible commitments, and shared understanding of acceptable outcomes—have largely collapsed. Each phase of the relationship, from the rupture of 1979-1981 through the oscillation of the 1980s, the nuclear diplomacy of the 2000s-2010s, and the current period of maximum pressure and military confrontation, has contributed to an accumulating trust deficit that now makes conventional diplomatic engagement exceptionally difficult.

The narrative of US-Iran relations has been shaped by competing historical memories that resist reconciliation. For the United States, the 1979 hostage crisis, Iran's support for groups designated as terrorist organizations, and its pursuit of nuclear capabilities frame Iran as an untrustworthy adversary whose ideological commitments preclude stable agreements. For Iran, the 1953 coup, the Iran-Contra scandal, the unilateral abrogation of the JCPOA, and the pattern of negotiations followed by military action—most recently in February 2026—frame the United States as a hegemon whose commitments are contingent on domestic political calculations and whose promises cannot be relied upon. The accumulated weight of four decades of hostility, reinforced by recent experiences in which negotiation has been weaponized rather than pursued in good faith, suggests that any such progress will require fundamental changes in both countries' approaches—changes that, at present, appear unlikely.

The assessment of US-Iran diplomatic relations thus reveals a cautionary tale about the limits of coercive diplomacy and the consequences of unilateral abrogation of agreements. When commitments can be abandoned without cost, when negotiation serves as cover for military action, and when each side's worst suspicions about the other are repeatedly confirmed, the space for peaceful resolution narrows. The Middle East's current crisis is not merely a conflict over nuclear programs or regional influence; it is the culmination of a four-decade process in which diplomacy itself has been systematically undermined.

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