

# **Explaining variation in U.S.–Iran relations after 1979**

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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Background

Much ink has been shed on the enduring enmity between the U.S. and Iran after the 1979 Iranian revolution. When not teetering on the edge of military confrontation, the two sides seem to have spent the past four decades pouring grievances into a “wall of mistrust”<sup>1</sup>. Relations between the two countries that began in a spring of mutual admiration in the eighteenth century seem all but frozen in a winter of hostility (Ghaznavian 2021). The U.S. considers the 1979 hostage crisis the inciting incident (Christopher and Kreisberg 1985; Penn 2009) while Iran pins the original sin on the 1953 U.S.-orchestrated coup that made Iranians suffer an absolute monarchy under the Shah (Kinzer 2003; 2007), a reliable U.S. ally. During the Iran-Iraq war, the U.S. first sought to bleed Iran and Iraq into a stalemate by providing Iran with the U.S.-made weapons it desperately needed (Byrne 2017). Once that bumbling effort turned into the Iran–Contra fiasco (Armstrong, Byrne and Blanton 1987), the U.S. tilted towards Saddam; attacked Iranian offshore oil rigs in 1987 and shot down an Iranian airliner over the Persian Gulf in 1988 (Blight *et al.* 2012). For its part, Iran was involved in the 1983 bombing of the U.S. Marines barracks in Beirut (DOD 1983) and supported kidnappings of westerners in the Middle East in the 1980s (Ranstorp 1997). In the 1990s a bevy of congressional sanctions aligned with President Clinton’s “dual containment” strategy made foreign investments in Iran—especially in Iran’s oil industry, nearly impossible (Gause 1994). Short on cash and unable to procure modern weapon systems due to arms embargos, Iran countered dual containment by an asymmetric defense doctrine relying on emerging technologies like unmanned aerial systems and proxy forces able to target U.S. allies and assets in the region (Wehrey *et al.* 2009).

The watershed moment in U.S.–Iran relations arrived on January 29, 2002, when President Bush lumped Iran, Iraq, and North Korea into an “axis of evil” and accused Iran of pursuing terror and weapons of mass destruction. This caused an earthquake in Iranian foreign policy and defense establishments, diminishing the moderates’ hold on policy and vindicating hardliners’ never-trust-America approach (Heradstveit and Bonham 2007). Enjoying a popular mandate, Iranian President Khatami had engineered a pattering rapprochement with Saudi Arabia, Iran’s key regional rival (Bahgat 2000), and had managed to enhance relations with the EU from “critical dialog” to “constructive engagement” early in his second term (Kaussler 2008). Seemingly unaware of the extent of neoconservatives’ ascendance in Washington and their plans for the Middle East, Tehran had also cooperated with the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, furnishing intelligence and helping coax feuding Afghan factions into accepting a new constitution (Dobbins 2008). After the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, Iran offered the U.S. a “grand bargain” with concessions on the nuclear issue and Iran–Israel relations (Kessler 2006; Dinmore 2003). The Bush administration, however, rebuffed the offer unceremoniously. Evidently, “real men” who intended “to go to Tehran” after conquering Baghdad had no incentive to negotiate with their next target (Hastings Dunn 2007). In response, Tehran ensured that U.S. forces would be bogged down in Iraq (Mausner *et al.* 2012). Supported by operators from the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC)

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<sup>1</sup> Former Iranian president Khatami coined a “high wall of mistrust” as a shorthand to describe the state of Iran–U.S. relations (Schneider 2000). The concept has endured among Iranian policy makers of opposing political stripes with the erstwhile “moderate” Iranian foreign minister Zarif hoping that the 2015 nuclear deal could bring down the wall (Gass 2015) and the current “hardline” Iranian foreign minister Amir-Abdollahian recently suggesting that the Biden administration could chip away at the wall by removing Trump-era sanctions before U.S. reentry into the nuclear deal (Wright 2022).

(Wehrey *et al.* 2003) and in parallel with Iraqi Sunni insurgents, various Iraqi Shia groups fought a pitched insurgency against the U.S. military (Byman 2008) until Iraq and the U.S. reached a status of forces agreement in 2008 in which the U.S. agreed to scupper plans for permanent bases in Iraq and withdraw the bulk of U.S. combat forces from the country. On the nuclear front, Iran resumed uranium enrichment in the waning days of Khatami's presidency in 2005, backing out of an agreement it had struck with the troika of UK, France, and Germany (E3) to suspend enrichment activities while negotiations for a permanent deal were underway (IAEA 2005). The U.S. stood on the sidelines but insisted on zero-enrichment inside Iran (Weisman and O'Neil 2006). This U.S. position turned Iran–E3 negotiations during Ahmadinejad's first term (2005–2009) into a futile exercise in which everyone escalated: Iran enhanced enrichment to 20 percent and accelerated work on advanced ballistic missiles; the U.S. piled on more sanctions to strangle the Iranian economy and the EU followed suit, not only to sidestep Washington's wrath, but also to gain leverage during the de-escalation phase of the conflict.

The Obama administration took three years to reach a consistent approach to the Iranian dossier (Maloney 2011). Initially, democratic foreign policy luminaries argued for ever more punitive and broad economic sanctions (Pollack *et al.* 2009). Compared with direct military action favored by neoconservatives such as Clawson and Eisenstadt (2008), sanctions offered a more attractive option: While coercive, they were considered less risky and could motivate disaffected Iranians to question the wisdom of Iranian foreign policies in whose response sanctions were being imposed. In this sense, Green Movement—nationwide protests against Ahmadinejad's irregular winning of a second term in 2009, offered a venue for sanctions to work. This position misread the potency of the Green Movement and prevented the U.S. from formulating rigorous nuclear nonproliferation options, save deepening the sanctions regime to include public Iranian banks, insurance companies and shipping lines. Yet, by 2012 the Iranian government was firmly in control despite soaring inflation crossing the 20 percent mark (World Bank 2022). Realists in the administration pointed out that in time Iran would adapt to sanctions. Having lost leverage, the U.S. would then find it unappealing to reach a negotiated settlement from a weaker position, paving the way to a costly military option with unknowable consequences. Eventually they won the policy debate by arguing that U.S. foreign policy priorities rested with curbing the rise of China instead of committing to a Middle Eastern security architecture fraught with dubious benefits. In a blatant repudiation of the neoconservative vision for the Middle East, the Obama administration acceded that Iran could “in principle” enrich uranium on its soil (Vaez and Sadjadpour 2013), leading to secret bilateral negotiations in Oman in 2011 and culminating in the joint comprehensive plan of action (JCPOA) of 2015. What would happen to U.S. allies in the region? Saudi Arabia and Iran need to learn how to “share the neighborhood”, responded President Obama (Goldberg 2016).

While campaigning, candidate Trump had promised to leave the JCPOA (Lorber 2016). Soon this campaign promise turned into the President's personal obsession in the first years of a tumultuous period in U.S. foreign policy. However, even with overwhelming congressional support, prevailing over the bureaucracy—the swamp in Trump's lexicon, proved to be illusive in 2017–2018. Citing the disarmament and nonproliferation benefits the U.S. was deriving from the nuclear deal, Secretary of Defense Mattis and Secretary of State Tillerson opposed Trump's plan to withdraw from it (McLaughlin 2018). Yet Trump had already sided with the UAE, a prominent if not conspicuous campaign donor (Kirkpatrick and Vogel 2019), Saudi Arabia and Israel on viewing Iran as the troublemaker of the Middle East (Fulbright 2018). Thus the U.S. began a persistent

“maximum pressure” campaign spearheaded by the National Security Advisor Bolton and Secretary of State Pompeo who had replaced Tillerson (Lynch 2020). Officially the campaign aimed to force Tehran to renegotiate a “better deal”. However, convinced that Trump’s maximum pressure policy merely hid regime change as its ultimate objective and without indications that Trump or future U.S. administrations would implement deals they would reach with Iran instead of renegeing on them when convenient, Iranian leaders refused to negotiate with the U.S. Relations between the two countries soured palpably: Iran shot down a U.S. Global Hawk UAV; the U.S. assassinated General Soleimani, the commander of the IRGC Quds Force, in Iraq and Iran retaliated with lobbing ballistic missiles at a U.S. base in Iraq. Attacking Iran remained a policy option in the White House even in the waning days of Trump presidency when the U.S. was mired in post-election turmoil in 2020 and early 2021.

Table 1 highlights significant milestones in post-1979 U.S.–Iran relations. Note that every U.S. president since Clinton has imposed his own sanctions on Iran, with President Trump imposing an unprecedented regime of sanctions designed to incite popular grievances and unrest; presenting a stark choice to the Iranian government on whether “they want their people to eat” in Secretary Pompeo’s forthright formulation of U.S. policy (Cole 2018). The issue of how sanctions affect U.S.–Iran relations merit an early mention when dealing with textual event data in the U.S.–Iran timeline. Sanctions are often announced in a bureaucratic language devoid of signs indicating conflict. The “sanctions dialect” as it were, may force algorithms for automatic content extraction and scoring to underestimate how harmful sanctions can be to the tenor of relations between countries, in this case the U.S. and Iran.

<b>Era</b>	<b>Events</b>
Carter	1979: U.S. embassy staff in Tehran taken hostage 1980: U.S. freezes Iranian assets in the U.S. 1980: Iran accuses the U.S. of backing the Nojeh coup attempt 1980: Operation Eagle Claw fails to free the hostages 1980: U.S. blesses Iraq invasion of Iran
Reagan I	1980: Iran releases the hostages, minutes into Reagan’s term 1982: U.S. removes Iraq from the SST list 1982: U.S. begins sharing battlefield intelligence with Iraq 1983: Iran supports bombing of USMC barracks in Beirut 1983: Rumsfeld visits Baghdad as Reagan’s envoy, solidifying U.S. support 1983: U.S. arms Iraq with materiel, and chemical weapons precursors 1984: U.S. and Iraq resume diplomatic relations 1984: U.S. and Iran begin tit for tat in the Tanker War 1984: U.S. scuttles UNSC resolution condemning Iraq’s chemical weapons use
Reagan II	1985: U.S. facilitates arms sales to Iran, using the proceeds to fund the Contra 1987: U.S. places an embargo on imports from Iran 1987: U.S. hit Iranian oil installations in Operation Praying Mantis 1988: U.S. seeks to implicate Iran on Iraq’s CW use on Halabja 1988: USS Vincennes shoots down Iranian airliner over the Persian Gulf
Bush 41	1990: Iran remains neutral in U.S.–Iraq war 1991: Iran opposes the U.S. Middle East peace process
Clinton I	1993: U.S. embarks on the “dual containment” policy

	1995: U.S. sanctions Iranian oil industry
	1996: U.S. signs ISLA into law
Clinton II	2000: Albright's interview dashes hope for rapprochement
Bush 43, I	2001: Iran cooperates with the U.S.' invasion of Afghanistan after 9/11
	2002: U.S. President Bush includes Iran in the Axis of Evil
	2003: U.S. rebuffs Iran's "package deal" to resolve all outstanding mutual issues
	2004: Iran orchestrates an insurgency against U.S. forces in Iraq
Bush 43, II	2005: U.S. sanctions individuals connected to the Iranian nuclear program
	2006: U.S. sanctions Iranian banks from indirectly accessing U.S. banking
Obama I	2010: U.S. signs CISADA into law
	2011: U.S. and Iran begin secret nuclear negotiations in Oman
Obama II	2014: Iran opposes U.S. Syria policy and helps Assad quell Islamist insurgency
	2015: U.S., Iran, EU, E3, Russia and China agree on the JCPOA
Trump	2017: U.S. signs CAATSA into law
	2018: U.S. withdraws from the JCPOA and reimposes previous U.S. sanctions
	2019: Iran shoots down the U.S. Navy Global Hawk UAV over the Persian Gulf
	2019: U.S. conducts cyberattacks against the IRGC
	2019: U.S. sanctions senior IRGC commanders and Iranian Foreign Minister
	2020: U.S. assassinates General Soleimani, commander of the IRGC Quds Force
	2020: Iran strikes U.S. bases in Iraq with ballistic missiles
Biden	2021: U.S. enters indirect talks with Iran to rejoin the JCPOA

**Table 1:** Significant events in the U.S.–Iran relations during 1979–2020. Source: Compiled by author.

## 1.2 Research puzzle

As discussed in Section 1.1, the post-revolutionary history of U.S.–Iran relations is rife with missed opportunities, broken commitments, misperceptions of intent and capability, asymmetric information, and bureaucratic turf wars in Washington and factional infighting in Iran. How can patterns of interaction between the two countries be explained?

It is tempting to dismiss relations between the U.S. and Iran as merely hostile. While conflict captures much of U.S.–Iran relations post-1979, it also buries significant variation in relations between the two countries even when the overall tone is hostile. For example, any faithful rendition of U.S.–Iran relations shows substantial differences during Obama's and Trump's presidencies. The same applies to, for instance, the relative calm of Clinton years versus hardening of U.S. policy against Iran after 9/11. *Qualitatively*, U.S.–Iran relations can be said to follow *regimes* of confrontation, deterioration, stagnation, or accommodation. Confrontation corresponds to a sharp decline in relations, deterioration to a mild decline, stagnation to a negligible decline or negligible improvement, and accommodation to a mild improvement. These *labels* of historical record are not meant as precise descriptions, but as evidence to show that U.S.–Iran relations have experienced noteworthy variation even when wandering in a generally hostile territory in the past forty years. Table 2 summarizes my application of descriptive labels to every U.S. presidency during 1980–2020. As will be discussed later in the section on data, fine-grained quantitative event data confirm these coarse labels aggregated over four years.

<b>President</b>	<b>Relations regime</b>
Reagan I	Confrontation
Reagan II	Deterioration
Bush 41	Stagnation
Clinton I	Stagnation
Clinton II	Stagnation
Bush I	Confrontation
Bush II	Stagnation
Obama I	Accommodation
Obama II	Accommodation
Trump	Confrontation

**Table 2:** Qualitative description of U.S.–Iran relations per U.S. presidency during 1980–2020.

### 1.3 Significance

Four decades of U.S.–Iran relations has spawned a cottage industry of ex-officials peddling memoirs detailing salacious quirks of the policy process (Bolton 2020, Mousavian 2014), think tankers promoting policy talking points (Sadjadpour 2022) and academics reconstructing large-picture histories (Leverett and Leverett 2010). Unlike most other works on U.S.–Iran relations, my research focuses on explaining *variation* in U.S.–Iran relations, not how single foreign policy decisions were formulated and adopted or how cascades of foreign policy decisions led to specific outcomes. Therefore, a satisfactory answer to my research question fills a gap in our theoretical knowledge of why we observe *variation* in relations among states with substantial differences in power *under* persistent conflict that fall short of war. This attempt at explaining variation in U.S.–Iran relations is highly likely the first of its kind. It seems that students of international relations with a theoretical bend may not have had access to the substantive knowledge required or were otherwise not motivated to tackle this issue while area experts, for example historians of modern Middle East, who enjoy field knowledge and motivation may have lacked a proper theoretical vantage point. My work can be generalized to other cases where hegemons and much less powerful countries are locked in longstanding conflict.

## 2 Literature review

No theoretical work directly addresses variation in U.S.–Iran relations after the 1979 revolution, except Fearon (1995) and Malici and Walker (2016), which can be *adapted* to match U.S.–Iran relations because of the type of puzzle they tackle. Therefore, my review focuses on analytic work either reflecting on various historical episodes between the two countries, for example, the Iran–Contra affair during the Reagan administration, or delving into Iranian or U.S. foreign policy in general.

In this tour de force examination of neorealist theories of war, Fearon (1995) shows that the usual accounts of why war happens fail to explain why leaders cannot reach a negotiated settlement prewar, instead of hurtling into risky war. He proposes three causal logics that explain why rational decision makers opt for war: private information, commitment problem and issue indivisibilities. Fearon’s three causal logics can explain many episodes of U.S.–Iran relations, most recently President Trump’s decision to cease U.S. participation in the Iran nuclear deal, a classic example of a commitment problem. Assuming sanctions are economic warfare, under President Obama, the U.S. seemed to have private information on the tempo of economic sanctions it was unveiling and



their impacts on the Iranian economy. Finally, the Ayatollah Khamenei, who has the final say in setting Iranian foreign policy, has always maintained that entering negotiations with the U.S. on “specific issues” is antithetical to the survival of the Islamic Republic, because once the U.S. receives what it seeks, it will bring other issues to the negotiating table merely to comply with previous commitments. President Biden’s conditionalizing the U.S. return to the Iran deal on follow-on negotiations reflects the prominence of issue indivisibility when countries of vastly differing powers are locked in conflict. However, as insightful as Fearon’s postulates can be about why countries go to war, it is ill-suited to my question. In essence, I have turned Fearon’s question upside down: Why is there substantive variation indicating various degrees of conflict and cooperation in U.S.–Iran relations, even when overall relations are hostile?

If Fearon (1995) challenged the usual realist accounts of war; Malici and Walker (2016) propose that the dynamics of U.S.–Iran relations can be explained by a conflict in “national roles” the two sides have chosen. Their work is perhaps the only effort I have come across that has sought to operationalize a formal theory of foreign policy decision making (role theory) and apply it to the U.S.–Iran relations. Like Ramazani (2008) Malici and Walker (2016) emphasize the notion of independence among Iranian decision makers. Unlike Ramazani (2008) whose concept of independence relates to a persistent historical aspiration, they view independent and sovereign as “national roles” that Iran wishes to play. This national role is in direct conflict with that of the U.S., which as a hegemon casts other nations into rebel or client roles. To demonstrate the capabilities of their role conflict model, Malici and Walker (2016) examine role conflicts between the U.S. and Iran during the oil nationalization crisis and coups of 1953, subsequent patron-client roles between the U.S. and Iran during the Shah’s rule, the hostage crisis of 1979–1980 and the 9/11 attacks, and conclude that a viable role forward for the U.S. and Iran is to recast their roles as “partners”. Yet they seem to be oblivious to the fact that national role conflicts arise from disparities of power and do not provide a convincing answer as to why the U.S. would adopt a partner role with a country it considers vastly less powerful.

While Ramazani (2008), Malici and Walker (2016) view independence as a “secular” aspiration and national role as the fundamental building block of Iranian foreign policy, especially vis-à-vis the U.S., Mohammad Nia (2012) adopts a constructivist approach to explain why Iranian foreign policy towards the U.S. has remained relatively unchanged and defies various stripes of realist, neorealist and neoliberal “rational” explanations. To understand a country’s foreign policy, argues Mohammad Nia, one needs to study the basic features of the “discursive structures” dominating the minds of the policy makers. In Iran’s case, these discursive structures are derived from Islam and are “ideological”, therefore they defy the self-interest and power maximizing logic of the nation-state. Mohammad Nia’s claim that Iranian foreign policy decisions are “ideological” (in whatever broad sense ideology is defined) is commonplace but it does not match the record of U.S.–Iran relations in which Iran has pragmatically preferred survival above all else.

Historical analyses of U.S.–Iran relations often begin with a watershed moment, usually the 1953 coup orchestrated by the CIA in Iran. In this vein Venn and Goode (1999) analyze U.S.–Iran relations in the aftermath of the nationalization of British oil interests in 1953. They focus on the career path of Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh as he struggled to free Iran from foreign influence and explain how his memory continues to affect U.S.–Iran relations. Ven and Goode hardly deal with the why and how of the coups or how the U.S. Cold War habit of toppling

“unfriendly independents” influences current Iranian thinking on U.S. foreign policy. On the plus side, they detail Anglo-American perceptions of Iranians as “clients”, which is usually omitted from the analysis of U.S. foreign policy decision making.

Updating her 1981 classic *Roots of the Revolution*, Nikki Keddie (2006) adds chapters on the results of the revolution. Keddie’s historiography deals with social forces instead of tackling complexities of political decision making. Her reading of the 1953 coups is among the earliest sympathetic to Prime Minister Mosaddegh and implicating the U.S. in the coups. However, in detailing the results of the revolution, Keddie ventures off to foreign policy: Iran-Iraq war, Persian Gulf War, and the impact of 9/11 on U.S.–Iran relations. In this foreign ground, Keddie shies away from explaining the logic, process, and institutional setting of specific Iranian foreign policy decisions. However, to her credit, she identifies various policy preferences within the Iranian establishment and connects them to the evolution the worldview of Iranian elites. Abrahamian’s *Khomeinism* (1993) is yet another attempt at bringing identity into decision-making, thus U.S.–Iran relations. Essays comprising *Khomeinism* are unified by a relentless focus on religion. Abrahamian (1993) examines the Islamic Republic’s manipulation of history to enhance the clergy’s reputation as defenders of ordinary Iranians against foreign influences, contending that Iran is challenging to negotiate with because of the cultural and religious beliefs its leaders. This can explain Iran’s seemingly irrational tactical decisions vis-à-vis the U.S, for example in tanker wars of 1986–1988. However, it can also be misleading. *Khomeinism* is severely out of date, missing the 1990s in which the Islamic Republic increasingly resembled a status quo power. However, it is still useful as a reference to the heady days of the Islamic Republic.

Using primary sources and personal accounts of Iranian and American officials, *The Eagle and the Lion* (Bill 1988) details U.S.–Iran relations from mid-1940s to mid-1980s. When it came out in 1988, the U.S. was supporting Saddam in the Iran-Iraq war in a cat and mouse game with Iran in the Persian Gulf. So, it was initially considered a controversial indictment of U.S. policy and caused an uproar in the Middle East studies circles. Three decades later however, Bill’s criticism of U.S. foreign policy is viewed as canonical. Bill also details U.S. interactions with Iran after the revolution and the Reagan administration’s approach to the Iran-Iraq war, especially the Iran-Contra affair, but does not tie often keen observations to broader theoretical conclusions. Nonetheless, this much-cited book is still a credible source as it captures essential causes of post-revolution animosity between the U.S. and Iran.

After the Iran-Iraq war, a “moderate” administration came to power in Tehran, ushering an era of reconstruction and attempting to normalize relations with Europe. This coincided with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Bush 41 administration’s defeat of Saddam Hussain in the Persian Gulf war and his subsequent aspirations to reconfigure the Middle East security architecture in an era when the value of old U.S. allies were to be re-evaluated because of new circumstances on the ground. The 1997 presidential elections in Iran replaced “moderates” by “reformists” who wished to rebuild relations with the U.S. This gave rise to overtly optimistic analyses on the potential to reset U.S.–Iran relations and popularized notions of factional infighting in the Iranian polity as a major driver of foreign policy decisions. Wright and Bakhash (1997) epitomize that zeitgeist, coming out after Khatami’s landslide victory in the 1997 presidential elections in Iran and the emergence of the reform movement in the country.



Khatami had beaten Khamenei's favorite candidate and talked of "dialog" and "civil society". Tehran's new rhetoric excited journalists and policy analysts in Washington with tantalizing possibilities of an opening in the U.S.–Iran relation during Clinton's second term. Therefore, it was common to argue, as Wright and Bakhash (1997) did, that U.S. containment had not worked and that given Iran's apparent willingness to shifting its positions, the U.S. would be wise to devise a well-thought roadmap with practical and concrete steps to eliminate the longstanding cycle of hostility and suspicion between the two countries. This enthusiasm was punctured by an interview in which Secretary of State Albright divided the Iranian leadership into "elected" and "appointed" and called on appointed few i.e., Ayatollah Khamenei not to stand on people's way, thus hardening the Ayatollah's position and setting back the clock on a possible opening.

While others were busy hyping exciting possibilities, Buchta (1999) popularized Iranian factional politics in the U.S. a decade after the Warren Commission glossed over the issue in the Iran–Contra affair, helping etch a monolithic image of the Iranian polity in the U.S. Buchta (1999) argued that the political system in Iran has a myriad of overlapping power centers, not only making a free and credible electoral process difficult, but also creating substantial policy differences between various factions making up the reform movement and preventing a peaceful evolution of the system to a more democratic state. A precursor to the "moderate" versus "hardliner" trope, Buchta's work came out at the height of the reform movement in Iran and provided a ready shorthand to everything Iranian to policy types in DC who could not be bothered with nuance and ignored how the complexity of power structures in Iran shapes the country's formal and informal processes of foreign policy making. As a guide to the fragmented and contentious foreign policy scene in Iran, Buchta's monograph captures essential turf wars and ideological tendencies of various institutional actors, shattering the "unitary actor" assumption of realism along the way. However, by tightly linking actors' foreign and domestic policy preferences, Buchta conflates the institutional roles of the military, especially the IRGC, with their ideological bend.

Bush's 2000 victory and the subsequent global war on terror (GWOT) shifted the analytic discourse on U.S.–Iran relations once more. The first signs of the sea change that would become the subject of much opining in the next decade came when President Bush lumped Iran with North Korea and Iraq into "an axis of evil" in 2002, after Iran helped the U.S. invade and occupy Afghanistan and supported U.S. efforts in forming an Afghan government. Being labeled axis of evil not only etched an image of the U.S. in the minds of Iranian foreign policy decision makers as "the hand that merely taketh" but solidified their belief that the U.S. policy vis-à-vis Iran seems "irrational" only when its objectives were construed to motivate change in Iran's behavior. Viewed as a lever to change Iran itself, that is, to achieve regime change, U.S. policy would regain not only rationality, but also urgency. Never a people to discount threats, Iranians reacted swiftly, turning Iraq into a nightmare for the U.S. military.

Cummings, Abrahamian and Ma'oz (2006) argue for an alternative to "containment", detailing U.S. interactions with Iran especially the axis of evil designation by President Bush. Abrahamian explores impacts of U.S. interventions on Iranian domestic politics and foreign policy in broad strokes and concludes that if U.S. policy remains the same, no evidence supports the notion that Iran will enter a stable agreement with the U.S. While Abrahamian's central claim has stood the test of recent history, he covers little new ground since his 1993 *Khomeinism* and waves through salient developments in the Iranian polity after the Iran-Iraq war without recalibrating his

“ideological” lens. In contrast, Slavin (2009) delves deep into setting up the institutional scene in Iranian foreign policy decision making, painstakingly going over the IRGC, MOFA, NSC and their functions. She then examines foreign policy viewpoints of opposing factions such as the reformists, conservatives and “principlists” and how they view Iran’s collaboration with the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, subsequent branding as axis of evil by President Bush, and Iran’s rebuffed “grand bargain” of 2003. In essence, Slavin (2009) captures conventional wisdom in Washington at the beginning of Ahmadinejad’s second term and before biting U.S. sanctions paved the way to nuclear negotiations but ignores these actors’ motivations on why they take the positions they take.

### **3 Research design**

#### **3.1. Theory**

Can international relations theories house a question on variation *within* an established regime of interstate relations, in our case one of entrenched enmity? At first glance, it appears not, because realist, liberal and constructivist schools are primarily concerned with explaining the overall frame of relations, in our case hostility, not variations within it. To do so requires a specific model built for the countries involved. However, since any such model picks elements of these dominant theoretical strands, let us briefly examine how they can be applied to U.S.–Iran relations.

*Realism.* Realists postulate that given enormous disparity of power between Iran and the U.S.; Iran’s failure to form or join countervailing coalitions or bilateral alliances against the U.S., and U.S.’ success in forming long-lasting coalitions against Iran, the U.S. can threaten Iran’s survival while Iran cannot threaten U.S.’ survival. Therefore, the U.S. has no *incentive* to compromise with Iran while Iran has no *choice* but to form nonstate alliances that can threaten U.S. core assets and interests in the Middle East. In this configuration of power, the U.S. will press on to include *everything*, including guarantees on Iran’s survival, in a negotiated settlement, which it will violate until regime change in Iran or fragmentation of the country. This approach explains the thrust of U.S. policy in much of its relations with Iran after 1979. However, it fails to explain why the President Clinton sought better relations with Iran in his second term. It also relegates the JCPOA to a disarmament arrangement that the U.S. had no intention of implementing in good faith. Yet, the Obama administration did implement the JCPOA. More critically, the unitary actor assumption of realism can hardly be applied to U.S.–Iran relations. Since President Carter’s initial sanctions against Iran in 1980, U.S. Congress has not only been in lockstep with the executive branch but vigorously pursued its own policy agenda. During the Obama administration’s negotiations with Iran, Congress turned from a force multiplier to the executive branch into an independent player, co-captaining U.S. foreign policy on Iran. After forty years of presence around Iran, the U.S. military has also emerged as a less apparent but no less significant bureaucratic player whose policy preferences have shaped successive administrations’ approach toward Iran (Crist 2013). On the Iranian side, fights between the elected executive branch and the IRGC in regulating Iran’s relations with the U.S. are well documented.

*Liberalism.* If realists focus on disparity of power to explain U.S.–Iran relations, liberals point to the existence of few technological, commercial, economic or military interdependencies that bind Iran and the U.S. after the 1979 Iranian revolution and to lack of a conceptual basis like democratic values or binding international bodies like the World Trade Organization to lower cooperation costs between the U.S. and Iran, and conclude that the two countries cannot escape from the current confrontational equilibrium to a cooperative equilibrium because such a move is *inefficient* for

both parties. While the liberal diagnosis of U.S.' and Iran's incentives and opportunity costs for maintaining the confrontational equilibrium are informative, their conception of improvement in relations resembles a profound change like Sadat's 1978 about-face more than *incremental* change within a confrontational regime. Liberals' focus on equilibria, as trajectories that remain in steady state, underscores the point that they too may be ill-equipped to explain variations that have occurred in U.S.–Iran relations. For example, President Clinton's decision to announce sanctions on Iranian petroleum industry in early 1990s when American oil companies were willing to reenter the Iranian market cannot be explained by the liberal approach.

*Constructivism.* Unlike realists and liberals that base their views of interstate relations on material foundations of power and economic interdependence, constructivists view identity as the driving force behind emerging patterns of relations among nation-states. In this case, constructivists argue that Iran's self-image of an historically independent polity predates the modern nation-state and prioritizes independence over modern values such as democracy and human rights while the U.S. views its role in the international system as that of a benevolent hegemon, a "shining city on a hill", an exceptional nation tasked with expanding its frontiers indefinitely (Grandin 2019). These conflicting self-images locks the two in conflict. The U.S. and Iran cannot have "normal" relations unless one side abandons its national self-image and role. Since world events in the past four decades have simply amplified and solidified these national roles, the two states cannot be expected to normalize relations soon. Rigid identity arguments advanced by constructivists cannot explain various episodes of U.S. and Iran pragmatism and cooperation, limited as they have been. For example, Iran helped the U.S. in its invasion of Afghanistan and in setting up the post-invasion political order in the country. Most recently and in the midst of intense negotiations to revive the JCPOA, Iranian leaders have tacitly disapproved of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

To summarize, after the 1979 revolution, Iran's refusal to play client and its appetite for charting an independent course was at odds with the U.S. self-image of a hegemon patron "conquering frontiers" by turning nations into clients. Moreover, diversification of U.S. oil supplies away from Iran and Iran's technology base away from the U.S. after the Iran–Iraq war meant that the two countries had little incentive to find common ground, especially when the dissolution of the Soviet Union had lowered Iran's value as a potential U.S. ally. Finally, enormous difference in power between the two has ensured that neither the U.S. nor Iran is incentivized to steer away from a confrontation. However, none of these hypotheses explains variation in U.S.–Iran relations. A proper explanation of variations in U.S.–Iran relations requires a model coherently borrowing elements from realist and liberal schools. I will present one such model below.

### **3.2 Model**

Borrowing elements from the realist and liberal hypotheses, my model to explain variation in U.S.–Iran relations starts off with an observation that U.S.–Iran relations cannot be understood without

- a. Measures of U.S. power in the international system.
- b. A broader context of the U.S. security architecture in the Middle East.
- c. Domestic political constraints in the U.S. and Iran alike.

In my model, *a* and *c* can be viewed as exogenously changing and shaping the environment or as control variables in an applied setting, because U.S.–Iran relations do not directly affect them. For

example, it can be safely assumed that U.S.–Iran relations do not meaningfully increase or decrease U.S. gross domestic product (GDP) as a percentage of global economic output, which can be thought of as a measure of U.S. power. The same logic applies to the ruling party in the U.S: U.S. voters’ preferences for Clinton versus George Herbert Walker Bush or for Obama versus Romney were hardly informed by U.S.–Iran relations at the time. Relations between the U.S. and its regional allies however require a deeper look at the dynamics of interactions among them. In other words, what we observe as confrontation, deterioration, stagnation, and accommodation in “U.S.–Iran relations” is merely one side of a multibody problem in the Middle East.

To unpack triangular relations among the U.S., Iran, and U.S.’ regional allies, I should connect concepts of threat perception and interests to outcomes of U.S. –Iran relations as follows:

*Confrontation.* When the U.S. as the patron and its regional allies as clients perceive the threat emanating from Iran to their interests *equally highly*, they ally to escalate tension with Iran. In this scenario, U.S. interests are separate from those of its clients. For example, in the Reagan and Bush 41 eras, U.S. interest in confronting Iran had a lot to do with access to the Middle East oil while U.S. clients’ interest in confronting Iran related to the threat posed by Iranian revolutionary fervor to the survival of their form of governance. This alliance during the Reagan, Bush 41 and Trump eras explains U.S. hostility towards Iran by both push and pull. The U.S. pushes for hostility and is pulled into hostility at the same time. When the U.S. patron and regional clients differ in their Iranian threat perception, either one can perceive the Iranian threat more acutely. If the U.S. perceive higher threat emanating from Iran than its allies, the determining factor is U.S.’ own stake, often a function of how much it needs access to the resources in the region: Low U.S. need to access resources leads to stagnation; high U.S. need leads to deterioration. If the U.S. has a lower threat perception than its regional clients, high U.S. need leads to deterioration again, while low U.S. need leads to accommodation. Table 3 shows this dynamic.

Threat perception	U.S. own interests at stake	
	High	Low
U.S. higher than its regional clients	Deterioration	Stagnation
U.S. lower than its regional clients	Deterioration	Accommodation

**Table 3:** Outcomes of U.S.–Iran relations based on U.S. and its regional allies threat perception and U.S. interest in the Middle East.

*Stagnation.* When Iranian threat is perceived by the U.S. as more acute than U.S. regional clients, but the U.S. stake in the region is low, U.S.–Iran relations do not deteriorate further, but stagnate. This is because there is no pull from inside the region for the U.S. to engage. The most conspicuous epoch in this dynamic happened during the Clinton administration when Saudi Arabia lowered U.S. protection cost by directly engaging with Iran. This did not cause an improvement in U.S.–Iran relations, because the U.S. could not allow a strengthened Iran after decimating Iraq in the Persian Gulf war; thus, upsetting the regional balance of power, and gifting Iran what it could not achieve in eight years of war with Iraq.

*Deterioration.* As can be seen in the table above, when the U.S. and its regional clients have different threat perceptions, it does not matter which side perceives higher threats emanating from Iran, so long as the U.S. has significant interests in the region. In this case, U.S.–Iran relations will

deteriorate. This independence of outcomes from threat perceptions implies that if U.S. regional allies do not perceive to be threatened highly by Iran, the U.S. can corral regional support for its stance vis-à-vis Iran in exchange for better relations with the U.S., which could first be worsened to ensure better relations do indeed offer value to regional clients (clients climb-up). If on the other hand, U.S. regional clients feel more threatened by Iran than the U.S., they will pay a protection price for what the U.S. would eventually do to advance its own interest (U.S. double dipping).

The Bush 43 administration is the natural candidate for this era in U.S.–Iran relations. Here relations between the two countries generally deteriorated regardless of the dynamics of the U.S.–Saudi relations or Saudi threat perceptions of Iran. In fact, Saudis had already forged somewhat stable security cooperation with the reformist government in Tehran up until 2005 due to low Saudi threat perception and came around to supporting the U.S. in its quest against Iran only after Ahmadinejad came to power in 2005. In this era, the root cause of U.S.–Iran enmity, and the crux of U.S. interests in the region lies in Iraq. Here the two countries engaged in a brutal battle for influence, with Iran orchestrating a successful insurgency against the U.S.-led coalition forces and the U.S. engineering the nuclear crisis, partly in retaliation for its defeat and withdrawal from Iraq by 2008. Theoretically, the Bush years witnessed the emergence of a mixed block of state actors like Iran and Syria and nonstate actors like Hezbollah and various Iraqi militias called the Axis of Resistance, challenging and counterbalancing the U.S. security architecture in the Middle East. Therefore, regardless of the internal dynamics of the relations between U.S. and the constellation of its clients in the region, U.S. interests simply trumped all else.

Up to this point, I have characterized variation in U.S.–Iran relations as regimes of confrontation, deterioration, stagnation, and accommodation and have outlined systemic, regional, and domestic conditions that may give rise to any of these regimes. In the Section 4, I delve into quantitative data on U.S.–Iran relations and how my model can be *partially* tested with available data.

## 4 Data

To turn my conceptual model in Section 3.2 into a model with dependent and explanatory variables, I will first introduce variables that characterize the quality or status of U.S.–Iran relations as the dependent variables. I will then proceed to a discussion of explanatory variables as they relate to my conceptual model.

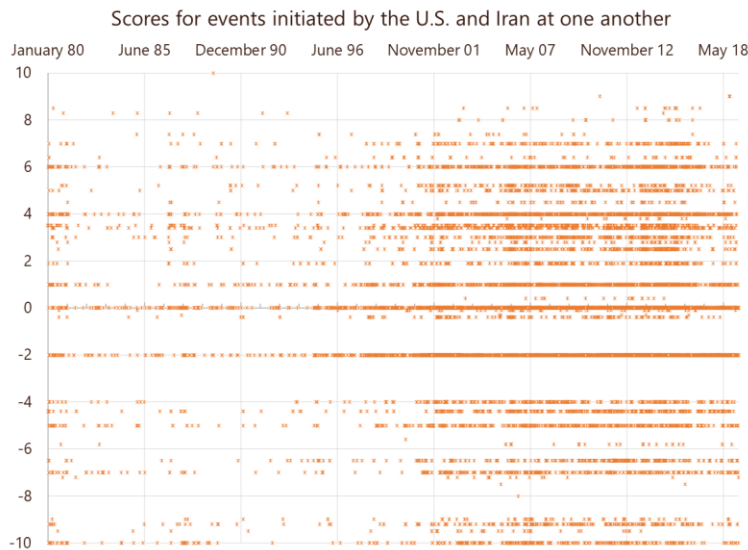
### 4.1 State of U.S.–Iran relations

Observable parts of U.S.–Iran relations are multidimensional events, ranging from waging fierce cyber battles, downing of military spy planes, imposing crippling unilateral sanctions, UN Security Council resolutions, negotiations, nuclear agreements, humanitarian aid and tacit cooperation. To capture this rich panoply of interactions, I will use granular event data collected by the British Broadcasting Corporation Summary of World Broadcasts (SWB 2022). Aggregated by Althaus *et al.* (2020), the SWB data on U.S.–Iran relations contains records of 13,094 events at a daily resolution spanning the first quarter of 1979 to the second quarter of 2019. Each event is read by a computer and assigned two scores: one by Goldstein (1992), the other called the *quad class* by Fisher (2016). Both scores are assigned by computer algorithms due to Schrodt (2007).

Goldstein event scores range from  $-10, -9 \dots +9, +10$  with  $-10$  indicating high conflict and  $+10$  indicating high cooperation contained in an event. Quad class works somewhat counterintuitively.



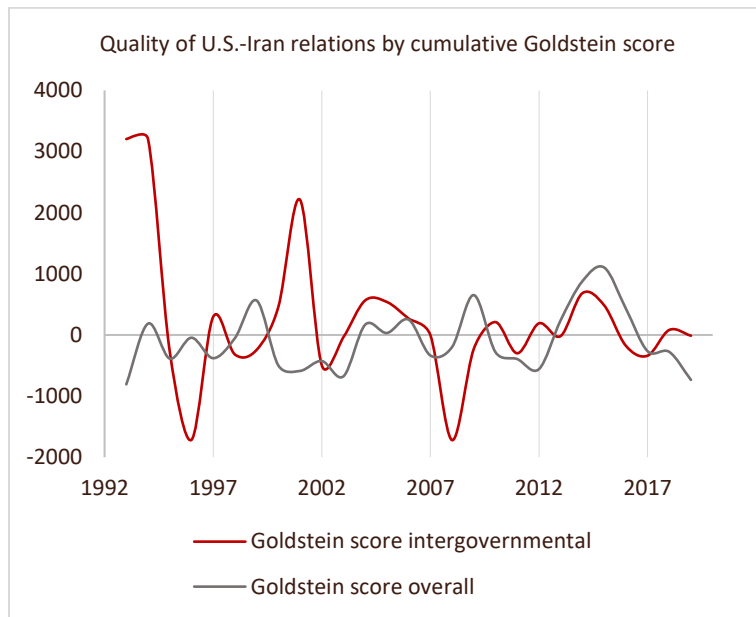
Here zero indicates neutral events; 1 those containing verbal cooperation; 2 those containing material cooperation; 3 those containing verbal conflict and 4 those containing material conflict. Sometimes actors sending or receiving a conflict or cooperation signal are identified in event data. A subset of signals sent and received by actors comprising a government, for example, the police, spy agencies, and military services, form *intergovernmental* events and scores on such events characterize intergovernmental relations. Figure 1 shows Goldstein scores for all U.S.–Iran events in SWB (2020) where the number of events has increased with time.



**Figure 1:** Goldstein scores for all U.S.–Iran events in SWB (2020) during 1980–2019. Source: Althaus *et al.* (2020).

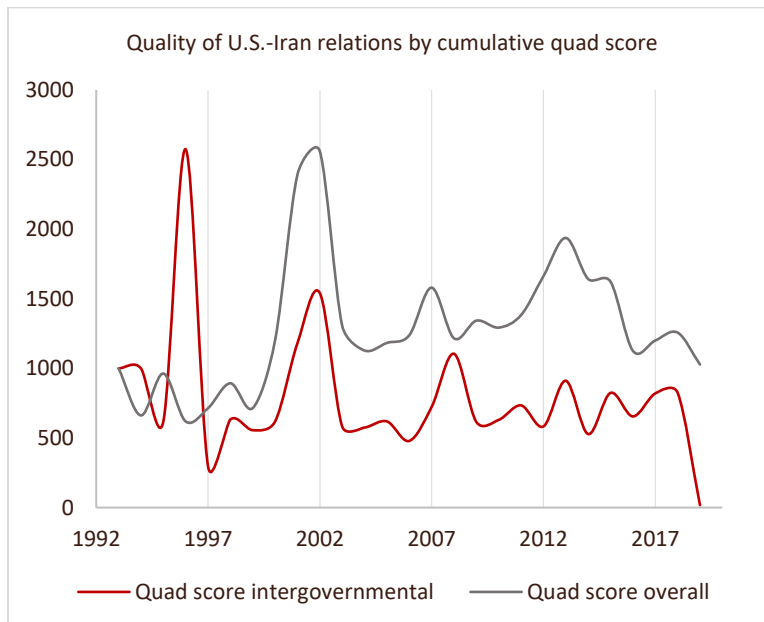
While algorithmic scoring of events may lose context and nuance; thus, suffer from inaccuracy, it does offer consistency, which should be prioritized in a study of U.S.–Iran relations where highly granular data with multiple events per day are common. However, using raw scores on event data in any systematic analysis of relations between states poses serious problems. To begin with, event scores are akin to a trader’s wealth. With every trade, a trader either gains or loses wealth. His wealth remains constant until the next trade in which he gains or loses wealth again. To arrive at a trader’s average wealth in a month, one should count his wealth every day, not merely on the day he acquired it and count the rest as zero. In other words, wealth is a cumulative process. So are events. When a new event arrives, it moves the temperature of relations between states. The impact of the event remains until the next event. Therefore, to properly portray the average state of relations between the U.S. and Iran in a year, we obtain the sum of event scores weighted by the number of days each event is “in the air” until the next event supersedes it. Data aggregation to a year is necessary, because the resolution of all explanatory variables is annual. The start date of the analysis is set to 1993, because this is the earliest date when data on some explanatory variables like the number of U.S. troops around Iran as a proxy for Iranian threat perception is available.

Figure 2 shows the aggregate annual Goldstein scores of U.S.–Iran relations for overall and intergovernmental relations during 1993–2019. Note higher variance in intergovernmental scores as evidenced by higher peaks and deeper valleys than the overall score and a time shift to the left of intergovernmental scores versus the overall score.



**Figure 2:** Annual Goldstein score of U.S.–Iran relations during 1993–2019. Althaus *et al.* (2020).

Figure 3 shows the aggregate annual quad scores of U.S.–Iran relations for overall relations and intergovernmental relations during 1993–2019. Again, note higher variance in intergovernmental scores than the overall score. However, unlike Goldstein scores, intergovernmental and overall quad scores seem to follow the same temporal pattern without time shifts between them.



**Figure 3:** Annual quad class score of U.S.–Iran relations during 1993–2019. Althaus *et al.* (2020).

Which score to pick as the dependent variable? Goldstein is more granular than quad class. Quad class scores can be transformed from  $[0, 4]$  to  $[-10, +10]$  according to the following table:

Quad	Goldstein
0	0
1	+5
2	+10
3	-5
4	-10

When transformed, Goldstein and quad class event scores show a high, statistically significant correlation (89%) for all events that constitute the data on U.S.–Iran relations. This correlation indicates high agreement between the underlying codings of the two score that is only tampered by the coarseness of the quad class as it admits only five values unlike the Goldstein score that admits 21 values. Given the high correlation between the two scores and higher resolution of the Goldstein score, I will use the Goldstein score.

## 4.2 Explanatory variables

Table 4 contains my initial variables to explain variation in the quality of U.S.–Iran relations.

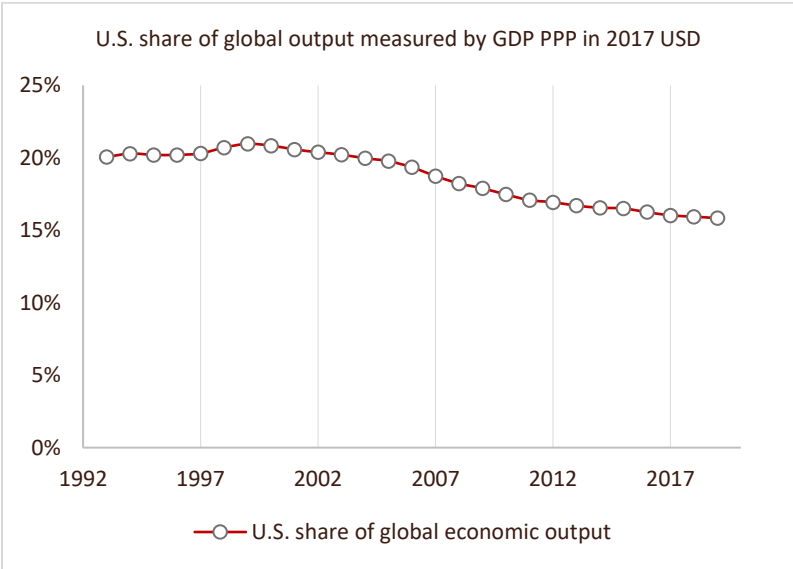
Independent variable	Hypothesized rationale
<i>U.S. global share.</i> U.S. output as a share of global output	A measure of U.S. hegemony. A U.S. in decline may choose to extricate itself from the Middle East while an economically resurgent U.S. may decide to remain in the Middle East.
<i>Non-ally share.</i> Difference in outputs of the U.S. and the next powerful non-ally	A measure of the rate U.S. power is changing vis-à-vis a near peer competitor. The more negative it is, U.S. power may be declining; the more positive it is, U.S. power may be growing.
<i>Ally share.</i> Difference in outputs of the U.S. and its next powerful ally	A measure of the rate U.S. power is changing vis-à-vis the EU, the next powerful economic bloc in the U.S.-led order. The higher it is, the more the U.S. can corral the EU to follow its Iran policy.
<i>Iran involvement.</i> Percentage of regional conflicts Iran or its proxies are involved in	A measure of U.S. clients' threat perception. The higher the share of conflicts Iran is involved in directly or indirectly, the higher the threat perceptions by U.S. clients in the region.
<i>Troops.</i> Number of U.S. troops stationed "around" Iran	A measure of threat perception by Iran. The higher the percentage of Middle Eastern countries hosting U.S. military forces, the higher the threat perception by Iran.
<i>Oil imports.</i> U.S. oil imports from the region as a percentage of its total consumption	A measure of how U.S. need to access to energy resources in the region. The higher the value, the higher U.S. dependence on its clients in the region; the lower the value, the lower U.S. dependence on its clients in the region.
<i>Arms exports.</i> U.S. arms exports to the Persian Gulf region as a percentage of its total arms exports	A measure of the tribute the U.S. can extract from its regional clients and subsequently U.S. perceptions threat. The higher the value, the harsher the U.S. stance against Iran and the higher subsequent perceptions of threat by Iran.

<i>U.S. administration</i>	A measure of the impact of the political party in power in DC on U.S. foreign policy. In general Democrats have not sought outright confrontation with Iran.
— Democratic	
— Republican	
<i>Iran faction</i>	A measure of the impact of political factions in Iran on Iranian foreign policy. In general moderates have sought better relations with the U.S.
— Moderate	
— Hardliner	
<i>U.S.–region. Relations between the U.S. and its regional clients</i>	A measure of the quality of relations between the U.S. and its regional clients.
<i>Iran–region. Relations between Iran and U.S regional clients</i>	A measure of the quality of relations between Iran and U.S. regional clients.

**Table 4:** Explanatory variables along with their hypothesized rationale on why they should be used to explain change in U.S.–Iran relations.

Before analyzing the data, let us briefly review the independent variables, beginning with systemic variables addressing U.S. power, then regional dynamics and finally domestic variables.

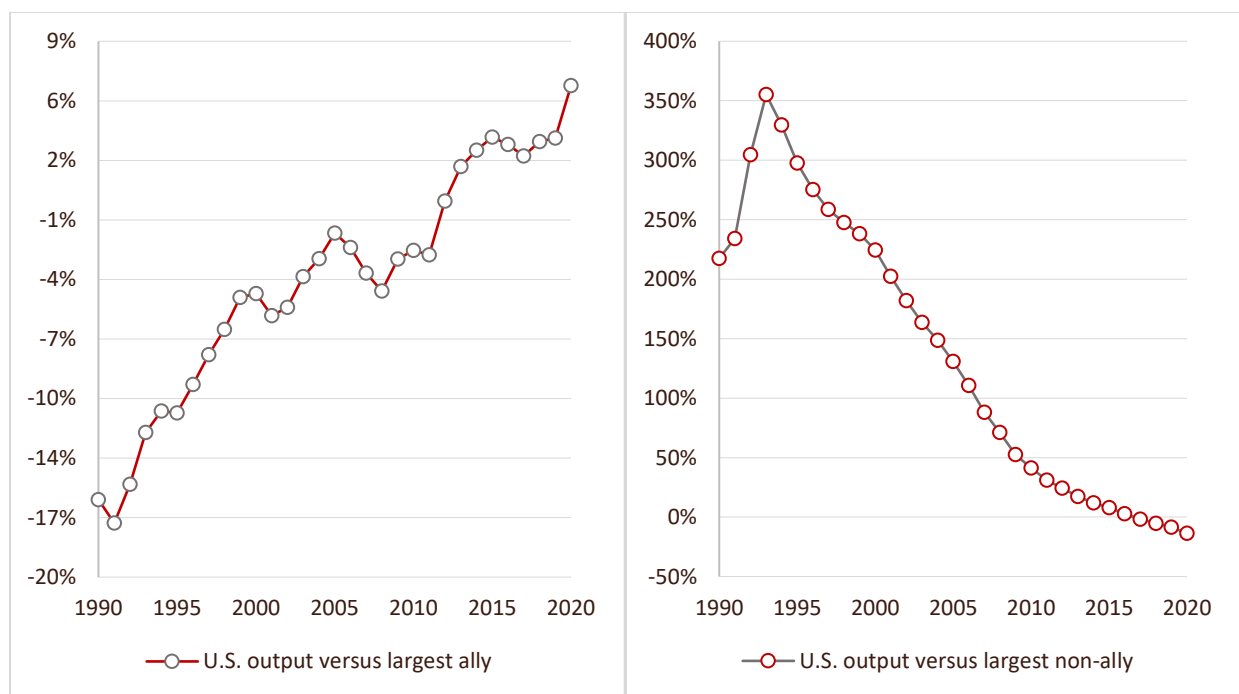
*U.S. global share.* Figure 4 shows the share of global economic output belonging to the U.S. measured by GDP purchasing power parity (PPP) in 2017 USD. After a brief surge in early 2000s this measure of U.S. competitiveness has been in steady, but moderate decline. However, note that based on PPP measurements of GDP, the U.S. had never reached high values often quoted in the media. Yet, even minor decline in percentage of U.S. output translates to hundreds of billions of nominal dollars, making the operating environment for the U.S. foreign policy ever more challenging. Have such challenges had a moderating impact on U.S. policy vis-à-vis Iran?



**Figure 4:** U.S. share of global output measured in GDP PPP in 2017 USD. Source: The World Bank (2022).

*Non-ally and ally shares.* The left panel of Figure 5 shows the percentage difference between the U.S. economic output measured by GDP PPP in 2017 USD compared with the EU, the largest

economy that is a U.S. ally. The right panel shows the same versus a non-ally: the Russian Federation from 1992–1994 and China since 1995. These graphs are also telling: Unlike nominal values, in PPP terms, the U.S. economy was indeed smaller than that of the EU throughout the 90s and 00s until after Obama assumed office. However, during the same period, it rapidly outpaced the EU in economic growth. This means that in real terms the U.S. has been gaining against the EU and in general can coerce the EU to follow its lead on Iran policy, as has been the case with Bush 43 and Trump presidencies when the U.S. strong-armed the EU into acquiescing to its unilateral sanctions against Iran. Recall however that this crude measure of power does not reflect U.S.’ profuse application secondary sanctions buttressed by global reliance on the dollar as reserve currency. The panel on the right of Figure 5 tells a diametrically opposite story as evidenced by a statistically significant  $-93\%$  correlation between the measures of U.S. economic performance. Here the U.S. began with an economy 3.5 times larger than China’s and lost the battle of economic size to China in PPP terms in 2015. Yet China has been reluctant in leveraging its new-found economic prowess in a head-on collision with the U.S. in the Iranian case.

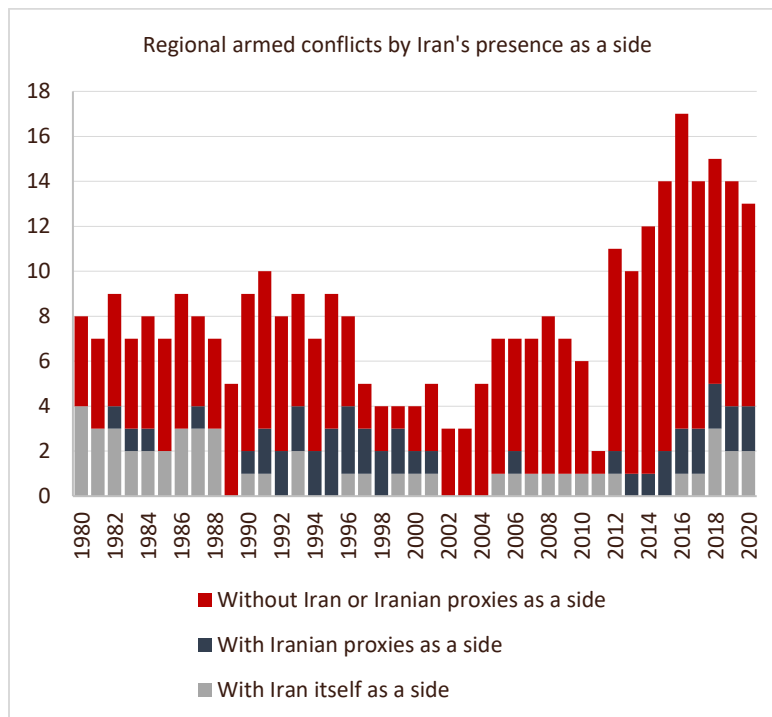


**Figure 5:** The left panel shows the percentage difference between the U.S. economic output measured by GDP PPP in 2017 USD compared with the EU, the largest economy that is a U.S. ally. The right panel shows the same versus a non-ally. Source: The World Bank (2022).

How can the three measures of U.S. economic hegemony be used in a model? On the one hand, differences between U.S. economic output and its allies and non-allies are highly negatively statistically correlated (93%). On the other hand, the shrinking share of U.S. output as the global GDP and the difference between U.S. output and China as its closes non-ally is highly statistically *positively* correlated (87%). In other words, as China has gained economic ground; the U.S. has lost its global output share. Therefore, these two variables capture the same information, so I will use only U.S. share in global GDP in my analysis.



*Iran involvement.* Figure 6 shows the number of conflicts in the region in which the Iranian military or proxy forces are involved and those that exclude Iran as a party based on Pettersson *et al.* (2021) and Gleditsch *et al.* (2002). However, I revised the original data to account for Iranian proxies fighting in Afghanistan (1996–2001) and Yemen (2014–present) and Iranian regulars and proxies fighting in Syria (2011–2020). Since early 2000s, Iran seems to have reduced its direct footprint in regional conflicts and instead relied heavily on proxies while the number of regional conflicts not involving Iran, or its proxies has been consistently on the rise in the region. These trends may indicate lighter Iranian involvement in regional “adventures” and should lower threat perception by U.S. regional clients. Nevertheless, Iran has adamantly stayed the course in Iraq, Syria and Yemen, the three conflicts that matter a great deal to Saudi Arabia.



**Figure 6:** The number of regional conflicts involving regular proxy Iranian forces and excluding Iran as a party. Source: Pettersson *et al.* (2021) and Gleditsch *et al.* (2002) modified by me.

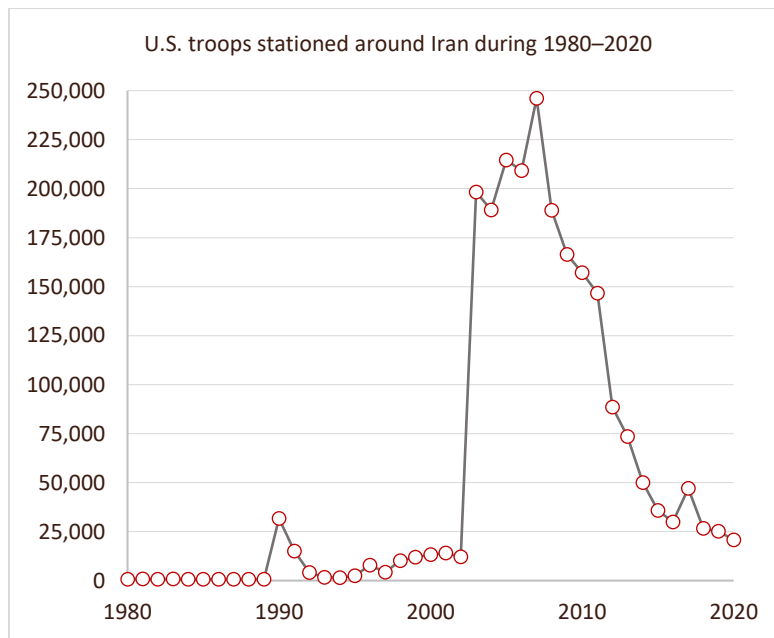
*Troops.* Figure 7 shows the number of U.S. troops stationed “around Iran” in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, UAE, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Yemen since 1980 based on data released by the U.S. Department of Defense. The U.S. deployed half a million troops to Saudi Arabia in operation Desert Storm. The U.S. then drew down forces from around Iran until the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and the subsequent invasion of Iraq in 2003. By 2008 U.S. forces around Iran had surged to about a quarter million, only to be drawn down again after the U.S. reached a status of forces agreement with Iraq and adopted a new strategy in Afghanistan in the early years of Obama’s first term as president.

Two notes of caution are in order about this data:

- It is widely reported that the U.S. dispatched about half a million troops to the region in operations Desert Shield in 1990 and Desert Storm in 1991 to oust Saddam Hussain from

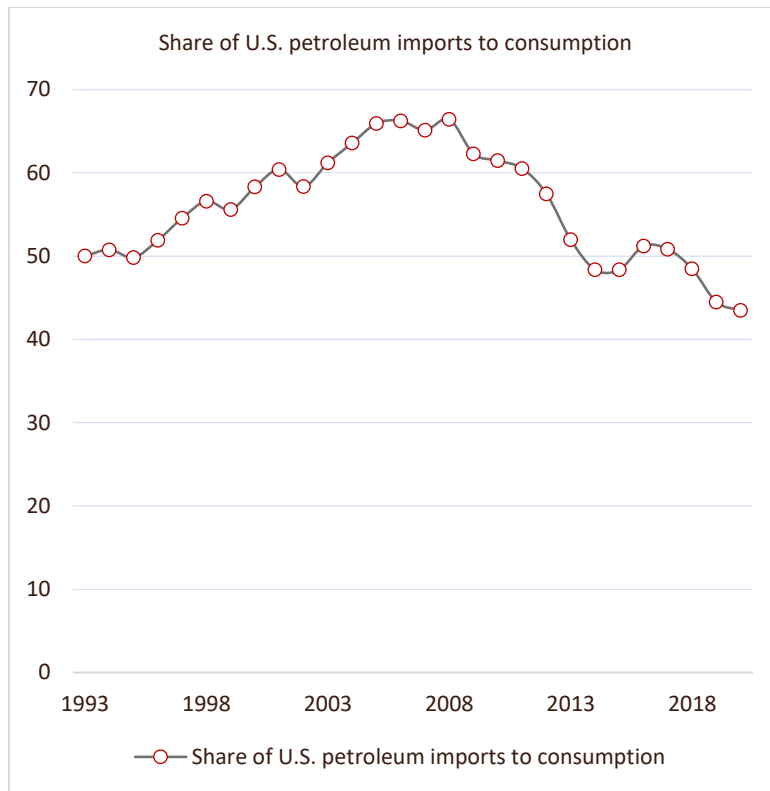
Kuwait. Yet, the Pentagon reports only 31,000 troops in the region in 1990 and 15,000 in 1991. I will use these official figures in my analysis since no reliable alternative data is available.

- As Iranian missile and UAV technologies began to mature in late 00s and their involvement in Iraq and Syria since 2012 morphed into well-structured expeditionary deployments of seasoned proxy forces, Iran began to view U.S. military presence in the region as both a target for standoff and proxy attacks and a threat. Therefore, the strength of that hypothesis that higher numbers of U.S. troops induce higher perceptions of threat in Iran may have diminished with time.



**Figure 7:** The number of U.S. troops stationed around Iran. Source: Allen, Flynn and Machain (2021).

*Oil imports.* Figure 8 shows the share of U.S. petroleum imports to consumption during 1993–2020 based on aggregated monthly data from the U.S. Energy Information Administration (2021). When the share of total imports to consumption rises, the U.S. dependence on imported petroleum increases. This is broadly the pattern observed until 2008. Obama years witnessed a major drop in U.S. dependence on imported petroleum. During Trump years, imports-consumption shrank further due to higher U.S. domestic petroleum production.



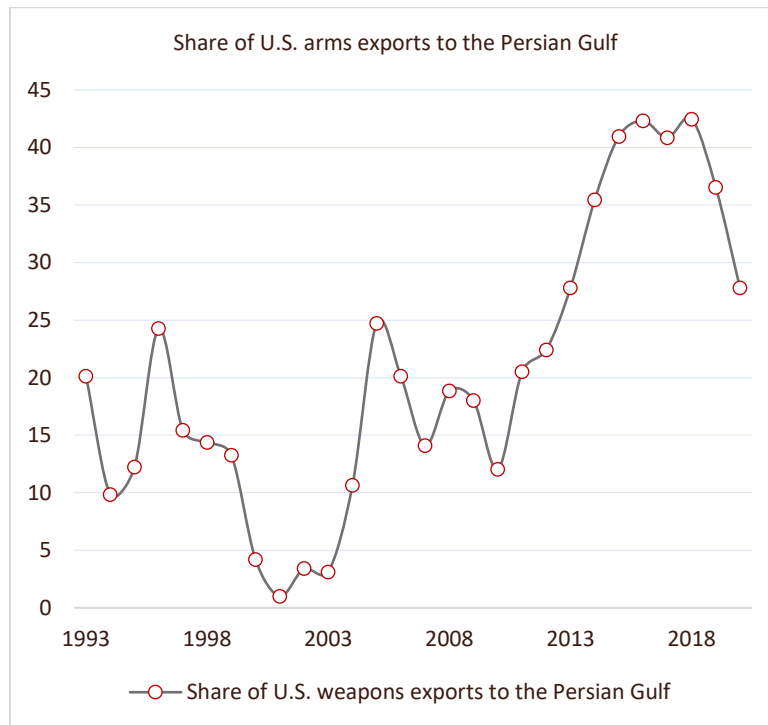
**Figure 8:** Share of U.S. petroleum imports to consumption. Source: U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA 2021).

*Arms exports.* Figure 9 shows U.S. arms exports to the Persian Gulf region excluding Iran as a percentage of total U.S. weapons exports (SIPRI 2022). The countries whose data is included in the figure are in alphabetic order Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and United Arab Emirates. The following points summarize how U.S. arms exports to the region can impact U.S.–Iran relations:

- U.S. arms exports to the Persian Gulf signify perceived need to counter the Iranian threat by U.S. clients. It can also be thought of as a *protection price* demanded by the U.S.
- Under President Clinton, percentage of overall U.S. arms exports going to the Persian Gulf had already reached a nadir by 2001. This is not the result of benign neglect or lack of interest by U.S. clients to buy U.S. arms, but partly motivated by “dual containment” which made arms sales by the U.S. unnecessary, and partly due to withholding arms sales as a bargaining chip by the human rights and liberal interventionist wings of the Clinton administration demanding reforms among their clients, especially in Saudi Arabia.
- GWOT changed that trend and stabilized Persian Gulf countries at their historical wrung on the ladder, receiving a quarter of U.S. arms exports in nominal USD terms. This was mostly due to Saudi Arabia escaping the U.S. wrath for 9/11 by paying *excess tribute*. Interestingly, this was the first time Saudis were paying the U.S. to be protected from the U.S., as the U.S. had established close connections with various parts of the ruling family to reform the Saudi society away from “extremism”. However, by mid 2000s, Saudis were

already confident that the U.S. democracy project in Iraq was destined to fail, and that they would not be the next democratization target. Arms purchases were lowered accordingly.

- The Obama presidency is unique in the past two decades in that U.S. arms sales to U.S. clients in the Persian Gulf increased to about 45 percent of all U.S. arms sales. This is mostly due to the negotiations leading to the JCPOA and an evolving U.S. posture on the Iranian file. If the U.S. were to pivot to China and reset its relations with Russia, it needed to extricate itself from the Middle East. In a classic client-patron dilemma, the JCPOA showed that the U.S. can increase the “protection price” not by threatening to abandon its clients, but by simply arriving at a modus vivendi by their archenemy. Saudi and Emirati leaders who felt betrayed and powerless did pay the protection price but refused to “share the neighborhood with Iran” as they were told. Instead, they vowed to solve the problem once and for all by “wagging the dog”, that is, influencing U.S. decisions on Iran, not as U.S. clients, but from the inside.



**Figure 9:** U.S. weapons exports to the Persian Gulf as a percentage of total U.S. weapons exports from 1993 through 2020. Source: weapons exports data are from SIPRI (2022).

*U.S. administration and Iran faction.* Since 1980 Democratic and Republican administrations in the U.S. have coincided with various two factions with distinct foreign policy approaches and preferences, often labeled “moderates” and “hardliners”, coming to power in Iran. Factional labels such as moderates and hardliners can be counterproductive in explaining decision making in Iran’s consensus-based, sprawling foreign policy establishment where bureaucratic infighting is built in as a feature (Parsi 2017). However, it is a truism in the analysis of Iranian foreign policy—at least after the Iran–Iraq war, that moderate and hardline factions espouse markedly different foreign policy views and objectives.

The table below shows the number of years different U.S. political parties and Iranian factions have coincided since 1993. As can be seen close to half the time was spent with Democrats and moderates coinciding and more than a third with Republicans and moderates coinciding. The eight years of President Ahmadinejad, a hardliner who came to power in 2005 was equally divided between Republicans and Democrats.

		Iran	
		Moderate	Hardliner
U.S.	Democrat	13	4
	Republican	10	4

### 4.3 Descriptive summary

Table 5 summary statistics of my dependent variable and explanatory variables, except for binary variables Democrat and moderate that were discussed above. For each variable, skew can be determined by comparing the mean to the median. Sample means are also used in Section 7 to determine the value of status of U.S.–Iran relations at the mean historical value of explanatory variables, everything else held constant.

Variable	Min	Max	Median	Mean	SD
U.S.–Iran	–807	1104	–264	–88	499
oil imports	44%	66%	57%	56%	6%
conflict involvement	0%	75%	21%	27%	20%
troops	1,505	246,087	35,838	80,471	83,809
arms exports	1%	42%	19%	20%	13%
ally output	–12%	4%	–3%	–3%	5%
global output	16%	21%	19%	19%	2%
U.S.–region	–78	2300	734	733	522
Iran–region	–5	2912	733	834	629

**Table 5:** Summary statistics of the dependent variable and explanatory variables, excluding Democrat and moderate rounded to integers for ease of comparison. SD stands for standard deviation.

## 6 Results

Having discussed in Section 3.2 my conceptual model based on qualitative observations of U.S.–Iran relations and in Sections 4.1–4.2 the quantitative data that approximate the conceptual model with 10 explanatory variables, I proceed to estimate the following time series:

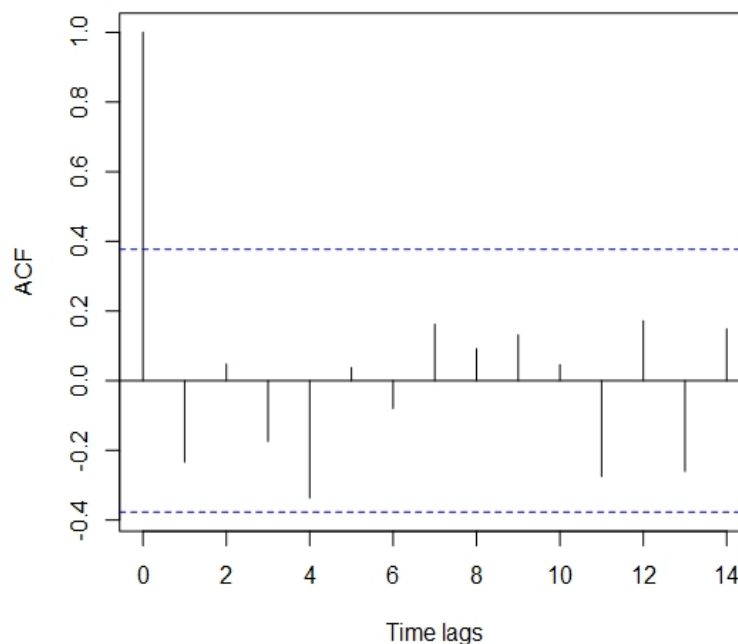
$$U.S.-Iran_t = \beta_0 + \beta_1 moderate_t + \beta_2 democrat_t + \beta_3 oil\ imports_t + \beta_4 conflict\ involvement_t + \beta_5 troops_t + \beta_6 arms\ exports_t + \beta_7 ally\ output_t + \beta_8 global\ output_t + \beta_9 U.S.-region_t + \beta_{10} Iran-region_t + \varepsilon_t$$

where  $t = 1993, \dots, 2019$ ;  $\varepsilon_t$  are error terms and  $U.S.-Iran_t$  stands for the aggregate annual Goldstein scores of U.S.–Iran events as the dependent variable to be explained by 10 explanatory variables outlined in the table below:



Variable	Definition	Values
<i>moderate</i>	Moderates in office in Iran	0: no. 1: yes
<i>democrat</i>	Democrats in office in the U.S.	0: no. 1: yes
<i>oil imports</i>	U.S. oil imports to consumption	Percentage
<i>conflict involvement</i>	Iran involvement in regional conflict	Percentage
<i>troops</i>	U.S. troops around Iran	Percentage
<i>arms exports</i>	U.S. arms exports to the region	Percentage
<i>ally output</i>	U.S. output versus allies	Percentage
<i>global output</i>	U.S. share of global output	Percentage
<i>U.S.-region</i>	U.S. relations with its regional clients	Integer
<i>Iran-region</i>	Iran relations with U.S. regional clients	Integer

Before presenting the results, let us check if the assumption of no autocorrelation among error terms  $\varepsilon_t$  for any possible lags holds via the autocorrelation function. Figure 10 shows sample autocorrelation values of error terms for time lags greater than zero. Autocorrelation for lag zero is correlation of error terms with themselves, which is 1. Sample autocorrelation values for lag values greater than zero are within the 95% confidence interval, therefore I fail to reject the hypothesis that correlations among all possible lag values of the error terms are zero, obviating the need for remedial procedures to correct for standard errors of estimates.



**Figure 10:** Sample autocorrelations among the error terms of the time series regression. Dotted blue lines show the 95% confidence interval. As sample autocorrelation values remain within the confidence interval, we fail to reject the hypothesis that the autocorrelation values are zero.

I will initially run the regression with all 10 explanatory variables in Table 4. I will then *select* a subset of explanatory variables with a similar explanatory power to my initial choices and discuss the differences in the size and direction of hypothesized effects.

## 6.1 Initial model

Table 6 contains the results of the regression of aggregate Goldstein scores on initial explanatory variables that approximate the conceptual model discussed in Section 3.2. Since the dependent variable—an artificial aggregate based on Goldstein event scores, does not represent a concrete known concept, straightforward interpretation of the size of estimates is not productive. Instead, I will focus on the estimates' relative effects, signs, and statistical significance.

Variable	Estimate	Standard error	p-value
Intercept	-6609	2047	0.0052
Moderate	391	366	0.3012
Democrat	866	193	0.0003
U.S. oil imports to consumption	2579	3511	0.4734
Iran conflict involvement	-339	554	0.5486
U.S. troops around Iran	0.003	0.002	0.2189
Arms exports	2589	1337	0.0707
U.S. output versus allies	6924	3035	0.0365
U.S. share of global output	20310	10520	0.0714
U.S. relations with its clients	0.352	0.206	0.1063
Iran relations with U.S. clients	-0.280	0.134	0.0531

**Table 6:** Coefficients on explanatory variables initially included in my conceptual model along with their standard errors rounded to the third decimal and p-values rounded to the fourth decimal. Variables whose coefficients are significant at 10% are highlighted.

First, the  $R^2$  of 0.72 shows that my initial variables do capture sizeable variation in the status of U.S.–Iran relations. However, only half of the variables in my conceptual model are statistically significant at 10%: *democrat*, *arms exports*, *U.S. output versus allies*, *U.S. share of global output* and *Iran relations with U.S. clients*. A negative intercept shows that the general trend of U.S.–Iran relations was negative during 1993–2019. *Iran relations with U.S. clients* is the only other variable with a statistically negative impact on U.S.–Iran relations, but the effect size (–0.280) is miniscule compared with that of the intercept (–6609).

## 6.2 Model selection

Table 7 contains a model selected to achieve the highest explanatory power ( $R^2 = 0.68$ ) with the fewest number of explanatory variables. In this model, all coefficients are statistically significant. The model includes the five statistically significant variables in the original model. However, this time *U.S. troops around Iran* and *U.S. relations with its clients* have gained statistical significance. Note that differences of effect sizes between the initial and selected models are statistically insignificant at 5%. For example, effect sizes of democrats in the original and selected models are 866 and 780 respectively. These two coefficients do not differ statistically. Therefore, by removing *moderates*, *U.S. oil imports to consumption* and *Iran conflict involvement*, the selected model has simply reduced the standard error of *U.S. troops around Iran* and *U.S. relations with its clients* barely enough to make them statistically significant.

Variable	Estimate	Standard error	p-value
Intercept	-5741	1526	0.0013
Democrat	780	175	0.0003
U.S. troops around Iran	0.003	0.001	0.0148
U.S. arms exports to the region	2162	1137	0.0724
U.S. output versus closest ally	8864	2578	0.0028
U.S. share of global output	25360	7365	0.0027
U.S. relations with its clients	0.387	0.183	0.0477
Iran relations with U.S. clients	-0.278	0.129	0.0449

**Table 7:** Coefficients on explanatory variables selected to achieve the highest explanatory power along with their standard errors rounded to the third decimal and *p*-values rounded to the fourth decimal. All coefficients are significant at 5%.

## 7 Discussion

What is to be made of my quantitative results? In this section I will discuss the implications of the quantitative exercise in Section 6 on my initial conceptual model. To begin with, consider the contextual variables in my conceptual model at the domestic level (*democrats* and *moderates*) and at the international system level (*U.S. output versus closest ally* and *U.S. share of global output*).

*Democrat* exerts a high positive, and statistically significant influence on the status of U.S.–Iran relations. This is in line with historical record: Both Presidents Clinton and Obama, especially in their second terms, sought to move U.S.–Iran relations to a less confrontational trajectory. On the other hand, empirical data does not support the much-touted relationship between ascendance of moderates to power in Iran and better relations with the U.S. This captures two key failures by moderate presidents in Iran to improve U.S.–Iran relations: President Khatami suffered a serious setback in normalizing relations with the U.S. after President Bush invaded Iraq in 2003 and adopted a hawkish stance against the Iranian nuclear program. Khatami’s failure demonstrated the limits of pragmatic bandwagoning with the U.S. in Afghanistan and forced Iran to opt for straightforward threat balancing in Iran (Osiewicz 2020). President Rouhani suffered a similar fate when he faced President Trump’s maximum pressure. The most prominent argument detailing the root causes of these failures posits that Iranian foreign policy is led by the Supreme Leader the Ayatollah Khamenei who builds consensus on foreign policy via the National Security Council in which his constitutional appointees who outnumber cabinet members believe that the difference in power between the U.S. and Iran makes it tempting for the U.S. to defect from any deal struck with Iran, therefore, it is incumbent upon Iran to first close the “power gap” between the two countries, if it wishes to arrive at a stable arrangement with the U.S. (Rezaei 2018).

The effects of *U.S. output versus closest ally* and *U.S. share of global output* on the status of U.S.–Iran relations are both large, positive, and statistically significant. In fact, these contextual variables exert a much higher influence on the state of U.S.–Iran relations than decision variables by the U.S. and Iran. Recall that with time, the U.S. has been gaining economically against the EU and losing against China; that is more higher values of *U.S. output versus closest ally* can be found recently; higher values of *U.S. share of global output* at the beginning of my timeframe. Since both effects are positive, this implies that if everything else were held constant, U.S.–Iran relations are on average better when *U.S. share of global output* increases and when *U.S. output versus closest ally* increases: That is for any given level of *U.S. share of global output* U.S.–Iran relations

improve on average when the U.S. can influence the EU economically; and for any given level of U.S. output versus the EU, U.S.–Iran relations improves on average when the U.S. can grow its share of global output. This contradicts the realist argument that an economically resurgent U.S. has few incentives to come to terms with Iran. However, this effect may be an artifact of history: Episodes of high U.S. economic growth coincide with Democrats in office, and Democrats favor either containment or negotiated settlements over overt military and political confrontation with Iran, either as a policy choice or to extricate the U.S. from the Middle East and pivot to great power games with China and Russia.

Large effect sizes of economic contextual variables lead to an interesting question: How much of variation in U.S.–Iran relations can be explained merely by contextual variables? Table 8 contains the coefficients of a regression of the aggregate Goldstein scores on contextual variables only.  $R^2$  of 0.36 is about half that of the original model. The same variables as the original model are statistically significant with the same coefficient signs.

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Estimate</b>	<b>Standard error</b>	<b>p-value</b>
Intercept	-2629	1477	0.0889
Moderate	-67	189	0.7246
Democrat	508	183	0.0112
U.S. output versus closest ally	8782	3126	0.0102
U.S. share of global output	13738	8287	0.1116

**Table 8:** Coefficients on contextual variables along with their standard errors and  $p$ -values rounded to the fourth decimal. Variables whose coefficients are significant at 15% are highlighted.

Variables that characterize the U.S.–Iran–Middle East triangle can be divided into three parts:

- Threat perceptions (Iran: *U.S. troops around Iran*, U.S. clients: *Iran conflict involvement*)
- U.S. resource need and protection price (need: *oil imports to consumption*, price: *arms exports to the region*)
- State of Iran and U.S. relations with regional U.S. clients (*U.S. relations with its clients and Iran relations with U.S. clients*).

As for threat perceptions, the coefficient on the presence of U.S. troops around Iran is positive, which is contrary to the hypothesized effect, and statistically significant. However, its effect size is miniscule (0.003). This effect size however is unit dependent: One more U.S. soldier around Iran on average contributes 0.003 to U.S.–Iran relations, everything else held constant. To put this in perspective, were the U.S. to move 80,000 troops into the region, on average U.S.–Iran relations would improve by about 240, which is close to one-half standard deviation. The coefficient on Iran’s involvement in regional conflicts is negative, which agrees with the hypothesized effect, but it is statistically insignificant. How can these effects be explained?

As a proxy for threat perception by Iran, U.S. troops presence around Iran may have lost validity. As Iranian missile and UAV technologies have matured since late 00s, Iranian leaders are increasingly viewing U.S. forces in the region as both targets *and* a threat. The same applies to the U.S.: Militarily, the U.S. has increasingly relied on standoff weapons like cruise and ballistic missiles in planning for military strikes in the Middle East. Moreover, since President Clinton the

U.S. has built a sophisticated sanctions regime against Iran, culminating in punishing sanctions by President Trump during 2017–2019. The Iranian economy buckled under these sanctions, causing widespread riots in 2019 and 2020, which rocked the country’s political establishment to its core, all without the U.S. firing a shot. Iranian leaders have long been aware of their vulnerability to U.S. economic warfare and have dubbed their own policy as “resistance economy”. Therefore, perhaps the number of Iranian entities under sanctions can be a better proxy for threat perception by Iran.

Percentage of regional conflicts Iran is involved captures theaters of operations Iranian forces or their proxies are active in, but not the significance of each theater to U.S. clients in the region. That is likely why it fails to proxy threat perception by U.S. regional clients. For example, Iranian presence in Syria counts as merely one point in the data. However, it caused a major rift between Iran and Saudi Arabia and a sense of betrayal in Riyadh after Obama refused to engage militarily in Syria. When Trump assumed office, Saudi Arabia pressed hard for sanctions against Iran to regain lost ground.

The coefficient on *U.S. oil imports to consumption* is positive, but statistically insignificant. This is because until 2008 the U.S. substituted out of Persian Gulf oil, reducing its share of Persian Gulf imported oil from 20 percent in 1993 to about 12 percent in 2008: the pie was growing, but the U.S. regional clients’ share from an expanding market was cut. Obama years witnessed a major drop in U.S. dependence on imported petroleum, but the share of imports from U.S. regional clients remained constant: the pie was shrinking, but U.S. clients could at least receive the same share. During Trump years, both imports-consumption and imports from regional clients shrank at the same rate (EIA 2021). This consistent shrinkage implies that the U.S. does not need petroleum resources in the Persian Gulf *directly* and that its regional clients have diversified their exports away from the U.S.; therefore, they do not need oil revenue from U.S. markets. Why else would the U.S. heed pleas by its regional clients for protection against Iran, if it does not need resources in the region? Aside from demonstrating credible commitments (no ally left behind); the U.S. may be motivated by regulating access to resources by its allies in the EU and competitors like China. A constant, reliable flow of oil from the Persian Gulf to the EU and China ensures that they do not seek to diversify with other energy resources, especially Russia’s. Testing for this nuance requires modeling the dependence of EU and China on Persian Gulf petroleum resources. A task for further research.

The coefficient on *U.S. arms exports to the region* is rather large, positive (2162) and statistically significant. Within my conceptual model, the higher protection price the U.S. can charge its regional clients, the easier it is for the U.S. to seek better relations with Iran: Such arms sales show U.S.’ countervailing commitment to its clients that would reassure them they are not abandoned, exactly when the U.S. has sought better relations with Iran during the second terms of Presidents Clinton and Obama.

Finally, the coefficient on *U.S. relations with its clients* is positive, small (0.387) and statistically significant; that of *Iran relations with U.S. clients* is negative, small (–0.278) and statistically significant. Their statistical significance matches my conceptual model as described in Section 3.2. Everything else held constant, on average better U.S. relations with its clients leads to better relations with Iran. This is due to the U.S. “leadership” in which U.S. interests take precedence



over those of regional clients. On the other hand, everything else held constant, better relations between Iran and U.S. regional clients, on average worsens U.S.–Iran relations. This is due to the U.S. being excluded from regional security arrangements in which the U.S. cannot play the “guarantor of peace” or external balancer. A prime example of this episode in U.S.–Iran relations relates to a short-lived security cooperation pact between Iran and Saudi Arabia during the first Rafsanjani presidency (1992–1996) when U.S.–Iran relations suffered, as the U.S. felt Riyadh had overstepped in regulating its relations with Iran without taking into account U.S. objections. As with the effect of U.S. troops around Iran on U.S.–Iran relations, the seemingly small effect sizes of *U.S. relations with its clients* and *Iran relations with U.S. clients* should be interpreted carefully. For example, recall that values for the status of U.S.–Iran relations are negative for 17 out of 27 years under study with an average of –88. A single event with a Goldstein score of 10 that remains in the air for a month raises *U.S. relations with its clients* by 300. Everything else held constant, this event improves U.S.–Iran relations on average by about 40, and 12 such events would on average improve U.S.–Iran relations by 480, close to one standard deviation (499).

## 8 Conclusion

In this research I set out to explain variation in the degree of hostility between the U.S. and Iran after the 1979 Iranian revolution. Examining variation in hostility amounts to explaining change in the margins, a more difficult task than identifying and explaining broad changes in relations among states such as hops from conflict to cooperation. To do so, I first examined in some detail the U.S.–Iran timeline and reviewed current scholarship on the matter, showing that while four regimes of confrontation, deterioration, stagnation, and accommodation can be identified in the timeline of relations between the two states, current work on the issue is mostly concerned with the making of single policies and explaining outcomes of policies, instead of identifying general conditions for jumps from one state of affairs, for instance confrontation, to another, for instance stagnation. Paucity of such scholarship stems from direct inapplicability of broad realist, liberal or constructivist assumptions to the question at hand, necessitating a smaller model that ties actors’ interests and threat perceptions to the operating environment to explain the state of their relations.

Having offered one such model containing U.S., Iran, U.S. regional clients’ threat perceptions based on qualitative observations, I proceeded to discuss variables that can proxy environmental factors: U.S. and Iran’s domestic politics with Democrats in charge in the former and moderates in the latter, and U.S. relative power in the international system measured by the U.S. share of global output and its relative economic performance vis-à-vis its largest ally, the EU. I then proceeded to proxy U.S.’ threat perception by its arms sales to the region, Iran’s threat perception by the number of U.S. troops around it, U.S. clients’ threat perception by Iran’s involvement in regional conflicts, and U.S. interests by share of imported petroleum to domestic consumption. The regression model turned out to explain much of the variation in observed changes in U.S.–Iran relations. A model selection exercise showed that the initial model was not overly ridden with too many explanatory variables.

What was discovered? I found that wholly half of variation in U.S.–Iran relations can be explained by environmental, not decision variables. This is a remarkable finding. U.S. position in the international system and U.S. domestic politics matters a great deal. Surprisingly, a moderate government in Tehran seems to have no statistically significant effect on the state of U.S.–Iran relations. A useful way forward would be to interact Democrat and moderate into a single variable

called *modocrat*<sup>2</sup> and investigate the effects of coincidence between the two on the assumption that the existence of leaders on the other side of the aisle who are known to be cooperative can help achieve less enmity. Environmental variables relating to U.S.' hegemony exercise an outsized effect on U.S.–Iran relations. However, the more significant and perhaps surprising effect relates to relations between the U.S. and EU. Since the end of the Iran–Iraq war, successive governments in Tehran have viewed a gap between the EU and U.S. as a precondition to improved relations with the U.S. My results indicate that this policy perception is not supported by empirical data. U.S. gaining over the EU economically improves U.S.–Iran relations on average by a significant margin: A pliant EU forces Iran to take more conciliatory steps when facing the U.S. alone and reassures the U.S. that EU–Iran relations are subordinated to U.S.–Iran relations, not against them. Finally, a surprising omission of effect relates to U.S. clients' threat perception. It turns out that while U.S. clients loudly protest Iran's presence in regional conflicts, this threat perception does not directly affect the state of U.S.–Iran relations. This may be due to the inadequacy of my proxy, which weights Iran's involvement in every regional conflict equally, without regard to how U.S. regional clients view the theater of operations Iran is meddling in. A useful development here could be to devise algorithms that extract a "threat score" from textual event data the same way Goldstein or quad class scores derive measures of conflict and cooperation. This way, actors' threat perceptions can be consistently recorded at a higher resolution without resorting to inadequate proxies.

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